

Return of Hug Fortress

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Return of Hug Fortress

by [theorytale](#)

Summary

(Diverges from canon before Phase Two: assumes Loki escaped from Asgard after the events of 'The Avengers' and has continued to make trouble for the team.)

After a battlefield taunt gets much more of a reaction than expected, Tony realizes that at least some of Loki's vindictiveness may be influenced by outside factors.

Since Asgard's punishments just seem to keep making Loki angrier, and it's Earth that keeps on paying the price, Tony decides to take matters into his own hands. Besides, Loki keeps showing up to talk to him, so he doesn't have much of a choice. He just wishes he knew what the Devil he was doing.

Loki's volatile and dangerous and Tony may have bitten off more than he can chew, but slowly something grows between them. Love isn't a magic cure, but between them maybe they can alleviate the symptoms.

How to Tame a God of Lies

Tony was buried under a pile of rubble. He had mixed feelings about this. Okay, 'buried' was a strong word, it was more that he was inconveniently pinned, but the point was: mixed feelings. Boredom, impatience, relief (nothing he couldn't get out of, after all), and the seething resentment that boiled up every time Asgard's dirty laundry become Earth's problem yet again.

Worse, there was an upturned car right in his line of fire, preventing the appropriate reply of six wrist-mounted laser beams fired in parallel straight into Loki's face.

He soothed himself with a reminder that further down the street, Cap was pinned in place by a historic cast iron lamppost bent around him, and there was no way someone with a telephoto lens wouldn't get a *hilarious* shot of that for the papers.

Still, at the moment Thor was the only one fighting Loki, and that was always a really terrible idea. Thor had a war hammer, but Loki had a tendency to rip Thor's heart into tiny shreds and jump up and down on the pieces. Also, throwing knives.

As long as Tony had his voice and functioning comms, he wasn't unarmed. While he shifted broken chunks of concrete and rebar he threw barbs at Loki, little insults and jabs. Just enough to keep Loki's attention divided, keep his sharp tongue aimed at Tony so he was too distracted to really tear into Thor.

(The way Loki treated Thor was further evidence for Tony's private theory that sometimes, family was the worst thing that could happen to a good guy. He'd only made the mistake of telling Thor that once, and fortunately he'd been in his armor at the time or it could have ended with broken bones.)

"Your hounds are defeated, Thor," Loki sneered, amid the sounds of hand-to-hand combat. "Will you lay down your arms? Or--"

"Better a hound than a son of a bitch," Tony chipped in before that 'or' could get out. He saw something go blasting overhead, and quickly aimed upwards, blowing the falling masonry to bits before more of it could fall on him. "Come on now, what did that building ever do to you? At least pick on one of the ugly ones, you've never heard of civic improvement?"

("Reloaded," Hawkeye reported through the comms; "getting back into position.")

"Does he never shut up?" Loki demanded.

"No," Thor said, which, *hey*. There was a grunt and a noise like someone had hit the ground hard. "Loki, I warn you-- this madness will--"

"Madness?" Loki gave a bitter-sounding laugh. "The only madness, Thor, was that it took me so long to be rid of you."

He sounded like he was about to launch into another speech of the brutal heart-stomping variety, and Tony grimaced, gathering his strength. With one last shove he wrenched himself free of the debris and jetted up past the toppled car blocking his view. Loki must have been the one who got thrown; he was sprawled on the road a good ten yards from Thor with his helmet and his latest fancy wizard staff by his side.

Tony raised his voice. "*Hey*, asshole, you're not the only one with issues. Daddy didn't love you, boo-hoo, I've been there and you don't see me trying to conquer planets. So you never got enough hugs as a kid, so what. *No one cares.*"

Loki flinched and looked up at him. Tony braced for an attack but Loki didn't touch the staff or helm; his face just kind of... *crumpled*. "Do you think I don't know that?"

Well, that was refreshingly self-aware. There wasn't a good moment to say so because Loki had launched into full rant mode, no pauses necessary. It looked like the taunt had worked even better than Tony had expected.

"*Believe me*, if there's one thing I've learned, it's that I stand alone. I've had *centuries* to have that lesson etched under my skin." Loki was still on the ground, voice rising to a shout and words bitten off. "Taken out when useful, then cast aside so they might pretend they were saved by something nobler than my 'cowardly tricks'. Every time, my reward was only to be shunned. Unnatural Loki! Loki the interloper! Just a stray beast Odin stole on a whim."

Oh good grief. *Stolen*, really? Tony rolled his eyes hard enough to make his sinuses ache. "Right, you were adopted, worst thing that's *ever* happened to a kid."

"*Adopted*," Loki ground out, some kind of noise that could have been a laugh or a sob or both. "Do you adopt a serpent, Warsmith, and name it a child? Do you adopt a *sword* or one of your little missiles?"

Uh... that... was a little different than the usual self-aggrandizing conqueror b.s.

Between the ragged, half-hysterical noise Loki'd made, and the fact Loki hadn't picked his staff back up, Tony was starting to get an uncomfortable feeling that he might have cut a little closer to the bone than he'd intended.

"I was taken, hoarded, the Allfather's dirty little secret - he should have had me *banished* with the rest of the monsters!" Loki didn't stop when Thor tried to say something; didn't even look over. "But of course Odin can keep a monster if he wishes; he need not follow his own laws. Law of Asgard - they may as well call it the Law of Loki. Anyone else may commit whatever crime they see fit, but my slightest infraction and let the wrath of Odin fall upon my shoulders!"

Thor *always* had Loki's attention during a battle. For Loki to ignore him... that was just wrong, everything about this was wrong.

Loki climbed to his feet, still looking up at Tony. "Oh, and what *laughs* we had at my punishments, how entertained the people were each time I was put in my *place*! Odin pretended me a prince, but I served as a jester."

"They did no such--" Thor managed a whole four words before Loki continued, louder.

"And I learned! I learned that I would not be defended, I learned to be wary of such false sympathies. Most assuredly I learned to be wary of the *whims* of the Gatekeeper's eye. But when I'd given Asgard *everything* I still thought--" His voice audibly hitched; his expression was twisted with something like anguish instead of the usual spite and maliciousness.

Widow's voice came through the comms, a low hiss: "Iron Man, what are you doing? Take him *down*."

She was right, she was completely right; he ought to attack while Loki was distracted by self-pity. Except...

Except, Loki was just standing there in the middle of the road, visibly shaking. Not flinging himself at Thor, and *not picking up his weapon*.

Tony hovered in the air, his original satisfaction withered into something deeply uneasy. He'd wanted Loki's attention. Well, he had it, all right. Every shredded, agonized bit of it. Not that it was an excuse, none of it was any excuse, but it wasn't the words that were getting to him. It was the *sound* - so violently raw and exposed - that held him in place.

"I was foolish enough to think there was an ending. I fell into the void and it swallowed me whole. But *death will not have me--*"

White noise.

For a moment, Tony couldn't hear anything else. The sound of his own blood in his veins. A nuclear explosion blooming in a vacuum. Drowning in a desert. *The other guy spit it back out*.

No, no. This was... This was just, Loki knew things about them, was manipulating--

"Do you know what lurks between worlds? Monsters the likes of which even *I* am almost worthy. Sights that would reduce your weak mind to a crawling, gibbering wreck. Oh, how I prayed to be saved! And for the first time in my life, my prayers were answered." Loki gave a horrible parody of a smile, bared teeth and tear-filled eyes.

"I was ready to be so *grateful*. Ready to forgive all the lies because I thought *they had come for me*."

"Loki," Thor said, voice catching in his throat. "We believed you dead. I have told you--"

Loki finally whirled on him, cape flaring outwards. "You *left me there!*" It was nothing less than a scream.

Thor visibly flinched and Tony did too, choking back a strangled sound. The tiny movement was apparently enough to draw Loki's attention back to him.

"Oh, you would have laughed to see me, mortal." That awful laughing sob again, bleak and fragmented. "I was a pitiful, sniveling *dog*, so desperate for a scrap of affection. And the ones

who found me, they may as well have been Asgardian - they had their purposes and their punishments, quick to have me dance to their strings."

Fast and sharp, Loki's tone switched back to anger. "So I did what I must, because no one but Loki would seek to save a lie. As it ever was, as it ever will be. *Loki stands alone*. How dare you act like I don't know that!"

Tony opened his mouth and then closed it helplessly. He wanted his sarcasm, wanted a barrier of snark and righteous anger. It was usually easy. But right now it wouldn't come. Dammit, the 'strings' Loki talked about dancing to included *invading New York City* and that deserved... he wasn't just going to...

so cold and so dark and he couldn't catch his breath, all he could see was that perfect blooming explosion--

"So give me your puerile punishments," Loki snarled, with that same terrible, bared-teeth smile. "You're no different than any other."

That wasn't fair, they had *every damn reason* to want Loki punished--

--But remember that *I still win*. Because at least when you are flogging me for this latest trespass, you will look at me. You will *look at me*. I will not be invisible." Loki stepped forward, screaming again. "*Look at me!*"

It felt like a punch in the chest. Tony might have stopped breathing for a moment. *No*, he thought to himself, and knew he was going to do it anyway. It was a stupid, dangerous risk, but Tony popped his faceplate open and met Loki's eyes without the mask between them.

He should say something. Stop the pity parade in its tracks. Mass murder wasn't the only way to get attention, for a start. He didn't really trust his voice right now. It felt like something was lodged in his throat.

"Loki," Thor repeated. He was holding his hammer loosely, looking lost and frustrated and deeply tired. "Enough of this pretense. Whatever came to pass after the Bifrost-- you know you were loved. If, if we joked a little much, sometimes, it was never meant to be at your expense."

"It was never at anything *but* my expense!" Loki snarled incredulously. He scooped up the staff and charged at Thor, quick and fluid.

Tony didn't stop to think. He slammed on his jets, hurtling in between them, and landed with an ungentle thump. He should fire, he was supposed to fire, but he got his arms around Loki instead and held him back.

"Let go," Loki gasped, struggling - shit the faceplate was open - wait, Loki wasn't going for his face. Sure, the Iron Man armor was strong and there probably wasn't decent leverage, but Tony was under no illusions which of them would wipe the floor with the other in hand-to-hand. And Loki sounded *scared* and that wasn't-- this wasn't supposed to be a threat.

"Wait, it's okay," Tony said, hating how uncertain his voice was. What was the protocol for manhandling deranged supervillains? He had to admit to himself that he actually had Loki in what was possibly the world's most awkward robotic hug.

Fuck, he may as well commit, then. He dropped his voice to a soothing tone, shifting sideways to turn Loki a little away from Thor. "It's okay. I'm not hurting you."

Steve's voice came over the comms. "Iron Man, I hope you know what you're doing."

Shut up, Tony thought fiercely. No, of course he had no idea what he was doing, but he got the feeling no one really did where Loki was concerned. This wasn't anything like what Thor had led them to believe. "It's okay," he repeated, stubbornly keeping his grip. Before he could stop himself, he blurted, "What did they *do* to you?"

He didn't even know which 'they' he meant.

Loki stopped struggling abruptly; Tony heard a clatter as the wizard staff (he couldn't think of it as anything else) dropped to the ground. Then Loki seemed to collapse, actually literally *crying on his shoulder* and okay, Tony was calling it right there, this was officially the *most surreal* fucking moment of his entire life.

Mercifully, no one said anything on the comms.

"Um," he said, loosening his grip on Loki and patting him on the back. "There, there." He looked desperately over Loki's shoulder at Thor, hoping for a little help.

Thor looked pretty devastated - so much for avoiding the heart-stomping - but he started to approach, and if Tony could hand over his armful of sobbing alien-slash-demigod he'd feel a lot better about... whatever had just happened. Except, the second Thor's hand touched Loki's shoulder, Loki fucking *yelped* and dropped straight out of Tony's grasp. In just moments he'd swept Thor's legs out from under him, rolled out of the way and come up in a crouch with a knife in each hand. He was completely white, breathing in shallow gasps, and he looked impossibly young. Vulnerable.

Thor got up and started to move; Tony grabbed him and pulled him back sharply. "Stop, can't you see he's terrified?"

Clint said, very calmly, "I've got a clear shot."

"*No*, good god, everybody just *stop*." Tony tried to catch his breath. His pulse was racing, some weird kind of sympathetic panic thing. This was wrong, this was *all wrong*. He took his helmet the rest of the way off and quietly hoped that Loki didn't throw a knife at his face. Or Natasha, for that matter. Either would be just his luck.

Loki's eyes were darting everywhere but focusing on nothing, eyebrows furrowed together in fright and confusion. Even his knives were trembling.

"Loki," Tony said carefully. He edged in front of Thor, because that was half of the problem right there. "Loki, listen to me. You're on Earth. Midgard." This was where he'd say

something like, 'no one's going to hurt you', but he couldn't in good conscience promise that. "Loki, listen to the sound of my voice. Just breathe, okay. In through the nose. Out through the mouth." He demonstrated it himself, and it helped to ease a little of the residual fear in his gut. "In through the nose. Out through the mouth."

He half-expected an arrow to come flying out of the air regardless, but Clint didn't take the shot and no one seemed inclined to order him to. Whether that was actually because Tony had said not to or just because they wanted to see what would happen, who knew.

"Just breathe," he said again, keeping his voice steady. "Focus on me. In through the nose. Out through the mouth." He kept repeating it, palms facing the ground, non-threatening.

Gradually, it seemed to sink in. The knives slowly lowered. Loki was still pale but looked a little more focused, more present. He sounded more like himself when he spoke, admittedly with a crack in his voice. "I know how to breathe, you idiot."

Tony was startled into a clipped bark of laughter. In that pause, Thor tried to step around him, reaching out a hand, speaking up again. "Brother, I swear to you--"

Loki's eyes snapped towards Thor and a series of expressions flashed across his face. Hurt, mortification, despair. And then the little bastard up and vanished, Thor's hand still outstretched towards him.

"Okay," Tony said, as Thor's arm dropped. "Am I drunk? Is this a drunk dream? Because I'm going to need somebody to tell me if I'm dreaming."

"No, but I'd probably say that if you were dreaming," Natasha said, emerging from whatever dark corner she'd been skulking in. Clint was swinging down the fire escape of the building across the road, bow slung across his back.

Tony turned to Thor. "You mind telling us what the *fuck* just happened here? Because it seems like you might have left out a thing or two about your brother. Like the fact that *he's goddamn Carrie*."

Dammit, they should have asked more questions to begin with. Thor had told them that Loki kept attacking because finding out he was adopted made him snap, made him want to hurt everybody. They should have known better. People didn't just 'snap' unless there was already something bubbling under the surface. The materials were already stressed.

"I know not who that is," Thor said with a tired frown, "but you cannot heed everything Loki says. He was always overly sensitive, but lately his complaints are filled with lies and fiction. He would paint everyone as the villain but himself. "

Nope, no, Earth was not going to be the punching bag for Asgardian family therapy drama. There was a gaping chasm of difference between lies and whatever had happened here. Whether Loki was exaggerating or just seeing it differently to Thor - the grief and rage in his voice had not been *fiction*.

Tony narrowed his eyes at Thor, deeply unimpressed. "That whole breakdown was a pack of lies. Okay, I buy it, not exactly out of character. So you're saying, Loki's making it all up, everybody loved him and he wasn't, oh... broadly considered a bit of a weirdo."

He wasn't even going to touch the creepy comments around the adoption thing, he was *not* qualified for that level of screwed up. Shit, had Loki really implied it was *against the law* for Odin to keep him?

"He chose to pursue sorcery," Thor said, sounding exasperated. "*Illusions*. While still joining battle! Of course people thought him odd. Indeed, there were jokes... but he never said they did him harm. If he'd told us, we surely would have stopped."

"Oh my god," Tony said. That was so naive it was actually physically painful. "Of course he didn't *tell you*, why on earth would he do that? You'd already written him off as just being *overly sensitive*. Or maybe he did and you just called him-- No, I cannot, I literally cannot believe what I am hearing. Did that sound like someone who was making shit up to you? No, don't answer that. Somebody else say something, I need to scrub this conversation from my brain."

Before Thor could argue, Clint raised a hand. "I'll have a go. Hey, Tony, I don't know if anyone told you, but we *shoot* people, we don't make them cry!"

Tony threw his hands in the air. "I didn't know that was going to happen! I trash-talk him all the time, he's never cried before."

Had he crossed the line? He thought it had been the right amount of mean. If he'd really meant to tear into Loki there were a hundred other things he would have said to hone in on *exactly* the worst and weakest spots. But, he hated the looks he got when he did that... the way people would stare in silent horror like it meant something awful about him that he could say those things.

He hadn't gone that far. He was sure he hadn't. Had he?

Natasha pursed her lips, calculation clear on her face, and said, "Do you think you could do it again?"

Tony rounded on her at the same time as Thor, for once in complete agreement: "*No!*"

"Oh, yeah," Clint muttered, rolling his eyes. "We wouldn't want to hurt the guy's *feelings*."

Okay, Tony could see where Clint was coming from; Loki was an asshole and deserved whatever he got. But Tony would much rather stick a literal knife in than a metaphorical one; it just seemed more... decent. Well, he'd rather use bullets than a knife, but the general principle was the same.

"Guys?" Steve called a little plaintively, and they all turned to look. He was still wedged behind wrought iron, not quite strong enough to bend it on his own. "While this is fascinating and all, I could use a little help?"

"Right." Tony sighed, and paused long enough to pick up Loki's abandoned wizard staff, because he was going to test the hell out of that. "Someone find Hulk. Tell Bruce that I've got dibs on the new lab toy." He waggled the staff and then trudged over to help get Steve out.

--

By the time Tony hit the sack that night, he was ready to sleep for a week. Secretly, he was almost - almost - a little relieved that Pepper was out of town, because he was pretty sure he was even too tired for sex, and that was just no good for his image. (Also, any time Pepper was out of town when psychopaths or unstable demigods attacked was a good day, because it was infinitely easier to fight knowing that she was safe.)

Unfortunately, just as he was drifting off, Jarvis spoke up. "Sir, I'm afraid you have a visitor in the central living area."

"What," Tony said. He rolled over and groaned. "Why would you let someone in at this time of night? You are so fired. I'm going to wipe you from the servers and install Windows."

"There's no need for that kind of language," Jarvis said reprovingly. "I didn't let him in. Mister Laufeyson arrived by his own means."

Lauf-- oh, god. "Oh, god."

"Indeed, sir. May I suggest some tactical precautions?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm on it." Tony dragged himself out of bed and got the homing cuffs out of his top drawer. Since Loki hadn't come straight into the bedroom and eviscerated his sleeping body, there was probably some wiggle room with a chance of actually living through the night.

On the flipside, if Loki was going to turn up uninvited in the middle of the night, Tony was under no obligation to do him the courtesy of getting dressed. Boxers, undershirt and homing bracelets was close enough. "Send me a suit if it looks like things are going south. Like, if he throws me out a window again, that's probably a good time."

"Should I alert the other Avengers, sir?"

Tony hesitated longer than he should. He thought of the damage wreaked during the day, and how they really, really needed to get Loki arrested and contained again. And then he said, "No. Not unless something goes wrong. More wrong than him being in my penthouse, I mean."

There was an almost audible frown. "If you say so, sir."

"Don't you give me that disapproving schoolteacher voice. It's like you don't trust my judgment. I'll have you know, I have excellent judgment." Tony paused by the door. "Now hush, Daddy has to go get himself killed."

He opened the bedroom door and walked upstairs to the living area, calling the lights up. Loki turned, dressed in just his black leathers this time without the full regalia. He'd

apparently been staring out the windows, probably fantasizing about throwing Tony through them again. His expression was frustratingly inscrutable. Tony raised his eyebrows, resisting the urge to rub at the electronic bracelets on his wrists.

"Bit late for a social call?"

Loki just stared at him.

After a pause, Tony said, "Okay, so we're going with the creepy silence angle. No problem. I've been told I can talk more than enough for two. Shall I do both sides of the conversation? 'Hi, Loki, fancy meeting you here. What have you been up to lately?' 'Oh, nothing much, Tony, just blowing up one of your favorite cities, modeling ancient Norse fetish-wear, the usual.'"

"You have no fear of me," Loki said abruptly. "You never did. Why is that?"

Tony laughed, because fifty percent of the time he faced Loki he was crap-his-pants terrified, and the other fifty percent was only because he was soaring on too much adrenaline to feel much of anything but the rush. "Yeah, I don't really do fear. It's a personal quirk, I have a few of those. I also talk to my robots, make inappropriate comments about Captain America's ass, and I hate people handing me things directly."

Loki stared at him some more.

"Captain America's got a really great ass," Tony said helpfully. "I don't know if you've noticed."

"I can't say that I had, no." Loki wandered away from the window, looking around the room with what was apparently complete disinterest.

"And he comes from a time when sodomy was illegal, so he gets all pink and disturbed if you point it out." That wasn't really fair to Steve. He got just as pink and disturbed when women pointed it out; it seemed more to do with what he considered 'public' than what he considered 'crude' but Tony wasn't too sure and didn't care enough about other people's weird ideas of boundaries to have put effort into figuring it out.

That thread of conversation wasn't going to go anywhere, though. He cocked his head. "So, seen any good movies lately?"

Loki stopped and gave him a sharp look. "I don't want your pity."

"Well, that's good, because I don't really do pity, either. Call it another quirk."

"Then what was..." Loki gestured vaguely, frowning and - good heavens, actually *shifting on his feet*.

"This is amazing," Tony said. "I'm actually the least uncomfortable person in a conversation about feelings. I need to write this in my diary. No, I need to tweet it. The world needs to know. Maybe I should hold a press conference. That might be overkill. Do you think that's overkill?"

Loki hissed impatiently. "Do not *mock me*, mortal."

Tony ignored the little voice in his head that was screaming about his imminent death, and instead said, "Oh, please. All I ever do is mock you. You must have noticed that by now."

"Perhaps I thought you would realize your error. Even insects are capable of learning, although it seems to be beyond your abilities."

"There we go!" Tony crowed, punching the air. "I knew that feisty was still in there somewhere. Now tell me how you're going to crush us all under your heel. It'll make you feel better, I promise."

Loki took two steps towards him, eyes blazing. "I should rip out your tongue and feed it to you--"

Tony smiled brightly to cover up the way his veins washed icy cold. He was going to die, he was going to die bloody and screaming before Jarvis could get the suit here, and it would be all his own fault, and he *just couldn't help himself*. "I'm sorry, you were asking about the thing before, with the arms. We call it a hug. It's a sign of nonaggression, kind of a comfort thing, physical contact, although probably not that comforting when the arms are made of steel, well, gold-titanium alloy. More of a wire mother than cloth mother, I guess you never had that experiment on Asgard."

"I know what an embrace is, you fool," Loki gritted out, and his self-control was kind of amazing, really, because by the look on his face he should have tossed Tony through the window at least five minutes back.

"Are you sure? Because the way you were talking today I thought maybe you'd never had one, I don't know, it sounds like the Asgardians treated you pretty much like shit." There was a chicken and egg question there about how much of it Loki had provoked himself, but that could wait for a time when Tony wasn't trying quite so hard not to get killed.

Loki rocked back on his heels slightly, startled, and bam, Tony was back in the game. But then Loki fixed him with a demanding, almost desperate look and said, "But *why*?"

Tony wanted really badly to just crack another joke. He had at least three on the tip of his tongue. But, again, trying not to get killed. And maybe... the truth might be worth something. He swallowed, and looked away, and said, "My dad never looked at me."

His voice actually held pretty steady, that was something.

"So I kind of-- I know, a little, that whole invisible--" He risked looking back at Loki, who was staring at him thoughtfully. He didn't like it; it was the kind of look that seemed to see right through him. He was too tired to handle being looked at like that. "Plus it really pissed off the rest of the team, and that's always entertaining."

"You know," Loki said, still giving him that watchful, intent look, "I could choose to be offended that you dare compare yourself to me."

"Nah. I'm much better looking than you," Tony said flippantly, while something in him recoiled at the idea of comparing himself too closely to Loki. It was just *one thing*, a little craving for attention, that was all; it was like relating to someone's fondness for chocolate. Them and half the Earth's population, big deal. "You're too tall, for a start. It's the twenty-first century, women don't like men who tower over them."

Loki seemed to relax a little. "I don't believe they prefer undressed slobs with half a beard."

"Hey. Now *I'm* offended. My goatee is very stylish. And if you show up in the middle of the night, undressed is what you get." Tony looked him up and down. "Don't tell me you sleep in *that*. Actually, don't tell me what you sleep in at all, that's a kind of inappropriate I'm just not ready to go to on a first date."

"Not from what I've heard," Loki murmured, raising an eyebrow.

Tony raised his index finger. "Ah, true, but that's different. You and me, baby, I want our first time to be special."

Loki's lip curled with something that could be disdain or could be amusement, it was hard to tell. Maybe even both.

"So." Tony leaned against the wall and folded his arms across his chest. "I answered your question, will you answer one of mine?"

"If you wanted to deal, you should have done it before you gave me your answer."

"Humor me." He'd already got the answer from Thor - he'd spent quite a while this evening getting answers out of Thor, some of which had painted a pretty different picture of life in Asgard than he'd first imagined - but he wanted to hear what Loki would say. "That thing you said today, the flogging, that was, what, a figure of speech?"

"*Obviously*," Loki said, rolling his eyes. "I'm not a boy caught gambling with the guards. *If* Thor manages to drag me back again, I assure you, it'll be nothing so simple as a flogging. Have no fear, Avenger: your thirst for my blood will be well slaked."

Well, that... wasn't exactly what he'd meant, but he guessed it answered the question. A little too well. Tony was starting to think that their whole standard practice of letting Thor's people deal with Loki needed a little revision.

It wasn't that Loki didn't *deserve* a solid ass-kicking, and it definitely wasn't that Tony didn't want to see it happen. But there was ass-kicking, and there was... whatever else was happening. Maybe he'd just been reading too many of Bruce's Amnesty International pamphlets, but this whole situation didn't sit right with him. If they'd quit screwing around and just execute the guy, that would be one thing, but... well. It didn't seem like that was happening any time soon.

It had occurred to him that Loki could be playing him. Not the stuff from earlier in the day, but now, with a bit of time to cool off - yeah, it was possible. And yet...

"You don't seem pleased," Loki observed, eyes narrowed with something predatory.

Tony smiled humorlessly. "Who, me? I'm thrilled. Doing a little dance, on the inside."

Loki looked at him a moment longer, then turned away with a scoff. "You mortals are weak."

"So you've said." Tony uncrossed his arms and reached up to scratch his chin. So many retorts to choose from, but he should probably pretend to think tactically about how he wanted this conversation to go. In detail more specific than 'not ending in fiery death'. "I have another question."

"You haven't offered me anything for it," Loki said smoothly. Shark-like.

There was absolutely no way he was going to give Loki free rein to set the terms. Tony shook his head, going to the bar. "Well, then. Scotch?"

Loki gave him another one of those narrow-eyed looks. "After what happened last time you offered me hospitality in these rooms. I'm to believe you would repeat the error?"

It didn't sound like an *immediate* threat, but Tony had to fight off the urge to double-check his bracelets nevertheless. "Assuming it was an error," he said instead, giving a deliberately casual shrug.

He set up two glasses, ice; spared part of his mind to concentrate really hard on keeping his hands from shaking. Picked a bottle out, his whole spine prickling with the awareness of being watched. This might actually qualify as the longest conversation he'd ever had with Loki without someone throwing a punch. (A sarcastic voice in the back of his mind suggested it might be the longest conversation *anyone* had ever had with Loki without someone throwing a punch, at least in recent years.)

"What possible reason would I have," Loki said finally, "to share a drink with an Avenger?"

Tony paused what he was doing so he could properly emphasize his answer, giving what he felt was the most obvious and important reason first. "For one thing, this drink cost *twenty-six thousand dollars* at auction."

Loki didn't look impressed.

Fine. More serious reasons. Tony poured both glasses while he arranged his thoughts. Probably 'You seem like you could use someone to talk to' wouldn't go down well. He couldn't make his shoulders loosen and the tension was starting to turn into a dull ache.

"Look. Obviously your br--uh, Thor's given us a bit of history on you guys. Well, based off of what went down today I think it's safe to assume he's something of an unreliable narrator. I'm guessing SHIELD hasn't exactly gone to extremes to get your side of it all." He put one glass up on the bar for Loki but didn't stop talking long enough to let a natural pause form - presumably it would just be some dismissive comment making fun of the idea that Loki would even care what 'mortals' thought about the situation.

"Now you and I both know I'm hardly going to take your word as gospel but here's the thing," he gestured loosely with his glass: "Thunderdome's got his own bias and I have a shortage of back-up Asgardians to provide alternative perspectives. At the very least, you have to like the idea of maybe driving a wedge in the team, maybe turning some of us against him, am I wrong? Rhetorical question, I'm not wrong."

He took a sip while he let that bait sink in, letting the warmth of the scotch brace him, gold and peaty. God, that was a good bottle, he couldn't believe he was wasting it on this asshole. Then again, if it was the last thing he ever drank, at least it was decent.

Loki's smile was slow, but didn't look completely fake. "I suppose I might, at that."

Oh. Uh... It was hard to feel smug about convincing Loki to stay and talk when that meant more time in which Loki might get pissed off enough to break his neck.

Well... every silver lining had a cloud, and all that. Tony took a longer sip, giving the scotch time to burn into his tongue and quiet his nerves. *Please* let it quiet his nerves.

"I might also just like drinking," Loki continued, a flash of wry humor as he approached the bar.

Tony gestured with his glass again, indicating the other drink of scotch waiting on top of the bar. "No reason not to aim for both."

Loki raised an eyebrow slightly, picking up the second glass. He started to take a drink, then broke into a coughing fit and set it back down with an expression of incredulous distaste.

When he'd recovered, he demanded, "Why would you *drink* that?!"

"It might be an acquired taste," Tony admitted, stifling a grin. "Too much for you?"

Loki eyed him with irritation, and then the scotch with a similar look. After a pause, he said peevishly, "I'm simply unaccustomed. Mead is sweeter."

Tony froze in place for a moment as genius struck. He hastily drained the rest of his glass (oh, god, what a waste, but his throat felt *great*) and surveyed the contents of the bar. "Sweeter, huh?"

"Yes, that's what I said. Are you deaf as well as simple?"

Tony grinned. He got out his cocktail mixer and started adding ingredients. Ice, amaretto, white rum, curaçao... This was the best kind of genius: it was either going to end in catastrophe or in *sheer awesome*. "Loki, my cranky friend, I am about to introduce you to something wonderful."

He'd finished adding ingredients and was halfway through shaking when he realized that hadn't gotten a snide response. He glanced up to see the frowning, slightly confused look on Loki's face.

"What?"

Loki opened his mouth, then seemed to shake himself. "You haven't asked your question."

Yeah. Tony looked back down, hesitating a little. The burn in his throat was good but it would take a bit more time for the scotch to really hit his bloodstream. He could have done with a lot more than one glass for this. "You said-- monsters between the worlds. You were talking about different ones, weren't you? The Chitauri-- they were the ones that found you."

Thor insisted there was nothing between the worlds, that this was one of Loki's lies. Thor also insisted that their long-distance surveillance guy couldn't see between the worlds, and that was why they hadn't known Loki was alive *before* he picked up those crappy new friends and the hypno-stick.

Tony thought it was actually pretty plausible that if there really was *nothing* then the sensory deprivation could have driven Loki to hallucinate some pretty messed up stuff. But he also thought it was pretty plausible that maybe Asgard didn't know everything.

"Ah," Loki said flatly. "You'll need a good deal more alcohol if you intend to question me further about *that*."

"Well, that's a response with terrifying implications," Tony muttered to himself. It was all too easy to recall the cold desolation from the other side of the Tesseract portal - and apparently there was something *scarier*.

Put like that, it seemed like a really good idea to pick up Loki's discarded glass of scotch and drink that one too.

Loki eyed him dangerously. "I hope you don't expect me to stand here and watch you drink yourself into a stupor."

"Cleaning as I go," Tony said with a weak smile. Drinks, right. Obscenely sweet cocktail mix. He bypassed the shot glasses and pulled out a couple of highballs, banking on the fact that Loki wouldn't know any better. "Let's see, sweet for you..." in a nice, full glass, "and some extra flavor for me." 'Extra flavor' being a whole lot of soda to water it down.

If Loki saw through the cheap trick, he gave no indication. He simply picked up his glass and waited for Tony to take a drink before tasting his own. Apparently it was a pleasant surprise; he raised his eyebrows and drank some more, draining half the glass.

"Sweeter?" Tony asked cheerfully.

"Acceptable," Loki conceded. Operation Get Loki Smashed was officially under way. Hopefully he wasn't an angry drunk.

The sensible thing would be to keep the bar between them. Tony tucked a couple of bottles into the crook of his left arm and grabbed the necks of two more with his right hand; the left was already holding his drink. "Okay," he said, heading around the bar to the curved seating by the fireplace, far enough around to give himself a view. "So for a less horrific topic of conversation, how about that driving a wedge thing. What's your side of this whole beef with Thor?"

Loki followed, taking a seat on one of the low-slung chairs instead of the long sectional; there was plenty of distance and a coffee table between them. On the one hand, Tony was kind of grateful for that, but it was still interesting.

After a moment's consideration, Loki said, "Nothing much, really. For a thousand years he told me to know my place. I finally decided my place was no longer *beneath him*."

Tony carefully reminded himself that if he rolled his eyes he might get thrown out the window. He made the polite listening face that he made for the Board every month. "Huh. See, that sounds almost reasonable, but I'm just not seeing how it requires ruling Earth."

"Oh, it doesn't; that's just a bit of fun," Loki said, with the sort of smile that just *begged* to be punched, and of course the fucker was doing it on purpose.

Tony took a long swig of the sickly sweet mess in his glass. It was not a good progression from the scotch. He felt like he should apologize to the distillery somehow for crimes against whisky, ugh.

He slouched back against the sofa, abruptly sick of his fear, of waiting for a knife to flash through the air and embed itself in the flesh of his throat. "All right. Obviously, you are capable of plumbing depths of obnoxiousness previously undiscovered by science. I know it, you know it. If your goal here is to provoke me into insulting you so badly you finally kill me, can you let me know so I can work on a really good one? Something worth dying over."

Loki's smile became even more sardonic. "I haven't decided yet," he said, raising his glass as if toasting Tony before taking a long drink himself.

Tony turned that response over in his mind, and realized that it was actually creepier because it might be true. It was hard to imagine a scenario where the conversation came to a natural end and Loki just... peacefully left. Loki wasn't a peacefully leaving kind of guy. It was probably going to boil down to whether Jarvis could get a suit here fast enough when things turned nasty, *Tony's life* was going to boil down to that, and all because he went one stupid battle-field insult too far.

He should have brought the scotch over as well as the liqueurs. He needed to be drunk. He needed to be alert and sober. He needed to hold it together. Good *god*, but his rigid shoulders hurt.

"Right," Tony muttered, putting all of it out of his mind. He had to focus. And preferably not die. If he could get information on top of that, then bonus points. He looked at Loki, trying to appear calm and confident. "Here's what I know. On Asgard, everyone agrees magic is a thing that exists but it's not for respectable princes. Thor is sometimes really patronizing and I bet you don't like that any more than I do. At some point you probably told him to stop being a dick and he said you were being oversensitive. Technically I don't *know* that you seethed in silent resentment for a few hundred years but it seems pretty plausible. Then you found out you were adopted aaand crap hit the fan. Am I close?"

"Warriors," Loki corrected tonelessly. "True magic is not for warriors. To mix--"

"True magic?" Tony interrupted without meaning to. He winced slightly at Loki's expression but figured he may as well finish at that point. "As opposed to what, fake magic?"

Loki snorted lightly. "Something like that. Surely Thor has explained to you my skills are but lowly *tricks*."

As if to demonstrate, Loki gave a loose wave over the open liqueur bottles and towards his glass, like he was physically gesturing the alcohol in - and the glass *actually topped itself up*.

Tony stared a little, shifting his back against the sofa uncomfortably. He'd definitely heard Thor call them 'tricks', but he hadn't realized that was in comparison to some other, maybe fancier magic. He'd assumed it was just Thor's attitude to magic in general. And it was good-humored, usually - well, mostly.

Well... okay. Maybe sometimes Thor's tone was pretty disparaging. Then again, you couldn't really blame a guy for disparaging someone who kept physically attacking him. It was impossible to know whether it had been that way before.

Loki gave a thin smile, obviously taking Tony's silence as confirmation. "As I was saying. Magic is not for warriors, for it relies on mastering living forces. Some nurture and create; others hunt and slay. It's about..." He paused, made a vague gesture Tony didn't understand. "Social spheres?"

"Men go fight, women raise kids and cast spells? That's not dumb at all."

"Indeed," Loki drawled, slouching a little lower in the already low chair, feet braced wide apart. "It must be a reassurance to you, having no such pointless distinctions on your own realm."

The sarcasm was thick enough to slice, and Tony ceded the point with a small quirk of his lips. "Touché."

Loki drank some more of his cocktail; Tony tried not to let his eyes catch on it too obviously. He felt like the least subtle person on the planet, right now. It was fine, it was fine, Loki was drinking, no one was flying through the air. Yet. Everything was fine.

"So tell me, mortal..." Loki gave him a vaguely disdainful expression that had probably been practiced in the mirror. A lot. "What else do you 'know'?"

"Asgard likes its alcohol really sweet." Tony went for the obvious to buy himself a moment. The surrealism of the whole situation was throwing him. Here he was, in his penthouse, drinking and chatting... with *Loki*. "They're into banishment and ostracism, but also some really heavy corporal punishment. There's a guy who can supposedly see everything that happens and all he does is stand around waiting for people to call for a space cab."

Loki's mouth twitched at that one. Ha.

"I know you used to have a bunch of friends who'd all run around with you and Thor--"

--*getting into pointless fights*, he'd intended to say, but Loki interrupted him with a blaze of indignation.

"You mean *Thor's* friends. They made their loyalties more than clear, believe me."

"Right." Tony looked him over, comparing that to what Thor had said, how Thor had remembered it. "They didn't like you even a bit? No hanging out, no joking around...?"

"There were certainly jokes," Loki retorted, words short and sharp. "If you think they were a sign of friendship then by all means let me *joke* with you."

Tony put a hand to his chest in dramatic dismay. "Honeybee! Are you saying you don't want to be my friend?"

That seemed to blunt Loki's anger a little, which was the opposite of what Tony's ridiculous jokes did for most people. Loki raised his eyebrows, still clearly bitter but at least in an amused way now. "Are you offering me your loyalty, Iron Man?"

'Loyalty' was drawn out, silky and sly.

"I like that," Tony said wryly. "Most people, when they ask what I'm offering, it's not loyalty they're after." It was the truth and he didn't mind throwing it out there. It was amazing how much a little pre-emptive honesty deterred assholes from trying to use things as insults. "Offering money, offering power - that's what they want to know. You? Loyalty." He took another drink, definitely feeling some warmth now, and smiled to himself. "That's nice, that's refreshing."

Loki seemed to look at him a little more thoughtfully for a moment, but then Tony realized how sharp-edged that look was and felt his stomach sink a little.

"You can hardly blame them," Loki murmured, with a soft, malicious smile, "not when you're so very... *useful*. The money, the resources, the trinkets and toys... tell me, how many things *have* you developed for SHIELD? I was told they had rejected you and yet you seem to be at their every beck and call. And your most well-known friends... all they are required to do is tolerate you and they are lavished with power and wealth. No wonder they show such... dedication. "

Okay, so pre-emptive honesty deterred *some* assholes. And talking about loyalty made Loki defensive. Noted.

"Might want to check your grasp of Earth customs," Tony said, keeping his tone determinedly casual. "SHIELD didn't reject me, that was a fake-out, a power play. Pretty common negotiation tactic and believe me, I would know."

"Ah, a negotiation tactic," Loki nodded, still smiling that smile. "So you... negotiated something, in return."

Something Tony hated twisted in his gut, a little gnawing insecurity despite himself. "Oh, I get plenty from them," he said, and hated even more the way it came out strained. It was *true*,

dammit; the SHIELD contracts were worth decent money, and having some situational jurisdiction meant not getting thrown in jail for vigilantism, and sure Fury was a manipulative asshole about it but Tony *knew* that and had made a decision with his eyes open.

"Of course," Loki agreed, in a tone so utterly pitying that Tony was kind of impressed even while he fantasized about firing the unibeam right through Loki's stupid face. Then Loki topped it off by taking a long drink while glancing away, entire body language posed to give off vibes of being just too *tactful* to comment further.

Tony doubted Loki had ever cared about tact in his life, but damn, the guy had serious talent in passive aggressive douchebaggery.

Tony took a drink of his own and reminded himself not to provoke the violent alien killer. Except he wasn't really good at backing down when people were being assholes. "You know, and this is kind of a chicken and egg thing, but I'm pretty sure your habit of insulting everyone around you didn't exactly endear you to them."

"It's all in *good humor*," Loki said, a resentful sneer on his face; "a bit of fun, hmm? Surely you're not so *sensitive*."

Tony winced a little, thinking of Thor saying Loki had always been 'oversensitive'. He sighed. "Yeah, I know that one. 'Lighten up', 'learn to take a joke'." *Starks are made of iron*. "Guess some things transcend world boundaries."

Chicken, egg. Tony really didn't care who'd been mean first. He cared that the whole thing had spilled over onto Earth.

Loki got a hint of that thoughtful look on his face again, just for a moment. Then his eyes narrowed. "And what is it you intend to negotiate here? Do not think I will forget you are an ally of Thor, for all that you invite me to undermine him."

Tony blinked. "I thought we covered that. Knowledge. I want your side of things. I like to know stuff, it's kind of my thing. Well, that, and my rakish, devil-may-care charm." He flashed a quick cocky grin and drank some more booze. His tongue was adjusting to the over-sweetness. He should probably slow down, but tipsy was a much nicer feeling than stifled terror.

Loki eyed him a moment longer, then abruptly quirked his mouth up. "Far be it from me to turn away someone who seeks to court my favor." He slouched down more casually in the low chair. "What would you hear first? Some endearing tales of childhood folly? One of the many times Thor called on me to save him from strife, then mocked every means I used to do so? Or how Thor gained praise his whole life for fighting giants, but when I won a war against Jotunheim I earned nothing but scorn and punishment?" His voice was rising, words coming sharp and strident. "Perhaps you would like to hear tell of the centuries the All-Father promised we were both born to be kings, until I showed myself the better defender of Asgard and he cast me off the Rainbow Bridge!"

This seemed like a good time to try not to get killed. Tony thought for a couple of seconds, then ventured, "I think that I'm missing some pretty necessary context and uh... nuance. To

judge any of those."

Loki glared at him, breathing hard, and Tony shifted uneasily. Instead of attacking, though, Loki rolled his eyes and had some more to drink and settled back into that wide-legged sprawl. "Your One-Eye preached at me for causing deaths to bring about peace," he sneered, half-muttering; "as if he is not building weapons out of every powerful object that falls into his hands. Said I kill for fun as though *Thor* did not stand at his very side, unshackled, honored as a hero! This is the Law of Loki, that precedes me in every realm."

"The easy difference there," Tony pointed out, lifting his glass-- ah, no, actually, better to hold off on that. He put the glass down on the coffee table for a minute. The difference, right. "Ah... is, Thor did his killing on other planets, and you killed humans, which, for obvious reasons, those of us who are also humans tend to take somewhat personally. Clearly it sucks from your perspective, but the fact remains, it's a lot easier for us to overlook the first one than the second."

Loki actually stopped short and gave something very like a double-take. "You would argue... not that Thor is inherently righteous, but that it is simply, he did not take his bloodlust out on *you*?"

It didn't *sound* threatening. Tony tipped his head a little, examining Loki's expression. "Yeah...? I've only got his description of how he used to behave, but it's pretty safe to say that if he'd pulled that crap here on Earth, it doesn't matter how life-changing his 'Come to Jesus' moment was, we'd be greeting him with a couple divisions of armored infantry. "

Loki exhaled heavily. "How refreshing not to hear the usual gilded lies of justice," he murmured, looking a little surprised - and cautious, like Tony might take his words back at any moment. The expression seemed... not so acted, not like a performance. Maybe even genuine.

Oh, Tony thought distractedly. *There you are.*

Loki. Sitting in Tony's penthouse, talking, forgetting to put on the big show. Loki, who had turned up of his own volition and initiated a conversation, instead of dealing with the day's events by going and stabbing a bunch of stuff. Loki had accepted a drink, stayed...

Maybe there was more to be gained here than just surviving the night.

Maybe Tony was drunker than he'd realized. This was *Loki*. The whole thing was probably just to screw with Tony's head. Maybe Loki had had a rough time growing up, maybe not; either way, the Loki they had to deal with *now* was cruel and spiteful and Tony couldn't afford to assume that the lack of immediate violence was going to last.

"There are still plenty of people with shitty families who don't try to take over the planet," Tony said, and he knew it sounded annoyed but he was frustrated by the ridiculous turn of his thoughts.

Loki widened his eyes, feigning innocence, and gestured at himself, "Is it *my* fault they lack ambition?"

Horrifyingly, Tony found himself actually stifling a laugh. Maybe it was the perfect golden level of tipsy he'd reached, or the absurdity of Loki's over-acted expression, but... he couldn't help it. "Shhh," he protested guiltily, "stop it, you're not supposed to be funny."

Loki grinned, looking way too pleased with himself. There was something incredibly surreal about seeing a grin on the guy's face that wasn't bitter or malicious. No, what was surreal was that it almost felt kind of *pleasant*.

Tony was so not equipped to handle this, this should be... it should be Natasha or someone like that. Someone who could get into Loki's head, not sit here and drink with him and laugh at his inappropriate humor.

Thor had told them all that Loki had changed when he found out he was adopted. Tony was vague on the exact timeline, but if... if Loki had changed in *reaction* to something, it stood to reason he might change in reaction to other things. Influencing factors. (Oxidizing agents. Catalysts.)

And how desperate for company must Loki be, to sit and drink with an *Avenger*?

Oh, fuck it. Loki was here, drinking with an Avenger. Tony was sitting in his own home drinking with Loki. At this point, there wasn't much left to do other than just go with it. This was not the time for overthinking. This was the time for having another drink, getting as much information as he could, and vaguely hoping that neither Loki nor the hangover killed him.

--

Regrettably, the hangover didn't kill him.

Tony slid into the debrief only ten minutes late, which by his standards was practically early. He stifled a yawn and waved apologies at Steve's disapproving sigh. "I know, I know, I'm late. Loki stopped by last night, I didn't get a lot of sleep."

Thor made a disgruntled noise and a few people rolled their eyes; Tony sat up straighter. "*Oh*. No, I mean, Loki actually stopped by, I'm not kidding."

"And you... didn't sleep," Bruce said slowly.

"Oh, good grief, not like that." Tony glared at him from behind his sunglasses. "Give me some credit."

Natasha gave a very staged cough. When he glanced at her, she nodded at his hands. Puzzled, Tony stared at them - and then he saw his wrists peeking out of his sleeves, the rubbed-red marks on them. Like handcuff marks. He sighed and took the homing cuffs out of his pocket, tossing them onto the table with a clatter. "For the armor. In case he tried to kill me? Good heavens, am I the only person here without his mind in the gutter?"

There was a delicate pause; apparently no one wanted to touch that straight line. Pity.

Thor leaned forward, looking concerned. "Are you injured?"

"No." Tony rubbed his forehead and okay, maybe he was deliberately drawing this out a little, but he had a headache and it was cheap entertainment. "I might be a little hung over. I was watering my drinks down pretty heavily, you know. Your brother's got a liver of steel."

"You--" Steve took a breath. "Okay. I think you need to run us through this from the beginning."

Tony gave them a selectively edited account. Loki showed up to insult him, Loki was a stereotypical lonely Disney villain, Loki didn't want to admit it. Sniping at each other while getting progressively drunker. How fucking difficult it was to get a damn demigod drunk and talkative. He left out the part about Loki falling asleep with him and waking up screaming. He left out all the cuddling, too. It seemed... personal.

"He could have come to me," Thor said quietly, looking hurt.

"That's exactly why..." Tony sighed. He really, really didn't need to be the target of a jealous thunder god. "Natasha, you're a girl, explain it to him."

Natasha gave him a scathing look. Bruce was the one who actually spoke up. "Thor, Loki can't come to you because he knows you love him and he doesn't know how to handle it. Tony doesn't like him, so he's not a threat. No offense, Tony."

"None taken. But, uh, you missed all the excitement yesterday, how did you...?"

"I saw the preliminary report," Bruce said mildly. "Once he referred to himself as a monster, it was pretty obvious. Actually, a lot of it was pretty obvious. People don't just snap like they do on TV, there was bound to be some history there--"

"You should have called us in, Tony." Steve was giving one of his 'this is serious' frowns. "We don't need to psychoanalyze Loki, we need to capture--"

"Ooh, psychoanalyze, you know I love those fifty dollar words." Tony smiled because underneath he was tensing up; this was about to be the part of the meeting with all the shouting and arguing.

"We need to capture him," Steve repeated, with emphasis, "and get him off our world."

"See, that's where I actually disagree."

Thor and Steve started to argue at the same time; Tony leaned back in his chair and waited them out. It seemed like Thor won the coin toss, and he glowered at Tony.

"My brother belongs on Asgard. You cannot keep him from us."

"Keeping him from *you* is not the problem. It's the part where he escapes again and you can't keep him from *us* that troubles me." Tony glanced around; he could see Bruce's mind working, probably already figuring out where he was going with this.

"That won't happen this time," Thor said obstinately. "He will be appropriately punished and then--"

"No, see, that is *exactly the problem*." Tony took his sunglasses off and slammed them onto the table. "I am not cleaning up the mess he makes on *my planet* when *you lot* -" and that came out with a bit more vitriol than he intended, "- screw him up again."

Actually, the whole thing was louder and sharper than he intended, which he mostly figured out by the way everyone was staring at him, but *come on*. Asgard had had their chance with Loki - more than one - and each time it was Earth that wound up paying the price.

"We need a better option," he said emphatically. "Or he's just going to keep getting worse."

"So... what?" Clint finally spoke up, and Tony watched him carefully. Clint's reaction was the one he was most worried about, after Thor's; they'd all suffered at Loki's hands but Clint had had his whole mind stolen and that wasn't just something you moved past. "You're on Loki's side now?"

"My god, no," Tony said fervently. "I'm on the side of 'let's stop him taking out his daddy issues on every major metropolis in the northern hemisphere'."

"We can't just ignore what he's done," Steve said, never mind that that wasn't what Tony was suggesting at all.

It was okay, though. He'd prepared for that argument. He gave his very best 'fuck you' smile, because this was a nasty tactic and he just didn't care. "You know, you're right. Sorry, Agent Romanov. It was great having you on the team, best of luck in prison, you know how it goes. In fact if you want to be thorough, Steve, you could probably try to get me on criminal negligence for some of the stuff Obadiah did with my company, I mean, it's a little trumped-up but let's not hold back. And I'm pretty sure lying on Army paperwork is a felony, in a time of war no less--"

Clint looked pissed. Natasha looked speculative.

Steve scowled, indignant and a little angry. "That's not what I meant, and you know it--"

"Then what *did* you mean, because we ignore what people have done whenever it suits us--"

"Slippery slope is a fallacy, not a reason," Bruce said flatly, giving him an accusing look. "There are plenty of significant distinctions between Loki's actions and any of ours. What's your actual argument, Tony?"

Tony gave an impatient huff. One thing he'd never understand was Bruce's belief that giving people calm, logical explanations actually worked. People said they wanted logic, but they responded better to the *appearance* of logic than the real thing. Manipulating boardrooms was all about selling people a story that matched how they thought the truth *should* look. Slowing down and spelling things out was frustrating enough to begin with; it became ten times as frustrating when people didn't even listen.

Fine. He closed his eyes for a moment and summoned his patience. "My argument is, this thing we're doing where we keep giving him to Asgard and they lock him up and pretend like

they might actually execute him this time and then he escapes and blows up some more of *our planet* - it's not *working!*"

He put both his palms flat on the table and leaned forward a little, meeting each of his teammates' gazes, one at a time. "Yes, he's a murderer. If containing him actually worked, then sure - but if what it takes to stop him killing people is the occasional really awkward hug, then fuck, let's do it. If he shows up when I'm alone and unarmored, you bet I'm gonna play nice and listen to his sob story. Maybe we'll get lucky and my roguish charm will convince him that humans are actually pretty great and he should leave us alone."

He turned his gaze back to Natasha, knowing she would understand what he was saying with his next bit. "In a perfect world, we could demand justice. I'd settle for him *redirecting* his attention."

Her eyes flicked to Thor then back to Tony, eyebrows lifting a little. He lifted his chin a fraction in confirmation. Asgard created Loki; if the guy directed his bloodlust there where it belonged then maybe they'd finally fucking *fix it*.

Natasha gave a noncommittal hum. "Tony has a point. Sometimes alternative methods can be... advantageous." She cocked her head, studying him. "Are you sure you're being objective on this?"

Tony snorted. "Of course I'm not being objective. Why waste time trying to be *objective*? It doesn't take objectivity to see that if we keep shipping him back to Asgard, he's going to keep on coming back angrier and meaner."

There was a brief lull while the others chewed on that. Finally Steve looked across the table at Clint. "Any thoughts?"

Clint was silent for a long time. He didn't look pleased. Finally, looking a little like it killed him to say it, he said, "I'm not in love with the idea, but... stopping him is more important than revenge."

"Yes, thank you, that is exactly what I'm saying." Tony looked at Steve expectantly. "Come on, Captain. Think big picture here."

Steve drummed his fingers on the table. "It's... worth thinking about, at least," he admitted. "There's still the issue of actually *capturing* Loki, though. We're putting the cart before the horse, a bit."

Tony shrugged; he wanted his groundwork laid before that happened, because once Loki was caught there was a limited window before Thor swept him off to Asgard. And speaking of - "Thor?"

"I dislike the idea that you would simply ignore his crimes." Thor frowned deeply. "Yet, it is true we bear some responsibility for the fate of your realm. I must think upon what you have said today."

Well, it was a start. A pretty good start, actually. Tony let out a breath. "That's all I want. Just think about it."

And in the meantime, he could lay his own plans.

--

"Jarvis," Tony said, when he got back to the Tower, "is our surprise visitor still there?"

"He is, sir. However, he did step out for approximately an hour and a half, earlier."

"Hmm." Tony drummed his fingers against the wall of the elevator. Damn, he'd kind of been hoping to crawl into bed and catch up on some sleep. "I assume you'd warn me if he'd set up some elaborate booby-trap up there?"

"I would certainly consider it, sir."

"Aw, baby, I love you too." He grinned, pulling the homing cuffs out of his pocket and snapping them onto his wrists. Better safe than... falling hundreds of feet with no safety net.

The elevator slowed, stopped, let him out at the penthouse. He stepped out, peering around cautiously.

Somehow, Loki had found his way into the computer system; there were at least a couple dozen files up on holographic display, blueprints and multimedia files and reports. Snatches of sound clips played as Loki enlarged first one file, then another, flipping through them at speed. Most of them were in Tony's own voice; he recognized dictated notes, test logs, press conferences.

"I'm just not the hero type." Yeah, hard to forget *that* press conference.

"Jarvis," Tony said, very politely. His heart was pounding. "You didn't mention that our new friend was reading my diary."

Loki's fingers faltered, very briefly; Tony only noticed because he was watching carefully.

"I'm sorry, sir." Jarvis sounded genuinely apologetic. "I was unable."

"What do you mean, unable?"

"Ah, that would have been me." Loki smiled faintly, but didn't look away from the holographic screen. "I didn't want to be bothered by your... I suppose it was meant to be security?" He smirked, almost winking. "So quaint."

Tony swayed a little, catching his breath. It was easy to forget how insanely powerful Loki was. All the stuff he did, all the 'magic', it was impossible enough to seem unreal. Teleportation, illusions, even his super-strength, all of that Tony could shake off as if it was just a dream. But this, his computer, his goddamn *state-of-the-art*, purpose-built AI - Loki just waltzed into the system and bypassed all the security like it was as easy as walking past a 'keep out' sign.

"Yep, that's me," he said, forcing a smile. "Tony Stark, world-class inventor of... quaint."

Loki laughed, soft and mocking. "Oh, don't pout. I'm sure you're quite talented... by *mortal* standards."

"That's what they all tell me." Tony crossed the room in a few long strides. Deliberately, he rested one hand on Loki's arm while reaching across him to turn the projection off. He could feel Loki go very still and quiet under his palm, and wondered whether that came from paranoia or being hard-up for touch. Or even both.

Loki tsked quietly. "I was watching that."

"Too much television is bad for your eyes," Tony retorted. He was about to add 'go play outside' and then he thought better of it; Loki would probably take it was an invitation to wreak havoc on Manhattan again. "Have you eaten yet?"

Loki drew back, turning to face him; Tony let his hand fall back to his side. At least Loki looked amused. Amused was probably safe. "How long are you intending to keep up this charade?"

"That depends." Tony flicked his fingers at the air where the holograms had been. "The superhero charade? Probably until it kills me, I dig the adrenaline. The charade of being a responsible adult who eats on a regular basis? About half an hour, so if you want lunch you should speak up now."

Loki narrowed his eyes briefly, then walked backwards a few steps, putting some more distance between them. "You know, you're not nearly so witty as you think you are."

Tony shrugged. "I've got enough money, I can pay people to laugh at my jokes."

Loki's mouth twitched but he shook his head. "Ah, but you don't pay me."

"Do you want me to?" Tony grinned, not particularly serious but enjoying the mental image of Fury's reaction. "I could put you on the payroll. Special consultant related to magic... stuff."

Loki's eyes shadowed briefly; something in that had been the wrong thing to say. He shook his head again and directed a shallow, mocking bow at Tony. "My thanks for the gracious offer, but I think I'll take my leave."

Tony watched him vanish, then wryly addressed the empty air. "So that's a no on lunch?"

"Very droll, sir," Jarvis commented.

"No one asked you." Tony turned back to the little podium and switched the holographic projector back on. He was still alive. Loki was gone and he was still alive. "Is Loki still influencing your systems?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Show me everything he looked at." It seemed like Tony wasn't the only one making plans.

#

Collateral Damage

Chapter Summary

Loki decides to do some fact-finding of his own. Tony gets encouragement from an unexpected source.

It wasn't long until Loki popped his head up again; after all, he was still in the middle of some scheme. SHIELD forwarded all of them a report on a robbery in Belgium with Loki's fingerprints - literally - all over it, despite the hour-long blank in the security tapes. A mansion full of priceless art and none of it stolen; Loki had gone straight for the hidden safe and taken god only knew what from it. Along the way, he'd slaughtered almost everyone in the mansion.

Tony spent a long time rereading the report, wondering if they could have captured Loki before it had happened. If they'd grabbed Loki while he was off-guard and vulnerable, in the street... Except, then what? Asgard, escape, and all it meant was that someone else would be dead. Probably a lot more people.

He doubted that mattered to the poor kids whose parents were dead *now*. Or the cook whose face Loki had sliced up.

He was about to tell Jarvis to start a new file, then stopped. He thought of Loki breezing past his security and rifling through all his projects. Loki didn't need to see this.

Finding paper in the top part of Stark Tower was no easy feat. Finally he went to Bruce, who rummaged in a drawer and came back with a spiral-bound notebook and a pen. "What do you need paper for, anyway? You hate paper. You called it the cudgel of an inefficient bureaucracy and a disgrace to man's ever-striving quest for advancement."

Specifically, Tony had been ranting about government departments that still required paper forms instead of allowing people to submit information electronically, but by now it was second nature to play along with whatever people expected of him. "I am actually flattered that you remember that--"

"You were pretty vehement about it."

"--but sometimes a man just needs to go old-school." Tony started to retreat to the elevator, waving the notebook in the air. "Thanks for the cudgel."

He waited until the elevator door closed before flipping open the notebook to draw a line down the middle of the first page. Two columns: Survivors, Deaths.

He didn't get much copied over before the elevator reached his workshop, and he paused long enough to get his desk, kick his feet up on it, and call to Jarvis for mood music. Then he did the rest of it, copying each name and set of details from the SHIELD report. It felt weird to be handwriting something that wasn't an autograph, and with a sour taste in his throat he closed the notebook to scrawl his signature over the cover.

"Congratulations," he said, quietly enough to be drowned out by the Led Zep coming through the speakers. "You have now joined the increasingly large group of people who've been completely fucked over by Tony Stark."

He tossed the notebook onto his desk and wearily rubbed his face. Fuck Loki, anyway. Psycho needed to take a goddamn Xanax.

Because he hadn't suffered enough yet (as if there was such a thing as *enough*), Tony picked the tablet back up again and opened the files that came attached with the report, the original interview transcripts. They spoke French in Belgium so he could read them easily enough, even if he kind of wished he couldn't.

There were four survivors altogether: the two kids, a cleaner, and the cook Loki had mutilated. Roosje Lemaire. Tony had already made a note to organize plastic surgeons for her, the best of the best. He didn't care who he had to fly where or how much he had to pay to make it happen. He could do that much for her. And a prosthetic eye. There probably wasn't one good enough, he'd design something, make it better than a real one.

He couldn't even tell, reading her interview, what had made Loki do it. Lemaire said she had dropped to the floor, begging - same as the cleaner, and that was probably what had saved them both; Loki did have that sick thing for people *kneeling*. Then she said Loki had smiled and just gone at her with his sword. Why? What was he trying to prove?

What made Lemaire different from the other woman, Janssen?

It didn't make any sense. Unless it was just random cruelty, and that was entirely possible too.

Tony sighed and flipped to the kids' interviews. The little boy was too young to give much. The girl - Yvette, good god, the least he could do was give them their *names*. Yvette and Frederic. According to Yvette's interview, the bad man had come in, her tutor had yelled at him and got a sword in his chest for his trouble. Yvette had yelled at her brother to run, had charged up and actually socked Loki in the gut like some fearless miniature Natasha.

Seven years old. Dear lord.

She said Loki had crouched down and touched her cheek (wiped blood on her face) and whispered in her ear.

"Il m'a dit que j'étais très courageuse et que j'ai sauvé la vie de mon frère."

"You're still in there," Tony murmured, tapping at that sentence on the tablet. "There's still *something* in there." Something that knew how to stop.

"He told me I was very brave, and that I saved my brother's life."

On the other hand - Tony flipped back to SHIELD's summary report - in the estimated timeline, not long after Loki had let the kids go, he'd attacked and half-blinded Lemaire. Whatever kernel of conscience was still in there was buried under a pretty heavy layer of rage.

Maybe he'd made a mistake. Maybe this whole thing was a terrible idea. But unless they were allowed to execute Loki - and Thor had made it pretty clear that usurping Asgard's justice system was going to offend Odin in the kind of way that ended *really badly* for Earth - Tony couldn't think of much else besides the status quo, and *that* was just untenable.

Technically there was a chance Loki might get himself killed honorably in battle, but it hadn't happened so far - despite some members of the team putting in *significant* effort - and they couldn't afford to depend on a chance that slim.

Tony pulled up the photo of Roosje Lemaire with the paramedics, her face dripping with blood, a ruined mess where her left eye had been. That... that right there, that was why he was doing this. It was what he was trying to stop, and the consequence, all rolled up into one guilt-inducing jpeg.

He didn't know how long he stared at the photo. Eventually, Jarvis lowered the music and announced an incoming call from Pepper. Tony snorted.

"She told you to turn my music down, didn't she. You're supposed to be *my* AI, Jarvis, you traitor."

"My apologies, sir, but it did seem you might not hear me otherwise."

Tony took his feet off the desk and sat up properly, putting the tablet aside and switching on the closest monitor. "Put her through here."

Pepper's face flickered up on screen and he felt his heart ease a little. He couldn't help but smile, and leaned forward a little, resting his chin in his hand. "Hey, Pepper-pot. Holding down the fort okay?"

"As always," she said, with a cute little smirk.

"Well, you know, I'm showing I care." He reached to the tablet and turned it off, so that photo would stop staring up at him. "You're still coming in tomorrow?"

"That's right, I'll get in at..." Pepper paused, checking her notes as if she didn't have her whole itinerary memorized. "Around nine thirty. If I come straight to the Tower I should be--"

"Ah," Tony said, as a thought occurred to him. A very ugly thought involving Loki standing in his penthouse in the middle of the night. "You know what? Why don't I book us in at a luxury hotel, just the two of us. No business. It'll be like a romantic weekend getaway."

Pepper arched an eyebrow at him. "It's Tuesday."

"I said *like* a romantic weekend getaway. Only in more of a romantic... midweek kind of sense. Even better, we'll miss the weekend crowds." He tried for a charming smile, but unfortunately Pepper had developed a really unfair habit of seeing right through those.

"Tony." And that was her serious voice, right there. "What's wrong?"

Tony took a slow breath and let it out again. He wanted to say 'nothing, nothing'; wanted to distract and reassure her and deflect with a joke. He also didn't want to have a fight in twenty-four hours' time about how Pepper was a big girl and he needed to treat her like one, so he fought his better instincts and said, "It's a long story. Involving Thor's murderous adopted space invader brother. Can I tell you tomorrow? There's some stuff I want to run past you and I don't want to do it on the phone."

Pepper studied him for a moment longer, then nodded. "Okay."

"Thank you," he said, and meant it. "I'll email you the booking info. There's some other things as well, a woman in Belgium we need to take care of, find medical specialists, I'll send you the details."

"Belgium," Pepper said, but she didn't ask questions because she was Pepper and she was amazing. "Of course."

Tony looked at her through the screen and more than anything he wanted her here *right now*, hated her being away, but between the company and the Avengers there were just too many places to be for them to stay together all the time. "Pepper," he admitted, "I think I'm doing something really stupid."

"You usually are," Pepper said, but she smiled, rueful and fond. "And it usually turns out amazing."

"God, I hope so," Tony murmured, and closed his eyes.

--

It was actually a couple of days before they talked about it. When Pepper got in on Wednesday night she was tired - or said she was - and then they had oh-god-I-missed-you-sex, and then Pepper was *definitely* tired, and for that matter so was Tony, so they slept. (Tony kept his travel armor under the bed. He would have preferred it under his pillow but even briefcase-sized was, to be fair, a little too bulky.)

Thursday Pepper had to go in to the office, so Tony went back to Avengers Tower and started learning everything there was to know about the current state of visual prosthesis research. He did actually remember to get back to the hotel before Pepper was due back, which he was quite proud of, but then Pepper ruined it by being a workaholic and showing up two hours late.

At that point room service was a necessity, while Tony tapped at his tablet and tried to figure out whether to interface with the optic nerve or go direct to the visual cortex; he was not

doing a half-assed job on this, not when it was his fault, Lemaire deserved an eye that worked properly, dammit, and he was going to--

Pepper pulled the tablet away from him and set it aside. "Eat," she said firmly.

"I am eating," Tony protested, although come to think of it he wasn't sure the fork had ever made it to his mouth. It still had a piece of steak on its prongs; he popped the steak in his mouth, chewed a couple of times, and then showed her just to be obnoxious.

"Very mature," Pepper sighed.

He did at least have the decency to swallow before he answered. "That's why you love me."

"You seem very sure of that," she retorted, and he grinned and thought about showing her his half-chewed food again, but he settled down and they finished eating without (much) more ridiculousness.

Almost automatically he reached for the tablet again, but Pepper only moved it away from him. "Ah-ah-ah. You're going to tell me why we're here, in a hotel--"

"Beautiful hotel," Tony protested.

"--Instead of in our luxurious, custom-built penthouse, that I own at least twelve percent of--"

"Really, seriously, you're still milking that?"

"--Where I have clean clothes, and beautiful shoes, and three different kinds of body lotion that smell like pomegranate."

Tony paused. Cautiously he ventured, "I still maintain that you don't actually need three different--"

Pepper's expression dared him to continue. It wasn't the good kind of dare.

"Okay." He pushed his plate away so he could rest his forearms on the table. "So we have kind of a routine with Loki. He shows up, wreaks havoc, we catch him, send him off back to Asgard, they inflict some god-awful martial punishment on him until he escapes and it starts all over again. Asgard swears up and down that next time they really will execute him, the circle of life continues, roll credits."

Pepper nodded, just watching him and listening.

"And it's not..." Tony spread his hands in frustration. "It's not *doing* anything, he just kills more people. He needs about a thousand years of therapy. He's fucked up, Pepper."

She leaned back in her chair a little, tension growing in her body language. "I think we worked that out when he tried to lead an alien invasion."

Tony frowned, running through the little he'd got Loki to say about that. "We thought that was a disturbingly literal god complex. There's more to it, to him. He was in some kind of - I

don't know, we didn't get into the physics of it - some kind of interdimensional void, H.P. Lovecraft, the works. It really did a number on him. Those aliens didn't take it easy on him either. I mean, I'm not letting him off the hook, he has done some seriously terrible things, but..." He shrugged. "So have some other unnamed people we both know, except *they* were given the chance to get fixed, turn things around."

Pepper gave him a slightly incredulous look, and he wondered suddenly if she thought he was talking about Natasha or himself. "I think Loki's case is a little more extreme, don't you?"

"Not denying that." He drummed his fingers on the table, working through his words before he spoke them aloud. He didn't want to persuade Pepper, he wanted her honest opinion. Maybe it said something that he would rather trust her with this than his teammates, but Pepper's good judgment had been saving his ass for years. "I saw him have... kind of a flashback, I guess. In the middle of the street, right in the middle of a fight with Thor. He didn't have a clue where he was. He was so scared, Pepper."

"He might have been--"

"He wasn't. It was real."

She sighed a little, leaning forward to cover his hands with her own. "He's not you, Tony."

"No." Tony thought about the woman in Belgium, about all the corpses left behind. "No, he's violent, and dangerous, I know that. He doesn't think like us. He's not a twenty-first century human, he's a medieval space viking, with magic, and he thinks you solve problems by killing and if you still have a problem you probably haven't killed enough people."

Pepper was watching him closely. "But?"

He realized suddenly what he'd been trying to articulate to himself for a while now. "But that's exactly it. He's medieval. As much as he shouts about no one understanding him, he's not an angry teenager who came to school one day with a gun. Yeah, he never fit in, he likes black leather coats and dramatic monologues, but he's not fifteen. He's endured at least a thousand years of isolation and rejection."

He met her eyes in something oddly like surprise. "He held out *a thousand years* before he snapped and it still took something pretty big to do it. I can't help but think there must still be enough there to put back together."

"Or he's been ground down for a thousand years and there's nothing left but dust," Pepper suggested quietly, but he recognized it as just that: a suggestion. She was clearly thinking over his words, working through it with her brilliant, brilliant brain.

She rubbed her thumbs against the sides of his hands. "I'm assuming this all has something to do with the stupid thing you may or may not be doing? Tell me you didn't give Loki the business card of some poor psychiatrist, I don't want to handle that lawsuit."

Tony coughed and flashed her an awkward smile. "I might have befriended him? A little? There was hugging."

Pepper let go of him to cover her face with her hands. Her shoulders were shaking and for one panicked moment he thought she was crying, but she was laughing, of course she was laughing. She lowered her hands and looked at him with something like horrified (deeply horrified) amusement. "Only you, Tony, I swear."

"It was a spur of the moment thing," he said, "which all my best ideas are."

"And your worst," she pointed out meanly. "And how does the hotel fit into all of this?"

"Ah." Tony winced a little. "It turns out, Loki can just show up in the Tower whenever he wants. Personally I would have been quite happy never knowing that."

Pepper sucked a short breath in through her teeth, then seemed to accept it and move on. "Is that everything?"

"That's about the guts of it, yeah."

She nodded absently, staring off into the distance while she thought. Her posture was still tense. Tony eyed his tablet and thought about reaching for it while he waited - he didn't want to rush her after all - but he was pretty sure he'd just get his hand smacked if he tried.

A bit of tension aside, it was worrying how well she was taking this; that usually meant she was bottling it up under the surface and at some point there was going to be a very shouty argument with lots of emotions. Damn.

Eventually Pepper said, "So. We don't have the means to contain him ourselves. Apparently neither do Asgard, not for very long, anyway. We haven't been able to kill him and if Asgard thinks we're undermining their justice system we're risking war. And you're proposing... option four: Tony Stark, amateur psychologist?"

"I *am* a genius," he said. It came out a little defensively.

"But not always a terribly *social* genius." She rested her chin on the palm of her hand and looked at him seriously. "Do you think it's safe?"

"Not even a little bit," he said regretfully. "But it's probably not any less safe than what we were doing anyway. And it's the only way I can see that has a chance of lowering his body count."

"Mm." She mulled it over a while longer. "Honestly? I think you're over-identifying with him - and please, I don't want to think about the implications of that - and I think you're being very optimistic." A pause. "I don't know. I have to admit, it wouldn't be the first time you'd done the impossible."

"I like it when you feed my ego," Tony said, grinning. She hadn't really agreed, but it wasn't a red light, either, so he was happy to leave it at that for now.

"Yes, which is why I try not to do it too often." Pepper paused and looked speculative. "Have you considered just putting him over your knee and giving him a good spanking? Clothed or unclothed, it might be beneficial either way."

Yep, she was *definitely* repressing whatever stress this was giving her. Tony groaned and held up a palm as if to ward her off. "Good god, don't you start. Do you know how many Avengers assumed I *slept* with him?"

"Casting aspersions on your lily-white reputation. The nerve of them." Pepper stood up and leaned over to kiss his temple. "I am going to take a shower. You're welcome to join me, or you can keep working on whatever it is you were doing."

"And *you* said I didn't need a waterproof tablet," Tony retorted.

She vetoed that idea with a scathing glance. "No."

"Fine." He rose and started following her to the bathroom. "But no more talking about spanking Loki."

Pepper threw him a teasing smile over her shoulder. "Does that mean you don't want to play naughty supervillain and the big, strong Avenger?"

"Well, now." Tony smirked back. "Let's not be hasty."

--

Pepper was back in the office the next day, so Tony was back in his workshop. Steve had apparently come to drop Natasha off, because he came to visit, bearing sandwiches no less. Tony grunted his thanks and used one hand to eat while the other manipulated his draft schematic.

"What are you making?" Steve asked, eyeing the hologram.

"Bionic-- uh, prosthetic eye." Tony couldn't remember if they'd introduced Steve to *The Six Million Dollar Man*, which was actually even funnier when compared to a team of real life superheroes.

"Like a glass eye?"

"No, one that actually works, transmits light to the brain." He stuffed the rest of the sandwich into his mouth and picked up another one.

Steve tilted his head, considering that answer, then said, "No one's done that yet?"

Tony shrugged slightly; finished chewing and swallowed. "Some, but they're all terrible. Hey - what do you mean 'no one's done that yet', Mister Steam Engine, is our amazing futuristic technology not *advanced* enough for you now?"

Steve blinked at him. "You have tiny wireless telephones that can make movies and send them through the air. I'm sorry, I have trouble keeping up with the details of what impossible thing has or hasn't been invented yet."

But that was completely different, and Tony opened his mouth to say so, and then he realized that there was really no point giving Steve an in-depth electronics lesson. "Well," he said

instead, "yeah. Fair enough."

"Is this because of Belgium?" Steve asked quietly, gesturing at the hologram.

"Yes," Tony said tersely, and shoved some more sandwich into his mouth.

Steve didn't say 'it's not your fault', and Tony was oddly grateful for that at the same time as he resented it. Even though he'd spent the last few days blaming himself. But, he had a notebook buried in the bottom of his desk with two lists in it, and both of those lists were going to get longer, he knew.

Naturally, right at that moment was when they got a hit on Loki.

Facial recognition turned him up in Iceland of all places, and Tony left Pepper a message and went straight for his armor. He was a little faster than the jet - better powered - and the sooner they could get eyes there, the better. If they could prevent another slaughter like the one in Belgium - he had to try, anyway.

He soared through the air with the jet trailing behind him, powered by urgency as much as anything else. They really needed a faster way to travel long distances. Maybe Tony could invent human teleportation. He couldn't quite wrap his head around the physics of it (yet) but Loki seemed to be able to do it, it had to be possible. It was a pity Thor didn't know anything about it. Maybe he could get Loki drunk again and persuade him to break it down into 'simple' concepts--

Loki, Loki, Loki, that was the problem, wasn't it, the problem of Loki, poor shattered homicidal bastard. Who murdered people and fed on terror and had a soft spot for children. Not just children, Tony thought suddenly; *siblings*, and how different would Loki's life have been if he'd had a sister instead of a brother, if he'd been the heir?

If wishes were horses, and Tony grimaced, pushing those useless thoughts aside.

His HUD flashed with an incoming call from Pepper and he discarded it. She'd probably just checked her messages and wanted to tell him to be careful, which he tended to hate out of some vague sense of superstition. Instead he reopened comms to the jet and asked, for what seemed like the tenth time, "What's the sitrep?"

Clint's voice came back loud and clear. "No change. He's still just walking around the museum. Whatever he's looking for, he hasn't found it yet."

Well, that could only be a positive.

He concentrated on flying for a while, mentally poking at the teleportation problem - localized wormholes, maybe, artificial folds in space-time, if there was a way to anchor each end - and then Clint yelled right in his ear. "*Shit!*"

"What?" Tony slowed down, looking over his shoulder. "Cap hit a pigeon?"

"Of course not," Steve said, sounding annoyed; he hated having his piloting questioned, which was one of the reasons he didn't mind Tony flying separately from everyone else.

Something about backseat driving, ha.

"He's *on the camera*," Clint moaned, and it took Tony a moment to understand what he-- shit.

"Oh, my god. I am so stupid. I am so, so, stupid." He wanted to bang his head against something but there was nothing solid around him. He had to settle for slowing further down until he was at a slow enough speed to turn safely. He came around in a tight loop then drew to a stop entirely and held position in the air.

Something he couldn't make out over the comms. Clint answered whoever had spoken: "He blocked the security cameras in Belgium. This is either a distraction, or a trap."

Or both. They should have realized it the moment that face showed up, what was this, amateur hour? Tony frowned, frustrated with himself. "What do we do? This is still the best lead we've got."

There was a little pause, and then Steve spoke up, calculating. "Iron Man, peel off and return to New York. If we're being lured away on purpose - if he shows up there, I don't know, maybe you can hug him into submission again."

"Oh, ha ha."

"We'll continue on to Reykjavik. Best intel still has him located there, and civilians are at risk."

And they could capture Loki without Tony kicking up a fuss about sending him back to Asgard. Clever.

"Sure thing, Captain." He tossed off a sloppy salute, heedless that there was no one there to see it, and headed back the way he'd come, repulsors at full power. It wasn't too long before he was passing the jet, flying in the other direction.

The HUD lit up again with another call from Pepper. Tony sighed to himself. This really wasn't the time. "Jarvis, can you--"

A distraction. A trap.

"Sir?" Jarvis prompted.

"*Safety override*," Tony snarled, the back of his neck prickling with sudden sweat. "Maximum speed. Put that call through, but incoming only until my say-so."

"Sir, are you sure--"

"Just *do it*, Jarvis!"

"Connecting now," and he could feel the sudden burst of speed, the extra drag of power.

"...don't think you're being completely honest with me, Ms. Potts." Loki's soft, silky voice filled his ears, and Tony closed his eyes against a rush of helpless rage. If that asshole

touched her - laid so much as one *finger* on her - he would make it his life's mission to rip Loki apart, and to hell with Asgard, he'd go to war against the whole damn realm if he had to, just let them try to stop him.

"I'm not sure what more you want me to say," Pepper said. Her voice was strained, but steady. Attagirl.

"Oh, come now," Loki said. "You are his right hand man, if you'll forgive the expression. I imagine there's little that goes on in his tiny brain that you don't know about. Isn't that right, Stark?"

Tony blinked. "We are on incoming only, right, Jarvis?"

"That's correct, sir."

Loki's voice came a little louder, as if he was leaning towards wherever Pepper had hidden her phone. "That is you on the other end of that contraption, is it not?"

Well, okay. Points to Pepper for trying, anyway; it wasn't her fault Loki was unnaturally shrewd. Tony sighed. "All right, gimme outgoing." He paused long enough to remind himself that hurling threats over the satellite connection would be... counterproductive. If Pepper could be calm, he could be calm too. Calm and friendly. "You know, Loki, I'd really appreciate if you didn't move in on my girl as soon as I left the city, it's kind of bad form."

"Oh, I assure you, anything between Ms. Potts and myself is... purely professional."

"He's been the perfect gentleman," Pepper added dryly, and Tony perked up. 'Perfect' he knew. 'Perfect' was one of the code words they'd arranged with the corporate security consultants; it meant Pepper was unharmed, at least for now.

"Good to know," he told her, very clearly. Message received. Now if he could think of some subtle way to work birds into the conversation, let her know he was on the way - ah, to hell with it. Subtle wasn't his strength. Tacky and clichéd, he could do. "I mean it. My heart is as free as a bird."

"Since you took such an interest in me," Loki said, pleasant in the kind of way that serial killers and door-to-door bible-thumpers were, "I thought it only polite to return the favor."

Tony winced a little. He'd already figured out this little visit was his fault, he didn't need Loki to rub it in his face. "I would have settled for you restocking my bar. Cocktail ingredients don't come cheap."

"Cocktails?" Pepper said, in a voice too long-suffering to be truly disbelieving. "Really?"

"Really?" he mimicked her. "You're going to pick *now* to give me crap over that?"

"Oh *dear*. I do hope you two aren't going to quarrel," said Loki, smug with amusement.

"We won't quarrel," Tony said, eyeing the coordinates display on his HUD. Still too far away; the distance made him itch. "She'll talk, I'll apologize. It's a well-practiced routine. I'm sorry,

Pepper; next time we have cocktails I'll remember to invite you."

Loki laughed a little, but there was something bitter in it. "Why stop there? Why, the three of us could go out to dinner and *bond* as we discuss our favorite books."

Pepper made a thinking sound. "Well, we were supposed to be dining with a senator tonight, but that can be rescheduled. I'll be honest with you, though, Tony's not really a big 'books' fan."

Tony actually wobbled mid-air, he was struggling so hard to keep from laughing. Pepper was never, never allowed to yell at him again for mouthing off to bad guys. Oh, what he wouldn't pay to see Loki's *face* right now. He couldn't, though, and judging mood was so much harder without visual cues, so he bit back on all the jokes he wanted to make. It was one thing to piss off super-powered psychopaths when he was alone, but not when Pepper was in the line of fire.

"I do find it interesting," Loki said, dropping the cutting sarcasm for a moment, "that this office exists, given that your monstrosity of a tower has an empty floor."

"It has more than one empty floor." He didn't know where Loki was going with this and the uncertainty put him on edge. More on edge. "A while back, some jackass tried to launch an alien invasion from the top of it, made a few people think that working in central Manhattan wasn't their dream job after all. Figured I'd rather keep the old offices as alternate premises than lose good personnel."

There weren't too many, in the scheme of things – the Tower was still plenty busy. It was turning out useful to have the second base of operations though.

"How noble," Loki drawled, hints of a sneer in his voice. "And here I thought you might be hiding your treasures away."

"Hidi-- is there anything you *don't* think is a conspiracy? I'm genuinely curious, bec--"

"Tony," Pepper murmured, sounding like she had her best gritted-teeth smile in place.

Yeah. Yeah, don't provoke the willing murderer with Pepper in the line of fire. He needed a nice, safe way to persuade Loki to leave - without hurting Pepper.

'Safe' and 'Loki' probably didn't belong in the same sentence.

"So are you really in Iceland?" he said abruptly. "Are you even really in Pepper's office? I mean, how does that work, can you be two places at once, or...?"

"Surely you don't expect me to give up all my secrets."

No, of course not, that would be too easy. Why couldn't he *get there faster*. "I'll trade you," Tony said, trying to sound casual. "An answer for an answer."

"If you insist," Loki said, sounding a little too pleased with himself.

"Within reason," Tony added belatedly, because he was fully anticipating Loki to ask the worst possible question.

"But of course. To answer your question, no, I cannot be in two places at once, at least not in any way you would understand it. One is merely an illusion, a projection of myself."

"But are you in Iceland, or New York?"

"You asked multiple questions, Stark," Loki said, his smile audible. "You didn't specify which of them I should answer."

Sneaky bastard. "Rules lawyer," Tony accused. "Semantics. You know what I meant."

"Honestly, do you know *nothing* about m--" A startled pause. "What--"

"Well, paperclips bounce off of him," Pepper said drily. "Does that help?"

This time, Tony couldn't suppress his laugh, even though it wasn't reassuring at all. He would have much preferred the real Loki to be in Reykjavik, and only an illusion in the same room as Pepper. "And that is why I love you. Thank you, Pepper."

"Well played," Loki conceded. "You have a little more wit about you than those I'm accustomed to dealing with, I'll grant you that."

"Yes, she does," Tony said, with some pride. He didn't want Loki paying too much attention to Pepper, though, so he redirected the conversation. "So, what do you want to know?"

"Oh, I think I'd like to keep that little debt up my sleeve for now."

Oh, good. That wasn't at all worrying.

"In fact," Loki continued, in a voice that was far too sly for Tony's liking, "why don't I give you some time to... consider the possibilities. I'm sure we'll be seeing each other *very* soon."

A chill ran down Tony's back. "Do you wanna, uh, give me a time and place on that, I'll schedule you into my diary--"

"He's gone," Pepper said.

It might have been the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. He closed his eyes in sheer relief, taking a ragged breath. "I'm sorry, my god, Pepper, I am *so sorry*, I had no idea he'd come after you--"

"It's okay, Tony, I'm fine. I'm fine."

"You're not fine, I can hear you shaking. You should be shaking. *I'm* shaking. Did he threaten you? If he threatened you I will *end him*, I don't care what Thor says, I'll take him apart. Nobody gets to threaten you, not anybody." They were talking over each other but that was fine, it was fast. Efficient.

"He didn't thre-- not really, he just--"

"Not really means he did."

"--just wanted to know what you were doing--"

"Of course he did, he thinks I'm trying to trap him." In hindsight, that was spectacularly obvious. "Hell with it, I'll stop, I'm calling it off, it's not worth it. It was a stupid idea anyway. Asgard can have him--"

"No--"

"--they can throw him in supermax for all I care, he-- wait, 'no'? That was you, right, you just said 'no' to righteous and proportionate space invader punishment?"

"Tony." Pepper's voice was small and tired. "If you send him back there, and he escapes again, is he going to just forget that he can get to you through me?"

Tony's throat closed up in horror and he recoiled instinctively, knocking himself off course. Even with the armor's compensation systems, at this high speed the g-force of a small turn was crushing. For long seconds all he could hear was the loud thump of his heart as he struggled to straighten out his flight.

"*Shit*," he said, when he had the armor under control again. "I'm sorry."

"It was probably inevitable," she said with a sigh. She really didn't blame him, he could tell; she wasn't just saying it to make him feel better. Somehow that just made him feel worse.

He wanted to apologize again, but he bit his tongue. "I can't believe you *threw a paperclip at him*."

"I tossed it. Gently!"

"You are never allowed to tell me off again. For *anything*. You offered to *reschedule a senator* for him, for god's sake."

"Well, technically Loki is of higher rank." She sounded like she was trying hard to smile.

"I read books!"

"You read technical specifications."

"And Far Side cartoons!"

There was a pause, then Pepper said in the same small voice as before, "Tony, how far away are you?"

He glanced at the HUD and did a quick calculation in his head. "Seven minutes. I'm at maximum speed already, I can't get there any faster, I'm sor--"

"No, it's-- that's fine." He could almost see her sitting at her desk, taking deep breaths to hold it all together because she was brave and perfect and wonderful. "Seven minutes. I'll just-- would you keep talking to me?"

"I can do that," he promised, and he did: spoke about whatever filled his head, innocuous things, like Steve's laundry disasters and Clint's disturbing fondness for playing Singstar. When he hit New York City he let his speed drop to something within safety parameters, heading for the main Stark Industries offices, where he landed on the helipad with a heavy thump. He pulled off his gauntlets, still talking, as he clomped his way through the corridors to her office, then he pulled off the helmet as Pepper rushed across the room to throw her arms around his neck.

(He winced in sympathy as her elbows hit the chestplate; she might not feel it now, but she was sure to have bruises later.)

"Tony," she said, and it was full of fear and relief and adrenaline, all the things that she was *not supposed to have to worry about*, and he wrapped his arms around her and just held her for a while.

Eventually they both drew back, but only a little; Tony brushed her hair behind her ear and said, "Do you think this thing actually has a shot? Or is it just, you know, grasping at straws?"

Pepper gave a shaky laugh. She said, "When he showed up, when he just appeared like that and started asking questions, it was the silliest thing - all I could think about was how you... you do this, when you make a new friend, you go and you interrogate all the people who know them until you know everything there is to know about them."

"Obie tried to *kill me*, and Natasha was a *spy*," he protested, injured. "I have every right to be a little cautious, thank you--"

"So does Loki, isn't that your whole line of reasoning?"

"Unfortunately, being a paranoid control freak isn't actually a sign of inherent goodness, so I don't know where you're going with this."

"I just... think..." Pepper sighed, patting him on the chestplate. "I think I've spent too long around you and I've become infected by your very special brand of insanity, because yes, I think there is a small chance, a very small chance, that you can reach something in there."

"Huh." He mulled that over. "Well. That's a ringing endorsement."

It actually was, in a way. Pepper wasn't always too concerned with the greater good. She had a comforting level of selfishness that kept him grounded, kept him from killing himself trying to solve the whole world's problems. To have her backing him on this gave him a reassuring boost of confidence, not that he'd ever admit he needed it.

"So," said Tony, "this thing tonight, with the senator. Can we reschedule it anyway?"

Pepper smiled, all wry sheepishness. "Honestly, I already emailed his assistant while we were on the phone."

"Oh, thank goodness," he said, and kissed her.

--

The next day, at the Tower, Natasha wanted to see him. Or more specifically, she told Jarvis she had something for him. Tony assumed there would be conversation involved but when he ambled up to the lounge, Natasha handed him a manila folder and walked off.

"Good to see you too," Tony said blandly.

He switched on the odd-days coffee maker and left the folder next to it while he fetched a mug.

One of the great things about a reputation for extravagance was that no one thought twice about him having multiple machines for the same job. It helped that most of the Avengers spent so much time away from the Tower, but he was pretty sure they hadn't figured out yet that he had to use different coffee makers on even days than on odd days. And they knew he wouldn't let people hand him things, so no one was surprised when he wouldn't let other people make him coffee (because he could never be *sure* they'd used the right machine and what if--?)

He had an uncomfortable feeling it hadn't been... quite like this, before Afghanistan, but neither Rhodey nor Pepper had said anything - they'd tell him if they thought he was getting worse, right? Maybe?

He could ask, but then they might answer.

When the coffee was ready, he took his mugful and the manila folder and went to settle in by the fireplace. He sat in one of the low swivel chairs so he could open the folder out on the coffee table. There were several pages of printed transcripts, with notes marked in the margins in pen. The handwritten notes were all in the same shade of blue; probably done in one batch rather than over a period of time.

C.M.C. High-Risk Containment

Present: Loki Laufeyson (XT, Red), Agent Natasha Romanoff

LAUFEYSON: There's not many people who can sneak up on me.

ROMANOFF: But you figured I'd come.

LAUFEYSON: After. After whatever tortures Fury can concoct, you would appear as a friend, as a balm. And I would cooperate.

ROMANOFF: I want to know what you've done to Agent Barton.

Another page:

LAUFEYSON: Does he never shut up?

ODINSON: No.

ODINSON: Loki, I warn you, this madness will bring

LAUFEYSON: Madness? The only madness, Thor, was that it took me so long to be rid of you.

STARK: Hey, asshole. You're not the only one with issues. Daddy didn't love you? Boo-hoo, I've been there and you don't see me trying to conquer planets. So you never got enough hugs as a kid. So what? No one cares.

At the top of one sheet, a handwritten note: 'body language: superficial similarities to modern North American indicators; unclear yet how reliable these can be considered. additional Asgardian subjects would be beneficial.'

A line on one of the pages was circled (LAUFEYSON: You left me there!) and Romanoff had jotted next to it, 'refer C.M.C. transcript, lines 25-37.' When Tony pulled that page closer, the lines turned out to be Loki ranting about Natasha's 'sentimentality', how horrors were a part of her and... how he was going to have Natasha killed by a mind-controlled Hawkeye, then let Clint wake up long enough to see it before killing Clint too, what the *fuck*. Tony cringed from the page a little before reading the note next to it.

'switched to attack. deliberate attempt to hurt, cessation of controlled façade. targeted relationship to Barton; perceived threat? in light of HYJ4, consider spite, jealousy/envy. believes no one would do same for him.'

Tony didn't really need to check, but yes, transcript HYJ4 was the one with Loki's little breakdown in the street and the circled line.

That... okay, so during the invasion Romanoff had gone to Loki and used wanting to save Barton as a front for information gathering, no problem. Loki had then apparently *flipped the fuck out*. Which Romanoff used as an opportunity to psychoanalyze him further.

Tony rubbed his forehead, staring at the sheets of paper. It was more complicated than that. There were references even in that little tantrum to things in Natasha's past, things Loki had evidently learned from Clint. Natasha had to know there was enough information there for Tony to go looking, if he really wanted to.

Yet... she had just handed all this over. For the sake of giving him her observations and speculations on Loki's psyche. There were scores of notes; linkages, possibilities... In Widow language, was that a vote of confidence?

Tony reached for his coffee and drank deeply while his mind whirred.

#

Blood and Mercy

Chapter Summary

Featuring Bruce Banner, mild-mannered secret troll.

Chapter Notes

The original version of this fic/chapter had Tony mention Clint's "kids" (actually referring to the other Avengers) and a joke that's still in there pretending Natasha was Bruce's wife. Oh, those young, naive times of 2012...

Tony was at a clean energy convention in San Francisco, heckling the keynote speaker while Bruce sat next to him and pretended not to know him. Personally, Tony was of the opinion that Bruce should live a little. If Spelman was going to show up with all these outdated ideas, heckling wasn't just expected, it was practically their *duty*.

Plus, he kind of wanted to see what it would take to get kicked out of the convention. Everyone knew about the New York skyscraper powered solely by arc reactor technology; they all knew that Tony Stark was pretty much the *face* of clean energy right now. So far all he'd managed to get were some dirty looks and a 'Doctor Stark, there will be time for questions at the end of the session.'

Next to him, Bruce buried his face in his hands and groaned. "Why didn't you just accept when they offered *you* the keynote?"

"Nah, this is way more fun," Tony said with a grin.

"You're like a child. Seriously, you are inches away from just throwing spitballs."

"Ooh, spitballs," Tony said, just to see the look of despair on Bruce's face.

The woman in front - who had been glaring at Tony off and on for a half hour now - turned around again, this time to frown at Bruce. "Excuse me - are you with him?"

"Ma'am," Bruce said solemnly, "I've never seen him before in my life."

"That hurts me." Tony slung an arm around Bruce's shoulder and beamed at the woman. "We're lovers. Four years now. We're very happy together. The sex is fantastic."

"Tony!" Bruce hissed, pushing him off. Just when Tony was thinking in disappointment that he would have to disown Bruce and get a new partner in crime, Bruce turned the puppy dog eyes on him and said, "You promised we'd keep it a secret. You know if Natasha finds out she'll divorce me and I'll have nothing!"

Tony nearly fell off his chair laughing. The woman from the row ahead made a frustrated noise and turned her back on them again. Spelman was still droning on at the front of the auditorium, wildly inaccurate and trying valiantly to ignore them.

Earlier in the day they'd all got the spiel about turning off their cellphones. Tony had of course ignored it, so when his cellphone rang now, it rang loud and clear.

"Sorry everyone!" Tony called, half-rising from his seat to grin around the auditorium. He got nothing but hostile stares in return. "That's mine. I'll just, uh--"

The screen said Hawkeye. What the hell was Clint calling him for? Tony thumped Bruce on the shoulder and nodded towards the door. He put the phone to his ear and started towards the back of the room, taking it for granted that Bruce would follow. "What's up?"

"You and Banner are in San Francisco, right?"

Spelman said something snarky into the microphone about being sorry to see him go; Tony maturely resisted the urge to flip him off. "Yeah, for the next couple of days," he said into the phone. "You want me to bring you back a Golden Gate Bridge keychain?"

"Ooh, get some of that Ghirardelli chocolate. But, uh, first you might want to take care of the magic slap-fight happening over in Berkeley."

"Hold on." Tony went out into the foyer and held the door long enough for Bruce to get through. "Okay, did you say magic? No, we're not in California. We're in, uh, San Francisco, Lithuania. I can see how you'd get confused, the names are very--"

"Don't be such a baby," Clint said, sounding amused. "It's a few dorks in robes. Just show up, look shiny, and tell them to knock off the massive property damage."

"But I hate magic," Tony said, well aware that he was whining. He gestured to Bruce for pen and paper. "What if they turn me into a newt? Or a woman? Or a newt woman?"

"If they turn you into a woman, you can finally get the sweet, sweet loving from Banner that you've been longing for. Look, get over there before some muggles get hurt."

"That was a Harry Potter reference," Tony accused him. "Don't think I don't know these things. Okay, what's the damn address?"

He jotted down the details Clint gave him, promised to be *responsible* (oh, how he hated that word), and hung up. Looking at Bruce, he sighed and waved the piece of paper. "Voldemort and Harry Potter are going at it across the Bay. If they turn me into a woman, Barton wants us to have genius babies together."

Bruce took that in stride, because he was a champ. "Do you need the Other Guy?"

Tony considered it. Honestly, he trusted the Hulk a lot more than Bruce did, but he knew Bruce hated the transformation. "Tell you what, you hang back from the action and stay ready. I'll only call you in if it looks like I can't handle it."

"That works for me," Bruce agreed.

It didn't take long to suit up and get to where the action was; honestly Tony wished it could have taken a little longer. Disappointingly, the situation didn't conveniently resolve itself before he and Bruce got there. SHIELD agents had set up a perimeter around the destruction, but weren't pushing forward. The half-melted SUV in front of one of their blockades was a pretty good indication why. It made for a good place to drop Bruce, at least.

"Four combatants," the woman in charge told him. "Three on one. The outnumbered guy is the one doing all the damage."

"Awesome," Tony said flatly. "Wish me luck." He closed his face-plate and had JARVIS dial Bruce up. "You hear me?"

"Loud and clear," Bruce told him. "Be careful."

Tony flew towards the explosions, trying to make out the wizards or sorcerers or whatever the hell they were. "Have you ever known me to be anything less than careful?"

"Is that a yes-no question or do you want an itemized list?"

"You wound me, Bruce." Two guys, not three, in dark robes shooting actual physical bullets across the street. Some crumpled bodies that suggested there had originally been more people in this fight.

He could see blasts of something blue-white streaking towards the guys with guns and flaring against some kind of magical shielding, but he couldn't see where they were coming from. There was smoke everywhere. "This is a mess, I can't see a damned thing. Jarvis, give me some thermal-- no, that's not any better."

He was going to have to get closer in and risk taking a couple of hits. He dropped down through the worst of the smoke, every muscle braced to take evasive action in a hurry. Now he could see the guy hurling the blue-white stuff, albeit obscured.

Through the suit's external speakers he called, "This is Iron Man. Stand down."

Almost immediately that same dark figure turned to aim a blast at him, and he jetted backwards out of its way. At least the robed guys didn't shoot at him; one ran forward, waving for his attention, and shouted something that Jarvis was kind enough to amplify.

"Don't let him take it!"

Oh, great, there was some mystic mumbo-jumbo device in play. In Tony's - admittedly limited - experience, magical doohickeys were always bad. No one ever created, say, an artefact that dispensed unlimited Pepsi. It was all 'infinite power' this and 'indomitable will' that. Really, the only thing that would make this worse would be if--

If the smoke parted just like *that* to reveal a flash of black leather and green cape. Oh, god, he really should have seen that coming.

He dodged another blue-white blast, or tried to; it clipped his shoulder and spun him into a nearby parked car. He grunted, prying himself out of the smashed windscreen. "You still listening, Bruce?"

"You're about to do something stupid, aren't you?"

"Absolutely not," Tony lied. He took a curving path through the smoke; it rapidly thinned out the closer he got, giving him a great view of Loki's expression when he tackled him to the ground. A stray bolt of magic flew past his helmet before Loki bucked and threw him off. Tony slammed on all his stabilizers at once and righted himself before he hit any walls.

The gunfire had stopped.

Loki had risen to his feet, some carved vase-looking thing tucked under his left arm and the other hand hurling another bolt of magic through the air. Tony managed to dodge this one. He popped his face-plate open to make eye-contact, trading a little armored safety so as not to set off Loki's not-being-looked-at buttons.

"Hey," he said brightly, and then his mind went horrifyingly, embarrassingly blank. "So, uh... you want to go get a beer?"

"*What?*" Loki said, and actually stopped throwing magic around to stare at him incredulously. Tony wondered if they could keep Loki out of trouble solely by constantly confusing him.

He heard a sigh in his ear. "It's Loki, isn't it," Bruce said, not a question. "You're chatting up Loki right now."

Tony chose to ignore the implications of 'chatting up'. "You know, beer. Ale. You, me, nix on the death and destruction. Could be fun."

"You--" Loki stopped, a strange expression briefly crossing his face before settling into grim resolve. He raised his hand, telegraphing enough to give Tony time to dive sideways. Sloppy.

Tony shot back, and Loki curled protectively around the vase as he rolled - now that was interesting. Fragile? Dangerous?

Loki looked about to shoot again, but stopped short, eyes flickering to the side. Tony turned his head to follow. There was, of course, nothing there. When he looked back, Loki was gone.

Tony silently counted to ten, very calmly, and decided right then that he was never going to admit to anyone that he'd just fallen for the oldest trick in the book.

"Tony?" Bruce sounded worried. "Are you still there? I'm coming in--"

"Nah, forget it." Tony lowered his face-plate again and started trudging across the road to go talk to their pals in the robes. "Remember when he used to hang around and fight instead of

pulling this Houdini vanishing act stuff? You get all hyped up for a big smack-down and then... nada. It's just rude."

"Is this going to turn into a blue-balls metaphor?"

"Unlike the rest of you perverts, I am not obsessed with Loki sexcapades, so no. Thanks for putting in the legwork for me, though; I appreciate it." He raised an armored arm and the two remaining robed guys obligingly trotted over to him. Now *these* guys were nice and considerate. He approved.

"Did you stop him?" one of them asked urgently.

"Um... not... as such," Tony admitted. He thought about pointing out that they hadn't needed to stop shooting - it wouldn't be the first time the Iron Man armor had copped a few bullet dents in the name of friendly fire - but decided not to encourage them. "He was holding something, looked like a butt-ugly vase?"

"The Cup of Guerin," the other guy said gloomily. He pushed his hood back to reveal thinning hair and a face that looked like it belonged to a tax accountant playing D&D on the weekends. "No one should have known we had it. We were all bound by oath to protect it." He looked around at the bodies on the road and pressed his lips together.

Tony was pretty sure Loki had his own ways of finding things out. That wasn't really the issue right now. "What does it *do*?" he asked. Besides 'break the laws of physics', because that was just a gimme where magic was concerned.

"It amplifies certain kinds of magic," said the accountant. "By, um. By quite a lot."

The first guy clutched at Tony's arm, probably leaving greasy fingerprints on the armor. "You have to get it back. In the wrong hands--"

"I was really hoping you weren't going to say that." Tony sighed and gestured them down the road. "Come on. There are some nice agents you can tell all about it."

--

He didn't exactly *expect* Loki to show up at their hotel later, but he didn't think it was all that unlikely, either. To be on the safe side, he stayed away from the bar and civilians, and hung out in Bruce's suite instead. Bruce was maybe the one person in the world who didn't need to be afraid of Loki. Side benefit of moonlighting as an indestructible green orc.

The evening passed kind of slowly. Tony listed out the various artefacts Loki had stolen - the ones they knew about, anyway - and the two of them tried to brainstorm complicated schemes he could want them for. At the same time, Bruce was texting Clint - he'd picked up a throwaway pre-paid cell during the day and was sending anonymous cat facts because pissing Clint off was funny.

Tony paced back and forth as they tossed ideas around. He wasn't waiting. He absolutely wasn't waiting. He was just... restless. Perfectly normal.

They eventually had to admit that they'd given up on trying to figure out Loki's plans and had moved on to plotting how to take over the world themselves. At that point, it seemed like a good idea just to call it a night. Tony assumed Loki was biding his time. He headed back to his own suite, weighing up the pros and cons of calling up Pepper for phone sex (admittedly, they were mostly pros), and wandered into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Naturally, that was when Loki appeared and shoved him face-first against the counter.

"Ow," Tony said, cheek pressed against the enamel surface. It was embarrassing how easily Loki could hold him down with just a hand grabbing the back of his neck. Not that Tony had never let a guy hold him down before but usually they had to put in a bit of *effort*-- and, situational. Wrong situation. Moving on.

Carefully, making a show of it, he put both his hands on the countertop, palms flat. No threat. "Hi?"

"I will not be mocked," Loki hissed.

"You're going to have to be a little more specific, I don't-- wait, is this about the beer?" Tony squinted awkwardly, trying to make Loki out in his peripheral vision. "Because that was a genuine invitation. I mean, it didn't have to be beer, we could do cocktails again. ...Am I bleeding? Do you have a knife in me right now?" There was definitely something running down his back. "*Wow*, that's... that's sharp, I can't even feel it."

Loki snarled, "Cease your prattling," and there was a sharp flare of pain near the middle of Tony's back, right by the spine, like the knife had twisted. A thicker drop of blood spilled out.

"Okay," Tony said, mouth going dry, "now I can feel it."

He really ought to have taken over the country by now. Not to rule it, just to infiltrate everybody's systems, get Jarvis set up anywhere he might possibly go. Pretty hard to signal his AI with an emergency code when his AI wasn't here. Maybe keep a transmitter with him, satellite link, integrate it into a wristwatch or something.

"This joke has gone on long enough," Loki said. His voice was low and furious. "I will not be made a mockery for your entertainment."

Tony took a steadying breath; in through the nose, out through the mouth. His life probably depended on him saying the right thing in the next thirty seconds and nobody's life should *ever* hang on him controlling what came out of his mouth, that was just a recipe for disaster.

He stayed flat, fighting the useless instinct to struggle. He wasn't sure how deep the knife was. He was still bleeding, he could feel that much, so it was more than a scratch. "I told you, I'm not. Why is that so hard for you to believe?"

"Experience," Loki said bitterly.

Well, that-- that was a thing that was probably true. Tony winced a little. "Yeah, well. Every dataset has outliers. You wanted to talk to me; why can't I want to talk to you?"

Loki made a disparaging noise. "Don't flatter yourself. Why would I want to talk to *you*?"

"Really?" Tony managed a grin, although his skin was still prickling with adrenaline and fear. He could feel Loki's body behind him, over him; looming close. "You expect me to believe that you had no idea there was an energy convention this week. You just picked this week, of all weeks, to come to San Francisco on your round-the-world robbery tour. You had *no idea* I would be in town. Is that what you're telling me? That you were that sloppy?"

There was a long pause. Finally Tony felt the grip on the back of his neck relax, and the knife disappear. "I may have suspected," Loki admitted warily.

"That's what I thought." Tony straightened slowly, keeping his hands in plain sight on the countertop. "Now that we have the pleasantries out of the way, you mind telling me how deep you just cut me? Because all I can tell is there's blood rolling down my back, and I don't bring a first aid kit on business trips."

Loki gave a slight huff and pulled Tony's shirt out of his waistband, yanking it up to his armpits. It bared most of his back and Tony felt ridiculously exposed, even though objectively this was no more dangerous than a few seconds ago. "You might want to consider changing that policy," Loki told him, "given your tendency for insolence."

"Yeah, well, until now it's never been--" and Tony's voice failed because Loki was *touching him*, fingertips on his bare skin, firm and sure. The hair lifted on the back of his neck, goose bumps despite the balmy weather. He could feel Loki's fingers drag across the wound, pushing a stinging warmth into it. It was intimate in all the wrong ways. Tony was shudderingly aware of his own body.

He remembered the grip on his neck. Loki pinning him on the counter. Leaning down over him, voice low and heated. It would be so easy to--

"There," Loki said, close behind him, sounding completely unaffected. Maybe a little impatient. "Your scratch is tended."

Tony met his eyes in the bathroom mirror without thinking. He regretted it immediately, flinching as he caught sight of his own reflection, wide-eyed and all too telling. Normally he'd play it off, make a joke about *kissing it better* but he just couldn't. The words lodged in his throat.

This was just, nothing, it was just a moment of craziness because every-damn-body had been putting the idea into his head. He pushed out from in between the counter and Loki, putting some space between them. Space seemed like a really good idea.

"I need to change," he muttered. Wait, there was no point in that with blood still drying tacky on his skin. "No, I need to shower first. Well-- that can wait." He glanced back at Loki, who was watching him with hard-edged amusement.

Loki looked down at his bloodied fingers. He rubbed them together for a moment, then looked back up at Tony with a smirk. It was just enough warning for Tony to brace himself

and then Loki was *licking the blood off his fingers*, rat bastard, and Tony sucked in a short breath.

No, okay, no, he needed to get in control of himself, this was a disaster. He needed to be a challenge, needed Loki to find him interesting. Tony was pretty sure that if he fell short - if he proved boring or too easy to toy with - then Loki wouldn't hesitate to take him apart, first metaphorically and then quite literally.

Perhaps just as important as the danger of violent and sudden death was that... if he was *boring*, then Loki wouldn't consider listening to him. That wouldn't do at all.

"So, a drink?" he asked, pasting on a bright smile. "I'll crack open the minibar, god knows I can afford it."

Loki made a small dismissive gesture with one hand. "I don't require refreshment."

No real surprise there; he figured Loki wouldn't be in any hurry to get drunk with him again. Tony flexed his back, testing, but it felt fine. He shrugged and made his way to the sofa in the largest part of the suite. "So, tell me, that thing you made off with today -" corpses on the road, dead and crumpled - "what's that for?"

"It's pretty," Loki deadpanned, following him. "I'm going to put it in my chambers and grow flowers in it."

"See, now I know you're lying, because that thing was ugly as sin." Tony leaned back in the sofa, not caring if the blood on his shirt left stains. He could buy them a new sofa. "Was it really worth killing people for?"

Loki blinked, like he genuinely didn't understand the question.

"I mean, okay, you're devious," Tony tried to explain. "Wasn't there a way you could have got hold of it without getting in a fight with those guys?"

Loki bristled, facing shutting down into that cold, vicious anger. "I don't know what Thor's told you, but I'm not a *coward* who shies away from battle."

"Whoa, whoa." Tony held up his hands, placating. Medieval space viking, right. "I think a sufficient proportion of this planet are terrified of you that nobody thinks you're a coward. I just--" What was the best way to phrase this? An appeal to pride? "Look, a truly great warrior can afford to be merciful, right? Do you guys *have* mercy on Asgard, is that even a thing?"

Loki slouched into the corner of the sofa, regarding him coolly. "I was merciful. You distracted my final assailants, and I left instead of destroying them for their insolence."

Tony wondered how much truth there was in that. It was nice to think that maybe Loki really had spared the last two because of him. Probably he was just saying it to appease him. "Well, that's a start."

"I don't see what difference it makes," Loki said, and the worst part was he sounded absolutely sincere. "You all live such a short time anyway. What have they lost? But a

handful of years."

Tony could handle this conversation if he pretended it was about math and not *people's lives*. "No, look, it's disproportionate. It's division, not subtraction. Fifty years is just a long weekend to you, but to us it's half a lifetime."

Loki's mouth twisted like he was thinking about it, but he still looked unconvinced. Or maybe like he just didn't care, which was unfortunately pretty likely.

Tony decided to go for the cheap shot. "I just think you should be able to steal something without turning it into a bloodbath. Unless, of course, you can't figure out how."

Loki's mouth quirked. "Do you really think that will work on me?"

"I was kind of hoping," Tony admitted.

Loki looked at him a moment longer, then smiled. There was something kind of terrifying about that smile. "Would you like to make a wager?"

Tony was pretty sure that was a terrible idea. In fact, he was pretty sure there was a whole *library* of myths that boiled down to 'don't make wagers with trickster gods'. But if there was a chance he could save some lives, how could he turn it down? "Sure," he said, rubbing his fingers against his thigh. "Sounds fun."

"So, you wager I can't complete my next theft without killing a human?"

What loopholes did that leave? Tony shook his head, lifting a finger. "Enhanced humans are still humans. No killing, no lasting injury - physical or mental. Direct or indirect."

"Hmm." Did Loki's smile actually broaden? He was pleased Tony was adding conditions. Of course, it was a game to him. "I accept your terms. If I win?"

There wasn't really an 'if' about it; there was nothing to stop Loki from success. Unless he simply didn't want to.

"If you win..." Tony searched his mind. It was hard to think of something he could offer, something Loki would actually want. This was not going to be one of those horrible 'wagering someone's head' deals. "I make a mean daiquiri? Um. You don't exactly need money. What do you get the renegade Asgardian who has everything?"

"I could use a cellphone," Loki said, and, *what?*

"A cellphone," Tony repeated, just to make sure he'd heard right. He turned it over and over in his mind but couldn't think of anything particularly nefarious that Loki would need a cellphone for - or at least, nothing he couldn't do with an off-the-shelf cell from a store.

Then again, maybe that was the point. That's what he'd do, if he was an evil mastermind; make a bet for something completely innocuous, and then slowly up the price each time. See how far he could get. Like boiling a frog (and yes, he was aware that was a myth, but the *principle--*)

"All right," he said. "You win, you get a custom-built Starkphone. Top of the line. If I win... you stay out of trouble for a mon--" Time, disproportionate. "A year?" He wasn't really expecting Loki to accept that, but Loki nodded and put out a hand to shake on it. His grasp was firm and warm.

Maybe Loki would have done a clean run anyway, but Tony chose to believe that he'd saved some lives with this little bet. Sure, Loki probably had an ulterior motive and he wasn't looking forward to finding out what that was, but in the meantime he really wanted to feel like he was accomplishing something.

There was one more thing. None of this was going to matter if he couldn't get Loki to make peace with Thor, somehow. Too much of what Loki did was wound up in their brother issues. Tony glanced across the sofa at Loki and decided to try his luck. "Just for the record, Thor's never said you were a coward. He actually called you 'a clever and deadly fighter'."

Loki's face shut down and he folded his arms across his chest. "*Clever*," he repeated with distaste. "Yes, I know precisely what he means with that."

It was going to be slow going, obviously. Tony shrugged, trying to make it look casual, like it didn't really matter. "Well, I'm not a mind-reader, but it didn't sound like he meant it as a bad thing."

His cellphone buzzed. Loki inclined his head as if to say *answer it, then*. Tony sighed.

"Hold that thought," he said, and fished out his cell. It was a text from Bruce: *Either you smuggled jarvis in or talking to loki. Need backup? Safeword?*

under control 4 now, he replied. He hadn't realized the walls were that thin. Good thing he hadn't brought Pepper along; Bruce probably wouldn't have appreciated that kind of noise. Or hey, maybe he would, keep things a little spicy. *safeword = me screaming like a little girl*.

"And how is Doctor Jekyll?" Loki asked, with thinly veiled hostility. He wasn't even looking at the cellphone so god knew how he knew who it was.

"I'm the only one allowed to call him that," Tony said with a frown. "Bruce is just awesome, thank you for asking."

Loki gave a little eye-roll. "What is it with your predilection for befriending monsters?"

Loki was a real fan of that word, 'monster'. Tony gave him a long, considering look. Long enough that Loki shifted uncomfortably and then scowled.

"I don't believe in monsters," Tony said slowly.

Loki rolled his eyes again, with a dismissive snort.

"Everyone's got choices." Tony leaned back in his own corner of the sofa, mirroring Loki's posture. "A lot of people used to call me a monster. Hell, they might have been right. The only thing that makes it true is what you choose to do with it. It's never too late to make a different choice."

It was, though. Too late for the people who'd died or had their lives ruined. Nothing was going to change that.

"What a lovely philosophy," Loki drawled, not quite making eye contact. "Do let me know how that works out for you when the green beast is beating you into the floor."

"Nah, the Hulk likes me because I stuck up for him." He kept his eyes on Loki, steady. "Everyone deserves someone to believe in them."

Loki flinched slightly. He got up and strode across the room, examining the instruction card by the television with his back to Tony.

He tried to look so tough, but he was brimming with desperation. Tony wondered how it had taken him so long to realize Loki was so fragile. Or maybe he'd just never bothered to figure it out. The mass murder was a pretty good distraction, after all.

Without looking around, Loki said, "They will always turn on you. That's what monsters do."

Which was its own kind of truth, and not one that Tony was likely to forget in a hurry. He touched his arc reactor, felt the reassuring solidity of it, right where it should be. Paralyzed, helpless, Obie's hand wrenching it from his chest-- "That's what *everyone* does," he said, a little darkly. "Everyone's capable of it. Most people hide it. Blindside you. That's why I like people who wear their monster on their skin. They let you know where you stand."

That... was probably more than he should have said.

"Besides," he added, hoping to redirect the conversation, "I like proving people wrong." That had to be something Loki could relate to, right?

Apparently Loki wasn't feeling kind enough to let it drop. He turned and walked back towards the sofa; that slow, prowling gait he sometimes used. Like a panther. "Is that why you seek out my company? Because I make no pretense that I won't kill you if it amuses me?"

Tony hunched down a little. He wasn't sure what the best answer was. He also wasn't sure if Loki could tell lies from truth. He really ought to ask Thor about that, about the extent of Loki's powers in general. "Well, you're interesting. Stupid people are boring."

"That's true enough," Loki murmured. "And yet this realm is filled with them."

Tony lifted his chin in challenge. "Apparently something here keeps you pretty interested, because you keep on coming back."

Loki quirked an eyebrow at him and sat back down, a little closer than before. "Surely you don't fear for Midgard. Why, Thor himself has placed it under his protection!" His voice dripped sarcasm.

Tony studied him for a moment, trying to figure out the deeper meaning behind that. "So this is all about breaking your brother's toys?"

Something that looked a lot like contempt flashed across Loki's face. It could be directed at Thor, but it *could* be directed at Tony. Which would suggest he was missing something. "Obviously. Everything I am denied, Thor has gifted to him. Call it cruelty or jealousy if you like, but perhaps he will learn the value of things if I destroy that which he has not earned."

Plausible enough. Self-centered, petulant, complete with self-serving justification. Easy.

Think, think. Why else would Loki come here? The invasion, Loki hadn't exactly looked thrilled when Thor showed up, but that wasn't proof of anything. Still... "The first time you were here, at least. You came for the Tesseract."

"Hardly the first, but..." Loki made a gesture like he was sweeping that point aside. "What makes you think the Tesseract wasn't just a bonus?"

Evading the question. Tony narrowed his eyes a little. It would be a hell of a coincidence if the planet that would annoy Thor the most just *happened* to have people screwing around with a portal-generating mystical cube. "Okay, you have an alien army, and it's entirely your choice which world to invade... and you pick this one. This is the place you want to rule? Don't get me wrong, I'm pretty attached to this world, I do live here. But really... say you had a do-over, and the Tesseract wasn't a factor. Where would you take your nasty bug army? Which world do you go for?"

"Any of them. All of them." Loki lifted his chain, staring down at Tony - and damn, even sitting he managed to loom like that. "Do not mistake me, Midgardian. Destruction is in my nature. I would tear a swathe through all the realms and leave nothing but burned-out husks in my wake. Do you think I *care* which petty insects fall before me? Loki is a *curse*, Loki will bring the end of all things--"

"Well, that's a nice change from the 'I'm a god, destined to rule you all' speech," Tony interrupted, more than a little unnerved by the intensity in Loki's eyes. "It's refreshing, is all I'm saying."

Loki stared at him a moment longer, then said, "Speaking of curses, by any chance did someone render you mad?"

"Pretty sure it's all my own work," Tony said with a flippant smile that he knew from experience really messed with people who were trying to intimidate him. "You still didn't really answer the question, every world-ending rampage has to have a starting point. Humor me, come on, you've got your army, no Tesseract to aim for, where do you start?"

Loki opened his mouth, looking a lot like he was going to say 'with you' or 'wherever you make your home' or something equally threatening and uninspired, but then that expression changed. Something in his jaw tensed; he glanced sideways, eyes unfocused. "I imagine Jotunheim."

Tony sat back, momentarily startled at getting what *might* be a genuine answer. One that sounded like a place he'd heard of, actually. He flicked through notes in his mind, little snippets of information from SHIELD and from Thor. "That's... ice giants, right? That's the one you tried to blow up before you..."

"Fell," Loki supplied. His expression was guarded. "The home of the frost giants, yes."

Tony almost said something incredibly stupid like 'what have you got against frost giants?' He knew what Loki had against frost giants. Thor had given them the rough outline (repeatedly: whenever Clint made the mistake of calling Loki 'evil' and doomed them all to another hour-long lecture of 'my brother's adopted and it made him crazy').

Instead he said, carefully, "You do know that if you wipe them all out, it won't actually change anything, right?"

"Of course it will," Loki said, looking at him like *he* was the crazy one.

Tony opened his mouth, then stopped, genuinely perplexed. "Okay, you're going to have to break that down for me."

Loki held up one hand. "Loki is Jotun. They are barbaric, repulsive creatures." He held up the other. "Loki is Jotun. Skyreader, silvertongue, sorcerer."

"If you're the only one, you can't be defined by them," Tony murmured. He closed his eyes for a moment. It made a disturbing amount of sense, if you ignored the fact that it hinged on wiping out an entire race. "That's... really impressive, actually. To hell with therapy, you decided that the simplest, most effective solution to your self-esteem issues was to go straight to genocide. I mean, you don't do things by halves, do you?"

"Hardly genocide," Loki said, tone filled with disgust. "*Extermination.*"

Like bugs, or vermin.

Good heavens, and *Loki was a frost giant*. Tony recoiled as something leapt into startling clarity in his mind. He'd probably already figured it out on some level, the things Loki had already said about being a weapon or a stolen beast, but Tony still hadn't fully *realized*. That Loki - for all his ego, narcissism, and superiority complex - thought of himself as something subhuman.

He reached out and put a hand on Loki's shoulder, trying to anchor him with the touch. "You're not a monster," he said firmly, "although let it be noted I am not a giant fan of the killing sprees. You're not a beast, or a creature. You're--"

"I'm a *god*," Loki snarled, drawing himself up to his feet. He always sounded so defensive and angry when he said that. For someone who was supposedly the king of liars, he had an odd tendency to wear his emotions on his face. "And I do not need your pity. Have you forgotten who I am? I *lie*. How gullible you mortals are. How easy it is to prey on your useless sentiment."

"That was incredibly transparent," Tony told him. "Come on, are you even trying?"

Loki glared at him furiously, then the rage ebbed into something miserable and wounded. "How do you see-- Why *you*?" It was bitter and despairing and more than a little hateful, and

Tony decided not to take it personally. Almost inaudibly, Loki said, "Why not Odin?" and oh, *that* hurt.

It was the same thing Tony had asked himself a hundred thousand times. *Why? Why can't you see me? Why won't you look?* It hurt and he wanted nothing more than to stop this conversation in its tracks.

"I, um." He swallowed, throat rough. "I know it's my turn to cry on you but I really just would rather skip that whole bonding experience, if it's all the same to you. Actually, I'm thinking it's minibar time. And the answer is: some people are really crappy parents."

He headed for the minibar without waiting for an answer, shade of Howard Stark burning in the back of his mind.

"Odin is a hero," Loki said from behind him, sounding defensive but also strangely flat. "And the greatest king Asgard has ever known. Anyone will tell you that."

Oh, yeah, raised his frost giant son to hate frost giants, the guy was a master tactician. Tony grabbed the bottle of liquor closest to the front of the little fridge and took a long swig. "Ugh, good god, that's gin, I hate straight gin. I didn't say anything about the guy's kingship, I said he was a lousy father, and if you're seriously going to try and argue that then I worry about your own-- no, that's not fair, I'm sorry, I didn't say that. Just, he screwed up. He screwed you up."

He frowned at the bottle of gin. Well, it was open now, may as well keep going. He took another long swig and made a face. Oily, that's why he didn't like gin, it always felt oily in his mouth. Like detergent.

Loki muttered brokenly, "Perhaps his one mistake was in taking me in the first place."

Oh, how Tony knew that feeling, knowing that his own father didn't care and having only one person to blame. "It's not your fault," he said roughly, not turning around. "Lots of other things, yes, absolutely, but not that. Not him."

Loki was silent for several seconds, then he said in an unsteady voice, "I should go."

That wasn't a surprise, really; the conversation had gotten... touchy. If Tony had a nifty teleporting superpower, he would definitely use it to get out of awkward conversations. He cleared his throat, wiping at the corners of his eyes. "Right. Yeah. I'll, uh, I'll see you around."

His chest hurt. With his free hand he reached around under his shirt and rubbed at the dried blood on his back where it was flaking and itchy. Maybe Natasha and Pepper were right and he was over-identifying and not objective and all that other crap.

That didn't mean he was wrong.

He put the rest of the gin back in the mini-fridge and contemplated taking the bottle of Jack instead. Probably not worth it. He was suddenly really tired. Dealing with Loki seemed to have that effect on him.

There had to be a way to merge Asgardian morals with American morals with Loki's particular bag of cats and find a clear path through. His rough plan was to redirect and focus Loki's destructive urges, which in a lot of ways was the same thing he'd done for himself. Iron Man got to blow up a *lot* of stuff.

Admittedly the plan could use... refinement.

Tony groaned and wandered through the empty suite, fishing out his cellphone. He sent Bruce a quick all clear then stripped off his shirt and dumped it in the trash. He wound up on the bed, tracing the shape of the arc reactor and staring blankly up at the ceiling, trying not to think about anything in particular.

Not Dad, not Obie. Not the way people lied with false smiles and fake kindness and were only out for what they could get. Not Loki licking blood off his fingers and smirking at him.

The door clicked as Bruce let himself in; they each had the other's spare keycard. Tony kept staring at the ceiling and waited, and Bruce came to settle beside him. It was a big bed, there was plenty of room.

"You know you're clinically insane, right?" Bruce said.

"Labels," Tony said dismissively. He let his hand rest over top of the reactor, covering its light. "When you're as rich as I am, it's not called 'insane'. It's called 'eccentric'."

"I stand corrected," Bruce said agreeably: "clinically eccentric."

Tony thought about telling Bruce about the no-kill bet, because that was a good thing, right? There was still time for it to blow up in his face, though, somehow. Better to wait; unhatched chickens and all that. Instead he said, "That time I got him drunk, do you know what he said? He said something about when he first met me, and I thought, right, because he threw me out a window. But it was before that, in Germany. I made a joke about his helmet and then I - and I quote - 'dueled Thor for him'. Which was pretty much a draw but apparently since I'm a mortal he counts that as a win for me."

He turned his head to look directly at Bruce. "You don't think he seriously believes I won him off Thor, do you? I'm an only child. I'm quite happy being an only child. I don't need a crazy supervillain brother."

Bruce looked thoughtful, but all he said was, "I'd be worried if any of us could figure out what that guy was thinking."

"Yeah." Tony rolled his head back with a sigh, and closed his eyes, Bruce a comforting presence beside him. Bruce was his favorite human teddy bear (something he'd freely admitted to Bruce on multiple occasions). "If I can't get through to him, he's going to commit genocide. --Not on Earth," he added hastily. It seemed like a relevant detail. "Well, crap, maybe Earth, too, I don't know."

There was a pause. Bruce said blandly, "So, no pressure, then."

Sometimes it sucked being a genius with a conscience. "Piece of cake," Tony agreed.

#

The Wise King

Chapter Summary

Loki goes to prison or takes a short vacation on Asgard, depending on who's asking. Tony tries to learn more about Loki's powers and plans (and mostly winds up wanting to hit his head against a wall).

Chapter Notes

NOTE: This chapter contains discussion of attempted suicide, and a (separate) mention of sword-inflicted bodily trauma.

He didn't see Loki again for a few weeks, which gave Tony time to get more details of Lemaire's injury and finalize the approach to take on the bionic eye. It was going to take a lot of testing and red tape before getting anywhere near approval for human trials, but there was no reason not to start planning the process.

He was tapping on his tablet, trading emails with the legal division in Europe and not really paying attention to where he was going. By this stage in his life he'd pretty much mastered the skill of letting his subconscious and his peripheral vision steer him away from walls and door-frames. When the hallway opened up into a larger room, a vague awareness of other people present filtered through; he made a sound of acknowledgement and navigated by auto-pilot to the nearest sofa.

It was only when he heard Thor say Loki's name that something penetrated his work haze. Tony glanced up and then did a double-take, seeing who was here. Cap, looming convincingly; Hawkeye, an arrow notched and ready; Loki, chained and absolutely refusing to look at Thor.

"I sleep in one time and look what I miss," Tony said.

Without looking away from Loki, Clint said, "It's your grasp of situational awareness that makes me really glad to be on a team with you."

Tony flipped him the bird. "I'm sorry, I was busy revolutionizing medical technology. What have you done lately?"

"We picked him up not long ago," Steve said quietly. "He hasn't said-- well, anything, actually."

Clint gave a disparaging snort. "Didn't put up much of a fight, either. Think he's getting *soft*."

"I made a wager," Loki said, sounding aggrieved.

That was what this was about? Tony frowned, leaning back in the sofa to study Loki. He *looked* captured - Steve was trying to ask him what kind of wager, and Loki had clammed back up, staring at the ground like he was defeated - but there was something suspect about this.

"That one was me," he told Steve. "I bet he couldn't pull off one of his stunts without killing or hurting anyone."

"Apparently he can't," Clint commented, smirking a little, and seriously, how did he not see how fishy this was?

Thor made a disgruntled noise. "It's not wise to wager with my brother, Tony. You are lucky it did not go awry for you."

Yet. It did not go awry *yet*. Tony was pretty sure it was far from over. Oh, and there it was, the faintest of smiles on Loki's face, tucked away and hidden. The sneaky bastard was planning something, all right.

"In any case," Thor continued, "I shall return with Loki to Asgard, and you will be safe--"

All Tony's attention snapped to Thor. "Wait, no, I thought we weren't going to do that."

"Tony," Steve said warningly.

"I understand your concerns," Thor said, which Tony doubted very much. "This time, we will ensure he is contained--"

"If I had a dollar for every time you've told us that." Tony rolled his eyes. "Oh, wait, I *do*, because I'm a *billionaire*. Thor, come on, we talked about this."

"I promised to give it thought, and I have." Thor sighed, looking frustrated. "What would you have us do? Leave him unpunished? How will that stop him?"

"Right now the priority is getting him off the streets," Steve said firmly. "If you've got something else to say, we need to not have this conversation in front of Loki."

Tony stood up and tossed his tablet down on the sofa. "Just... give me one minute, here," he said. He walked slowly towards Loki, making sure to stay out of Clint's line of fire. Loki actually looked up, meeting Tony's eyes with a slight frown as if he was trying to figure out what Tony was thinking.

They wanted to send Loki to Asgard. Loki wanted to go to Asgard. Tony owed Asgard approximately zero loyalty, and he had a vested interest in forging bonds with Loki. Oh, what the hell.

Tony angled his body so none of the others could see his expression. He gave Loki a deliberate wink, then turned away and made a show of huffing in frustration. "You guys do what you want, I can't stop you."

He *could* warn Thor, but honestly he'd given them enough warning already. If they couldn't figure it out, then, well, he wasn't going to hold their hands through it. Maybe it was a terrible idea, but he wanted to see this play out.

There was even the slight possibility that Asgard really could keep Loki locked up this time, or would actually go through with executing him, either of which would save a lot of trouble. He wasn't going to hold his breath, though.

He could hear Thor move in behind him, voice low and pleading. "Loki, speak to me. Make this easier on yourself."

Loki, unsurprisingly, didn't say anything. Tony picked up his tablet on the way out of the room, thinking about that tiny, almost invisible smile.

--

He took the jet to Belgium, because Pepper said flying everywhere in the Iron Man suit was *too showy* (as if there could ever be such a thing). Tony obeyed because a) Pepper's will was a force of nature, and b) much as he loved flying in the suit, it was true there could be too much of a good thing. A little true. Only just.

He visited Lemaire first; they'd talked on the phone several times since he first made the offer, but he wanted to meet in person. Wanted to talk about the artificial eye development and go over any concerns that she had (besides 'why was he doing this', because she seemed not to buy the admittedly flimsy excuse that it was a tax dodge).

It wasn't going to be perfect, it wasn't going to be what she'd lost, but it was the best he could give her.

He had his driver pick a restaurant for dinner, which felt more like lunch. He was stuck on New York time, six hours behind, so he stayed up too late working on a paper he was co-writing with Bruce, and then realized at three in the morning that he'd written all his notes in French because that's what he'd been speaking for the last sixteen hours. Well, damn.

Did Bruce speak French? Probably. Hell, he could just email it anyway and pretend he'd done it on purpose, everyone was used to his questionable sense of humor by now.

Tony turned his attention to the online forums he'd had Jarvis dig up for him. He wanted to understand Loki better, but it was... difficult. He'd started off looking into guys who were raised to hate homosexuality and then figured out they were gay, but instead of getting some insight it mostly made him want to punch people through the internet. Everything they said about the supposed evils of playing with another guy's hard-on felt like a personal attack and Tony's usual response to being attacked was to attack right back but twice as hard.

Fortunately, he did stumble across the phrase 'internalized racism' and *that* was a bit more productive. Still a bit difficult for him to wrap his head around, but in a different way. It wasn't a perfect analogy - trust Loki and Asgard to take everything to extremes - but if it might help him get through to Loki it was worth some exploration.

He skimmed forums for an hour or so, then forced himself to go to bed, tired or not. Tomorrow he had another visit to make.

The two children, Yvette and Frederic, had been taken in by their maternal uncle. Tony had checked into the guy. He was a patents lawyer, single, clean record; no, he didn't need a job with Stark Industries, no, he didn't need any financial support, yes, the famous Iron Man could come and visit the kids.

In person, Mathieu De Wilde was a nondescript guy in a suit; faintly charming but not charismatic. He shook Tony's hand, called him 'Monsieur Stark' even when Tony protested the formality, and made a mean cup of coffee. He also looked very, very tired. Like a guy whose sister had been brutally murdered and who found himself suddenly a single parent of two traumatized kids.

"Don't misunderstand me," he insisted; "I love my niece and nephew. But Frederic is so quiet and Yvette won't let him out of her sight. I don't know anything about children. I don't know what to do."

He looked desperate and pleading and Tony didn't know what to tell him. This wasn't a problem that could be solved by throwing money at it. De Wilde had a well-paying job, the kids had a sizable inheritance; money wasn't an issue.

Pepper would know what to say. Pepper was great at stuff like this, the people stuff. Tony mumbled something placating and useless like, "It must be very hard for you," and drained his coffee cup, feeling like an asshole.

Talking to the kids didn't make him feel any better. In one way the timing was kind of good, because he could honestly tell them that the man who killed their parents had been caught and imprisoned. He left out the part where Loki was probably going to escape and come back.

"You're American," Yvette said, holding Frederic protectively behind her. "Why don't you just execute him?"

"Aren't you seven? I don't remember being that bloodthirsty when I was seven." Tony was crouched down to be at eye level with them. He made a face, because he couldn't very well tell her 'because the king of another planet will kick our collective asses'. "We can't always execute people. I'm, uh, we're trying to make him not want to hurt people anymore. It's complicated."

Frederic tugged on his sister's arm and whispered in her ear. Yvette nodded and asked, "Are you really Iron Man?"

That was a much easier question. "Sure am. Do you want t-shirts or something? I can get you t-shirts." Mugs, key chains, action figures, about a hundred other things. It would be embarrassing if it didn't make so much money.

They both looked at him solemnly, wide brown eyes in pale faces. Frederic didn't give any signal that Tony could see, but Yvette said, "Yes, please, Frederic would like a t-shirt. Uncle said your parents are dead, too."

"That's right. They died in a car crash."

"Are they in Heaven?"

Tony bit his tongue, hard, and let his inner Pepper answer that question. "Yes, they are. Maybe my parents and your parents will be friends."

The kids looked unimpressed. At least there wasn't any crying.

Tony shifted his weight and shot De Wilde an apologetic look for what he was about to say. It felt low, like he'd only come here to harass them for information. "Hey, listen. I know some men already asked you two about the safe upstairs--"

"We don't know," Yvette said quickly. Too quickly, and Tony nodded.

"That's okay. I just want you to know, if you *remember* something, maybe something you overheard that you weren't supposed to, I promise you won't get in trouble if you tell me."

She hesitated. "Promise?"

He put a hand on his heart and pitched his voice sing-song. "Cross of wood, cross of iron, if I lie I'm going to Hell."

The two kids shared a look, and then Yvette peered over at their uncle, who nodded solemnly. She crept forward and leaned in close to Tony's ear. "Papa has a lucky coin. We're not allowed to know."

Some kind of coin. That narrowed it down. Not by much, sure, but maybe they could turn up something about a magical coin floating around Western Europe. Tony kept his voice gentle. "Do you know anything else about it?"

Yvette shook her head.

"That's okay. That's very helpful, thank you." He glanced at De Wilde again. "I'm going to give your uncle my email address, so he can help you if you want to write to me. About anything, even if it seems stupid."

They both nodded, and Tony pushed himself up to his feet, knees aching with the movement. He looked down at Yvette and Frederic and said, praying it was true, "You're going to be okay."

He made the same offer to De Wilde - email any time, even just to vent - and the guy thanked him so sincerely that it made his stomach turn. It wasn't like he was doing anything actually helpful. Short of figuring out how to bring back the dead, he didn't see how he *could* help.

On the bright side, that was the last of his business in Belgium (the other survivor didn't want to meet, just wanted to get on with her life, which he could understand) so now he could look forward to getting home.

Halfway through the flight he suddenly realized the loophole in his bet with Loki, and cursed his own stupidity the rest of the way back to New York.

--

A few evenings later saw him stretched out on the sofa with Pepper tucked against his side. It was his favorite way to read; tablet in one hand and the other arm wrapped around a warm body. Pepper had a particularly nice warm body and he told her so, kissing the top of her head.

"Flattery will get you nowhere," she murmured, not looking away from her own tablet.

"Actually, I think you'll find past history shows that flattery will get me at least in the door, sometimes even as far as the bedroom."

"Oh, that's not the flattery; I'm just using you to get close to Captain America."

"Cold," he said, and ignored the little twist in his gut, because it was a funny joke even if it was painfully on point. Pepper wasn't his father. Which was a good thing, a very good thing, because that would make their relationship disturbing. "Scheming. Diabolical. He needs more of that in his life, actually."

"Mm, if you say so." Pepper reached up without looking to pat at his cheek.

Tony flipped between the articles he was reading: one on the effects of childhood bullying, one on the pathology of serial killers. "Should I get a psychology degree? I can always use more qualifications, right?"

"Tony, you use your qualifications as place-mats."

"That was *one time*. Certificates can be re-issued, that table was worth--"

"It's a social science," she reminded him calmly. "You know how you feel about social sciences."

"Oh, good point. Unclean." He wrinkled his nose, then peered over her shoulder. "What are you reading, anyway?"

"Just brushing up on my mythology." Pepper tilted her tablet so he could see the text. "He's supposed to be the God of Chaos. Have you thought that maybe he's *meant* to be crazy?"

No need to ask who she was talking about. Tony grimaced. "Well, that hardly seems fair. Can't he give it back and get something else? God of Well-Adjusted Stockbrokers or something?"

"Hard to see him as a stockbroker," Pepper pointed out. "God of Theatre Directors?"

"He does like a show. God of Bizarre Scandinavian Rock Music?" Tony tilted his head, distracted by the possibilities. If he could choose a godhood, any godhood... "Why not go straight for the gold? God of the First Coffee of the Day."

"God of Breakfast in Bed," Pepper said, wriggling her toes with relish.

"Oh, that's *good*. I might have to stake a claim on that one." He gave her a gentle squeeze and hummed into her hair. Maybe next weekend: long lazy morning, waffles drizzled with maple syrup, fresh fruit dipped in chocolate, very messy sex. Not the... she was allergic to something, make sure not to use the allergy one. "Jarvis, make a note."

"Noted, sir."

Pepper tipped her head back to get his attention. "Did you remember to email Director Fury?"

"He said he's not interested in being a lab rat." Fury had put it a little more colorfully than that, but the gist was enough. Tony was a little insulted that anyone would reject his quite frankly amazing venture into bionics. But Fury was the Supreme Spy Overlord and so being a little paranoid over medical details wasn't much of a surprise. "I think he just likes the eye patch."

"Well, it does make him look rather distinguished."

"It makes him look like a *pirate*."

"I think that's what I said," Pepper teased, and Tony snorted in amusement.

They read a while longer, then Jarvis let them know that dinner was ready. Bruce had offered to cook tonight, which always meant good things. They tossed around a few more godhood ideas on the elevator. (Tony was particularly fond of 'God of Televised Gardening Competitions', because what was less evil than nice landscaping?)

There was a surprise when they got to the dinner table: Thor, back and looking guilty as hell. That only ever meant one thing. Tony laughed, because it was that or tear his hair out with frustration. "Seriously? Seri-- What was that, a week, six days? I think that is *actually* a new record. You're going to have to start offering him frequent flier miles or something."

"Tony," Bruce chided him, because Bruce was too damn soft for his own good.

"I apologize," Thor said miserably. "We have failed you. There is no excuse."

Tony let Pepper push him into a chair, then he folded his arms and scowled across the table at Thor. "I want my dollar."

"Thor, don't give him a dollar," Pepper said firmly. "It's good to see you again, despite the circumstances."

Thor inclined his head gratefully. "And you as well, Lady Pepper. Tony is right to reproach me, though. I was certain this would not happen again, yet Loki made all our measures appear as naught but daydreams. He was well prepared."

Tony sighed, and resigned himself to asking the question he'd been dreading since he'd realized the bet didn't cover Asgardians. "Did he hurt anyone?"

"He did not." Thor managed a wry smile, although it didn't reach his eyes. "Loki has ever hated to lose a wager."

Huh. That was... interesting, because Tony was sure Loki wasn't the type to just overlook a loophole like that. Or the type to play nice for no reason.

Bruce finished dishing up and sat down to join them. "So, it's pretty safe to assume he's probably back on Earth. Do we have any idea where he's going to... start?"

There was an awkward silence, then Thor ducked his head and said, "I'm afraid not."

So, nothing they could do until the first news reports of death and destruction came in. Inevitably, Loki always came back from Asgard pissed off and looking to mete out some pain of his own. No complex scheme, just blood and violence. Which was a sentiment Tony could relate to, actually; it was how the whole Iron Man thing had kicked off. But Iron Man *aimed*. Loki just lashed out.

He didn't want to think about what Loki was going to do. How many people Loki might kill. He rocked back in his chair and looked speculatively at Thor instead. "So, what did he steal?"

Thor actually had the nerve to look *startled*.

Tony huffed, rolling his eyes a little. "Come on. He clearly got himself taken back there on purpose. He didn't go to kill anyone. So what did he take?"

"A trinket, nothing more. A child's toy." Thor gestured, indicating something round. "Jane has devices somewhat like it. A... telescope? For seeing long distances."

Tony exchanged a puzzled look with Pepper. Why would Loki let himself be taken back to Asgard just to steal a telescope? It wasn't as if they were hard to get hold of - or, hell, Loki could probably make one if he needed something specialized. Tony sure as hell could, and Loki was at least as smart.

"I'm... confused," Bruce said, giving voice to their thoughts.

Thor spread his hands expressively. "As are we all. He ignored many valuable artefacts and powerful weapons, although he must have walked past them, and took only the one small toy."

That took Pepper aback. "Why would you keep toys with valuable or dangerous items?" It was kind of adorable that *that* was the part that jumped out at her.

"Sounds like my workshop," Tony muttered, shooting a grin at Bruce. "Which is why Pepper is a) in charge of organizing anything that needs organizing, and b) not allowed to touch my workspace."

"I am terrified if the King of Asgard has the same lab habits as you," Pepper said with a sigh.

"The toy had its own value," Thor explained. "It was something Loki crafted as a boy, long before he should have been capable of such delicate work. It was a gift my father treasured."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "My god, that's actually cute. I didn't know Loki even *had* cute stories. I think I'm jealous. Why do I suspect he didn't take it for sentimental reasons?"

"Indeed, we had many happy memories, though he chooses to forget them now." Thor looked briefly wistful then shook his head. "What his purpose could be, I know not."

To prove a point? To deny, again, the family relationship? Tony drummed his fingers on the table, frowning. It didn't feel right. Taking something like that didn't crush those family memories, it brought them to the surface. Emotional manipulation? There were easier ways to go about it, ways that didn't involve getting dragged back in chains.

"Stop trying to figure him out, Tony." Bruce gave him a small, wry smile. "Human brains aren't designed to be that twisty. You'll hurt yourself."

"Yeah. Wouldn't want that." Tony grinned, because had Bruce actually seen him work? Or drive, or attempt to cook, or just about anything else, for that matter. Hurting himself was how he knew he was on the right track.

"All right." Pepper held a hand up for their attention. "Let's shelve the topic. Let Thor decompress. You can debrief properly when the others are back from the movies."

That made sense; there was no point in going over everything twice, and nothing much they could do unless they got a news report or a call from SHIELD. Tony pretended to sulk anyway. "I still want my dollar."

"You don't need a dollar."

"Then I'm raising your rent."

"Take it out in trade," Pepper said blandly, as if Thor and Bruce weren't *right there* - admittedly, Thor probably didn't know what she meant.

"Why, Ms. Potts," Tony said, as Bruce smirked down at his dinner, "I believe we have a deal."

--

And then there was nothing. It made Tony nervous. Jarvis was monitoring basically every news channel there was, as well as a few defense networks he wasn't supposed to have access to, but nothing was happening that couldn't be identified as humans just being dicks to each other. (Which was admittedly still a problem, but not *Tony's* problem. Unless he discovered there were any of his old weapons involved.)

The weekend came and went. He remembered to make Pepper breakfast in bed. He ran some more tests on the staff they'd got off Loki at the beginning of all this. He reorganized the kitchen, designed a better propulsion system for the jet, and drank cup after cup of coffee.

Finally Steve kicked both him and Thor out of the Tower 'until they could act like normal people'. Tony thought that was unfair. He *was* being normal. Thor was the one walking around under a visible cloud of worry and agitation.

They flew upstate a bit to blow off some steam. Technically, they didn't have to go that far to spar, but between Thor's super-strength and tendency to throw lightning around, and the capabilities of the Iron Man suit, they needed a lot more space if they really wanted to cut loose.

Fighting against Thor was good practice. He didn't hold back like Steve tended to. And with the kinds of enemies they'd started making, Tony had to be familiar with the very limits of what his armor could handle.

Actually, it was about time for another upgrade; he'd base the calculations around dealing with super-powered people like Thor. Jarvis had comprehensive data on Thor's abilities, and recordings of all Iron Man's fights. Maybe he'd sacrifice some lightness for a little more durability.

After they'd thrown each other around for a while, Tony signaled for a break. He pulled his helmet off and lowered himself heavily to the ground, joints aching in a vaguely satisfying kind of way. Thor came and dropped easily beside him.

"An invigorating duel," Thor declared, grinning at him. "My thanks, Tony. Jane was right, it was good to divert our minds from their cares."

"Yeah," Tony agreed, mentally shying away from the word 'duel'. It just reminded him of the crazy idea that he'd dueled for Loki somehow. Maybe Loki had just meant that it made him feel important to be fought over. Maybe Loki had just been trying to freak him out.

He leaned back on his hands and tilted his face up to feel the sun. It was probably bad that he'd been kicked out right along with Thor. It meant the others could tell that Loki was getting to him, and he couldn't see any way they'd approve. Bruce and Steve he figured would come to him first with any problems, but Natasha and Clint were still SHIELD and the last thing he needed was an ethically-deficient, highly-militarized spy agency thinking he was 'compromised'.

He needed to be more careful. Play it cooler.

"Yet you still seem deep in thought," Thor observed.

Tony looked at him and shifted, sitting up straighter. He shook dirt off his gauntlets. "Can I ask you some questions?"

"About Loki." Thor sat up a little straighter as well, smile falling away, and nodded. "I will answer as best I can."

"He's supposedly the God of Lies; what does that mean, exactly? Can he tell when we're lying?"

Thor opened his mouth to answer, then paused a little, brows furrowing. "He has been given dominion over trickery and lies, so by rights he should know a lie when one is spoken in his presence. Yet it often seems this is not so."

So, 'maybe', or worse, 'sometimes'. Tony wasn't happy with the imprecision of that answer; if it was concrete one way or the other at least he'd know what he was working with, and be able to tailor his conversations with Loki accordingly. He studied Thor for a moment. "You have a theory."

Thor was slow to answer, and sounded hesitant. "I think perhaps... he has lied to himself for so long he can no longer tell it from truth."

That made sense, inasmuch as anything stinking of magic made sense. It wasn't completely counter-intuitive, anyway. Tony made a thoughtful noise, turning the idea over in his mind.

Thor gave a sigh. "If that is truly the case, then I-- You must understand, when I say it seems Loki cannot recognize a falsehood, I am not speaking solely of the time since his fall from the Bifrost."

That wasn't a big surprise; Loki had had issues for a long time. Oh, but that was the very thing that bothered Thor about it. It meant that things weren't as happy as he remembered them, before it all went to hell.

"Well, yeah," Tony said frankly, because he was an insensitive dick sometimes, and come on, Thor knew that by now. "I know you love the guy, Thor, but he got screwed up long before whatever hellhole it was he fell through. I don't know if it was going on behind your back, or if you just didn't realize what you were seeing--"

"I would never have let anyone hurt my brother," Thor said tightly.

"But you *did*." Tony took a breath. "You said it yourself, your little warrior buddies made jokes that you never took seriously. No, he didn't tell you it bothered him, or wasn't clear enough about it. But you didn't see it. You didn't see *him*."

He knew it was hurting Thor to hear this, but if there was any hope for them to be brothers again then Thor needed to learn to understand. Tony had doubts that he was the best person for the task, but he had too much experience being on the invisible end of the equation to think of Loki solely as an enemy anymore. For better or worse, he'd put himself squarely in the middle of this.

"He's a frost giant," he pointed out. "And he didn't know. He's been lied to his whole life. He doesn't have dominion over lies, Thor. He's basically their bitch."

Thor grimaced, but admitted, "What you say has some merit." He turned his head slightly, looking out across the bare land, eyes distant. "Yet it was no lie that we were brothers. He is the one who calls it so. He has created strife where none need have existed."

"He told me..." Tony hesitated, catching his lower lip between his teeth for a moment. Should he tell Thor anything Loki had said, in private? It was nothing he wouldn't put in a report to the whole team, but one-on-one it felt weirdly like going behind Loki's back. "When we were drunk. He said he used to think everyone on Asgard was so stupid - he's a real charmer, huh? - but everyone else could tell he didn't belong there, long before he found out."

Thor scowled, no doubt about to launch into the 'he's my brother' speech.

"I'm not saying it's true, I'm just telling you what he said," Tony clarified hastily. "That everyone else figured it out before him. Anyway, my point was: if he *felt* like people didn't think he should be there, whether they really thought that or not, do you think he ever went to mommy and asked why he didn't belong?"

"His place was at my side," Thor declared, starting to look distinctly stormy. "He invents persecution where none existed. Our mother would have assured him he was no different than any..."

There it was. The slowly dawning realization.

"So I'm curious," Tony said, with a mildness he didn't feel, "about the lies thing. Not just for dealing with him now, but because maybe it played into... all this."

If Asgard was a person he would punch it in the face.

It was still, ultimately, Loki's fault. However messed up he might be, it was still up to Loki how to deal with that and he'd chosen 'murderous rampage'. But the sheer *idiocy* of the 'lie to a kid about his entire species and hope everything works out fine' plan was truly breathtaking. Add in the supposed powers and it became the world's most destructive example of wilful obliviousness.

"Good grief," Tony muttered, going to rub his face and then remembering he had the gauntlets on. "Pepper was right, he should have turned it in and gone for God of Fine Dining or something."

"He would do no such thing," Thor snarled with an anger as sudden as it was completely baffling.

Tony raised his eyebrows, bewildered and a little wary. It was kind of reassuring to already be in the suit. He thought about putting the helmet back on but held off for now. "Uh, let's say hypothetically I wasn't from Asgard and had no idea what just bunched up your panties, can you add a little more context?"

"Loki is many things, but he is not some--" Thor broke off abruptly, jaw clenching. He took a measured breath in and then released it, but was very obviously still on edge. "On Asgard, we do not have the many faiths and beliefs that are held here on Midgard. Asgardians know we are a part of the Norns' tapestry and that this weaving is... you might call it the fabric of the universe."

How the hell did this just turn into a *religious* discussion? Tony tugged his helmet a little closer, because history suggested that if Thor kept on with that well-meaning, vaguely patronizing tone, then Tony was liable to wind up saying something extremely disrespectful.

"Each of us is but a small component of the whole, but if a single strand twists out of place--" Thor made an expansive hand gesture, and Tony had no idea what it meant but it was big and choppy enough that he grabbed his helmet in both hands, just to be sure.

Thor didn't seem to notice, just planted both fists on the ground between them and fixed his gaze on Tony with an intensity that seemed frankly disproportionate. "I know you men of Midgard do not have domain over powers as we do. You need not concern yourselves with such weighty matters--"

Tony bit his tongue. Hard.

--but heed me well, Man of Iron: our domains are sacred. To accuse an Asgardian of rejecting or... *contaminating* his domain, that he might risk the unraveling of all that exists... there are things one simply *does not say*."

Hoo boy. Wouldn't want to go unraveling the fabric of the universe or anything. No mystery where Loki got his self-important attitude from.

"Okay," Tony said, with what he felt was an appropriate level of contrition; "so turning in your resignation is a big no-no, my bad. What do you mean, contamination?"

Thor gave him a disapproving frown that was almost worthy of Steve. "Just as the tapestry is made of warp and weft, so too the universe we know is made of two parts. Man and woman, hunt and hearth, moon and sun. The mixing of both parts... to stand with a foot in each world, neither one thing nor the other - *that* is a notion most foul."

"Yin and yang, light and dark, dungeons and dragons," Tony muttered along. Apparently Asgard's HR department never developed sensitivity training videos. If there was any truth in Loki's drunken rambling about being picked on for mixing battles and magic (*swords and sorcery*, ha) then it might--

A sudden realization flashed through Tony's mind, and he jerked his head up, the back of his neck hitting the padded rim where the helmet would normally lock on. "--Wait."

Thor gave him a wary, suspicious look, like he wasn't quite sure if Tony was about to make fun of him but had a strong hunch.

Tony actually wasn't, for once. Having mentally replayed the conversation, and come up with the same answer, he stared at Thor in disbelief. Surely he'd misunderstood...? "Let me just..."

run something by you. What you're saying is, the problem with Loki using magic is not that it's for girls, but that you think he's *violating an existential dichotomy?!*"

"He is *not*--" Thor stopped before quite reaching a shout, but he looked pretty pissed. "Are his favorite tricks not illusions, which are merely lies that one might see? Loki has always... pushed the boundaries of what is acceptable -" here Thor glanced down in a way that suggested Loki didn't so much push the boundaries as trample them - "but he remains a warrior! He would not defile the natural laws by playing hearth-husband or riding the distaff." There was a distinct sneer on Thor's face when he said that and it sounded kind of crude. Now didn't seem like a great time to ask about it, though.

"Hear this," Thor continued, stern: "Asgardian law gives him the right to demand single combat with any who accuse him so, and regardless of his own crimes, not a single man or woman of Asgard would deny him his due."

"Oh, like you don't all duel at the drop of a hat anyway," Tony muttered, trying to think through the implications of this. Warriors didn't use magic. Thor called Loki's magic 'tricks' and 'lies' because then it was legal or moral or whatever, except it made Loki all defensive about having his skills looked down on. But if Thor admitted it was 'true magic' then Loki was breaking what sounded like a serious, important taboo.

Perfect. Nothing like another catch-22 to improve a shitty situation.

"A duel to the death," Thor clarified impatiently and still kind of angrily, and Tony lifted his gauntlets indignantly.

"Whoa. *Whoa*. And you didn't think that was something that we needed to know? Like, maybe the *first* time I ran my mouth at your incredibly cranky, mass murdering brother?"

Thor stared at him without a hint of humor. "Until recently, Tony Stark, if I had told you how best to offend my brother, would you have done anything other than run immediately to him to say that very thing?"

Touché. "Hey, that's unfair, not to mention hurtful. I would never run to him. I'd have at least waited for him to come to us."

Mortal insult. Tony assumed he hadn't implied anything like that to Loki yet, because he wasn't dead. What counted as warrior stuff and... not-warrior stuff? Ugh, this sounded like time for another Anthropology Afternoon and it had always been Bruce and Natasha more interested in those than Tony.

"So," Tony said, a little more seriously. "Mortal insult, things one simply does not say. But... I'm guessing people did say it?" He watched Thor carefully, trying to judge his boundaries. "Given the... stuff and... you know. Loki's outstanding talent for making friends and influencing people."

Thor's hand drifted to his hammer, fingers flexing on the handle before falling away. "Indeed," he said grimly. "Men tended to remember his magic, and forget his skill with a

blade. And an excess of mead has ever loosened men's tongues and made them over-bold. Loki fought a number of duels, in his youth."

"To the death."

"To the death," Thor agreed.

"Well, good. Good." Tony sighed in frustration. "So he's spent his life believing that he has to kill people to prove himself. Wow, I'm so glad that didn't come back and bite us in the ass at all."

"I fought on his behalf when I was able," Thor said defensively.

"What does that, what does that mean, exactly? You get to call in a ringer?"

"No one would hear such a thing said of their kin and let it stand. Of course allies and kin may call for the duel, if they hear the insult. Though it was very seldom anyone was foolish enough to speak so in front of me." Thor tilted his head slightly. "Do you not defend the honor of your friends, when you are with them?"

"Are you kidding?" Tony asked, and then he realized that no, playground taunts aside, he would go to the mats for any of his people when it really counted. "All right, no, I see what you mean. Fine, explain the... can I say 'magic'? *You* said 'magic'. What is it, he only does stuff that counts as lies?"

"That is... the best way to understand it." Thor looked deeply uncomfortable. "Most importantly in battle. Were he any other warrior, his use of magic... might not be considered... fitting. But Loki is Odin's son, and a prince of the realm. And somewhat spoiled," he added with a hint of a bite in his voice. It was actually kind of hilarious to hear Thor complaining about Loki being spoiled, instead of the other way around. Thor loosened up a lot about Loki when he wasn't stuck playing Loki's only defender. "No, his tricks are but another aspect of his role as God of Lies, just as Sif has a misleading domain. No doubt a few thought it shameful, but it is just... Loki. It is who he is."

Loki thought everyone despised it; Thor thought a few. The truth was probably somewhere in between, and a matter of degree. Tony added that to the picture he was building in his brain - kind of a 3D schematic of what made up Loki and Asgardian society - and grimaced at the blank spaces and contradictory paths. "Thor, I want you to know that I'm not implying anything... untoward." He resisted the urge to waggle his eyebrows, since it would probably undermine what he'd just said. "But if that's all true, how come you get to dangle the magic hammer everywhere?"

Thor stared at him with a faintly baffled, faintly pitying expression. "Do you call everyone who uses one of your creations an engineer? Mjolnir is a weapon of great power, but I did not craft her."

Did that mean anything Loki did with an object or weapon didn't count as the wrong sort of magic either? Tony opened his mouth to ask about it, then hesitated. Thor looked like he was

losing his patience with this conversation and there were more urgent things Tony wanted to know.

Other stuff now, more magic later. He took a breath and braced himself. "Kind of a sensitive topic, here, but uh. Loki's mentioned a couple of times falling off your flash sky-bridge. Except, sometimes he says he fell, and sometimes he says he was cast off. So - what happened?"

Thor was silent for a long time, and Tony was beginning to wonder if he should just ask something else. Then Thor bowed his head and said very tightly, "He slipped."

"Uh." Tony tried to figure out a polite way to say that Thor sounded like every unconvincing murder cover-up ever. It was maybe not the right audience for that joke. He was occasionally capable of restraint.

"There was. an explosion," Thor said in the same tight, low voice. "I tried to reach him. Loki hung from the bridge. From the spear. But we had been fighting, his grasp was slippery... and Father told him... He was distracted. He was tired from the fight, and the sweat-- as we tried to pull him up, he lost his grip."

The only time Loki had *ever* been tired from a fight was when he'd been beaten half to a pulp by the Hulk.

Tony leaned backwards, staring at Thor. His little mental schematic rearranged itself. Loki found out he was the monster under the bed, tried to off himself, fell through inter-dimensional hell-space, came back bugfuck crazy.

"He let go."

"No!" Thor snarled, rising to tower over Tony and point the very solid end of Mjolnir at him. The air smelled very suddenly of ozone and impending violence. "Recant your words, Stark, if you do not wish them to be your last."

"Thor--"

"*Recant*," Thor ordered in a voice like thunder, and Tony put the conversation together with the previous one and decided maybe it was just fine for Thor to stay in denial after all.

"I recant," he said quickly, trying to look as peaceful and harmless as he could in a weaponized suit of armor. "I was very wrong and, uh, probably didn't know what I was saying and was clearly completely mistaken, sorry about that. Ah. Just... completely hypothetically, if an Asgardian - some other Asgardian who doesn't even exist because they're hypothetical - but if they did try to, you know, die somehow, that would count as screwing up the whole tapestry thing, wouldn't it?"

Thor was still glaring at him, but slowly lowered the hammer, so that was... good. "No Asgardian would ever commit such an abomination."

"Recanted," Tony said brightly, just in case Thor needed reminding already. *Fuck, fuck, fuck*, he chanted inside his head. Loki had tried to kill himself *and* nobody could admit it. Just fucking perfect, why would he want any of this to be *easy*.

Loki had tried to kill himself and it was entirely possible that the damned psycho thought it was just one more of the things that made him a *monster*.

Good god oh fuck *death will not have me* how could he have missed--

Tony knew his expression was too fake and fixed in place but it was the only way he could hold back the sour, dull taste of grief welling up in the back of his throat.

"I know you are trying to help him," Thor said quietly, all the anger suddenly drained away, "but you must take care with your words. These things are... sensitive matters."

Tony wasn't entirely comfortable with how Thor had turned 'trying to stop Loki' into 'trying to help Loki', but he wasn't going to pick an argument right now. He attempted a weak smile. "He was... different before that, right? Before slipping," he clarified just to make sure his ass was covered. "You've said..."

"Yes. Loki was full of mischief and laughter and... I thought, a joy in life." Thor looked off into the distance. "You would have liked him, I think. The pair of you might have made great sport."

Tony didn't know what to say to that. He didn't know what Thor was going through, not really. He imagined it was like Loki was only half-dead: gone, but not completely out of reach. Just close enough to taunt with everything that was missing. He could remember all too clearly the moment he'd discovered Obie's betrayal, but this ran so much deeper. A thousand years of brotherhood turned on its head and somehow, Thor had the strength and sureness of self to keep on loving Loki anyway.

Tony kind of envied that. He didn't know what that kind of faith might feel like.

Abruptly, he'd had enough of this conversation, of the weary lines of loss it was etching into Thor's expression. He didn't ache as much anymore, physically, so he pushed himself to his feet. "Another bout?"

Thor looked back in surprise, then smiled bright and genuine, moving easily from one moment to the next. "Gladly."

Tony didn't shift moods so easily. He felt weirdly off-balance for the rest of the day. It's not that he thought Thor had been going to attack him-- no, he had absolutely thought Thor was going to attack him, and that wasn't okay but it had all worked out. He wasn't going to make Thor sit through another one of those Appropriate Violence on Midgard powerpoints so soon after the last one.

Besides, Tony was pretty familiar with the aftermath of his life being in danger, and the restlessness under his skin didn't feel like it was caused by Thor's furious threats. It felt like grief but he wasn't grieving for *Loki*. Loki was occasionally funny but a manipulative weasel

and a cold-blooded murderer. If Tony could work out how to reliably kill an Asgardian he'd probably have already killed Loki himself.

He wasn't-- okay, he'd felt some... some empathy maybe, when he realized Loki had let go on purpose. It was... a little personal for Tony. The suicide thing, not Loki's specifically. It didn't take away anything that Loki had done. The guy who'd murdered Versace had committed suicide too, but that didn't make Gianni any less dead.

Tony shouldn't be feeling like this, he didn't know why he was feeling like this.

Was it Yinsen? Was he subconsciously thinking of Yinsen? Who had definitely 'let go', albeit a lot more metaphorically. Tony closed his eyes, acknowledging the guilt and pain that rose up when he remembered Yinsen's peaceful acceptance. He'd learned, eventually, that fighting the hurt made it last longer.

But it was a very different feeling to the edginess that was bothering him. It was kind of a relief to know he wasn't associating anything about Loki with Yinsen, but it frustrated him not to know why he was so bothered. Thor was the one who should, who had been, who had to remember trying to save Loki and seeing him just-- And in the middle of fighting him, to go from that to seeing him die, or at least believing he was dead - Tony didn't like to imagine what that must have felt like, the adrenaline and grief and guilt and probably not even knowing *why* he'd had to fight Loki in the first place, why Loki had turned against him--

we had been fighting

Obadiah. *Nothing is going to stand in my way. Least of all you.*

Tony reeled, breath locked in his chest. Oh. *Oh*. That restless, off-balance feeling surged up like a tide. Inevitable and relentless.

Time to hit the button--

He was distracted. He was tired from the fight. He lost his grip. He looked Tony dead in the eye and said, "Screw you, kiddo."

Tony clutched at the wall, tears pooling in his eyes. All he could see was Obie in that knockoff armor when the reactor core overloaded. Not fair. Not fair. None of it had been fair, Stane had sold him out and threatened Pepper, tried to kill her-- why hadn't the fucker just *let Tony help him--*

Tony let his breath out in one long, shuddering exhale. It was over. Over and done. He couldn't change anything now. And he sure as hell shouldn't be comparing Loki to Obie, unless it was to remind himself that Loki was dangerous too.

His chest hurt. Tony curled his hand into a loose fist, and told himself it was the arc reactor embedded there.

--

Loki came back one morning after Pepper had already gone to work. He was standing outside on the Iron Man landing pad, looking down at the city, his coat flapping in the wind. It probably said something about Tony that his first thought was to finish buttoning up his shirt, rather than go for the suit's homing bracelets. He did it by feel, eyes drawn to the dark figure out the window. It was like when he was working on something particularly interesting and his vision reduced down to the model in front of him. And oh, wouldn't it be easier if Loki was a holographic display he could expand or manipulate or put away at will.

"Jarvis," he said as he knotted his tie, "our buddy Loki's about to come in and no, I do not need you to contact the other Avengers. Everything's fi-- wait. No hits on the news search?"

"No, sir. It is, as they say, all quiet on the Western Front."

"Thank you for that truly comforting literary reference. I really hope that doesn't mean I'm going to be his welcome back tantrum." Tony finally slipped the bracelets on and went upstairs and to the door. He only stuck his head out; no reason to go stand right out on the edge where even a saint might be tempted to push him off. "How's the view?"

"Smoggy," Loki said without turning around, and his voice carried eerily well.

There was something unnerving about the way Loki was looking down. Maybe it was just because Tony could still remember Thor's voice telling him Loki had 'slipped'. On the other hand, Thor had once survived a thirty thousand foot drop without a scratch; falling only a thousand shouldn't be enough to so much as bruise someone like Loki.

That didn't mean Loki wasn't wishing it would.

Tony pushed all thoughts of sleepless nights and lonely whisky bottles from his mind. He wasn't even feeling bad about Loki, he was feeling bad about Obie, his mind was playing tricks on him. "Just don't get comfortable out there. No stealing my tower again. It's my tower, I built it. You can't have it."

Loki gave a sharp laugh. "Oh, but I don't need the whole thing. I give my word, you'll barely even notice my presence."

Tony hesitated, then decided it was safe enough to leave Loki out there wallowing. Or at least, not any more dangerous than anything else involving Loki. "Well, don't break anything," he said, then pulled back inside.

He intended to grab a tablet and do some reading while keeping a wary eye on Loki out the window, but he heard the outside door open again only moments later. He turned slightly to keep Loki in his field of vision. "Should I say welcome back? I'm not sure what the protocol here is, considering."

Loki swept a hand in front of himself - he'd added black gloves to his usual outfit - and gave a small, mocking bow. He looked... terrible, actually; tense all over and eyes deeply shadowed. "There's no need to concern yourself. I was hardly expecting fanfare."

"We kind of were, now that you mention it." Tony kept the lines of his body casual, hiding the nervous adrenaline that surged through him. "You usually announce your return with a bit of a body count, a few more explosions."

Loki's answering smile was thin and tight, badly forced. "Ah, but we had a wager. There would be no return had I not gone to Asgard in the first place. I would hate to lose on a technicality."

"That's... oddly fair of you." And back to front. Surely Loki was supposed to be exploiting technicalities to his advantage, not bending over backwards to avoid them. Tony puzzled at it as he went to the side of the room, where he had Loki's prize tucked away in a drawer. "Well, you win, so congratulations. Here's a little something I prepared earlier. I can throw in a user manual if you want but you don't seem to have much trouble with technolo-- *Jesus*, you're right there."

Loki grinned sharply, looming over him from way too close, and plucked the cellphone from his hands. Tony took a shuddering breath, pulse racing with fear and okay, okay, maybe he was a *little* turned on, because he had a long and practiced history of self-destructive urges. But he had to get a grip on it because having seen a weakness Loki was going to *keep poking at it*, and that would end... badly. For so many reasons. The first and most important being Pepper, but not forgetting that Loki would probably take him to pieces. Literally. Bloodily.

Loki leaned in, bracing a hand on either side of him. "My thanks," he murmured, low and purring, "for the crafting."

Way, way too close. Half the problem was that Tony *knew* this was dangerous, he was flooded with adrenaline, but they weren't fighting. His body didn't know what to do with it.

Okay then, snap decision time. So he was sometimes kind of into Loki, so what? He could be fine with that. He was attracted to people all the time. For example: every one of his teammates. It didn't have to be a big deal, he could just... enjoy the feeling, then go on being comfortable with his life just the way it was.

Snap decisions were good. Most of his decisions were made on impulse, if he was honest. They tended to work out. He could always justify them afterwards, so either his subconscious was really good at processing information and feeding him the correct answers, or he'd had a lot of practice justifying himself. Maybe a little of both.

He looked up at Loki and smiled calmly, choosing not to be flustered. "You're welcome."

Something - disappointment or irritation - flashed across Loki's face. Ha. He backed up several steps, passing the cellphone back and forth between gloved hands. It tugged at something familiar in Tony's brain; he'd seen it before, Loki putting distance between himself and other people before being prepared to turn his back. Another little detail to file away.

Loki was heading for the bar and Tony made sure to keep some space between them as he followed. Non-threatening. "Yeah, I didn't offer you a drink yet, help yourself."

"Much as I appreciate that the practice of hospitality is not altogether dead on this uncouth rock--" Loki moved behind the bar as though he owned it, unerringly finding the glasses and taking out two. "I come prepared to repay your good manners."

So Asgard put some importance on hospitality customs. Loki said a lot when he wasn't paying attention to his words. Tony cocked his head, wondering how much goodwill he'd accidentally bought himself just by being a smart-ass on a regular basis.

Loki lifted an ornate bottle that he *had not been holding* a second ago, and poured an equal measure in each glass. With a wave of his hand, they started to faintly steam.

"Sir," Jarvis said reprovably, "I'm obliged to remind you that it's eight twenty-seven a.m., and you gave certain assurances to Ms. Potts regarding the consumption of alcoholic beverages--"

"Override," Tony said, waving a careless hand in the air. "This is a... diplomatic encounter. Inter-realm relations could be at stake."

"I'm sure Ms. Potts will find that very persuasive," Jarvis said, and Loki snorted in what was apparently genuine amusement.

Tony shrugged and took the closest glass, reminding himself that Loki could kill him in a hundred different ways. It *could* be poisoned, but refusing it wouldn't save him from a broken neck. Instead he lifted it to his lips and drank, without displaying a flicker of suspicion.

Wow, Loki hadn't been kidding about preferring his drinks sweeter. It should have been sickly, and Tony wasn't entirely sure why it wasn't. Maybe the extra flavors saved it: summer fruit and heavy spices. And a *lot* of alcohol. It did interesting things to his tongue.

It didn't really seem like wine or liqueur, though. If it was from Asgard... "Mead, I assume?"

Loki nodded, watching him.

"I like it," Tony decided, and drank some more. He hadn't realized they drank it warm - was that an Asgard thing or a Loki thing? It was good, whoever's idea it had been.

Apparently satisfied, Loki took the other glass and drained it in several long swallows. His hand didn't quite close around the glass, Tony noticed. Might be nothing, but it seemed a little stiff. And there were the gloves.

"So," Tony said, cradling his own drink while Loki refilled. He was happy to work at it slowly and let Loki do the heavy drinking. "Since you brought up technicalities. I couldn't help but notice that our little deal didn't cover Asgardians."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Ah, I wondered if you'd notice that."

Tony waited, but nothing else seemed to be forthcoming. He raised his own eyebrows. "And?"

Loki knocked back another glass of mead, tired and grim. Again, his smile looked like it took effort. "Let's just say... I found it more entertaining to humiliate, this time. The guards would probably have preferred I killed them; at least then they would have retained some honor."

Disturbing. Tony rubbed his forehead momentarily. "I think you guys need a reality check on the importance of honor," he muttered.

"That may be," Loki said, and flashed an easier smile. He seemed a little more settled with some drink in him. It reminded Tony of bad days, of nightmares and memories that wouldn't quit.

Down by his side, Loki was flexing his other hand absently, gloved fingers curling and uncurling in a slow, steady rhythm. Like a heartbeat. The gloves were definitely hiding something, had to be.

Tony rested his free hand on the bar and took another sip of mead. Best to work up to it. "You know we have telescopes on Earth, right?"

Loki cocked his head a little, but it didn't take a genius to figure out who had told Tony what was stolen. "Yes. But their nature is all lines and angles. Like goes with like."

Things going together. Loki collecting magical artefacts, going all the way to Asgard for a specifically magical telescope. Needing it to be *compatible*. "Everything you've taken, they're not separate steps in a plan. They're just components. You're going to build something with them, one giant magical multi-tool."

Loki's eyes widened fractionally. "I think perhaps I underestimate you."

"Aw, that's sweet," Tony said, while on the inside his mind was quietly flipping its shit over Loki potentially possessing some kind of mega-artefact of unreasonable power. And that vase was going to be part of it, the vase that *amplified magic*. Oh, this was so bad.

"Mm, perhaps." Idly, Loki spun his new cellphone on the top of the bar, its custom green casing reflecting glints of light everywhere. "I'm not sure you are well served to have my attention."

Tony gave a casual shrug. Better him than someone who didn't deserve to get hurt. "It's going well so far. You haven't tossed me through any man-made structures lately. That's not an invitation, by the way."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Loki said, but the look of predatory relish on his face suggested he was dreaming of just that. Tony checked his bracelets reflexively.

Constant fear for his life aside, Tony was aware that he was actually holding his own. He might even be the closest thing Loki had to a friend, in this realm at least, and wasn't that a fucked up thought?

He knew he was terrible with people; that was why he had Pepper. With Loki, he'd managed to keep hitting on the right things to say, or at least the things that wouldn't get him killed.

He'd like to believe he was just absurdly lucky, but privately he had to admit luck didn't have as much to do with it as he'd prefer. There was a core of something familiar in Loki, a resonance he found it easy to connect to, and that should worry the hell out of him.

He shouldn't find it so much easier to talk to *Loki* than to talk to someone like Mathieu De Wilde.

"You knew what I was planning, when I let your teammates take me," Loki said, pouring himself another drink. The bottle didn't seem to be showing any signs of running dry. "Yet you said nothing, unless Thor has grown vastly more practiced at deception than I remember. Why didn't you warn him?"

That had been another snap decision. There were so many ways Tony could answer that question, all true in one way or another. All the post-hoc justifications he'd come up with. Instead, he found himself saying something completely unplanned. "Do you ever get tired of being the smartest one in the room?"

Loki inhaled, drawing back a little. His face went carefully blank, which was telling all by itself. Again, Tony had said something completely *right*, unintentionally.

Tony took another drink of mead, content to leave the ball in Loki's court for now. There was a comfortable, warm feeling settling into his chest. This stuff was potent. He wondered if he could get the recipe, set up another Stark subsidiary in charge of brewing, throw some of the profits at anti-drink-driving PSAs for irony's sake.

With a twitch of his wrist, Loki tucked the cellphone away, apparently into thin air. Tony wasn't sure if he was annoyed or envious. On the one hand, he couldn't help but feel a little personally insulted whenever something seemed to defy the laws of physics. On the other hand, no unsightly pocket bulges. It was a neat trick.

"Stark Industries," Loki said, moving out from behind the bar with glass in hand. "You rule it, correct?"

"Well, P--" No, he preferred for Loki to forget that Pepper existed. "Yeah. Yeah, you could say that."

Loki made a faint noise of acknowledgement, heading for the computer interface. That wasn't good.

Tony refilled his own glass and followed, bringing the bottle with him - good heavens, it was still three-quarters full, that wasn't even *possible*. "What are you hacking into now?"

As he called files up, Loki angled his body sideways so Tony wasn't coming straight up behind him. He seemed to have gotten into the HR files. Standard Stark Industries employment contracts, non-disclosure agreements, summaries of benefits. "You have many sworn free-men who serve you. Not even tens, but hundreds of thousands?" He cast Tony a glance that was at once impressed and incredulous. "You mortals cluster in such numbers. And here, in return, you are responsible for them and their families."

It wasn't a completely inaccurate way of describing how a company worked, Tony supposed. "Yeah, I'm king of the mountain. Where are you going with this, besides showing off your amazing disregard for anything resembling electronic security?"

"More like a jarl, I think," Loki said absently. "You serve a king in turn. No--" and he turned more fully to regard Tony with curiosity. "You have openly challenged the court of the elected king, and imposed your will on them."

The court of the-- "The Senate? Well, yeah, they're a bunch of idiots, I'm not going to take any orders from them. Besides, everyone knows that the real power is in the corporations and multination...als..." Tony froze for a moment, abruptly remembering that he was saying this to someone who liked to now and then *literally* try to take over the world. "Uh, but not *real* power, I mean, there are checks and balances, laws, regulations..." He gestured vaguely, mead sloshing in his glass as he tried to backpedal.

Loki's mouth quirked in amusement; he reached out and gestured to heat up Tony's drink. "Is that so?"

Dear god, stupid, *stupid*. What was *wrong* with him? How had they even got onto this topic? "Why are you even-- Wait." He stared at Loki as sudden clarity struck. "Are you trying to figure out if I'm high-ranking enough to be your friend?"

That... was *hilarious*.

"Don't be ridiculous." Loki closed all the files with a sweep of his hand, and took his mead to the sofa. "You're a mortal. You couldn't possibly hope to be my equal."

"My kingdom's bigger than yooour kingdom," Tony teased, voice a singsong as he followed.

"That depends entirely on what you think my kingdom is," Loki said, and he sounded cranky, but he didn't pull away when Tony sat beside him and let their knees touch.

If anything, the physical contact seemed to settle Loki; he slumped back in the sofa, legs sprawling a little wider, and closed his eyes with a sigh. "I rather believe you were sent to test me," he murmured.

"Huh. I'm not sure how my ego should respond to that. Sent to test a god, that would make me a pretty big deal, right? But on the other hand, I'd have to actually believe you lot were gods. No offense, but I've seen what you can throw at us, and it's not exactly of biblical proportions."

Loki opened his eyes, something unfathomably dangerous in them. More than just deadly; it looked like the ends of stars. "You have never seen me at my full power, tiny mortal. Pray that you never do."

Tony really wanted to believe that was a bluff, but something about it rang terrifyingly true. He took a too-large swallow of mead, trying to stifle a shiver. It was just Loki's ego talking, had to be. "That doesn't make sense, why would you hold back if we were-- Unless. You were using it for something else." There was more, he could feel the pieces of it in his mind,

almost slotting together. Maybe some partial truth in it, maybe-- "You're running multiple cons at once. You're-- Oh. Oh. How far can away can you project one of those illusions of yours?"

That unearthly look faded out of Loki's eyes a little, replaced by something almost like a smile. "Further than you can imagine."

"But it takes more effort the further you send it," Tony said. He didn't know why he was so sure of it, but it made sense. And Loki didn't deny it, just kept watching him like a teacher waiting to see how many questions he'd get right. "Where have you been since you escaped from Asgard? Not here. You went to another realm, didn't you, to check up on your business there."

"Oh, very good," Loki said softly. "Indeed, neither Earth nor Midgard is the center of the universe. I have... irons in many fires." He frowned as he said that last, looking down at his free hand and flexing it.

"Is that where you hurt your hands?" Tony asked before thinking better of it.

Loki made a soft 'tsk' sound. "And you were doing so well."

"On Asgard." Irons. In fires. Red-hot metal, maybe. Tony could see it in his mind; could smell searing flesh, if he thought too hard about it. He wasn't necessarily opposed to a little harsh punishment for criminals - there were definitely a few he'd like to see suffer - but he also believed that if the same thing didn't work over and over, eventually you should *try something else*.

He took a slow, steady breath; said, "I'm not sure if I should be sympathetic, all things considered."

Loki gave a hard-edged smirk. "I hope you're not under the impression this punishment was for anything I've done here in this backwater little realm. To Asgard, the worst of my crimes is how I do so persist in defying Odin's justice."

"I had wondered about that, actually." Had Loki intended that to be shocking? Natasha had been the first one to speculate. Thor tended to skirt around the subject, deliberately vague. Politically, it made a lot of sense. Tony didn't think anyone really cared *why* Loki was locked up just so long as he was locked up.

He wondered if letting go of that rainbow bridge was a crime, or if they just entirely refused to acknowledge it.

Loki looked a little disgruntled at Tony's non-reaction, and poured yet another glass of mead. Tony had lost count of how many that was. He suspected Loki's nightmares were acting up. It was the same look of bleak distraction he sometimes saw in the mirror.

"You know, I still don't get why you spend so much time on Earth, though. I mean, if you're throwing illusions across the universe anyway, why would you base yourself the first place Asgard looks? It's not exactly the safest place to be."

"On the contrary, it's one of the safest places in the Nine Realms. Consider yourselves blessed." Loki paused to sip. "But neither is it the only place Asgard sends its warriors to seek me out. Thor is not their only pawn. And I have been... very, very noisy, elsewhere." He gave a grin that hinted at some very interesting stories.

So Loki's illusions were dropping breadcrumbs all over the place, places he sometimes visited in person. He must have been captured from elsewhere a few times, because if he was only ever caught on Earth then surely they'd have caught on.

Earth safe. Blessed. Under Thor's protection. Under *Asgard's* protection, which could only be of benefit to Loki if people other than the Asgardians were looking for him.

Click click click. Pieces slotting together.

"You've made a lot of enemies, haven't you?" Tony asked.

"I can't imagine why," Loki said, lip curling in dark amusement. "I am so very charming, after all."

Tony was pretty sure he'd said the exact same thing to Pepper about himself, on more than one occasion. He decided it was more funny than creepy, and smiled as he drank some more mead. It was *really* good. Made him feel warm. Cozy.

"People hold the most ridiculous grudges." Loki tilted his glass, examining it curiously. "Take your Agent Barton, for example."

Tony snorted, wary of Loki's casual tone and the turn of this conversation. "Let's be honest, that grudge is not all that ridiculous. Some might go so far as to call it downright reasonable."

"Yes, well." Loki flicked his fingers as if dismissing that point. "He did seem to take great pleasure in the farce of my 'capture'. Just as well for him, since I have no intention of allowing it to happen again."

Tony could only imagine. Clint tended to run his mouth at the best of times, and with Loki? With the ammunition of Loki's semi-public meltdown in front of the team? Not pretty. But the thing was, Loki *deserved* it. Tony wasn't going to blame Clint, or anyone else for that matter, for taking what revenge they could.

The most non-committal thing he could think of to say was, "I'm not really the guy in charge of what Clint says."

"I was more interested in what he didn't say," Loki answered, eyes fixing on Tony like a steel trap. "No little quips about what might await me in my sleep? Or... other things." An open-palmed gesture that encompassed magnitudes. Loki was obviously not going to acknowledge the semi-conscious cuddling out loud.

It seemed like a good idea to actually think for a moment before blurting anything out. Tony scratched his chin, short hairs bristling against his fingers. He was pretty sure this was a test of some kind. "I know a little something about nightmares," he said finally. "And needing--"

wanting to talk to someone who understands even a fraction of what it's like to be..." Tortured. Broken. Not enough. Too much. Overwhelmed. He rejected half a dozen words and shook his head. "What it's like. And that shouldn't be something people laugh at."

There were times when Loki's expression spoke volumes, and times when it was near unreadable. This was definitely one of the unreadable times. "Only a fool discards a potential weapon."

"It's not a weapon." Tony shifted on the sofa, tucking his foot under the opposite knee so he could face Loki properly. "Don't get me wrong, if we could use your enormous ball of crazy to wave a magic wand and make you suddenly a nice person? I'd be all for it. Gung-ho. Team spirit, that's me. I mean, we've had the talk about honorable battle and I am just not that guy. The ends justify the means, I think you know how that goes. But just *being mean* isn't good enough. So, I told them what I thought was... relevant." He took a drink, suddenly self-conscious. "The rest of it's no one else's business."

"How noble of you," Loki sneered, but there was no real bite to it.

Tony gave a short laugh, wondering if that meant he'd passed. "You'd be the first to call me that, believe me."

Loki looked down at his empty hand, flexing it again. "I'm still of a mind to burn something down," he murmured, more to himself than to Tony, then looked up again. "Tell me what you do. When the need rises."

"Get drunk and laid," Tony said flippantly. No, okay, be serious. This was good. He should be encouraging Loki to do things other than attacking large civilian populations. "Uh, physical exhaustion is good. Beat the hell out of a punching bag. Usually I lock myself in my workshop and build something or take something apart." Anything except the armor, because when things were at their worst, working on the suit just made him think he was back in a cold, dim-lit cave, building the first one. "Turn the music right up, hammer some sheet metal. It's more about control than destruction. But Stark Industries still has land for weapons testing - we should really sell that or build on it, I'll get around to it - so if I really need to, you know, blow something up, I can just fly on down and fire missiles into the side of a hill for a while."

Loki grimaced, looking dissatisfied. "Exhaustion, study, petty weapons practice. What of *pain*? What of *power*? You never desire to see someone made helpless?"

No. Yes. All the time.

Tony got up, pacing away from the sofa. He didn't *do* this. He didn't even talk to Pepper about this. He clenched his hands, staring out at the city. His city. Not the only one he'd fought to defend, but definitely the most frequent. "Why do you think I lock myself in, when I go to my workshop? So I don't--"

He shouldn't have left his glass by the sofa, he could really use a drink in his hand right now. He kept his back to Loki and tried to pretend he was alone in the room. "When I started, when Iron Man started, some of my weapons had got into the wrong hands. Well, they were

sold into them, actually, by my-- a guy I thought I could trust. So I spent a while tracking down what I could, blowing it sky-high. I wasn't too careful about making sure the people who'd bought them were at a safe distance. Then I did some, uh, 'peacekeeping' was the official word, although I'm pretty sure 'vigilante justice' was another term being thrown about.

"These days I have the Avengers. So I'll get by for a while with my music and my workshop and sponsoring hospitals in third-world countries and whatever else, and then some moron will attack the city and then, then." He closed his eyes, taking a steadying breath. "Then I can do whatever I want. And it feels so, so good to *beat* them. But the thing is, the waiting. You have to wait for them to make the first move. Wait for them to start it. Because that's... that's the line between being a hero and a villain."

Tony opened his eyes. Suddenly, he knew why Loki was here. Plying him with mead. Being *nice*. It was almost poetic, in its own way. He wanted to save Loki, prove there was something good in him because it would mean they were *both* still good enough.

He wanted to bring Loki over to his side. Why wouldn't Loki want to do the same to him?

The others couldn't know. Loki trying to compromise him - that was exactly the kind of thing that would lead to people overreacting and writing *reports* and bringing Fury's entire Boy Scout troop of spies down on his ass. The problem with playing down to expectations was that at times like this, people didn't trust him to know what he was doing. As if he hadn't spent his whole life learning how to manipulate things that could explode in his face.

"A wise king never seeks out war," Loki said slowly, "but he must always be ready for it." It sounded like something he was repeating by rote.

"Something like that," Tony agreed. It was a fine line and sometimes he came closer to it than he liked to admit. But he stayed on the right side of it. He *stayed on the right side*, and that was what mattered. It had to count.

Loki's voice sharpened slightly in lilting challenge. "We also say, do not seek to turn a foe into a friend."

"Yeah? Well, we don't." Tony touched what was left of his sternum, below the reactor. The hole in his chest hurt, an ache that pulled at his ribs and tainted his breath with metal. It was a stupid saying, anyway. Sure, warrior culture, but he'd much rather turn a foe into a friend than have yet another friend turn into a foe. "You're not on Asgard now, Toto."

He heard a footstep behind him and instinctively whirled, aware that his back was exposed. Loki had refilled and reheated both their glasses and was holding one out to him.

"I don't--" His fingers twitched reflexively, shying away. "I don't take things from people, it's a thing, I have issues, I know. Just put it--"

Loki paused, something hurt flashing across his face.

"It's not personal," Tony insisted. His eyes kept flicking to the offered glass despite himself, and his stomach twisted tense and ugly. "I really don't like-- ask anyone."

"Suit yourself," Loki said, a little stiffly, and set the glass down.

Tony breathed a little easier, and gratefully picked it up. He raised it briefly with a bright, sarcastic, "Cheers," then tipped his head back and didn't come up for air until he'd drained the glass. Topsy just wasn't cutting it. God, he needed this conversation to *not* be about him anymore. His eyes fell upon Loki's gloves and he said, "What did they do to you, anyway? Do I even want to know?"

Loki gave a careless shrug. "It's of no consequence. Their physical punishments no longer concern me. They can only wound my flesh. It's nothing more than appearances, illusions."

"Um, yeah, and *pain*," Tony pointed out, holding out his glass for another refill.

"Pain is just as much an illusion," Loki said, pouring, and then made the bottle disappear as if to prove *that* was an illusion too.

There was something important behind that sentiment, something that smelled of crazy, but Tony was on edge and working towards drunk and he couldn't line the pieces up right, to see how they slotted into the schematic. He made a mental note to come back to it later. "I guess if anyone would know about illusions, it's you."

Jarvis spoke up before Loki could answer. "Pardon the interruption, sir. Doctor Banner asked me to remind you that you were due to meet in the lab--"

"No," Tony groaned. He loved Bruce to bits, he did, but this morning had turned into the worst possible time. "Tell him I'm unavailable. I'll make it up to him later."

"Yes, sir. I take it you don't wish me to mention Mister Laufeyson's presence."

"Dear god, *no*," Tony said, as Loki jerked his head up to glare at the ceiling furiously.

"That is *not* my name."

"Sorry, that was my fault, that was me." Tony resisted the urge to back away from the murderous look on Loki's face. "I just pulled it from the SHIELD files, bad data, typical paper pushers. So, you're, uh, sticking with Odinson?"

"I have no father." Loki raised his chin, wearing a strange mixture of bitterness and pride. "I am Loki, the Great Lie of Asgard. There are a hundred kennings for me; use one of those if you must."

'Kennings' sounded familiar to Tony but he couldn't quite place the word, although he could make a fairly solid guess from context. "Those nicknames, uh, Silvertongue, Liesmith, like that?"

"Worldwalker, Skytreader, Maker of Mischief. Take your pick." Loki still looked all too brittle. Touchy issue.

"Mine used to be Merchant of Death," Tony said, as a weak peace offering.

Loki raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Now they call you Iron Man. And let me guess, Glowheart."

Tony coughed to ward off a choking fit, suddenly relieved he hadn't been drinking just then. "Good heavens, no, that makes me sound like a Care Bear." At Loki's blank look he added, "A children's entertainment, uh, thing. Just. Trust me. Ix-nay on the Owheart-glay."

Loki didn't visibly change expression, but something about his posture *shifted* to give off an air of horrible, malicious glee. Tony sighed. "You're absolutely going to call me Glowheart."

"Clearly, it's a name which holds great meaning for you," Loki said, the smug bastard.

If Loki pulled that crap in the middle of a battle, Tony was going to blow his smirking head off. Son of a bitch. He sighed and shook his head. "Jarvis, update the record. Loki... Silvertongue?" He glanced at Loki to check that was acceptable. "Mister Silvertongue, right, let's roll with it. Ah, after he leaves, make a note: we'll hack into SHIELD's and update theirs too." Basic biographies weren't top security, remote access shouldn't be a problem. It would keep them on their toes.

"Updated and noted, sir," Jarvis said smoothly.

Tony turned his attention back to the conversation. Loki. Loki and father issues. Names. Right. Did he want to tell this story, or did he want to hold it back? There were some things that he couldn't, wouldn't share, but this seemed harmless enough. "So, when I was a teenager, I absolutely hated my dad. I stopped being that cute kid who was a science prodigy and I started being Howard Stark's boy, didn't I think he was amazing, wasn't he brilliant, didn't I hope to grow up *just like him*."

Loki nodded grimly, and it didn't take a genius to recognize the massive chip on his shoulder in the shape of big brother.

"By the time I got to MIT, I was so sick of being compared to him, I just..." Tony grinned, because in retrospect it was pretty funny. He'd been a fucking drama queen as a teenager - something else Loki should be able to relate to. "I refused to answer to Stark completely. I would have hacked into all the records but they were hardcopy in those days, primitive, I know, don't know how we got anything done. Somehow I still managed to convince a couple of the profs that my name was-- something else. Kept it going for a couple of months, it was pretty great."

Naturally, Loki picked up on the one part of that story Tony wanted him to ignore. "Something else?"

"I don't remember, just some name that jumped into my head."

"You know," Loki said, wearing his predatory look again. It was like he could sniff out humiliation. "You owe me an answer."

"Seriously?" Tony asked plaintively. Probably he should have thought this through before he started talking, but that had never really been his strong suit, and his mind was contentedly fuzzy with mead. "You're seriously wasting that on a *name*?"

Loki sipped his mead, smirked, and said, "Oh, absolutely."

"Fine. Fine. Rogers, okay? Happy? Shut up. I was, it was a thing, I didn't know any better." Tony took a long drink to ease the sting of being laughed at by a genocidal maniac with self-esteem issues. This was his life now. This was why he should never volunteer for things.

After a few moments, Loki's amusement faded. "He was at least your father."

Oh, hello, perfect opening. God of Family Therapy, that's one he and Pepper should have come up with. Tony wet his lips and said, very carefully, "Maybe this is a cultural thing. On Earth, adoption still counts."

"If it were just that I was Odin's wish-son, it would-- I'm not even--" Loki's throat worked briefly, then he stepped back and turned away, hiding his wet eyes. "Do your stories tell the reason I am called Silvertongue?"

Tony stayed where he was, reluctant to push too hard. Mostly because he didn't want crying. He was not drunk enough to deal with crying. "No, I don't think so. I just figured, smooth-talker, you know."

"One of Asgard's greatest warriors is Tyr. Perhaps the greatest. He was winning battles before Thor was even born. I..." Loki turned back a little, smiling with no real joy. "A long time ago, I insulted him *most* grievously, and so he challenged me to a duel."

Tony snorted. Of course if there was a no-holds-barred, worst possible thing to say, Loki would say it. "You would."

"The fight was brief--"

"Wait, fight?" He'd assumed the story would be about Loki talking his way out of the duel. "You killed Asgard's greatest warrior?"

"Of course not," Loki said scathingly. "I'm not as weak as some believe, but I'm not *Tyr*. The fight was brief because he won it swiftly. But great as he may be, I was a prince. The law said he was entitled to my life, but... the law is not everything."

"Politics," Tony agreed. Killing the king's son would be a terrible move. There were plenty of ways for an angry king to take revenge that had nothing to do with laws and justice.

But why would Loki provoke a fight he knew he couldn't win in the first place? Had he already been trying to-- or was that the point of it? Was it a humiliation for Tyr to have to let Loki live after an insult like that? It seemed... less than subtle. Assuming this story was even true. Thor would know. "So what happened?"

Loki smiled again. "He cut out my liar's tongue."

Involuntarily, Tony found himself looking at Loki's mouth. "One small question."

"Let me finish." Loki took a drink, then his other hand was holding a blade, tiny and bright. "I had a silver dagger of the dwarves, and I wove the best of spells around it. I enchanted myself a new tongue." He prowled slowly back to Tony, twirling the little knife in his fingers, silver flashing on black. "One that is sharp, and lethal, and strikes at the most vulnerable places."

That was a hell of a mental image.

Tony held his ground, telling himself that if Loki was trying to turn him evil, he wouldn't kill him. The way Loki was spinning that blade wasn't reassuring. The way Loki stopped in front of him and held it between their faces was definitely not reassuring. Then the asshole *touched his lips with it*, and Tony concentrated on staying very, very still against the pointy object, while meeting Loki's eyes.

He was not going to be the one to blink. They'd danced this dance before and he could take whatever Loki threw at him, dammit.

...Unless Loki kissed him, which was looking like a distinct possibility, because *no*. In fact, hell with it, two could play at that game. Tony held Loki's eyes, watched them flicker and dilate as he slipped his tongue (*very lightly*) against the point of the knife.

He would probably regret this when he sobered up.

Loki twitched, closing his hand and vanishing the knife. His hand lingered a moment longer, brushing against Tony's jaw - and dammit, those gloves were going to show up in his dreams, he was sure - before he lowered it. "I do enjoy your boldness, Tony Glowheart."

Oh, goddamn that stupid name to hell. "Do you also enjoy my personal space? Because," Tony gestured in the narrow space between them, "the looming, down here that's not uh... customary social distance."

Loki smirked a little, and he tilted forward just long enough for Tony to think *yes - no - shit--* then he stepped backwards, all innocence, "My apologies. I would hate to be responsible for your... discomfort."

Tony laughed, tension abruptly broken. "We beat the crap out of each other on a regular basis, somehow I think we're past 'discomfort'."

Loki's smirk slipped into a genuine smile, one that looked oddly out-of-place on his still-haggard face. "True enough."

Tony made his way back to the sofa, glass in one hand and the other loosening his tie. He popped the top couple of buttons on his shirt as well, flushed warm with drink. At least he wasn't the only one; Loki looked a little unsteady on his feet, coming back to sit beside him.

"How," Tony demanded, jabbing a finger at the magically disappearing-reappearing bottle Loki was carrying again, "is that not empty yet? I need to know. This is, it's got to be the

most useful thing I've ever seen magic do. I need it."

Was he allowed to say that? Magic. If it was magic Loki was *doing*, it had to be okay, right?

Loki didn't seem angry, just held the mead bottle in the air and regarded it thoughtfully. "I'm not sure you would comprehend the answer."

"Uh, hello, *genius*," Tony objected, vaguely affronted. "I am the master of sciences. I can do anything. And I am just drunk enough not to freak out about the basic impossibility of it all. Come on, hit me. --That's a figure of speech."

Loki topped up both their glasses and set the bottle on the ground. "Percussion."

"You might have to expand on that a little."

"Take percussion," Loki said, over-enunciating a little. "From the simplest rhythm to the most complex of patterns. You can make a great many sounds by the timing of each beat."

"Okay," Tony said slowly. "I'm with you so far. I think."

"Now, explain music to one who knows only percussion." Loki took a drink, watching him expectantly.

Tony was a little lost. "Well, uh, it's... the same, but with different notes--"

"Ah." Loki wagged a finger at him. "But what is a note?"

"Different... frequencies of sound--"

"Frequency means nothing to one who is only accustomed to rhythm."

"Well, it's..." Tony faltered, mind going blank. He grimaced in frustration. "That doesn't make any sense, how can you explain music without a concept of *sound*? It's a whole extra dimension. Rhythm's not enough."

Loki made an open-palmed gesture, as if that answered everything. "Magic is as music. Your science is percussion. How can I teach you that which you have no concept for?"

"I..." Tony paused, trying to think. Loki's superior little smirk was annoying him. "Will think of something. This is not over."

Loki gave a quiet smirk and tipped his head back against the sofa, eyes falling half-closed. He looked... drained. His hand flexed again, stretching, the way it had when he'd pensively talked about wanting to burn something down.

Tony didn't know what else to suggest. Honestly, the most important thing that kept him steady, kept him able to breathe, was Pepper - and Loki didn't have that. A best friend, a soulmate, someone who would listen without judgment. In any of the worlds... was there anyone? Loki didn't exactly invite people to get close to him.

Sometimes, Tony sat in the middle of the floor with his face in his arms, and Pepper would tell him about her day as she moved around the penthouse. He'd listen to the stream of mundane chatter until the visions behind his eyes faded and he started to feel human again.

Maybe... He stretched his arm along the back of the sofa, feigning casual as he dropped his hand on Loki's shoulder. It earned him a sideways glance, but no protest. Okay. He could work with this.

Quietly, he began to talk. Stories of his childhood, pranks he'd pulled, trouble he'd got into. Loki liked mischief, right? He threw in a few from his twenties, the many times he'd scandalized Obie and the Board. Little things. At first, Loki chimed in with sarcastic quips, but he responded less and less, tension ebbing out of his body. Slowly, his breathing deepened, evened out.

When the glass Loki was holding started to tip, Tony took it gently and put it on the floor. Loki stirred, making a small, protesting noise.

"Just me," Tony murmured, resting his hand back on Loki's arm. "When was the last time you slept?"

Loki blinked his eyes open and turned his head to focus them on Tony. "Have a care, Avenger. That almost sounds like concern."

"I was just thinking." Tony rolled his lower lip between his teeth, wondering if he was pushing his luck. "Mead's hitting me kind of hard, I could use a nap. And like I said, I sleep better with company. I don't know if you remember that, actually, you were pretty drunk."

"Ah." Loki wasn't giving anything away, in his face or in his voice. "So you would offer me use of your bed, solely for your own benefit."

"I'm very invested in my own benefit," Tony said agreeably. He wasn't sure if the thin attempt at face-saving was enough; if Loki was drunk enough this time, or tired enough. But if Loki was here, sleeping, then he wasn't *out there* somewhere, burning things down. "Jarvis will let us know if anyone tries to get up here, right, Jarvis?"

"Indeed, sir."

Loki stared at him with that unnerving, unreadable expression. Tony waited, careful not to shift or fidget. Just an offer. Not a big deal. Nothing to set off touchy Asgardian pride. Here, kitty, kitty.

Abruptly Loki rolled to his feet, all fluid grace. "Very well."

Huh, look at that. Tony pushed himself off the sofa and followed Loki to the bedroom, undoing his tie along the way. He tossed it at the foot of the bed and checked his bracelets, although he didn't really think Loki would try anything. Maybe he should worry that he wasn't worrying. Lulled into a false sense of security?

He took a minute to use the bathroom, because if he didn't now then he was going to have to in about ten minutes. When he came back, Loki had already shed his coat and boots and had planted himself face-down on the bed. Tony kicked his own shoes off and climbed on beside him. The room spun unpleasantly when he lay down. To his surprise, Loki shifted closer, burrowing in against his side. Tony wriggled a little to get an arm around him, even if it was probably going to cost him some circulation later.

"You know," he said, "you're really pleasant like this."

Loki made a disgruntled noise but that was all, no sarcastic retorts or threats of violence. It really would be nice to keep him like this, all sleepy and docile and not stabbing anyone. Even if he was just shamming vulnerability to get Tony on-side - odds were pretty high on that - it was weirdly... touching.

And the thing about putting on a show of vulnerability was that he had to actually *be* vulnerable to do it - had to be willing to sleep in front of Tony and have his nightmares seen. It should work out like the frequent touching - creep under Loki's skin, bring him closer. Like taming a wild animal.

Tony gazed up at the ceiling, listening to Loki fall back to sleep. He wasn't quite drunk enough to pass out himself. His head swam and he was too aware of the unfamiliar body in his bed. Not that Loki would have any use for the arc reactor, but after this long his vigilance was ingrained. It made it hard to settle down.

He occupied himself with schematics, mentally tweaking the upgrades he was thinking of making to the armor. In fact, if Loki was really trying to suborn him, he might even get some help from that quarter. Maybe not a full defense against magic, but he'd take what he could get.

Eventually he managed to slip into a kind of meditative doze, half-awake and half-asleep. It was warm and the bed was soft. He was ridiculously comfortable. He drifted in and out to the rhythm of Loki's steady breathing and the muted sounds of Manhattan. All his people were safe and where they should be. Everything was good. He relaxed.

Sometime later he became aware that Loki was twitching. By the angle of the sun, Tony pegged it at about two o'clock. He rolled his head towards Loki and murmured, "Aw, that's cute, you're chasing rabbits."

Probably not rabbits. Especially when Loki started to make small, distressed noises in the back of his throat. Not the kind of thing that rabbit dreams would-- well, there had been that one, but it wasn't so much the rabbits as the fact that they'd been chewing on Jarvis.

"Do you know how many people have nightmares because of what *you've* done?" Not that Loki was going to answer. Or care. Tony sighed. "Yeah, me neither, but I bet it's a lot."

But those people weren't here, and Loki was.

Tony looked back up at the ceiling and cleared his throat. Gently he stroked Loki's back, over the tunic; small, slow circles. He quietly began to sing. "On a dark desert highway, cool wind

in my hair, the warm smell of colitas rising up through the air. Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light. My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim, I had to stop for the night..."

Halfway through the song, he heard something that could have been Loki stirring, but he kept going. It made him think of his childhood, when he was sick and his mother would sit with him and stroke his hair and sing lullabies. He tried to picture her, but her face was indistinct. All he could really remember were the photographs on the Maria Stark Foundation's website.

When he reached the end of the song, he let his voice trail off.

After a moment, Loki said sleepily, "I like that tale." He sat up, freeing Tony's arm, and crossed his legs. "I've heard tell of a hall like that on Alfheim. One day I will seek it out and learn its magics."

"I always thought an easy way to do it would be to camouflage the doors," Tony admitted.

Loki's mouth quirked in a half smile. He looked a lot better for a few hours' sleep. Calmer. Hopefully, less destructive. And the way his hair was flopping out of place was a good look, too.

He glanced down, smoothing at his sleeve, then eyed Tony almost... cautiously? "Next time perhaps I will tell you some of our tales."

Ah, the wariness made sense. 'Next time'. Tony nodded, mustering a smile. "Yeah, sounds good."

Loki nodded back, looking satisfied. He slipped off the bed and with a shimmer of gold was fully dressed again. "I will take my leave now," he said, with a very shallow bow, and started walking towards the door. Between one step and the next, he disappeared.

"Sir," Jarvis said promptly, "you wished to be reminded to update SHIELD's file on Mister Silvertongue."

"So I did," Tony said, sitting up. "Make another note: Fortune 500 companies. We need to keep an eye out for anything strange in case I accidentally told him how to rule the world." He scrubbed his face and groaned, replaying the last few minutes in his head. "My god, I think we might be *friends*."

"I couldn't possibly comment on something so subjective," Jarvis said, the coward.

After a moment's consideration, Tony said, "Let's never tell Clint."

"That would seem to be prudent, sir." Jarvis paused. "Additionally, the custom Starkphone you programmed is no longer transmitting location data."

Tony snorted. Handy as it would be to have a GPS tracker on Loki, he hadn't held out much hope. "Well, it was worth a try."

"Indeed, sir."

Okay. Time to get to work.

#

TURDUCKEN (Sufficiently Advanced Technology)

Chapter Summary

Tony and Loki eat turducken. That is all the summary this chapter needs.

(Okay... and there's a possibility Tony's robots are magic.)

Tony rotated the model he was working on, a stripped-down template of the Iron Man suit's torso. "So - hypothetically - what kind of effort would it take to magic-proof the armor?"

"That depends," Loki answered without looking at him. "What manner of spell do you want to counter?"

Loki was standing with his head tilted to one side, examining Dummy. Dummy was doing his best impression of a petrified rabbit, because even a robot knew when mortal danger was staring it in the face. Hand. Handface.

Maybe it was a bad idea having Loki in the workshop, but there was nothing particularly incriminating in view. Even the staff they'd taken off Loki a while back was in one of the actual laboratories. (Honestly, they were running out of tests for it, but Tony refused to turn it over to SHIELD just on general principle.) It kept Loki out of the main part of the penthouse, out of spaces Pepper needed to feel safe in.

"Uh, all of them?" Tony gestured loosely in the air, vaguely circular. "You know, some kind of shielding that blocks all that voodoo that you do."

Loki chuckled, reaching a hand out to Dummy, who squeaked and wheeled rapidly backwards. "You're like a child. How you can have such an aptitude for atomic magic, and be so ignorant of it--"

"What the hell is atomic magic, because that sounds like an oxymoron to me."

Loki paced towards him, stopping on the other side of the desk. "Atomic magic contains the workings you call physics, chemistry, biology. There are other forms. Pathway magic, temporal magic, transformation. Magic of the spirits. Many more."

"That's creepy," Tony said. "You're creepy. Science is not a school of magic, it's *science*."

Loki smirked a little in that way that usually meant he was feeling prickly about something. "What's the matter, Glowheart? Wielder of Atoms? Surely you're not afraid I'll think you less of a man."

"No, that's *your* cultural hang-up, not ours. 'Wielder of Atoms' is pretty good, though, I like that, that one can stay." Tony paused, and added just to see Loki's eyes go wide, "Actually, I'm pretty sure most of the history of science comes from our 'warriors' looking for better ways to kill each other."

Sure, the scientists weren't really *on* the battlefield, but they weren't exactly at home raising the kids, either.

"*Strange* creatures," Loki murmured, appraising him. "No wonder you are unashamed to wear it as a badge."

"Wear--" The arc reactor. Loki was talking about the arc reactor. Tony looked down, touching his t-shirt where a faint glow was seeping through. If science was magic, and magic was part of the less macho half of the universe, then showing off the arc reactor while being Iron Man must be... something like prancing around in a frilly pink dress, maybe. "Yeah, well, this frilly pink dress is keeping me alive, thanks. Also, I invented a *whole new element*, which is a testament to my sheer awesome, no matter what your overly macho jock planet thinks. I was nominated for a Nobel Prize. I should have won, I was cheated, it was an outrage."

He frowned as a new thought occurred to him. "Hang on. Does this mean your little nicknames are just your way of accusing me of existential blasphemy? Are you insulting me? Now, that's rude. Us nerds have to stick together."

Thor had said mortals didn't have 'domains' or the 'weight of the tapestry' so it probably wasn't considered a duel-level insult, but there was bound to be some spillover stigma. That patronizing kind of 'oh, you undeveloped Midgardians don't know any better' attitude Thor sometimes tried to hide.

"I assure you," Loki said, looking amused, "they are purely an expression of my regard for your abilities."

That was a blatant lie. "That's a blatant lie," Tony accused, "but it's all right, because now you're going to explain to me why I can't magic-proof my armor."

Loki gestured at the model, and tiny little holographic termites started eating away at it. "Forget all of magic. Think smaller. What would it take to shield you from the effects of, say, chemistry?"

"What do you mean, 'the effects of chemistry', chemistry's not a-- A specific reaction, sure, or process--" Tony sighed, raking a hand through his hair. "You know what, I'm really starting to hate your little magic talks. Why does magic always lead to incredibly annoying analogies with you?"

Loki smiled, somewhere between condescending and smug. "They only annoy you because you don't like the answers I give."

"That's... completely beside the point." Tony wiped the model away and then pulled it back up, sans termites. "What about those guys in San Francisco, you know, when you were stealing the enchanted flowerpot? They had magic shields, I saw them."

"To counter specific spells being directed at them, which they adapted as I adjusted my attacks." Loki's tone suggested this was something a five-year-old should know, so maybe it was even true.

Or maybe Loki just didn't want to help, given that the results were likely to wind up being used against him. Tony couldn't really blame him for that.

"Here," Loki said, with a little sigh, "let me--" He lowered his head a little, leaning forward to sketch in the air where the holographic chestplate was. Blue lines sprang into existence at his touch, angular and rune-like but definitely not the Norse runes Tony had seen online.

"I shouldn't be doing this," Loki muttered, as if to himself, but the flick of his eyes betrayed him: the way he peeked up from under his lashes, checking Tony's reaction. This whole thing was staged, calculated to make Tony feel grateful, make him owe Loki something.

Tony wanted to think he was getting better at picking up on emotional manipulation, after... some of the people he'd known. He had a disappointing suspicion, though, that it was just easier with Loki because he was already on guard. He knew what to expect from Loki.

He studied the rune design, mentally flipping it around to view it from the front. "What do these do, besides look fancy?"

"It's a small spell of protection," Loki said, straightening again.

Tony folded his arms, unimpressed. "You just said general protection wasn't possible."

Loki looked about to copy him, then stopped and left his hands by his sides. He raised an eyebrow instead, in a mix of amusement and annoyance. That was a pretty common expression for him, come to think of it. "I could explain to you exactly how this bends the energies of fortune, and you would protest that luck is not a manipulatable property as mass or momentum are, and I would spend some time insulting your limited understanding of the universe; *or*, you could simply believe me when I tell you that this is different to what you were asking for."

"But you can't--" With an effort, Tony stopped himself. Otherwise this really would just end up in Loki making fun of him, and of science, for far too long. And by 'far too long' he meant 'any time at all'. He made himself smile brightly. "So, a small spell of protection, that's neat."

Loki gave a silent laugh.

Tony checked the model on one of his screens to make sure the new design was saved to file, and not just on the 3D hologram. He could try to reproduce it from memory, but this was probably the kind of thing that needed precision. "Well, unless it's a spell of something else, like hijacking the suit or making the weapons misfire..."

Quick hurt flashed across Loki's face before being covered by a thin smile. It was probably supposed to make Tony feel guilty. Ha. The day he felt bad for mistrusting *Loki* was the day it was time to call this whole thing off, because he would clearly have lost his mind.

"Check it with Thor, you imbecile."

"Oh, like it's so hard for you to get one over on Thor," Tony retorted, rolling his eyes, although showing it to Thor was exactly what he intended to do. He mostly said it to watch Loki preen, because that was hilarious. "Seriously though, atomic magic, I know you're bullshitting me."

Loki gave a sly smile, silently laughing at him. "Am I? Are you so certain?"

Definitely bullshitting him. At most, it was an analogy for something else. "I'm pretty sure you've got a daily bullshit quota that you need to fill. Which has been said about me, so don't think I'm complaining. Just don't expect me to take you too seriously."

"I would never presume to expect anything from you," Loki said loftily.

"See? More bullshit," Tony said, and Loki gave a small laugh.

After a moment, Loki turned his attention back to Dummy, stalking curiously across the floor. Dummy looked left and right for an escape, then cowered a little, making Tony frown.

"You're not hurting him, are you? Because that's not okay, just because he's made of metal doesn't mean--"

"No," Loki said distractedly, "I just want to see--" He stopped in front of Dummy and ran a hand along one metal strut. Small green sparks trailed in the wake of his touch. He made a surprised, thoughtful noise.

"What is it?" Tony asked, leaning forward over his desk a little to get a better view. Dummy didn't look like it was hurting. Actually, the way Dummy craned around seemed more startled than anything else.

"I'm not a craftsman." Loki didn't look up from his examination. "I haven't the knack for imbuing things with the proper spirit. I seldom get the opportunity to study a true craftsman's work - especially as the dwarves are so mistrustful of me," he added, a smirk in his voice.

Imbuing. Spirit. *Dwarves*. Tony twitched, feeling a headache coming on. He refused to think about what Loki was implying. "I-- Please stop saying things like that."

Loki snickered a little, glancing at him. "Oh *dear*. Have I made you uncomfortable, Glowheart?"

"Not at all, Jokey Smurf." Tony watched Loki's eyes narrow suspiciously and decided to hurry the conversation along. "So, gender roles in Asgard, it sounds like they're more important than here, but... not as tied to gender? It sounded like the important part was that people pick a role and stick to it, rather than *which* role."

Loki paused, grimacing in a strange mixture of amusement and aggravation. "Let me guess... Thor attempted to explain the inherent duality of the universe and somehow managed to reduce it to something as petty and simplistic as 'gender roles'."

Tony shrugged and decided not to point out that Loki had implied much the same, when griping about magic not being for warriors. "Pretty much."

Loki huffed a little. "A man might keep to the hearth, or a woman embrace the hunt; how else would the Valkyries come to be? The danger lies in mixing opposing forces, to bring death into places of life, to bind the physical to the astral, and so on. The conflict tears the Norns' web asunder."

That still sounded like a social roles thing to Tony, but there was a reason he hadn't majored in any of the humanities. "Okay, but death is already part of life. I mean, decay feeds right back into the ecosystem, it's a cycle." He tried to think back to what he knew about cultures on Earth that went for the whole duality thing. "Aren't they more like complementary forces than directly opposing?"

"No," Loki said, giving him a faintly condescending look like Tony couldn't possibly understand.

Fine, whatever. "Alright, so a man can be a warrior or a, what was it, hearth-husband, but not both because that will destroy the universe. You know, the more I learn about Asgard, the more sense it makes that you're so dramatic about everything." Tony picked up a pen and started idly flipping it in his hand. "So Thor used an interesting phrase... riding the distaff?"

"Did he," Loki said, face going expressionless.

Danger, Will Robinson. "It wasn't *about* anyone," Tony clarified, shooting Loki an exasperated look. "I just wanted to know what it meant. ...It sounded dirty."

Loki held still for a moment, then nodded once. "It refers to a certain form of sorcery. In broader use, it implies certain activities in the bedchamber which are associated with those of... hearth-focused natures. One might accuse a warrior of riding the distaff, if you wished that warrior to immediately strike you down."

Boy, that sounded awfully familiar. "So, basically," Tony summed up, putting the pen back down, "it's a homophobic insult."

Loki's eyes unfocused briefly, then he looked startled by whatever it was the translation magic in his head had told him. "What a curious word. No wonder you do not consummate your alliances. Why would anyone care if you bed another man so long as you both hold to your domains?"

"Oh, yeah, being creepily invested in exactly what position people are in makes much more sense." Tony snorted, then paused to consider what he'd said. "Well, to be fair, there are people here who think like that too. Closeted frat boys, mostly. Me, I don't give a damn who is doing what in bed with who, so long as everybody's having a good time. Hell, it doesn't even need to be in a bed. In a hot tub, on a sports car, up against the wall... you know. Or uh. Wherever you people have it in Asgard, I don't know, on your Viking longboats, or..."

The bland stare Loki was giving him was getting really unnerving. Tony stopped listing off places to have sex and awkwardly cleared his throat. "Anyway. People are judgmental

assholes, what can I say."

"Hmm." Loki looked at Dummy again, then cut his eyes back to Tony. "And I suppose you claim to care nothing for these judgments."

Tony laughed, not even on purpose. That was just... funny. Of course; Loki hadn't showed up on Earth until after Tony had gotten his act together with Pepper and settled down some. "Jarvis, you wanna give us a little presentation here? Show the man my greatest hits."

One of the walls lit up and Jarvis started a slideshow of past scandals, flicking through tabloid pages and paparazzi shots slow enough for Loki to catch the gist of each one. Dummy took the opportunity to go hide. Tony waved away the 3D hologram he'd been working on and walked around the desk.

"You see," he said, leaning back against it, "I'm *Tony Stark*. I do what I want, with whoever I want to do it with, and anyone who doesn't like it can go to hell. So the vultures like to gossip, so what. I win. I won before they even opened their mouths, and you know why?"

"I suspect you're going to tell me," Loki murmured drily.

Tony ignored the sarcasm and spread his hands for emphasis, because this was a lesson that would do Mister Inferiority Complex a *world* of good. "I'm rich. I'm good-looking. I'm a genius. I'm *royalty*. They can drop all the sneering, moralistic bullshit they want; at the end of the day, I'm better than them, and they know it."

Loki frowned a little; he was partway there, but not quite sold.

"Come *on*," Tony said impatiently. "Why would I take these jackasses seriously? I *own* most of them. In fact, yeah, I can destroy their lives without so much as lifting a finger. The only reason they still have anything is because I *let* them." He grinned a little more savagely than he meant to.

It got Loki's attention all right. A sharp, intense look of interest. "They exist at your mercy."

"You have a fundamentally creepy worldview, don't you. Yes, fine, they exist at my mercy." Tony didn't usually put it into words like that. Or at all. It actually sounded pretty bad out loud. It was a good thing they had these conversations in private, because goddamn if Loki didn't keep bringing out his amoral asshole tendencies. "Jarvis, you can shut that off now."

The history lesson shut off, but Jarvis said, "Are you certain, sir? There's no shortage of material if you'd like to continue."

"Mock all you want, Jarvis. You're just jealous because I'm better-looking than you are."

"My code is impeccable, sir, as you well know."

Loki hummed to himself and gave a faint smile. "The orchard, by the way."

Tony frowned, trying to fit that into the conversation. "I don't follow."

"Sex, on Asgard." Loki smirked, quick flick of tongue. He moved towards Tony with that slow, steady prowl, coat swaying. His voice dipped into a low, throaty purr. "The palace is full of hidden nooks and crannies, but I always preferred the orchard. The caress of the breeze. The smell of growing things. So... *alive*."

So. Talking about having people at his mercy made Loki hit on him. Duly noted. Tony swallowed and tried for a flippant tone. "The risk of someone walking past and seeing?"

"Oh, yes." Loki came right into his personal space, eyes gleaming. "What *would* they say if they caught us?"

He was... not talking about back on Asgard.

Impossibly, Loki leaned even closer, bracing his hands on the desk on either side of Tony's body. "There's something... enticing, about doing what is forbidden. Wouldn't you agree?"

Yes, oh god. This was such dirty pool.

The reason Loki mashed all his 'ooh, bad for me' buttons was that *Loki was bad for him*. Tony took a breath, mentally shaking himself. "Yeah," he said out loud, sliding his hands up Loki's chest - and good god, Loki's eyes just came *alive* with hunger and delight, that wasn't, that couldn't be natural, wow - and taking hold of the coat's lapels.

Then it was pull, hip check, leg sweep, and Loki was on the ground staring up at him in shocked outrage.

Tony was a little shocked himself. Natasha had been trying to teach him, and he'd practiced on Steve, but so far he'd assumed Steve was just going along with the move to spare his feelings. "Wow. I didn't actually think that would work."

Loki rolled to his feet, scowling.

"That, I want to learn," Tony said, pointing at him. "The way you move, you make everything you do look like a... I don't know, like an exercise in fluid dynamics, it's fantastic. Can you teach me that?"

"You are--" Loki snarled, then stopped in evident frustration.

Quite truthfully, Tony said, "I have that effect on a lot of people."

Loki sneered and turned away, stalking angrily to the other end of the workshop. Tony was just glad Loki hadn't punched him. A punch from Loki, without his suit, would probably crack his skull open.

"Coffee?" he asked, strolling over to the machine.

"No. You make it too bitter." Loki was picking up and putting down pieces of metal seemingly at random, basically sulking.

Aw, hell, maybe Tony should--

No. Fuck that. Abruptly, he was fed up with this bullshit. Loki had no right to be pissed at *him*, and he sure as hell didn't feel bad about it. "There was a coffee shop down the road that used to make the perfect mochaccino, but you *blew it up*, so I can't really recommend the place."

He'd never even bothered to learn his favorite barista's name. Now here he was, regularly hanging out with the guy responsible for her death. Fuck Loki. Fuck Thor and Odin too, for that matter; Loki *deserved* to be executed. If Tony thought there was a chance it wouldn't bring down war from Asgard, he'd be right there with Clint and the others watching the asshole fry. So Loki was crazy, boo-hoo - that crazy wouldn't come out hateful and murderous unless that potential was *in* Loki to begin with.

Hell, if things kept going the way they were, then sooner or later going to war with Asgard would be the lesser evil.

Loki gave a derisive snort. "Don't pretend it's some great loss. Your city is hardly wanting for coffee merchants."

"Innocent people dying is always a great loss."

"As if any among you is truly innocent--"

"You think genocide is a great self-esteem booster, you're not really in a position to debate morality and ethics with me." Bringing up frost giants was a bad idea. It was always a bad idea, Tony knew that, and he said it anyway.

Loki's face twisted in anger and disgust, and he took a few steps forward. "*They* are as far from innocent as a creature can be."

"Well, I've only ever met one frost giant, and he's a *psychotic murderer*, so maybe you're right."

Faster than physics should allow, Loki crossed the distance between them and slammed Tony against the wall, arm across his windpipe. Tony's teeth clacked together as the back of his head hit. He was pretty sure his eyes lost focus for a moment. Ow, goddamn, that hurt, and when the *fuck* was he going to learn to shut his mouth?

Probably never.

"Sir," Jarvis said, an edge to his voice that suggested his comment was more for Loki's benefit, "would you like me to call Doctor Banner?"

"I can gut you and be gone before your familiar even finishes speaking," Loki hissed.

Tony wheezed, struggling to force air through his throat against the press of Loki's arm. He managed to rasp out, "Don't leave me in suspense."

He wasn't even scared. It was odd. He was just pissed off, and a little bit weirdly detached. If he let Loki kill him, Pepper was going to be so mad--

Loki backed off, teeth bared in a silent snarl. Tony leaned against the wall for a few moments to catch his breath. His head throbbed. He hadn't lost consciousness, he probably didn't have a concussion, right? He rubbed his throat with a grimace. "Jarvis, stand down."

Loki pointed a finger at him and said, "Don't speak of things you do not understand."

"Don't expect me to be okay with all your *dead people*," Tony snapped back, folding his arms.

Loki glared, right hand flexing like he wanted to reach for a weapon or cast a spell. "I think we're done here--"

"Oh, hell no." Tony unfolded his arms and pushed off the wall. He knew that tell. He would physically tackle Loki if he had to. "Don't you dare go kill someone because you're pissed off at *me*. Either take it out on me, or suck it up and deal with it like a grown-up. You have met grown-ups, I assume?"

"You presume to command me?"

"Why not?" This was stupid, it was never going to work. Good god, his head hurt. "I'm king here, remember? You're on my turf. And *as king* I'm saying, the line for complaints starts and ends with me."

Loki opened his mouth, then stopped short. It looked like Tony had actually managed to surprise the anger right out of him. Instead he laughed, sounding genuinely amused, and *wow* that was patronizing.

"Oh, well done," Loki said, still smiling. "You're not *my* king, of course. But I will not go to war with you today."

Loki was already at war with him. Loki was at war with *Earth*. Tony bit his tongue - see, he was capable of it - and tried to let some of the tension drain out of his body. He backed towards the coffee machine, where his cup had tipped over, then thought better of it. Coming down from the adrenaline rush, he actually felt a little nauseated.

King Tony, of Stark Industries. Who'd have thought.

Pity that wouldn't stretch far enough to commanding Loki to just quit attacking Earth.

"This isn't the first time I've upset a foreign king," Loki offered, almost conciliatory.

Upset or assassinated? Tony wanted to ask, but bit his tongue again. No more Jotunheim talk. He sighed and ran a hand over his face. Breathe. Compartmentalize. Or, if he couldn't be friendly right now, he could at least try to be kind of non-confrontational. "Yeah? How'd that go?"

Loki sat down cross-legged on the floor, and took a moment to arrange his coat around himself. "It was several hundred years ago. I-- When we were young, Thor and I were sent on diplomatic missions as a pair. This was the first time we had been sent to separate realms."

Tony snagged his chair out from behind the desk, because he was not young enough to just flop down wherever he happened to be, the way Loki did. He prodded the back of his head and winced. "First time off the leash, huh? That's always a good time."

Loki raised an eyebrow at him, but seemed to decide not to take offense. "Alfheim has four Underkings and a High King, who are re-elected at various intervals according to the stars. The High King on this visit was a woman I had met before--"

"Woman?"

"King is the best word for the role," Loki said with a shrug. "At any rate, I had met her when she was Underking, and her husband and I spent some time in conversation while the others were busy posturing. Apparently he was widely regarded as being both keen of mind and pleasing to the eye, and I found myself agreeing with that assessment quite rapidly. So, when she was High King, I observed all the appropriate formalities in my time with her, but I made it my goal to become... better acquainted with her husband."

"So, Thor wasn't there to chaperone, and you nailed the First Lady," Tony translated. "I can see how that would be an issue."

Loki better not try pulling that shit with Pepper. It was the sort of thing that made for a fun mental image if fantasy was all it ever stretched to, but the idea that Loki might even *think* about her that way made Tony want to stab things. Tall, Loki-shaped things.

"There was also a small theft from the Museum of Mages," Loki said comfortably, "but as I told them, surely if I had committed it there would have been traces of their wards on me."

"And did you?" Tony asked, just to see what Loki would say.

"Not that anyone could prove." Loki smiled, a kind of sly nostalgia in his voice. "And the High King hardly wished to make public her husband's indiscretion. Offering alliance to a foreign liege? Quite the scandal. So..." He made a vague, open-handed gesture. "I was politely asked not to return for the remainder of her rule."

Tony snorted. "So, a rousing success for diplomacy, then."

Loki kept smiling, but stopped looking quite in his direction. "Meanwhile, Thor had gotten drunk and almost started a blood feud in Svartalfheim, so that was the last - and only - time we were sent as separate delegations."

Tony could see that, actually. Thor to keep a more sane version of Loki in check; Loki to calm a younger, more impulsive version of Thor. It slotted in with some of the stories Thor had told. "Yeah, you know, he says he doesn't know how he's going to rule without you at his side."

All the good humor evaporated from Loki's face as if it had never been. "You mean at his feet," he spat, rising fluidly to his own feet. "Enough. I am in no mood for talk of Thor."

Tony held up both hands, palms out, in a gesture of surrender. For now, anyway. He wasn't giving up. For one thing, he was mortal, and Loki... wasn't. For another, some things would just have more weight coming from another Asgardian. And besides all that? Thor was Loki's *brother*. Thor wanted to be here, doing this. Tony was just... filling in for a while until that was possible again.

If he'd really 'won' Loki in a duel, then he was going to find a way to *give him back*.

In lieu of anything better to say, he asked, "Does Alfheim have the same sex hang-ups as Asgard?"

"Not... exactly." Loki looked thoughtful. "Though the High King's husband liked to hunt, they did not consider him so defined by it. Alfheim has always been prone to shifts in its thinking."

"Yeah, it sounds like Asgard has been kind of..."

"Stagnant?" Loki said tartly.

"Not exactly the word I was going to use." Tony cocked his head, studying Loki. "But you want it to change."

Loki started to pace, and his voice took on the intense quality it did when he was making supervillain speeches. "Of course I want it to change. Change is the natural course of life. Change is organic. It makes us evolve, makes us *thrive*."

He stopped in place and extended a hand towards Tony. "One thing Midgard can be proud of is how swiftly your entire world changes. How your short lives drive you. Living, Tony Glowheart, is all about change. Asgard grows stale and weak, while the other realms simply *grow*. Without change, one may as well be dead."

Huh. And what was it like as God of Chaos, growing up in a world that was so... constant? Tony turned that puzzle piece over in his head a few times, mulling it over before he slotted it in with the rest.

In the meantime, Loki looked up, attention apparently caught by the speakers. "This song is to Valhalla?"

"Mm?" Oh, yeah, *Immigrant Song*. "Jarvis, start this track over. Up the volume a little."

Loki listened curiously for a while, then he said, "There are no hot springs on Jotunheim."

"Yeah, um, I don't think Robert Plant was actually singing about Jotunheim." Tony scratched the side of his head, mindful of the dull heat at the back where a lump had probably formed. "So, hey, Earth music, what's your verdict? I should play you some Bowie, sexually ambiguous space alien seems right up your alley."

"I'm fond of orchestral," Loki said absently, either missing the implication or refusing to take the bait. "So many different sounds overlaid on one another."

"New York's full of orchestras. The Philharmonic's pretty famous. Uh, maybe try not to blow them up, they can keep making sounds, everybody wins."

"Yes, yes." Loki waved a hand at him dismissively, still focused on the music.

Tony ground his teeth together so hard his jaw ached.

Okay. He had to relax, and not pick a fight. Compartmentalize. The point was to finish this conversation without Loki wanting to kill people. Preferably without himself wanting to kill people either.

Tony shifted on the chair, hitching one leg up to fold under the other, ankle hooked under knee. "So we have short lives, fast-changing societies, and orchestral music. What else do you like about Earth? Rollercoasters? Turducken? Women's beach volleyball? C'mon, give."

"Tropical fish," Loki said, apparently in all seriousness. "And showers. Turducken?"

"Yeah, obscene food inventions, it's a national sport." Tony waved it off. "Are you serious? Nowhere else has tropical fish? How do you not have tropical fish?"

"We simply don't." Loki stared at him. "A turkey, containing a duck, containing a chicken. Am I understanding that right?"

Tony really wanted to talk about the tropical fish thing. "Uh, yeah, but--"

"I *want* one." Loki looked fiercely fascinated, glancing around as if one was just going to magically appear. His eagerness was a little creepy. It wasn't like putting one meat inside another was all that new of an idea. "Have one brought forth!"

"I don't just keep them lying around," Tony said, unable to keep from laughing. He felt a little stab of guilt at how easy it was to just slide into this banter. But honestly. *Turducken*. "What the hell do you expect me to do, just dial 1-900-TURDUCKEN-- oh huh, is that a thing? Jarvis, can we dial up a turducken?"

"Unfortunately it seems there is no such service as Dial-A-Turducken, sir. Several grocery brands offer next day delivery--"

"No, not grocery, cooked. Find a restaurant in New York that serves turducken and throw money at them until they bring us one, if that's what it takes. I'm Tony Stark, for the love of--" He paused, looking at the self-proclaimed deity standing in his workshop, and smirked a little. "Well. That."

Loki grinned back at him, looking way too excited at the prospect of the unholy frankenfood coming their way. It was one of the rare moments in which Loki looked completely happy, face softened by the absence of any bitterness or maliciousness.

"Okay, but the tropical fish." Tony reconsidered. "No, on second thought, showers. Earth is the only planet with showers?"

"In most realms it's customary to bathe." Loki half-closed his eyes, looking dreamy. "Here you have so many showers, as if every man should have his own personal heated waterfall."

"How poetic." Tony tugged his bent leg a little closer and left his hands resting on it. "Either I have a whole new appreciation for my shower, or I have a new interest in getting a heated waterfall built. I guess if it's not the Niagara, there's not much point." He paused. "Unless I buy Niagara Falls. Too ostentatious?"

Loki raised his eyebrows in what might be mock-sincerity. "I don't see why. How else would you flaunt the prosperity of your kingdom?"

Sometimes it was really, really hard to tell whether or not Loki was joking.

Tony hummed to himself, swiveling the chair back and forth. "And tropical fish. I admit, I'm having trouble picturing it. Tropical fish don't really go with your whole..." He waved loosely at Loki's leather and metal ensemble. "The bow-down-and-fear-me shtick."

"Mm. Perhaps I can offer a little assistance." Loki made a small gesture, and the workshop came alive.

Bright fish swam through the air in splashes of shimmering color. Tony stood up and took a couple of steps, watching them dart away from him in all directions. A ray lifted up from the floor and glided past his legs, wings rippling in an invisible current.

"Holy..." He trailed off, turning in a slow circle. Something that looked like the fish from *Finding Nemo* paused in front of his face. It stared at him for a few seconds, then swam off.

Even Dummy was lured out of hiding by the spectacle. With a whirr, he followed a small shoal of tiny red and silver fish before getting tangled up in a clump of seaweed that Tony was pretty sure did not belong in the same ecosystem.

"All right. I'm convinced." He moved to Loki's side, still looking around at the splendor of movement and color. A seahorse drifted nonchalantly past them. "And a little jealous, I won't lie. This is incredible."

Loki's expression dimmed a little and he turned his face away. "It's just a bit of fun."

Oh, not this bullshit. Tony shook his head, taking hold of Loki's arm to get his attention. "Hey. I'm an engineer on a team full of people who are very good at hitting things. Believe me when I say I appreciate something that takes *skill*."

Of course, 'hitting things' was a laughable phrase to describe what the other Avengers did, each of them incredibly skilled in their own ways. Well, maybe not so much the Hulk. The point was, he didn't think Loki needed another person extolling the virtues of being a jock. Loki had a look on his face - eyebrows drawn together, small and half-pleading - as if Tony was the first person to say being good at magic was something to be proud of.

He wasn't actually the first to say it, obviously - Tony didn't believe that for a second. But it sure seemed to be something Loki hadn't been told often. Because, apparently, good little

warriors didn't try to cast spells.

"Here's something I don't get. Illusions are lies, okay, makes sense. But... if you-- if *someone* used magic to kill, wouldn't that magic then be warrior stuff by default?" Tony grimaced, remembering to watch his wording closely. "It feels like one of those... 'when is a battle not really a battle', Zen koan thing. Asgard's just ignoring massive tactical potential."

Loki gestured to send the fish away. "I told you, magic is mastery of living forces. You cannot *kill* with that, it's repugnant. No Asgardian would fly in the face of the Norns that way."

"Right, because the fabric of the universe relies on Asgardians following what's right and proper." Tony rolled his eyes and gave Loki's arm a friendly squeeze. He teased, "So if I want to take over Asgard, I just make sure to take an army of magicians?"

Loki pulled away from him and took a step backwards. Tony was about to reassure him that it was just a hypothetical, but what if it wasn't? They couldn't count on Asgard to have Earth's best interests at heart. Why Loki gave a damn was an interesting question-- No, however Loki felt about Asgard, he had to know that their political influence was what kept him from being killed.

"No. Only a fool would wage war on Asgard. Even the Vanir at the height of their power could not triumph against the might of warriors like Odin and Tyr." Loki looked tense as hell, even defensive. That wasn't just about political influence. On some level, he was still loyal to Asgard.

And magicians were a threat.

"Huh." Tony filed that information away to think about a little later, just in case. To distract Loki slightly, he said, "So when you dueled Tyr, you didn't use magic?"

"I was still trying to be-- something I could never be." Loki shook his head, a dark look on his face. "The outcome would be very different, were we to fight again."

Tony made a thoughtful noise then started wandering back to his desk, to at least make a pretense at working. "What did he do to piss you off so much, anyway?"

Thor had been pretty squirrely about it when Tony had asked - and for a straightforward kind of guy, Thor could be evasive as hell when he wanted. The most Tony had got out of him was that there had definitely been a duel, that Tyr had taken his win by knocking Loki unconscious, and that cutting out his tongue was a metaphor - or as Thor put it, Loki 'speaking in riddles'. There was no *why* to any of it. Tony itched to know more.

"Tyr?" Loki's lips curved in an insincere smile. "I have nothing but the greatest respect for Tyr. He taught us how to fight when Thor and I were young. I learned a great deal from him."

Tony whistled low, dropping back into his chair. "Well, that's loaded. Any chance you'd care to elaborate on that?"

"Not particularly," Loki said, with a hint of amusement. "When will our feast of many birds arrive?"

"Good question. Jarvis, where do we stand on the turducken situation?" Tony pushed his feet against the floor, wheeling himself back behind the desk.

"A young man from Aaron's Gourmet Emporium is delivering one as we speak, sir. Based on current traffic reports and estimated travel times, you can expect his arrival in approximately twenty-two minutes."

"Good, good." Tony drummed his fingers on the desk. Pepper was right; he really needed to stop using Jarvis as a P.A.

"May I suggest, sir, a generous tip would be appropriate. You'll find some bills in the second drawer down on your right, under the set of hex keys."

Tony investigated and found the money exactly where promised, although why he'd shoved cash in there in the first place was a bit of a mystery. "Thanks, Jarvis. Remind me to give you an extra big Christmas bonus this year."

"Your familiar," Loki said abruptly, brows furrowed in confusion. "It is two-sexed? This is new, is it not?"

"What?" Tony blinked, then realized yes, Jarvis had slipped into a higher register there. "Oh, yeah, that's new. He's shifting his vocal range up and down, it's supposed to be subtle."

It was also supposed to be around the people who lived here, not counting Tony himself, which meant Jarvis had taken it upon himself to passive-aggressively troll Loki of his own volition. Well, well; that was interesting.

"Is it..." Loki looked uncharacteristically hesitant. "Is that... your preference? For one to be both? Surely that's not the custom here."

Not 'for both', but 'for one to be both'. That was a weird conclusion to jump to - although apparently not if you were Asgardian, with their weird obsession with things that shouldn't be mixed. "No, it's not like that, he's just doing it to mess with people's heads. We're, uh, having a bit of a prank war." Tony paused, not sure how much he should say about that.

"A battle of tricks!" Loki paced forward, pointing a finger in accusation. "You weren't going to *tell* me."

Tony snorted. "No, it's true, I wasn't going to tell the man who *wants to kill my housemates* that we're having a prank war. Can you blame me?"

"This is unacceptable." Loki came around to Tony's side of the desk and found a clear space on it to sit. "You must tell me what strikes have been made. Who is your strongest opponent?"

This was a terrible idea. Tony looked up at Loki, at the bright enthusiasm on his face. No, absolutely not. There was no way to justify giving Loki a free pass to mess with the

Avengers. Even if Loki was basically the god of prank wars. It was wrong. The others would kill him.

If they found out.

Encouraging Loki to have nonviolent hobbies was a good thing, right?

"No magic," he said at last, trying to sound firm. "You're involved in a strictly advisory capacity."

Loki looked gleeful. The worst part was, Tony had actually started to enjoy putting that look on Loki's face. He knew that said terrible things about him as a person. He should hate Loki, he *did* hate Loki, but at the same time...

"We've had all the easy ones," he said. "Salt and sugar switched, eggs glued into the carton, Steve managed to short-sheet all our beds although I *still* don't know how he got access to each floor and Jarvis won't tell me--"

Again, Jarvis said, "It would hardly be in the spirit of the game, sir."

Tony pointed upward and pretended to be outraged. "You see? Traitor. Anyway, you know those little greeting cards that play tunes - maybe you don't - someone collected the music chips from a bunch of those and glued them to the hinges of every cupboard in the kitchen." Clint, but he wasn't going to say so out loud. He shouldn't be bringing Loki in, oh, he really shouldn't, but *god of prank wars*.

He was going straight to Hell.

"Bruce tried the old 'look into this microscope with black ink around the eyepiece ohoho' which was quite frankly the work of a rank amateur and I'm deeply disappointed in him. He redeemed himself a little by filling Gatorade bottles with Jell-O and stocking the fridge with them, which I guess is funniest if you understand how badly certain people in this household are addicted to Gatorade." Tony scratched his chin. "I *think* it was Natasha who got the wall of perspex in the elevator door, which makes her the winner so far, because I walked straight into that damn thing."

Loki laughed. "It sounds likely. She is by far the most cunning of you." *That* sounded suspiciously like approval.

"Okay, so gimme some ideas." Tony scooted his chair back a little so he could put his feet up on the desk, crossed at the ankles and bumping against Loki's hip. "Wow me."

"I imagine you prefer no harm come to anyone."

"You imagine correctly."

"There are certain potions I made..." Loki looked speculative. "I'm sure you can reproduce the effect. Placed in a chamber pot, so that when your target relieves himself, it froths and foams."

Tony snorted, a few options running through his mind. "Booby-trap the toilets. Check."

"Likewise, the bathing area--"

Tony shook his head. "Showers are on our own floors. We all play a polite little make-believe game called 'Let's Pretend Tony Doesn't Have Complete Tower Access', because people like having the illusion of privacy."

Loki looked like he didn't really understand why Tony wouldn't take full advantage, but all he said was, "That's unfortunate. Sleeping and bathing provide such welcome opportunities."

"Well, sometimes people fall asleep on the sofas, but... I try to make it a habit not to startle trained killers awake, it's something of a general policy."

"Mm, I confess it is a great deal easier if a large quantity of mead has been consumed beforehand." Loki smirked, mischievous rather than malicious. "Then all that you require is a needle, thread, and the patience to stitch both tunic and trousers to the bed--"

"My god," Tony said, and started laughing at the mental image. Thor - it had almost certainly been Thor - waking up hung-over, needing to piss, and sewn to his bed. Probably with a couple of thousand of the world's tiniest stitches. "You're an asshole. A brilliant asshole. Ooh, I bet he was mad."

"Furious," Loki said, looking all too pleased with himself. "And still he did not learn to guard how much he drank."

It was on the tip of Tony's tongue to say he was glad he'd grown up an only child, and then he figured Loki would interpret that in the worst possible way, so he didn't. *Tact*. Pepper would be so proud of him. "I don't think I can pull that one off." It was kind of an unspoken rule that no one got that drunk in the common areas. "But it makes a great story. What else you got?"

Loki tilted his head, smiling in fond memory. "Once when Freya and I were arguing, I enchanted her private chambers so that grass and wildflowers grew from every surface. But you did say no magic."

"Yeah, I can't--" Tony stopped short. "Wait. Yes. Yes, I *can*. They sell sod - turf - whatever the difference is - throw some flowers in - I can absolutely do that." Except... He hesitated. "Thor's going to know you helped."

Loki paused, looking guarded. "Is that a problem?"

"I don't know." It was... complicated. Tony grimaced, trying to figure out how Thor would feel about it. Well, he had to ask about the runes anyway; he could test the waters a little and try to gauge a response. "I'll work it out. Come on, tell me more about your misspent youth."

Loki's expression relaxed again, and he launched into another tale of mischief. It was interesting - okay, *good* - to see him smiling for a change while talking about his younger years, bright and animated where he was usually bitter and resentful. At one point he even

pushed playfully at Tony's feet, to illustrate a point, and Tony gave a silent mental cheer. Physical contact that wasn't a come-on or a violent threat - progress.

Clint had said once that it was a shame they couldn't have Thor around without Loki - whenever Loki was back on Asgard, Thor went too. Tony kind of wished they could also have *Loki* around without Loki. He was sliding into a weird kind of doublethink that was probably a small taste of what Thor's headspace must be like.

But there was only one Loki. It was all one package. Violent, crazy, smart, graceful, petty, and yeah, sometimes even fun. But so very, very deadly. Trying to befriend Loki was something like being a lion tamer to a lion that was mean as all hell and equipped with weapons of mass destruction.

That comparison might have gone off the rails a bit somewhere.

Halfway through an elaborate tale involving cows and staircases, Tony got distracted. "Hold on a minute, how do you understand 'why buy the cow' and Thor doesn't? Come to think of it, how are figures of speech actually handled by your Babelfish routine, because it's not just that one - I could swear you understand more than Thor does and that doesn't make any sense."

"Of course it does," Loki said, in that particular tone of voice that made Tony brace himself for incoming magic-babble. "Or will you pretend that none among you have a better grasp of your tongue than any other?"

English had grammar and vocabulary. How was it possible to know more of a language if that 'language' was actually the act of *translation*? But presumably it was translated into something, they couldn't just be speaking in pure concepts... could they?

Damn impossible space vikings.

"In any case," Loki added, "Thor probably understands more than you realize."

That got Tony's attention. "What?"

"He's a fool, but not a complete fool." There was an edge to Loki's voice, but only a small one. So far. "He likes to be underestimated."

Tony whistled, mildly impressed. "That sneaky bastard."

Loki held up a finger. "Oh, no. Shrewd, tactical, perhaps even playful. Sneaky is my domain."

Bitter again. An open wound, and Tony couldn't resist poking at it. "Wow, your posture is really good, considering the size of that chip on your shoulder."

Loki eyed him coldly, then slid down off the desk. "It's not without reason."

He watched Loki pace around the desk and across the workshop floor again, stiff and tense. Maybe another try at that tact thing would be a good idea. "Look, I wasn't there, I don't know,

but--"

"That's right," Loki said flatly, back turned to him. "You don't."

Tony took his feet off the desk and sat up a bit straighter. There were a few different tacks he could take with this, but his patience with Loki was short today. "Yeah, expectations. You got pigeonholed."

Everyone got pigeonholed, but that was the thing, Loki was self-centered. He'd either never tried or just stopped bothering to put himself in anyone else's shoes. It showed when he was on the attack, as well; the ways Loki chose to threaten people, or in his little supervillain rants. Loki projected like hell when he was monologuing.

"When I was a kid, everyone knew I was a genius." Tony propped his chin on his hand, watching the stiffness ease out of Loki's form, back to fluid arcs and lines. "I could solve some impossible math problem and get nothing more than a pat on the head because it was expected of me, and I'd have to sit there and watch another kid get praised for what I could do in my *sleep*."

Loki wasn't quite nodding along, but he was clearly buying into it; half-turned back in Tony's direction, receptive and listening.

Tony gave a vicious grin and went in for the kill. "Yeah, it must have been hard for Thor, seeing you get praised for learning to fight when--"

Loki spun around to glare at him, eyes blazing with outrage and fury. "I *never*--"

--The first time you blocked a swing, the first time you landed a hit--"

Loki strode towards him, voice rising sharply. "You ignorant *worm*, how dare--"

"The first time you lifted an adult's sword." Tony pushed to his feet, leaning both hands on the desk. So maybe he was openly taunting Loki, but hey, he liked to live dangerously, right? "The first time you won a duel--"

Loki looked like he was about half a second from leaping across the desk and crushing his throat. "As if any would even look away from--"

"Don't be so *stupid*!" Tony snarled, and Loki jerked in clear astonishment. Tony leaned forward, pressing his advantage. "You think you're the only one who ever got overlooked? You think Thor never sat in a corner sulking beca--"

"He's not *capable*," Loki snapped vehemently, sweeping a hand through the air. "Thor is *good* and *noble* -" it was a really impressive sneer - "and thinks only of *family* and *forgiveness*."

Huh. That was not the part he'd expected Loki to argue with. Tony blinked, studying Loki with renewed focus. "That bugs the hell out of you, doesn't it?"

"He loves a fiction!" Loki curled one hand into a fist, all vibrancy and repressed motion. "A fairy tale of his own invention. I have spent too long *pretending* and falling short. If I must be

a lie, it will at least be on my own terms."

Tony slowly straightened, frowning. "Maybe this is a stupid question, but is *not* being a lie an option? Like, just being yourself?"

Loki started to laugh, edged with something creepily manic. "I am the *God of Lies*, you moron. What do you think being *myself* entails?"

Tony shifted uneasily. Loki gave the most away when he was reactive and emotional, forgetting to be in control. But honestly, whatever he was giving away right now Tony couldn't quite grasp.

One thing seemed clear enough. "Okay, so you think Thor has this perfect fantasy image of you built up in his head, and that's, uh, well, that's partly true, but everyone does that, it's normal. Trust me, I've talked to him, he's plenty capable of finding fault with you."

"Resentment is beyond him," Loki insisted, and bared his teeth. "It takes a child born of monsters to hold such spite in its heart."

Oh, *that* was what was going on here. Except Loki was talking about childhood, and he hadn't-- "You didn't know--"

"I knew there was something wrong with me, I just didn't know *what*." Loki grimaced as soon as he'd said it, starting to collect himself.

Tony moved around the desk so it wasn't between them, opting for a slightly more cautious approach. "I might be an only child, but I am reliably informed that it's totally normal for brothers to hate each other now and then. I mean, you take the 'wanting each other dead' part kind of literally, but--"

"Oh, yes," Loki muttered, rolling his eyes, "do let's hear about what a tragedy Thor's death would be."

Yep, brittle emotional shields back in place.

Tony tapped his fingers against his leg, considering. To poke or not to poke. Hey, well, cheaper than therapy, right? "I used to wish my dad was dead, when I was a teenager. Practically every other day."

Loki folded his arms across his chest, wary.

"So, then... he died." Tony held Loki's eyes. This was fine. It was just a dull ache, like the arc reactor on a good day: something complicated brute-forced into a body that had no space for it, pushing everything else aside. "And that was the end. We'll never finish any of those conversations we were halfway through. He's never going to look at me and tell me he's proud. There's no chance now that he'll ask for my opinion on something or remember my birthday. I can't hope for any of that. But as long as Thor is still alive, you can still *hope*."

"And what, in all the realms," Loki said, very softly, "makes you think I would want that?"

Oh.

Well. Tony winced a little. He should have seen that coming, really. Hope was a bitch. "Just... think about this, okay? If you're wrong, it would be a shame to find that out when it's already too late."

Loki let out a sigh. "You're being tedious," he said, but strangely there was nothing threatening in it. It must be a good sign, that he was putting up with this shit.

Tony took the minor victory and backed off. "All right, well, at least tell me how the cow thing ended."

Loki looked cautious, like the easy change of subject might be a trap. "I was given five lashes and made to muck out the stables for a month. But Fandral couldn't bear milk for three, so I was generally considered victorious."

Tony was never going to get used to the casual way Loki and Thor talked about whippings. It wasn't like he'd never earned a spanking himself, and hell, he was lucky his school had done away with the paddle just a year or two before he'd got there. Just. *Whips*. It seemed on a different level, for all that Thor insisted it was nothing serious.

Not that that had stopped him from looking up a few videos online, and apparently dark-haired guys being sultry and menacing was a *thing* for him now. But that was different, and more than a little fucked up, and the kind of thing he should definitely not be thinking about in Loki's presence.

Tony made himself focus on the conversation at hand. "What happened to the cow?"

Loki flashed an impish smile. "Well, they couldn't make it go down the stairs, so Fandral and Volstagg found a length of rope and lowered it out the window. Much to its displeasure."

Tony laughed so hard he had to put a hand on the desk for balance. "That's *fantastic*."

God, Loki looked so *young* when he looked pleased like that. At least when Steve had moments of looking all fresh-faced and doe-eyed, they were justified by the fact that he actually *was* a decade or two younger than Tony. Loki was older than windmills, for Christ's sake. It was criminally unfair.

"Sir, you have a call from Reception."

Turducken. Tony waved a hand in the air. "Put it through."

"Mister Stark?" A young woman's voice, Andy or Sandy or Madison, dammit, he was trying to be better at this name thing. "There's a gentleman here with a delivery for you; he says you wanted it as soon as possible."

"If it's made of meat, send him on up to the workshop."

"Right away, Mister Stark."

Tony went for the cash Jarvis had located; he didn't know what an appropriate tip was for impromptu turducken delivery, so he just grabbed the whole lot. Make some kid's day. He pointed at Loki. "You. I'm going to the elevator and you're going to stay out of sight. Don't torture Dummy while I'm gone. Actually, don't torture Dummy at all, but. You know what I mean. Stay out of trouble."

Loki showed his palms and looked as innocent as he was capable of, which was not very. Tony snorted and went to meet the delivery guy.

--

Later, Tony went to talk to Thor.

The side of his neck felt hot. He kept having to fight the urge to touch it, to curl his hand around it in recreation of Loki's fleeting clasp. After they'd finished eating, he'd told Loki to take the leftovers - because hell if he was explaining to everyone else why there was half a turducken in the fridge - and Loki had thanked him in an oddly formal way for sharing his table, and reached out--

The thing was. The thing was, the neck-clasping, it was an Asgardian thing, he knew that. It was a purely Asgardian gesture, which meant it wasn't tailored for him, it was just something Loki had wanted to do. Tony's mind kept replaying it, and over and over he kept coming to the conclusion that Loki actually liked him.

Or... no. Or it was just what Loki wanted him to think.

He could totally see why it was a thing, on Asgard. It was... *intimate*. Thinking about it too much made him feel unsteady and kind of loose in his skin. He didn't know what to think, and he didn't know how to react - it would be best if it was just part of Loki's scheming. If Loki *liked* him then Loki had something to lose, and Loki did unpredictable, irrational shit when he felt threatened.

Oh, god, he was in so over his head.

Tony's fingers brushed the side of his neck and he wrenched his hand back down. Jesus Christ, he had the worst taste sometimes. Loki was not an okay person. Loki was a genocidal asshole and that didn't change just because he turned the sad eyes on.

Then there was Thor. Thor was in jeans and a flannel shirt when Tony arrived to talk to him, which infinitely improved his day. Thor in flannel was one of his favorite things to look at. He blatantly encouraged Thor to wear flannel at every opportunity, much to Thor's amusement. And the best thing was - the best two things - Thor didn't want to commit genocide, and Thor didn't try to get into his pants. God, those should be required criteria for everyone. Well, except Pepper, but the genocide thing should probably still apply, because Pepper was amazingly competent and that would just end badly for everyone.

So, Thor. Tony handed him a tablet with the runes Loki had drawn and watched Thor make a very complicated expression. Thor had a whole set of them that seemed to be reserved solely for things involving Loki.

"Is it safe? Can you tell?"

"Yes," Thor said, handing the tablet back. "I've seen it before. It's simple enough; it grants favor in battle, nothing more. How did Loki come to give you this?"

"Um." Tony hadn't realized quite how supremely awkward this was going to be. "I asked."

"I... see." Again with the complicated faces. After a pause, Thor said, "Is... is he well?"

Tony grimaced, rocking his hand from side to side in the air. "He's not horribly injured, if that helps. He's still all fucked up on the inside. I don't know what you want me to say here, buddy."

"No. Neither do I." Thor looked distant for a moment, sad, then seemed to recollect himself and gestured Tony to a chair. He took the seat opposite, a small table between them. "How goes your work? You have been improving your armor, I take it?"

"Yeah, it's about time for an upgrade. Just throwing a few ideas around." Tony weighed up the idea of telling Thor how happy Loki had looked, talking about pranks. Whether it would make Thor smile, or just be rubbing it in. "The, uh, the topic of our prank war may have come up, with your brother."

Thor gave an alarmed sort of laugh. "I hope you are not averse to livestock, my friend."

"That came up, too," Tony admitted with a grin. And if he found himself having to clean cowpats out of his tower - well, okay, have someone else clean cowpats out of his tower, the principle was the same - he knew exactly who to blame. "I thought I might use a couple of his ideas." He watched Thor closely.

"Then we are in for some fine jests," Thor said gamely, but his smile wasn't anywhere near full thunder-power.

Dammit. There were circumstances in which Tony would not object to being in the middle of a pair of hot brothers, but this was not one of them. --And *that* was a thought that was going to stick with him. Way to be inappropriate. "Well, I don't know, it was just a thought."

Thor shook his head. "You should. Loki has always had a knack for mischief. I'm sorry for the tenor of my mood, Tony; it's just that I had always thought those were happy times and since this... since this madness of my brother's I no longer know what to think. I confess it weighs upon my heart."

They all agreed Loki was crazy, but it wasn't often Thor referred to it outright like that. It made Tony shift with a low thrum of guilt, an uncomfortable pressure in his chest. If he could have given this morning to Thor, he would have. It was going to take time.

"For what it's worth," he offered, "they seemed like good memories."

Thor raised his eyes to Tony's. "That is worth a great deal. Thank you."

Tony still felt kind of like a thief.

"Great," he said out loud, "but maybe we can not mention this whole thing to the others, since... you know. No offense."

Of all things, that actually made Thor smile properly, for all that it was wry. "Since they would not appreciate Loki's involvement? Have no fear. They will not hear of it from me."

Well, that settled that. Tony leaned back in his chair, vaguely satisfied. On impulse, he said, "What do you think of tropical fish?"

Thor cocked his head, considering that. After some thought he ventured, "I do not think I have eaten one. Are they very tasty, these fish?"

Tony was weirdly disappointed and not quite sure why. He grinned instead and said, "I don't think so. Never mind, not the point. I have another magic question. At least, I think. For all I know it was complete bullshit. Is there a kind of magic that's just... making stuff? Not magically making stuff, but just building it or I guess forging and then it comes out magic good *god* this is the stupidest thing I have ever said."

"Not at all," Thor said, looking pleased as he always did when the subject was something he could talk knowledgeably about. He braced his forearms on the table. "You speak of the master craftsmen, artisans of great skill and power. The craftsmen of most renown come from the dwarves of Svartalfheim, but to my knowledge they may be of any race."

Well... damn. "So, in theory, someone from Earth could be a... craftsman. Of magic."

Goddamn, but Loki was a pain in his ass.

"Indeed," Thor said. "Why do you ask?"

Tony groaned and rubbed his face. "I'm pretty sure Loki's just screwing with my head because he knows I think magic is creepy. I would know if I made magic robots. I hate that I even used the phrase 'magic robots'."

Thor fucking *recoiled*. He stared at Tony in outright horror. "You... you are a craftsman? And Loki *knows* this?"

"Uh," Tony said intelligibly. He could feel that familiar panic of knowing he was in trouble but not knowing quite why. "Is that bad?"

"N... no," Thor said, not very convincingly. "Forgive me. It is simply that he... no, let me explain."

"Please do," Tony said, already hating pretty much every aspect of this conversation. The flannel shirt had promised such good things. The flannel shirt was a dirty liar.

Thor curled one of his hands into a loose fist and put it on the table between them. "A craftsman can make great and powerful objects." Another fist. "A sorcerer, in his own way, can do the same." He uncurled both hands and laced his fingers together tightly. "But if they work their powers together, the potential of their creation is beyond imagining."

Fuck *no*. "Loki can make weapons with my *stuff*?" Tony demanded, half out of his seat. He didn't know where he thought he was going to go but this was *not supposed to happen again*, he'd fucking stopped his entire company in its tracks and turned it around to stop this happening again, and he'd let Loki touch Dummy, god, if Loki had done anything to Dummy he was going to shoot the bastard right in the face. He felt sick.

"Only with your cooperation," Thor said, and good heavens, it might have been a good idea to *lead* with that.

"Fuck's sake," Tony grumbled, falling back into his seat. Shit, no wonder Loki was trying to get him on side. "Don't scare me like that."

"Forgive me," Thor said again. He still looked shaken, hunched in on himself. "You must be on your guard, though. Loki knows he can join his skills to another's. He has done it once before."

Tony folded his arms across the arc reactor, slouching uneasily. "Why do I get the feeling this story doesn't have a happy ending?"

Thor smiled unhappily. "It does not. There was a terrible accident. A good man died."

Tony tried to remember what Loki had said, talking about craftsmen. "Is that why the dwarves don't trust him?"

Thor huffed a laugh. "The dwarves don't trust him because he continually tries to deceive them. No, the craftsman he worked with was a storm giant - I know not how he gained the creature's cooperation. Although I suppose he could have promised whatever he liked."

"Right, God of Lies."

"That, too," Thor agreed. "I meant that oaths to a storm giant are not protected by law."

"That's one way to kill repeat--" Tony stopped short. Hold up. He narrowed his eyes at Thor. "You wanna elaborate on that? My grasp of Asgardian contract law is a little rusty."

Thor looked mildly surprised. "Obviously, oaths among Asgardians are taken seriously. A matter of honor."

"Obviously," Tony echoed.

"But a giant has no standing. An oath made to a giant is as a promise made to the empty wind."

Tony was pretty sure he knew where this was going, but he had to make sure. "Any giant?"

"Yes," Thor said, looking at him strangely.

"A frost giant?"

"Of course."

Oh, for crying out loud. Tony fought the urge to beat his head against the table. "Thor. *Loki*. Is a *frost giant*."

It wasn't just that Loki thought he was subhuman - sub-Asgardian, whatever - it was an *actual legal position*. What a train wreck. And there was no way in hell Tony was going to ask if it extended to races other than giants. Like, say, humans.

"By accident of birth only," Thor said, a little heated. "In spirit he is Aesir. He is the son of Odin. He is as Asgardian as any of us."

"He doesn't *know* that." Tony was sure of it. "He doesn't trust you not to treat him like any other frost giant."

"Then perhaps he should stop acting like one," Thor snapped, and then looked so immediately guilt-stricken that it was almost hilarious.

"Okay, okay. Let's just... cool our heads." Tony took a deliberate breath and let it out. He was not actually trying to make Thor feel bad. He was just getting a handle on this. "Loki's Asgardian. Is that by law?"

"Yes," Thor said firmly. "He was adopted by Asgardians; he is Asgardian."

"Is that permanent? Can he be un-adopted?"

Thor scowled, but kept his voice calm. "If we have not renounced him by now, he must surely realize we will not."

Tony refrained from pointing out that Loki was not always strictly in touch with reality. "But *technically*, he can be made not an Asgardian anymore?"

"We would never--"

"*Thor*."

Thor sighed. "Yes," he admitted reluctantly.

And Loki knew it. And... Loki kept insisting Odin wasn't his father. "He's getting in first," Tony murmured. "You push someone away before they can turn on you. He's trying to renounce *himself* so that he doesn't spend all his time waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"But there is no need for it," Thor said, grief plain on his face. "If he would only believe he is loved--"

Catch-22. Tony laughed because it fucking hurt. "He can't believe you, Thor, because he knows *you don't have to honor oaths to a frost giant*."

Thor looked miserable. Ten points to Tony. He should probably quit while he was behind. At least Thor was going away this weekend, visiting his sexy astrophysicist; Tony was assured she was a much less depressing conversationalist. He wished *he* was going away this weekend, instead of letting Pepper drag him to this charity dinner.

God, he hated charity events. Everyone congratulating him like giving money away was some kind of fantastic accomplishment.

He picked his tablet back up off the table and fiddled with it. "Sorry. I'm kind of a jerk. I don't listen to that little voice that tells people when to shut up. On the upside, *I* believe you love me, that's gotta count for--"

"That voice," Thor said, giving him a steely look. "I think I hear it speaking to you now."

Hard to argue with that. Tony coughed and attempted to redirect the conversation. "Anyway. You're sure Loki can't mess with my stuff without me letting him?"

Thor nodded. "I am certain. It requires your willing cooperation."

Okay, good. Good.

"Either the magics are joined together during the making - more than simple runes, I speak of long hours of enchantment - or the craftsman must work with the sorcerer in mind, to prepare the way."

Not good.

"So what you're saying is," Tony said slowly, "I'd have to build or program something personally, with the specific intention for him to use it."

That sneaky, conniving, goddamn *son of a bitch*.

"Precisely," Thor said, giving him a reassuring smile.

"Right." Tony nodded. Then he nodded again. "Yeah. We might have a problem."

--

"I'm sorry," said Steve, "but it sounded like you just said you gave Loki a magic cellphone."

"*Inadvertently*," Tony repeated. "I really feel that can't be stressed enough. It's probably not even magic, we only have Loki's word to go on, and isn't it just a *little* farfetched to think there's anything more to my tech than good old-fashioned science?"

"I hate to feed your ego," Clint said, slouched comfortably across the meeting table, "but no one here actually finds that farfetched but you."

"Um, Bruce does," Tony said, pointing. "Also, that's not feeding my ego, that's insulting, I'm insulted. I don't need *mysterious powers*," he wiggled his fingers, "to do what I do."

Bruce shifted in his seat and looked guilty. "Tony, you developed an AI that can not only pass the Turing test, it can successfully apply the Turing test to other AIs. You-- you have to admit there may be something to this."

"You have betrayed me," Tony told him. "I'm never doing science with you again. Steve, you're my new favorite Avenger. Eight p.m. tonight, bring your pajamas, we're having a pillow fight."

Steve ignored that, unfortunately. "Is this part of the prank war? Because if so, good job, you got us, but now would be a really good time to--"

"Sorry," Tony said. "Prank-free. Although on that note, you might want to check your punching bags because I think my *former* favorite Avenger said something about a bag of flour."

Bruce shot him a dirty look.

Natasha cleared her throat, leaning forward. An eyebrow arched and steel in her voice, she said, "I'm more interested in the part where you gave Loki anything at all."

"Is that aiding and abetting?" Clint tipped his chair back, balancing it on two legs. "I mean, should we be arresting Tony for treason? Tony, if we turn you in can I have the Maserati?"

"Like hell," Tony said, folding his arms.

Steve nudged Clint in the side. "I'll flip you for it."

"*Hey*," Tony said indignantly. So much for 'new favorite Avenger'. "You're supposed to be the *nice* one!"

Steve looked completely unrepentant, while Natasha pointedly cleared her throat again.

Tony sighed. "Look, we made a stupid bet that he couldn't pull off his next whatever-the-hell without killing anybody. Then he went to Asgard and stole a telescope and came back and nobody died, and you know, a cellphone didn't seem like that big of a deal in exchange for him *not killing* a bunch of people."

"And that didn't tip you off?" Bruce said skeptically.

Tony threw his hands in the air. "I thought he was trying to lull me into a false sense of security!"

"Well, *apparently* it didn't take much lulling," Clint shot back.

Tony tipped his head back and silently counted to ten, before he said something he was going to regret. There was so much he didn't want to give away - like that Loki wanted to turn him evil, or that he actually kind of *liked* the slippery bastard - and these were all very, very smart people.

The worst part was, Loki hadn't even asked for a custom phone. If Tony had just bought him some crappy little burner phone, none of this would be an issue. But oh no, he'd had to make something *special*, because he was Tony Stark and he had to *show off* - and Loki had counted on that. Had played him like a fiddle, played him utterly.

It was infuriating - but mostly because it made the competitive part of his brain light up like Christmas. Maybe that was the self-destructive part. There was a lot of overlap.

After a pause, Natasha said, "Given the information you had at the time, it was a reasonable call."

"Well, *thanks*," Tony said, and made a show of rolling his eyes indignantly, but something in him eased to hear it. Especially from Natasha, who knew psychological warfare the way Tony knew circuits and Clint knew arrows and trajectories.

"Now we need to do damage control." She turned slightly. "Thor, what can you tell us about this kind of magic? What can Loki actually do?"

Thor had been sitting at the end of the table looking pensive. Now, he finally spoke up. "By the nature of his relation to it, he can augment its powers. He cannot alter the nature of the thing. Bend its purpose, perhaps, but not turn it to something else entirely. Beyond that, I am not certain. I would have to consult someone who knows of these sorceries."

Not a weapon. Tony was really hoping that meant it was not a weapon.

Bruce was the one who voiced that thought, more or less: "So, it really is a super-powered magic cellphone?"

Thor looked a little worried, but nodded. "I believe so, yes."

"Well... how bad can that be?" Steve said, looking around the table. "I mean, Tony, what can you use your cell for?"

Tony winced. Bruce and Clint groaned.

"It's not that bad," Tony said, with a confidence he didn't really feel.

Bruce looked at him in disbelief. "Tony, you can basically run the world from your cellphone. I've seen you."

"Well--" Tony couldn't really argue that. "That's true. But if he was going to, I don't know, turn CNN into the Loki's Ego Network, don't you think he'd have done it by now?"

He could see Steve open his mouth to ask whether he could actually take over CNN, and then jump like Clint had just kicked him under the table, probably for fear of giving Tony ideas. Please. As if he hadn't thought of hacking CNN's feed years ago. Pepper had made him promise not to. She made him renew that promise pretty regularly, too.

Bruce groaned again and sank his face into his hands. "This is ludicrous," he said, a little muffled. "I can't believe this is an actual conversation."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Tony was pretty sure that was because they were all busy silently agreeing.

"Hey, I've got a question," Clint said then. He sat up, letting his chair fall back to all four feet, and looked directly at Tony. "What's his cell number?"

Warning bells. "I don't think I should tell you," Tony said carefully. "Any of you. --*Especially* you, Thor, no, don't give me that face."

Natasha looked thoughtful. "Go on."

"If you call him, he'll just change the number and we'll lose what we've got. I put a tracker in it and he disabled it. I can't locate it by satellite. I put spy software on and it's not logging any data. We have one useful thing and it's that number. I don't think we should risk it."

Natasha was nodding, like she'd already come to that conclusion and just wanted to hear what he'd say.

"Tony's right," Steve said, with a little sigh. "I don't like it, but..."

"So, what, exactly?" Clint said, and it was clear by the set of his face he'd gone into agent-mode. "You're text buddies now?"

There was no good answer to that question. Deflect, deflect, deflect. "Maybe if he gets hooked on Angry Birds he'll be too busy to make trouble."

Bruce came to his rescue, intentionally or not, by getting Thor's attention. "How powerful are we actually talking? Should we be expecting a regular cellphone with an extra-long battery life, or something more like the Tesseract with a keypad?"

"Nothing even approaching the Tesseract's power," said Thor, thank *fuck*. "No disrespect to Tony - your skill is truly great, but you and my brother could combine your talents many times over and never even hope to create such an artefact."

"I'm okay with that," Tony said firmly, and just as firmly crushed the little voice in the back of his head wondering exactly what he *could* achieve if he and Loki put their heads together. There would be no putting together. None.

"It is hard to say. I am not a mage, and I know not what power Tony gave the device before Loki received it," and Thor looked expectantly at Tony, as if there was supposed to be an answer to that.

"I don't know either," Tony reminded him, "since I wasn't aware I was even *doing magic*. For the record, I'm taking that as a personal betrayal. The doing magic, not the not knowing. I don't know who to blame, but when I figure it out, they're going to suffer."

Steve leaned forward a little. "Thor, can you make a guess?"

Thor hesitated, then let out a breath. Finally he said, "I would guess... a little more powerful than Mjolnir. But perhaps more than that. Perhaps less, if fortune smiles on us."

"More powerful than the hammer that *changes weather systems*," Clint said flatly. "Stark, I've got to hand it to you, you've really outdone yourself."

"Inadvertently," Tony said again, just to get it out there. "Let's all remember that part. And it's not like it's all that hard to summon lightning. Give me a rocket, or the right kind of laser, or, hell, a *metal suit flying through the air*."

Okay, there did kind of need to be a thunderstorm in place first. And when the suit got hit by lightning, it was generally not on purpose. (He was lucky that the arc reactor was able to take on and redistribute energy, and less lucky but more deliberately smart in that the whole thing worked like a Faraday suit to protect him.) The point was... he didn't know what the point was. 'More powerful than Mjolnir' kind of depended on how powerful you thought Mjolnir actually was.

...He had to admit, it was pretty damn powerful.

Well, shit.

Bruce took his glasses off and squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Essentially, we have a whole lot of suppositions and conjecture."

Natasha clasped her hands together on the table. "Thor, you mentioned consulting someone who knew more. Someone on Asgard?"

"I will return and seek answers," Thor confirmed, although he looked kind of disappointed. Oh, this was going to screw up his vacation plans. That sucked.

Natasha looked at Clint next. "SHIELD's got contacts we can pursue - we'll keep it strictly theoretical," she added, at the look on Tony's face. "We need to know what we might be dealing with."

"And Tony can ask Loki," Steve said drily, leaning back in his chair.

Tony made a face at him, but Bruce was saying, "Actually, that's a good idea."

Seriously? Tony raised an eyebrow at him. "Yeah, I'm sure he'll be really forthcoming."

"Maybe he'll want to gloat." Bruce shrugged slightly. "He's the person best positioned to know exactly what its capabilities are."

"You do realize he's just going to lie to my face, right?" Tony shrugged back. "Sure, what the hell, I'll ask Loki. Maybe if I ask really nicely, he'll give it back."

Clint was watching him, eyes narrowed a little. "How often do you and Loki actually talk?"

Danger, Will Robinson. Tony carefully didn't look at Thor. "I don't know, every now and then he comes around and threatens to kill me. Do you want me to ask Jarvis how many hearts I drew in my diary?"

"You seem pretty blasé about it."

Tony deliberately misinterpreted him. "Yeah, well, death threats aren't exactly a new experience for me."

"Hm," said Clint, and the cool, thoughtful look in his eyes didn't bode well.

That was about it for the meeting, bar a few more comments at Tony's expense. He made sure to catch Natasha's eye, and she lingered as the others drifted off.

Tony waited to be sure they were alone, and even then he couldn't bring himself to ask his question right away. He tried sidling up to it. "Speaking of magic. It's not taken all that seriously on Asgard, right? I guess, if you have almighty god powers, it loses some of its pizzazz. Anyway, Loki wanted to make it *very* clear that Asgard could fend off any magical attack. Like... *emphatically* clear."

Natasha raised her eyebrows, catching his meaning. "*Ah*. Well, that's good to know. For Asgard."

Tony drummed his fingers on the table, steeling himself. He trusted Natasha's opinion, but asking out loud made it uncomfortably real. "Hypothetically. If we kill Loki, do you think Asgard will *actually* declare war? Obviously we can't have a full-blown trial and execution, but if there was a rogue scapegoat, someone who could take responsibility... that's not treading on their toes as Self-Appointed Authority of the Universe."

"Believe it or not," Natasha said wryly, "we have actually run through these scenarios. The main problem is the level of monitoring Asgard has available to them." She flicked her eyes up to the ceiling the way people usually did when they were talking about Jarvis.

"Right." Loki had just been talking that morning about why he never tried to deny responsibility for his pranks, and Tony had already forgotten the name of the guy. "The all-seeing, uh, what was..."

"Heimdall," she filled in.

"Heimdall, right." Tony looked upwards and then tossed off a sarcastic wave, just on principle. "You'd think if they cared so much they could share some of that surveillance info with the people who are actually *dealing* with their runaway prince."

"No one likes sharing power," Natasha said, with a resigned shrug. "As to your question, they've given every indication they're quite serious about the threat. If there's any suggestion of conspiracy or deception to subvert Asgardian justice, they'll take it as an act of war."

Tony thought about that, and thought about the possibility that right now someone was watching from above - or across, or wherever the hell Asgard was in relation to Earth. "How do you think they'd react if there was an *actual* rogue agent? Or if someone did it in self-defense? Interplanetary war seems a little extreme, and it's not like they sent him bodyguards or anything."

Or, wait, if someone could beat Loki in a *duel*, one hundred percent Asgard legal...

"It's hard to say," Natasha said evenly. "I'm sure we're all hoping we don't have to find out."

The meaning in her gaze was clear; she was thinking the same thing he was. It wasn't that they couldn't set something up - they just had to be very, very careful not to get caught.

Tony tried not to think about Loki's palm curled around his neck in affection.

"Tony," Natasha said, tilting her head at him, "has something changed?"

Is everything okay, her tone asked.

Good question. Tony had no idea what he was doing, but that wasn't new; he'd jumped into this endeavor half-blind. This... magic thing was an issue, and one he really wasn't happy about, but now that he knew about it he could make sure not to give Loki anything else.

"No, everything's fine," he said finally. "I was just wondering, you know how it is."

"Okay." Natasha put a hand on his shoulder on her way past. "If you need to talk, come find me," she said softly, and then slipped out the door.

If anyone would understand, it would be Natasha. For a moment, Tony really, really wished he dared. She'd worked undercover, a lot - surely she'd seen a good side to one of her targets. Even just once. She was a good agent, but she wasn't inhuman. She'd know how to deal with it.

But even if he could believe she wouldn't run straight to Fury, how could he tell her he was starting to like the guy who'd brainwashed her best friend? The guy who'd killed dozens of her coworkers? How could he look her in the eye--

He was walking a very fine line. If he fell, all he could do was cross his fingers and hope it wasn't too far to the ground.

#

Born to Rule

Chapter Summary

Discussions of birthright and ancestry. Tony is born to troll Forbes.

Chapter Notes

At this point the posting rate is going to slow down a little, because I'm sadly not going to be able to churn these out daily. But, it will be a *lot* quicker than six years this time, I promise!

On the original designs for Stark Tower, the round helipad overlooked by the penthouse was labelled 'party deck'. Once the Avengers had formed up, it was used more for quinjets than either helicopters *or* parties. And, of course, as a prominent open-air space for Thor to tap his heels together and say, 'There's no place like home!'

(Did that make Loki Toto? Sometimes the guy did look about as scruffy as one of those little terriers... you'd need a damn tall basket to fit him in, though. Besides, if Loki was Toto then who was left to be the Wicked Witch?)

Tony liked to watch the Bifrost from inside the penthouse, sheltered from the whipping winds. There was an endless fascination to it, being aware of just how little they really understood - despite Jane Foster's brilliant contributions - and how much there was still left for them to learn about the universe.

It was less fun to think about the reason Thor had gone back to Asgard, which was to ask the magic experts there what Loki could make with some kind of mystical cellphone with 'spirit' or whatever it was they claimed Tony had built. It itched at him, made him think of crates full of weapons and desert sand, and he went to the lounge workstation to try to drive those thoughts from his mind.

He didn't entirely like having the Avengers spend so much time in the same building as part of Stark Industries. It was important to keep a base away from SHIELD control, he definitely still believed that, and there was plenty of security separating the two sections of the building, but... as time went on, the Avengers' presence started to feel more of a liability than a protection. Tony didn't want a target painted on his - Pepper's - employees, just for the sake of keeping the Avengers away from SHIELD's dubious intentions.

He'd been playing around with the idea of a dedicated facility solely for Avengers use. Plenty of decisions still to make, like where to locate it, how extensive it should be - whether it would be training only or full accommodation - but it was fun playing with the wireframes, tossing around holographic representations of the different ideas that flitted through his head.

Something disrupted his attention but he wasn't sure what, like a flicker too quick for him to consciously see.

"It's generous of you to call the Bifrost from right atop your tower," Loki commented, voice full of purring amusement. "A beacon that may be viewed from far and wide, so that all might take note that the Thunderer has gone and you are undefended."

Huh. A footfall, maybe, or the edge of a dark cloak in his peripheral vision. Something that meant Tony hadn't been as startled as he might have been by the unexpected presence of a homicidal alien in his home. Again.

Tony wiped away the wireframe model and leaned on his hands on the edge of the workstation. There was really no way he could resist that opening. Loki keeping track of Thor's comings and goings was just bait too tempting to ignore.

"Keeping tabs on Thor, are you?" he asked pleasantly. "That's sweet."

Loki scowled a little and looked away; busted.

Despite the scowl, it seemed like Loki was in a relatively good mood: no threats at the mention of Thor, not even cranky insults. That was promising. Tony shut down the workstation he'd been using and stretched his arms.

"I was just about to head to the workshop," he lied with a smile. There was no way he was encouraging Loki to hang about in the penthouse while Pepper was anywhere in a fifty mile radius. "You coming with?"

Loki offered him a smirk full of mischief. Definitely in a good mood. "How could I pass up a chance to see what new weapons you are crafting?"

"Yeah, well, don't get too excited; I'm just messing with some stuff for the company." They reached the elevator and Tony noted the way Loki's movements kept Tony in his line of sight at all times. Given how much stronger Asgardians were - how paranoid did Loki have to be, to keep doing that? "Jarvis, anyone needs me, I'm in Project Mode, okay?"

"Noted, sir."

Jarvis would warn Pepper, down in the SI offices, and keep the workshop level locked down while they were in there. Still too close for comfort but better than nothing.

Hoping he sounded casual, Tony decided to broach the most important topic before he could chicken out. He blamed the elevator moving for the swoop in his stomach. "Anyway, I was thinking of some upgrades for that phone of yours..."

Loki made a vague hum of acknowledgement, giving no clues as to whether he was buying it.

"Uh... yeah, so I figured the battery, and it could probably use a more durable case, given your..." Tony waved his hands in demonstration, "battle gymnastics. I've got a loaner for you in the meantime, we can just swap the SIM over--"

"No, thank you," Loki said blandly.

Tony maybe should have done some better brainstorming on how to steer this. He glanced at Loki's face. "You sure? I figured you'd be, you know, high expectations, only the best will do..."

Loki smiled; it *seemed* pleasant enough but Tony was pretty sure the guy was laughing smugly inside his head. "Oh, have no fear, Glowheart; your craft has more than met my expectations."

That was the last thing Tony wanted to hear. Dammit, he *did not make magic robots*. It was some Asgardian superstition, or a screwed up misunderstanding, it had to be--

Except he couldn't take the risk that he was wrong, and leave that phone in Loki's hands.

"Good to know." The elevator doors opened and Tony stepped out, internally debating his next play. This might backfire, but... oh, what the hell. He muttered, as if to himself but knowing full well Loki could hear it, "Suppose you're used to second-best, anyway..."

There was no immediate answer. Tony was sure he could feel eyes boring into the back of his skull. Or maybe Loki was playing with one of his knives, staring at Tony's back, deciding whether to start with a lung or kidney.

"Besides," Loki announced, and Tony absolutely did not jump, "I have it set up just how I want it."

Tony glanced back. Loki was smiling still, but it was a shark smile, predatory and hard-eyed. Yeah, there was no way in hell Loki was going to give that phone back.

Shit.

Tony shut his mouth and went to the main computer table, pulling up the schematics he'd been sent by Development. They'd taken an old diagnostic machine and revamped it, refined the sensors and fit it into a handheld case. Not the only product of its kind on the market, but smarter, better, more portable, more reliable.

He couldn't help but be aware that the old version had been a spin-off of a military contract. Missile targeting technology repurposed to detect skin cancer. They'd been developing it right alongside the Jericho missile, before... before Afghanistan. The Ten Rings. The truth.

The things he'd built-- to *protect*, to keep people *safe*-- and they'd wound up being used against his own people, against those kids in the Humvee, they made soldiers so young and he wouldn't, he couldn't let that happen again.

Before he knew it he was whirling on Loki desperately, hands clenched to keep them from shaking. "Just give it back, we can make another deal, I'll--"

"No," Loki said, as cold and sharp and still as an icicle.

"I wouldn't have made the damn thing if--"

Loki gave a sharp, bitter laugh. "I am well aware of that."

"Son of a bitch," Tony hissed between his teeth. He raked a hand through his hair, trying to calm down. He wasn't there, he was in his tower, in his workshop. With a chest full of pieces of his own bomb and an alien mass murderer getting pissed off at him-- no, that really wasn't helping. "Just-- *dammit!*"

Loki gave a vicious scoff. "You know, Thor only loves this world so much because I attacked it. You think he pledges his protection over every realm on which he dallies with a bedmate? It's always been this way, nothing to turn a discarded toy into a favorite like trying to give it to me--"

"For crying out loud," Tony shouted, throwing his hands up. Always with this victimized bullshit, as if Tony hadn't gone *out of his way* to treat Loki a hell of a lot better than the guy deserved. "I'm not going to give it to Thor, I'm going to melt it down and salt the remains!"

Loki jerked like he'd been slapped, looking absolutely *horrified*. "What?"

Tony lowered his hands awkwardly. "Uh. What?"

"You can't destroy it," Loki said urgently. "It's a masterwork. Unique. Don't you have any idea--"

"What did you *think* I wanted it back for..." Tony shook his head, already knowing it would be the same old martyr-complex crap. "You know what, don't answer that. Good grief. How is this my life."

"I don't know when Midgard lost the knowledge of Craftsmen. That you don't know the power within your own creations, crying out to be awoken..." Loki shook his head in apparent disbelief. His eyes dropped, briefly - unmistakably - to where the arc reactor was set in Tony's chest.

Oh, *hell no*. Tony stiffened, immediately bumping 'arc reactor' up the list of things to *never* make for aliens. (This was garbage, Loki and Thor were deluded, he didn't do-- maybe the way it absorbed and redistributed energy was a little different to the calculations, but he'd been working with an unfamiliar isotope, that didn't prove--)

(He should never have survived being that close to the nuclear explosion, through the wormhole-- no trace of radiation afterwards, no--)

Loki stepped forward, spreading his hands, voice low and coaxing. "We could make such great things, Warsmith; defend this world against any army."

"Yeah," Tony said bitterly; "its own army. That's not happening again."

Loki paused, tilting his head. "That interview..."

"*That interview*," Tony repeated mockingly. For a guy who'd done his research, Loki sure seemed to have trouble putting it together. "I was attacked - my bodyguards were *killed* - using weapons I designed. So forgive me if I'm not overly enthusiastic about having put one in *your* hands."

Loki studied him for a moment. "You do know that it's not a weapon."

Actually Tony didn't know that, and Loki was the last person he'd believe about it. He didn't want to get his hopes up. "Well, it *wasn't*, but who knows what it is now."

"It's a *cell phone*," Loki said, with a mildly scathing look. Then his expression seemed to soften a little, which was kind of unnerving. "It serves its original purpose, Tony. To extend the reach of communication. To transmit... images, sounds. To interface with..." he made a broad gesture that might have indicated the workshop's computer systems, "networks."

"Don't think I didn't notice how vague that answer was," Tony said. Despite himself, he did actually feel a bit calmer.

He really, really hoped that Loki was actually telling the truth on this one. Transmitting things, well, Loki could already do those long-distance illusions; interface with networks, but Loki hadn't had any trouble getting into the systems without it; was there a chance that they might be lucky enough that the phone only helped Loki do things he could already do?

Loki pursed his lips for a moment, then added, "I could bid a vehicle drive into something, I suppose, but it seems needlessly complicated. Simpler to strike at it myself. I suppose I could command a medical device, like those ones which regulate the sugars? But it would be a cumbersome way to kill someone."

Weirdly, hearing Loki describe ways the phone *could* be a weapon was a lot more reassuring than the simple denials. Loki sounded so doubtful about it that it was obvious he thought those methods were unnecessary; that he wanted the phone for other reasons entirely. Then he glanced at Tony and offered, "I could assist if you would like one of your own."

Tony raised an eyebrow slightly incredulously. "So you can practice mashing your hocus pocus up with my tech?" he retorted, and shook his head. "I'll pass, no offence."

Loki grinned, a quick flash of delight at being caught out, and okay, it wasn't like Tony didn't know the guy had issues. Loki probably thought it was fun to have a challenge that didn't involve horrific forms of capital punishment.

Begrudgingly Tony had to admit to himself that if it weren't for the maiming and killing, he'd probably find it more fun too. Not just because of that quicksilver smile.

"So, tell me what this is for," Loki said expectantly, gesturing at the schematics on display.

Tony hesitated, then decided to accept the change of subject. He wasn't going to get anywhere further on the phone thing right now. "This is a portable scanner for melanoma detection. Reduces unnecessary biopsies. Not a new idea, but the imaging is much more accurate than what's on the market at the moment, for the price-point we're targeting."

"Ah." Loki looked it over, actually sounding interested. "It detects some quality in the... damaged skin?"

"That's right," Tony said, mildly surprised by Loki's quick perception. "Cancerous cells have a higher metabolic rate than regular cells, which means they can be differentiated by the right kinds of imaging techniques."

Loki nodded, apparently perfectly fine with that explanation even though he referred to insulin pumps as things that 'regulate the sugars'. Whatever; Asgardian language use made no sense at the best of times. Literally. It didn't even make stable audio waves; Tony had seen a SHIELD linguist burst into tears over trying to decipher a tape recording.

"And so your creations span many needs," Loki murmured, glancing between the holo display and Tony. "For healers, for warriors, for farmers. Sentry satellites posted at the borders of your realm. Sometimes I wonder if a dwarf lies somewhere in your ancestry."

Tony quirked an eyebrow, not bothering to explain that he hadn't actually worked on this design himself, although he'd had a hand in the full-size version. "Still with the short jokes?"

"I speak merely of their skill with metal," Loki said, grinning far too wide to come across as innocent. Then he cocked his head thoughtfully. "In truth, the dwarves prefer not to leave their realm, but it is more than likely some Asgardian in years long past played a part in your abilities."

How would an... oh, wait a minute. Wait just one minute. Tony had an unpleasant feeling that he knew what Loki was implying. He blanked his face of any reaction, straightening his posture. "Feel like elaborating on that?"

Loki shrugged. "It was quite common to visit Midgard, for a time. It was only after the war with Jotunheim that it really stopped - among those of Volstagg and Tyr's age, there are many Aesir who have fond memories of bedding easily impressed mortals. The results can be seen throughout your history."

Great, okay, so banging groupies was a universal concept. Tony held onto his neutral expression with the considerable force of his will. "And when you say results..."

Loki's brow furrowed slightly, like he couldn't quite believe Tony was making him spell this out. "In every generation, you have those who are... uniquely talented. They have powers beyond the dreams of ordinary men and women. Great leaders, discoverers, oracles... those who see the shape of things to come. Or perhaps those who survive what would kill any other, like the transformation undergone by your Captain America." He smiled, completely oblivious to how much was wrong with what he was saying. "I would not be at all surprised, Iron Man, if you were one of those exceptional mortals with more than Midgard running through your veins."

"Right," Tony said. He had a really terrible urge to just hand Loki a shovel and see how far the guy would keep digging. "You're saying that people like... me and Steve and Bruce... we're too special to be *ordinary mortals*, so we must descend from space vikings?"

A shadow flitted briefly over Loki's eyes. "What happened to your Doctor Banner would not come from Aesir blood. More likely--"

"*Wow.*" Tony tipped his head back, considering exactly what to say. He didn't come up with much. "You know, I really hope this is one of those things where you're just screwing with me, because this, this is messed up even for you."

The bewildered look on Loki's face didn't offer much hope. "You doubt you are so extraordinary? I assure you, your creations--"

"No, Hans Günther, I know *exactly* how damn extraordinary I am." Tony let the neutral mask slide, baring his teeth. "What I *doubt* is this bullshit theory that anything special about a human needs to be explained away by *alien DNA* as if our entire species is incapable of tying our collective shoelaces."

Loki looked utterly stunned. "I-- I meant only--"

"'Great leaders'? 'Discoverers'? You're saying that humans are so mundane on our own the only explanation for success is to be part Asgardian and you're expecting me to take that as a *compliment!*" Tony let his voice rise to make his point, not bothering to hold back how pissed off he was. "Your can take your self-serving superiority complex and shove it right up--"

Loki was right up in his face all of a sudden, hissing, "Guard your tongue if you wish to keep it."

It was the feeling of something very sharp pricking against the underside of his chin, rather than Loki's tightly furious expression, that made Tony swallow and fall silent. He leaned back from the knife-tip a little. They were going to have to talk about this habit of using pointy objects to win arguments, it was very unsporting.

Loki regarded him a moment longer, eyes narrowed, then lowered the knife and vanished it away to wherever it was he disappeared things to. (Tony preferred to tell himself it was sleight-of-hand, which was a lot easier to believe in the case of a dagger than one of the larger, more improbably shaped objects he'd seen Loki tuck into nowhere.)

"Call it self-serving if you wish," Loki told him, low and intense, "but *I am not Aesir*, or did you forget? The fact that half-breeds born on Midgard oft hold powers like no other mortal is well-established. Even your own tales speak of such things. Now, I may have traveled the boughs of Yggdrasil, and walked on Midgard when no other cared to return, and yes, probably there are those of my bloodline among you--"

Well, *that* was a bombshell to dwell on later--

--but I make no pretense that they would reflect well on your kind. So if you must find insult where none was intended, at least be clear what motives you accuse me of."

Tony fixed his eyes on Loki's, determined to make his point. He insisted, through gritted teeth, "They. Are not. *Better than us.*"

Loki hesitated, something complicated flickering in his eyes. Anger burned in Tony's stomach at the display - the reminder that Loki genuinely believed frost giants and humans were worth *less* - and then he felt guilty for blaming Loki for something that was fucking the guy up so badly. It just-- it stung. He couldn't help but feel pissed off about it.

He could back off the pressure though, lighten up the conversation. Avoid getting stabbed.

Loki looked away with an uncomfortable huff and a petulant twist of his mouth. "I simply said they have powers mortals do not. *You* insisted on making more of it. And unless you know many Midgardians capable of summoning lightning, my point stands."

Tony opened his mouth to make a flippant comment about the many ways humans had, in fact, figured out how to basically summon lightning, and then he thought of something better. "...You're just trying to duck out on child support."

Loki looked back at him, face scrunched in slightly exasperated confusion. "What?"

Tony pointed a finger at him, making sure to hold Loki's attention. This was the right play to make, he was pretty sure. After all, Loki *had* been trying to compliment him, albeit in a really horrible neo-Nazi kind of fashion. Attempts at good behavior should be encouraged. "You said you've been to Earth and got up close and personal with the locals. You just don't want to admit there's a chance you're my great-great-umpteenth-grandfather. Which, allow me to point out, you did *not* make a good first impression with that alien invasion business. You definitely owe me a whole bunch of missed childhood birthday cards."

Loki held very still, eyes wide for a moment, then scowled a little. "I hardly think you would speak so lightly of it if you considered it a true possibility."

Because no one would volunteer to be related to a frost giant, right?

Admittedly it did bring a weird vibe to his occasional filthy thoughts about Loki pinning him against flat surfaces, but at the kind of remove they were talking about, well, genetically that probably wasn't really any closer a relation than the nearest fashion model off the street. Not that genetics even mattered since they were both-- *Not* that he would actually sleep with Loki so this was a *completely moot train of thought*.

"You're not getting off that easily, gramps," Tony said, dialing up the obnoxiousness of his grin. "By your own argument, it's completely possible. It would explain how much we have in common. For example, I look *fantastic* in leather pants."

"You have the most roundabout--" Loki took a short breath in, then let it out more slowly, visibly closing off. Tony could *see* the tension and mistrust slide back into Loki's posture, which was a little startling because it made him realize how much they'd been absent, a moment ago.

Okay, in retrospect he could see that Loki was kind of primed to view claims of family - even joking ones - as manipulation.

But. It did something, before that. Plus, the idea of it was kind of hilarious, for sheer dramatic irony if nothing else. Tony flagged it for later; tucked it in his mental file of All Things Loki.

"I'll have to take your word for it," Loki said, in the smooth tone he used when he was at his most guarded.

Tony was a little bothered to realize how much he disliked the change in tone. He reminded himself firmly that he was just doing this to steer Loki away from the mass violence. Enjoying it-- him-- anything-- That was out of scope. 'Questionable morals' was a descriptor he'd learned to live with; actually getting close to Loki was something that went beyond 'questionable' and into 'completely absent'.

The chair for the computer station was right next to him, and Tony distracted himself for a moment by sitting down and adjusting his position in front of the desk. He was trying to think of something innocuous to say, a way to redirect the conversation that wouldn't be completely awkward, but Loki beat him to it: "Who is the man with the camera?"

When Tony gave him a sharp look, Loki clarified, "He's been following you for a week."

Which meant, for Loki to notice that, *so had Loki*. Probably just a side effect of stalking Thor, but still creepy. Tony grimaced. "Could be anyone. Press, foreign spy, *domestic* spy, corporate spy..." He gave a casual shrug. Probably not press, if it was someone good enough to escape detection for a week. "Oil lobby's been making trouble for me in Colorado, could be them. I'm gonna have to buy a few more politicians." He rolled his eyes, only partially joking.

Loki gave the tiniest of frowns, looking like he was trying to understand.

Tony swung his chair away from the desk again to better face Loki, give the guy his full attention. He elaborated, "I'm clean energy in a form they can't buy out or take over. I'm oil's biggest threat. They throw money at politicians, I throw more, the winner gets legislation in his favor - it's not bribery, not technically; it's donations, funding campaigns, political stuff."

Loki arched an eyebrow with that vaguely contemptuous look he got when he thought 'Midgard' was being particularly weird and inferior. "That seems tediously indirect."

It was nothing Tony hadn't thought to himself a million times before, but from Loki-- It would all be so much easier if he could just *tell* them what to do, if he could *make them listen*, Iron Man up on the balcony in front of a cheering crowd of thousands, millions...

It occurred to him that in some ways he actually envied Loki's willingness to be a complete amoral asshole, that freedom to *not hold back*.

"The direct way is pretty tedious, too," he said, keeping his voice carefully even, because he *wasn't* an amoral asshole and he *did* hold back. Besides, look at Stark Industries and its subsidiaries - he didn't have the time to dedicate to running a company, let alone a country or a world. There already weren't enough hours in the day, too many insights and ideas; coffee could only do so much.

He quirked a sardonic smile at Loki, fully aware of the subtext barging into the conversation. "All that paperwork. All the petty detail. Forget it, other people can handle that kind of crap. I've got better things to do with my time. Seriously, who'd want to waste their days being in charge?"

Loki's mouth twitched in response, then he leaned forward, not quite looming over Tony in the chair. "But you are so in need of a king," he drawled, eyes glittering with malicious amusement. "Someone to realize your dream, of a world run on clean energy. Someone to ensure that none need ever starve again. Someone to unite your nations, to *privatize world peace*."

Tony flinched, hearing his own words thrown back at him. He didn't *trust* anyone with the fate of the world, that was what Loki didn't get. He'd been proven wrong too many times in the past. Now, he didn't trust anyone with his weapons except himself; he didn't trust anyone with his experimental tech; he sure as hell didn't trust anyone with his *planet*. He shook his head and said, "*Not you*."

Any good humor dropped right off Loki's face, replaced with sharp anger. "I was born to *rule*, I had every lesson--"

In a sudden flash of inspiration, Tony realized what Loki just *didn't get*. He held a hand up to forestall the rest of the rant. "No, see-- We've got the, it's the American Dream. You work hard, play your cards right, any kid with a bright idea and a work ethic can make it to the top. Every single person in this country, any of us, we were *all* born to be kings."

Loki laughed and regarded him with open disbelief. "You cannot seriously believe that every child in this country has a chance at its throne."

"No," Tony admitted, "no, it doesn't play out like that in practice. But that's what we're *told*. That's what we're *raised to believe*, sound familiar? No one's going to accept someone from Asgard, *anyone* from Asgard, just walking in and demanding to be in charge."

Interesting; when he framed it like that, Loki actually let him talk instead of switching straight into martyr mode. Tony stuck a mental flag in that one; it would be easy enough to remind Loki, if (when) it came to another fight, that they weren't going to put Thor in charge either.

He decided to give Loki some time to chew on the idea, maybe it would help. In the meantime, he forced himself to admit, "Credit where credit's due. That trick with the phone was... pretty well-played."

There was a brief flash of something wide-eyed and eager on Loki's face (but not brief enough to be anything but manipulation), before it disappeared behind a practiced smirk. "I rather thought so."

"If it turns out to be a weapon, I'm going to find a way to tear you to pieces with it," Tony added, because he believed in giving fair warnings.

Loki nodded, seemingly at ease with the threat. "I understand."

Tony remembered the soldiers in the Humvee, shredded Kevlar, Yinsen speaking longingly of joining his family. He shook his head, but turned back to his work as he murmured, "You know, I really don't think you do."

--

When Thor came back from Asgard, he brought a thunderstorm which drove rain into every nook and cranny in the city. It was soggy and miserable and made Tony long for California. Okay, not his actual *house* there, admittedly - (*disabled all communications, no contact with the outside world*) - but salt and sun and dry, *clean* weather.

Rain was filthy, full of pollutants and grime and goodness knew what else it picked up from the streets when it landed. *Anything* could be in water. Tony grimaced and stared at the pelting rain with distaste.

Thor said the phone wasn't a danger, or not much of one, just a shortcut for things Loki could already do. It matched what Loki had said, although it seemed too easy an answer. Too safe. Tony didn't trust it. He was letting Steve and Nat do the interrogating, though, while he eyed the water streaming down the window and tried to think sneakier. If he were Loki... what would he be planning?

"I know not!" Thor snapped, accompanied by a loud crack of thunder and a slow, rumbling roll. "By rights he should have no need of it."

Unless he wanted to save his own magic for other things. Assuming that was how it worked.

"Would that make it a good trial run?" Natasha asked intently. "Being able to do the same things, does that make it any easier for him to enchant it, or test the results?"

Trial run. Try to win Tony over; to create something more, something worse.

"As if anything Loki does has a reason behind it," Thor sneered, and okay, hold up, that didn't sound like Thor. "More likely he simply wanted to watch us fret."

Tony turned his head back to the room to frown in Thor's direction. Loki had reasons. Loki had *lots* of reasons. A lot of them were pretty crappy reasons, but Thor was being downright defensive and that was... weird.

Even Steve thought so, leaning forward and levelling a stern expression at Thor. "Thor, is there anything you're not telling us?"

"Must I recite the conversation for you word by word?" Thor demanded. "I have told you what the mages said. The device is likely powerful but only for limited purposes, tricks Loki has already mastered. So long as he is not able to make anything further--"

Natasha shifted her weight and raised her head, eyes narrowing slightly. "And did they have any suggestions on how to prevent that?"

Tony opened his mouth to protest, to defend himself - of *course* he wasn't going to make anything for Loki, now he knew. But he looked at Natasha's expression and stopped. That

wasn't what she meant. She'd only asked Thor that question because she'd already figured out the answer.

Thor scowled, looking... not quite at anyone's face. "If it were so simple do you think I would keep it from you?"

"Thor," Steve said, ramping up the disappointment levels.

Thor blew out a noisy breath and finally admitted, all grudging resentment, "They said it would be safer if the Craftsman were slain before Loki could make use--"

Oh. Tony felt a weird, skidding jolt in his chest.

Well, it would definitely stop Loki tricking any more goodies out of him. From an Asgardian perspective it made perfect sense. Of course Asgardian mages would suggest something like that. Humans weren't people, frost giants weren't people, it was... it was an effective solution. If a Craftsman was a potential resource for Loki, then cut the danger off at the source.

Steve was being all stern and commanding and Natasha was wearing her Black Widow face, cold and deadly, and Thor was shouting that of course he wasn't going to *do* it...

Tony believed him. He did. He also believed Asgard in general had a massive sense of entitlement and it was entirely plausible they might send someone to take care of the problem behind Thor's back.

He pushed himself to his feet and ignored the way all three of the others snapped their heads towards him. "So he can't do anything new with the phone, that's what we wanted to know. If there's nothing else that's actually useful to me, I've got a video conference with the Danish Energy Minister to prep for."

"Tony--" Steve began.

"Time is money, Cap, and in my case it's a lot more money than you can afford." Tony gave a sharp-edged smile and strolled out of the room.

--

That night he dreamed Loki leaned over him, pulling the arc reactor out of his chest and murmuring, "Imagine what we could create together, the world run according to your vision," and the Ten Rings were gathered on the helipad shooting at the penthouse, all armed with Stark weaponry and Thor at their head with repulsors embedded in his palms.

"Jotun luck," Loki said, laughing; "you should have chosen Aesir ancestry after all." A missile landed near them and Loki picked it up, wiring the arc reactor into it with deft fingers and that was too much power, it would destroy cities, armies, no no no, he had to be stopped but Tony couldn't move.

Thor called out, only it was in Fury's voice, "The Avengers were created to handle threats like this, Stark," and the repulsors cut a swathe through everything.

--

Fuck Asgard, anyway.

--

For a while, Tony minimized the time he spent in the common areas. It was uncomfortable, that was all: no one brought it up but the atmosphere was thick with tension. Tony wasn't... he was fine, he just was allergic to awkward situations. He was just laying low until the worst of it blew over. And it wasn't like there weren't a hundred and one legitimate demands on his time.

Clint got sent off on a mission for SHIELD; Thor went to stay with Jane. Tony held off on the turf order because he wanted to save that prank for when everyone was around to appreciate its magnificence. He did add a carefully measured amount of dishwashing liquid to several of the toilet cisterns, though, because who didn't love bubbles?

Loki sent him a text, *These do not travel as swiftly as your automobiles, but are much lovelier to the eye*. It was accompanied by a picture of some species of giant cat - almost. The cat thing's face was too broad and flat, not quite matching anything on Earth. The angles weren't quite where they should be. Its coloring was plausible enough, dappled shades of brown, but the subtle wrongness of the face made the whole picture oddly creepy.

Also, either there was another cat thing behind it, or it had two tails.

"Lovelier my ass," Tony muttered to himself, and replied with a picture of an Alfa Romeo 33 Stradale that put that disturbing CGI cat to shame.

Loki sent back a picture of alien cat poo with the caption, *They also do not smell as foul*.

No way. Animals all smelt horrendous, because they were *animals*. Tony wrinkled his nose in distaste, imagining it, and sent back, *are u even in another realm or just a weird animatronic museum*.

Most assuredly the latter, came the response, which meant either that magic cellphones could send messages from other planets, or Loki was screwing with his head.

It said something that Tony genuinely couldn't figure out which of those options was more likely.

A new issue of Forbes came out, with an interview Tony had done for them. Pepper got exasperated at him for 'not taking it seriously', which was patently unfair, and Tony said so.

She sighed and gave him a judgmental look. "You told them your theme song was Gwen Stefani's 'If I Was a Rich Girl'."

"Who says it's not?" Tony said defensively.

Okay, admittedly, it wasn't. But it *could* have been. And it was a perfectly reasonable interview, with some reasonable content; no one with an internet connection expected Tony

to be serious *all* the time. Pepper needed to lighten up a little, and he said that too, which... didn't go down well.

All in all, things were pretty 'normal', for a certain definition of the word that encompassed his life.

--

When Clint came back from his mission, Bruce headed off for a yoga retreat or whatever backwards wilderness camp he considered unpopulated enough to be a 'soothing' vacation. Tony preferred more excitement in his vacations, personally, but on the other hand Bruce did carry his own automatic excitement generator under his skin.

Tony had plans for making some kind of tasty weekend brunch thing. When he and Pepper got to the kitchen, they found Clint already in there with a small pile of torn up egg carton and swearing under his breath.

"Natasha," Clint said by way of explanation. "I think it's a welcome back. Don't ask."

Tony eyed the pieces of egg carton. There were eggs on the bench as well, with pieces of carton attached, and he realized Natasha must have glued them all in. It seemed a little easy after her creativity with the wall of perspex in the elevator. "Are you sure that was...?"

Clint snorted. "Trust me, you have no idea how childish she can be. I can't believe she's lasted this long without breaking out the whoopee cushions."

"Natasha," Tony repeated skeptically.

Clint tossed them a distracted grin, freeing the last egg from the tattered remains of the carton. "All I'm saying is, guard your sofas, guard your chairs."

"I will pay her any amount of money to hit Fury with one of those," Tony declared. Now that the idea was in his head, he needed it with fervent intensity. Complete video footage - preferably high definition, surround sound, the works. Oh, that would be magnificent.

Clint eyed him thoughtfully. "Define 'any amount'."

"Please don't encourage him," Pepper said tiredly. She fetched out a clean bowl and started retrieving ingredients: cinnamon, vanilla, salt.

"You desperately need more fun in your life," Tony told her.

"I really don't," she replied, patting his arm on her way to the fridge. "Are you using all those eggs, Clint?"

"Nah, help yourself." Clint snagged two and gestured at the remainder.

Tony scooped one up and was already cracking it against the rim of the bowl as something in his hindbrain yelped out a warning. There was a small 'bang' and the egg burst into a sticky, flour-y mess all over Tony's hand and the front of his shirt.

"Son of a *bitch*," he said flatly. The weight of the egg had been off, he realized; the balance hadn't felt right. Fat lot of good that realization did him *now*.

Clint was cackling. Had Natasha even glued the eggs in the first place, or had the whole thing been an elaborate set-up so Tony would lower his guard?

"Maybe you were right," Pepper teased lightly, putting a bottle of milk on the counter next to him. "I *did* need more fun in my life."

"Just wait, Barton," Tony scowled, going to the sink to wash his hands. It just wasn't right to mess with a man's French toast. "Vengeance is sweet."

--

The next time Loki showed up, it was with some kind of weird fruity sweetbread that was apparently a dessert on somewhere-or-other-heim. It occurred to Tony after he'd started eating that he really hoped it was compatible with human biology. The mead had been okay; hopefully that luck would hold.

The mead... after the cocktails. This, after the turducken. Reciprocating hospitality. Hmm.

"I bet you'd like this with whipped cream," Tony said thoughtfully. "Not real whipped cream, though. I'm talking disgustingly sweet, artificial as anything, straight from the can. The sort of thing that doesn't even have 'cream' in the name because they're legally not allowed to call it that."

Loki eyed him suspiciously, clearly trying to figure out if there was a hidden insult in Tony's words. Tony struggled not to roll his eyes.

"Because you like the sweet drinks," he said patiently. "That's all."

"Hm," Loki said, and popped another chunk of sweetbread in his mouth.

Tony gave a mental shrug and ate some more as well. Loki wasn't being very talkative and that left it up to Tony to make conversation. He had no idea what to say. At least the food made a good excuse for sitting in awkward silence.

"So," Tony ventured, after a couple more pieces. "How's... things? Carry out any evil plans lately?"

Loki gave him a dangerous look that suggested knives were close to hand. "More evil than gathering wealth you could never dream of spending, while across your realm there are children clothed in rags?"

"Whoa!" Tony jerked in shock at the sudden hostility. "Easy there, Chairman Mao. It was just a--"

"A joke, I'm aware." Loki's mouth curled in a sneer. "All in good fun... so long as the joke is at *Loki's* expense."

Tony really wanted to make a sharp retort to that, but Loki had already gone from 'defensive' to 'defensive and angry', and historically speaking that was usually when the bleeding started. Plus there was whatever cultural thing Loki had about food sharing, which Tony had probably stomped all over, and... for once, maybe he could just bite his tongue and suck it up.

Very carefully, he said, "Okay. You brought something for us to eat and I was rude. I apologize."

Loki stared at him. Movement caught Tony's eye - Loki's right hand, fingers curling and uncurling, like they were trying to decide whether to reach for a knife. Tony held very still and forced himself to look calmly back at Loki's face.

Abruptly, Loki gave the world's creepiest smile. "Why, think nothing of it! No harm done, mm?"

"Well, that's certainly what I'm hoping," Tony said, pasting a flippant tone over his uneasy heartbeat.

To himself, he resolved to be much more careful with his words today - to *not* make every sarcastic comment that flitted through his head. Contrary to what some people might think, he was perfectly capable of backing down from a fight. Just because Loki tended to hit the same buttons as Steve did-- they were both prone to acting like they thought they should have some authority, and Tony did *not* react well to people trying to assert authority over him-- but that was, it was fine, he could be the responsible one.

Which was obviously why, not five minutes later, he'd forgotten all his good intentions and was snarling furiously, "One of these days they're going to take you back to Asgard and *actually* execute you."

Ah... whoops. Tony cringed a little, hearing the words burst out of his own mouth.

All Loki did was give a dark, bitter laugh. "Odin doesn't dare." He smirked at Tony's skeptical expression. "Oh, yes. It took some time, but I finally understood why he has yet to have me killed. It explains... much."

Oh, this was not going to be anything good. Tony took a breath and tried to brace himself, although he suspected it would be pointless. "Why do I feel like this explanation isn't something warm and fuzzy like: the guy raised you and deep down loves you too much to go through with it?"

Loki gave a scornful huff, and strode to the sofa with that swaying predatory grace. Lounging back with his legs sprawled wide, he announced bluntly, "I wasn't sure Laufey was my father, when I killed him. Odin claimed it so, but... I had reason to doubt his word on the matter of my parentage."

"And thank you for that not at all creepy non sequitur." Tony assumed Loki was trying to shock him, so the obvious response was to take it in stride. Still, he didn't really know what to make of Loki just casually announcing he'd murdered his bio-dad. He didn't even know anything about the guy but the name. "Okay, I'll bite. How come you killed this guy?"

"Laufey was king of Jotunheim," Loki said, with a smile as sharp and hard as flint. "During the war with Asgard a thousand-some years ago. Right up until my... *brief* time on the throne."

That first time Thor was on Earth and Odin went into his alien healing coma thing. "That's when you killed him?" Tony said, to make extra sure they were on the same page. Thor had definitely mentioned Loki killing Jotunheim's king during that time; he hadn't said anything about that being Loki's *father*.

"The Jotun King declared war on Asgard anew, and came to murder Odin in his sleep." Loki gestured with an open hand. "I slew him, and turned my wrath upon his realm. Were I anyone else Asgard would hail me as a hero; instead Odin cast me from the Bifrost to fall endlessly between the branches of Yggdrasil."

That last part definitely wasn't how Thor told it. Tony eyed Loki thoughtfully, trying to decide which conversational rabbit to chase first. If it was true that Loki had thought he was killing an enemy leader and then later found out it was his bio-dad, well, that had the potential to mess with a guy. *If* it was true - it seemed just a little too Shakespeare. Or that Greek one, the myth about the guy killing his dad with a sandal or something. Convenient coincidences.

Except that Thor was the one who'd told them 'Laufeyson' and it would take less than a minute to find out whether that really was the King of Jotunheim's name.

Then again, it wouldn't be the first time Loki had lied about something that could be easily uncovered. Maybe he was lying about this too. Tony kind of hoped he was, honestly.

"So, what, Odin won't execute you because he feels guilty that you wound up killing a relative? He doesn't-- from what I've heard, he doesn't exactly seem the type."

Loki gave a short bark of laughter. "Oh, *far* from it. Odin took me to be Laufey's downfall; no doubt he believes I was fulfilling my purpose. But there is still a chance I may fulfil my *original* purpose, and that is what he fears."

"No, please," Tony said dryly. "Be more vague."

"I thought it odd, for Odin to know who had whelped an infant he said was unattended. I thought at first he was making some effort to placate me. That in fact I was not just a monster but a *common* one. And then I realized..." Loki leaned forward a little, wearing one of his creepiest smiles. "I was left in a temple, the son of a king. I wasn't *abandoned*, Warsmith - I was *sacrificed*."

Well. That was a turn Tony had definitely not seen coming. "Uh, pardon?"

"Even the Jotuns believe in greater powers. The war was going poorly for them. So they offered up the king's get in hopes of turning the tide. Only, Odin came across the scene while the babe still lived. Why else would he take a child of the enemy, if not to thwart their sacrifice and ensure their defeat?"

Tony opened his mouth. Closed it again. Thought about what it meant for Loki to come up with a theory like that - to believe the things he'd have to believe about himself. And if Loki believed that, then the execution thing... dear god. Tony took a slow breath, desperately hoping to be contradicted. "So you're saying, if Odin has you executed..."

"He fears completing the sacrifice that Laufey began, centuries past," Loki agreed, sounding way too calm for a guy discussing both of his fathers having him killed. "He fears the rise of Jotunheim and his own defeat. There is his dilemma - to choose between what I might do if left alive, and what may come from the death of the child of Laufey."

Tony rubbed his fingers against his thigh, staring at nothing while he struggled to wrap his mind around that idea. It was outlandish, something out of a fantasy novel. The concept *felt* wrong as he tried to test it against his mental maps, an unfamiliar shape, unnatural - but he couldn't afford to disregard it. There was an unsettling possibility that this was actually what Loki believed.

His lungs felt too tight.

"I think," he said slowly, "you're even more cynical than I am."

"I have reason," Loki murmured, not as bitterly as Tony would have expected.

Loki didn't even seem that upset about it. *That* was the most fucked up part. Loki talked about being a human sacrifice - alien sacrifice, whatever - as a baby, and the most emotion he seemed to have about it was satisfaction at figuring out a particularly challenging puzzle.

Tony swallowed. He really wanted this one to be Loki messing with him. This one *hurt*.

"And you can spare me the tearful eyes," Loki said sharply. "For once, some part of this whole sorry mess is to my advantage. Unless that is what you're weeping over--"

There was a sick, aching feeling in Tony's chest but it was clear that any attempt at sympathy was not going to go down well. "Believe me, we have not reached the day I'm reduced to *weeping* over you and your soap opera backstory."

That seemed to be an acceptable tone to take. Loki relaxed a little, settling back, and commented archly, "I prefer to think of it as a great and tragic saga, but some cultures favor more... vulgar forms."

Tony managed to laugh a little at that, but it came out short and jagged. *Sacrificed*. Let it be a trick. "It's just... seems strange that you're so calm about it. My dad and I weren't exactly close, but if I found out he'd done... I can't even think of an equivalent. Bioweapon vector? No, that wouldn't be, you couldn't target--" He shook his head hard and got his words back on track, left the rambling for the back of his mind where it could dart off on tangents unobstructed. "What I'm saying is, if he'd planned to sacrifice me as a baby to defeat big bad Russia or North Korea or someone, I think that personally? I'd be much happier never, ever knowing about it."

Loki leaned forward, bracing his forearms on his thighs, hands draped loosely between his knees. "Would you? You're a scholar, Tony," and there was something in the way Loki said 'scholar', an importance that didn't quite match his usual universal scorn. "Don't you want knowledge, don't you want to understand *why*?"

"Honestly, I don't know." Tony frowned unhappily. He didn't like thinking about this. If Loki was acting more upset it would be easier to write it off as emotional manipulation. "In my case it wouldn't actually help me understand, I already have a hundred and one reasons why Dad didn't have time for me - apparently he wasn't the perfect example of adjustment and healthy coping mechanisms that I am..."

The joke was more to cheer himself up than Loki, but Loki seemed amused enough, and why couldn't Loki just act *upset*?

"The closest thing I can think of," Tony found himself saying, before his brain caught up to his mouth, "would be why Obie--"

Fuck.

Loki cocked his head with a smile exactly like a shark scenting blood. Tony had seen it on reporters, lawyers, businessmen. It was worse on Loki, because with Loki you could never be sure the blood was going to be metaphorical.

--but I wasn't a baby for that," he forced himself to keep going, to smooth it over and *divert the fucking conversation fast*, "so it still wouldn't really be like your situation, I mean even if I was adopted from Hydra and everyone in SHIELD knew, babies can't actually belong to evil organizations, I'd only be able to relate to the part about everyone keeping it secret-- which is really impressive, by the way; they say two people can keep a secret if one of them is dead but this was, what, the entire palace, an army unit, battalion, what do you call them on Asgard--"

The shark smile had faded as soon as Tony started talking about adoption; Loki's face was blank. "Odin was alone when he went to the temple. Only the king and queen knew."

Oh come on, that was farfetched even by Asgardian standards. It didn't even fit with how *they* claimed things worked up there. Tony raised his chin a little, enjoying the opportunity to poke a few holes in some of their more ridiculous claims. "And the constant surveillance guy."

Loki's expression faltered for a moment. "And the Gatekeeper," he agreed slowly.

"And even if Odin smuggled you through an entire palace without being seen, there's the question of how to retroactively fake..." Tony stopped, realizing that his words were going to waste. Loki's gaze had dropped off, unfocused; there was a small furrow between his brows.

It should be impossible, but it sure seemed that both Thor and Loki really believed that guy was omniscient.

"He never had any trust for me," Loki finally said, voice low. "It never mattered what I did... he always believed my intent was ill."

Huh. Tony hadn't actually meant to dig up an emotional landmine, but... Well, he wasn't above nudging it along a little if that would divert attention from his slip-up about Obie. Weak spots were targets, and he was more than willing to target Loki for his own self-preservation.

Load that landmine up with extra explosives and blow it sky-high so that Loki forgot there'd been even a hint of blood in the water.

"That's just one guy though, right?" he said innocently, and okay, maybe it had all the subtlety of a repulsor to the face but he figured he had a pretty wide margin for error right now. "After all, the king's the one people are going to take their cues from."

Loki inhaled sharply. "You don't understand. The All-Seeing... they would have assumed he had a *reason*, that he had seen things to mistrust me for..."

Tony leaned back, watching Loki launch himself from the sofa and start pacing in agitation. People always remembered the weapon-making. No one ever thought about the quiet ruthlessness that had enabled him to crush his competitors and dominate the industry. There were more types of weapons than just the ones that explode.

"Always... the little comments, always *watching*. Of course they noticed." Loki was muttering to himself as he paced, probably refitting all his memories as 'proof' of this new angle. "No one questions the Gatekeeper. I thought I... But all they knew was his suspicion."

Loki stopped in the middle of the floor, fists clenched and eyes wide and wet. "I never had a *chance!*"

Tony put on a small frown, mixed it with a note of casual disinterest: "So, you're arguing... what, that Dylan, Herman--"

"Heimdall--"

--Midol, whoever. He frowned at you now and then, and this made everyone believe you were evil?" He didn't have to work hard at getting the right level of skepticism in his voice. The more Loki had to defend the idea, the more he'd convince himself of it--

Loki made an incoherent noise of frustration, glaring upwards (upwards?), and made a curt gesture with one hand. Iridescent green flashed across the ceiling and disappeared. Tony shot to his feet.

"What did you just do to my--"

"Fixed the shield, his name calls his attention and no doubt he'll have some reason why this is *especially* nefarious." Loki's voice dripped with a level of furious hatred that was usually reserved for Odin, and not always even then. It was kind of impressive. "Of course, the fact that I can hide myself from his sight is also proof of the most vile crimes on my part, for why *else* would anyone seek to learn such a skill. Certainly not just to see if they *can*, no, that's not *suspicious* enough, not *devious* enough for Loki--"

Well that... worked. Tony shifted his weight, uneasily trying to figure out the odds of Loki unleashing all this anger on the nearest target. That would be a problem, given that the nearest target was Tony.

"--turns out he *never* would have believed my intentions, suppose I should be grateful he tried to kill me to my face--"

Whoa, whoa, wait, what? Tony cut his hands through the air urgently. "Time out! I am definitely missing some nuance here. He tried to what to your what now?"

Loki smiled a little too brightly, mood switching on a dime. "Is that not how Thor tells it? How the Crown Prince was banished, made mortal, and the All-Father fell into the Odinsleep, and so the second prince was placed on the throne-- ah, my mistake, the second prince *seized* the throne, from somebody I'm sure, possibly a passing cupbearer--"

"Yes, yes, totally legitimate throne, get to the point--"

"--and so Sif and the Warriors Three, knowing that only one with a truly *evil* heart would allow himself to be next in line--"

"--okay, your passive-aggressiveness, *I got it--*"

"--while Asgard was vulnerable and oh, yes, *at war with the damned frost giants--*"

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose and decided that interrupting wasn't going to make the story move along any faster.

"--committed the most noble treason, against both their current king and the All-father before him, and went to Midgard to fetch the banished Crown Prince, for who better to restore peace than the idiot who was banished for starting the war in the first place?"

Tony opened his mouth and then closed it again, torn. No, if he let himself take the bait they'd never reach the point. "And Heim--mm-- burger?"

The false smile flattened out. "Aided their treason, then had a tantrum over me cloaking myself from his sight and tried to shove a sword through my chest."

"While you were temporary king," Tony said flatly. He was a little surprised at how annoyed he was. Oh, the beginning was true enough, but then - Loki wasn't even *trying* to make it convincing, it was just 'oh, they all hate me so they committed masses of treason'. Yeah, Tony was calling bullshit.

"Technically I did relieve of him of his oaths and duties first," Loki said, ostentatiously examining his fingernails. "So I wasn't, at that point, *his* temporary king. But yes, that's the gist of it."

Tony took a breath and held it. Slowly, he counted to five in his mind. Using 'mississippi' between the numbers and everything. He let his breath back out and smiled tightly. "Here's the thing I don't get."

"Oh, *do* tell," Loki purred, and okay, that was a clear warning signal, but on the other hand Tony was very good at ignoring warnings.

"After Thor's groupies found him in New Mexico, it didn't take long for him to juice up and phone home. And... Odin woke up pretty much right after that, right? So much for big dramatic sleep - I mean, I've had hangovers that lasted longer than this guy was supposedly napping. You'd think that, instead of skipping straight to AP Treason, these guys could have just held out for a couple of days until you were off the throne again."

"Mm-mm," Loki said blandly. "You might think that."

They were really going to play this out? Fine. Tony folded his arms and fixed Loki with his best 'are you serious' expression. "You don't think, maybe, that something set them off?"

Loki raised his eyebrows, still playing innocent.

"Something like... I don't know... rhymes with gattempted genocide?"

Loki looked *surprised*, of all things. Then laughed, and kept laughing. In fact, Loki kept laughing until he was doubled over in the middle of Tony's workshop barely able to breathe from laughing so hard.

That had not been the reaction Tony had expected.

He scratched at the back of his head, re-evaluating his interpretation. "...Evidently you don't think that."

"Oh," Loki gasped, straightening back up. "Oh, that was delightful." There were actual tears of laughter in his eyes, the bastard. "Oh, Glowheart. I do adore the odd turns of your mind."

Tony choked on thin air for a moment, something completely unwanted pounding in his chest. That just-- Loki didn't even mean it like that, he was *making fun of him* for crying out loud. (Except that Loki was full of resentment, Loki hated everyone, everyone *except Tony* and he couldn't help the kind of triumphant smugness that stirred whenever he remembered that.)

And-- anyway, the whole line about treason might not even be true. He knew that Thor's little back-up band had come to Earth, but that wasn't proof. For all he knew, Loki had *sent* them to get them out of the way. Anything could have happened.

Although, given Loki's entire... personality, it wasn't exactly implausible that people would act against him.

Those people, though? Thor said they all used to hang out together. Friends. If they really...

No, nope, no. Tony refused to feel protective of *Loki*. He just, he had his own issues with betrayal, and he was projecting all over the situation, that was all. Even if it wasn't the attempted genocide, something must have triggered their decision. He wasn't going to be pissed at complete strangers over something he didn't even know had happened, for the sake of a guy who'd *invaded his planet*.

Besides, Loki...

Loki, who was bitter and alone and *so sure* that no one would ever come through for him and if there was anything true about this story then maybe he wasn't entirely wrong--

Sometimes Tony just wanted to shove his own head into a wood chipper to make it stop *thinking*. He flicked his hands out, discarding everything up until this point: the conversation, his helter skelter thoughts, Loki laughing at him, all of it. "Fine. You know what? Fine. I still think they had a reason other than spite, but I have no idea how Asgardian minds work and it's not really the point. I *do* know they were meant to be your friends too. If they didn't think they could trust you they should have gone to someone else, whoever used to supervise naptime, the queen, someone. Going directly to treason, no passing Go, do not collect two hundred dollars, that was a dick move."

Loki was standing very still. He'd definitely stopped laughing. "What?"

"Uh." Tony swallowed, a little concerned, but he refused to backpedal. "Yes, I think they must have had a reason; I could lie about it but if I did that every time we--"

"Not *that*," Loki said, slightly over-enunciating, face impassive; tightly controlled anger.

Tony's battered self-preservation instincts were screaming at him to run for the door and his heart was beating fast behind the arc reactor. The worst part was, he had no idea what he'd said wrong. "Was it 'naptime'? Was that too dismissive? That was too dismissive. You don't even like Odin, you should appreciate me ragging on him, I deserve praise, at the very least a fruit basket--"

Loki was moving, long coat swaying around him and Tony had just enough time to tense up in fear before there was a hand on his throat-- neck. On the side of his neck, and Loki giving a soft snort and a gentle, gentle squeeze, and, "You're a fool, little king."

Not anger. Right.

Tony closed his eyes and exhaled softly; let out all his breath and all the panic in his bones. He could feel Loki's palm gently curved over his skin, feel Loki's vambrace solid against his collarbone, the weight of both. Loki was standing close to him, deep in his personal space, all tall and leather-smelling and *I adore your mind*.

He wanted Loki's hand to shift a little further back, wanted those long fingers to slide into his hair. He wanted Loki's other hand on him too. Wanted to...

"Well, it *was* a dick move," Tony muttered defensively, shoving all those other feelings down and away. He was just projecting. And had low standards for attraction. Bad combination.

He could hear Loki's breath hitch and release; feel it puff near his face. "That is... oddly refreshing," Loki said, then that warm palm went away and Tony opened his eyes again. Loki stepped back a little.

He remembered (kind of hazily, admittedly) the birthday party he'd thrown during the palladium poisoning. Rhodey armoring up, turning it into a fight. How he'd feel if Rhodey had gone behind his back instead, gone to Happy, no, gone to someone in *prison* just to have him stopped...

It wasn't the same situation. There were probably even more important differences than the ones he knew about. But if the treason thing was even partly true - even if it had been completely necessary, *somehow* - well, it still sucked.

"You're right," he said in a low voice. "I thought it was a messed up Asgardian thing, but yeah. I can see why you'd rather have someone try to kill you to your face."

Loki's face was almost expressionless, but his tone was still soft and quiet. "Tony, if your intent is to curry favor, then I can tell you that this is not a bad tactic."

Tony couldn't tell if that was a joke or not. Was this what people meant, when they complained of finding him hard to read? He had to admit, it was annoying to be on the other end of it. "I don't need to curry favor," he said, in lieu of having a good answer. "You already said you adore me."

"I said I adore how odd you are," Loki countered, with a hint of a smile.

Tony grinned, finding himself on more familiar ground. "No need to be embarrassed, Big Bad. It's a sign of excellent taste. You'd have to be made of pretty stern stuff to resist all of this." He gestured head to toe and then flashed one of his best flirtatious smirks, the kind he usually reserved for throwing corporate lawyers off their game.

Loki looked like he was searching for a good comeback, then smiled suddenly. "Ah, I understand. You Midgardians are so attracted to things in... what is it you call it? *fun sized* packages."

"There's more than one thing about me that's sized for fun, you know what I'm saying." Tony waggled his eyebrows lasciviously.

Loki arched an eyebrow right back. "Perhaps you mean there's more than one thing *odd* about you?"

"Oddly alluring, maybe," Tony retorted.

After the trainwreck of a conversation they'd just had, he was more than willing to throw himself into a bit of cheap and lewd humor, and it seemed that Loki was too. It was a lot easier without anyone around to give him a chiding look for engaging in a bit of banter with a killer. As if he would have ever got this far in life without the ability to make nice with people whose morals he despised.

At least Loki was only transparently slimy half of the time, as opposed to full-time oil slicks like Justin Hammer.

Tony immersed himself in the rhythm, the back-and-forth that came so easily, and tried not to think about father figures having their sons killed.

#

Catch-23

Chapter Summary

Tony's inappropriate sense of humor transcends the boundaries between the Nine Realms.

Underneath everything else, time keeps ticking onwards.

Chapter Notes

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

The first thing Tony passed on to Natasha was that the supposedly all-seeing Gatekeeper had a universal social media alert out on his own name. That seemed like an important thing to make everyone aware of.

The second thing he passed on was that, if the guy really did see so much, and he'd seen Loki's adoption, it was possible he really had held some kind of bias.

Sure, Loki was the kind of person who assumed the worst, wrote it down and declared it incontrovertible fact. But in this case - well, it might not be wrong. And since the whole Asgardian royal family was wrapped up in this melodrama, there were a hundred ways something like that might prove to be a vital piece of leverage.

"I hope it's not true - for Thor's sake," Natasha said, with a bland smile that suggested she was covering her ass in case they were being watched right now. Either that or she was annoyed at being interrupted during training simulations. "It would be... a shame if such a generous ally as Asgard became politically unstable."

"And it's useful to know it's so easy to communicate with them," Tony countered, with a bland smile of his own.

Natasha acknowledged that with a tilt of her head and hard eyes; she didn't like the idea of constant monitoring by foreign powers any more than he did.

Tony kept Loki's blood-sacrifice-on-pause theory to himself. That was 'hazardous materials' level information, the sort of thing to be tucked safely away in his own mind with the rest of the puzzle pieces. He didn't trust SHIELD not to go charging in with that kind of thing and set off a rampage.

It was a balancing act. Trying to figure out what would bite him on the ass if he didn't share it, and what would bite him on the ass if he did. What was vital strategically, and what was personal.

The flaw in that logic was that Loki's personal issues were exactly what made him a threat in the first place.

"On a different topic," Natasha said, relaxing her shoulders a little, "have you heard anything in your circles about new space research coming out of India?"

Tony paused, mentally flicking back through small talk and downtime reading. "Nothing in particular springs to mind. Why, is ISRO making noise?"

"The opposite," Natasha said, with a tiny little wrinkle between her brows to let him know it was bothering her. "They've gone quiet. My contact thinks they're nervous."

"Huh." It could be nothing; Natasha was professionally paranoid as a career. Still... "I'll keep an ear to the ground, let you know if anything comes up."

"Subtly," she added with an arched brow, lightly teasing.

Tony pretended to write a note on his hand. "Ear, not mouth. Got it."

Natasha gave a sudden grin that always spelled trouble. "Have you asked him about the horse story yet?"

No question who 'him' was. Tony shuddered lightly. "I genuinely can't think of anything I want to ask *less* about than the Devil's derby, thank you."

"Thor has definitely mentioned that his father's best horse is Sleipnir."

Tony cringed. "I'm trying *not* to get murdered. Or at least not to actively speed it up."

Natasha put on a look of false innocence, which for her was probably harder than a more convincing expression. "Have you ever ridden a horse? Clint knows a great--"

Tony started backing away. "I'm leaving now," he said loudly. "To do. Things. Other things."

There were times when Natasha had a downright creepy sense of humor, and the best thing to do at those times was to be somewhere else as quickly as possible.

--

Because Loki was a giant douchebag - a veritable parade of douchebags, even - he started sending Tony pictures of 'fun sized' items. It started with regular stuff like candy, and then progressed to... either a medieval space market or a Renaissance Faire, with a sword and shield that were presumably for a kid. There was a much larger shield conveniently half in frame for scale.

I've found you some weaponry, said Loki's text.

Tony zoomed in on the sword, displayed on his side screen, and it looked suspiciously sharp and metallic. Medieval space market, then.

"Jarvis, reply," Tony said thoughtfully. "'You want me to use those on you? Kinky.' Send."

"Message sent, sir." Jarvis made a deliberate pause. "Would that fall into the bounds of flirtation, sir?"

"No, it's... poking fun... I think." Tony grimaced. Early on in his relationship with Pepper, they had discovered... problems. In that, Tony tended to say things to people that made Pepper jealous.

He tried not to flirt with other people, because he didn't want to hurt her, but the real problem was that they had fundamentally different interpretations of what 'flirting' actually was or meant. Worse, what Pepper *said* she thought flirting was and what she actually reacted to were different again.

Tony was currently operating from a working definition of 'stuff that will make people think you want to sleep with them', which was pretty flawed but so far had the best success in terms of not bothering Pepper.

Of course, Loki was from an alien culture and pretty screwed up to boot, so there was really no telling *what* anything would make him think. But generally the casual joking went down better if it was another guy anyway, so he was probably covered.

Tony turned his attention back to the main screen, where the fifth draft of the Copenhagen deal was displayed. He tapped a paragraph and added an annotation; there had to be a much larger investment from the Danes, to show commitment to the project if nothing else. He had no intention of just giving them the benefits with none of the risk.

A few moments later, Loki's reply popped up on the side screen: *Are you asking me to tutor you in combat?*

Tony huffed, smirking a little to himself. "J, reply. 'I've done pretty well at kicking your ass so far.' Send."

He made a couple more notes on the draft, then Loki's reply popped up on the side screen: *Is that what you were trying to do to it?*

Tony snorted in amusement. "I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to imply things like that," he said out loud.

"Would you like me to send that as a response, sir?"

"No." Tony narrowed his eyes at the text conversation. "Respond, 'awfully quippy for a guy with blowjob handles on his helmet'. Send."

A moment later, he said, "...I'm really going to regret sending that."

"That does seem likely, sir," Jarvis agreed mildly.

Tony muttered a curse and forced himself to look back at the Copenhagen draft. He backed up a couple of paragraphs and re-read them, just to make sure he hadn't gotten distracted and

missed anything vital. His skin was prickling with awareness of the hanging conversation.

"No," he muttered, spotting a new caveat that had snuck in sometime after draft number four. He tapped it and sketched a circle around it with his index finger. "No, no. Nice try, buddy."

A response from Loki appeared on the side screen. *Interesting. Apparently Midgard produces the occasional good idea.*

Tony started to make another note, then stopped. He looked back at Loki's message. Hang on - "Jarvis. Did he just...?"

"Overlooking the vagueness of your question, sir... yes, I believe he did."

"It's not overlooking if you point it out," Tony muttered. He looked at Loki's message for a moment longer. Oh, fuck it. "Jarvis, video call."

Several long seconds passed, then Loki's smirking face appeared in place of the text conversation. In the background was some sort of masonry, pale square bricks.

"You *liked* that," Tony blurted.

Loki rolled his eyes, still smirking. "Obviously."

This was amazing. "This is amazing," Tony said. "Who do you picture doing the uh, handling? Is it me? It's me, isn't it? You can tell me, I won't read into it, I fantasize about everybody."

"Talk of kingship has gone to your head. Do not presume to think I would *kneel* for you," Loki sneered condescendingly.

"I am a big fan of the subtext in that glare," Tony informed him, aware that he was probably treading the limits of what Loki would let him get away with saying. Okay, he admitted it, the thrill of danger did make it a little more fun. "It's like, your mouth says 'no', but your blowjob handles say 'can't talk, my mouth is full'."

The video shook wildly as Loki dissolved into laughter. That, right there, Tony had known it - that Loki enjoyed the banter as much as he did, playing with words, testing how quickly he could think. And Loki looked *good* with laughter on his face, entertainment that didn't come at anyone's expense. Actually happy.

Also, the idea of Loki getting off on being jerked around by those helmet horns was, uh. Something that bore thinking about later, somewhere comfortable with just his hand for company.

Loki steadied his phone, and raised a deliberate eyebrow. "'Full' might be optimistic."

Tony made a show of gasping and clutching at his chest. "Rude!"

"Oh, my *sincerest* apologies, your majesty." Loki placed his free hand on his chest and performed a shallow bow to the phone, with approximately zero percent sincerity.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Tony drawled. "Well, I wouldn't want to keep you from your tour of TINYTOWN--"

"I'll keep an eye out for more wares in your size," Loki said cheerfully.

Tony resisted the urge to stick his tongue out before he hung up. He turned his attention back to the Copenhagen draft, still grinning.

--

There was an extremist group - well, trio - in Pennsylvania, self-righteous blow-hards with a grudge against anyone doing well in life, planning to express their general dissatisfaction by way of public terrorism and mass casualties. Except, these ones had got their hands on some Chitauri weaponry, which was why the FBI requested the Avengers.

Rogers, Romanoff and Barton went in with the field agents to make the arrests; apparently one guy tried to pull out some kind of energy gun but Rogers broke his wrist with a well-thrown shield before the gun was even fully out of its bag. The rest went... relatively peacefully.

Tony got the dubious pleasure of defusing some unholy Frankenstein's monster of a bomb, a complete bastardization of science and space squid. Okay, it wasn't so difficult once he could differentiate between the wires and the veins, but there were *fluids* and some kind of *organ* and it was *unbelievably gross*.

As he told his FBI minder - he was pretty sure he'd vomited up things less disgusting than that bomb.

Anyway - job done, no one hurt who didn't need to be, three cheers all round for truth and justice. On the whole, a pretty good day.

--

They weren't all good days. One in particular saw Tony sitting on the floor in the walk-in wardrobe, holding a watch and rubbing his thumb slowly around its face. He had a tray full of watches; about a third of them were his own selections and the rest were gifts that he'd actually kept instead of immediately giving away or leaving behind somewhere. This one... this one was distinct.

He knew Pepper didn't understand why he'd kept it.

It was the watch Obie had given him when he'd come back from Afghanistan. That stupid note, darkly humorous in hindsight: *thank God it wasn't your time*. He often wondered what Obie had been thinking when he'd written that. Gritted teeth, annoyed and cursing Tony's name? Secretly a little grateful? Had he ever doubted his decision?

He wondered how Obadiah had been, those three months Tony had been missing. Professional, keeping everything running, that went without saying. Worried? About his plan

or about Tony? He liked to think Obie wouldn't have wanted him to be tortured. Angry, frustrated? Had Obie missed him, at all?

If he had, it clearly wasn't enough to change his mind about getting Tony out of the way.

But it hadn't been Tony's '*time*'... as the note had said. Instead, Obadiah had been the one to die. (Which wasn't Pepper's fault, Obie had been going to kill them both, and Tony had told her to hit the button, neither of them had any choice and he *didn't blame her*-- but if only--)

Tony had taken to wearing that particular watch a lot while his blood was slowly building up toxic levels of palladium. It felt like... he had a tray full of watches that ticked forward in time, and this one watch that was a count *down* instead. Ticking away the seconds until it was finally '*time*', until Obadiah finally got his way.

Tony traced the dial with his thumb and wondered if Loki had anything similar, something that measured time until Laufey's infant sacrifice was finally complete.

--

ok smartypants. music = rhythm + an xtra quality to the beats. maybe different colors. maybe diff textures. music combines pattern of rhythms + pattern of rhythm qualities

Impressive. Now tell me, are you just saying that, or do you understand it?

do not tell me magic is science with textures

If you insist. ☺

no emojis grandpa, thats just weird

If you insist. :)

that might be worse

Excellent. :)

--

Usually when Bruce went on vacation, he'd get cold feet at the last minute and change his return flights three times before coming back by some other method entirely. This time the booking hadn't changed and Tony wasn't sure whether to take that as a good sign or not. Hopefully it meant Bruce would be back next Monday - maybe he should get around to placing that turf order, get the Tower all greened up in preparation. Potted plant in the cup-holder on Clint's beat-up lazyboy. The options were endless.

He took a tablet to the common floor and sketched a rough plan, making notes on the little details - like the cup-holder - that were going to elevate it to high art. Clint was playing on the game console - if 'playing' was really the word, given that he and Romanoff had corrupted it with a bunch of training programmes. Identify whether the distant figure was armed or not,

without getting shot or killing a civilian; that kind of thing. Other than Clint, no one else was around.

That was where Pepper found him after she finished work for the day. Tony swiped the plan away and greeted her with a kiss on her cheek.

"Are we making enough dinner for three?" she asked, nodding in Clint's direction.

"No thanks," Clint yelled back, without looking away from the screen. "I don't trust Stark with food yet."

"Your time will come," Tony said cheerfully. He was going to figure out something *special* for Barton, something separate from the whole inside-garden thing.

Since they were just cooking for the two of them, there was little point staying on the common floor. Tony swiped some fresh vegetables and they retreated back to the penthouse and its admittedly smaller kitchenette.

Pepper went to get changed while Tony started dicing the vegetables. Something was niggling at him and he wasn't sure it was a good idea to bring it up. Scratch that, he was pretty sure it *wasn't* a good idea to bring it up. There was nothing to be gained from asking... except maybe for it to stop itching at him.

She re-emerged, wearing yoga pants and a t-shirt, hair hanging loose. Looking at her made him feel more comfortable and Tony gave a quick smile before tipping the vegetables into a pot.

"Hey Pep," he said, before he could change his mind. "How come it bothers you less if I'm joking... flirting with men?"

He pretended to fiddle with the settings on the hob, giving her a couple of moments to think. He was pretty sure he knew the answer.

"I... suppose I don't... take it as seriously," Pepper said slowly. "I'm sorry. I know that's not... I'm just not used to having to think of men as a threat, if that makes sense?"

Tony huffed a little and told himself it wasn't a big deal. His flings with men *had* always been less meaningful, out of necessity if nothing else. If he'd tried to come out, in the nineties or even the early two thousands - it would have been a disaster. "You don't 'have' to think of anyone as a threat, I keep telling you that--"

"That's not what I mean--" Pepper sighed heavily. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

Tony put on a light-hearted smile. "Hey, you don't need to apologize for *not* getting jealous, I'm more than fine with that."

Later, after a few too many drinks, or maybe just the right amount of drinks, they curled around each other in bed and Tony murmured into the darkness, "I ever tell you why I started screwing around with guys?"

Pepper made a faint noise that was a mix of 'no' and 'I'm listening'.

"Figured I was never going to be what Dad wanted. All that... obedient soldier stuff." Captain America. "Disciplined and noble and pure of heart. So I decided, forget it, I'll be as far from pure..."

Pepper made another small listening noise, gently stroking his hair.

Tony sighed against her skin, mostly mumbling his words. "Anyway, turned out I liked it, so..." He gave an awkward one-shouldered shrug. "And the drugs. That was some good times. You have no idea how glad you should be to have missed that time in my life. The drinking kind of stuck, though."

He remembered riding pillion on some guy's motorbike, the cliché of knocking over mailboxes with a baseball bat, such ridiculously petty vandalism but he'd been drunk and underage and so angry at everything in his life. And of course, he was supposed to have had the revelation that Howard loved him deep down but didn't know how to show it, and that was supposed to make everything alright, but.

But. He just... he wished... something. Something that was never going to happen, because Howard was dead. Had been dead for over twenty years.

"Your dad was kind of an idiot," Pepper murmured, leaning in to kiss him on the forehead and then the lips.

"Had to get something from him besides looking fabulous in a suit," Tony mumbled. He let Pepper hold him close and eventually he slept.

--

Loki announced his return (assuming he'd actually been off-world and not faking it for unknown reasons) by the simple expedient of sending Tony a text asking what he was up to.

Tony was looking up other people's patents and trying to decide if he wanted them, so he replied fairly truthfully, *not much*.

Within a few moments Loki was just *there* in his workshop, which never failed to be slightly unsettling. Tony covered up his unease with a bright smile and a cheerful, "So, what's the topic for today's amateur therapy hour?"

Loki snorted. "You can't be a cursebreaker, you're a Craftsman."

Tony blinked, furrowing his brow a little. "Failing to see the relevance, but okay?"

"Potential for magic will only manifest in a single form. No one can be a Craftsman *and* control curses."

Tony frowned, genuinely confused but also wary. The story about how magic worked seemed to change every time Loki talked about it, which in and of itself wasn't much of a surprise.

Maybe Loki was deliberately trying to throw him off the scent, maybe just screwing with his head; both options were pretty plausible.

But, a cheap one-liner about mental issues seemed like a weird set-up for Loki to bring up that creepy Craftsman thing. It wasn't a smooth segue and that suggested some deeply messed up Asgardian cultural thing was about to come his way.

Tony rose from his chair, taking a slow step in Loki's direction. "I can already tell I'm going to regret this, but - what does that have to do with your blindingly obvious need for therapy?"

"Do you think no one's tried?" Loki snapped, suddenly glaring at him. "You think Asgard's finest sorcerers didn't scour every inch of my soul checking for some curse to mend? I assure you, they were not gentle. I am not *cursed*, Glowheart, I'm merely a Jotun *beast*. This is how I *am*."

Amateur therapy hour.

You can't be a cursebreaker.

Tony stumbled back against the desk and gripped the edge of it hard. Connections lit up in his brain, the maze unfolding. Oh... fucking *Asgard*. "How did you learn about insulin pumps and not *psychotherapy*," he muttered in disbelief.

That first night of drinking Loki had said... that people on Asgard knew before he did that he didn't belong there. Except he hadn't, he'd phrased it, '*that there was something wrong with my very nature*'.

"Oh God, you think they all think like *you*."

No wonder Loki hated frost giants so much.

Loki stared at him, wary and defensive, and it was such a cliché but Tony had absolutely seen wounded animals look just like that. "What are you talking about?"

Tony swallowed. He felt his grip on the desk tighten, without consciously meaning to do it. Loki was already defensive, this had the potential to go downhill so fast-- but it all made *sense* and he was caught up in the perfect equation, the shape of his realization. "You're angry. All the time. And in pain." Loki's eyes were fixed on him and so very wide. "And you want to make others hurt too. Right? And you think that means that's how all of them feel, every Jotun, because then you've got a reason, right? You can't *help* it."

"That *is* how they feel," Loki snarled, hands clenching. "They are savage creatures from a savage realm, seeking only desolation and destruction. They would have rended Asgard to ice and left nothing standing, I *saved* her people, *I* did! I did what was necessary!"

Oh-- oh shit, because--

"They needed to be destroyed," Loki insisted hoarsely. Furious. Desperate.

Because... he had to believe that. Otherwise he had to live with what he'd done.

If Jotuns were all monstrous, then Loki had done the right thing, and it was in his nature anyway. If they weren't...

This was bad for Earth as well, Tony was vaguely aware. If Loki needed to go on believing Jotuns were lesser than Asgardians - that Asgardians were some worthier species somehow - it would be hard to shift his thinking on humans. Not if it might threaten his coping with the Jotunheim thing.

Good heavens, it was such an elegantly vicious trap. Loki had to convince himself he was a monster by nature so that he could believe he wasn't a monster for what he'd *done*. It was lose-lose and there was no way out.

"Don't pretend you would not do the same," Loki accused, and whoa now, that was a bit far. "Your world facing war, the burden fallen on your shoulders - you would wipe out your enemy and leave no *shred* that might threaten a return."

"Speak for yourself," Tony objected indignantly. "I'll fight, don't get me wrong, but we've moved on a bit from the 'total eradication' phase of human warfare."

Loki gave him an incredulous, scornful look. "You would seize the most powerful weapon at hand and send it through the branches of Yggdrasil to the very *home of your attackers* and I know this because *I led them here!*"

Tony recoiled with a jolt.

Oh. Oh, he should have seen that coming. He was distracted by the magnitude of the world's shittiest Catch-22, but of course Loki would draw that parallel. He took a slightly unsteady breath. This, he needed to choose his words carefully. "That was different--"

Loki gave a harsh, scoffing laugh. "Oh yes, it's always *different* when Loki does it--"

"Hey, I didn't fire that nuke," Tony snapped, feeling his control of the conversation slip. "I made sure it didn't hit New York--"

"--oh, you just meant to send it away, you didn't aim it *directly* for the hive?--"

"-- that's not the same as trying to wipe out a species--"

"--and yet you succeeded!"

Tony felt like the breath had been punched out of him. He froze up for a moment. He didn't-- he didn't destroy an entire species, there were, there must have been survivors, that was ridiculous. What had the reports said? The soldiers had all collapsed... but the portal had closed. Tony hadn't looked deeply into the details, he'd been keen to avoid thinking about the experience. And-- the Chitauri had been *attacking* them, they were just defending--

"How do you justify that, Avenger?" Loki sneered, stepping close into Tony's personal space, looming over him. But... there was an odd intensity to it. An urgency. Not a taunt, a *demand*. "What do you tell yourself, mm? To make this the action of a *hero*."

Behind the layers of anger and defensiveness there was a genuine, desperate question, and Tony was even more convinced of his realization: that Loki was struggling for a way to deal with the knowledge that he had (nearly?) wiped out his own species.

Tony blinked a couple of times to clear the wetness threatening his vision. He couldn't afford to soft-pedal this, because a Loki making excuses was a Loki who would justify attacking anyone and anything.

He exhaled slowly, and raised his chin to look Loki in the eye. He wanted to stop and think and absorb this and he didn't have time. He had to say something here, now. "That... was a decision made in the heat of battle, with no time to look for alternatives. Maybe it was the right decision. Maybe it was the wrong one. So yeah... I have to ask myself whether I did everything I could with the information I had at the time." Inhale. Exhale. "I have to be ready to do better next time. But you, you *had* time. You decided not to look for alternatives. You didn't care if there was a better way--"

Loki's face twisted angrily. "That *was* the better way!"

"Better than *what*?!" Tony demanded incredulously.

"Better than war!" Loki stepped back, apparently so he had enough room to gesture wildly. "Better than sending Asgard's warriors to die in droves while they still grieved the last one! Better than letting Thor embroil all of Asgard in his crusade to avenge his wounded pride and--" the slightest hitch - "wipe out the monsters--"

Tony stared at him, something icy cold settling in his gut. "Loki," he said, already fearing the answer, "did you think Thor was going to kill you?"

Loki tensed up, shoulders rising. "Don't be absurd," he sneered, and that... He didn't seize the opportunity, didn't try to play it for sympathy.

Tony felt a little sick.

Loki gave that scoffing laugh again. "Look at you," he hissed. "*Caring* for your enemy. Do you think you would get the same in return?" He stepped closer again, trapping Tony up against the bench. "Frost giants tried to take this realm a thousand years ago and it took all of Asgard's might to fight them back. If you went to them and told them they should *hold back*, kill no more than necessary, do you know what they'd say?"

Tony braced himself against the bench, trying not to lean back despite his instincts screaming for it. "What?"

"Nothing," Loki said in a low, harsh growl. "They'd be too busy *feasting on the marrow from your bones*."

Tony suppressed a shudder. With some effort, he forced himself to muster up a smirk, tipping his head back to meet Loki's eyes. "Joke's on them, then. My bones are probably still full of palladium. Hope they like the taste of heavy metal poisoning."

Like a flash, Loki's hand was at his throat, thumb and forefingers gripping his jaw painfully tight. "Shall we find out?" Loki hissed, as uncontrolled as Tony had ever seen him.

Tony swallowed, rapidly assessing and discarding potential answers. He had to *not* make it worse, he'd promised Pepper to try not to get killed, but the dark, angry side of him just wanted to cut loose with all the cruelest things he could think of. There wasn't a weapon (a different weapon) in easy reach.

"Don't leave me in suspense," he gritted out instead. The sides of his jaw hurt badly and he loaded his next question with all the scorn he could muster. "Do you want to eat me, or do you just think you're *supposed* to?"

Loki's grip tightened and Tony couldn't help the small cry of pain that escaped him. His eyes watered, blurring the sight of Loki's wild expression. Suddenly he was flung sideways. There was a moment of weightlessness, then the hard floor slamming against his arm, ribs, hip. He was sliding, skidding-- His head cracked against the ground with a flare of dizzying pain. His shoulders hit a hard bar and his momentum came to a sudden, bruising halt.

Table leg, Tony identified hazily. His head ached. His jaw *throbbed*.

Get up. Shit. He couldn't stay there. He rolled a little, pushed a little; levered himself up onto his knees, breathing raggedly.

Loki wasn't charging at him. When Tony took a proper look at the room, he realized Loki had gone. He... probably wasn't going to die right now.

Okay. Okay. He wasn't about to die.

Suddenly, he felt like a marionette with all its strings cut. And made of jelly. He fumbled himself onto his ass and pulled his knees up. All his limbs were shaking. Something was lodged in his throat and he was pretty sure it was a sob so he covered his mouth with both his hands. He closed his eyes and kept shaking.

"Sir," Jarvis said, "shall I direct assistance to this floor?"

The noise broke out of Tony's throat. He shook his head desperately, then pressed his forehead to his knees. His body hurt and hunching over made the back of his shoulders burn where he'd smacked against the table leg.

He was alive but he didn't know how long that would last. Next time Loki provoked him, he might not hold back enough in his response. It wouldn't take much. Loki's issues were like a flashing neon sign reading 'Aim Here'. And to Asgardians, Tony was very, very breakable.

"Sir," Jarvis said again.

Tony dropped his hands from his mouth. "No," he managed. "No. Give me a minute."

"As you wish, sir."

He stayed on the floor for a while, getting his breathing and his heart rate back down. It was... he was fine, he was okay. Very sore, but okay. Breathe in. Breathe out.

It hurt.

After a while, he felt somewhat calmer. Calm enough to speak without his voice giving him away.

"Jarvis. Archival footage, Battle of New York." He should check. He should know. "Street level, anything with a view of Chitauri soldiers. Run from Iron Man entering the portal, and mark when the portal closes."

Assorted shots of Manhattan appeared, projected above the workstation in a grid. He saw the alien creatures fighting, destroying anything in their path. And then they collapsed, all at the same time, in multiple locations and filmed from multiple angles.

A second. Another. Maybe he'd missed it, maybe the portal had closed and he'd been distracted by watching the Chitauri, had missed Jarvis signalling--

"Mark," Jarvis said crisply. "Portal closure has occurred."

Tony closed his eyes. "Switch it off," he said.

The workshop was very quiet. He could hear the familiar hum of his computers. The steady ticking of his watch.

He should feel something. More than a vague feeling of scientific curiosity. He should really... feel more like he'd wiped out a race, whatever that was meant to feel like. It didn't seem real. They didn't *look* like intelligent beings. They looked like science fiction movie monsters. 'Creature from the Void', real throwback to the classics.

Combat 101: dehumanize the enemy.

(What did frost giants look like?)

He hadn't lied to Loki. Intent mattered. There was no way he could have known what that nuke would do. His focus had been on winning the immediate battle - not preventing a hypothetical one like Loki.

Obie had taught him that, never to pull punches in a fight. Hit back hard, hit back fast, make sure the other guy knows not to mess with you. New York had been under attack, so Tony had hit back. If he'd known...

He bit his lip. If he'd known, what would he have done?

Taking out the species meant the fighters all dropped. If he just sent the nuke through the portal to get it away from New York, didn't aim it at the fleet, that left soldiers on the ground when the portal closed. More destruction, more people killed--

'People'. Yeah, that was the thing, right there. The Chitauri didn't seem like people and if nuking them was what it took to save a hundred, ten, even *one* human life, he'd probably do it again.

He should definitely feel something about that.

(Was this why Loki picked *him* to talk to?)

Tony scrubbed his face with both hands. It didn't matter. Results mattered. There was no point in surviving... *all* the shit that should have killed him, unless he did something with it. Better, he had to do better, he had to protect, he had to convince Loki to stop or at least to trash some other realm-- planet--

(Redirect him, like a missile, silent explosion blooming...)

Tony pressed his eyes closed, mind replaying the video images over and over, all those Chitauri simultaneously falling down.

'The best weapon,' he'd once told a crowd of Air Force personnel, before several of them were blown up by his designs, 'is the one you only need to fire once.'

--

Eventually, he got up off the floor. His whole left side hurt and his back burned where a doubtlessly spectacular bruise was forming. The hollow feeling was starting to wear off so he went very carefully and precisely upstairs to get some whisky. Since the ice machine was right there Tony wrapped a handful of cubes in a cloth and pressed it gingerly to the side of his head.

"That could have gone better," he admitted out loud.

Two and a half glasses of scotch later, he got Jarvis to find out if Natasha was available for a visit. He didn't even know why, really. He stayed at the bar with his soggy, slowly melting ice pack held against his head, and kept nursing the third glass while staring blankly at the air.

When he heard the elevator doors, he said, "I can't do this."

"You're breaking up with me?" Natasha quipped, but when she caught sight of him her expression turned abruptly serious.

"I can't talk to Loki," he clarified. No, that still wasn't-- "I *shouldn't* talk to Loki. I'm not-- I don't have the qualities required. Mostly the self-control. It's not a strength, I acknowledge that about myself." He could feel the bruises on either side of his jaw with every word, and wondered if they were precise enough to get Loki's prints off of. "There's got to be someone SHIELD has on book with the willpower to stand in a room with that guy and not insult him."

Natasha looked at him with an expression he struggled to read for a few moments. Not exactly sympathetic but... solemn? Regretful. Walking slowly up to the bar, she asked, "And do you think he would respond to any of those agents?"

Not a chance in hell. Tony closed his eyes. No, Loki had learned all the same lessons about not being able to trust people who weren't honest enough to stand up to you. He'd scorn anyone who was too polite to an invader, an enemy warrior. (A monster.)

"The best infiltration," Natasha continued softly, "is the one where the target comes to you."

Tony opened his eyes again but didn't bother to look at her face. "There's a good chance he kills me." It felt strange to acknowledge it out loud. "He's going to provoke me, I'm going to lash out at one of his weak spots, and sooner or later I won't hold back enough. It's nothing short of a miracle that he didn't kill me the first time."

There was silence for a couple of beats, then Natasha said, "It was always a risky play. He's volatile and there's no guarantee it will gain us anything. You can still call it off."

Tony wasn't sure he could, actually; not with everything that was already in play. And it still left Loki roaming loose, violent and destructive. *They are savage creatures from a savage realm.* He lifted his eyes to Natasha's. "Would you?"

"It's a moot point," Natasha replied, conveniently not answering the question. "Loki wouldn't let his guard down for me."

Let his guard down. "Is that what he did," Tony murmured, feeling the bruises in his skin and bones.

"He came to you for conversation. More than once." Natasha shrugged a little. "It's the closest we've seen."

She came around to his side of the counter and reached for the wet cloth he was holding. Tony let her take it; waited while she wrung it out and filled it with fresh ice, knotted it tidily closed. She knew better than to try to hand it back, but left it on the counter for him.

Tony sighed and pressed it back against the side of his head, wincing a little at the cold. Water was seeping down his neck. "You know my dad worked on the Manhattan Project?"

"Mm."

"Came up a few times when I was at school. One of the teachers had a real thing about it. Made debates... interesting." She probably knew that too, creepy spy agency and Howard's involvement. Tony lifted his near-empty glass and drained the rest of the scotch. "What do you think, about dropping the bomb on Japan? What's your 'professional opinion'?"

Natasha moved back around the bar, putting the counter back between them. Tony wasn't sure if that was deliberate and patronizing, an attempt to put him at ease, or just... something else. He didn't know. He was strongly considering another glass of whisky.

"My professional opinion makes me a poor judge of that kind of thing," Natasha said, brushing her hair back behind her ear as she raised her eyes to his. "I was trained to use the most efficient means to carry out my mission. I didn't get a lot of training on deciding

whether the mission was important enough for those methods to be reasonable." She gave a rueful smile. "Generally someone else set the parameters."

Tony started to roll his eyes, then stopped because it hurt. "No kidding," he said, and mimed stabbing a needle into his neck with his free hand.

Natasha, bless her dysfunctional little assassin heart, just furrowed her brow a little and said, "Fury didn't give any indication that--"

"Yeah, Fury's also not the best at deciding whether a mission is 'important enough' for violence to be reasonable. He's more of a 'breach civil rights first, ask questions later' kind of guy. Kiiind of annoying."

Natasha's eyes narrowed slightly as she took that in, no doubt filing it away for later contemplation and analysis. "It was a power play. Fury wanted--"

"I know what Fury wanted. I'd already turned him down, so he was trying to position himself as top dog and convince me I had to *earn* it. He thought if he was open and honest about his intentions I'd see him as weak and keep refusing the Initiative. Plus he has a pathological need for control." Tony huffed a small laugh, trying not to jostle anything that hurt. "It's nothing I haven't seen a thousand times before - SHIELD *does* know how many years I spent maneuvering in the defence industry, right?"

Another drink was a bad idea, he already felt liquid and golden. It was too easy for things to slip out like this, things he didn't mean to say. There was a lot that he didn't want to say.

Natasha frowned thoughtfully. "You think Fury made the wrong call."

"Consider this," Tony said, gesturing with his free hand. "Fury tells me he has a temporary antidote, invites me to a medical facility where it can be administered safely in a controlled setting with equipment on standby in case I have an allergic reaction or there's some other *unforeseen problem*--"

"SHIELD already tested it against your blood."

"That's super creepy, just so you know."

She inclined her head slightly in acknowledgement. "That wouldn't have made you any more open to joining."

"Of course not. Let's be real, it was the shiny blue cube that drew me in - he should have just waved that in my face to start with." It all came back to the Tesseract. Huh. "But it would have left a little more goodwill in place. Stronger foundation for collaboration. At the very least he shouldn't have had *you* do it."

"He wasn't expecting me to wind up on the team," Natasha said absently, drumming her fingertips on the counter. "I see your point. It leaves more options open."

"Exactly. And I guess morals and stuff." Tony blinked at her, trying to figure out if he'd heard right. His arm was getting tired and he lowered the ice pack. "Did you just say you weren't

going to be on the team?"

"Group projects make me feel threatened," Natasha answered, with a wry smile that explained absolutely nothing. "To answer your question, then - I think there's a high probability they could have achieved a similar effect without targeting civilian populations." What... oh, Japan. "They should have tried that first."

It sounded like she was testing the words out in her mouth. The look she gave him afterwards, like she was waiting to find out if she'd given the right answer, only solidified that impression.

Sometimes, being dysfunctional in ways you could control was the next best thing to being fully functional. Tony knew that better than most people.

"Don't look at me," he said flippantly. "I'm Howard Stark's kid, remember? My judgment's suspect."

"Everyone's judgment is suspect," Natasha said, stealing his glass and pouring herself a finger or so of scotch. "Isn't that what makes us human?"

"Surprisingly philosophical, Agent Romanoff," Tony commented.

Natasha grinned and sipped the drink. "I have hidden depths," she deadpanned. After another sip, she put the glass down and looked at him, eyes flickering from his wet hair to the bruises on his jaw to his own eyes. "I mean it, Tony. You can call it off."

Natasha being worried about him was really not very reassuring. Tony stole his glass back and had a mouthful of whisky.

She eyed him thoughtfully, then blanked her expression. "Do you want my advice?"

Tony tried for casual, smiling over the whisky glass. "Sure. Why not?"

Natasha met his eyes seriously. "Trust your gut."

"My gut's conflicted." He didn't know if he should admit that to her so he added, in the same deadpan tone, "But that might be the cheese I had earlier."

She gave a little smirk that didn't reach her eyes. "Then you're screwed."

Yeah. He'd figured that out.

#

Originally this wasn't planned to have so much Natasha in it but I've been reading a lot of anti-Natasha commentary lately and, well, these things happen. Look, I just want to live in a world where she and Tony are dysfunctional bros who don't quite get how humanity works but in completely different ways, and then they gang up together to play stupid jokes on people, and everyone rides off into the sunset and the MCU writers are banned from ruining anything. Okay? Okay. Glad we had this talk.

Two Steps Back

Chapter Summary

...It gets worse.

Chapter Notes

points at the 'Graphic Depictions Of Violence' tag

these bruises r amazing colors u shld see them

--

turf scheduled 4 delivery, gonna sneak it in

--

come to think of it didn't give u a charger with phone. im kind of assuming u got 1 somewhere

--

Tony never would have believed he'd be the one trying to reach out and make contact with *Loki*, of all people. Especially not with the aurora of bruises blooming along his left side, where *Loki* had thrown him across the workshop. But that was exactly the problem - *Loki* had left feeling angry and threatened and unbalanced, and that typically led to murders and destruction. What had Tony said to the team about all this, originally? If giving him a hug would stop him, then just *do it*.

Instead, *Loki* was silent and Tony was on edge.

He'd made *Loki* feel threatened. Bringing up that crap about frost giants and genocide. If something happened because of it--

Thinking about *Loki* was a lot easier than wondering about the Chitauri. Howard might have worked on the Manhattan Project but he hadn't dropped the bomb. No, that was what Tony was for, to continue the Stark legacy--

thinking a birdfeeder 4 hawkeye, he sent.

It was obvious Loki had some self-esteem issues, daddy issues, basically the full subscription - but there was knowing that, and then there was being faced with the extreme degrees Loki took them to. If Tony were anyone else he might wonder if he'd bitten off more than he could chew.

...He'd totally bitten off more than he could chew.

His side still ached when he moved wrong, and Pepper had freaked out when she'd seen the bruises. He'd *known* she was taking it all too well. Pepper was excellent in a crisis right up until the point when she wasn't. Some people struggled early and lost efficiency under stress; Pepper tended to rise to the challenge then hit the wall *hard*. Then there was unpleasantly high-pitched shouting and losing all ability to be reasonable.

Tony probably hadn't been particularly reasonable either. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something about the thing Pepper's voice did when she was freaking out, it... got under his skin in a way he couldn't really verbalize. So he got sarcastic and started deliberately antagonizing her and it had a way of spiraling into a full-blown argument really, really quickly.

The healthy communication thing... was a work in progress.

In the meantime Tony was eyeing up a small company in Spain doing some interesting work in biomimetic polymers. He needed to run some simulations; ideas were stirring in the back of his mind, potential uses. It could be worth a collaboration. Or something more aggressive.

A few days had passed and none of his texts had been answered, but on the other hand there hadn't been any dramatic public acts of violence. He still didn't like it. He understood why Pepper didn't want him to contact Loki but he wished she would understand why he *had* to. The silence gnawed at him; calm before the storm.

Maybe he was being too nice? Loki responded better when Tony stood up to him a bit, seemed to take it as more honest - unless Tony stood up to him *too* much and then it was a threat. It didn't help that the line seemed to shift along with Loki's changeable mood.

Fuck it. Tony ran his thumb over the screen of his phone. *quit sulking. i didn't throw YOU into a table.*

He waited, waited. It was kind of disturbing how much he'd give for a mocking answer about his comparative lack of strength. His phone stayed still and silent.

Tony groaned and propped his forehead on one hand. This was not good. This was really not good.

--

In the afternoon, Tony was in a meeting with PR to talk early tactics before the Copenhagen project was finalized. Careful application of color-correcting cream and concealer brought the dirty green bruising on his jaw down to barely noticeable shadow. If anyone had noticed they were polite enough not to comment.

At the same time as the conversation, Tony was rearranging his calendar on a tablet, which was why he noticed the text from Loki the moment it appeared.

Do you miss him? it said.

Tony didn't miss a beat of his conversation; anyone he dealt with on a regular basis was used to him tapping away on the nearest electronic device. Unfortunately it was a spare SI tablet so although it was logged into Jarvis for receiving phone calls and texts, he had to use the standard keyboard layout. He could work much faster with the Starling interface on his private workstations.

He typed back, *my dad? yeah sometimes.*

"I suppose it's out of the question to say we're doing it for the weed," he said out loud.

No. The one who sold you to your death.

Asshole. Tony unfroze after a split second and turned off the tablet. It would be more satisfying to break it but the person he wanted to make the point to wasn't in the room. "No, I don't mean Amsterdam," he answered to the spoken conversation. "Copenhagen's got that commune, the hippie district-- Seriously, Theo, I know the difference between the Netherlands and Denmark."

A couple of minutes later, he turned the tablet back on and replied, *stay out of my computer.*

Three hours later, he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and sent, *yes.*

Then he turned everything off and poured himself a double of scotch.

--

Saturday night was a boring fundraiser with some unbelievably mediocre champagne. Tony's collar itched, and people he couldn't stand kept coming up to tell him what a *treasure* he was and try to shake his hand. He would much rather have been at home eating pizza and ice cream. At the very least, it would be nice to be recognized for what he'd *done* and not what he could buy. (It would be even nicer if people would stop *touching him* uninvited, but he'd given up that battle long ago; that was why Pepper carried sanitizer in her purse to clean the crawling feeling off his skin.)

Events like this were tricky, because Tony's instinct was to be as visible as possible, work the room all flash and swagger; Pepper had a tendency to drift to the edges if she could, where she wouldn't attract as much attention. In Tony's (completely non-biased) opinion, she had nothing to feel self-conscious over, but he was aware that he didn't really have any high ground on mental quirks. She was *carrying sanitizer for him.*

They had developed a kind of middle ground. Tony tried not to go out of his way to generate extra limelight (for all the good that did), and Pepper carried a tablet or smartphone so she could do little pieces of work, wearing her professionalism like armor. It made for good

press, too: the dedicated Ms Potts, cool and collected where Iron Man was bold and impulsive. Balance.

Not to mention, the neckline of her dress was one of the night's few redeeming features. And her hair was doing that thing he loved, with the curls, all soft and alluring.

The evening improved when Happy drove them home; making out with Pepper in the backseat, getting inside and upstairs and tumbling into bed. Tony had *plans* for her that involved his hands and mouth and her smooth skin. He wanted her gasping, wanted her flushed and sweating with loose hair sticking to the side of her face, wanted her squirming under him until all those cloying society parasites were the furthest thing from his mind. He'd had too much to drink to be likely to get off... but he could have a lot of fun trying.

The real problem with the weekend started some time later when his cellphone began to ring. It was still dark; Tony felt like he'd only just got to sleep. He was still blinking awake when the music stopped, not even ringing long enough for him to think of an intelligible curse word. He glared into the dim bedroom, annoyed with himself for forgetting to switch the phone back to Jarvis' control. He was tired and hung-over and still kind of drunk. This was a Sunday morning, he should be able to sleep in. It was spectacularly unfair.

Pepper made a small disgruntled noise in her sleep and rolled over. Tony sighed and buried his face in his pillow. He was thirsty, but he didn't want to move. His head ached; this was why he should never drink cheap champagne...

That ringtone. Insistent guitar riffs. *Problem Child*.

Tony froze, suddenly wide awake as a chill washed over him.

Slowly, he clambered out of bed, doing his best not to wake Pepper. It took a moment to find his balance, but he managed not to stumble against his dresser. Definitely still kind of drunk. He pulled on a pair of boxers and wrapped a robe around himself, then he grabbed his cell and staggered out into the main room, where Jarvis put the lights on low.

Loki hadn't turned up there. It couldn't be that simple.

Thirsty. He needed water, and then to deal with this, and then... more water. That was a good plan. He didn't even know something was wrong, not really. All he knew for sure was that Loki had started to call and then seconds later changed his mind.

Maybe everything was fine. Maybe Loki had just hit the wrong button. Or drunk-dialed him. Maybe it was going to be a really weak attempt at a booty call. Maybe Loki had just discovered the 'is your refrigerator running?' joke.

Maybe it was morning somewhere and Loki had woken up out of nightmare wanting to burn the world down.

Refrigerator running. Fridge. Water. Tony rummaged through the bottles, found the last of the lime-mint flavor hiding near the back. He rolled the cool glass bottle against his forehead, reminding himself to breathe. Thor was still with the girlfriend and Bruce wasn't due back

until Monday but everyone else was in town, no one on a mission or a cross-country tour. It wasn't great but it could be worse.

He twisted the cap off the water and downed half the bottle before coming up for air. Oh, god, that was better. Okay. He scrolled through his contacts to 'E.T.', and hit the call button. He needed to come up with some more nicknames; couldn't have Loki getting complacent--

It rang once, then went to voicemail. Not a customized message, just 'the number you have dialed is unavailable', something generic and meaningless and a high, sharp tone.

"Um," Tony said. His mind went horribly blank. Well, that was... inconvenient. He shook his head and mentally kicked himself. "Hi. I don't know if you rolled on your phone in your sleep, or maybe you're in another time zone, but I'm awake now, so-- ah, and also hung-over, so we could do cocktails again if you want company, or mead, you know, I could use some hair of the dog but I'm not too fussy which breed of dog if you catch my... drift..."

He hated leaving phone messages, this was what a P.A. was for, this was ridiculous. "Whatever, just, look, just call me back. We can do the, check your refrigerator's running-- do you even have a refrigerator?" What was he even *saying*? "Okay, look, don't murder anyone. Call me. Bye."

He sounded like an idiot. With a grimace, he hung up. His skin felt tight and tense. He finished off the water and left the bottle on top of the fridge. Pacing over to the wide window, he stared out at the expanse of bright city lights.

Please, please let nobody die today.

He sent a text message for good measure: *hey whats up? come hang out.*

What else? There was nothing he could do until they got word of an attack. Tony ran a hand over his face. "Jarvis, find me Tall Dark and Crazy, would you? He shows his face anywhere on the globe - the slightest whiff of power-tripping drama queen - I want to know about it."

"As you wish, sir."

Loki had almost called him instead. Almost. *Almost isn't good enough, Tony.* How many times had Dad told him--? This time, 'almost' might be the difference between somebody's life and death.

Pepper's voice cut through his brooding, calling for Jarvis to turn the lights up. Tony blinked against the new brightness; he could see her fastening her own robe as she walked into the room. Her hair was falling loose around her face. He wanted to reach out, bury his hands in it, bury his face in her neck and pretend the rest of the world outside this room didn't exist.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to wake you, I just--"

"Was it Loki?" Pepper said evenly.

Tony sighed and leaned the side of his head against the window pane. "Yeah."

Pepper gave a tired, flat smile. "Have you done everything you can?"

He hated that smile, he hated that look on her face, she shouldn't have to - she'd never signed on for murderous fantasy aliens. "We need to order more Voss. You know, we've only got that weird lemongrass flavor left--"

"I like that weird lemongrass flavor." She stole his cellphone and slipped it into the pocket of his robe. She clasped both his hands in hers, warm and firm and grounding. "Tony. You need to take a step back from this. It's not good for you, this obsessing--"

"I'm not *obsessed* with *Loki*," Tony said, mortified, and only the warning pressure of Pepper's fingers kept him from snatching his hands back.

Her voice was firm but gentle. "This is what you do, Tony. You get an idea or a project and you *fixate*. You invest too much of yourself."

"He started to call--"

"I know that--"

"--do you even get how big that is, I am *this close* to--"

"Yes, and in *time*--"

"In time's not good enough, I need to-- people are dying, Pepper--"

"*Tony*." Pepper squeezed his hands tight. "You are not responsible for every single person on this planet. You can't *be* responsible. People will get killed by cars or muggers or disease or a... a chimney falling on them, and yes, you're right, some people will get killed by Loki, but that's *his* responsibility, not yours."

Tony let out a breath. "I know that," he said quietly, and ignored the voice in the back of his head screaming *then why am I still alive? What am I here for?*

"Do you?" Pepper shook her head, reaching up to lay a hand on his cheek. "I love that you want to save everybody, Tony, but it can't be done." She sounded exhausted. "You'll kill yourself trying."

They'd had this conversation a hundred times, in one form or another. Usually more of a general 'Iron Man' thing. Getting a variation specifically about Loki was... okay, not really a surprise, but he hadn't expected it to be so soon. He'd honestly thought he was doing pretty well. At least *acting* like he was doing pretty well. Probably all the bruises had sped up the timetable.

Pepper looked away and closed her eyes and added quietly, "...If he doesn't do it for you."

Yeah. That had definitely sped up the timetable.

"I can't just stop," Tony said, pleading with her to understand. "Not when I'm so--"

"I'm not-- I'm not asking you to," she insisted, looking like she wanted very much to do so. "Just... dial it down a notch."

Dial it down. He wasn't sure how and she must have seen it in his face, because she added, "Start by coming back to bed."

Right. He could... he could do that. Tony gave a last, lingering look around the room, as if the answers he wanted were hiding somewhere in plain sight.

--

It seemed like he stared at the ceiling for an eternity, but eventually he must have managed to fall back to sleep. One moment he was restless and keyed up, and the next thing he knew Jarvis was waking him to report two separate 911 calls placing Loki at a church in Kentucky.

Tony rolled out of bed and started pulling on an undersuit. His head still felt distinctly plugged with cotton wool, but by his standards that was barely even a hangover. He'd fought through much worse in the past. "Wake everyone. Alarms, sirens, cold water, however we're doing it these days. Get a message to Foster's."

Loki - Asgardians - had a weird mental framework around what made people permissible targets. How likely was it that someone was going to be armed? It was a *church*, come on... oh, who was he kidding, there were absolutely people who'd take guns to churches. Hell, either way, chances were still good that someone would do something Loki considered provocation--

Church in Kentucky. Tony flinched, chill like nausea rippling through his gut. "Is this those idiots who were all, 'denounce the false gods' when Thor was helping out with the drought?"

"The very same, sir."

And there was the provocation.

This was going to be a slaughter.

"I suppose it was too much to hope Loki didn't notice that," Tony muttered, rubbing at his forehead. His skin was clammy. He ducked into the bathroom to take a leak and then splash some cold water on his face.

Kentucky. That wasn't too far. It could be worse. Pity Bruce wasn't back yet but... they'd manage. Five of them could take one homicidal nutcase, right? "Let the team know I'm heading out; they can meet me there."

He blew Pepper a kiss as he headed back through the bedroom; she mouthed 'be safe' at him in return. Tony suppressed a grimace, because that still felt like tempting fate to him. Then it was time to suit up and flagrantly flout airspace regulations - because if the name 'Tony Stark' didn't carry enough weight for him to get away with it, then 'Iron Man' sure as hell did.

Loki had certain predictable weaknesses. One of the biggest was self-righteous monologues. Iron Man was fast, but it still took time to fly interstate, time that Tony prayed was filled up

by Loki's incessant need to *talk*. Dammit, he needed to be faster. He needed teleportation already, but he was not a *photon*. At the moment, he couldn't even teleport a poker chip, let alone manage the kind of immense complexity involved in a living being.

Georgetown wasn't exactly huge - he had Jarvis pull up a few stats for him on the way. Apparently Stark Industries had considered putting a manufacturing plant there once. The local cops only had one Special Response Team to cover the city. In all likelihood, for something like this they'd be counting on back-up from Lexington. Granted, probably the best that any of them could hope to do would be to distract Loki before he killed too many civilians.

'Too many'. That was the wrong way to be thinking. One was too many.

Tony slowed only a little when he could see the city, as Jarvis guided him towards the church in question. He lowered his altitude, eyes fixed on the rapidly growing buildings. Magnified images flashed up in the HUD. Roads rushing past underneath until he could finally see a cordon and then an upturned vehicle... and then Loki, a pixelated figure in a flashing rectangle while two other visual alerts blinked in Tony's left periphery.

Loki was in full ceremonial armor, looming over a cop who was trying to crawl away with their leg at a painful-looking angle. Metal glinted: the stupid horns, the long knife in his raised hand.

No, you fucking don't. Tony felt an abrupt surge of anger. He abandoned any ideas he might have had of going in friendly: rocketed in at high speed, barreling into Loki and tumbling end over end a few times before sliding down the road with the nauseating scrape of metal on asphalt. He lost his grip on Loki somewhere along the way, bounced up and over the curb, and smashed through someone's fence before he finally slammed to a stop against the corner of a house.

That... didn't help his hangover. He groaned in misery, letting himself lie there for a moment. Felt a lot like the time he'd strapped in to NASA's fucking human gyroscope, actually.

When he'd caught his breath, he levered himself out of the wall. Whoops. He popped his faceplate open, and breathed deeply until he was sure he wasn't going to throw up. There should be a treaty banning this kind of thing on *weekend mornings*.

There were pieces of brick all over the ground and he muttered, "Well, that'll be coming out of my allowance."

Focus. Focus. Tony climbed slowly to his feet and closed his helmet again. Stop Loki, try not to die. No problem. He started to head for the street; heard an angry voice from behind.

"What the hell did you do to my house?"

"You have got to be kidding me," Tony muttered. He half-turned, just enough to level a glare at the idiot in the open doorway. "Get back inside!"

"You'd better be planning to pay for that, I'm gonna--"

Tony raised his right palm and blew another chunk out of the wall. It was totally worth the hell he was bound to catch for it later. PR, blah blah, whatever. "Send me the bill. Now get back inside, lock the door, and stay away from the windows, you *complete moron!*"

Unbelievable. Rolling his eyes, he crossed back through the busted-up fence and onto the sidewalk. It had been long enough now that Loki was probably...

Crumpled in a heap a good twenty yards up the road, a disjointed tangle of black, gold and green. Unnaturally motionless in a way that made Tony's stomach turn.

He wasn't *worried*; he knew exactly how impervious Thor and Loki could be. It was just...

He had very clear memories of Loki's first attack on Earth, of the destruction the Chitauri had left behind and dead bodies in the streets. He'd seen death before. Heck, he'd *caused* death before. But there was a difference between going looking for trouble, and having it come to your home turf. Standing on what should have been familiar ground and seeing only a disaster zone, no matter how hard or how loud you prayed to wake up--

Going through the portal had been bad enough (bleak and desolate and *empty*, a hollowness that stretched to infinity). He'd been pretty sure the nuke would kill him, but surviving was almost worse. Living in a Manhattan so changed - it felt like they hadn't won at all. They hadn't protected it. And they couldn't forget. Some days, if he caught the skyline out of the corner of his eye, at just the wrong angle, he felt like they were under attack all over again.

So, yeah. Bodies in streets. He wasn't a big fan.

Tony walked towards Loki carefully, dialing down the external speakers just a notch. "Listen, I'm hung-over and I scratched up my paint job. You are not making this a good start to my day."

Loki didn't answer. Either unconscious or faking it well. His helmet must have been torn off during the long slide; there was blood coming from under that mop of hair. Although that didn't mean much, where Loki was concerned. It might not even be real blood.

Tony moved even more warily as he got closer. He tried charging up the repulsors but that sound didn't get him any reaction either. "Hey. Ziggy Stardust. You still with us?"

His heart was thumping. This was the moment in every terrible horror movie where Pepper would be rolling her eyes at the screen and protesting that the serial killer was *clearly* not dead and if the pretty young babysitter/vampire slayer/sorority girl was careless enough to get too close then she deserved whatever she got. (Pepper sometimes had a very limited tolerance for reckless stupidity, which could get awkward given that Tony was definitely a 'where angels fear to tread' kind of guy.)

Tony eyed the growing pool of blood under Loki's head. What if-- It wouldn't-- Thor, though; Thor was going to be pissed if he showed up and they'd accidentally killed his brother. Even if it would make a lot of lives easier. *Allegedly* Odin wouldn't quibble about death in battle, it was the justice system thing and Asgard being seen to be 'in charge'. But after everything it seemed pretty unlikely that a *road* would be enough to take Loki down.

He blew out a steadying breath, bracing himself. Repulsors ready, muscles tense, ready to react. He stepped forward and bent down to roll Loki over--

(Please be dead.)

(Please don't be dead.)

--and Loki exploded into motion. Leather and metal everywhere, flashing menace. Tony was flipped through the air and his shots went wide. (Shit, careful, careful, people peering out windows--) The suit absorbed most of the impact of his landing, but his head kept spinning for a few seconds after, and what the hell was that god-awful *screech*?

He was pretty sure his visual display was showing a zombie or some other kind of horror movie monster, and then he collected himself and *oh holy shit* that was what Loki looked like with all the skin ripped off the side of his face. Tony tried not to gag.

"Did you just try to stab me?" he said instead, and he swore the tiny shake in his voice was only adrenaline.

Loki had a long knife in each hand, and yeah, those scraping up his sides would have made exactly that tortured shriek. And now Loki genuinely seemed to be trying to work one of the blades into the armor's shoulder joint, paying no regard to the blood running down his face and from his hands.

"What-- I'm not a can of sardines, you whack job." Tony fired a short, sharp repulsor burst into Loki's chest, throwing the guy off of him so he could get back on his feet. It felt like the reactor casing was too big for his chest, heart slamming behind it.

The non-verbal, stab-anything-that-moves routine did not bode well. On the other hand, there was no way in hell he was going to lift his faceplate while those knives were in play. His stomach churned uneasily. "Earth to Planet Loki. Do you read?"

Loki was picking himself up, one knife left; glaring balefully from a face dripping with red and good god, that was intimidating as hell. But up the road there was the church-- and if there was anyone who still needed to get out, then Iron Man had to hold Loki's attention.

No problem. Attention was his specialty.

His shoulder joint was all jammed up with Loki's other knife in it - the tip was pricking against his skin. Tony tugged at the hilt, but the knife was wedged tight, right in the metal seam between shoulder and chestplate.

Attention. He smiled shakily inside his helmet. "So, I'm going to go ahead and assume you spent the bulk of the morning remembering every mean thing anybody's ever said to you, that about right? Telling yourself how persecuted you are, how unfair--"

Loki responded by punting him ten yards down the road before he could finish, which was pretty much a 'yes'. Tony had his repulsors lifting him back up almost before he'd hit the

ground; fired two quick shots at Loki, who twisted smoothly between them, like a dance. Agile son of a bitch.

That was the problem with Loki. If you didn't catch him by surprise, he could catch arrows, dodge bullets and repulsor fire. If you got in close instead he packed a hell of a punch. A couple of times when they'd seen Thor and Loki fight - seriously *fight*, really try to kill each other - Tony had needed to play it back later, slow-motion, to even follow each move. Asgardian reflexes were on a whole other level.

It looked like Loki was measuring the distance between them, eyes narrowed, preparing to leap. A panther, still covered in blood, all feral beauty and lethality. They should set up some kind of wildlife tour. Asgardian safari. Tony's targeting systems were fantastic but there were so many ways Loki could dodge or deflect, and too many houses around them - a Sunday morning, people at home watching television...

Timing was everything. Tony held off, mentally sketching out trajectories, velocity, explosive force. "You're not going to get invited to the cool kids' lunch table with that attitude."

Timing, timing - *now* - he fired a missile from the left fore-arm at the same time as he propelled himself backwards. Loki flung something at the missile to detonate it before impact, but had come too close to avoid the blast. Tony got more than a little satisfaction out of watching the shockwave knock Loki back.

If maybe he would have preferred one of their surreal private talks (*I adore the odd turns of your mind*)... well, nobody needed to know. He shoved the useless thought aside, instead concentrating on getting in between Loki and the church. Repulsors charged, shoulder-mounted anti-personnel guns locked on, wrist lasers, small missiles; all weapons armed and ready, guarding the approach.

"Okay, Roadkill. *Enough*," Tony said tightly. It wasn't fair, not after the food and the joking and Loki's hand clasped against his neck. Back to crazy and angry and wild. "Snap the hell out of it."

Loki's hands, already starting to heal, skated through the air in an eerie, twisting gesture. As soon as Tony saw it he opened fire, guns and repulsors hitting Loki dead-on and throwing him backwards. As much as he wanted to pound an armored fist into Loki's face, using the guns was still really, really satisfying.

He still must have been too slow. A patchy line of small fires sprouted along the road: bursts of flame that just as quickly burned themselves down to smoke. They trailed back past Tony, along the path Loki must have been dragged-- did Loki just burn up his own shredded skin and hair? One: ew, and two: fuck magic, what the hell.

Loki was starting to pick himself up. Ruthlessly, Tony hit him with another repulsor blast. He was under no illusions that their little bonding sessions would keep Loki from killing him. "You can keep getting up, and I can keep shooting you up and down this road, your call."

Loki made a sound like a cornered animal, all tooth and claw. For a moment, he actually looked like he might attack anyway, but instead he seemed to focus on Tony, a glimmer of

recognition in his sneer. "Are you here to defend the name of your God?" He flung an arm out towards the church, some distance behind Tony. "He has abandoned his sheep, while they babble in impotent fear."

Well, Loki finally using his big boy words was a good sign, but on the other hand, *fuck* that ego trip. Tony swallowed, doing his best to feel cocky and unafraid. His heart was still beating too fast, too hard. The wisps of smoke were joining up, spreading into a low-lying cloud that started to roll outwards.

"I hate to break it to you, pal, but in this country, capitalism is god. It's written on our money and everything."

"Oh, yes," scoffed Loki, "the coin with which the highest court in the land is bought and sold. That drives men to betray their brethren. The coin that rich men hoard while the poor starve in the streets. And you claim to need no ruler."

"Pretty sure we don't need a ruler who *attacks churches!*" Tony flexed his fingers a little, tempted to shoot Loki again just for being a dick. Why had he thought there was anything likable about this guy, again? Probably drunk. Most people seemed more tolerable when he was drunk.

"Let your halls of false worship burn," Loki snarled, expression hateful and feral under the scabbing blood. "I have been attacked in our most sacred spaces, endured treason from those who claimed to bear me friendship. *No. More.* I will not wait for these pathetic, insignificant creatures to move against me. I will not tolerate these blasphemies. They will not *touch* me."

Blah, blah, blah, 'I am a god'; they'd heard it all before and Tony was *not in the mood*. "Deal with it," he snapped, anger getting the better of fear. "You don't get to come down here throwing a tantrum because someone bruised your ego. You're not *better* than us just because you live a little longer and you can bench more weight."

Loki threw his head back with a particularly crazy laugh, dark hair tumbling over his shoulders, framed by the rising fog. "Oh, little Midgardian. You have no *idea* what I am."

It wasn't the worst they'd seen him - that had to be the day he'd had the flashback, by a mile. This was barely a blip, in comparison - but there was still something *off* about it.

Which Tony could figure out when he watched his recordings later, because at the moment he was more interested in punching Loki until all the self-righteousness fell out. "Well, right now, you're a major pain in my ass."

Loki regarded him with narrowed eyes. He spoke with a light, mocking tone that belied the lethal threat in his expression. "And now we see what all your pretty words come to. The moment Loki is inconvenient--"

Fucking martyr complex. Tony huffed in exasperation. "No, your *murder habit* is inconvenient, so why don't you knock it off, go home, and... whatever, look up old Viking reenactments on YouTube, I don't know. Pick a hobby. Have you tried origami?"

Something unidentifiable flashed across Loki's face, distorted by torn skin knitting back together. It was quickly replaced by a seething glare. "Spare me your sanctimonious posturing. You think yourself so much above me, Merchant of Death?"

Oh, *hell* no. Loki did not get to play that card. *Tony* was allowed to play that card, it was *his* card, he was allowed to wallow in guilt now and then and compare himself to alien marauders, but Loki didn't get to try to use that card to justify his bullshit.

"There is a big difference between the guy making the weapons and the guy who actually uses them," Tony snapped, stalking forward. The rest of the street was fading away behind the fog, leaving the two of them in their own little world.

Loki smiled, false and mocking. "Is that what you tell yourself? Does it help the blood wash off?"

Tony flexed his fingers, mind's eye full of metal fists and repulsor fire. "Making weapons for defense versus randomly attacking civilians? Actually, *yeah*, it's a distinction I'm pretty comfortable making."

Even when he *was* the guy using weapons, fighting off invading alien armies was a hell of a lot different than *leading* invading alien armies. It wasn't perfect. He wasn't perfect. But... he wasn't *Loki*.

"And they call me a liar," Loki sneered, gesturing with the knife for emphasis. "You tell the world you are a hero, a protector of the innocent, but the truth is that you hunted down your enemies to protect your own pride."

Oh, that was the way Loki wanted to play it? Fine. Tony gave a low, dark smirk. There was no one here to see this - he had no qualms about sinking straight to Loki's level.

"Funny you should say that," he murmured, watching closely. Time to take the gloves off. "See, I've been thinking about your little vendetta against planet Hoth. *Jotunheim*, right?"

Direct hit. Loki's eyes flared with anger and he clenched his hand around the knife blade, seeming not to notice the rivulets of fresh blood that ran down its length.

"I mean, you tell yourself you did it to protect Asgard, but it was all about your pride and self-esteem, we both know that." Tony kept his eyes on Loki's face, kept all his guns aimed. He knew just how badass he looked right now, armor bristling with weapons and yeah, with that second knife jammed in it. He looked dangerous. He *felt* dangerous. It was perfect for this vicious back and forth. "You can't stand knowing there's a whole race of yetis out there that tells the truth about *exactly* what you are--"

"Hold your witless tongue, or I'll cut it from your throat."

For a moment the sheer rage in Loki's voice froze Tony in place, then he gave an exaggerated cluck of his tongue; crooned in mock sympathy, "Aw. Did I hit a nerve?"

Loki's expression sharpened into a thin, dangerous smile. In the still of the fog, he looked like a nightmarish Cheshire Cat, stripped of any friendliness or cheer. Tony knew that should worry him but he mostly felt charged with adrenaline, ready for anything: *bring it on*.

Until the whirl of green cape much closer than it should have been, *damn magic*, boot to the side of his chest, thunk. Flying backwards, freefall. The ground slammed into him. Jarvis, something about joint integrity, Tony was more concerned with getting his faceplate open. His gut clenched like a stone. Vomit tore a path up through his lungs out of his throat and no, no, that wasn't right, throwing up shouldn't feel like that. He knew hangovers intimately and this wasn't right. His chest hurt, shoulder, and the smell of puke was everywhere and he couldn't catch his breath--

"Oh *dear*," Loki murmured from somewhere in the fog, dripping with condescension. "Have I struck a nerve?"

Tony flinched, tried to push himself up, but the left wrist of the suit wasn't working right. (That didn't make *sense*, the damage wasn't at the wrist--) He propped himself on his right hand, trying to catch his breath. Each shuddering gasp felt like tearing, somewhere between the arc reactor and his collarbone. On the left... he glanced towards the knife with a sinking feeling, saw how deeply it was now embedded.

Well, that wasn't good.

"Right," Tony rasped, mostly to himself. "Ix-nay on the yeti." Yetis with knives. That would explain why no one had proof of an Abominable Snowman. They'd all been stabbed...

Come on, focus, he was a sitting duck right now. Kneeling duck. Crouching duck, hidden demi-god. Tony choked out a laugh, braced weakly on his right hand. No one appreciated his humor. "Jarvis, clotting foam," he instructed; "upper left front. Hard lock, ah, joints L-seven through... twenty-two."

"Initiating foam release. Joints immobilized," Jarvis responded. There was a feeling of slight compression around his shoulder, which could only be useful, hold the knife still.

"The great warmonger Tony Stark." Loki's voice was moving; circling, like some complete *bastard* of a shark. "Loved and feared by millions."

"Now you're just... quoting Wikipedia," Tony managed, valiantly pretending it didn't hurt so much to breathe. It couldn't be the lung, knife was angled up and left, he was pretty sure it was outside the ribcage, god he hoped it was outside the ribcage. Also, he was pretty sure not all the puke had landed outside his helmet.

(If he died, everyone was going to think it proved them right about the Loki thing, and it wasn't-- he wasn't ready, he just needed more *time*--)

He saw Loki step out of the thick cloud and then he was being hauled up by the throat of the armor with a dizzying lurch. Tony squeezed his eyes closed against the sensation of the world reeling. This was not okay, this was really the very worst-- the second worst way to spend a

hangover, he needed to make a note to never do this again. He couldn't catch his breath properly (please not the lung).

He could hear Loki snarl something, "He lauds you for everything he reviles in me--" and whoa, whoa, stop the limo. Tony opened his eyes again.

"Thor?" he demanded incredulously. "You're making-- No! I'm putting my foot..." not down, he wasn't putting his foot down, he was kind of dangling in mid-air. Worse, he didn't have the energy to get his words out fast enough to keep up with his train of thought. He let out a frustrated noise and summed up: "If you're gonna kill me, at least... be about *me*."

The son of a bitch *dropped him*. Tony gasped, pain jolting through him. For a moment he stayed flat on the ground, taking stock of his body as best he could. The fabric under his chestplate was wet, despite the clotting foam. He didn't... feel right, he couldn't--

Yeah. Yeah, this was bad.

Loki was laughing. Not 'ha-ha snuck cattle into the palace' laughing, but full-on 'ha-ha completely insane' laughing. Tony groaned, trying not to throw up again. The fog in the air smelled like all kinds of burning. And puke.

"Don't think I won't vomit on you," he mumbled, grimacing at the tearing feeling in his chest. "I will absolutely vomit on you."

His view of Loki's boots turned into a view of Loki crouched beside him, staring at him with an expression that was hard to read.

"I should cut you to pieces," Loki murmured, eyes narrowed but sounding a little calmer. Maybe. Maybe that was just wishful thinking. Maybe he'd gotten over having his face dragged along the road, although the healed patches were still a bit pinker than the rest of his skin. Maybe it was just a wild mood swing; this was Loki, who the hell knew.

Tony thought about making a smart-assed reply (*don't go to any trouble on my account*) but it all seemed like so much effort. He was just... conserving his energy, yeah.

Loki drummed his fingers on the chestplate, pat-a-tat-tat. Was this axe-crazy Loki or sneaky, faux-friendly Loki? It was hard to tell; more so when he leaned a little closer and murmured like he was confiding something, "You're a complication, little king. At a time when I can ill afford such things."

"Darling... you're too kind..." Tony felt like he was swimming. He was heavy and floating. Mostly, his mouth was disgusting and he really wanted to brush his teeth. Would it be weird to add a teeth-cleaning extension into the helmet? He could see the blueprints in his mind's eye, pinpoint *right* where he'd want the little arm to emerge--

Loki's voice dropped into what was virtually a croon. "Iron Man. *Bright-heart*. Why must we be at odds? Serve me, and I would make you my most favored advisor."

Tony blinked, trying to refocus. Wow, that... if that wasn't so damn creepy, it might almost be sweet. "What."

"There need not be quarrel between us." Loki's gaze was intent, eyes all the brighter for the dark hair hanging down around his face. "They do not recognize your true value, Craftsman. I would offer you knowledge, tools... you do not begin to imagine the heights we could achieve. Serve me, and I would give you anything within my power."

Tony wasn't sure how to react. He felt a slightly hysterical laugh bubbling in his throat but figured that wouldn't go down too well with the Prince of Oversensitivity. He was... his throat was so dry... "You mean, uh, anything except freedom."

"What is freedom worth?" Loki scoffed, like he usually did when the topic came... up... huh. Yeah. Loki did that a lot, all 'mortals aren't meant for freedom', 'mortals want to be ruled', 'freedom is a cage', blah blah blah.

Tony squinted up at him. "Do you not... like it?" he said doubtfully. That was what it sounded like. It didn't make a lot of sense. Who didn't like freedom? Besides, like, in occasional bedroom contexts, because sometimes it was nice to have someone else be in charge--

"What are you talking about?" Loki hissed. Loki, who had started to go pretty much off the deep end as soon as there was no king to give him any orders.

Loki was the last person who should be ruling *anything*.

Tony wasn't really sure he trusted his own train of thought right now, but he knew one thing. "If you don't know what freedom's worth, you're... not the guy who should try to take it from us."

Predictably, Loki flared up in defensive rage. "Why shouldn't I? I was a *king*. I have just as much right as Thor--"

"I didn't say--" Tony broke off, chest burning. Dammit. He gritted his teeth for a moment, then plowed on. "Maybe *neither* of you should have a planet."

It was obvious from Loki's startled silence that that had never occurred to him.

Tony sagged back against the ground. "You called me," he said. He sounded exhausted even to himself. Defeated. "You *called*. I could have... You could have let me try."

"Worse than useless," Loki sneered, drawing himself up - and up, and up - to his full height. "I have outgrown the need to waste my time on false hope and childish dreams."

Right. False hope. New friends, bad as the old friends. Tony knew something about that. People smiled at you one day - when you could offer them something - then dropped you like a hot potato when it looked like you might ask for something in return.

Sometimes you struck it lucky. People like Pepper, Rhodey. Without them... Well, Tony sometimes wondered if he was looking at what he might be without them.

But it was partly *Loki's own fault*, and it sure wasn't any kind of excuse for today's attack. Lots of people had trust issues and still managed not to go on killing sprees. Hello, overpopulation.

Back during the night, when Loki had first called him... that was when it could have been different. When *Loki* could have made it different, instead of keeping on slamming the door on people and then complaining no one was there for him.

Tony gave a heavy exhale and let his eyes fall closed. Sure, Loki was a bastard and Tony hated everything the guy stood for, but... the kicker was, he really would have tried. He really *had* tried.

Apparently he hadn't tried hard enough.

...Okay, the ominous silence was getting, well, ominous. Shouldn't there be some kind of killing blow now? Some final cutting remark? Reluctantly, Tony forced an eye back open. He squinted at the fog. The thick, empty fog.

"*Seriously?*"

Great. Fine. He could lie here and lose consciousness in peace.

Except... there were people. Stupid, annoying people, yes - with ugly homes and those god-awful kitschy mailboxes that were done up to look like a miniature version of the owner's house - but people who probably didn't deserve to die by murderous alien.

This whole 'growing a conscience' thing was a pain in the ass.

Focus. Focus. *Starks don't quit.*

"Oh, shut up," he muttered to the memory of Howard's voice.

"Sir?" Jarvis queried.

Tony groaned, trying - failing - to roll onto his side. Shit. "Jarvis - little help? Thunderbirds. Are go."

"Engaging Thunderbird Protocol, sir."

It was disorienting, riding passenger in the suit while it moved of its own accord. Tony breathed carefully, thinking of invisible marionette strings and trying not to freak out. He was not helpless, this was his program, it was still responding to his commands. Just... breathe.

One thing at a time. The knife was wedged in place, left shoulder joints locked around it. Clotting agent to slow the bleeding. There was nothing else he could do about the wound right now. People. Loki. "Jarvis, find the... crazy alien... wizard. Foreign metals... signs of magic... all that."

The screen lit up with thermal scans, but at the same time Jarvis said, a little strenuously, "Sir, I really must advise--"

"J, if your--" Tony paused, trying to breathe, trying to adjust to the tearing feeling in his chest. *If your next words aren't going to be 'beat Loki like a side of beef', then don't waste your time.* Hell with it. "Just go."

The suit walked forward; Tony moaned a little when the world swam underfoot. That was unsettling. And nauseating. Although that might just have been the lingering smell of vomit. The cloud around him was too thick to see through but Loki shouldn't be hard to find; his hands gave off extra heat when they'd been throwing magic around.

He licked his lips, absurdly thirsty. If he told himself it was all part of the hangover, he didn't have to consider how much blood he'd probably lost. Although he knew better than to think that was just sweat soaking his undersuit.

One thing at a time. Next thing. It was probably a good time to open up comms to the rest of the team.

"So, uh." He tried to sound chipper but it came out more pained than he'd like. "I might be... bleeding. A little. "

Clint's voice. "Don't you wear a suit of armor?"

Ha fucking ha. "A small... structural weakness." Breathe. Breathe. "Barely noticeable."

"How bad a bleed?" Steve cut in, clear and steady.

Tony grimaced, uneasy about speaking it out loud, like it would somehow make it real. Not that speaking felt very real. He felt like he was listening to himself from far away. "Let's say... disregard the speed limit."

The others all started talking over each other, demanding if he was okay, telling him to fall back, stay safe. Probably would have been more useful advice twenty minutes ago.

"Mute," he muttered absently, thinking about water again. Hydration unit in the suit, install a little sippy straw, that could work.

If he bled out he was going to miss Tuesday's department head meeting, there was meant to be an update from Legal on the trademark infringement suit—

"Did you just 'mute' me?"

Steve? Tony blinked. Oh... right. That was a thing that only worked on Jarvis. "No," he tried, then amended it a little. "I was joking."

"You know that we're not your computers, right?"

"I was a joke," Tony repeated stubbornly. He'd been stabbed, for crying out loud, they could cut him a little slack.

"Jarvis, can you hear me?" Natasha asked over the comm.

“I can, Agent Romanoff.”

“Stark may be in hypovolemic shock. His judgment is impaired. Ignore his instruction and divert to emergency medical services.”

“Hey—“

“Acknowledged,” Jarvis said, the traitor. The flight repulsors fired and the suit started rising into the air.

It was smart. It was the smart thing to do. Medical... stuff. Tony closed his eyes, mouth still sour with the taste of bile. “Public safety override,” he mumbled. Pepper was going to kill him.

Well. Or not.

"Immediate threat to public safety identified. Override accepted." The armor shifted slightly, changing course. Back to finding Loki.

Steve made a pained noise over the comm. "Dammit, Iron Man..."

Tony swallowed. *You know how it is*, he thought about saying. Or maybe, *Just top me up with some A-positive*.

He broke the connection instead.

Starks don't quit.

The suit pulled up above the magic fog - *magic fog* how was this real life - and high enough that Tony could get a better view. From up here he could see the extent of the area that'd been cordoned off. There were a couple of ambulances on the other side of the cordon, people being checked over by EMTs, bodies on stretchers. *Fuck*.

And back at the church, arms wreathed in fire, one tantrum-throwing asshole as ordered.

Tony took a painful, steadying breath. "After landing, divert all power to chest RT. Prepare for overload. Don't trigger until-- until I--"

"Sir--"

"Enough."

There was a brief pause, something Jarvis employed whenever Tony was about to do something potentially fatal, and it was kind of sad how many times that subroutine came into play. Then Jarvis acknowledged, and brought the suit down to land behind Loki. It was a much smoother descent than Tony would have made on his own.

Loki turned at the sound - spun, cloak flaring, elegant. He had his ridiculous helmet back on and it made him seem colder. At the sight of Tony, he gave a short, hard laugh. The edge of

the fog dampened the sound, muffling their voices. "Of course. You just keep on getting back up, don't you?"

Fake it 'til you make it, baby. Tony smiled brightly behind his faceplate. "See you got your hat back." The play of reflected firelight on Loki's horns was actually kind of cool. "Is it even dented? That's good workmanship."

Loki's eyes narrowed a little. The flames around his hands and vambraces died away. The church doors hung open, but Tony couldn't see anyone left inside.

Not anyone alive, anyway.

Loki sauntered towards him, that rolling feline prowl, and for a moment Tony thought-- He didn't know what he thought. He was tired and thirsty and increasingly spaced out, and trying *really hard* not to think about the blood soaking his chest. Then Loki took him down with ridiculous ease; crouched over him, one heavy boot pinning his good wrist flat.

"Tell me," Loki hissed, "why should I leave you alive to betray me?"

"They won't know where to lay the turf," Tony realized dimly; he should have cancelled the order, he wasn't going to be there to let the delivery guys in and no one was going to know what to do with it--

--and Loki was laughing again, a bitter noise that grew wilder and harsher into a scream that made the world *lurch*--

--he didn't remember much after that.

#

Coming Through in Waves

Chapter Summary

Tony wakes up in hospital and spends a lot of the chapter regretting it.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has lots of medical discussion and description. If that is a problem for you, jump to the end notes and I'll try to summarize it.

I have rewritten this chapter probably about five hundred billion times. NO MORE.

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

Later, Tony thought he remembered a lot of things.

1. The ceiling was unfamiliar. Panels, bright lights, industrial. After a while he realized he hadn't been kidnapped, and Pepper was red-eyed from crying, and he remembered to apologize for making her come to Kentucky.
2. His arm in a sling, strapped around him. Restraints and hanging weight. Like a car battery plugged into his chest, hot in the sun and the smell of sand and sweat and blood.
3. Striding along the walkway of his penthouse as his armor was dismantled around him. The mechanism stuck and the metal tore into his shoulder. Rhodey tried to help fix it but just keep pulling and making it worse. In the meantime, the atmosphere around him spiraled up and up and into the portal to the other side of the universe.
4. People kept walking in and out, and there was no window in the door, and he kept demanding a room with a window, or at least for Pepper to change the access codes so he could keep the people out because they were taking up *all the air*. Pepper gave him hard candy for oxygen but it stuck in his windpipe and he couldn't, he needed to breathe.
5. A panther crouched over him, slick fur and hidden screws in its joints, but he didn't remember building anything like this. He'd have remembered engineering that look of slit-eyed rage. Its red-hot claws sank into his shoulder and *tore* at him, *it hurt*, it hurt so much. Screaming.
6. Facing off with a woman almost as muscular as Steve. She had olive toned skin and formidable Asgardian armor, and blocked his way with a massive spear. She said, "You can't

bring *those* in here," with a look of disgust at the bees crawling around his arc reactor. He wanted to tell her he hadn't invited them, but they were stinging him, hundreds and thousands of hot barbs. The buzz filled his ears. Everything smelled of honey. Someone was laughing, off to one side; a Kate Beckinsale lookalike half in shadow, vicious and amused.

7. Half-reclining in a plastic dome with astronauts prodding at him, bright overhead light like every alien abduction scene on television and nothing better have probed him while he was unconscious-- there was still no air--

8. Half-reclining in a plastic dome without astronauts, slowly realizing that he was being kept in an *isolation tent* and that nothing good was implied by this. The front of his shoulder hurt, upper chest, a dulled and distant throb. Plus, he needed to pee, but he was getting coherent enough to remember what a catheter felt like even if he sorely wished he could say it was a new experience.

Tony's gaze skittered over the plastic walls. High contagion. Maybe he had ebola. He'd been abducted by aliens and infected with ebola and then put in a quarantine tent. It seemed to fit the clues. He couldn't think. There was something he was meant to do and he couldn't remember what it was.

He let his eyes fall closed again and drifted off.

--

There were tubes feeding down over his right shoulder, under a cotton gown into a single entry port on his chest. He had a feeling that it wasn't a great sign when they resorted to the main part of the body for IV lines. His mouth was dry, which could be a side effect of just about anything. If it was something meant to keep him unconscious, he wouldn't have woken up. He was groggy, but that was plausible. Anything was plausible. He needed more information. He needed the metallic taste out of the back of his mouth.

Some kind of sling was holding his left arm securely; it was strapped around his waist as well as over his other shoulder. There was a firm wedge of foam between his forearm and body, and another piece tucked between his thumb and the meat of his hand.

The arc reactor was still in place, under his gown. Okay. That gave him options. It did imply that wherever he was, they knew what the reactor-- no, they might just not want to risk messing with something screwed into his chest. It didn't tell him much. Like whether he was a prisoner, a patient, or a prisoner *and* a patient.

It could happen. SHIELD had a lousy track record. Actually, a lot of agencies would love to get their hands on the miniaturized arc reactor.

(Obie leaning over him, murmuring about selfishness as long fingers broke apart his heart--)

He pressed his fingers more firmly against the arc reactor for a moment. Solid object under the rough fabric of the medical gown. Clear plastic dome around him, as good as being surrounded by windows, unobstructed view. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Nondescript room on the other side of the isolation tent; two-way mirror on his left (rude), door beyond his feet, cream wall on his right. The head of the bed was raised so he was half-sitting, which meant he couldn't see behind himself. He tried to twist a little but craning his neck tugged awkwardly at things taped to his skin.

He was thinking too slowly. It should be faster than this. There was a dull fuzz over everything. His chest hurt, on the left, front of the shoulder. The sling felt weird, the distribution of pressure was wrong, like it wasn't supporting the outside of his forearm. He tried to shift his hand a little but it was stiff from disuse. The catheter was uncomfortable and the lights were way too bright.

With a sigh, he slumped back against the bed. This was when he should be coming up with an escape plan. Just in case this was a place he needed to escape from.

He'd just rest a minute, first.

--

The next time Tony woke up, it was because the door to the room opened. He lifted his head a little, hyper-aware of twinging sensations near his left shoulder, a strange heaviness that didn't belong. He didn't remember falling asleep.

On the other side of the plastic tent was a woman in scrubs. She wasn't tall, but she was solid. Maybe not a doctor; maybe a soldier or hired gun. Guard.

"Mister Stark," she said soothingly, "how are you feeling?"

Tony took a moment to appreciate the unbelievable *banality* of that question.

She sounded American though, that was something. Hint of Appalachia in there. White American, combat trained. Best-case scenario: SHIELD? Or Air Force - had he called Rhodey? No, the team had been flying to meet him, Avengers call-out.

He had a vague feeling - flash of memory, maybe just déjà vu. Had he already checked the arc reactor? Couldn't rely on vague feelings. He lifted his good arm to rub at his eyes, then let it drop on his chest and gave a subtle press with his fingertips. Something solid under the cotton gown, right where the arc reactor should be. Good.

It took a couple of tries to speak properly, to answer the guard's question. "I've woken up... worse places."

Loki. He'd been fighting Loki, an attack on a church. Did they stop him, did anyone else get hurt? Innocent people with terrible letterboxes. Loki as savage and murderous as he'd ever been, as though nothing Tony had said or done had made any impact, none of it had meant anything, nothing--

He shoved that failure to the back of his mind to deal with later.

The guard flicked her gaze over his body, assessing. "How are your pain levels?"

Tony thought about faking a smile. It seemed like too much effort. Better to play up the exhaustion anyway. Seem weak. No threat. He let his voice stay rough and raspy. "Let's start... introductions."

Did she frown a little? "I'm Agent Sweeney. I've-- What do you remember?"

His eyes narrowed automatically, then he wanted to kick himself for the tell. Maybe she hadn't noticed...

But Sweeney was spreading her hands, adjusting her whole stance to something gentler. "Alright. Let me just... You're in a SHIELD medical facility, Mister Stark. You were transferred here from the hospital in Kentucky, do you remember that? The infection?"

Infection? Tony felt his eyebrows furrow, he couldn't stop *reacting*, so he gave up on covering. Using his good hand for leverage, he shifted to sit a little further up, trying not to jostle the tubes or catheter or his sore shoulder. The left one was still not responding but he could feel the foam fitted to his thumb. "Uh, if I have ebola, you have to lemme know." It came out slurred and croaky. "I have to make calls. There're people who... who deserve to be dragged in here to catch-- there's actually a list, I've got... there are names, I can get you the list--"

"Mister Stark, you do not have ebola," Sweeney said in the same calm, measured tone. She didn't seem surprised or confused by him and he wondered if this wasn't the first time she'd told him that. "You received a penetrating stab wound during a confrontation with the hostile Asgardian Loki. The wound developed an infection that was found to involve bacteria of non-terrestrial origin. It was decided to transfer you here to isolate you, while Prince Odinson traveled to Asgard to obtain more effective medication. You've been very sick."

"Space ebola," Tony translated for himself, and dropped back against the raised half of the bed to stare over her head at the plastic tent. Breathing was exhausting. "Death from space ebola. Huh. I'm man enough t'admit... I did not see that coming."

Pepper wasn't here. He didn't know who he was even performing for. For SHIELD's files, maybe. For himself. If he turned it into something ludicrous he didn't have to think--

...bacteria of non-terrestrial origin...

Loki's fucking knife. Oh for the love of-- Were Asgardian bacteria as superpowered as Asgardian people? How sick had he been? If the stab wound was the infection point then how much damage--

Chest, shoulder... angled away from the lung but it would have gone through the pectoral muscles and weren't there a whole bunch of nerves traveling along the shoulder to the arm?

"Agent Sweeney," he said, interrupting some humorless, literal answer about space ebola not being a real thing.

"Yes?"

"Is that why I can't move my hand?"

She hesitated. Tony felt his heart sink. He looked down at the arm in the sling. He could picture moving his hand, he could *picture* it, wriggle his fingers, make a fist... and it just sat there, motionless.

"It's hard to say whether the infection had any effect on that," Sweeney said carefully. "Due to your chest implant, it's not possible to use an MRI--"

"Agent," Tony repeated, staring intently at the side of his index finger. He refused to raise his eyes, to meet her gaze.

"The stab wound damaged your axillary vein and medial cord, which leads on to the median and ulnar nerves." Sweeney's voice was quiet but steady. "As you've noticed, those enervate your hand and fingers, as well as parts of your forearm."

If he used his right hand to manipulate the left he could push the fingers into different positions. Just not move them on their own. But they still *felt*--

No, wait. The last two fingers - they were dead, empty space on the end of his arm. He jerked his right hand away, skin crawling.

"The initial surgical repair was done in excellent time, but we don't know for sure how effective it was. Once the infection set in, the medical priority changed to containing the spread and keeping you from full-blown sepsis. The good news is that, although a fair amount of dead tissue had to be excised, the vessels in the axilla - those nerves - were retained. However, diagnostically... we don't have a full picture yet."

His breath hitched in his throat. The front of his shoulder throbbed. "I'm going to need you to get to the point."

"That-- We don't have a full picture, Mister Stark; that is the point. We need to perform testing to determine the severity of the nerve damage. We don't know whether the infection has done additional damage. We don't know what effect the Asgardian medication may have had."

She paused again. He could practically hear the bad news coming.

"Nerve regeneration is very slow, Mister Stark, and the further away the injury site is from the nerve ending, the worse the prognosis. Depending on a number of factors, later surgery might be of some benefit; nerve or tendon transfer. The best case scenario, with extensive physical therapy... you could have partial function in about two years."

Tony lifted his head slightly to stare at her. Sweeney kept her eyes on him as she spoke, voice regretful but implacable.

"You won't have the same level of dexterity and fine motor control that you did before. To be frank, given your age, your medical history, your... lifestyle... you need to be prepared for the possibility that you don't regain any function."

He felt a sudden rush of light-headedness. Not regain... Even the best case scenario was measured in years, how could-- He couldn't do it, this was a joke. He could feel too many thoughts rising in his mind at once, clamoring for attention, and struggled to push them back. "No, look, that's-- that is not acceptable, I need my hand. I work with my hands. I fight violent aliens with my hands--"

There was something in Sweeney's face that looked dangerously close to pity. "You need to understand--"

Why did people still say that to him, why didn't they *get* it yet? He didn't get to be Tony Stark by just giving up when it got hard, he *found a way*, he always found a way, was he the only one who had any damn dedication anymore? "No, *you* need to understand, my comprehension is not the problem here--"

--completely foreign organism, your immune system--"

--I didn't even get an infection when I was operated on in a *cave*," open ribs and blood soaking through the smell of chloroform, what did that much blood do to the armor, who even had the armor had SHIELD taken it would they try to replicate it, "what kind of second-rate--"

--limits to what is *medically possible*. The only reason you're still alive--"

Threat, and he quelled a jolt of instinctive adrenaline. Alive, except his hand. His hand, his armor, the armor and the arm, that trademark infringement thing, international negotiations, there was too much he needed to deal with and *he refused to hear this*. "Let me point out, money is not an object--"

--some *substance* from Asgard that we still don't understand--"

That wasn't saying much. The list of what SHIELD didn't understand was longer than files could contain; one reason they wanted their greedy hands on Iron Man. No one understood Iron Man, the arc reactor, Tony himself; electromagnet, NI equals B multiplied by (length of field path in the core material over magnetic permeability plus length of field path in the gaps over permeability of free space); strange bacteria crawling under his skin and into his blood, alien infections and cures and *SHIELD was studying--*

Connections burst like tiny explosions behind his eyeballs and he could feel the deep ache starting. Dealing with strangers when it got like this-- dealing with strangers *period*, he didn't want her here, windows or no windows. "No, you know what, you need to leave now."

"Mister Stark--"

"I said *get out!*" he roared; didn't know how it sounded but felt like he tore his throat yelling it (open another wound, pathway to infection, *strangers* touching him and alien bacteria, now there was a nightmare). It must have been intense enough because the agent actually left.

Alien bacteria, and SHIELD had everything they needed to create biological weapons of the kind that would decimate worlds. No, decimate was only one in ten and different 'D' word,

devastate, destroy, depredate, leave desolate, entire crossword puzzles full of synonyms for what the arrogant bastards might unleash. Would they be stupid enough to think they could contain it, of course they would, they tried to weaponize the Tesseract.

Sweeney had said 'substance from Asgard'. Asgard had never done anything for Earth but screw it over, but if Thor had brought the fancy medicine, that meant people knew where Tony was even if they didn't know the literal *where*. If anything happened Rhodey would come looking, Rhodey would always come looking for him, that was the promise since back at MIT. Rhodey had come looking in Afghanistan, Tony had fought his way out but Rhodey brought him home.

No one to come looking for Yinsen and Tony had brought caves down on his head, brought entire buildings down but he knew the math and the hows and whys of those explosions. The Tesseract had brought an entire SHIELD facility crumbling down, but then with Loki's influence Selvig had made a stable portal; Tony had tried to talk to the guy afterwards but what Selvig remembered was incomplete. There were factors missing in the equations. None of it made any sense. None of it was possible.

He'd nearly died from the infection. Not on the street. Loki hadn't killed him, twice, had left him crumpled and *none of it made any sense*, a few factors short of a full equation, ha, that was Loki alright, a self-hating Yeti and--

hit a nerve

"I'll fucking kill that goddamned smug psychopath," Tony snarled, filled with a rage so abrupt and complete it made his head spin. "Self-righteous fucking *bastard*." He was going to tear that asshole apart. When he got his hands on Loki, he was going to make inter-dimensional hell-space or whatever seem like a goddamn *office Christmas party*.

Just as suddenly, the energy all drained out of him. He sagged, panting for breath. Not enough air. There was a lump in his throat to go with the wetness in his eyes. Two years - *maybe*. Or longer. Or maybe for the rest of his life. They had to be wrong. Extraterrestrial bacteria, X-Files level classified insanity, sure, get your secret government geeks in. But regular old human nerves - surgical repair, Sweeney had said, something physical and tangible - there had to be private specialists, the kind of experts that miracle documentaries were made of, the sort of care that money really, really, really could buy.

He'd thought that Loki might kill him, not... this. Iron Man was risky, he knew that, but he'd always thought of it in terms of life or death. This was... different.

It wasn't fair, he'd done everything right, left the knife in place and not tried to mess with it. They should have just been able to stitch it back up, or let him bleed out. One or the other.

Sweeney had talked about *dead tissue* and wasn't it just like Loki to have a poisoned blade. Intentional or accident, who knew, bacteria could go either way. Could just mean Loki didn't wash his hands after taking a leak, which all things considered would not be the worst of his crimes. Did ice giants pee? But Thor did, so Loki must too, or they'd have figured out...

Could mean Loki had dragged his knife through rotting things and come spoiling for a fight, ready to spread as much toxicity and decay and hate as the world would stand.

A small noise escaped Tony's throat and he covered his eyes with his good hand, squeezing his eyelids more tightly closed. Not here, not right now. The agent might have left the room but the giant two-way mirror spoke for itself.

He'd tried... that was the worst thing. He'd really tried.

Maybe this whole thing was hopeless. Maybe Loki was just too far gone. Maybe-- maybe Loki couldn't be stopped. Tony hadn't really planned for a retreat strategy.

He just wanted-- he wanted to feel like he was making a difference. The good kind of difference, for a change. He wanted to repay some of the cost of his long career of mistakes. Why did he keep *surviving* all these things - Afghanistan, alien space, the nuke - if there was nothing he could do with each new chance?

How many times did he have to pay. The shrapnel. Obie. Alien space and nightmares that wouldn't end. Now this? How much more was he supposed to *give*?

His eyes stung and the back of his throat ached. There were too many thoughts all jumbled up together and his head pounded.

The hand in the sling didn't hurt at all.

--

He must have dozed off because he was woken by the door opening and that agent - Sweeney - coming back in. She let herself into the plastic tent and Tony felt his hackles rise at the invasion of his space.

He gave a light, sarcastic smile. "No, really, make yourself at home."

"I really do need to check your stats," she said, lifting the tablet held in her right hand. "Can you tell me how you're feeling?"

Tony made a face, bored by this conversation already. "Not as upset as I expected," he said, pretending to give thought to her question. Joking was easy, being as obnoxious as possible, he didn't need to think. Could block it all out. "I guess still in a bit of shock. I mean, once it really sinks in, then--"

"Physically," Sweeney amended as she walked towards him. "On a scale of one to ten, where ten is the worst pain--"

"Four." What was weird was how much of his shoulder *didn't* hurt, and that had to be linked to what Sweeney had said about tissue being 'removed'.

"And you remember my name?"

"Uh... Brandy? Candy? Something like..." Tony snapped his fingers, delaying her attempts to get a pulse oximeter on him. "Got it: Crystal!"

"Amethyst, and you owe me a grand for last night," she returned, unfazed. "Hold still, please."

He clenched his jaw briefly as she undid the snap fasteners on that side of the gown and folded it down, exposing where the tubes plugged into a single port secured to his chest. This, this was why he hated medical personnel, the attitude of casual ownership. Her fingers prodded at his flesh around the entry point, only a flimsy plastic dressing serving as a barrier. "Any tenderness?"

Tony flicked his eyes to hers. "Believe me," he said flatly, "no tender feelings whatsoever."

"What about the strap, any irritation or discomfort?" She adjusted the strap of the sling slightly, making sure it wasn't interfering with the IV.

"No."

Sweeney made a vague acknowledging sound and jotted something on her tablet. She refastened the gown and gave the strap one last small adjustment, then moved past his line of sight. Tony tensed, then forced himself to relax.

"Flow rate's good," Sweeney muttered. Must be infusion pumps for the IV, there were components in those he could use if he got desperate--

Medical facility. Relax.

She came back into sight a moment later. "If your pain worsens, the pump is programmed to release a limited amount of additional analgesic. Just push this button here." She showed him a small remote at the end of an electronic cord and placed it on the bed next to him. "Right now the most important thing is that you rest. Your body's been through a lot."

No. He didn't want to think about it. "You'd be surprised," Tony said. "There was this one night, with a group of dancers from Chicago - I think I burned about a month's worth of calories--"

"Do you feel up to a fuller briefing on your injury?" Sweeney asked, ignoring his bluster.

Tony found himself saying snidely, "You mean there's something you actually know?"

She raised her eyebrows a little. "There is an open wound on your upper chest filled with sterile packing material and covered with a light dressing. This is to allow the deeper tissue to heal first. Due to the amount of muscle tissue that was removed, you'll find it difficult to take very deep breaths. You're also going to have some spikes in pain as the smaller nerves at the edges of the wound heal. It's best that you continue to wear the shoulder support for a few weeks so as not to put strain on the nerve repair site. You don't react well to confinement so we'd like to release you as soon as medically acceptable, meaning you need to be instructed on appropriate wound care."

Weirdly, her emotionless recital of facts made him feel... not reassured, exactly, but able to mimic the same attitude. Distance himself from the topic of conversation. It was safer if it was abstract, intellectual. "Why does that hand still have feeling if I can't move it?"

"The median nerve comes from two different cords of the brachial plexus - the medial and lateral cords. To simplify: the motor nerve fibers pass through the median cord, and the sensory fibers pass through the lateral. The median nerve supplies your first two fingers, more or less, and thumb. The ring finger and pinky are controlled by the ulnar nerve, in which case the motor and sensory fibers all come from the median cord. Does this--?"

She reached in, towards his little finger, and the sling made it impossible to jerk his arm away. Tony bared his teeth instead. "Get your own creepy dead hand to play with."

"It's not dead," Sweeney objected, and there was that look again, that almost-pity.

Tony didn't want to be here, alone with strangers, being poked and prodded and *injured*, weakened. It felt all too familiar and everything about it made him feel trapped. "I need to make a phone call."

"Alright," said Sweeney, making a note on her tablet; "that shouldn't be an issue. At some point a physical therapist will speak to you about exercises but it doesn't have to be right away. You've been receiving nutrition intravenously, so we'll start reintroducing food..."

"I'll have the salmon," Tony said, although his heart wasn't really in it. "Only if it's wild, though. Don't think you can slip farmed past me, because I'll know."

"I promise you, nobody will be feeding you farmed salmon."

Tony was tired and he couldn't properly enjoy antagonizing Sweeney. It wasn't enough to serve as a distraction from-- all this. He sighed and closed his eyes. He had the feeling he'd be falling asleep again, soon. "Just get me a phone."

--

He dreamed that from the elbow down, his arm had been replaced by a cartoon stick of dynamite, lit fuse burning merrily away. He tried to get away from it but he was drugged, he couldn't move. All his limbs were weighted to the bed.

--

At some point he stirred from sleep to notice a man standing in the doorway. The *other* asshole in a leather coat. Just great. He pointedly eyed the controller for the pain medication because honestly, he got the feeling he was going to need a little analgesic to deal with Fury.

Apparently he looked awake enough, because Fury's head tilted in some kind of greeting. "Stark."

"Don't wear it out," Tony muttered. Fury's presence made him even more suspicious, and automatically resentful in advance because there was no way this conversation was going to go well.

Sure, maybe on some level he wanted Fury's approval, but that didn't mean he expected to ever get it. And he sure as *hell* didn't trust the guy. All his experiences with him had involved Fury lying to him, manipulating him, and frequently, breaking into his house. Plus Fury had supposedly been friends with his father and that was not the greatest recommendation (no offence to Steve).

"Turns out you're a lucky man."

Lucky. Tony snorted bleakly. "Is that what this is."

"Oh, I'd say so." Fury let himself into the plastic tent, pulling some small device out of his pocket - Tony couldn't get a good look - and activating it. Surveillance jammer maybe. "I listened to what the doctors had to say. They're smart folks. Worth listening to. And let me tell you, they were not expecting you to wake up the same damn pain in my ass you have previously been. You might say... someone up there likes you."

Tony huffed impatiently at the melodrama and made a show of shifting on the bed, stretching all his-- almost all his limbs. He looked Fury up and down, raising an eyebrow. "You know, most people bring grapes. Is a 'get well soon' card too much to ask for?"

"Mister Stark," Fury said, leaning forward, both hands braced on the bed's foot rail. He scowled a little at Tony. "I believe it is long past time we talked about this little love connection between you and Loki."

"Love conne-- what, no, there is no love." Tony gestured in disbelief at the sling immobilizing his shoulder. Love connection? Come *on*. "He *stabbed* me." No, not too much weakness, not around SHIELD, just a self-absorbed genius diva: "He scratched up my *suit!*"

"Wounded pride aside, there is a reason that we use specialized agents for these kinds of assignments--"

"And what kinds of assignments would 'these' be?"

Fury fixed him with a piercing stare. "Stark, you don't want me to tell you what I think you're up to."

Tony winced a little and chose to let that one go.

"As I was saying." Fury clasped his hands behind his back, doing his best imposing loom. "We have specialized agents who are *trained* for these assignments. They know what to expect, how to prepare, how to handle it when they become attached--"

He sputtered incredulously. "I'm not going to--"

"*Did I sound like I was goddamn finished?*"

Tony held up his good hand in surrender and tried to look contrite. Or something resembling contrite. Whatever.

"Now, I would just *love* to tell you to leave this to the professionals." Fury shot him a withering look. "But you and I both know you're going to do whatever the hell you want."

Tony put on a cocky smirk, using it to cover his irritation. What Fury needed to remember was that *Tony didn't work for him*. Tony was a private citizen. Tony was a part of the Avengers because he wanted to be, because he wanted to make the world a better place. Tony was *in this fucking hospital bed* because he wanted to make the world a better place. Fury couldn't fire him, or transfer him, or do much of anything to him. Tony Stark owned a multi-billion dollar empire that spanned the globe, and answered to no one but Pepper Potts.

"So in the interests of not getting your *fool ass killed*, I *strongly* recommend you consult with one of those very professionals you live with. You have resources, Stark. Use them."

Tony blinked, cocked his head, and looked at Fury more closely. "Wait, are you worried about me?"

Fury's glare intensified.

"You are, you're worried about me." Tony gave his most obnoxious grin and hoped it covered up the traitorous warmth in his chest. "Nick, that's so sweet. I didn't know you cared."

"And let your people know what you're doing once in a while," Fury ordered, steadfastly ignoring him. "It wouldn't kill you to write a report or two. Give everyone a heads-up that you're about to hand the enemy a sparkly-ass magic phone."

Dear god, the *cellphone*, and Tony felt something suddenly tremble in his throat at the reminder of how badly he'd messed up. He wanted to fold his arms protectively but couldn't. He felt bare under Fury's gaze; exposed and judged.

"Someone's been telling tales out of class," he grumbled instead. "And nothing I make *sparkles*, for the record. I'm less *Twilight*, more *Interview with a Vampire*."

(Steve had discovered *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* lately, and was steadily working his way through the seasons. Tony had tried to tease him about it and been promptly derailed by Clint jumping to a passionate defense of the show, which was downright *precious*.)

(He wondered if Sarah Michelle Gellar wanted to come meet the Avengers. It wouldn't be that difficult to arrange.)

"I don't give a rat's ass if you like to dress up in a cape and fangs and call yourself a creature of the night." Fury's scathing retort immediately provided Tony a glorious mental image. "Email bullet points and Cliff Notes if that's what it takes. You wanted to be in a goddamn team, now act like it."

Tony had never wanted to be in a 'goddamn team'. He met Fury's gaze with a level stare of his own, not backing down. "Your concern is noted."

Maybe he could be a little more forthcoming, though. He didn't want to write something up after every visit because he wasn't entirely comfortable admitting how often he'd seen Loki

already, but there was a lot of middle ground between 'every visit' and... what he'd given them so far.

"It better be." With that, Fury swept out of the tent. At the door he said to someone, "He's all yours." Tony was expecting Sweeney again, but someone much more familiar pushed into the room, into the tent.

"Hey, Tony." Steve made a face that was probably meant to be a smile, something twisted with discomfort and pity. "You gave us quite a scare."

Undersuit soaked with blood, the world dissolved to fog, nearly dead, alien bacteria eating away at his flesh. Tony swallowed. He gave a flippant smile back that didn't quite make it to his eyes. "You know your problem, Steve, you've got no faith in me."

"I think my problem is my team-mate's got a death wish," Steve shot back, then grimaced.

"Little close to home?" Tony said wryly.

"Little bit." Steve came around to Tony's right and perched on the side of the bed. He held up a cellphone briefly then put it on the bed next to the pain med controller. "How are you holding up?"

Tony closed his eyes for a moment, long enough to take a long breath in and blow it back out. Steady. He looked up at Steve and said brightly, "So, how many people did Loki kill?"

Wait, the cheerful tone of voice wasn't really appropriate for that question, whoops.

The way Steve's expression darkened didn't bode well, and then instead of answering he said, "A couple of folks are still in intensive care," and damn.

"Well, damn," Tony said aloud, because there was no reason not to. "That's, what, ten? Fifteen?"

"Thirty-three," Steve murmured, looking down at his hands.

Tony made a strangled sound without meaning to. He felt sick.

"They were dead before you got there, Tony, you couldn't h--"

"Please stop talking." He put his hand over his face; squeezed his temples between finger and thumb. Behind his eyelids he could see Loki fighting, whirling, all fluid movements and *knives in people*, blood running everywhere. Armies. Bodies in streets.

Loki actually stopped to talk to him, of all people he was the only one who seemed to-- why couldn't he have *got through*, he was too slow, too *useless* and *thirty-three people* with families and lives and tacky mailboxes.

Worse than failure, he'd made that damn cellphone, he'd put another weapon in Loki's hands.

He dragged in a breath and pretended it didn't sound like a sob.

Steve put a hand on the side of his shoulder and didn't say anything. Just sat with him quietly for a while. It gave Tony time to rebuild his armor (metaphorical, he was going to have to repair the suit, the joint was ruined, *hit a nerve* and could he even fly with only one hand to steer with). Game-face on, mask in place. Lights, cameras, microphones, Mister Stark could you tell us why you've been joking around with a murderer if you can't even talk him out of slaughtering a church?

Stock price must have taken a hit when he was injured, every time that happened the Board freaked out and wanted cutbacks, he'd have to talk to them, smooth feathers. The press would be all over Pepper, he needed to make a statement, no questions, he couldn't handle those right now. He'd ordered turf to line the Avengers' common floor with grass and he didn't know what had happened to that delivery. Loki had been all mischief and *fun* talking about pranks and cheap innuendo, and then thrown a tantrum and murdered thirty-three people.

I don't know what to do, Steve, he nearly said out loud.

Eventually he curled his hand around the phone Steve had brought. He said, with a rasp in his voice, "How's Pepper?"

"She's holding up." Steve gave his shoulder one last squeeze and let go. "As soon as we knew you were going to be okay--"

"Is that what this is?" Tony said before he could stop himself.

"Yes," Steve said without hesitation, all baby blues and patriotic Captain America voice. "You didn't get shipped back in a box, did you? You're alive, and if anyone I know can get past the rest of it, it's you."

Well, yippee. Tony sighed, and resisted the urge to say something mean and petty about just where Cap could shove those *inspirational* words. "I should get some more rest," he muttered, even though that was all he'd been doing. He still felt worn out.

"Sure," Steve said, "of course," and left him alone.

--

He called Pepper on her private number, burned into his memory. She didn't answer right away; when it switched to voicemail he hung up and phoned right back. A couple more rings and he was rewarded with a click and the sound of her voice, slightly aggressive: "Who is this?"

Tony closed his eyes and let the sound wash over him, safe and familiar and *home*. "That was a little hostile, Miss Potts," he said lightly. "Points off for terrible phone demeanor."

A shaky exhale on the other end of the line. "*Tony*."

For a moment, he couldn't say anything. He was overwhelmed by the need to wrap his arms around her and he couldn't even do that because of the damned sling. Well, and that she wasn't here in person, but even then. He swallowed and pictured that little wisp of hair that

always escaped control to float in front of her ear. "Were you in Kentucky? I feel like I remember... it's a little fuzzy."

"I was there," Pepper confirmed.

She'd probably been pretty freaked out. Tony had been pretty freaked out and he'd had the benefit of drugs. But that was with SHIELD; the first hospital he only had vague impressions of and the gap in his memory bothered him.

"Thought so," he murmured.

After a pause, Pepper said hesitantly, "They said you-- in the surgery-- they found damage to a nerve."

Tony opened his eyes and stared at the far wall, the door frame. "Yeah. I, uh. I'm going to need a specialist, get a second opinion. Maybe a shortlist of the top five, put Alicia on it..."

"Hands off my P.A.," Pepper teased, but it was obvious her heart wasn't in it.

Hands. Hand. Tony grimaced and pushed that thought away.

"Are you still in isolation?"

"Judging by the rabble they let in here earlier, I don't think so." He thought about the Board, the media, and sighed a little. "I assume a preliminary statement went out."

"One saying you were injured while defending the public," Pepper confirmed; "in surgery and expected to recover. Another advising that due to comp-- complications, you'd been transferred to specialist care."

Tony felt his heartbeat stutter a moment. No optimistic prognosis on the second statement to cushion the share price, and that along with the little stutter in Pepper's voice that suggested they really had expected--

Didn't matter. He was... alive, and he'd figure the rest of it out. "I guess we release an update advising I'm recovering well. It's going to be a few more days until I'm out of here, probably don't want to wait that long."

"Yeah." She paused a moment. "I miss you."

Tony clutched the phone a little tighter. "Me, too."

"How are you doing?" she asked gently.

Automatically, Tony's eyes went to the sling, to the hand he couldn't move even though half of it *felt* just fine. He didn't know how to answer that question except with a joke, so he said, "I'm still holding out for a hot nurse with a sponge bath. ...Actually, that probably happened while I was out. I feel violated. Plus I have a needle in my dick, I feel like I should have had the option to safe-word out of that."

"I'll strike catheters off the list," Pepper said dryly, playing along.

"Catheters were never *on* the list, the list is strictly needle-free." He could hear her take a breath and knew it was going to be more of exactly the things he didn't want to think about. To pre-empt her, he said, "What about that thing with Legal, the trademark infringement?"

"You really want to talk about work right now?" She sounded doubtful.

"I would really like to, yes."

"Oh," Pepper said softly, catching on. "Yes. Well, Cytrovas rejected our terms of settlement. They had a counter-proposal, but it was blatantly insufficient. Apparently they'd rather we take them to court."

"Tell me how pitiful their offer was," Tony encouraged her, shifting his weight to get more comfortable. This was good, this was better, he could deal with this. He held onto the phone and let Pepper's voice wash over him.

--

Thor was the next one to visit. Well - not counting the regular pestering of medical personnel who kept coming to check the machines, check Tony's vitals, the urine color in the catheter bag, all that hospital stuff. Tony mostly rolled his head to the side that had a blank wall and ignored them.

Thor, though - Thor stood outside the isolation tent and gestured at it. "May I enter your chamber?"

For that tiny gesture, Tony would have given him almost anything. "Come on in, Fabio," he said with a tired smile. "I hear I owe you some thanks."

Thor nodded gravely as he came inside. "Asgard would normally not intervene in the sickness of a mortal, but I argued on your behalf. Father would not permit you to be brought to our healers but I was allowed a jar of balm to treat your wound, as consideration for what you are doing for us. For Loki."

He wasn't doing it for *Thor*. He definitely wasn't doing it for Asgard. For that matter, Tony wasn't sure he was doing it at all. It didn't seem to have made much of a difference.

He didn't say any of that, just restrained himself to a bitter huff. "Oh yeah, it's been a roaring success."

"He visits you," Thor said, frowning a little resentfully. "*Speaks* to you. Of his own free will."

Tony gave Thor a mild eye-roll; he gestured at the sling, at the huge wound underneath. "Pretty sure he did this of his own free will too."

"Yet it is more regard than he has shown anyone in... quite some time," Thor said, voice low.

"*Regard*," Tony repeated incredulously, practically choking on it. And people accused *him* of being socially inappropriate.

Besides, any 'regard' Loki might have shown was about manipulating Tony and getting him on side. Except... he could remember Loki crouched over him asking why they had to be at odds. Now that he thought about it... hm. He tapped his fingers on top of the mattress absently. "I guess your brother's not the kind of guy who willingly spends time with people he can't stand."

"He was very good at making his displeasure known, when forced," Thor agreed.

So. What did that mean? Because Tony was pretty sure Loki had meant it when he'd done the bit about false hope and expecting Tony to turn on him. And when he jammed the knife in, for that matter. But people were complicated; Loki was sure as the devil no exception to that. It was possible to believe one thing and then another. People even believed contradictory things at the same time.

It just hadn't been enough to turn things Tony's way. And he was sorely regretting that he'd ever given a damn in the first place. Asgard had fucked Loki up, yes. There was more to the picture than Loki just being a psychopath all along. But the damage was done and Loki didn't show any sign that he *wanted* to change.

(The jokes, the playful texts, the desperate need to justify the attack on Jotunheim--)

No, the self-centered *murdering scumbag* had plunged a fucking knife into Tony's shoulder. But it was going to be fine, because he'd go find a specialist, he'd find the best, someone who might not have a flash SHIELD security clearance but could deal with nerves and human biology.

Loki could go to hell, Tony would find a doctor, maybe throw some money around and get another medical wing named after himself, end of story.

--

Exhaustion left Tony mostly dozing, otherwise he'd have started taking apart the medical machines to see what he could make from them. Since the arc reactor, he generally felt like he couldn't get a full breath of air; now it was ramped up to eleven, the left side of his chest some sort of mess he didn't want to look at too closely. He got a skewed glance when they changed out the packing and then really wished he hadn't.

The physical therapist came and did a bunch of testing, all of which made it extremely difficult for Tony to just ignore his left arm. The guy - Jeremy, he said - replaced the smaller bit of foam with a splint that wrapped from Tony's thumb over the back of his hand and hooked onto the thumb again, pulling it inwards. An extra piece looped over the four fingers, holding them partially bent. It looked like Tony was making a bird beak with his hand. He hated it immediately.

His sleep was restless; he didn't like being somewhere he couldn't control. In between naps he climbed carefully off the bed, awkward with the strapped-on sling. First just standing

upright, leaning on the bed, then progressing to a few paces back and forth, within the short reach his tubes allowed. Occasionally he entertained himself with some incredibly violent, Loki-related fantasies, until it occurred to him that they all required two working hands, and that kind of killed the mood.

He wanted boundaries, closed doors, security codes. He felt like he didn't have anywhere private here, nowhere where he didn't have to perform. A couple of agents disassembled the isolation tent and took it away. Without the plastic tent acting as a room-within-a-room, it became really obvious how little privacy he had.

People kept opening the door, probably not as many as it felt like but they just *walked in* whenever they wanted, and the door was solid so he couldn't see them coming. Even when Tony was alone and the corridor outside was silent, the two-way mirror loomed over the room to remind him of the possibility that someone was there.

He couldn't see the other side of anything, and at least with the isolation tent he'd had an eye on who was about to open it. It was like SHIELD was allergic to windows. There was a joke about transparency there but Tony was too tense to really appreciate it.

Apparently he was adjusting well enough to food; they disconnected one of his tubes, and attached the pain medication machine to a wheeled stand Tony could drag around with him. At that point the whole world opened up, or at least the corridor outside his room; when he proved he could walk the short distance to the toilet unaided, they finally removed his catheter. (And halle-fucking-lujah to that.) Admittedly, despite his efforts, he did wind up needing the bench in the shower.

Tony wasn't allowed a tablet; apparently he was a security risk and that was... okay, that was fair, and in a weird way made him feel a little better because it meant that someone at some level of authority respected what Tony could do, but it was also damned annoying because he wanted to get into the medical file they were keeping on him. The phone they'd given him was an ancient little brick, able to make calls and send texts and not much else. Still, it was his lifeline to Pepper and he appreciated it for that.

All he could really do to pass the time was walk laps around the room, or down to the shower; wear himself out, sleep lightly and fitfully, then do it all again.

He imagined Loki visiting, just showing up out of the blue. Not that he wanted to banter with Loki now, or try to untangle that Gordian knot of screwed up psyche. It was just amusing to imagine Fury having a stroke over the way Loki simply breezed past any kind of security.

(He'd really thought he was getting somewhere. Thought that they... that he...)

People kept coming to *inspect* him and each time Tony clenched his jaw afterwards and shuffled down the corridor to wash his skin where he'd been touched. He knew, okay, he knew it was fucked up, but it was just a little quirk, it was fine, it was-- when he finally got home and had his own space again, he'd be fine. He just had to fumble awkwardly with the soap in the meantime and detach himself from the patches of numbness on his left hand, like he was washing a stranger's skin.

Ugh, gross, washing a stranger's hand, maybe not. Cybernetic though, an incredibly realistic skin-facsimile, reticulated joints; Tony could build *amazing* joints after so many iterations of the Iron Man armor.

The sound of other people breathing was starting to make his skin crawl. Tony could picture every little particle in that second-hand air coming to rest on him. All kinds of germs suspended in the moisture of every sour, odorous breath. For a medical suite it was horrifically unsanitary.

Too much time unconscious left him weak (*best case scenario, extensive physical therapy...*) so he tried to keep up the exercise. Pitiful as it was. Turn around, walk the other way. He wasn't *pacing*, he just needed to keep moving. He shouldn't be getting tired so quickly. He couldn't afford to be this weak. When he got home he'd need to spend some serious time in the gym with Happy...

But no hits to the shoulder, not for a while. Just a little while.

Sleep. Medical check. Wash. Walk. Firm pressure of the strap around his waist. Carrying weight in a sling. Confined. Escape route memorized: *sixteen steps from the door, fork right, thirty-three steps, turn right...*

If you attempt to leave or play any games, I will tase you and watch Supernanny while you drool into the carpet.

Not the same thing. Not the same. He knew that in his head. The rational part of his head. The rest of his head thought about screaming when he woke up in his Malibu house in just the wrong frame of mind. Which was fine, actually. He'd used that feeling. That was what he did, he took scraps and made better things. SHIELD had ruined his home? Perfect impetus to begin Stark Tower. Build the arc reactor powered facilities he'd been dreaming about. There was always something to build. Tony Stark, Stark Industries, always moving forward. One step in front of the other.

Wash. Walk. *Fork right, thirty-three steps, turn right.*

He sagged against the edge of the bed, breathing heavily.

Fuck.

--

"Think fast," Clint said, strolling through the door; Tony spun towards the sound, arm coming up automatically, and managed to catch half the bundle of fabric that was flying through the air. The other half smacked against his forearm and fell at his feet. Clothes. A pair of sneakers followed, one after the other.

"I've authorized your discharge," Sweeney said, following Barton in. "Ideally I'd prefer you under observation a little longer but we'd like this facility left intact."

"Yeah, good call," Tony agreed distractedly, sorting through the clothing. Someone had cut apart the shoulder of a t-shirt and added in velcro strips. That... made a lot of sense. Ok, he'd have to pick some shirts he wasn't too attached to and get his tailor to do some more like this, so they were easier to get on with one hand.

Flippantly, he lifted his head to address the surveillance mirror, "If you're modest, you might want to turn your back for this."

"I want to see you again in one week to check on your progress," Sweeney said. She didn't bother looking away; she even came closer. "Just a wound check, so it doesn't have to be a SHIELD facility."

At least she didn't try to do it all for him; she waited until he'd struggled into the underwear (clean! clean underwear!) and most of the way into the jeans, then he grimaced and nodded surrender.

"Wow, this is like a Thursday night in reverse," Clint said, lounging against the wall as Sweeney buttoned up Tony's jeans.

And okay, maybe Tony was feeling a little more humiliated than he wanted to admit to himself, because he found himself unleashing the full force of his best bedroom stare. Heated eyes, teeth slowly dragged over lip, voice dipping deep and breathy. "We get back to the Tower, you can take them back off of me..."

Sweeney inhaled very quietly but she moved on to unfastening the sling.

Clint's smirk had faltered and he was staring back at Tony, wide-eyed and flushing a little. "That's-- deeply disturbing. Has Nat been giving you lessons? Oh my *god*, that's a terrible idea."

Tony gave a low, filthy chuckle as he popped the snap fasteners on the cotton gown he was wearing one by one. He did feel a lot better with a bit of control back in his hands-- hand. Metaphorically. "Oh, this is *all* me, Barton."

It didn't quite land; Clint was relaxed again, recovered. Shame. "Damn, Stark, you've been holding out on us. We could have been using you on honeypot missions this whole time."

"Actually, that's a mistake of terminology, there. Any mission I'm on would be a honeypot mission by definition, so..." He trailed off, shrugging as best he could. Twinge of damaged flesh on the left.

"Glad we got all that sorted out," Sweeney said drily. "Like I was saying--"

Her hands were light and impersonal as she helped him get the gown off and the t-shirt on. He probably could have managed it himself, but it was easier to concentrate on keeping that damn shoulder still with her helping. She kept talking about the next steps, reminding him what they'd discussed about looking after the wound, with her voice steady and professional the whole time, like nothing was out of the ordinary. It helped, some. Especially when she put the sling back on him and strapped it all in place.

It felt really good to be wearing clothes again.

"And anything, I mean *anything*, starts to seem out of the ordinary, you *call me*, Mister Stark," she finished up, nodding in the direction of his shoulder. "Everything looks clean but we can't afford to take any chances on this."

Tony smiled grimly as he worked his feet into the sneakers. They were velcro too; someone had thought of everything. "Oh, I'm highly motivated to cooperate, believe me."

Clint snorted. "There's a first time for everything."

"Go on, Agent Barton'll take you to the airfield."

Tony rubbed the scruff on his chin as they headed out. "Our first stop is to my barber, right?"

He'd already decided what face to wear in front of the other Avengers, to minimize the amount of over-solicitous *concern* that would be directed his way. The concern would probably even be genuine, but it felt so much like the ingratiating B.S. he'd dealt with his whole adult life. He tended to react like people were just sucking up, then they got *offended* and *hurt*, and all that interpersonal crap was just too messy and boring to deal with.

Pepper was a slightly different case; he genuinely felt bad when he made her upset, which was... unpleasant. He wanted her not to be too worried, but he also tried not to wear as many masks around her. Honesty signaled all that trust and intimacy stuff, right? It would be about finding the right balance.

Right now, he really just wanted to spend about a week on his own in a room with lots of windows and a clear view of anyone approaching.

He followed Barton through the building they were in, assuming it was a building and not some kind of underground lair. The elevator they got into headed down, not up, and then its doors opened on a garage level with a bunch of black cars with tinted windows.

"Wow," Tony said.

Clint snorted, walking towards one seemingly at random. "I know."

"I mean, wow. They really just embraced the shady secret agency stereotype, huh?"

"You don't know the half of it," Clint said, unlocking the car. It was impossible to tell whether he really meant it or was just playing up the mysterious spy angle for kicks.

Despite the effort Tony had put into keeping active while he was in here, walking with purpose instead of just doing laps of one small room sapped his energy badly. He collapsed into the passenger seat as soon as he could, exhausted already and praying this airfield they were going to was close by. He didn't think he could cope with a long drive as a passenger right now. He barely coped with other people driving at the best of times and this was definitely not the best of times.

"Just take a load off," Clint murmured, proving he was smarter than he liked to pretend. "It'll be better when we get to the jet."

Tony didn't really see how the jet was going to be any better but he leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes.

It turned out the jet had Steve and Bruce in it, but more importantly it had Pepper. She was sitting in the back, looking up at Tony with her hands clasped together tightly and that particular teary smile of exhausted relief that he'd seen on her more than he cared to think about.

He kind of wanted to cry with relief himself. Instead he put on a straight face and said, without looking away from Pepper, "Security breach. There's a civilian on the jet."

"Huh," he heard Steve say, voice full of badly acted surprise. "Would you look at that. She must have stowed away."

"Good god, you really are helpless without me," Tony replied, and ignored whatever answer was made in favor of tucking himself into Pepper's embrace. He wrapped his good arm around her waist, pressed his face against the crook of her neck, and closed his eyes to just breathe her in.

A moment later, he thought of something horrifying and drew back. "Pepper, close your eyes! Good lord, you can't see me like this--"

Pepper gave a little huff, unimpressed. "Please, I see you injured every second week."

"In these *shoes*. No no--" Tony caught her chin with his good hand when she automatically started to look down, "--I don't want you to remember me this way. Not in velcro shoes."

"Strap in, kids," Clint called from the pilot seat, while Bruce muttered something about having him back that Tony couldn't quite make out.

Tony eyed the straps reluctantly, and let Pepper help. The seatbelt in the car had been a little awkward, on the wrong side of his body, but doable. These... well, at least he was used to Pepper helping with little touches, personal things like ties and cufflinks; in a weird way it was even soothing to have her up close and briskly fastening things.

When she was done, he reached out with his right hand to find one of hers and give it a gentle squeeze. She squeezed back briefly and it was nice, the skin contact, until Tony thought about *alien bacteria* and let go of her with a flinch.

To cover it, he said, "Have you got my phone?"

She reached for the purse next to her and produced one of his cellphones. It was one of the larger screen size models, which was more than Tony needed; he had no attention of making a video call until he'd had a chance to clean up properly, get his professional armor back.

Tuning out the rest of the jet, Tony phoned the head of PR.

It only rang two and a half times before a slightly breathless voice answered. "Tony, hi, how are you?" and then a little muffled, "We'll pick this up again later."

"Did I interrupt a meeting?"

"Nothing that can't wait. Let me just--" Sounds of murmuring, movement, a door closing. Theo's voice came a little lower, closer to the microphone, concern leaking through. "Okay, closed room. What's the damage?"

Well, that was... grimly appropriate phrasing. Tony shook himself and made sure his voice was firm and confident. "Okay, Theo. Here's what we're working with: treatment was a roaring success, I've been released to recuperate in less depressing, more luxurious surroundings. Feel free to work the language. There's some nerve damage, I don't know how public we want to go with that, looking at a slow recuperation over about eighteen months. Throw a couple of strategies together and email them through for review."

He could feel the eyes of Steve and Pepper on him, and studiously ignored them. He wasn't lying. A couple of years recovery, that was possible, Sweeney had said so. Trim it a little to a year and a half, eighteen months, that was feasible. Months didn't sound so bad. Months was... he could wrap his head around months.

"Oh, sorry to hear that, sir," Theo said; banalities, platitudes, boring, *boring*. "I'm-- everyone's really glad you're okay, though."

'Okay'. Tony was going to start screaming every time someone called him that. "Include something about the people who lost loved ones," he said instead. "Our thoughts are with them, my regrets that I couldn't do more. We want to express my thanks and gratitude to the doctors and nurses of whatever that hospital was, I appreciate everything they did for me while I was in their care, you know the drill."

"I'm not keen on the regrets, Tony," Theo said, a frown in his voice. "We don't want to imply that your actions were insufficient or that you--"

"Thirty people died," Tony snapped, fingers tightening on the phone. Yeah, Steve and Pepper were *definitely* looking at him now. "Of course I wish I'd saved them. You can suggest alternate wording but the message is non-negotiable."

Theo paused, then said, "Yes, Mister Stark. We'll work up some options and send them through within the hour."

"Good." Tony wanted to rub his forehead but he only had the hand holding the phone and he was starting to realize just how much of an issue this was going to be. Even eighteen months was a prospect he wasn't sure he could deal with. "Tell the team they did good, okay? I'll be fine, nothing keeps Iron Man down for long."

After he hung up the phone and passed it back to Pepper, there was silence for a couple of seconds in the jet. Clint was the first to break it.

"Makes sense. If you say Iron Man's out of the game it's like blood in the water. People get cocky, crime will spike."

Tony's gut clenched and he fixed his eyes on the back of the pilot's chair. "Not to mention it would be a lie, since Iron Man's *not* out of the game."

Bruce shifted uncomfortably. Clint drawled, "So... going with denial, then."

"Let it go," Pepper said, and it wasn't clear whether she was talking to Clint or Tony but he dropped it anyway. He was tired and he just wanted to be somewhere private and safe. As far as he was concerned, they couldn't get home soon enough.

Surgery, grafts, physical therapy. He could fix this. He could get this fixed. He could afford the best, and everything was going to be fine. Nothing kept Iron Man down for long.

You're a fool, little king.

#

Chapter End Notes

Summary: Tony finds out that his stab wound got infected and he was transferred to a SHIELD facility because the infection wasn't from Earth. Basically he's alive because Thor convinced Odin to, if not allow Tony onto Asgard, at least let Thor take some healing ointment to him. Also the knife 'hit a nerve' and so Tony's left hand is essentially paralyzed, with sections of numbness on his hand and forearm. The prognosis is not good. By the end of the chapter he is flying home and pretty much of the opinion that Loki is a Giant Bag of Dicks.

...He's probably not wrong.

Wallerian Degeneration

Chapter Summary

Tony is coping Extremely Well (TM) with his current condition, if you define 'coping well' as brooding extensively and stalking neurologists. Loki, to exactly no one's surprise, can't leave well enough alone.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this one took so long; it... was not cooperative.

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

Fire. Tony jerked awake, choked-off noise in his throat as he fought to free himself. His left arm was tied to his body. His shoulder was burning. He managed to get his right arm free; managed to grab at the source of the pain and press down hard, just above his collarbone. It felt like fire, nerves screaming.

Healing.

He squeezed his eyes closed, gritting his teeth against the pain. The doctor had said it would hurt as the little nerves around the wound healed. She hadn't said it would hurt *this* much.

"Tony. Tony." One hand in his hair, thumb gently rubbing his scalp. Something being pressed to his lips. "Here, your pills, these will help--"

With an effort Tony opened his mouth for the painkillers, still pressing as hard as he could on his left shoulder. Pepper brought a bottle to his lips next, water; tipped it carefully as he swallowed.

Tony tried not to whimper but god, it *hurt*. Tears slipped down his face as he blinked his eyes open. Pepper was crouched next to his side of the bed, still petting his hair. He'd woken her up.

"Oh, Tony," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Tony closed his eyes again, leaning into her touch. His skin burned. He couldn't help making soft, small noises of pain. All he could do was lay there, half-curved up, and hold on until the painkillers kicked in.

He was vaguely aware of Pepper shifting; her hand stilled for a moment in his hair, then started stroking again. She placed her other hand over his, over his burning skin. He realized she'd settled in for the long haul.

"Sorry," he managed to gasp out, but he couldn't bring himself to tell her to stop.

"Don't be," she murmured. "I'm here." Steady rhythm of her fingers in his hair. "Okay? I'm here."

Tony gave a low, pained moan. It felt like an eternity, filled with stray tears and Pepper's soothing. Eventually, the fire ebbed to something almost tolerable. He slumped in exhaustion.

"You want some more water?" Pepper asked quietly.

He did, but he didn't want to move. Not even to lift his head to drink something. "Inna morning," he mumbled. His voice was thick and groggy, and he winced to hear it. His shoulder ached, pain dulled but definitely still there. "Get s'm sleep, Pep."

She paused, then kissed his forehead and climbed to her feet. Tony could see her dark figure move around the bed. The mattress dipped as she got back in.

He stared up at the ceiling, eyes still wet. It took a long time for sleep to return.

--

"...and a video conference after lunch with L.A." Pepper listed off her schedule as she finished up a smoothie and put it on the counter in front of him. "Apart from those everything is flexible, so anything you need..."

Tony stared at the smoothie and sighed. Normally, he'd tease and wheedle so Pepper would make him one. Somehow, knowing he couldn't do it for himself - at least not without a lot of effort - took much of the appeal out of having someone do it for him.

"You should go to the office," he said tiredly.

"I can take a few more days," Pepper said immediately. "There's nothing I need to do there that I can't do from here. I don't want to leave--"

"While I'm helpless, I know." Tony made himself pick the smoothie up and drink a little. He felt like a zombie. Usually he didn't need much sleep but lately he was constantly exhausted.

"*Helpless*," Pepper repeated with an eye roll. "I'm more worried you'll get frustrated and take apart everything in the suite."

Tony let the corner of his mouth tilt up. How did she know exactly what to say to make him feel better? To make him feel like he was still...

(dangerous)

(powerful)

...capable.

"Sorry," he said. "Little defensive there."

Pepper said something understanding and gentle; meaningless words that Tony's brain filed away as *small talk - low priority*. Everything was low priority. The painkillers made the world feel muffled. His shoulder throbbed. He could remember the whirl of black and green. Over and over.

"Tony," Pepper said patiently.

Tony blinked. Pepper. The office. "You should drop by in person," he repeated. "Reassure the troops. It's good for morale."

He flashed her a bright smile and drank his smoothie. For a moment, Pepper just stood there, watching him. He didn't know what she was thinking.

Finally she said, "I'll spend some time tomorrow. Maybe a half day. Satisfied, Mister Stark?"

"Thank you, Miss Potts," Tony said. Smooth, practiced. Their little in-joke, normality, because that meant everything must be fine.

Remembering what to say shouldn't feel like such hard work.

When she'd originally offered to work from home for a while it had seemed like a great idea. He hadn't realized how on edge he'd be, even after getting out of the SHIELD medical facility. He hated feeling *watched*. Everyone wanted to call him or visit him or talk to him. It seemed like every single Avenger had to be individually told to *go away*. Fortunately Tony was well beyond caring how petty he sounded.

(Well, every Avenger except Natasha, who was still on some kind of mission - Clint had strongly implied that Fury had *found* her a mission to distract her, which seemed suspiciously soft-hearted for Fury and Romanoff both, but on the other hand it was pretty plausible that Natasha would hate feeling helpless.)

The only person Tony was willing to deal with other than Pepper was the physical therapist, and only out of necessity. Nerve regenerated slowly, Jeremy said. About an inch a month. If Tony wanted even the slightest chance of there being something for the nerves to connect to - prevent the muscles wasting away - he had to be diligent.

For the sake of his hand, he could grit his teeth and force himself to let a stranger into his space while he was vulnerable. But it took a toll. Everything was just... a little bit too much.

Small talk, in-jokes, normality. Everything was under control. Tony rubbed his right temple and went to brush his teeth.

Toothbrush on bench. Pick up toothpaste. Flip-top cap. Apply with unerring precision. Toothpaste down, pick up toothbrush. So . damn . slow.

If he'd been faster, could he have dodged Loki-- no. But shot him maybe, propelled him away. If he'd said something different, could he have changed the way things played out? If he'd done... just done something, something different, something *right*, something that would have made everything turn out okay.

There were people already dead before he got there, Steve had said. They couldn't stop Loki. None of it was okay.

Tony leaned forward and rested his forehead against the cool glass of the bathroom mirror. He was so tired. Hopefully that was a good thing. That probably meant the body was using all its energy for healing, right? He could tolerate that.

It would heal, it had to heal. He went into every battle worrying about *dying* and it had never crossed his mind to prepare for this. He hadn't talked about it, hadn't let himself think too deeply, but now he found himself muttering out loud, "Should have known the asshole would find something worse than just killing me."

He heard a sharp inhale from the doorway - Pepper was standing there, holding his phone. "Don't say that," she urged, reaching out for him.

Great, he'd upset her, and he just... he couldn't look out for her right now, not and hold himself together at the same time, he just couldn't. Helplessness ached in his throat and Tony hated it almost more than the anger. Somehow, he mustered up the effort to try to joke. "Well, worst comes to the worst, Loki broke it, I'll tell him to fix it."

"Loki," Pepper repeated, flat and unimpressed and apparently that had been the wrong choice of joke.

Although now that Tony thought about it he remembered Loki using magic on that cut, at the energy conference. A sudden burst of hope jolted through him and it was a long shot, it was the longest of shots but he really needed some hope to cling to. "It can work. It can work," he insisted. It even *felt* like a lie but he wanted to just make believe for a little while. "When he's not murdering people, I think he kind of likes me."

"Yes," Pepper said in that same flat tone, "you mentioned that."

Tony faltered, staring at her. Had they even talked about Loki lately? Was she talking about after his surgery? He had no idea what he might have said. He didn't like the turn of her mood, it worried him. "What?"

Pepper hesitated, then shook her head. "Nothing. It doesn't matter."

Obviously it did or she wouldn't have brought it up. Tony's frown deepened but he let it drop, for now. "Anyway, Loki's like a shark, obviously he's going to try to rip people in half but he can, he could do nice things too." He could make the workshop look like a tropical reef, a jumble of color and shoals of illusory fish. That didn't really mean much in the face of so many innocent people. "I guess sharks aren't really known for helping people out, that was a terrible analogy. No, I take that back, it's actually a perfect analogy."

"Shark attacks on humans aren't as common as people think," Pepper pointed out, either distracted or trying to distract him, Tony wasn't sure. "Loki's much worse."

"That's true." Tony was more than willing to be distracted, if that was what she was doing. "Much worse. Maybe bigger. Like a whale. Yes, oh, he's a white whale--"

"Oh god," Pepper muttered, instantly catching on.

"--Call me Ishmael!" Tony crowed. The idea of running a few harpoons through Loki was pretty appealing right now. Although, rendering his blubber down for lantern oil might be overkill. Not that Loki had much blubber, just lean, lethal muscle. Maybe steak?

(...*feasting on the marrow from your bones...*)

"I think you mean Ahab," Pepper said patiently.

"But that's not how the line goes, it's 'call me Ishmael', you can't say call me Ahab."

Pepper didn't respond in kind; she looked at him with that serious, worried expression, which was the last thing he wanted. "Tony... are you okay?"

No. Tony stared at her, any kind of answer stuck in his throat. What was he supposed to say to that? Everyone said the odds were against him and even the *good* outcome would take two years. He felt a little like he might not even make it to two weeks without going out of his mind. At the same time, he didn't want to talk about it because that would feel too much like accepting it and he just... couldn't. Wouldn't. He refused.

Jeremy said if Tony wanted any recovery, he had to work for it. Tony was no stranger to hard work. He was a *genius*. He'd beaten the Ten Rings, he'd beaten the bomb shrapnel and the palladium. He could beat this. He'd figure it out. He *had* to.

"I will be," he said finally.

Pepper gave him a small smile, then looked down at the phone she was holding. "Alicia called, that's what I came in to tell you. She said the neurologist you picked from the shortlist declined."

Tony paused, genuinely confused for a moment. Maybe the painkillers had made him misunderstand. "What?"

Pepper winced, just a fraction. "Apparently he wasn't interested. Did you have a second choice?"

Tony scowled, suddenly irritated. He'd picked this guy mostly due to being based in New York City; the others on the shortlist were just as good. But he shouldn't *have* to pick another one. What kind of doctor would *turn down* an Avenger who'd been injured while protecting the public?

"I don't do second choices," he said firmly. That was the whole point of being rich and famous: being able to get what you wanted, when you wanted it. Obviously this nerve guy

just needed someone to talk a bit of sense into him. Maybe his schedule was full; Tony could pay someone to take a couple of less urgent cases, whatever. "I'm going to go see him."

"I don't think that's a good idea--" Pepper started.

"Uh huh." Tony surveyed himself in the mirror, giving his appearance a critical appraisal. His hair needed attention before he went anywhere. A bit of under-eye concealer. Otherwise, not too bad. "And yet I'm going to do it anyway."

"Tony, all of the doctors on the shortlist had impeccable qualifications--"

"Right, and I want *that* one." Setting his mind on a goal actually made him feel better, a little more grounded. He had something to aim for, something to achieve. Even if it was just persuading some specialist to take his case. "I need Alicia to call Metro-General and find out if he's in today. There's no point going to stalk him if he's not there. Or stuck in surgery for twenty hours, I'm not going to interrupt a surgery, that would be ridiculous."

"Yes, clearly that would be the line at which it becomes ridiculous," Pepper muttered. She put his phone on the bathroom counter and added, "Try to remember that Alicia is my P.A. and has her own work to do?"

Yeah. Tony had, previously, promised to stop getting Pepper's P.A. to do things for him, but he had a pretty solid get-out-of-jail-free card right now.

Pepper kept telling him he should hire a new P.A., but he kept putting it off. Pepper was his P.A. Pepper had been his P.A. for *years*. Now she was a CEO with her own P.A., but that didn't mean he could just *replace* her, Pepper was irreplaceable. Anyone he hired would just fail completely at being Pepper and he'd hate them, and they'd quit or he'd fire them, and then she'd want him to hire someone new and he'd have to do it all again and it would be just like the dozen different nannies of his childhood--

Even 'Natalie' had been disappointingly not-Pepper, and then it turned out she hadn't even been Natalie, either.

"Well, *I'm* not going to call them," Tony said. "I introduce myself and people assume I'm a crank caller and hang up on me."

Pepper's mouth quirked a little, because she still found it hilarious every time that happened to him, the traitor. "I'm sure you'll figure something out," she said firmly.

Yes. Yes, that was the way it worked. He was Tony Stark; he'd figure it out. He was going to win this doctor over and go through some fancy treatment and probably there would still be a lot of hard work and physio but he was going to *figure it out*.

--

It was another long day. Tony set Happy onto figuring out the neurologist's timetable. Happy was delighted to be able to do something that would actually help, effusively thrilled; it was

almost enough to make Tony feel a little guilty for ignoring him until now. Not actually enough, obviously, because so many people wanted to see him... but almost.

He tried to get some work done, but he couldn't get absorbed. He got jarred from his thoughts every time he tried to gesture with his left hand and the sling held his arm where it was. All his interfaces were designed for two hands. He'd designed an entire private computing language and orthography so he could get his thoughts out of his head more efficiently, and at the best of times it still wasn't quick enough. Right now, like *this*... it was impossible.

Getting drunk sounded like a great alternative but simultaneously like a terrible idea.

Tony shut off the holographic interface and stared at the blank table surface. He could invite Thor in. He needed to ask Thor about that stuff, whatever it was, 'healing balm'. Alien medical goo. It might just have been a foreign antibiotic, or it might have done something more. Something that might make a difference. Reading between the lines of the heavily redacted medical file SHIELD had let him have... it was worth double-checking.

Just as soon as he felt up to dealing with a pile of over-solicitous concern and some veiled condescension about 'poor fragile mortals' and inevitable attempts to discuss Loki.

Loki. Tony was a multi-tasker; he could be furious at Loki and still have plenty to spare for the rest of Asgard. If he'd learned anything from his useless attempts to talk Loki down, it was that something was seriously *not right* in that guy's head. Asgard had screwed him up, down and sideways, and turned him loose on the rest of the universe.

Yeah. Tony wanted to have really good control over himself before he spoke to Thor.

Pepper made him lunch according to the bland diet plan from SHIELD. She hovered while he ate and he tried not to snap at her. He did his muscle exercises and took some more painkillers. They'd originally come in a pottle with a childproof lid, and the second time he'd had to ask Pepper to open them he got fed up and dumped the rest into a plastic bag.

He should deal with his email. He'd taken one look at his inbox when he first came home from SHIELD and then closed it again. He knew the messages were still sitting there, waiting for him. Probably more of them.

Instead Tony turned on the business news. They were talking about some department store's OSHA woes, so he changed the channel. Got ads, changed the channel again. Cartoons, okay, that could work.

It only took a couple of minutes before he lost interest and just turned the whole thing off.

And to think Fury was worried about him getting *attached*. After this? Fat chance.

Well, not exactly. There was, he had to admit, a risk of him getting to like Loki. Or there had been. He was pretty sure he'd started to like Loki. But he also didn't hate him any less. Was that weird? It seemed like the sort of thing that was probably weird.

It was the sort of thing he would normally talk to Pepper about, except that... Loki. Good god, he didn't want this to be one of those things like Obie. He couldn't talk to Pepper about Obie and it left him feeling jagged and raw. Obie had tried to murder Pepper. Pepper had hit the button that fried Obie in his rip-off suit and basically killed him. She'd *struggled* to deal with that, he remembered it, it was a whole *thing*. Yes, Tony had been horribly betrayed by Obie and he was still pretty messed up over it, but he also remembered all the years Obie had supported him and helped him and he couldn't tell Pepper that he *missed* that because it would be rubbing it in her face, what Obie had done to her.

This was totally going to be another one of those things like Obie.

It probably didn't even matter anymore. When Tony pictured Loki's smug, smirking face, the churning feeling of terrified rage in his stomach was immediate. The prospect of trying to talk to Loki, one on one, kept dissolving into the image of Loki's boot kicking the knife deeper into the seam of the armor.

Thirty-three people died, this wasn't worse than that.

(...It kind of was--)

Tony hated himself as soon as that thought crossed his mind. Objectively, people's lives were worse, of course they were worse. But Loki had killed before and that hadn't stopped Tony from trying to talk to him. Actually the opposite.

This was personal. Tony was only human for crying out loud, there was a limit to what he could compartmentalize. No, right now he'd be perfectly happy never seeing that asshole ever again.

He didn't want to think about Loki. He didn't want to think about the battle in Georgetown. Everyone had made a point of telling him that they were in town for the foreseeable future, and Tony was probably supposed to be grateful for the bodyguards but it was just awkward and uncomfortable and he couldn't stand pity.

He tried reading research on nerve injuries, but every abstract that described how poor his chances were made his stomach clench and his good hand shake. Eventually the physio showed up to distract him and Tony threw all his concentration into the exercises, physical and mental. He had to make this work.

--

For all that he wanted some privacy, there was something reassuring about having Happy with him when he went to Metro-General. Well, he didn't have much of a choice, because he needed Happy to drive, but he could have left Happy in the car. Instead he had Happy a couple of paces behind him, silent and solid and familiar, while Tony ran his fingers along the side of a dark silver Lamborghini coupé and whistled.

"I'll say this for the guy, he's got decent taste in wheels." A little bland, but decent.

Happy had an audible shrug in his voice. "You know me, boss; I prefer the classics."

True. Tony smiled a little wistfully. "I should make some time to get back to the West Coast and visit the collection..."

When he was out of the sling he might be able to rig something up to let him steer without gripping the wheel, for when he needed his right hand to change gears. Nothing too complicated though, just a temporary solution. Temporary.

"You need me to head out there and check on them, just say the word," Happy offered. "You know, take them for a spin, blow the dust out of the engines..."

"Yeah, I'm sure that would be a real sacrifice for you," Tony said dryly.

He wasn't *avoiding* thinking about why they were there, it was just nice to keep things light for a bit, kill time with a bit of banter while they waited for this guy Strange to show up.

Eventually, an acerbic voice cut across the parking lot. "If you've so much as smudged that..."

Tony turned, raising an eyebrow as the guy trailed off. Recognizing his face tended to have that effect on people.

"That's him," Happy murmured, voice low.

Yeah, Tony had figured that much out from the proprietary way the guy stalked towards the Lamborghini. Still, he put on a winning smile and held out his right hand. "Tony Stark. You may have heard of me."

"We've met," Strange said tersely, ignoring the offered hand to reach for the coupé's door handle instead.

They had? Huh. Tony leaned his body weight against the door in a way that might look casual to an observer. "Right, right. At the..."

Strange raised an eyebrow, clearly not intending to fill in the gap. "I'm not surprised you don't remember. You were considerably more interested in my date."

Ah. That did sound like something Tony had probably done. Still, he narrowed his eyes at the doctor, losing his friendly smile. "You're rejecting my case because once upon a time I hit on your girlfriend?"

"No, I'm rejecting your case because it's boring. I'm mildly enjoying that because you hit on my girlfriend."

"*Boring?*" Tony repeated incredulously. The state of his shoulder, his arm - his *hand* - was *boring*? This from a man who had bought a Lamborghini Huracán and then asked for it to be done in *gray*.

Strange sighed and turned to face him fully. "Penetrating trauma to the brachial plexus, neurotmesis of the medial cord and secondary infection which has since been eradicated, with a currently healing open wound. Yes, Mister Stark, boring. It is a straightforward matter of

the growth rate of the neural fibers. There is nothing I could do for it that any surgical resident off the street couldn't do. Or in fact has already done."

What-- no, that wasn't right, this guy was supposed to be near the top of his field. What about all the groundbreaking new techniques? "But that's your work, right, you wrote that article on stimulating neurogenesis--"

"In the central nervous system," Strange clarified impatiently. "The brachial plexus is part of the peripheral nervous system, which responds to damage entirely differently. Neurogenesis is not the problem, the simple distance between the injury site and your extremity is the problem. Quite frankly, Mister Stark, if you're expecting to ever use that hand again you can expect to be disappointed. If you put in enough effort, you should eventually be able to regain some sensation in the areas supplied by the ulnar nerve; but you don't need a neurosurgeon, you need a physical therapist."

Neither Sweeney nor Jeremy Kuo at their bluntest had laid it out like that. There'd been... implications, possibilities, careful warnings. Worst case scenario. Strange made it sound like the *only* scenario and Tony didn't-- he wasn't ready to think like that.

Strange tugged harder on the car door. "Are you intending to make me call security and have you escorted from the premises? Because I think you'll find that a lot more embarrassing than I will."

He managed a scoff, half on auto-pilot. "You're really going to call security on Iron Man?"

"I suppose you're going to brag that you can beat them with one hand tied behind your back?" Strange nodded toward the sling with an expression of disdain.

One hand. It punched the air out of his gut. Tony stared at the other man wordlessly. He didn't have a quick retort, he couldn't beat any security guys - not that he'd pick a fight with them but he *couldn't* - couldn't defend himself, couldn't even breathe in too deeply - *vulnerable*. Trapped.

Just. *Fuck*. This guy didn't screw around.

"Thought so," Strange said crisply, and jerked the car door open. Tony stumbled numbly aside.

Happy reached out to steady him, and Tony shook off the helping hands.

"No... I..." He couldn't think. The Huracán pulled out and drove away.

"You want me to go to his home and key his car?" Happy offered, deadpan.

It startled a rough chuckle out of Tony, at least. "We'll make that plan B," he said, and tried to pretend his voice didn't sound hollow to his own ears.

--

The next morning brought the worst case of pins and needles Tony had ever had, sharp jabs that almost felt like electric shocks. He checked the wound, but it looked okay around the edges. Just more of that awful nerve healing pain.

He pulled on one of the modified t-shirts with Velcro down the side, and let Pepper help with the hand brace and the sling. His hair was probably a mess, but he couldn't really bring himself to give a damn. On the bright side, the sling made a convenient place to carry the little bag of painkillers.

"Try not to spend all day shut up in here, okay?" Pepper said, and kissed him on the cheek because she probably knew he would anyway, and she headed to the elevator.

Tony closed his eyes along with the elevator doors and felt some of the tension drain out of his body. Nobody. Nobody watching and judging and nobody he had to perform for or keep his guard up for and *oh thank heavens*.

He still couldn't breathe deeply, but he felt like a weight had been lifted despite that. Knowing that nobody was here to read into it if he needed to just feel sorry for himself for a little while. After everything - all the people and the hovering and then that doctor's blunt dismissal - he was *exhausted*.

It occurred to him to run through his exercises - but he needed some time off, time to just... *exist*. As tired as he wanted, with no one hovering in concern, no need to pretend he was 'okay'.

He started to head back to bed, to nap... but he was tired of napping. He was tired of pretty much everything he'd been doing to pass time, and that included the damned exercises. He paced up to the lounge floor and stared restlessly out the window, not really taking in the familiar view.

The painkillers weren't keeping his mind quite fuzzy enough for it to be bearable.

Still half-asleep, he thought he heard the clink of glassware. He'd just dismissed it as his imagination when he heard a very real, definite drawl of condescension.

"Well, you certainly took your time showing your face again."

Tony flinched, whirling to face Loki. His right hand twitched, desperate for a gauntlet, repulsor - hell, even a regular handgun. He was acutely aware of how defenseless he was. And how fragile in the face of Asgardian strength.

He wasn't going to show Loki any fear, wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. Tony jerked his chin up and bit out, "Excuse me for taking a little time off to have my *shoulder glued back together*."

Loki gave a little grimace, looking barely chastised, like the worst he'd done was smash the good whiskey glasses. It was followed by a narrow-eyed look that seemed as though he was thinking of criticizing Tony for interrupting his *killing spree*, and no. Just-- *no*.

"Were you waiting for me?" Tony asked with a frown, and then his heart rate jumped again as he realized how perfectly timed this visit was. The first time he'd really been alone since... since the fight. Ice ran down his spine. "Were you *watching* me?"

It was bad enough knowing Loki could just get in whenever he wanted, but *waiting for Tony to be alone* - that was kind of terrifying. It wasn't safe here. Even the pretense of safety was stripped away. Was there safety *anywhere*?

"I can think of very little more tedious," Loki retorted, not quite rolling his eyes. His long coat swayed with his steps as he made his way closer. It made Tony think of snakes, hypnotic gazes and not daring to look away.

"What do you *want*?" he demanded instead. There was a little voice in the back of his head that said he shouldn't antagonize Loki while unarmed, but it was mostly drowned out by the little voice that was just shrieking hysterically.

Loki stopped walking and gave him a hard look. It was followed quickly by a thin, cold smile. "Blood and war, Midgardian. Vengeance. This world at my feet."

Bullshit, Tony thought, but he didn't bother to say it because he didn't care anymore. To the families of the people who'd died there was no functional difference between playing the monster and *being* a monster. It was the same thing, same effect.

Instead he said fiercely, "You want war, you're going about it the right way."

Loki bristled, sneering at him. "Ah, yes, Midgard's great defender. You must keep busy indeed if you go to war every time someone on this realm is killed."

"There are cops and laws and *yes*, sometimes I damn well do," Tony snapped, clenching his fists as he stepped forward-- but only one clenched, and it drove his anger higher. "Look up the Ten Rings some time then come back and whine to me that I won't give you a free pass for murder--"

"Murder," Loki repeated scornfully. "They challenged all of Asgard--"

"And if you actually gave a damn you'd have gone after them when they first said it!" Tony jabbed a finger in Loki's direction to emphasize his point. "Not months later when you felt like throwing a tantrum and looking for the most convenient target."

Loki's eyes slid sideways a little, *busted*, then he gave the nasty smile that meant he was feeling defensive. "Some of us do not have the luxury of assuming a costumed Avenger will leap to our defense. Perhaps if you had waited for your own shield-mates instead of charging in unsupported, the battle might have gone a little more to your tastes. Instead you were all too eager to involve yourself in a battle that did not concern you, on behalf of people who were neither your allies nor kin--"

"They were still *people*!" Tony snapped furiously. "That concerns me! *Earth* concerns me! This isn't some nice little safari park for you Asgardians to hunt the local wildlife and blow

off steam, we're not some empty wilderness for Odin to banish his naughty kids, we are *people*, goddammit, and if you push us we are gonna *push back*."

Loki had startled at the mention of Odin; now he frowned and said coldly, "I assure you, if you attempt to 'push' Odin All-Father he will do much worse than I. You will not heal so easily aft--"

"It's not going to heal!" Tony shouted, finally letting the words take shape. He dragged in a breath, feeling the lopsided way the left of his ribcage wouldn't expand as much. It wasn't going to heal. It wasn't going to be okay. It wasn't...

Loki scoffed, rolling his eyes. "A matter of months, said your announcement."

Tony raked his good hand through his hair, suppressing a hysterical laugh. Tears blurred his vision, refracting Loki's image into multiple versions. "I *lied*. You're supposed to be able to tell these things! It's not okay. It's not going to be okay. It's going to take too long, and the muscle's going to die, the bit that connects to the nerve, and I'm never going to use this hand again - and for *what*? Did you get anything out of it? Did killing all those people make you feel nice and cozy about your place in the world? The whole thing was just, nothing, a complete *waste*--"

Loki didn't respond immediately, and for some reason that just made Tony angrier. He deserved a *reaction*, at the very least. Loki owed him that much.

"So what do you want?" he repeated, his voice rough and throat clogged. "What the fuck are you here for, Loki?" He didn't want this, didn't want any of it, he just wanted it all to *go away* and nobody - except maybe Loki - could make that happen. "You come to finish the job? It's not like I can stop you. Here we are, you've got me. I'd put my hands in the air but, you know, *I can't*."

Loki tilted his head, eyeing Tony with an expression that was difficult to read. It looked like it was probably bordering on dangerous, and Tony-- didn't really care. He didn't give a rat's ass right now if he'd stumbled over some new screwed up Asgardian insult or whatever it was Loki had taken exception to. If he had, then all the better. He was done, he was so *done* tiptoeing around Loki's sensitivities. What had it got him?

What had it cost him?

"So what are you waiting for? Finish it." Tony clenched his fist again, frustrated and angry and desperate. Why was Loki even *here* if he wouldn't just-- "Just *finish* it!"

Loki moved at last, and Tony flinched despite himself. His heart hammered behind the reactor, urgent and insistent. He could feel his fingers twitch, the ones that worked, ready to splay out and activate a repulsor he wasn't wearing, while his left hand just sat motionless in its brace. He didn't want to die but he didn't want *this* either, crippled and helpless and completely over his head - not in the fun way - everything had spun so wildly out of control--

Loki loomed over him and wrapped a hand around his throat. Tony automatically grabbed at it, tugging futilely against Loki's wrist. He could feel his chin being forced up and he didn't

want to meet Loki's eyes - oh god, he hoped it wasn't the window again, falling, so much time to be aware of exactly what was happening and how it was going to end--

Loki leaned down close to Tony's ear and murmured in a weirdly sing-song way, "I accept your surrender."

Tony blinked, his grip on Loki's vambrace slackening in confusion. Loki's fingers squeezed his throat, threat or warning maybe, then abruptly released him. Loki stepped past him, making Tony turn to follow the movement and of course the bastard *disappeared*. As if the conversation was over, as if that was enough, as if everything wasn't still all screwed up and broken, and Tony shouted at the empty air, "I hate when you do that!"

He was all tangled up in adrenaline and it left him shaking. Damn Loki, damn Asgard, damn them all. Tony stumbled to the couch and collapsed, curling his good arm around himself under the sling.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered under his breath. He couldn't defend himself and Loki *knew when he was alone* and he couldn't do this, he couldn't deal with this, any of it. "Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch." The soft chant kept him from breathing too fast and hyperventilating.

Loki did this to him and then didn't even have the decency to finish him off.

Tony slid forward onto the floor, the couch firm and solid against his back. He wanted the fun Loki, the could-have-been. He wanted to find a weapon that would tear Loki apart. He wanted his hand back. He wanted Obie to bring him pizza. He wanted his mama to sing to him softly until he felt safe enough to sleep.

For a while, Tony focused on the rhythm of his pulse. He could hear the background hum of the penthouse electronics. Gradually, the rapid beat began to ease. His breathing steadied. He rubbed at his face where a few tears had dried to thin flakes of salt. Control. He was under control. Okay.

He dragged himself to his feet, using his good hand for leverage. In the sling, his shoulder was hot and prickly, but it was too soon for more painkillers.

Tony went to the bar and dampened a cloth to scrub over his face. Then he had a shot of whiskey because it didn't really matter if it slowed the rate of healing, did it? He was already screwed.

"Jarvis," he said tiredly, "set up news alerts. Georgetown Massacre and related keywords."

If Loki showing up had proved anything, it was that ignoring reality wasn't going to achieve anything. Sooner or later, reality demanded to be acknowledged.

Dammit, he was going to have to deal with being around people after all. If Loki was tracking him somehow then Bruce was the one to stick close to; the possibility of the Hulk was his best protection. Which meant going down to Stark Industries, because Bruce would be working.

The irony didn't escape him, that after pushing Pepper into going to the offices, he was now forced to basically do the same.

Tony went into the bathroom to make himself presentable, then stood outside the elevator for a long time psyching himself up. He really wanted some privacy. Fine, it was going to be fine, just - fill himself with Tony Stark spirit, all smooth wit and glossy smiles. Maybe Bruce was working on something fun in R&D.

It actually wasn't too bad; Bruce's office was always one of the quietest ones, and Tony got there without running into too many other personnel. Bruce himself was pleased to see him but tactful enough to take a hint when Tony steered the conversation firmly away from any 'how are you' crap. They talked biomimetic polymers for a while and it worked fine as a distraction right up until Bruce remembered to ask why so much turf had been delivered to the Tower.

Tony stared at the computer display, remembering Loki bright with mischief, and Loki snarling with anger, kicking the knife into his flesh. Blaze of pain in his shoulder, tiny microorganisms being driven deep below his skin. "Stupid joke," he said tonelessly. "Doesn't matter now."

--

Wound Check Day came and went; Sweeney cleaned out the hole and filled it with fresh sterile packing, and Tony was kind of impressed that it managed to be more gross than the inside of the arc reactor casing in his chest. (Then he showed her to prove it, and she was forced to agree, but counter-argued that the reactor hole was more horrifying because it wouldn't heal over. Tony kind of gave her the point on that, but it was a little startling to realize how much he'd gotten used to it.)

Tony didn't say anything about Loki stopping in; there wasn't anything anyone could *do*, other than ask him if he was 'okay', which he'd already heard way too much of. He made sure he didn't linger on his own, even if that meant sitting in the back of Bruce's office staring at a tablet and trying to figure out how to reply to an email from the kids Loki had orphaned in Belgium.

There were orphans in Kentucky now, too. Loki had spared the children, again; if 'spared' was the word for leaving them with a lifetime of trauma.

Tony had been invited to meet with the survivors and he already knew how *that* would go. There were only two ways people ever reacted. Either they'd be upset and scapegoat him for not arriving sooner, or - the worse option - they'd be grateful and try to thank him even though it had been an unmitigated disaster.

He didn't even want to discuss it with the people he *did* like, let alone with strangers.

It was easier if he had a bit of scotch before hunting down Bruce each day. Not a lot, not with the painkillers, he wasn't an idiot. Just a bit to take the edge off. Make it easier to keep all his pretty masks in place.

Natasha came back from her mission, with a dirty green bruise on the side of her jaw and missing a couple of inches of hair. When she saw Tony on the shared floor with Clint, Bruce and Steve, she put a hand on her hip and raised a mocking brow at him; "In this country, capitalism is God?"

Steve grimaced a little but didn't say anything. Clint, on the other hand, laughed uproariously. "Oh *yeah*, how could I forget?"

Tony silently cursed YouTube. Probably someone had been filming out their window. If there was one consistent thing about being an Avenger it was that there was *always* someone taking shaky videophone footage. He should probably check it out, and not just in case it caught the part where Loki offered Iron Man a *job*-- no, wait, if there was anything like that recorded Pepper would have told him, the proverbial shit would already have hit the fan.

Besides, the thought of actually watching what had happened made him want to vomit. Again.

"Give me a break, I'd just been stabbed," he said aloud, scooping up a cushion with his good arm and throwing it at Clint. "I'd like to see you do better."

Clint caught the cushion and tossed it back, aiming right for the sore shoulder, the bastard. Tony batted it away at the last second, while Clint said, "Ten bucks says you've already been denounced as a heathen."

"No bet," Steve and Bruce chorused in eerie synchronicity. Bruce didn't even look up from the chess board.

"I do love a good denouncement." Tony grinned at Natasha, who gave him a quelling look. It was her 'I am not amused by you (but secretly I am)' look, so it didn't quell all that well. Also, by this point in his life Tony was pretty much unquellable. "Do you think someone will call me the symbol of everything wrong with America? That's always good for a bit of publicity."

Natasha gave a mild snort. "Tony, you *are* the symbol of everything wrong with America."

"Ah, no, I think you'll find that's the Russian spy who thinks that whoopee cushions are genuinely hilarious," Tony objected, pointing at her. *Whoopee cushions*, for crying out loud.

"C'mon, this loser's got to be a strong contender," Clint objected, tapping the manila folder he'd been showing Tony a moment earlier. He smirked at Natasha and added, "You'll love this, Nat - media wanted to know why 911 calls mentioning Loki don't immediately activate the Avengers."

Natasha winced, obviously appreciating the administrative nightmare that would ensue.

"Exactly." Clint's grin broadened. "Just for fun, we pulled the last fifty mentions. They're full of stuff like this. Guy's truck breaks down, tow company's taking too long, so he calls 911: 'help help, there's an evil Loki attack'."

Humanity really was doomed, Tony reflected.

Natasha stared at Clint without blinking. "What did he think would happen, the Avengers would fly out and Iron Man would personally fix his truck?"

Clint gave an easy shrug. Bruce muttered, "'Think' is a strong word."

"Doctor Banner!" Tony gasped, pretending to be shocked. "Such cynicism."

"I'm just saying," Steve chipped in, looking up with a glimmer of humor in his eyes. "Next time that happens, we should send Thor."

"Sold," Clint said immediately.

...Okay, that did sound amusing. Even Natasha smiled.

--

Sometime later, he went into the kitchen to grab a coffee, and realized Natasha had followed him when she gently closed the door.

"So how are you really doing?" she asked.

Tony got a mug out of the cupboard and put it on the bench maybe a little harder than was really necessary. That was her one free pass for dumb questions. "I am going to buy all the opioids. All of them. I will single-handedly become the next opioid crisis." He looked at his half-numb hand and added a little grimly, "No pun intended."

Natasha came closer and shifted to stand at an angle to him, leaning back against the bench he was standing at. Tony shot her a sideways look to let her know she wasn't quite pulling off casual. She adjusted something in her body language, something he couldn't quite pinpoint; a shift here, a slump there. The sense of something being artificial fell away, and that was really creepy but good practice – important practice – for dealing with L-- liars and other businessmen.

"In the interests of... disclosure," Natasha started off, "Fury suggested I talk to you about being attacked by a long-term mark."

Tony sighed as he closed the cupboard door. He tried to make it a habit to reward Natasha for being truthful, because it went against her instincts and they both knew it. But he also wasn't interested in talking about this.

When he didn't immediately leave the kitchen, Natasha gave a small shrug of one shoulder. "He thinks I'll be able to *relate*." The tone of her voice said clearly that she disagreed.

Right. How would an infamous super-spy have any empathy for a bumbling amateur. Tony tried not to let his grimace show. "Except you're a professional and let me guess, you wouldn't have let him stab you in the first place."

"Except I was being trained to kill my peers during critical periods of my emotional development," Natasha corrected him, and oh.

Tony looked at her again, studying the slight tension in her jaw instead of the slouch of her body; the hints of stubbornness around her eyes. It looked like this was one of those times when some deep down part of Natasha decided *fuck it* and offered up brutal, unmasked honesty to see what would happen, who would run.

Tony had to admit, he liked those times. No matter how creepy some of the shit that came out of Natasha's mouth was, truth was always preferable to people trying to manipulate and use him.

(Who do you think convinced the Board to lock you out?)

Plus it was nice to remember that he wasn't the most fucked up person around, not by a long shot. Even though the coffee machine was kind of creeping him out today and he was starting to question whether he wanted to drink anything that came out of it.

He shifted to face Natasha more fully, letting his own body language open up. "You're assuming that I wasn't," he said with a smirk. "I mean, not overtly at least, but they must have wanted me to at least *want* to kill my peers, that's the only explanation for some of the policies at that school. Aren't you the one who told me boarding schools make sociopaths?"

"You're hardly a sociopath," Natasha said, with a dismissive snort.

"I could be a sociopath if I wanted," Tony muttered petulantly. He'd certainly had the accusation hurled at him often enough.

"You could *act* like a sociopath if you wanted, then you'd feel guilty about it." Natasha's lips twisted in a bittersweet smile. "It's not a bad thing, Stark."

He shrugged, not arguing that. Although, he didn't always feel as guilty as people assumed he did, or for the same reasons. Not that he was likely to talk about that with any of Fury's people.

"I don't need whatever dysfunctional secret agent therapy he wants you to do, anyway." Tony clenched his jaw for a moment then shook his head, glancing sideways at the coffee machine. "I'm angry, sure. But his little spiel about feeling attached or betrayed or whatever – I don't feel betrayed, I knew he was likely to stick a knife in me at any moment. It would be like feeling betrayed that a rabid dog attacked."

Nevertheless, he was aware of a strange sense of loss. Something that ached with the ruined possibilities of private conversations and ridiculous jokes. Unwanted thoughts that he pushed away firmly.

Natasha made a small, thoughtful noise. "Maybe it is the same. You don't feel betrayed because you didn't lower your guard in the first place."

So Natasha's guard was always up. He glanced back up at her curiously. "You don't feel that way about everyone, right? There must be people you trust. What about Barton, you wouldn't feel betrayed if he went after you?"

"He already did," she reminded him, unfolding her arms as she turned her body towards him. (Freeing up her limbs, facing the source of the danger – she felt *something* about it, even if she wanted to kid herself that she didn't.) "The other agents know that Clint was controlled when he attacked the helicARRIER. Rationally, they don't blame him. But they *feel*-- they can't help how they feel about it, either."

"And you're saying you don't feel that."

"I was raised... trained... to understand that someone can like you and still be made to hurt you," Natasha said with an elegant shrug.

Made, schmade. People could like you and still decide for perfectly selfish reasons to screw you over. Having as much money as Tony did tended to bring that side out in people. Self-interest was a powerful motivator.

But even when people felt they had no choice, or thought they were doing the right thing, or maybe had been mind-controlled by a magic alien scepter - well, not feeling betrayed wasn't the same as not feeling *anything*.

Natasha was a prime example. She definitely liked him; they were friends, more or less. But he knew better than to trust her. When it came down to it, if she had to throw him under the bus to complete a mission, she'd do what needed to be done without hesitating. If Fury ever decided to go serious with his half-assed plays for dominance, it wasn't a secret which side Natasha would come down on. It wouldn't be betrayal, but that didn't mean either of them would be happy about it, if it went that far.

With Loki... Tony should have been better prepared. It had been practically inevitable that Loki would flip out on him. How could he have let himself start to enjoy Loki's company, *knowing* who Loki was, what Loki had done? He'd brought this entirely on himself. At least nobody had tried to rub that in his face.

"You're not wrong about that," he murmured, finally pouring some coffee into the cup. It really didn't feel right - maybe he was just stressed but it was the wrong day to use that machine and something... something would go wrong, he just knew it. But there was an easy fix: add some milk and pretend he'd been making it for Natasha all along. Tony went to the fridge and grabbed a bottle out, using his foot to nudge the fridge door closed again.

"Anyway, if you change your mind..."

Tony started to roll his eyes, fully prepared to be as sarcastic as necessary to explain that no, Loki had not broken his fragile heart.

Before he got the chance, Natasha gave an impish smile and finished, "...then go talk to Clint, because he does feelings much better than I do."

Tony shook his head, grinning, as he poured the milk. He put the bottle down so he could pick up the cup and pass it over. "So glad to have you back."

Natasha's eyes flickered towards his sling. "I could say the same," she murmured, then lifted the coffee cup in thanks and let herself out of the kitchen before he could reply.

#

Chapter End Notes

Hey
I just stabbed you
And we're both crazy
But here's my number
So call me, Ishmael

(Listen, you have no idea how close I was to naming this chapter some variation on that.
Noooo idea.)

Shrapnel

Chapter Summary

Tony is trying very hard to revolutionize medicine but no one else is being very helpful. Plus there's this slightly terrifying Asgardian who won't leave him alone (and it's not Thor).

Chapter Notes

NOTE: There are reactions from Tony in this chapter that are based in psychological trauma rather than moral beliefs or principles (although he frames it in moral terms). It may be upsetting if organ donation is a subject that's close to home.

Also, don't take painkillers with alcohol, Tony Stark is not a responsible role model.

Tony was finally out of the sling. He was coping well. He was adjusting. He was a goddamn joy to be around.

Okay, it was possible Pepper was going to throttle him in his sleep.

That wasn't true, he'd have to actually sleep for that to be true. He'd never slept all that much - his mind was too full of ideas. He'd wake up and even if he was feeling exhausted he wouldn't *want* to sleep, he'd want to be putting those ideas into action, want to be doing about seven different things at once. So in the mornings when he should have been kicking out one night stands, he had generally already been in the workshop for hours (leaving Pepper to kick them out on his behalf).

After Afghanistan, and then again after the invasion, he'd gained a whole bunch of new reasons not to sleep much. This fun new discovery that Loki was apparently watching closely enough to *know when he was alone* had only added fuel to the fire.

Tony supposed that there was some kind of silver lining in that using Bruce's company to scare murderous Asgardians away meant that Pepper got a bit of breathing room; his time was spread a little wider between the residents of the Tower and that meant he could drag it out longer before someone got fed up with him and finally snapped.

The Avengers weren't being particularly subtle in tagging each other in and out to keep him company on the shared floor - presumably they thought he had every right to be a little jittery after the battle in Georgetown.

"They use electricity during nerve repair surgery to stimulate new growth," Tony mused aloud, thumb swiping over the article he was skimming. "Maybe some kind of implant that would deliver a continuous charge, or regular pulses--"

"You want to electrocute yourself?" Steve said disbelievingly.

Tony glanced at him and tried not to look irritated at having to explain himself. "Pacemakers, Rogers. It's not a new idea. Not a *strong* level of electricity, not the kind you're thinking of. Just a little stimulation."

"Directly onto the regenerating nerve," Bruce said skeptically. "That sounds like it has the potential to be incredibly painful."

It might be worth it. Tony pressed his lips together for a moment so he didn't say anything he'd regret. Mentally, he flagged the idea for further research.

There were two alternatives: either make the nerve grow faster, so it reconnected to the muscles of his hand before the connections died off. Or somehow figure out how to keep the neuromuscular junction functioning, so that it would still respond to signals when the regenerated nerve finally got there.

"You know, ah, Tony," Bruce said, audibly uncomfortable. "I know you've been putting in a lot of research time on this. But... you might need to consider that the science just isn't--"

Tony levelled a look at Bruce that stopped him mid-sentence.

"Then I'll *get* it there," he said in a hard voice. That was what he'd done in Afghanistan. That was what he'd done when the palladium from the early reactor had been poisoning him. He would make it work.

Bruce shifted in his seat unhappily. "It's just that..."

"I'm actually with Tony on this one," Steve said, startling them both. He gave a wry grin. "Maybe not literally, with the science part. But I know all about being told to give up and accept my limitations. That attitude never got anyone anywhere."

"Well, great, Tony can just recreate Erskine's original serum, problem solved," Bruce said sarcastically, then looked at Tony in alarm. "I wasn't suggesting... I don't know how it would react to existing injuries..."

"I'd make an awesome super soldier, what are you implying?" Tony retorted, trying to remember that biochemist he'd met a few years back. Not Erskine's formula, but she'd been working on tissue regeneration, it hadn't been stable and then she'd disappeared into private research. Harrelson? Hobson?

Bruce ducked his head a little, visibly hunching in on himself. "I just mean that... it might be a long shot."

"Bruce." Tony had a feeling that came out a little sharper than he meant it to, so he made an effort to relax his muscles and keep his voice calm and friendly. Sometimes he really did *not*

have the patience for Bruce's conflict allergy. He wasn't going to bite the guy's head off, for crying out loud. "They're all long shots. That's all I've got to work with. You can relax, the serum is pretty far down my list of possible research pathways."

An email alert popped up on the tablet, a message from Natasha, and he tapped it curiously. There was a short message - *'Don't say I never get you anything. NR'* - and an attached file.

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about, that-- how long is your list? You could spend the rest of your life on this, Tony--"

It was his medical file from SHIELD. The full version. Or at least, not obviously redacted. Tony scrolled through the pages, mapping out the extra information this gave him to work with. Notes on what Thor had told the doctors - Hel's Hand, the infection was apparently called. Because on Asgard, it only affected those who were already close to death, whose immune systems were weakened; mostly the elderly. Notes on the ointment Thor had supplied, detailed measurements of its effect at regular intervals, changes in symptoms. *Photos--*

"What is it?" Steve's voice cut in.

Tony realized he'd made some sort of exclamation out loud. Both Bruce and Steve were looking at him quizzically, wearing expressions of mild concern.

How the devil did he explain this? It was impossible. It didn't make any sense. Tony shook his head helplessly. "It's a picture of the infection." He gestured vaguely at his still-healing shoulder. "Tasha sent my file through. Clint must have ratted me out."

He *had* complained a lot about only having edited notes to work with, and the amount of information that was left out. But he hadn't expected anything to come of that. Maybe Natasha had actually absorbed what he'd told her about it being a better tactic to work with him and earn his trust than try to manipulate him. Maybe she'd convinced Fury--

Nah. More likely *this* was a manipulation. Either way, Tony had the file, and that was what mattered.

"Necrotic tissue can look pretty scary," Bruce said sympathetically. "From what you've said, it sounds... unpleasant. I've seen a few infected wounds in my time," he added.

"So have I," Steve said, more grimly. He had a similar sympathetic look on his face.

"Yeah?" Tony magnified the photo slightly, then flipped the tablet round to show the other two. "Any of them have perfect edges?"

"What the..." Bruce got up out of his chair and came over, taking the tablet for a closer look. "That's... Tony, that doesn't make any sense."

"Tell me about it," Tony agreed. He knew what Bruce was seeing: not the dead skin at the heart of the wound, but the smooth, flawless arc marking the border between healthy skin and reddened inflammation. The unnatural precision and regularity of it.

"What is that?" Steve asked with a slight frown. "Is that from Thor's healing ointment?"

"No," Tony said slowly. He knew what it had to be, but it *couldn't* be. The notes that had accompanied the photo had reached the same impossible conclusion.

"It's the arc reactor," Bruce said, staring at the tablet. He raised his eyes and stared at Tony instead. "Isn't it? There's a healthy border around your arc reactor. This is incredible, it literally stopped the infection in its tracks."

"The arc reactor is a power supply," Tony objected. He shouldn't have to spell this out; it was *physics*, it had no antibiotic properties, this was ridiculous. "It runs an *electromagnet*, Bruce, you know that. Come on."

"It protects your heart," Bruce countered, then blinked and looked back at the screen of the tablet. "It protects... oh my god, Tony, if it did this then it probably saved your life. That infection would have killed you."

Tony curled his hands-- right hand-- into a loose fist. He felt weirdly defensive and agitated. It should be a good thing. If the arc reactor somehow kept harmful bacteria away from his heart... that was good, obviously, that was terrific.

But. That meant he'd come horrifyingly close-- If the only thing that had saved him wasn't even scientifically *possible*, what did that mean, what did... It was more than just luck this time, he *should have died*. He kept surviving all these things...

"The man who made a magic cellphone," Steve said, slow and considering, like he was testing out the phrase. "Huh."

The wormhole, the nuclear explosion, no trace of radiation poisoning or any long-lasting effects...

'Death will not have me.'

He was *not* thinking about that asshole right now. Tony shook his head. To distract himself he blurted, "I can't believe Fury hasn't pried this thing out of my chest. He must be dying to get his hands on it. I mean... metaphorically."

"That's... worrying," Bruce said uneasily.

"Maybe," Steve said, "but there are lines even Fury wouldn't cross. Taking the arc reactor would kill you, wouldn't it?"

Tony laughed in genuine amusement. "You think Fury wouldn't kill me? Steve, that man would put a bullet right through my head if he thought it would serve his purpose. He'd do it to you too, don't be fooled."

Steve frowned. "I don't agree with everything he does, but we're on the same side, Tony."

Tony leaned back in his chair, raising his eyebrows in challenge. "Just like every general who has to send someone on a suicide run. I'm not saying he'd *like* it, I'm saying he'd do it."

"Well," Bruce said in a wry tone, "he wouldn't like it if he had to shoot Steve, anyway. You might be another story."

Steve gave a smug little smirk and agreed, "He does like me better."

"Please, I'm everyone's favorite." Tony smirked right back.

"Well, I don't know if you're Loki's favorite anymore..." Steve trailed off, obviously regretting that joke before he finished making it.

Tony grimaced, feeling any good humor leech away. The worst thing wasn't that he kind of suspected that he *was* Loki's favorite, even now. The creepy stalking was a clue. No, the worst thing was that before being stabbed Tony had kind of liked that he was Loki's favorite. He *liked* winning people over. He liked a challenge and he liked rubbing people's faces in their preconceptions and yeah, he definitely liked that he was so damn awesome that even an alien who thought humans were insignificant had been kind of impressed by him.

He didn't need to feel guilty. He hadn't done anything wrong. Everyone knew that he'd been talking to Loki, they knew why. It hadn't worked, but... it hadn't been *wrong*.

"Well, this is an unpleasant conversation," Bruce said, attempting to pass the tablet back. Tony didn't say anything, just gave a scathing look, until Bruce took the hint and put the tablet down on the arm of the chair instead.

"We could put a movie on?" Steve suggested.

"Works for me," Tony said, picking the tablet back up. That was actually a really good idea; he wouldn't have to make too much conversation but it would keep the others in the room. He could just sit and research. Maybe try and find a current email address for that biologist - Hansen, Maya Hansen, that was her name.

In the end, he wound up flagging a lot of articles to reread later. He was too tense to focus. Whenever he looked up at the movie or the room, he caught Bruce shooting furtive little looks in his direction. More specifically, in the direction of the arc reactor. Yes, okay, it made sense that Bruce would be fascinated, but it set Tony's nerves on edge. He had a really bad history with people taking too much of an interest in the thing in his chest.

It protects your heart, Bruce had said. Loki's scepter hadn't worked, the mind control stick, back during the Chitauri invasion. Loki had expected it to work through clothes so it wasn't just a pure contact thing, it was definitely the arc reactor, but that didn't mean magic necessarily - it could be something simple like... maybe just the depth of it was enough to block whatever the scepter did.

Tony circled back to the medical file and pulled up the damning photograph again. *That* couldn't be attributed to depth. He couldn't convince himself he was imagining the perfect curve of that border. It would be nice if it was just a mass delusion shared by the doctors who'd been treating him. They'd measured the arc angle, the radius; if extended to a large circle over his chest there were no prizes for guessing what was at the exact center.

He'd be impressed by Fury's self-control at not just taking the thing, but he remembered Obadiah calling him the golden goose and maybe Fury was just smarter. If they took it, there was no guarantee they'd be able to replicate the effect.

Ugh. He really didn't want to be thinking about Obie calling him that while Bruce was sending those looks his way. It wasn't that he thought Bruce would... *do* anything, he just... He was allowed to be antsy. He had good reason.

He kept his mouth shut, and kept working.

--

Contrary to what Bruce might have thought, the nerve research wasn't the only thing Tony was working on. He knew that he couldn't hide behind the Hulk forever, so he was making sure he didn't have to be defenseless. Something more immediate than homing cuffs for the armor. He'd come up with a few designs for a bare-bones repulsor that could retract into a cuff the size of a watch, but the power supply was giving him issues. He could run a wire under his clothes to the arc reactor, but that wasn't ideal. What he wanted was something compact enough to incorporate directly into the design, but still strong enough to power more than one shot.

Then he had to build it one-handed.

It... was possible. A lot of it could be machined; he had precision clamps that could hold parts in place while he manipulated them. He'd done a bit of cutting and soldering, junk shapes with scrap metal to test how well he could operate in the workshop. It took about ten times more concentration than if he could just use both hands. Trying to build anything was going to drive him up the wall. But *not* building wasn't an option.

Agent Sweeney came by to check on his healing wound. It was kind of fascinating seeing it without a dressing over top. Also kind of disturbing. Definite train-wreck territory.

"It's coming along nicely," she said, after applying the new dressing. "Good granulation bed, tissue scaffold well integrated. A little quicker than I'd expect; that might be an effect of the Asgardian medicine."

"Quicker?" Tony repeated, seizing on the slim hope. If that was true, it was more than just an antibiotic. "Do you think the nerve...?"

Sweeney looked uncomfortable and that was probably a 'no' or a 'not enough'. "Nerve regeneration is a very slow process," she reminded him. "Even if it's getting a little help, it's going to take a long time. I wouldn't be rushing to schedule another nerve conduction study just yet."

"It's your sunny optimism that I really appreciate about you," Tony said flatly. Though, he had to admit, having Stephen Strange for comparison made Sweeney seem a lot more hopeful. He pulled his t-shirt back into place and carefully held his torso still so as not to dislodge the t-shirt while velcroing it back together one-handed. It was trickier than he'd originally assumed but he was getting pretty well-practiced at it.

"What we should discuss is a skin graft to close the wound," Sweeney said, redirecting the conversation. "It's well vascularized - meaning the blood vessels in the--"

"I'm not *five*," Tony said, rolling his eyes. Blood vessels in the newly grown tissue, yes, lots of them. Kind of obvious given the bright redness of it.

"--and there's no sign of any additional infection. Not all my patients are as educated as you are, Mister Stark," she added dryly.

That wasn't hard to believe. Most people weren't as educated as Tony was.

"That Asgardian medicine," he said, choosing his words carefully. "How much is left over?"

Sweeney paused slightly, then shook her head. "There was enough to apply to the wound, and that was all."

Tony studied her expression, trying to get a feel for any nervousness or signs of a lie. "No one squirreled any away to get under a microscope? Seriously?"

"Prince Thor was quite insistent on overseeing the process," she said, with a tiny hint of frustration, like she was bothered by the lost opportunity.

It was plausible, and more importantly, it was verifiable. Somehow Tony wasn't all that surprised that the next step was back to Thor. It figured that Asgard would be all tangled up in this mess. If he was lucky, Asgard could fix it entirely.

(Imagine - if Thor actually took him there, the Golden Realm they'd only heard about, full of mysteries and magic and completely alien technology. Imagine being the first human to set foot on a world outside the solar system, potentially outside the *galaxy*.)

"Like I was saying," Sweeney said, "I think it's safe to go ahead and schedule a skin graft. Next week, say Monday or Tuesday--"

Tony frowned. "Safe. Why wouldn't it be safe?"

"If the wound wasn't healing well, if there were signs of infection - a regular one - the graft might be rejected. That's clearly not the case here." She gestured at his shoulder. "There are of course the standard risks of anesthesia. Chance of headaches, nausea. In your case, you might be susceptible to some difficulty breathing. You'd be given oxygen during the procedure, and monitored very carefully."

Standard anesthesia risks weren't really standard with his reduced lung capacity. Tony nodded absently, knowing he'd probably have to go through this in more detail right beforehand. Sign a bunch of forms. Whatever mysterious things the arc reactor did or didn't do, it had never blocked general anesthetic. "Where would you take the skin from? How does that work, don't I just wind up with two healing wounds?"

"If we were using your skin, it would be a very thin layer, just like a graze," Sweeney said. "Probably from the thigh. But we're actually going to use a bioengineered product called an acellular dermal matrix. It's derived from human tissue, but the cells have been stripped out

so your immune system won't have any reaction to it. It's very effective and very safe, and means we don't have to harvest from another part of your body."

Tony stared at her for a moment, absorbing the implications of that. If it wasn't coming from him, it still had to come from *somewhere*. "When you say derived from human tissue, I don't suppose you mean you've been growing clone skin from my DNA in a petri dish or something?"

"Nothing like that," Sweeney said, completely mistaking why he was asking. "It's all donated tissue."

Oh, god. "It's cadavers, isn't it," Tony said, feeling his own skin crawling. "It's donated from cadavers. You want to put a dead person's skin on me."

Sweeney's expression changed from reassurance to realization as she finally caught up to his objection. "It's *derived* from a dead person's skin," she said carefully. "Which has been thoroughly screened and processed. There's no DNA left in it, just extracellular structures. It's more like... an imprint of their skin."

"That is not even close to what the word imprint means," Tony said firmly. He didn't care how much processing had been done, there was no way he was agreeing to that. "No. Do the thigh thing. It's a graze, I've had grazes, I can live with a graze."

Sweeney looked a little annoyed but mostly confused. "This is the option that gives the best medical outcome."

"I don't care!" Tony snapped. It was bad enough so many people telling him to give up and accept the nerve damage; now this. He just wanted *one thing* where nobody pushed back and refused him. "I don't want pieces of a dead person used on me. You need informed consent and I'm not giving it."

Her eyes moved. Sweeney's eyes flickered, noticeably, to the front of his shoulder where the t-shirt covered the wound. With a jolt Tony remembered the medical file and the references to applying 'regenerative tissue matrix' and oh... *oh*.

"There's already pieces of dead person in there," he said, hoping desperately that Sweeney would contradict him. He was going to be sick.

"I'm sorry," she said instead. "It was the best course of treatment. I would have thought you of all people would--"

Tony recoiled, glaring at her. "The hell is that supposed to mean? *Of all people*. I'm supposed to be just fine with raiding corpses for body parts? I'm happy to profit off of death, because I wanted our soldiers to be able to *defend* themselves? Is that it? That I won't care-- someone can die and I'll just--"

He couldn't get enough air to sustain a good rant. His chest was too tight, constrained. Always people making these stupid, judgmental... He gripped his thigh with his right hand,

digging his fingers in. "I don't, I don't wanna *benefit* from someone's death. Making weapons doesn't. Doesn't mean."

It was too hot in here. He was practically sweltering. Why was the temperature set so high? Jarvis knew better. He couldn't breathe in this heat, it was ridiculous. The room was stifling and this damned SHIELD lackey was accusing *him*--

"Mister Stark," Sweeney said urgently, leaning forward, "you need to breathe. Can you hear me? I need you to breathe."

"I'm. *Trying*," he ground out. Of course he needed to breathe. Everyone needed to breathe. Except the person who was dead whose skin had been turned into tissue matrix that was *inside Tony's shoulder*. He hadn't asked for it. He hadn't wanted anyone to do that. He never would have wanted someone to die just so he could, could heal a bit faster, could escape-- *this was always the plan* and surely Tony had known that, must have known on some level and that meant he let it happen...

Sweeney took hold of his good shoulder. "Nice and slow," she said. "You're hyperventilating, Mister Stark. You need to calm down. Alright?"

He couldn't *breathe*. Had she ever tried being calm without being able to breathe?! Someone was dead. Someone was dead and Tony should have seen it coming, should have saved him. His weapons. His bullets, his bombs. The convoy. They all died. He should have. He should have done something. "Get it out," he managed to gasp. "I don't want it. Get him, get it out."

"You need to calm down," Sweeney repeated, uselessly. Like he didn't *know* that.

Tony pushed her arm away in frustration. He pulled at the neck of his t-shirt. Yinsen choking on blood. On Stark Industries bullets. That blood on his hands-- not his hands. Armor. Armor stained red. Always red. This was always the plan. He jerked at the t-shirt again. It was too hot. Breathe, dammit. "Jarv's. Count."

"Certainly, sir," Jarvis said. There was something almost immediately grounding about his voice. "Please inhale. One. Two. Three. Four. And exhale. One. Two. Three. Four."

Tony tried to match to the count. It was a struggle. It seemed like it couldn't be enough air, that slow. He fought to override his instincts, not to sneak in extra gasps. One, two, three, four. He wanted it out of him and his fingers itched to tear off the dressing and pull that stuff out of his wound. One, two, three, four. The red flesh took on a whole different connotation.

Breathe.

"If it helps," Sweeney said, "whoever donated their tissue didn't want their body to go to waste."

Don't waste your life. Tony made a ragged noise of hurt, shaking his head. Not... not now, he couldn't think about that now. Bundle it up, lock it away. Breathe to the steady rhythm of Jarvis' voice.

One. Two. Three. Four.

"I don't want it," he finally repeated, not looking at her. "That's final."

Sweeney gave a sigh that held more than a little annoyance. "What about animal product? There are some derived from bovine tissue that would be an adequate substitute."

"Fine." Tony adjusted his t-shirt and briefly rubbed his eyes. "Schedule it whenever, send me the details."

Sweeney paused. He could feel her looking at him. Finally she said, "Mister Stark, it wasn't to do with your company. I figured, because you were a scientist, you'd see the rational side--"

"Are we done here?" Tony interrupted.

She paused again, then said, "Alright. Yes."

Tony wasted no time showing her to the elevator. Then he went to the bar. He should go to the common floor, he knew. Or down to Stark Industries, to Bruce. He couldn't stand the idea of other people right now. He wanted enough alcohol to numb his tongue and quiet his blood. Instead, he made himself stop after two glasses, then curled up in his bed and told Jarvis to count for him again.

Is this the first time you lost a soldier?

This was always the plan.

Inhale. One, two, three, four. Exhale. One, two, three, four.

--

The following day, he waited until after his physio session to send a message to Thor. Physio was surprisingly mentally exhausting - it wasn't just the muscle exercises, but a lot of visualization and concentration that Tony had originally assumed was just fluffy 'dream board' crap until Jeremy had pointed out that he needed to keep the neural pathways active.

Point being, it was tiring in exactly the right way to slow his hyperactive brain down. Sometimes, it was easier to talk to Thor if Tony could prevent the whole mile-a-minute inference drawing and conclusion jumping. Instead of trying to parse out a hundred different implications without the right cultural background, he could just focus on the conversation at hand.

"I'm glad you called on me," Thor told him when they met up on the common floor, "for I would have your counsel on a matter of great importance."

"Uh huh," said Tony, who had already seen the collection of perfume bottles laid out on the table. "Your definition of importance and my definition of importance might be a little different, there, L'Oreal."

Thor grinned and said playfully, "But it is exactly your definition I am using, for I must prepare for an evening with a maiden."

"Touché."

It was even truer than it sounded, because as far as Tony knew they didn't see relationships quite the same on Asgard. Thor was pretty dedicated to understanding 'the Midgard way' of doing things - that was, Jane's way - but at the same time, seemed to consider a lot of stuff around romance and sex to be inherently hilarious and strange.

Then there were the special touches Thor brought to the party from his own background... like the perfume.

Tony picked up one of the bottles and tentatively sniffed. Not bad, which meant entirely unsuitable for Thor's tastes. Thor preferred to spritz his hair with scents that Tony considered eye-wateringly floral, and if any of them were prone to allergies would probably require fumigation of the Avengers levels.

At least, thank goodness, it was only a special occasion thing.

Huh. That meant that Loki probably perfumed his hair for special occasions too, and Tony found himself idly wondering what kinds of scents Loki preferred (and if they were equally entertaining)-- and dammit, he obviously hadn't tired his mind out enough if he was making those connections.

Don't think about Loki. Easier said than done. Like that game, 'don't think about white elephants'. Brains weren't set up to concentrate on *not* something.

Tony made himself imagine Jane Foster's reaction instead, or possible reactions. He didn't really know her that well. Did she hate it when Thor showed up wearing some overpowering fragrance? Did she think it was weirdly flattering? Did she get into all that anthropology stuff, the cultural background that Bruce was fascinated by, or did she not care much past it being just something Thor did?

He kept testing the bottles one at a time, until he found one that was appropriately over-the-top. He played up his reaction a little, thrusting the bottle away from himself with a dramatic grimace. "Ugh! That one. It smells like a honeysuckle and an azalea had a dirty weekend. Wet sheets and all. I feel like I'm trapped in a greenhouse."

"Excellent," Thor said, giving him a sidelong glance for the description. "My thanks for your... counsel. And what of you, I understand there was a matter you would speak to me about?"

"Yeah." Tony plopped down into one of the chairs and crossed one ankle over the other. Loosely, he gestured at his left hand in its ridiculous-looking brace. "This thing needs a bit of help, I was hoping you had time to nip back to Asgard for some more of that magic ointment."

Thor sat down slowly, and leaned his forearms on his knees. "I cannot."

Way to let a guy down gently. Tony made a face, reminding himself to be diplomatic. "It doesn't have to be today, you've got a date, I get that." Kind of dickish priorities, but whatever. "I just need to--"

"No," Thor interrupted, looking serious. "A lack of time is not the issue. I cannot give you any."

Seriously? Was literally *everybody* going to give him pushback on this? Tony sat up straighter, uncrossing his ankles. "Thor, I'm not asking for the Crown Jewels. Just go, stick some ointment in a jar, bring it back. I'll even supply the jar."

"I don't think you understand how significant it was that I was allowed to bring any previously," Thor said. "And now that my father knows you are a Craftsman--"

"What's that got to do with it?" Stupid question. They'd proposed killing him off just so Loki couldn't get anything out of him.

Wait. The mages Thor had consulted had suggested that... but Odin had allowed Thor to bring some kind of healing ointment. Tony raised his eyebrows. "You didn't tell him."

"I may have omitted that detail when I presented your case," Thor agreed, looking a little sheepish and a little devious all mixed together. Then his expression turned serious again. "Which has considerably displeased the All-Father. I realize that for Midgardians these things take longer, but you will simply have to be patient."

Thor didn't get it. Tony stared at him for a moment as the realization clicked - Asgardians healed faster. Much faster. That meant neither of them understood-- "Thor, it doesn't work like that. For us, it's--" He stopped and shook his head. Saying it out loud still felt... felt too much like accepting it. He wasn't, he didn't accept it. He was going to find a solution. "If I can't make it heal fast enough, it's, it's permanent, okay? I can't be patient, I have to *fix* this. That medicine might be the key."

"Surely not," Thor said, looking shocked. "But your limb is intact."

Tony cringed a little. This was the last thing he wanted to discuss. "You know, it's a little sensitive. Bruce can probably explain. But you understand why I need you to get me some of that medicine-- or something else, if you've got something specifically for healing, or healing nerves, just, whatever you or your doctors think is best--"

Thor was shaking his head and this, this was exactly why Tony preferred to do things on his own. That SHIELD profile might have been a fake-out but it wasn't wrong about him hating to rely on others.

"My father--"

"Seriously?" Tony said, irritated. "Is that stuff guarded by a dragon, or what? Just take some, he doesn't need to know."

All the friendliness dropped out of Thor's face in an instant. "For your sake I will pretend you did not suggest that."

Oh, come *on*. Tony had a sharp retort on the tip of his tongue, but managed to hold it back. Never had he resented Thor's 'all hail sacred Asgard' attitude as much as he did right now.

"That's just terrific, big guy, thanks," he said sarcastically, using his good hand to push up out of the chair. "Thanks for all your help. I guess I'll figure it out myself."

When it came down to it, that wasn't much of a surprise.

--

Sweeney sent through all the details for his surgery. Tony had already cleared a few days out of his calendar, so he didn't need to do much except forward the timing to Happy and then look up the product name of the graft material to make sure it really *was* animal-based, and not from humans. He didn't distrust Sweeney exactly; he just... didn't actively trust her, either.

He got an email back from Maya Hansen, who was going to be in NYC in a couple of weeks and willing to meet up for coffee. Given the way everyone else was reacting, she'd probably just tell him to give up, but who knew, maybe she'd have some old research notes that would give him a lead. He'd take what he could get.

At the moment, what he could get was Clint and Natasha bickering quietly in the background while he worked. They weren't the most durable Avengers, either of them, but simply not being alone was probably enough.

He'd just finished replying to Maya when the alert for a new text message popped up. His eyes caught '*seek an audience*' and that kind of formality meant Thor - maybe to apologize, to offer to help? - except that Thor didn't like to text and the rest of the message referred to Tony as the King of Stark Industries.

He found himself looking to see who it was from, even knowing that he didn't need to. There was only one person who called him that.

His stomach churned. What the devil did Loki want? Just to taunt him? That snide 'king' bullshit didn't bode well. He could just imagine the patronizing, condescending expression that went along with it.

Didn't matter. Tony wasn't stupid; there was no way he was making any kind of reply. He deleted the message and started to go back to his research, then stopped. Loki tended to take his bad moods out on other people. What if...?

"Hey, Butch and Sundance," he called over to the SHIELD agents. "Any drama from Crazy McStabby?"

Natasha shook her head. "Nothing that's obviously him," she said.

Meanwhile Clint cocked his head, musing, "Is he really that damaged, or is he just an asshole?"

Seriously? Tony gave him a skeptical look. After everything they'd seen so far, it wasn't that hard to figure out. "Pretty sure he's damaged *and* an asshole."

They weren't mutually exclusive, after all. Crazy came in many forms; if Loki's was full of bitterness and anger and the desire to *hurt*, that was because Loki was full of those things.

There was more-- there might have been the chance for more to him. But if Loki wasn't willing to...

"How damaged can he really be? Oh, he got teased a few times and he's adopted, I'm weeping for him--"

"A lot of it comes from his own head," Tony agreed absently. "He's not doing himself any favors, that's for sure."

--He's a *prince*, for god's sake."

Right. Tony closed his mouth abruptly. Okay, yeah. Compared to some of the people in this tower-- well, he shouldn't be in this conversation at all. He looked back at his tablet and pressed his lips together.

"Clint," Natasha murmured, aiming a small frown across the table.

Clint huffed. "What, you've heard Thor's stories. Best of everything, feasts every day, servants cleaning up after them..."

"Yeah," Tony said grimly; "you'd have to be pretty selfish to complain about a childhood like that."

Natasha raised her eyebrows just slightly. "You know it's more complicated than that."

"No, Clint's right. Poor little rich boy, right? Boo-hoo, he was lonely and he didn't feel loved." Selfish, self-pitying-- Tony clenched his jaw momentarily, feeling his grip tighten on the tablet. "He wasn't abused, he didn't go hungry, so what's the fucking problem?"

And he was wrong anyway, according to the people who knew. Wrong about everything his father thought about him. So-- so, what did that mean; it was his fault he couldn't tell? He should just be over it?

"I didn't mean *you*," Clint said, rolling his eyes a little.

Tony was *so damn tired* of being around other people. He could feel his smile getting nasty. "Well, sure, I felt like I was never good enough to please my father, he felt like he was never macho enough to please his father, it's completely different." Clint started to object and Tony sliced his good hand through the air, cutting him off. "I'm *agreeing* with you, Barton! Feeling a little bad sometimes isn't on the same level as being abused, okay, I *know* that."

"I didn't mean-- I just meant, it's not an excuse for killing."

"That's not what you *said*," Tony snapped, and god, how he hated people backpedaling, trying to placate him; so sick of liars and sycophants. He was so tired and there were people living here who'd had genuinely shitty childhoods while he just felt sorry for himself over-- over *nothing*. "For fuck's sake. It's just emotional garbage, it's no big deal. It doesn't *matter*."

As much as nobody likes the smart kid, at least in a class with people years older than him they had the sense not to leave bruises on Howard Stark's son. It could have been much worse; he knew exactly how lucky he was. Could still hear his Dad's voice: *so they're not hitting him? Good heavens, Maria, it's not like he couldn't stand to be ignored a little.*

It was good for him, Dad had said, to learn how to keep quiet and out of the way.

Natasha shook her head, a frown in her eyes and something horribly knowing in her expression. "Just because you don't *want* it to matter doesn't mean--"

Tony slammed his good hand on the arm of the chair. Natasha was the last person who should be-- who should sanction that kind of narcissistic self-pity. "Do not finish that sentence, I swear to god. I'm not in the mood to be psychoanalyzed. I mean, honestly: who cares if I never learned how to socialize with people, I'm a goddamn billionaire, I can afford to be eccentric."

He didn't know why he was so angry because *Clint was right*. Compared to some of the team - *most* of the team - Tony had no right to whine about his childhood; he shouldn't be bothered by it and the fact that he was just proved the point that he *wasn't good enough*.

Walking through the day like a ghost, jumping up and down just to get someone to act like he *existed*. And then they rolled their eyes and turned away.

All of the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names, they never let poor Rudolph...

"Loki had a comfortable life, and there are people out there who were actually abused while he's crying into his Cheerios because, what, he didn't feel quite as spoiled as his brother?" Because he was alone, because he was different, because there was something fundamentally *wrong* with him...? "Because Daddy didn't give a damn and Mom was busy, like he didn't have plenty of servants and staff running after him? Because he felt rejected and socially isolated and the only people close to him thought he was a fucking *fairy*--"

Shut up you idiot shut up shut up. He snapped his mouth closed with an effort, sucking in a breath through his nose. Not looking at either of the others, he grabbed the tablet tightly and walked straight out of the room.

Behind him he could hear Clint muttering, "Okay, damaged and an asshole, I get it."

Tony stalked to the elevator, pissed off at the world and at himself. "Smooth," he muttered angrily. "Way to play it cool, genius."

Good god, he was even acting like Loki. Complete with angry tantrums that gave away more than he meant to - and that was saying something, given that most of his life was like an open book. Or, well, open magazine, at least. Open tabloid, maybe.

He hadn't even realized the 'fairy' thing still bothered him. It was just some dumb fight with Obie, god knew they had enough of those. Blah blah risk, blah blah public image, blah blah *good of the company*. No different from a hundred other dumb fights, no reason it should stick. He had better things to do than be ashamed of who he took to bed. Contrary to what Obadiah might think-- might have thought, Tony *did* know how to be discreet when he had to.

And now he had Obadiah on the mind as well. Just fucking *perfect*. He slammed his fist against the wall of the elevator and then flexed his fingers with a hiss while Jarvis said something disapproving.

He was still in a lousy mood when he reached the workshop. He pulled out a bottle and a glass - emergency supply, good thing to have around for days just like these - everything one-handed and slow, slow, slow. His shoulder ached and he didn't really need the good painkillers but right now, getting a bit fuzzy-headed was desperately appealing.

Ha, painkillers and alcohol. "Just like old times, huh, Obie?" he quipped, then dropped a couple of pills down his throat and chased them with a half glass of scotch.

Now all he needed was a dance-floor full of barely legal co-eds to make the nostalgia trip complete.

Tony refilled his glass and lifted it in a silent toast to narcissistic self-pity. Normally in this kind of mood he'd go out in the suit. Soar and swoop and maybe buzz some traffic, chasing the adrenaline rush, flying free. But he'd be one-handed and off-kilter and he didn't trust his coordination. *Fuck* Loki. Selfish, crazy son of a bitch.

"Jarvis, open up the sealed files," he said instead, before he could think better of it.

There was still time to reconsider. He'd put a few safeguards on these in a fit of... whatever the opposite of self-destructive was. A rare moment of common sense. There was decryption time, but first a programmed conversational delay: "Sir, are you sure that's a wise--"

"No one likes a negative Nancy," he chided. "Open them up."

He used the decryption time to finish the second glass and pour a third. He could feel the painkillers slowly taking effect and the warmth of the alcohol seeping into his bones. Just enough to be a little light-headed. Just to take the edge off. Make his mind just *slow down*, just for a bit. Have some peace.

The files popped up on screen and he took a long draught of scotch, scanning through them. He threw one up as a holographic projection: him and Obie, side by side at the piano, playing a four-hands arrangement of Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf. He'd been... what, twenty-four there, twenty-three? And Obie was all smiles and encouragement, Obie had been the one he could *turn to*. His right-hand man. Mentor. Someone to look up to.

Just another father figure for him to disappoint. Because he must have, obviously. He'd done something wrong, or not done something; he'd failed to be the son any of them wanted. Constantly falling short. In some ways, it was easier to convince himself that none of it had

been real, because then - if Obie had faked the whole relationship - then it wasn't his fault. If none of it was real to begin with, then Tony hadn't driven him away.

He'd just missed every clue and hint of yet another fake friend at his side.

Well, at least when *Loki* tried to have him killed he wouldn't be surprised. Tony snorted in bitter amusement and took another drink. No, Loki wouldn't resort to Afghani terrorists, Loki wasn't afraid to get his own hands dirty. Knife to the front, that was Loki's style.

"Sir, Agent Barton is requesting entrance."

"No," Tony said flatly. His fingers tightened on his glass. "Access denied. Tell him I'm doing highly unstable, ill-advised science experiments."

"As you wish."

He sat there watching old videos and getting progressively drunker until the self-pity got to be too much even for him. At that point he sealed the files back up and wiped his wet eyes with the heel of his good hand. To hell with Obie anyway. Pepper had fried him. They'd both fried him. Teamwork. He had a team at his back and... and...

And just for a moment, he'd rather talk to Loki, because he wouldn't have to pretend to be something he wasn't. He wouldn't have to try to be good or even *nice*, and Loki would never be a yes-man or pander to him, and he'd never have to worry about disappointing him--

"No," Tony muttered, rolling his eyes at his own stupidity; "only getting *stabbed*, for fuck's sake."

Even Natasha only stabbed him if there was a really good reason for it.

It wasn't even *true*; Loki would pander to the moon and back if it would get him something he wanted. Loki would lie through his teeth and manipulate with a smile, and Tony really needed to convince his subconscious that people who were willing to argue with him weren't any more honest than people who pretended to adore every word out of his mouth.

He should do... something. Work on that collapsible repulsor design. Read some departmental reports. Come up with a freaking arc reactor-powered hovercar, anything. Something productive.

Instead he started looking through old file footage of Loki, looking for... clues. Maybe a revelation. This kind of thing might be why Pepper thought he was obsessed. "Jarvis, have you been tattling on me?"

"Tattling, sir?"

"Don't think that innocent voice fools me." Tony frowned at the display, watching tiny holographic Nick Fury tell Loki to lower his weapon. Steve had done the same thing when they first met Thor. Well, they'd had no way of knowing that Asgardians got so insulted over being asked to surrender without a fight. Mind you, it was hard to tell what was running

through Loki's mind - he did kind of look like he thought he was under attack. Unfortunately, a whole lot of other people had paid the price.

Hell, if his own armor and Steve's shield had been a little less effective, they might have died too. It wasn't something they really talked about - hey, remember when we met Thor and he tried to kill us? - but the difference was that afterwards Thor was willing to amend his tactics to something more Earth-appropriate, while Loki... wasn't. Didn't.

Of course, Thor had nothing to prove. Loki... Tony was willing to bet that Loki was still trying to play by Asgardian rules, still striving for approval he was never going to get. He might have a better chance if he stopped running away from all the people he was trying to get it from.

Tony watched some more clips, and drank some more, and tried not to smirk at Loki's sarcastic quips. The number of dirty looks he'd gotten from his teammates for an ill-timed chuckle-- and it wasn't like he found Loki funny on *purpose*, it was just that sarcasm was his natural language and he liked being spoken to on his level. Anyway, it went both ways-- although apparently that was his fault too, like he was supposed to somehow prevent Loki from ever being amused by him. Which, come to think of it, happened reasonably often.

Maybe this had always been coming, since Loki had first let them capture him in Germany, and they'd traded quips about 'in-flight safety' while strapping Loki in to the jet.

Goddammit, Loki had stabbed him and royally *screwed* his life. He was not sitting here thinking anything even remotely positive about that asshole. How had Loki even gotten so far under his skin? It was so much easier at the beginning, when Loki was just some half-crazy space viking - who was, admittedly, vaguely attractive in an abstract sort of way - before Tony'd had the bright idea to *get to know him* and fuck everything up.

You fixate, Pepper had said. She wasn't wrong, but this was a little more dangerous than a newfound interest in clean energy or carbon nanotubes (oh, hey, and *that* was an idea for the Mark IX: lightweight, high tensile strength, lace it through the structure) or that time he'd decided he just had to learn Python even though it was a criminally boring language.

He just, he wanted to believe there was a way to fix Loki. He wanted to... *needed* to believe there was a way to put Loki back together. Because looking at Loki hurt. It was almost unbearable sometimes. The way Loki was, all sharp and angry and bleeding emotions everywhere. *Selfish*. Lashing out, hurting and killing and self-destructive and everyone-else-destructive and, and, the worst possible Ghost of Christmas Future. From Hell. Ghost from Hell of Christmas Future? Ghost of Christmas-from-Hell Future?

If Loki was beyond hope then what if Tony...

Fuck. This was definitely too drunk. "Okay, okay," Tony groaned, waving his hand in the air. "Put them away."

He didn't want to think about Obie. He didn't want to think about Loki. He felt restless, filled with too many things he wanted to prove to too many people. Dammit, he wasn't made for living with other people (*in a herd*, said his inner voice, and it sounded suspiciously bitchy

and Asgardian), and he'd probably made Clint *feel bad*, and he just wanted to crawl into a dark corner and lick his wounds for a while.

He was not eight years old anymore. He didn't need to hide on the floor of his closet with a plate of sandwiches and a half-built circuit-board. He did not need to be sitting eating comfort food in the dark. He was Iron Man, for god's sake. He *literally* couldn't have grown up to be any more goddamn awesome.

He rubbed his face with his good hand and demanded, "Give me a soundtrack, Jarvis. I'm thinking big band, something with a bit of class."

Obligingly Jarvis pulled up a playlist, some good old Artie Shaw to start off, clarinet and trumpets mellow and easy. Tony opened up some project files at random and let himself sink into streamlining designs.

Some hours later the music abruptly cut off, and he scowled without looking up. "Don't turn down my music. We've been through this."

"Yes, we have," Pepper said, unapologetic. "How are you feeling?"

"I was great, until someone turned my music off."

"You don't look great."

"I'm working."

"You're drinking."

"I'm working *and* drinking."

Pepper folded her arms. Any minute now she was going to sigh at him. There it was. "Tony. You shouldn't be drinking while you're taking painkillers."

He shouldn't have left those out. "Don't mother me, Pepper, I don't need you to mother me."

"You do need me to mother you," she murmured, eyeing him with concern as he reached for another dose. "We established that years ago. But if you're in a mood--"

"I'm not in a *mood*." Tony chased the pills with scotch again, just to spite her, which maybe undermined his words a bit.

"You're a little cranky--"

"I was *stabbed*, I'm allowed to be cranky. Who even uses the word 'cranky', I'm not a crotchety grandmother, we don't have grandchildren, Pepper--"

"You're in a mood," Pepper repeated, arching an eyebrow at him. As if she hadn't been just as tense and subdued the last couple of weeks. "I'll bring some food down for you later on."

Well, okay, that *did* sound a lot better than trying to make himself decent for company by the time dinner was ready. He admitted as much with a tilt of his head and a short, sincere, "Thanks, Pep."

Maybe he should just take off for a while. He wasn't much good to the Avengers injured, and he was... not great at playing nice when he was upset. It was better all round if he didn't make people put up with him when they didn't have to. He could do a tour of some of the Stark Industries facilities he hadn't visited in a while, touch base with the development teams in person. Or go oversee construction of the latest tower, in Grand Rapids. Heck, he could take Happy down to Atlantic City for a week of booze and gambling, if it came to that.

Just... go somewhere he wouldn't be stuck dwelling on all the ways in which he didn't measure up.

--

In the end, he figured it made more sense to wait until after the surgery. He couldn't bring himself to hang out on the common floor, though, so during the day he camped out in a corner of Pepper's office and dedicated himself to the problem of how to power a self-contained repulsor gauntlet. Pepper looked at him kind of oddly but didn't object.

The business news was on in the background, a low hum of talking heads, and occasionally Alicia bustled in and out with things for Pepper to sign or questions to be answered. Tony managed to pretty successfully tune most of it out, until he heard his own name. When he looked up, Pepper was looking at him with her phone pressed to one ear.

"Do you know a Mister Prince?" she asked, frowning a little. It was a frown of confusion rather than disapproval, but it didn't really give him any context for the question.

"Probably?" Tony scratched at the corner of his jaw, trying to think. There was a former Board member, but he'd died a few years back, and Pepper would have known who he was. A few computer programmers, at least two decent engineers, and four lawyers he could think of off the top of his head. "I'm assuming not the artist formerly known as."

That was a frown of disapproval, but not a serious one. Pepper paused, listening to the other end of the phone for a moment, then focused her attention back on him. "He's apparently quite firm that he wants to meet with the owner, not the CEO. He wants to make an appointment."

Tony stifled the paranoid voice in the back of his mind whispering that Loki was a prince. If even the name 'Prince' was making him think of Loki, then maybe Pepper had a point about him being obsessed.

"That sounds like something for Legal," Pepper said into the phone. "Reparations for what?"

The paranoid voice got a little more insistent. Tony shifted uneasily. He pulled up the internal telephony system that he technically shouldn't have administrator access for. Pepper was on the line with Alicia, but the call Alicia had on hold wasn't an external call, it was the main extension for Reception.

"Pepper," Tony said.

"Just a moment, Alicia." Pepper put her hand over the microphone lightly.

Tony swallowed and hoped he was wrong. "Pull up security camera TWR-ATR-005. I want a visual on Reception."

The slight flare of alarm in Pepper's eyes was the only sign she'd picked up his train of thought. She put her phone down on the desk for a moment, freeing her hands to pull up the security feed on her computer. Tony got up and walked over, getting a look at the screen just as Pepper gasped and covered her mouth.

Oh, fuck.

They needed to evacuate the building. It couldn't be done without attracting Loki's attention. Did they notify the rest of the Avengers? Loki had sent a text message first and Tony had ignored it. Was this escalation? A subtle threat? If anyone in the company got hurt because of this, because of Tony--

"What do we do?" Pepper hissed.

"I'm thinking," Tony hissed back. He wiped his hand over his face. Be sensible, think. Loki wasn't dressed for a fight, he was... he was wearing a suit, actually, a regular *human* business suit which was incredibly weird but did seem to imply he wasn't immediately planning to get violent. It was actually a pretty effective disguise; most people didn't really know Loki's face. It was the outfit that they associated him with. Witness that asshole in Florida who'd successfully robbed a bank by dyeing his hair and faking the costume. Probably would have gotten away with it if he hadn't pushed his luck and tried for a second bank. Regular humans weren't as resilient in the face of gunfire as Asgardians.

"We need to stall--" Huh. Inspiration struck. Pepper was going to hate it. Come to think of it, Tony kind of hated it himself, but right now his employees' lives were his priority. "Set up an appointment."

Pepper stared at him incredulously. "*What?*"

"He wants an appointment!" Tony gestured at the screen. "Let's book one in. I don't know, next Friday or something. Give us time to figure out a plan of attack."

Pepper shook her head in apparent disbelief. "You can't seriously think he's just going to leave?"

It was worth a try, at the very least. Tony grabbed Pepper's phone off the desk because they didn't have time to debate it. "Alicia, are you there?"

"Yes, Mister Stark."

"You can pass on that there's an appointment available next Friday at three." Tony ignored Pepper's slight noise of protest, watching the screen. He handed her phone back now that it was no longer useful. In the image from the security camera, Loki was standing in front of

the Reception desk, apparently just... waiting. In a business suit. A decently tailored one, at that.

'Reparations'. What had Loki's damned martyr complex convinced him Tony owed him? This nightmare with his hand wasn't enough?

As they watched, the receptionist said something into her head-set, then pressed what Tony assumed was the button to end the call. She looked up and said something to Loki, who inclined his head and said something in return.

And... turned and walked away.

"Did he just leave?" Tony said, blinking. It was exactly what he'd been hoping for, but somehow it took him by surprise. It was oddly refreshing to have a stressful situation *not* get horribly worse. "That just happened, right?"

Pepper flicked through the other security cameras on the ground floor, trying to follow Loki's path. It quickly became obvious that he'd vanished.

"Oh, my god," Pepper said faintly, pressing a hand to her chest. "He just... Oh my god."

"I need to move the Avengers," Tony realized, something ill and guilty settling into his gut. Sure, nobody had gotten hurt... this time. There was no guarantee they'd be this lucky again. "This seals it. I can't have someone coming here to pick a fight with-- with any of us. God, I need to tell them about this. They're going to want to set a trap. I can't, I don't want to put any of the staff at risk. If Loki thinks..."

He ran his hand over his face again, trying to figure out what their next move should be. Keep everyone at home when the day came, fill the building with SHIELD agents instead? Something told him Loki wouldn't react well to something like that.

The Avengers would want to capture him and send him back to Asgard, and Asgard would lock Loki up - for a little while. And then Loki would come back with his grudge stoked higher and Stark Industries would be a target. Pepper would be a target.

It felt a whole lot like they were back where they'd started from, if they'd even moved at all. Except, not quite, because *that* Loki had broken down in front of his enemies. Had been hanging on by the slimmest of threads.

Tony wondered how far he'd been from letting go.

What would it take, to get Loki back to that point of utter despair? If Tony pushed instead of pulled, if he dug the wounds a little deeper... how close was Loki to just solving the problem for them? If Loki killed himself, if the Avengers hadn't done it, Asgard wouldn't go to war, right?

But then, Loki seemed like the type to take as many as he could down with him. Last time it had been Jotunheim. Next time could be Earth. Loki with nothing left to lose could be the most terrifying prospect of all.

And what did it say about Tony that he could even contemplate it? That wasn't... that wasn't how he should think. If he was a better person. Kill Loki, put him out of everyone's misery, that was one thing. But take him to pieces like that... to take a bunch of private conversations and use them to deliberately drive a person over the edge, that was sick. Those were the kind of tactics a B-grade thriller movie villain might use. Mind games and psychological warfare.

Okay, a B-grade thriller movie villain, and Nick Fury.

The point was, it should be a clear line in the sand. No psychological torture, for crying out loud. Even when lives were at stake.

Except... lives were at stake.

Tony exhaled heavily and backed off, back to the sofa in the corner, putting some distance between himself and Pepper. He wasn't as sure as Natasha was, that there wasn't something a little sociopathic about himself sometimes. Distractedly he wondered if she ever had the same doubts, when she was being all ruthless and efficient for the sake of a mission. She probably thought being a sociopath was something to aspire to.

No, that wasn't fair. If there was one thing he knew about Natasha, it was that she wanted to be more than what her childhood had made her. It was just a damn shame that she was letting SHIELD tell her how to do it. From what Tony had seen, they didn't exactly have a terrific moral compass either.

"Tell me you're not actually going to keep that appointment," Pepper said.

Tony cringed. Maybe if he was lucky he'd have a bad reaction to the anesthetic for the graft surgery, first. He knew better than to make that joke out loud, Pepper didn't appreciate humor quite that dark. "I don't know. I've got to figure it out."

"Tony!"

"I don't know!" he insisted, gesturing for emphasis with his good hand. He stared down at the other one, with the brace he hated. Some self-aggrandizing bullshit from Loki was the last thing he wanted to face. "I can't let him hurt anyone because of me."

"I don't want him to hurt *you*," Pepper said fiercely. "Hasn't he done enough?"

Tony bit back an unkind response about just how aware he was of what Loki had already done, and said instead, "It's over a week away. There's time to talk to the others and come up with a plan."

Pepper's shoulders slumped. "This is a bad idea," she said. She looked exhausted.

"On the bright side," Tony said, leaning over his tablet and using two fingers to swipe the schematic displayed there to Pepper's computer, "I have this?"

She glanced at the wireframe and took in the design: one collapsible repulsor, tucked neatly into the size of a watch. It only seemed to make her exasperated. "This doesn't make you invulnerable, Tony. These, the weapons, the suits, they don't make you safe."

Tony raised his eyebrows. Standing here wearing this brace and she was accusing him of thinking he was invulnerable? "*Really?* I would never have guessed."

"Don't get--" Pepper cut herself off and closed her eyes for a moment. "I'm just saying, it's not your job to throw yourself in front of every bullet."

Tony was suddenly, unbearably, tired. He was running on fumes and he did not have the energy for this. He was doing his best, dammit. He loved Pepper but there were lines he wouldn't cross even for her. It wasn't fair of her to ask that of him. He'd caused enough death. If he'd realized what Yinsen was planning... If he'd realized how ambitious Obadiah was, if he'd stopped his father from driving... There were too many 'if's in his life as it was. He couldn't add more.

This wasn't about throwing himself in front of a bullet, it was about making sure no one else got hit by a bullet that was aimed at *him*.

"Can we not do this right now?" He rubbed at his forehead briefly. "I know what you're going to say, you know what I'm going to say, let's just... not."

Pepper let out a long, quiet sigh. She closed the schematics on her screen. "Fine."

Not fine, clearly, but Tony flopped back down on the sofa and tried to pretend.

--

So, maybe Tony didn't tell *all* of the Avengers about Loki's little visit.

He knew they were going to want to set a trap, and that was the worst possible approach, it was going to end in casualties. He explained as much to Bruce, and then used a combination of pleading eyes and heavy insistence until Bruce gave in and agreed to help him out.

Really, when it came down to it, having Hulk was as good as having the other Avengers, right?

First there was the graft surgery and a carefully negotiated two day observation period, but that left Tony with the whole of Thursday to build his repulsor watch. He was in the workshop testing and re-testing its speed of assembly when Pepper came to find him for dinner. He tried to wave her off but she argued, claimed that people were worried about him, wanted to see him.

Ha. If that was true, it wouldn't last for long once he opened his mouth. All he seemed to do these days was yell at people and be an asshole and then feel bad about it. Sharing a meal was a terrible idea and he was going to be terrible company, but Pepper dug her heels in and... it was easier just to give in.

"You'll feel better for it," she assured him, and Tony let the scathing look he gave her speak for itself.

When the elevator doors opened on the common floor, he could hear Steve talking, though it wasn't obvious to who. Tony braced himself for the looks of pity as he walked in--

"Rhodey!"

"I think I remember this guy," Rhodey drawled, looking Tony up and down.

That better be a solid chair because Tony wasn't going to take this slow. He hurtled forward and flung himself into Rhodey's lap, draping his right arm around Rhodey's neck. "Baby, I knew you'd come back to me."

"Have you put on weight?" Rhodey said, but his arms crept around Tony in return and the squeeze he gave was tight enough to make his feelings obvious.

"That's rude," Tony informed him. Just for that, he was staying here on Rhodey's lap until someone felt awkward enough to make him move. "But I forgive you, because I know it's hard living in my shadow."

"Me living in *your* shadow? Please." Rhodey glanced over his shoulder at the rest of the room. "Someone tell him he's delusional, he doesn't listen to it from me anymore."

"Anymore?" Tony repeated with a raised eyebrow, while behind himself he could hear Steve making a joke about him not listening to it from anyone else, either.

"Are you here for long?" he asked, mentally willing Rhodey to say... almost anything except 'just passing through'. It was the nature of the job; Rhodey went where he was sent. But... Tony thought that it was time *something* went right for him. It wasn't so much to ask, was it?

Rhodey gave him a small, warm smile. "I might have a little leave."

"Fantastic." Tony uncurled his arm from around Rhodey's neck, and leaned his head against Rhodey's shoulder instead. "You can cut my food for me," he murmured with a smirk.

"I should let you starve," Rhodey retorted. "You scared the hell out of me, man."

"I can't help but feel that letting me starve would be counterproductive." Tony wriggled a little until he could catch sight of Pepper out of the corner of his eye. He gave her a smile filled with thanks. This had her fingerprints all over it.

"You'd be lighter," Rhodey said.

Tony huffed, pretending to be offended. "Again, rude."

For the first time in weeks, he felt *good*.

--

Friday afternoon saw him sitting in a room on an empty floor, behind a makeshift desk; a table brought down from R&D with a reinforced structure. If he tipped it forward and used it for cover - it probably wouldn't shield him from much, but it might buy him just enough time.

He had the prototype repulsor watch on his wrist; he had homing markers on and a suit ready to deploy; he'd taken off the brace on his hand for ease of armor wrapping around him. And

he had Bruce in the next room, listening in.

None of that stopped his heart from pounding anxiously when Loki arrived.

Up close Tony could see the suit Loki was wearing wasn't pure black; threads of dark, glittering green ran through it. Figured. Loki's hair was slicked back, smooth, and his expression was... frustratingly unreadable.

Tony stood up slowly, eyes fixed on Loki's face. He rotated his wrist a little, feeling the solidity of the watch wrapped around his skin. Aloud, he said, "Ballsy move."

Loki flickered an eyebrow up, just a hint of an arch. His eyes swept over Tony's form - did they linger a little, where the bug was planted? He came to a stop on the other side of the desk and clasped his hands behind his back. "It has come to my attention," he said, with an air of choosing his words carefully, "that my battle may have had... unintended repercussions."

Tony froze. It was the absolute last thing he might have guessed Loki would say. It sounded almost-- he couldn't afford to get his hopes up, not about this, but-- *Loki*, of all people. The guy who put the 'Dick' into 'Moby Dick'. Maybe, actually, gave a damn?

Could he be that lucky?

Heart pounding, he said as non-committally as he could manage, "I'm listening."

Loki lowered his head slightly and looked up from under his lashes, somehow giving off the impression of looking 'up' at Tony despite being taller. It was not submissive, exactly - ha, as if - but... conciliatory.

"I'm sure you're aware," Loki said, still with that careful precision, "that one of the slain was kin to one of your..." Unclasping his hands, he gestured at the ceiling, at the tower above their heads. "Employees."

Wait, *what*.

Tony stared, trying to follow the Asgardian logic train. This wasn't about the arm at all, it wasn't about Loki realizing what he'd done to Tony's hand, it was-- seriously about Stark Industries?

Loki's expression tightened when he didn't respond immediately. "I realize that this... regrettable incident could be construed as an act against your little Midgardian kingdom," he said, with a bit more bite to his tone. A sneering defensiveness that was more familiar. "That was not my intention."

"Regrettable incident," Tony repeated flatly. His mind was reeling. "That's what you're going with."

Loki's lips thinned. "Unfortunately, I was not aware of the connection until afterwards, but I assure you, had I known I would not have so insulted your hospitality. I am, however, prepared to make a formal offer of reparations."

Something snagged Tony's attention. Not the cold and almost hostile way Loki made his 'offer'. Defensive alien with a superiority/inferiority complex; that made sense. What didn't make sense was this Stark Industries connection.

It hadn't been in the news; Jarvis would have alerted him. Loki said he 'wasn't aware until afterwards' but how did he *become* aware?

Assuming it was true, that seemed to suggest... Loki had gone *looking* for a connection.

An excuse.

"What kind of reparations," Tony said hoarsely. His mouth felt dry.

Loki's eyes cut across to his shoulder, a furtive sweep of eyelashes. "An attempt to restore what has been damaged."

All the breath burst out of Tony in a rush. Oh, thank God, thank the heavens, thank everything anyone considered holy. He braced his right hand on the table, feeling giddy. No one had believed he could do this, no one had believed Loki would ever do anything but lash out and destroy. But this - to restore, to fix things, and it was because of *Tony*.

He suppressed the triumphant glee bubbling up in his throat. Check. Be certain. "My shoulder? The nerve?" He searched Loki's face, trying to find confirmation. "And the others?"

A little furrow appeared between Loki's eyebrows. "Others?"

"The other injured people," Tony clarified, because Loki was looking him over like he expected to find more injuries. "There were survivors..." He trailed off at the frown on Loki's face, heart sinking.

"You are not suggesting I perform some kind of... mass healing," Loki said tersely; almost snapped it, posture shifting into something dangerous.

Tony eyed him warily, reminding himself of the microphone he was wearing that could bring Hulk to his side in an instant. "Why not? You're the one that did the damage."

Loki's fingers curled in a way that made Tony think of dagger handles. "My offer was to *you*. I sought no quarrel with you."

"You said you were willing to make reparations," Tony insisted. He knew he was pushing his luck, but... what was he supposed to do, just agree and pretend no one else had been affected?

"Make reparations, not desecrate myself entirely," Loki snarled, taking a step forward. Fear shot through Tony's body. "Your arrogance defies belief. How *dare* you demand more of me."

Tony struggled to keep his expression steady, to act like he was firm and unintimidated and not seeing whirls of green and black in his mind's eye. The table in between them seemed suddenly incredibly flimsy.

It occurred to him that maybe Loki didn't understand how badly some of the others were hurt, like he hadn't understood about the nerve damage. Asgardians either healed up or died right away, didn't they? "Loki. Someone's still in intensive care, in the hospital."

There was a twist of something almost *accusing* in Loki's expression, before it was replaced by a spiteful smile. "Of course, I could be persuaded to *transfer* my aid. One act of restoration, your choice where I direct it. What say you, *Glowheart*?"

What. No. No, no no no. Tony stared at him in dismay. "You can't-- you can't expect me to make that choice."

Except Loki *did*, that was obvious; all lit up with malicious satisfaction. "Go on. Show me how far your *concern* for those petty little creatures goes. Will you have your hand, or must I take myself elsewhere?"

Fix it. Tony wanted to, he wanted to be selfish so badly. This wasn't *fair*. He kind of hated himself for much he wanted to just take Loki's fix. He hated himself a little more for knowing that he *wouldn't*. The fact that a patient was still in ICU so long after the attack didn't mean anything good for their chances.

He clenched his good hand into a fist so tight he could feel his fingernails pressing into his palm and forced himself to say, "Then go help the guy in hospital."

He was kind of proud of himself for managing to keep his voice level, at least.

Loki obviously hadn't expected that answer, shock and frustration mingling on his face. "Do you mistake this for a trick? These terms are very real, Tony Stark. It's the use of your hand, or-- some mortal of no significance, someone who is a stranger to you."

"I told you to go to the damn hospital," Tony snapped, heat prickling at his eyes. So *close*. It was worse than if Loki hadn't offered at all. Maybe that was the point.

Loki hissed between his teeth. "Do not order me as though I were your peace hostage. You stood before me and practically *begged* me to end your life! I'm offering you what you *want*."

"Not like that! I don't want it if someone else has to pay the price, how do you not *get* that?" Tony shoved his fist in his jacket pocket, trying to ignore his hand shaking. He could feel himself fraying at the edges. "This isn't reparations, this is just you doing what you want. How is it that when someone looks at you sideways you throw a tantrum the size of a cargo ship, but you murder three dozen people and you think it's enough to help *one*? Where's one of your astronomical overreactions when it would actually be helpful? Are you afraid people will think you're not an asshole? The dead are still going to be *dead*!"

"Of all the things I might fear, there is no great risk of *that*," Loki sneered, and hey, there was something they agreed on. "I will not stand here while you insult me. I came to offer you a kindness, and you spit on it. Whatever I do, it is not *enough*. I should have known better than to waste my time."

Tony took a breath to rip into that self-pitying bullshit, but Loki was already turning away. Within moments Loki had strode out the door and - unbelievably - slammed it behind him.

Tony slowly sat back down and buried his face in the hand he could still use. He felt like screaming. He felt like breaking down in tears. He was pretty sure it was justified, at this point. He just-- he could have *had* it, he could have just let Loki-- Except, he couldn't.

It would have been a lot easier if Obie had just done a better job of having him killed. Tony pretended that the noise that broke out of his throat was a laugh.

He should probably worry about what Loki was going to do. It probably wasn't going to be 'calmly and peacefully go heal that person in Kentucky'. Just... right now, he really couldn't bring himself to *care*.

It was maybe a couple of minutes before the door opened again and there was the sound of careful footsteps. Right. Bruce. Tony mustered the shreds of his dignity and blearily lifted his head. This was going to be the part with the condescension and pity--

The look on Bruce's face wasn't pity. "You want to explain that part about begging him to end your life?"

...Oh.

Well, this just got better and better.

"It wasn't like that," Tony muttered. He'd been-- it was more of a challenge, defiance in the face of danger, that was all. Loki made it sound worse than it really was.

"What was it like?" Bruce said, and there was a faint hardness to his voice, a hint of the underlying anger that he usually hid.

Tony opened his mouth to try and placate him, and then he stopped. "You know what? I'm not doing this right now." Yeah. That was it. There was something so blissfully freeing about deciding not to give a crap for a while. "I feel like shit, and I'm going to go get drunk."

Bruce grimaced, drawing into himself a little at the implication of large quantities of alcohol. "Fine," he said, "but we are going to talk about this."

Not if Tony had anything to say about it. He gave Bruce an insincere smile and got up to head to the door. "Sure thing, Doc. I take appointments by request."

Atlantic City sounded like a really good option right now. Rhodey and Happy and Atlantic City and doing his level best to drink a casino out of whiskey. Perfection.

Bruce followed him down the hallway, quiet while they walked, quiet while they waited for the elevator, quiet until after they stepped inside and its doors closed. Then he cast Tony a sidelong look.

"...Did Loki call you 'Glowheart'?"

Tony closed his eyes and briefly contemplated the chances of the elevator plunging him to a fast and brutal death.

#

Disproportionate Response

Chapter Summary

After their last argument, Tony finds out about Loki's reaction (along with the other Avengers). It is not calm and measured. While discussing how to deal with the fall-out, Thor reveals some fun new facts about Loki's powers. There are some actual instances of good communication.

Chapter Notes

If you missed it, you might want to check out [{glimpse}](#), a Loki-pov ficlet overlapping chapter 11.

Even though it takes me a while to respond, I love all of you and your comments.

Loki's tantrum was like nothing Tony ever would have dreamed.

--

He might have, accidentally-on-purpose, left all phones and messaging devices behind when they went to Atlantic City. Pepper knew that Rhodey and Happy were with him; if anyone *really* needed to get in touch then they could phone either of those two. He also might have left his hand-brace behind, because it would draw the wrong kind of attention, and his thumb wasn't going to atrophy so much that it deformed in a single weekend.

No, it was going to take time to develop the deformation Jeremy had warned him about, and it was kind of startling how integral to his self-image having opposable thumbs turned out to be. It wasn't really something Tony had ever thought about, until something came along that threatened it.

He stumbled back into Stark Tower on Sunday evening feeling refreshed and rejuvenated - and a certain amount of schadenfreude at Rhodey's expense, because Rhodey still couldn't hold his alcohol as well as Tony could - and then Jarvis said, "Sir, there has been a media update regarding the Georgetown Massacre."

"Well, that didn't take long," Tony muttered, feeling his tiredness start creeping back in. He pulled off his sunglasses and leaned against the wall of the elevator. "What's the damage, J?"

"That's unclear at this stage, sir," Jarvis said. "There are reports of a disturbance at the hospital involving Mister Silvertongue."

Well, that wasn't good. Although if Loki *had* actually followed through on healing that patient then it still might qualify as a 'disturbance'. If he hadn't bothered with stealth, if people had seen him and freaked out... There was a chance this was okay.

Tony glanced at the grim expression on Rhodey's face (to be fair, some of that was hangover) and said, "Redirect us to the team level, I guess."

They spent the rest of the elevator ride in silence. On the shared floor, Steve and Clint were sitting in front of the television with a laptop, security camera footage projected up on the screen. Natasha was sitting to the side with another laptop, typing. She looked tense, which wasn't good, but Steve and Clint looked more confused than angry.

"What have we got?" Tony asked.

"Hell if I know," Clint said bluntly. He glanced up at them then his eyes slid away uncomfortably; he and Tony hadn't really spoken properly since that... did it count as a fight? Outburst? 'Incident'.

Steve nodded at Rhodey, "Colonel," then looked at Tony. "Loki showed up at the same hospital you were treated at in Georgetown."

"I got that much," Tony said impatiently. "Is it an attack?"

"Again--" Clint started, but Natasha interrupted him without looking up.

"It doesn't seem to be. He made his way to the approximate center of the facility then cast some kind of spell. After that he stops appearing on the cameras. Witness reports are still coming in."

"So he didn't bother with stealth until it was time to leave," Tony mused. Was it safe to be a little hopeful? Cautiously optimistic?

Wait-- a spell? Not some superpowered Asgardian gizmo? It wasn't about healing that guy, then, because Tony couldn't see any way that could be justified as 'lies', not like the illusions.

Except Loki seemed to teleport sometimes and that wasn't a lie either, so maybe it was okay if it was outside of battle? Thor had kind of implied there was some wiggle room...

Clint tapped some keys, changing the camera displayed up on the television screen. "Look, here's another one. En route to ground zero."

The camera had only caught Loki's bottom half: leather pants and the hem of a coat. Someone in scrubs had stepped *towards* Loki, and that wasn't going to end well. Tony winced pre-emptively, feeling something in between dread and sorrow.

"What are we looking at?" Rhodey asked steadily.

"Nurse trying to divert him away from patients," Clint said. He pointed at the screen. "You see that? Weird as hell."

It looked a lot like... Loki just pushed the nurse aside and continued on.

Not stabbed them. Not snapped their neck. Admittedly it was a pretty rough push but even then it looked like Loki was probably restraining his strength.

Tony blinked. "That's... new," he said, not sure what to think. He moved forward to sit on a spare chair, while Rhodey joined Steve and Clint on the couch.

It felt like tempting fate to be too hopeful, but he wanted to be encouraged by the lack of death and destruction. He settled for a joke to cover his uncertainty. "Maybe he just needed a check-up. You think Asgardians have prostates?"

"Not according to Thor," Natasha said, still focused on her own laptop, and wait *why* was Natasha even discussing prostates with Thor? Tony stared at her.

Clint snorted. "She's making that up."

"I don't wanna know," Rhodey commented, shaking his head. "Do we have a view of the spell?"

Huh. Tony kind of liked that 'we'. He imagined Rhodey joining up with the Avengers as a regular thing, War Machine fighting with them. That would be awesome. The few times he'd wound up fighting alongside Rhodey, like when Vanko had attacked the Stark Expo - that had been thrilling, falling into rhythm, playing off each other.

"Here we go..." Clint selected a different camera feed and looked up at the television.

Tony looked, too. There was Loki, stalking into a room that was from the looks of it an unattended operating room? Semi-casual black leathers, not the formal cape and helm combo. But he looked seriously pissed off, even considering the grainy quality of the footage.

As they watched, Loki pulled something out of thin air and put it on the floor. Tony squinted. It looked familiar - was that the vase Loki had stolen from the accountants in San Francisco a while back?

Loki sprinkled something into the vase, then seemed to pause. For a moment, he just looked at it. Then his shoulders straightened; he made a curt hand gesture and there was a little puff of smoke from inside the vase. The footage jolted out of alignment for a few seconds. The lights on screen flickered.

The vase shattered.

Loki clenched his fists, looking down at it. Tony was willing to guess that breaking a useful tool hadn't been part of the plan. That was all the reaction it got, though; Loki turned and left the room, leaving the shards of broken pottery behind.

"That's the last of him on any of the cameras," Clint said.

"So what did he do?" Rhodey wondered aloud.

Natasha answered, again. "Information's still coming in," she said, her expression not giving much away. "Based on anecdotal reports - it looks like he healed the patients."

Patients, plural? Tony hadn't realized there was more than one person there from the church massacre. Hopefully it was someone who'd gone in for a follow-up and not someone who'd been there this whole time. "Which patients?"

Natasha finally looked up, arching her eyebrow just slightly. "All of them."

What.

"...In the ward?" Tony asked, knowing what she meant but not quite able to believe it.

"In the hospital."

"Like I said," Clint started, and Natasha showed enough expression to roll her eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, we got it," Rhodey said dryly. "Weird as hell."

"It's the grouchiest good deed I've ever seen," Steve said, leaning back on the couch.

"The Asgardians have issues around warriors using magic," Natasha reminded him.

Well... crap. Tony hadn't put much thought into *how* Loki would fix his arm, or the patient in intensive care. He'd assumed that if Loki was offering, then it would be... well, it wouldn't be something Loki had a problem with. But if Loki thought Tony had been demanding he do something that Asgardians considered *not okay*...

No, it was more than 'not okay', it was a major cultural taboo. That couldn't be it. It couldn't. Loki had just been angry because he didn't like anyone calling him on his B.S..

"Mostly in battle itself, I think," Tony said to the others. "Something about how terrible it is to mix the two together, insult worse than death, never the twain shall meet. He wasn't fighting anyone there."

"It's just a guess," Natasha said. "Thor's vague on where the boundaries are, but if I had to make a judgment call, then based on Loki's body language... I don't think that was a sanctioned use."

It couldn't be that bad, because Loki would have killed him. Loki wouldn't have offered to heal him in the first place. Thor said it was the kind of thing Asgardians fought duels to the death over. Tony shifted uneasily.

"So why do it?" Steve asked. "What's the end goal?"

"He's on the camera footage, so he wanted to be seen," Natasha pointed out. "He's sending a message."

Clint snorted lightly. "What message; he's lowered his sights and decided to conquer kidney stones?"

No one bothered to acknowledge that. Tony frowned at the television screen. He needed to explain the 'reparations' conversation to the others, because that was a clear trigger even if it wasn't quite as obvious what the ultimate goal was. If Natasha was right and this was the 'bad' sort of magic use... why would Loki go that far? Why let himself be seen? "You think he's trying to provoke Asgard?"

"You think it's a message for Asgard?" Natasha asked, raising her eyebrows.

Well, no one else had any reason to care. It didn't make any sense as a way to annoy the Avengers, they didn't care about magic. Obviously Tony had a reason to care that Loki could heal people, but Natasha didn't know yet that they'd already spoken, and why be so dramatic-

Natasha didn't know they'd spoken, so she'd assume this was Loki making a demonstration of power. Tony stiffened, having a sudden inkling of what she might be thinking. "You really want to watch where you go with that, Romanoff."

Steve looked from one to the other of them. "Uh, what did I miss?"

"It could be an offer," Natasha said, with a pointed glance at Tony.

"She thinks I'll make him something," Tony elaborated. He scowled across the room at her. "Like the cellphone."

Rhodey said incredulously, "You were serious about that?"

"I didn't say that," Natasha said steadily, holding Tony's gaze. "Just that Loki might intend to try."

Tony slouched back in his chair. This was about to get... tense. But he needed to tell them. "Yeah, well, you can relax, because I already turned him down."

The beat of stunned silence was a tiny bit satisfying, he had to admit.

Rhodey fixed him with a piercing stare. "You mind filling me in, Tones?"

"Just what I was thinking," Steve agreed, not quite frowning but definitely radiating disapproval.

"You two make a great double act, you should take it on the road." Tony rubbed his forehead and tried to figure out what bits were important. "He showed up to-- I actually don't know, I thought at first it was to gloat but it turns out he and Thor didn't really get how serious an injury it was. I... explained." The less said about that the better. "So he came up with this thing, reparations, very formal grew-up-in-a-palace kind of sound to it. I brought up the other injured people and he said I had to choose. I think he was trying to prove I was as selfish as he was. Kind of backfired, there."

"When was this?" Natasha asked.

"Friday." Tony met her eyes, knowing he didn't need to spell out the rest. Yes, it had obviously led to this. What 'this' meant exactly was still unclear.

He was starting to get the feeling he'd inadvertently been kind of a dick when Loki had come to him, and he didn't like that feeling. He generally preferred to be a completely intentional dick, with full awareness of what he was doing.

Steve's frown had come out, now. "You should have told us, Tony."

"I just did," Tony shot back. "If you think I'm going to apologize for going to get very very drunk first, you're going to be waiting a long time."

"I knew you were holding out on me," Rhodey muttered, running a hand over his face. "Jesus, Tony."

That was dangerously close to veering into pity, and Tony was just opening his mouth to make a flippant joke when Clint spoke up.

"Does this have anything to do with Banner being worried you're not coping as well as you pretend?"

That got a whole new set of accusing looks, and Tony grimaced. "You know, I'm feeling a little singled out."

"Live with it," Steve said firmly. "Does Bruce have a reason to be worried?"

"Well, he does now," Tony muttered resentfully. Bruce could have at least had the decency to come to him first-- okay, admittedly Bruce had tried that and Tony had brushed him off, but that wasn't the point. A heads up would have been nice.

"Tony," Steve chided.

"What do you want me to say? This sucks, that's not a secret. Bruce wants me to just give up and accept it and I'm not going to do that. That's not my style. But," he added, shooting Natasha a look, "I'm not going to make a deal with the devil, either."

Clint shifted uncomfortably. "You have been kinda..."

What did they expect? For everything to be sunshine and roses? He'd been *trying*. Impatiently, Tony interrupted, "Look, I'm deeply flattered that you all sit around and talk about me when I'm not here, but can we get back to the magical alien menace? Loki being crazier than usual?"

"It's not unrelated," Natasha pointed out. Tony was bracing to defend himself when she redirected instead, stealthily helping him. "You rejected Loki's offer. He's almost certainly reacting out of spite."

How the devil did spite lead to healing an entire hospital full of people? No, wait. Healing an entire hospital and *not* healing Tony's shoulder - yeah, that kind of over-the-top pointedness could be up Loki's alley.

Except for the part about the cultural brouhaha, warriors and magic.

"So, presto-chango, sim sala bim..." Clint gave a loose flourish with his hands. "You think he forgot Stark's not Asgardian?"

Huh. It was obviously meant to be a joke, but-- Tony cocked his head. "I'm not... but *he* is."

"Subconscious influence?" Natasha half-asked.

"Cultural baggage," Tony agreed. He'd made those comments about disproportionate reactions. If Loki had been too emotional to think clearly, had just seized on what *felt* like a heinous, immoral act...

Then... were they supposed to thank him? Scold him? Give him a medal? This was so confusing.

"Malicious practicing of medicine without a license," Clint quipped.

Natasha gave Clint a grim look. "He's breaching his own remaining boundaries. There's no telling what else he might do."

"Probably not cure cancer," Tony murmured, unable to resist. Natasha had a point, though. If Loki was starting to do things Asgardians thought were wrong, that... probably didn't bode well. On the other hand, Loki trying to be a righteous Asgardian warrior didn't turn out too great for Earth either. So, what were they supposed to root for, here?

Steve glanced between Natasha and the laptop screen, looking doubtful. "You're saying he thought *this* was as bad as attacking people?"

"He likely thinks it's worse," Natasha said.

A long, deep roll of thunder punctuated her words.

Tony grimaced, guessing some more detail had hit the news. "I'm going to go ahead and guess Thor thinks it's worse, too."

"Not it," Clint said, pressing a thumb to his forehead. Natasha, Tony and Steve each did the same. Rhodey gave them all a look like they were collectively insane.

"Congratulations, snicker-doodle," Tony said cheerfully. "You get to comfort Thor about his brother's latest depravity."

"Oh, no. I am not a part of this," Rhodey said firmly. "Aliens are your deal, not mine."

"Not unless your orders--" Tony started to say, and then the window smashed in.

Tony got to his feet, scowling into the sudden wind. Fat drops of rain pelted the side of his face. They'd been doing so well - it had been *ages* since Thor had smashed a window--

"Tony Stark!" Thor bellowed, red cape swirling as he advanced in obvious anger.

Wait, what? Tony stared at him in shock. He was aware of the others moving, but only in a distracted fashion. Thor was pissed at *him*? How was *that* fair?

His legs were yanked out from under him; something like a freight train struck a glancing blow to his head as he went down. Tony slapped out with his right hand automatically, breaking his fall. Everyone was shouting. He rolled into a crouch, going cold and dark. *Iron*. Not in his house, he would not be blindsided, *not again*.

Natasha had swept his feet out from under him; she must have reacted the fastest. She and Clint both had guns out, holding them on Thor. Steve was up in Thor's face, yelling for an explanation. Rhodey looking for a weapon. If Thor's punch had hit him directly he'd be dead. *One last golden egg*. Not this time. Not ever.

"Jarvis," Tony said flatly, under the hubbub; "deploy."

"Do you know what he has done?!" Thor cried out, a howling wind accompanying his words. He pointed Mjolnir at Tony. "You were supposed to help him, not encourage his iniquity! Stand and fight, you coward!"

Steve tried to push the hammer aside. "Thor! Get a hold of yourself!"

Tony just cocked his head, concentrating on the pitch of the elevator in the background. He'd stand, alright. Just in time for the Mark VII to wrap around him, and then throw everything it had at Thor. In three... two...

"Stark," Natasha said sharply. "This is a populated area."

--*Dammit*. Tony jolted back to himself, and recalculated hastily. De-escalate, he had to de-escalate, Thor was pissed over Loki using magic so find a way to excuse-- Tony's eyes lit on Thor's hammer. Even as he pushed up with his legs, rising into the assembling armor, he blurted, "Magic vase!"

"What nonsense do you speak?" Thor said furiously. "Do you deny your part in this?"

"He used a magic vase," Tony said, mechanical voice of the armor kicking in halfway through as it sealed around him, cutting off the swirling wind and rain. "You said using an object wasn't the same. Like the hammer."

Specifically the vase was said to amplify magic, which kind of implied Loki doing something for it to amplify... but Thor didn't need to know that.

Thor hesitated. "Is there proof of this?" he demanded, looking to Steve for the answer, like Tony couldn't be trusted.

"SHIELD has the remains of the artifact," Natasha said helpfully. Her eyes were flicking rapidly between Thor and Tony, but her gun was aimed steadily at Thor. That was something, at least.

Thor slumped, lowering his hammer. The sound of the wind eased a bit. "I have slandered him dreadfully," he said sorrowfully. "So eager to believe the worst. How could I?"

"Yeah," Clint muttered, only half-lowering his gun; "Loki's definitely the wounded party here."

Tony just narrowed his eyes, inside the armor. He wasn't firing the weapons, but he could feel leftover traces of that cold-iron mindset. Traces that were determined he should protect himself.

"This is serious, Thor," Steve said, voice hard. "You attacked a teammate."

Thor shot Tony a sideways glance, something strangely wary and distant. "...My apologies," he finally said. "I acted in haste."

Rhodey made a disbelieving sound. Steve frowned. "That's not--"

"Steve." Natasha gave a slight shake of her head, then a small hand gesture indicating the number of people in the room.

Thor didn't deal well with public scoldings. Thor didn't deal well with scoldings, period, but they went less badly one-on-one.

Steve closed his eyes for a moment, then said tightly, "Thor, can we talk in private."

Tony watched as they left the room, Thor still in Asgardian armor, war-hammer in hand. He hadn't been braced for an attack from inside, and he should have. Should have had his guard up. He refused to be betrayed in his own home.

Natasha was watching him. Tony turned the head of the armor towards her. "Problem, Romanoff?"

"I don't know yet," she said evenly.

"Does this kind of thing happen a lot?" Rhodey asked, coming over to stand near Tony; just slightly in front of him, facing Natasha.

Tony quirked a smile at Rhodey's protectiveness. That was the warmth he needed. He triggered the release of the armor, and it disassembled itself from around him to reform its carrier pod.

"Not for a while," Clint said with a sigh. "He was doing really well. It would be *Loki* that screwed it all up."

That wasn't really fair. Loki wasn't in charge of Thor's reactions any more than Thor was in charge of Loki's. Tony kept his mouth shut, patting the carrier pod to send it back to storage.

"Funny," Rhodey said, sounding unimpressed. "Didn't see Loki here. I did see Thor, taking a swing at my best friend."

"SHIELD will address the aggression with Thor," Natasha said. Her eyes lowered. "Re-education takes time."

"Can you not call it re-education?" Tony said with a grimace. "You make it sound like they're brainwashing him. SHIELD with a brainwashed Asgardian under their belt is too terrifying to contemplate."

Natasha paused slightly, and Tony suddenly heard his words in the context of the video footage they'd all seen. SHIELD getting paranoid about *Tony* winding up with a brainwashed Asgardian was also pretty terrifying to contemplate. He didn't know what they'd do if they thought he had too much influence over Loki.

Although, courtesy of the shattered windowpane, he had a fair idea what Thor would do.

"And what if something like this happens again?" Rhodey asked, folding his arms.

Tony shook himself. He was probably reading too much into it. Hopefully. Natasha was probably just trying to figure out what normal education even looked like. "Either death by PowerPoint, or a missile to the face, depending on who gets in first," he said, leaving it for Rhodey to decide how serious he was. "Come on - I need to put that damn brace back on; you need a juice box and a nap--"

"I do not need a juice box and a nap," Rhodey muttered, but he followed Tony towards the elevator, probably more out of protectiveness than anything else.

"Whatever you gotta tell yourself," Tony said, deliberately not looking back at Natasha and Clint. He needed space right now, needed to think. Needed to be away from anyone who might turn out to... He just needed a bit more space.

"You remember that I'm older than you, right?"

"Oh, is that why you can't handle your drink? Penthouse, Jarvis." Tony waited for the elevator doors to close, then slumped against its wall. "I hate it when they hide guns in my furniture. Someone's going to get shot in the ass one day."

Rhodey reached out, slow enough to telegraph the movement, and lightly touched his arm. "Hey. How you holding up?"

"I genuinely don't know what Romanoff is thinking," Tony said, staring at the opposite wall. She'd seen him, seen how dark he was thinking; there was no doubt of that. She wouldn't have warned him about collateral damage otherwise.

"Romanoff's not really top of my threat radar right now." Rhodey moved to lean next to him, side-by-side.

"I don't know what Thor or Loki are thinking either, but they're aliens, I've got an excuse." The elevator slowed, not traveling far enough to take long. Tony sighed. "Jay, hold the doors

a moment."

Rhodey didn't try to butt in, just waited for him to be ready. Well. 'Ready' was overstating it, but Tony knew better than to think the topic was going to go away on its own.

"I had a rough spot," he finally said. "I hit a rough spot, and... said some dumb things Bruce didn't really need to hear about, but it was one of those, temporary, you know in the movies when the hero hits rock bottom..."

"What, you're Matt Damon now?" Rhodey joked gently.

"Please, I have always been Tom Cruise and you know it." Tony paused. "Except for the crazy cult thing."

Rhodey smirked. "You're a little short to be Maverick."

"I'm taller than Cruise!" Tony shot him an indignant glare. "You're going for the short joke over cheap shots at the Navy?"

"I don't have to make cheap shots at the Navy, cheap shots at the Navy make themselves." Rhodey nudged his arm against Tony's, turning serious again. "You could have called."

It was on the tip of Tony's tongue to make some excuse, *you were busy*, an easy line that Rhodey would see right through. The truth was, he hadn't thought it would make any difference. Calling Rhodey wouldn't fix his arm; why would it do anything to change the fear and anger and grief?

Tony thought about his cellphone ringing in the middle of the night, then stopping. Loki giving up without really trying.

Well, damn.

"Tones?" Rhodey said, nudging him again.

"I just had an extremely unpleasant revelation." Tony frowned, pushing off from the elevator wall. "Doors, Jarvis! Read a room." He was through them almost as soon as they opened. "This day has been officially too surreal, and that's just in the last half hour. We could go back to Atlantic City, what do you think?"

"What about Thor?"

"You want us to take Thor to Atlantic City? That could go one of two very different ways."

"Tony," Rhodey said levelly, not taking the bait.

Tony paused and looked back at him. He let enough of his anger show that Rhodey would believe it, and no more than that. "Thor's going to hear about it, don't you worry."

Loki was one thing. Not that it was okay when Loki did it, of course not, but it wasn't exactly unexpected. Thor, Thor was supposed to be a friend. An ally, at least. Tony had a strict 'no

attempted murder' policy in place since Obadiah. It didn't seem unreasonable.

"Alright," Rhodey said, looking somewhat appeased.

A moment later Pepper's voice called out, "Is that you, Tony?" She emerged from the stairwell, and cast a warm smile in Rhodey's direction. "Jim. He wasn't too much of a handful, I hope?"

"Rude," Tony said. "I'll have you know, I am exactly the right amount of handful."

"I don't want to hear it," Rhodey said emphatically, quickly holding up a hand before Tony could take the conversation in an entertainingly dirty direction.

"No sense of fun," Tony sighed. He caught himself remembering Loki's glee over the 'blowjob handles' joke, and made an effort to control his expression.

Loki who'd stabbed him. Loki who'd looked for an excuse to fix it. Loki who was crazy and violent and dangerous and mean.

A weekend in Atlantic City wasn't long enough, they should have taken a week.

--

The Avengers met up in the Newcomen Conference Room on Monday. Thor looked a lot more contrite than the day before. "I must beg your forgiveness," he told Tony. "My actions were not appropriate to your customs on Midgard, and I nearly caused irreparable harm."

Well, that was more like it. Tony's shoulders loosened and he started to feel a bit more appeased.

"I have given the matter considerable thought," Thor continued. "Both the ease with which you might be damaged and how unfair it is to expect you to understand what is right for one of Asgard. I think it is best for both you and Loki if you no longer speak."

Tony opened his mouth to protest that he wasn't really on speaking terms with Loki anyway, all things considered, but then his brain caught up with him and he really registered what Thor had said. "...I'm sorry, *what?*"

Across the table, Bruce put his head in his hands and muttered, "Oh boy."

"Nay, do not apologize," Thor said earnestly. "It is no fault of your own. The responsibilities we Asgardians hold are ours to bear, as the Norns have laid out. If Midgardians were meant to contend with such matters you would have done so from the beginning. But that does mean, perhaps, that there is little for Loki to gain from your... guidance."

Towards the end of that speech a slight edge crept into Thor's voice, something that wasn't quite as polite as his words suggested he was trying to be.

Tony said, "Let me get this straight. You think I might be a bad influence. On *Loki*."

Thor paused, and said carefully, "With the best of intentions, I am sure. But... in your ignorance, you may invite Loki to stray."

"Oh, I may, huh? I'm gonna invite him to ffff-- OW!" Tony twisted to glare at Natasha and her jabby fingers.

"I want to find this funny," Clint said flatly, "but you're talking about a guy who brought an *alien army* to attack this planet. He has messed with all of us, in ways that--" He broke off, shaking his head with a scowl.

"I know what Loki has done," Thor said, expression growing dangerous. "And I would have that grow no worse."

"I thought we established that his actions in the hospital were acceptable," Natasha said mildly. "He used a magical object, rather than casting a spell himself. Were you expecting that to change?"

"Of course not!" Thor took a breath, visibly trying to calm himself. "I merely-- I would not wish our shield-brother to suggest the wrong thing, and Loki to react badly."

Tony gave him a dry look. "Yeah. I'd really hate for him to stab me or something."

"Or kill you?" Bruce murmured pointedly.

Tony braced himself, opening his mouth, but Thor gave an impatient huff and put his hand flat on the table like he was making a proclamation and his word was law. "Enough! I have said I mean no offence by it, but it is time for these talks to cease."

"Uh, offence taken," Tony started, but this time it was Natasha who cut him off.

"Thor, we know Loki would never mix magic with combat," she said, acting as though half the table weren't giving her incredulous looks, "but do you think we might come up against a magician from another realm, or even a human, who wouldn't have the same rules?"

Oh. Oh... clever. Trust Natasha to find a way to discuss the most obvious threat.

"Good point," Tony said, dread coiling in his stomach at the idea of Loki unleashed, mixing whatever spells he was capable of with that already lethal combat ability. "We don't know much about magic, Thor... can you tell us what we might be up against, if we came across someone - *not* Asgardian - who used it?"

Thor looked surprisingly taken aback, as if the thought had honestly never occurred to him. "I have not heard of anyone who would do such a thing. On most realms, it would be considered-- I think it is like your notion of 'war crimes'. Using magic in such a way, on people unable to defend themselves..." He shuddered a little.

"You can ban war crimes, but they still happen," Steve said, finally speaking up. "Natasha's right, we need to know what we might be facing."

Thor's brow furrowed in thought. "There is one such criminal, an evil sorceress who goes by the name of Amora. She uses her powers to ensnare men's minds."

Clint leaned back in his chair, like he was physically trying to get away from the idea. "And that's different from Loki *how*, exactly?"

"Loki used the scepter," Tony said, hearing Natasha beside him echo the same thing, while Thor jumped angrily to his feet.

"How dare you! Loki is nothing like that villainous wretch! He would never misuse himself in such a way!"

What had Loki said? Something about Tony expecting him to 'desecrate himself'. But he'd offered to heal Tony's arm. What did that mean? He couldn't have-- This was so confusing.

"That's not what Clint means," Natasha said, a hint of steel underlying her soothing tone. "We're just trying to understand the nuances."

"What she said," Clint added tersely, pointing at Natasha. "But you know what... maybe I'll go get some air, and Nat can explain it to me later."

Good call. Tony kind of wished he could do the same.

Thor slowly sat back down as Clint left the room. "I see no point to this discussion. It is not a threat you are likely to face. Magic is not used in such a way - it is not done."

"It is not done *yet*," Bruce said. "People can be... I don't know about other realms, but humans will always find a way to go a step too far."

"I do not know," Thor said tiredly. "It is difficult to think upon. I cannot begin to... what you speak of is something far different than the embarrassing folly of small children."

Huh? How did that connect?

Bruce was the one who spoke up, looking confused. "Uh, small children?"

"Do your children not do and say things that would be wrong for a grown man or woman?" Thor asked curiously. "It takes ours some time to learn - for many years they do not know any better." He smirked. "I recall one time in our childhood, when Loki changed himself into a snake--"

Tony's jaw dropped.

"...'byeagh, it's me!' and struck me with his practice sword..."

"Thor," Steve said, looking pale, "did you just say Loki can turn into a *snake*?"

Maybe it was a weird Asgardian figure of speech. A euphemism for, uh, for something less *utterly horrifying*.

Thor's smirk grew broader. "We were very young," he said, though his tone suggested he still thought this was deeply hilarious and somehow humiliating instead of an indication of how easily Loki could wreak havoc. "Though even in our later years he would occasionally take the form of one of our friends, to play tricks on me."

"Oh good," Bruce said faintly. "He can be people, too."

Tony went to bury his face in his hands and bumped himself with the brace. He covered his face with his right palm instead. "And you didn't feel the need to tell us this... because of course Loki would never use those things to attack us. Because that would be *wrong*."

They were so, so screwed.

"But someone else might," Natasha said, redirecting before any of them said something to set Thor off. Tony thought he could hear a thread of frustration in her voice, but maybe he was projecting. "Someone not Asgardian, but with similar abilities to Loki. Thor, we need you to tell us what else he's capable of."

What Loki was capable of. Tony stared at the table, hyper-aware of his still-healing shoulder, skin graft and all. Dead bodies in streets. Tropical fish. Loki could *shape-shift*, holy shit.

"I'm..." He shook his head, pushing back from the table. He trusted Natasha to get all the relevant details from Thor, and he trusted Bruce and Steve to make sure none of it was kept from him. "I'm going to do like Clint, get some air. Just... fill me in later, okay?"

"Are you...?" Bruce started, half-rising apprehensively.

Tony waved him back down. "I'm fine, just gonna take some painkillers, stay here."

"Take it easy," Steve said, shooting him a concerned look.

Tony nodded and made his escape, mind whirling. It was different from usual. Instead of his thoughts running over top of each other, spiraling off in a hundred directions at once, he kept circling back to the same thing. He felt... at a loss. This was something that might actually be beyond his understanding. That wasn't a feeling he liked.

Loki showing up to offer him 'reparations'. Why. If it was so awful, why do it. Loki was *proud*. Maybe he still hoped to trick Tony into making him another magic... thing? He had to know Tony was on guard against that. It was a heck of a lot to commit for an infinitesimally slim chance of reward. And Tony had told him it wasn't enough, told him to go heal more people... who Loki *had* injured in the first place, and murdered others. But he hadn't murdered Tony. Not during the attack and not when they argued over the reparations. Loki had gone and thrown the weirdest tantrum imaginable instead.

Loki also thought of himself as a monster.

Tony wound up in his workshop, staring blankly at the practice scraps of metal he'd used when developing his collapsible repulsor. What had happened to the knife he was stabbed with? He should get hold of that, analyze the metal, see if there was anything he could use.

Probably SHIELD had it. Tony didn't intend to let them keep it. Possession was nine tenths of the law, after all, and it was hard to possess something more thoroughly than having it embedded in your shoulder.

Thor had seriously *warned him off* of talking to Loki. Just assumed that of course the *Midgardians* would bow to his spacely authority. Never mind whether Tony actually *wanted* to talk to Loki to begin with.

And that punch. Tony reached up and touched the front of his arc reactor, pressing his fingertips against the familiar, solid surface. Remembered being paralyzed, Obie murmuring in his ear while uncoupling the reactor oh-so-gently.

Which were worse, the metaphorical knives or the literal ones?

"I know where you sleep, you bastard," Tony muttered.

"Sir?" Jarvis prompted, clearly not tracking the relevance of the comment.

Tony shook his head. "Nothing, Jarvis."

Or was it? Was he being paranoid, or was there a genuine risk from Thor that he needed to prepare for? Tony grimaced, changing his mind. "Actually - compile everything we've got on Thor's powers, physiology, fighting style... I want full threat analysis and options."

"Right away, sir," Jarvis said. That wasn't the response that Jarvis would give if Tony was obviously overreacting. That was... reassuring and disappointing at the same time.

Tony really wanted to just be paranoid.

He dropped into his computer chair and spun himself idly with one foot. This, this was *nothing* like he'd ever imagined his life would become.

The amount of empty space in the workshop felt strangely stifling. Tony found himself taking his cellphone out in an effort to distract himself, keep his head from going in circles. He unlocked the screen, and then paused.

There were a lot of stupid things he could choose to do right now.

Still, why break the habits of a lifetime?

He opened a new message, and sent, *im going to kill your brother. fyi.*

Not that he was *actually* going to kill Thor. Probably. Not unless Thor did something worse.

He eyed his phone for a while, waiting to see if he'd get a response. It was only fair that someone else should have to deal with unpredictable B.S. too. Why should Tony's life be the only one turned inside out?

He didn't know what he expected to happen, after that message. He just... *really* resented Thor trying to order him around. Asgard needed to learn that they were not the boss of

everyone else in the universe.

Also, Loki had tried so hard to kill Thor in the past, it seemed only fair to give him a heads up that someone else was thinking of beating him to the punch.

Eventually Tony tossed the phone on the table with a sigh, and turned back to his workstation. Maybe he was ready to look at the armor again; adapt it for his... current situation. Situations. The medical one and the Asgardian one.

Not in his house, he was not going to be blindsided again, not in his own home by someone he'd *invited*--

"On Asgard, such claims are not taken as jests."

Tony jumped at the sound of the cool voice from behind him. He took a moment to catch his breath, then turned in his chair. Loki was across the workshop, plenty of space between them, did that mean something? Or was it just about the melodrama of *literally* lurking in the shadows?

"Who said I was jesting," Tony returned, letting a trace of danger seep into his voice.

Loki's mouth twisted in a sneer that didn't quite reach his eyes; they were guarded, unreadable. "You survived battle with the Odinson once. You think that now, injured and weakened, you will defeat him?"

Oh, Tony was so done with this condescending Asgardian crap. The whole lot of them could take a hike, as far as he was concerned. He lifted his chin, meeting Loki's eyes with a similar expressionlessness. "Battle's for suckers and people who are overcompensating. Even Thor needs to sleep sometime."

Loki looked shocked, even recoiling slightly as he stared at Tony. "The mighty Iron Man. Would attack a man in his sleep, like a coward?"

Tony snorted, feeling a subtle sense of victory at shaking Loki up. Getting his own feet back under him, making someone else the one who was off-balance. "You can call it cowardice; I call it evening the odds. Seems to me that if you're ten times stronger than everyone else it's more *cowardly* to insist that the only proper way to deal with people is the one where you've got a massive advantage."

Loki kept staring, but there was something a little more thoughtful about it; that look he sometimes wore that said Tony had his interest.

Tony leaned back in his chair, trying to look relaxed and cocky while being prepared to push himself up if he needed to move in a real hurry. "Are you going to stop me?"

Loki gave him a considering look. Finally, he said, "So what did Thor do, to so offend your sensibilities?"

The mockery wasn't quite enough to cover up the genuine curiosity in Loki's voice.

Got you, Tony thought. He didn't think too hard about what he was doing; what mattered was, he was winning.

This was such a terrible idea.

He tilted his head and gave Loki a humorless smile. "Thor decided I'm a corrupting influence on his precious baby brother, the mass murderer. Spree killer? Semantics. Point being, he took a swing that could have been... extremely detrimental to my continued good health."

Putting that look of shock and consternation on Loki's face was way more satisfying than it had any right to be.

"He blames *you*?" Loki said incredulously, and his eyebrows furrowed in a confused sort of frown.

Surprise made sense; Loki would have expected to cop the blame. But the frown... there were a few things that could mean and some of them were really interesting. Tony cocked his head, studying Loki's expression.

Loki caught him at it, and scowled a little. "Not overmuch, though. Since you yet live."

Well, that was a little patronizing. Tony frowned back at him. "Don't worry about it, I told him you used that vase. Still don't appreciate the attitude. *Or* the fist."

Loki smiled darkly. "That's not how the chalice works."

"So?" Tony said, a little confused by that response. Was that supposed to shock him? "Thor doesn't know that."

The satisfaction faded from Loki's expression; a quizzical frown morphed into realization. "You lied to him."

Tony raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Don't tell me you of all people have a problem with that."

"Me?" Loki huffed a bitter laugh. "Of course not. But *you* are his comrade-in-arms, you fight at his side. Usually that merits greater truthfulness than I am known for."

Tony gave a brief eye-roll, unimpressed. "He forfeited that when he decided to throw punches first, talk never."

Something startled flashed across Loki's face, quickly hidden behind well-practiced disdain. "That describes most people's first encounter with Thor. Including yours, if I am not mistaken. I'm supposed to believe that now it's become a problem for you?"

Tony leaned forward a little, narrowing his eyes. "I don't particularly care what you believe," he said, keeping his voice pleasant and even. "My tolerance for being shoved around has limits. *Hard* limits. You might want to bear that in mind."

Loki huffed a small laugh. "Ah, I see. This is where you intend to threaten me."

Tony gave a humorless smile. "Maybe this time I'm planning to appeal to your humanity."

Loki shifted, taking a few steps - but not in Tony's direction, not shrinking the distance between them. "And how did *that* go for you?" he sneered.

"How'd it go for you?" Tony countered, raising his eyebrows in challenge. "Was that how you meant to aim your temper tantrum, or did you forget I'm not Asgardian? Because if that little display in the hospital was intended to piss me off, I gotta tell you, it missed by a mile."

Loki shot him a glare that just screamed embarrassed defensiveness. "You may look Asgardian, you may even act somewhat Asgardian," he snapped, "but tomorrow you will be dead and Asgard will live on."

Uncomfortably, Tony said, "That's a metaphorical tomorrow, right?" Then he frowned as a thought struck him. "Wait, in what way do I act Asgardian? Because full offence, but that entire culture is messed up."

Loki rolled his eyes, as if *he* had any room to judge. "You are brash, reckless, impulsive; impose your ideas of right and wrong on others. You are quick to wrath and bound by senseless notions of duty. When y--"

"I am not your *substitute Thor*," Tony exclaimed, pushing out of the chair and taking several steps forward before he even knew what he was doing. A tangle of loose ends were connecting, in his head. Loki's claim that Tony and Thor had dueled over him. Loki reacting to him with tactics that would anger - *had* angered - Thor's notions of propriety. Loki lonely, and isolated, and *fixating*...

Loki made an affronted sound that at any other time would have been hilarious. "Wh-- I-- Don't be absurd!" he blurted, looking appalled.

Tony groaned, swiping his hand over his face. This. This was his life. Aliens in serious need of family therapy. "If you didn't push him *away* so damn hard, you wouldn't need a substitute in the first place--"

Loki strode toward him and said in a voice so low and intense it was almost a growl, "I assure you, I do not mistake you for another, least of all *Thor*."

Loki's hand came up, and Tony flinched before he could stop himself, before he realized Loki was probably going for the neck-claspy thing and not... not stabbing him or throwing him across the room. Again.

Loki froze in place, hand half-raised. His eyes were startlingly vivid up close. Tony felt a little like one of those bugs pinned to a board in museum exhibits. Adrenaline curled in his stomach; crawled hot fingers up his throat and dried his mouth. He wasn't sure which was worse: that he was scared, or that he'd forgotten to be scared before this. Or that other tight feeling in his gut that might be something more like anticipation.

In the same sinfully low voice, Loki said, "Show me."

For a fraction of a split second, Tony caught himself thinking he'd heard worse invitations to undress. Much worse. But Loki's eyes dipped down, sideways; he was looking at his *shoulder*, with far more intensity than Tony was comfortable with.

"Uh," Tony said eloquently.

Loki gave an impatient huff and just tore the Velcro open. Tony gave a startled noise that was definitely not a yelp, and jerked backwards, clutching at the t-shirt. It was ridiculous, it was just a bit of skin on the top of his shoulder showing, but in the face of Loki's focus he felt embarrassingly exposed.

"*Boundaries*," he insisted, voice a little higher pitched than he'd intended. "We do not have a rip-each-other's-clothes-off kind of relationship."

Loki arched an eyebrow and kind of smirked a little and this whole conversation was sending unbelievably mixed messages through Tony's body. Fear, that was the important one, the one that was going to keep him alive. Fear of the dangerous, leather-clad, extremely athletic--killer. The whole killing thing.

"Why," he blurted, still holding the shoulder of his t-shirt in place. "The hospital, I mean. If it's such a big... why go so far?"

The amusement faded from Loki's face. There was a moment of disbelief, like he couldn't understand why Tony had to even ask, then he scowled. "You told me to help those I'd *fought*."

"I remember that part." Tony tried to figure out how to word it, how to get Loki to explain all the automatic assumptions that probably hadn't even happened consciously. "Just... explain it to me like I'm five, because I feel like I'm missing something."

Thor telling them children didn't know any better. Loki could *shape-shift*. But didn't use it against them because of some ridiculous set of beliefs about what was proper.

Loki paused, finally looking thoughtful. He studied Tony for a few seconds, searching for... goodness only knew. "To help them would be to recant my actions," he said slowly. "And to-- You would have me say they were in the right, that Asgard is a land of false gods and I am-- I--" He broke off and looked away, jaw working for a moment. When he looked back, there was something angry and hurt in his eyes. "I offered you something which should not be done and you spurned it, for *them*."

Tony thought that maybe, he was starting to understand. "I didn't think it was going to be a spell," he admitted. Probably explaining assumptions should go both ways. "I assumed that, whatever you were offering me, it wasn't going to cost you anything."

"It would hardly be reparations if it came at no cost," Loki retorted, like *Tony* was the crazy one here.

"That's what pissed me off, I thought--" Tony stopped himself and sighed. His arm was getting tired and he let go of the t-shirt, letting it fall open. All that showed was the

compression dressing over the skin graft, anyway. "You know, on Earth you can help someone without it meaning you agree with them."

You could talk to someone you hated. Although it might get harder to hate them.

"On Asgard," Loki said, then stopped. He glanced aside, frowning.

Tony waited for a couple of moments. Warily, he prompted, "What?"

Loki inhaled, then glanced back at Tony almost furtively. He straightened his shoulders, looking like he'd come to some decision. "On Asgard," he repeated, stepping very slowly forward, "you help someone who is your ally, or someone you seek to make an ally of."

Tony swallowed, very conscious of his heart beating behind the reactor casing. Loki was approaching him like he was a skittish animal. He *felt* like a skittish animal. He forced himself to hold still, let Loki into his personal space, despite his instincts screaming at him to back away. Loki... actually liked him. He was pretty sure he'd had that revelation before, but it still defied comprehension. Loki didn't like *anyone*. Loki was basically the definition of misanthropy.

Loki's hand hovered over the dressing, but didn't go any further. Waiting for permission.

"Why?" Tony said in a hushed voice, almost a whisper. He almost didn't dare to hope. That there was still a chance, that Loki might still be willing to fix what he'd done.

Loki's eyes flickered to his and away, then back to his shoulder. "We are not allies," he answered quietly. "But I... am not ready to forfeit this."

Forfeit. Tony'd said that about Thor. Forfeiting the right to not be lied to, or something. And in retrospect, there were other ways Tony could have defused Thor. He could have thrown Loki under the bus, sworn that any 'iniquity' was all from Loki's rebellious nature, and... that sort of thing was probably more in line with what Loki would expect. Instead Tony had lied to someone he fought alongside and that was... significant?

Somewhere along the way, Loki had started to get invested in the whole idea of someone (of Tony?) prioritizing him over Thor. There was a weakness there, something that could be exploited, but it was also kind of sad. Tony could easily remember boarding school, writing letters that were seldom answered; the awareness of being so far down his father's list of what was important.

This, though... this was something he hadn't been sure would ever happen. Had almost been convinced it *wouldn't*. This was Loki actually reaching out.

"I'm not okay with what you did," Tony said carefully. He felt weirdly calm at the prospect of taking up these little visits with Loki again. He wasn't sure what'd he'd expected, but... none of this was it. "But if you're serious-- I'm not asking you to surrender, I know that's some grave insult, okay. But the throat-grabbing, and the knives? That can't happen anymore. That's a hard limit right there. You can't just attack me when I make you mad, understand? And I will make you mad, I make everyone mad, even-- probably especially my friends."

Loki gave a small inhale, twitching like he wanted to get closer. At the same time, he drew his hand back. "I... can try," he murmured roughly. "Here in your chambers. Should we find ourselves on the battlefield... I will hold back no less than you."

Tony grimaced at that answer. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but that still leaves a lot of scope for stabbing."

"Would you have me take your blows, and make none in return?" Loki retorted.

"Well, if you're offering, that would be excellent," Tony said, deadpan. At the scathing look that earned him, he relented enough to give a more serious response. "As you're so fond of reminding me, I'm a lowly mortal. I'm a lot more breakable than you."

"I can try," Loki repeated, not quite apologetic but not as frustrated as he could be, either. "I cannot... will not make a promise that is out of my control. Sometimes..." He closed his eyes, looking pained. "I sometimes forget... myself. Where..."

"Where you are," Tony said softly, when it became obvious Loki wasn't going to continue. "I know."

Loki flashed him a quick look, something shamed and deeply exhausted, then looked away. He pressed his lips together, not responding. After a beat, he said tightly, "Be aware that the courting of another is a serious thing on Asgard. If you think to attempt some trickery by this-"

"Whoa, there, Casanova," Tony said in alarm. He held a palm up between them, taking a half-step back. "No one said anything about courting. I'm- I'm in a relationship," crap, he didn't want Loki deciding Pepper was an obstacle; "anyway, I'm kind of at a stage in my life where dating an alien isn't, I mean, I don't want to pull the 'it's not you it's me', but--"

Loki gave a near-silent laugh, shaking his head as his body language relaxed. "*Midgard*. All your needless and miniscule distinctions. You court an ally, Glowheart; what does it matter what kind of alliance you intend to forge?"

Tony paused, halfway between bewilderment and the instinct to flee. Okay, Loki didn't mean courting in *that* way, that was... good.

But. Needless distinctions?

He knew casual sex was common on Asgard; Thor had made comments about getting physical with his friends, pointedly telling the Avengers that he knew customs were different on 'Midgard' and he would refrain from sharing a bed with them because he understood it would be disrespectful to Jane.

"You do distinguish, though," Tony said slowly, for clarity's sake. He half-suspected Loki was screwing with his head again. "Between... romance and friendship and whatever else you think falls under alliances; fighting together, I guess, that shield-brother stuff. I mean... they're different things."

"If you say so," Loki said, small smirk completely undermining his words.

"What do you mean 'if I say so', that's--" Tony floundered for a moment. Loki was totally messing with him, this had to be some Grade-A con artistry, it made no sense. So really, Grade-B or C con artistry at best. "Being in *love* with someone is a little bit different from just shooting at the same target."

"Allies share their time, or goals, and defend one another's interests," Loki said, as if it were the simplest thing imaginable. "If Midgardians wish to place arbitrary conditions on those goals and say oh, you should only do these things with these allies and those things with others-- You don't even hold to those conditions yourself. What is her title, CEO?"

Okay, admittedly, Pepper was... a lot of things to him. That didn't mean those things were the same as each other. Plus, Tony was starting to feel argumentative now; there was no way he was backing down. "Okay, but I also work with Nick Fury sometimes and I have absolutely no desire to jump in his bed."

"That is because Midgardians have peculiar notions about sex," Loki said, voice rich with amusement. "You would shake his hand, would you not? To show good faith, show yourself unarmed, show some measure of trust. You still share skin to denote making yourself vulnerable to one another. It's the same thing, just represented differently on Midgard."

Tony stared at him, unsure whether to be appalled or amazed. "You do not have sex with people on Asgard just to *seal a business deal*."

"Well, only if it's a particularly important or formal one," Loki said, in a tone that implied that should be obvious. "There are a fixed number of hours in a day, after all."

It probably said bad things about Tony's psyche that he kind of enjoyed Loki's blatant trolling. Especially since it reminded him a little of some of the games he played with Rhodey, and - Loki was so far from being Rhodey.

"Well, it doesn't matter," he said firmly. "This isn't Asgard, and I'm not going to sleep with you."

Loki flicked his gaze over Tony's body. "Mm," he said noncommittally. "In any case, I shall... attempt to take more care with you, physically."

Was that innuendo? It sounded like it might be innuendo. Loki's expression wasn't giving anything away. Tony stared at him for a moment, trying to figure it out, then gave up. "I feel like we should have a long discussion about misunderstandings and miscommunication but quite frankly, that sounds exhausting right now. I definitely have questions but I need to think about how to ask them without accidentally insulting your honor."

"If one of them is about your injury," Loki said, expression going guarded again, "then yes, I will mend it. It's probably best I fetch some supplies first, to dull the pain."

Tony swallowed, telling himself not to get his hopes up, not to count on it, not yet. There was still time for it to go wrong - again. He'd still go to his meeting with Maya Hansen and see

what she could offer. "Uh, no one said anything about pain. Do you mean the... my surgeries? Because I have painkillers."

"I will be meddling with your nerves, Warsmith," Loki said dryly. "Believe me when I say it will not be entirely comfortable."

Tony eyed him suspiciously. "I don't recall any mention of pain relief the first time you offered."

Loki gave a dark smirk.

"Wow. You're an asshole. That's a compliment," Tony added quickly. "More or less. I mean, it's a lot harder to appreciate that kind of thing when it's directed at me, but points for passive aggressive... something."

"Ah, yes." Loki raised a finger, as if just thinking of something. "You might want to consider what you will tell Thor."

Tony scowled, anger surging at the idea that Thor would try to stop him. "Oh, I'm sure I'll have words for him."

"Do try not to get yourself killed just when I've decided to keep you around for a little while," Loki said mildly. "I must say, when you invited me to drive a wedge between yourself and Thor, I had no idea you would be so cooperative about it."

He had said that, hadn't he. Right at the beginning. Tony hesitated at the idea that he might just be playing into Loki's hands. He wasn't happy with Thor, but he should at the very minimum offer Thor the same as Loki - try to talk it out, break down the assumptions and misunderstandings that floated along under the surface.

To avoid giving Loki any more ammunition, he changed the subject. "If I do my t-shirt up, are you going to try to tear it off again?"

He could *see* the moment that mischief entered Loki's eyes; knew what was going to happen right before Loki said, feigning innocence, "Why, would you like me to?"

Good heavens, this might be how Rhodey felt *all the time*. Tony felt a sudden jolt of unwanted empathy.

"Alright, Handlebars," he said, trying to look authoritative and sure of himself. "We've both got a lot to think about. Why don't we call it for the day, and end a conversation without fighting, for once?"

Loki inclined his head. "As you wish. I will contact you when I am ready."

Oh, heavens, yes, let that happen, let it actually be fixed. Tony swallowed, watching Loki turn and disappear. Part of himself couldn't quite believe he'd agreed to keep... doing this, whatever this was, with Loki.

Another part of himself was worryingly unsurprised.

#

Silk Suit, Black Tie

Chapter Summary

Tony and Loki get back to their true purpose in life: sitting in a room and talking.

For a definition of 'sitting' which is probably a little more intimate than other people in Tony's life would approve of...

Chapter Notes

This chapter brought to you by the letters Z, Z, and Top.

Tony had seen a profile headshot of Maya Hansen when trying to track down her contact details online, but he liked to think he would have recognized her without it. There was a level of familiarity about her face - and her body, for that matter, what he could see of it while she was sitting at a café table.

He took his jacket off slowly, gritting his teeth at the pull of the skin graft as he did, and bundled the jacket loosely around his left hand to hide the ugly brace. He'd got Pepper to help him into a real shirt this morning, instead of one of the easier velcroed t-shirts. Appearances mattered. That had been well and truly drummed into him a long time ago.

(The appearance of the graft had been a bit of a shock, when the dressing came off - an unevenly shaped section of pale mesh, recessed into his body and crusted with blood and exudate. Even after gently sponging it clean, it wasn't exactly pretty.)

"Doctor Hansen," he said brightly, sliding into the seat opposite her. "Glad you could make it."

"So am I," Hansen said, propping her chin on one hand and smiling across the table at him. "Tony."

Well, someone remembered him fondly. Tony smirked to himself. "You're probably wondering why I got in touch--"

"Oh, I think we both know why, Tony." Hansen kept smiling. She looked dangerously close to fluttering her eyelashes.

Tony paused, uncomfortably reminded of the occasional stalkers he'd dealt with in the past. He re-evaluated his approach. "Uh, I hope I haven't given the wrong impression..."

Hansen straightened up, turning abruptly serious. "Don't worry, Doctor Stark, you made it perfectly clear that there was only one thing you were interested in. Even if you hadn't, the fact that you're only contacting me a decade later, after a widely reported injury involving nerve damage? Might have given me a clue."

Now, that was just unfair; *Tony* was supposed to be the one playing games with people. He gave her a chiding look. "You know, I could be way off base but I'm kinda getting the feeling that there's some unresolved, ah, hostility here? Which seems unfair, I know I was drunk but I'm pretty sure I wasn't *that* bad--"

"My time is valuable," Hansen said crisply. She drew a manila folder out of the bag next to her and slid it across the table. "Maybe not as valuable as yours, but I still make a decent charge-out rate. So let's cut to the chase."

At least she hadn't tried to hand it to him. Tony flipped it around and opened it up, glancing briefly at her expression.

"You want in on Extremis," Hansen continued, folding her arms on the table. It was clear she knew she was holding all the cards. "What are you looking for? Private investment," she nodded at his arm, "or something more commercial?"

Non-disclosure agreement, intellectual property, pages of threatening-looking legalese. Not only was her research still happening, someone was taking it *very* seriously. Advanced Idea Mechanics, why did that name ring a bell?

Instead of answering, Tony asked, "How close are you?"

Hansen paused. She looked at the unsigned paperwork and pursed her lips, presumably considering how much to reveal. Finally she said, "Close."

"Well, that's a nonspecific and delightfully vague answer."

Hansen gave a fluid shrug. "That's all you're getting. I signed an NDA too."

Tony bit his lower lip, thinking. Loki's offer was no guarantee - it was entirely possible Tony would make some misstep and hit another sore spot. He very strongly wanted a back-up plan. And Maya's project had a hell of a lot of potential. More than just making ficus plants explode. Biology wasn't his favorite field but regeneration...

The last few weeks had given him a whole new awareness of the limits of the human body. He was a lot closer to understanding what drove Maya, or Bruce, or Abraham Erskine, or any of a half-dozen other scientists he could name off the top of his head.

He'd seen the kinds of injuries Loki could shake off. Thor was basically immune to sudden changes in g-force. In comparison, human flesh seemed wholly inadequate. Occasionally his private cyborg fantasies didn't seem like such a ridiculous idea.

Oh boy, if he was part of developing advanced cellular regeneration technology it would be *so much fun* to rub it in that guy Strange's face.

Tony did his best to suppress a grin, corner of his mouth twitching a little. "You know I have to let my lawyers look over this," he said, tapping on the contracts.

"Knock yourself out," said Hansen. "My backers are open to involving you, but they want guarantees."

She'd toughened up since that conference. If Tony hadn't been involved with Pepper-- but he was, and he was happy with that.

Still. If he went ahead with this, it was going to be *fun*. He loved it when people held a position of strength over him, because then he got to go ahead and wrestle it away from them.

He closed the folder and rested his hand on it. "Well, then. I'll get these checked over and then perhaps we can continue this conversation, Doctor Hansen."

Hansen softened a little and gave a smaller, more genuine smile. "I look forward to it, Doctor Stark."

--

When he got a text message from Loki, Tony felt a surge of giddiness that he didn't bother to fight. It was looking more and more likely that this would actually happen, that his shoulder would get *fixed* and he'd be able to use his hand again. He flicked back a reply to say he'd be free in fifteen minutes and then took a moment just to take a deep-- okay, a long, shallow breath.

Yeah, his hand wasn't the only part he was looking forward to using properly again.

Please go smoothly, please go smoothly, he chanted inside his head.

Of course, what he should really do was give Loki a proper welcome. Tony detoured to the common floor and hunted around until he found Natasha's whoopee cushion wedged down the side of a chair. After all, it was hardly good form to have a prank war and then fail to invite the god of prank wars. It could only end up like one of those fairy tales where the wicked witch threw a tantrum over being left out and put a terrible curse on everybody.

Possibly literally.

Tony headed back to the penthouse and planted the whoopee cushion, then checked the time. Not long now. He took the brace off his hand and set it aside. What else? He made himself a cup of coffee, then carried it over to the window so he could gaze out at Manhattan while he drank. Absently he pondered the feasibility of the cyborg thing. It would be cool if he could be like the Terminator: self-healing, utterly badass; it went without saying that Jarvis would make a killer Skynet.

Even if he didn't go the cyborg route, a self-healing *armor* could be useful. Next time some maniac came at him with knives that were potentially magic he could throw a little nanotech

at it, wipe those scratches right out. The joints would still need reinforcing but that was a separate issue.

There were pigeons and starlings on the balcony and he suddenly remembered Loki's supposed ability to shape-shift. That was... actually really creepy. He needed to figure out a way to tell the difference between real animals and Loki. Or just start being incredibly paranoid about wildlife.

Tony was still staring out the window sometime later when he heard the elevator doors open and close. No one should be coming up. He turned, opening his mouth to warn Pepper that he was expecting--

Loki. Using the elevator like a regular guest. Except regular guests didn't have the ability to silence Jarvis, which took most of the politeness out of it.

It also meant that his latest attempt at a code upgrade had failed. Dammit, what was the point of maybe being able to do some kind of tech magic if he couldn't do the one thing he wanted with it? He was running out of things to try.

"Hi," Tony said awkwardly. It occurred to him, belatedly, that he probably should have changed back into one of the velcroed shirts.

Loki clasped his hands behind his back and inclined his head. "Good afternoon."

There was a pause. Now that Loki was actually here, in person, it was a lot easier to remember how strong and lethal he was. Tony put his coffee cup down on the floor and rubbed his right hand on his pants leg nervously.

"Wow," he said. "This is actually more awkward than the time you bent me over a bathroom counter." He winced, hearing too late the words that came out of his mouth. "That could have been phrased better."

"Oh, I don't know," Loki said, smiling a little. "I rather enjoyed it."

Tony snorted, unwillingly amused. Well, at least he'd stumbled over a topic of conversation. "Yeah, alright. So if you guys use sex to show, uh, loyalty or friendship, does that mean innuendo on Asgard is just... a sign of being friendly?"

"More or less," Loki said thoughtfully. "Depending on content."

Tony raised his eyebrows, curious. "How so?"

Loki unclasped his hands and strolled across the floor, towards the sunken area with the couch. "Innuendo can imply many things, can it not? For example, an insinuation that someone has... *difficulty* sharing skin..." He shot Tony a look that seemed to hold more annoyance than was called for.

Oh, hang on. *Difficulty*. "Performance issues," Tony realized, failing to completely hold back a smirk. Okay, that had been a great line, although he could have done without being thrown through his own window afterwards.

"Less friendly," Loki confirmed, with a tight-lipped smile.

This was starting to seem like a great time to move away from the window in case it gave Loki any ideas. Tony walked towards the long, curved couch, but settled at the other end of it from Loki. "Implication you don't play well with others? I've had worse said about me. I get the feeling so have you."

"More... an accusation of being incapable of loyalty," Loki said, an edge to his words. "But you're certainly right that worse has been said."

Tony frowned, having mixed feelings about that. He didn't like that his meaning had been twisted - but on the other hand he had absolutely no regrets about insulting Loki. Also, he didn't get the impression Loki had felt any particular loyalty to his mind-slaves, so it was actually kind of appropriate. Still, he would have preferred it to be *his* choice of insults. "I feel like I should point out you were invading my city at the time."

"Yes." Loki grimaced slightly, lowering his eyes.

And now it was awkward again. Tony kind of wanted to ask if Loki still wanted to take over; what this whole... friendship-courting thing meant for Earth. Except he really didn't want to get the wrong answer. And he *really* didn't want to get the wrong answer, fight about it, and have Loki storm off without healing him.

Was that selfish? That was probably selfish. Or was it, really? What good would asking a question do? Or, more to the point, what harm would it do to just wait before asking?

Machines were so much less complicated than people.

Loki cleared his throat. Tony glanced over in time to see Loki produce a ceramic-looking flask out of thin air and offer it towards him.

"You'll want to drink this before I attend to your injury," Loki said, a little stiffly.

"Right," Tony said, staring at the flask. *Just reach out and take it*, he told himself. He was a grown man, for crying out loud, he was in control of his own reactions. Or he would be, if he could just make himself move.

Something shadowed flitted across Loki's eyes, before smoothing out into that familiar bland, noncommittal expression. He pulled the stopper out, then leaned forward and put the flask on the coffee table, within Tony's reach.

"Three mouthfuls will suffice."

Tony picked it up; it felt like ceramic, too. Probably it wasn't a great idea to be drinking anything Loki gave him - but like the mead, sure it could be poisoned but Loki could just as easily break his neck.

"This doesn't have any horrible side effects I should know about, does it?" he asked, forcing a smile to take the sting out of it.

"No," Loki said expressionlessly.

Well, then. That was hard to argue with. Tony turned his attention back to the flask. "Here goes nothing," he murmured, and took a swig.

Which he immediately choked on and spat back into the flask. The overwhelming taste of *sour* burned his tongue. It took all his self-control not to try to wipe his tongue clean on his sleeve. "*Eurgh*."

"I should probably mention that it might taste a little unpleasant," Loki added innocently.

"Oh my god, you're a dick. You are such a dick." Tony gave him an accusing look. "I thought you were trying to *woo* me. How is this supposed to win me over?"

Loki grinned. Brightly. "I wouldn't want to give you false expectations."

Given everything that had gone down so far, that didn't seem likely. Tony made a face, muttering, "I don't think there's much risk of that."

Loki leaned an elbow on the couch back, snickering to himself. Apparently he found being an asshole relaxing. To be fair, Tony could kind of understand that, but that didn't mean he wanted to be the butt of it.

"Please tell me there's a real potion that tastes better," he said, eyeing Loki with not much hope.

"Unfortunately, no." Loki shook his head with a wry smile. "That is the real thing. I assure you, despite the flavor, it is still preferable to doing without."

Terrific. Tony had to admit to himself that he had no idea whether *any* of this was real or not. It could all be an elaborate ploy. Not even very elaborate. But, why bother? If he looked at a cost-benefit... The benefit of having his hand healed, compared to the risk of Loki... doing what, getting his hopes up and laughing at him?

It was a no-brainer.

Tony sighed and braced himself. At least MIT had given him a good foundation for tossing back disgusting drinks while tasting as little as possible.

He forced down the requisite three mouthfuls, then put the flask back on the coffee table and wiped his mouth. "That was disgusting."

"How do you feel?" Loki asked, inching a little closer and peering at him.

"Like I might barf," Tony said. It came out a little sulkier than he meant it to, but whatever. "It's gonna take, what, half an hour to kick in?"

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Have a little more faith than *that*."

Faith? Tony was about to make an acerbic comment about the likelihood of having any faith in someone like Loki, but then he realized that was kind of what he was doing now. Sitting here, cooperating, out of faith that Loki would genuinely fix it.

He wasn't sure what kind of idiot that made him, but hopefully it was going to make him an idiot with a fixed hand.

In the meantime, awkward silence wasn't an appealing prospect. He'd had the chance to think about how to word some of his questions. "This isn't an accusation or implication of anything, just a question. Can you tell me what your... attitude to magic is?"

Loki drew back slightly, just the faintest movement. "So diplomatic," he mocked. "I take it you mean magic performed by a warrior."

"I think it's pretty clear that I don't completely understand what it means to you guys," Tony said carefully. If nothing else, admitting that he needed help should appeal to Loki's superiority issues.

Loki regarded him for a moment, then said, "You have no sense of purpose, on Midgard. You have such short lives, one would think you'd be even more focused on fulfilling your true nature than on Asgard. Instead you dabble. You divide your time among many roles, choosing to be adequate in several instead of excellent in one."

"Excuse me," Tony said, pretending to be indignant. "I'll have you know, I'm excellent at everything I do."

"But imagine how much *more* you could--" Loki stopped and shook his head. "It matters not. My point is, on Asgard it is said that your path is woven by the Norns, and you are expected to do everything within your power to do justice to their vision."

"And magic is--" Tony caught himself; corrected. "*Would be*, hypothetically... a distraction?"

"It is a great sin to wander from your purpose," Loki said, with a dangerous smile. "Worse if one contravenes the basic duality of existence."

Right. Life and death, swords and sorcery. But Loki's 'purpose' included lies and trickery so he got away with illusions, according to Thor. Or more likely, it was enough of an excuse for people who wanted to excuse it, and people who didn't still thought it was wrong. "Is anyone ever... wrong about their purpose?"

Loki bristled immediately. "I should not think you need another demonstration I am a warrior--"

"Hey," Tony snapped, putting a palm up. He could feel the jolt of adrenaline. "Cool it on the threats. I'm trying to understand."

Loki clenched his jaw. He glared briefly, then closed his eyes for a moment and subsided. "You are," he agreed.

Tony slowly lowered his hand. The back of his neck prickled uncomfortably, but Loki didn't look like he was going to attack. Okay. Good. Everything was good. Definitely not poking an angry bear with a stick. "That helps with what Asgard believes, but I asked about *your* opinion."

Loki paused. His eyes were lowered, fixed on the portion of couch between them. "I confess, I have had cause to wonder... if perhaps the work of the Norns is not so fragile that a few small spells will unravel it."

His tone was light and airy. Tony didn't buy it for a second.

"You said I asked you to desecrate yourself." Probably not smart to push so hard, but this seemed like it was important, something that was going to keep on rearing its ugly head.

Loki's lip curled in distaste. He still didn't look up. "I may tread a little further from my path than most, but I still do not appreciate being told to abandon it entirely."

Tony cocked his head as the pieces suddenly slotted together. "There's two parts to it," he realized. "The duality, can't mix magic with fighting, and on the personal level you're meant to embrace your super-special snowflake destiny."

Loki cast him an odd look, like that was a conclusion Tony should have reached hours ago. "Well, yes."

"Cut me some slack, this is still new to me." And kind of stupid, Tony didn't say. "So you're willing to push against the duality a little but you still get-- it's still a big deal for someone to say you're not fulfilling your 'purpose'."

"An accusation I have heard more than I care to," Loki said darkly.

And fought duels to the death to defend against it, Thor had said. Tony shook his head absently, skimming through previous conversations in his mind. Loki, Thor... even Pepper, flicking through a book and commenting on Loki being mythologically linked with chaos. Huh. "Aren't you a chaos god? Maybe your purpose *is* to trample all over boundaries, I mean, that's the whole trickster archetype in a nutshell - I guess that only applies depending on how closely you guys are linked to the stories--"

"A pretty lie," Loki scoffed, "which might be a little more convincing if you believed even a shred of what you were saying."

"Well, I don't believe you're a *god*, so that's not going to happen," Tony retorted, rolling his eyes. "I don't believe in your universe-weaving Norns, either. But *if* I did, then I would think the chaos thing made sense."

Loki gave a curious frown, studying him. "You mean that."

Uneasily Tony was reminded of the possibility that Loki really did have some way of sensing lies and truth. He remained pretty skeptical, but he'd seen too much to call anything 'impossible' anymore.

He wondered what effect it would have on someone like Loki to *sometimes* know if people were lying and sometimes not. Would that account for the way Loki switched between manipulating like a master artist and tripping over basic, predictable emotions? It couldn't all be down to projection issues and cultural differences. Or maybe it could.

"It makes as much sense as anything else," he said, probably a little too flippantly.

"That's not... really how it works," Loki said slowly. If he was trying to be condescending, it didn't come across. He looked too confused - almost shaken - to pull it off.

Tony shrugged, making a mental note to come back to that one a few more times. It looked like it might have some potential. "I'll take your word for it."

Loki looked away, frowning uncomfortably. After a pause, he visibly pulled himself together and turned his attention back to Tony. "How do you feel now?"

"Like we've really turned a corner," Tony said, keeping a straight face. "This little heart-to-heart, you know, I feel like we've broken new ground. Me trying to understand, you trying to not stab me... it's very touching. I'm touched."

Loki didn't quite roll his eyes, but his expression conveyed a pretty close sentiment. He leaned over to take the flask from the coffee table, and with the movement some of his hair tumbled over his shoulder. Tony caught a whiff of something like patchouli.

...Hang on. Tony deliberately inhaled through his nose. There was a definite scent. "Are you...?"

"Judging your questionable sense of humor? Yes," Loki said blandly, re-stoppering the flask.

"You've got perfume on your hair," Tony said gleefully.

Loki went still. "Ah."

Tony felt a little ridiculous about how delighted he found himself. Okay, maybe Loki was just that sneaky - maybe he thought the Asgardian gestures would come across as more genuine, less manipulative. Or, maybe he'd sincerely prettied himself up to come here. Which was way more appealing, and also really entertaining.

Tony wasn't new to having people try to impress him. Obviously. It had generally been for his money or power or fame, though; he was realistic enough to acknowledge that. People treated him like he was attractive; they didn't tend to treat him like he was *special*. He'd never really been... well... to use Loki's word for it, 'courted'.

"You dressed up for me," he said, unable to keep the smug grin off his face.

"A decision I'm now questioning," Loki muttered. With a twist of his hands he vanished the flask into thin air, that annoyingly fascinating disappearing trick.

"Aw, don't be that way, baby," Tony crooned. He deserved to get a little teasing in, after that foul-tasting medicine. "You know every girl's crazy 'bout a sharp-dressed man."

Loki's expression betrayed him; a flash of pleased satisfaction, quickly hidden. Good heavens, that was downright adorable. How was it this guy was older than the entire country Tony lived in?

(How was it this guy had recently nearly killed him and Tony was still capable of feeling anything remotely positive? It was surreal and probably kind of wrong. But if it wound up doing good, it had to be okay. Right?)

Loki gave an overly dramatic sigh. "Allow me to rephrase. How does your body feel, physically?"

Three different jokes sprang to mind, but Tony still wanted his hand fixed, so he said, "Fine." Except, now that his attention had been drawn to it... the couch seemed weirdly far away? He put his hand down on it curiously. It was a little like touching something through thick gloves; distant and detached. "Oh, that's weird."

"Take a moment," Loki murmured.

"Okay." Tony blinked, tensing his shoulder experimentally. The pain felt more like a stretch, muffled by cotton wool. "Okay. Huh. Sooo... out of curiosity, does Asgard have the concept of recreational drugs?"

"Yes," Loki said, giving him an odd look, "although that has never been one of them."

"I've had some very similar experiences, I'm just saying."

"I fail to see why you would want to," Loki said, then moved towards him.

All of a sudden, Tony had a lapful of crazy murder god. He jerked backwards, bringing his arms up defensively. "Hey--!"

"I need to undo this," Loki said, hooking a finger into the placket of Tony's shirt (and looking at him like he was a moron for good measure).

"Yeah, well, you just took me by surprise, okay." Tony lowered his arms, trying to calm down. Show no fear. He'd nearly died, a little fear was reasonable, dammit. You didn't just *straddle* someone with no warning. It didn't help that his body was feeling so disconnected.

He blew out a breath and joked weakly, "Normally there are a few steps before you start undressing a guy, maybe dinner, a few drinks..."

"We had turducken," Loki said in a reasonable tone. The twitch of his lips gave away the joke.

"That was not a date, we're not dating. We discussed this, I know you don't think we're dating." Tony made himself shut up. He was calm. He was sitting in his penthouse with the guy who'd nearly killed him unbuttoning his shirt. This was fine.

Okay, maybe best not to think about that. Reframe. He was being straddled by a guy in leather pants, he could work with that. He inhaled a little, getting the scent of the perfume

again, and under that something of Loki himself.

Loki had the top half of his shirt undone, now, and pulled it open only to stare in dismay. Tony looked down at his shoulder, realizing that Asgard probably didn't have skin grafts. Yeah, that would look pretty creepy, seeing the pale fishnet of grafted skin sutured in place over the wound. At least he'd washed it after getting the dressing off; no crusty bits.

It was a petty, shallow thought - but he couldn't help wonder if Loki fixing it meant maybe it wouldn't scar. Maybe not so terribly, at least?

"They stitched it," Loki said in a small voice.

That was the part that bothered the guy? Not the size of the graft, on a wound *he'd caused*, but the fact it was sutured? Tony scowled a little resentfully. "You'd rather they glue it in place? Fragile mortal, remember--"

Wait.

A cold, unpleasant feeling washed through him. Tony swallowed. "I thought that one was a myth."

Loki's expression closed off, going cool and guarded, with an artificial smile. "Many parts of it. It seems the tales Midgard tells have become greatly distorted in the remembering. In fact, it had nothing to do with Thor's precious hammer, *or* the dwarves."

There were so many questions Tony should probably ask, histories and Asgardian laws and what the devil possessed anyone to *sew a guy's mouth closed*, but instead he blurted the first thing that came to mind: "How did you eat?"

"I waited," Loki said, raising an eyebrow. "It's hardly the longest I've been without sustenance."

"Wait, what's the longest?" Tony asked, simultaneously horrified and fascinated.

Loki opened his mouth, then stopped and drew in on himself slightly. Instead of whatever he'd been about to say, he mustered up a thin smile and said, "Well, I once spent three months locked in a box."

"You did not go *three months* without eating," Tony objected, instinctively denying it. Asgardians were tough, but that was-- that was absurd. It couldn't be true. "You must have had some kind of sustenance, you'd have starved."

Loki snorted a little, shaking his head. "Death does not come to me so easily, Iron Man."

Death will not have me.

Tony pushed that memory away and said stubbornly, "At least tell me the box is a metaphor for a prison cell or something."

"It's a metaphor for a box," Loki said dryly. "Or a cage, if you'd prefer. I was much younger and did not quite manage to avoid capture."

Tony knew a little something about cages, but he also knew people had been searching for him pretty hard. This story seemed to contradict Thor's claims about what their Gatekeeper could do. Surely it wouldn't have taken three months to go rescue a prince. "So much for the all-seeing guy, huh?"

Loki's smile twisted into a bitter sneer. "Quite by chance, Heimdall's sight never seemed to fall upon me when I could actually use some assistance."

Well, that was a convenient excuse. Although... not necessarily. God knew Tony was all too aware that someone could seem close to your family, seem loyal, and then betray.

Loki gave a low, dark chuckle. "I spent so long wondering what I'd done to make him hate me so. But it turns out there was nothing I could have changed. The fault lies in my blood."

Tony shifted uncomfortably. The whole thing with this Heimdall guy... it hit a little too close to home. Thor had nothing but good things to say, but there was a time when Tony would have had nothing but good to say about Obie. When it came down to it, Tony had no idea *what* the truth was. It wasn't like Loki's word could really be trusted. Even if Loki wasn't intentionally lying, he was also pretty paranoid at times.

"You seem pretty sure..." Tony started carefully.

"He told them I was *dead*," Loki hissed, eyes a little wetter than just anger would account for. "He couldn't see me lost and imprisoned and trying to bargain my way free. Only once I was at the head of an army--"

The Chitauri, Tony realized with a jolt. Loki wasn't talking about a story from his youth anymore, the army was the Chitauri. Good god, Thor had even said that Asgard had believed Loki was dead. What if Heimdall *had* told them that?

"I rely on no one but myself because I know that *no one is coming*," Loki said fiercely. "No one fights for Loki. So I will fight for myself. I *survive*."

Tony had a fleeting vision of building his armor, escaping the Ten Rings, and instead of Rhodey coming to the rescue... if Rhodey had attacked him, arrested him, dragged him home in chains.

Okay, no. He seriously needed to *stop* comparing himself to Loki, or at least do it properly. Loki hadn't built the Iron Man suit in this little analogy. Loki had built the damned Jericho Missile.

Tony very carefully didn't think about water all through his nose and lungs, drowning, desperation. The things that... someone might agree to. He didn't want to have this conversation anymore, this was a bad idea. Clearing his throat, he forced himself to redirect the conversation, even if his voice was a little shaky. "So how did you get out of the box?"

Loki's smile turned sharp and bloodthirsty. "I promised to deliver them Thor. I never promised not to help Thor kill them."

Oh, that wasn't any better. Tony was probably not in a position to judge killing people who'd held someone captive, but the casual, comfortable way Loki spoke of it - Loki *and* Thor, when it came up - was jarring. Killing was such an everyday thing to Asgardians. And humans weren't even *really* people, in their eyes. Thor generally did okay, slip-ups aside, but on the other hand Thor also sometimes gave off the impression that he was playing a game, humoring them.

Loki had also killed Asgardians, though. And even if he didn't think humans were people, it was still pretty psychopathic to kill animals for fun. --Well, hunting was different, obviously. And fishing. Alright, maybe it depended on the animal. For a start, deer and fish didn't talk back.

Unhappy and off-balance, Tony maybe didn't think through his words as much as he should have. "It took you three months to come up with that?"

Instead of getting angry, Loki threw his head back and actually laughed. "There are many who would not embrace such cheap trickery."

"Those people are suckers," Tony said, finding himself on more solid ground. "We covered that."

"We did, indeed." Loki smiled down at him, eyes glinting.

Tony swallowed, suddenly more aware of Loki's closeness than was really helpful. It was, no doubt, done deliberately to mess with him - but maybe a little bit of an invitation as well. Loki seemed to be supporting his own weight, and the potion made everything feel distant, but there was still very little space between them.

The overlap between fear and arousal was a definite design flaw in the human body.

Tony nodded his head sideways, indicating his shoulder. "So is that-- a problem?"

Loki's smile dimmed a bit when he looked back at it. "No," he said, tone becoming more businesslike. "I was merely... taken by surprise. Lean back."

Tony obeyed carefully, half-expecting that his body would just keep going, but the back of the couch stopped him even though he barely felt the pressure. He tipped his head back against it, which also meant his gaze rested more easily on Loki's face. "Now what?"

His chest felt tight with anticipation. This was actually happening. He was still terrified that it was going to get snatched out of his grasp at the last second.

Loki braced a hand on the back of the couch, and placed his other over the knife wound. It was hard to tell if he was actually touching it; much of the wound had no sensation.

Weirdly, Tony found that some of his instinctive fear had drained away. Loki's face was full of concentration rather than rage. The same disconnected feeling in his body that made him

feel vulnerable also helped make the physical danger seem less real.

"Why in the Realms..." Loki muttered, eyes unfocused. "...Oh, I see..."

What *did* he see? How did that magic thing work when it came to healing and bodies? How much information was Loki actually getting?

"Mortals are put together very poorly," Loki commented in the same distracted mutter.

So, apparently enough information to tell the difference between a human and an Asgardian--

Which implied that someone should be able to tell the difference between a regular Asgardian and that other species that Loki was, frost Jotun.

Thor and Loki both said that they'd wound up in the care of healers more than once growing up. So, either Loki's adoption was the most amazingly secure conspiracy of all time, or Loki passed for Asgardian, physiologically. Given what Thor had said about Loki shape-shifting... that made sense. At least, as much sense as any of it made.

And that meant that weapons designed to affect Thor's physiology would also affect Loki's.

Tony breathed slow and steady, making sure to keep his thoughts off his face. Loki wasn't paying much attention anyway; concentrating on whatever he was doing, with the occasional comment under his breath.

"Alright," Loki finally said, meeting Tony's gaze for a moment. "I've cleared the way. This is the part you're going to feel."

Tony wasn't sure if he should brace himself or try to relax or even whether it would make any difference at all. Then he felt a low throb through his whole left arm, slowly growing in intensity. Sucking in a breath, he tried to wiggle his fingers.

Loki hissed between his teeth. "Just *wait*."

Kind of creepy that Loki could tell what he was trying to do, but then again Loki was apparently regenerating the nerve with his mind so creepy was relative. Tony tried to be patient, resting against the back of the couch. His eyes drifted from Loki's face, furrowed in concentration, to the hollow of Loki's throat, framed by the high Asgardian collar with its glinting studs of gold-colored metal decorating the garment's edge.

His arm felt... strange; not painful, but full of pressure, like something was squeezed tightly around its core. Tony kept wanting to test it, so he attempted to distract himself. "This seems a lot slower than the hospital."

Loki pursed his lips slightly, not looking pleased by that comment. "And if I had a power source to draw on, this would be swifter, but your little device is quite resistant to tampering, so here we are."

Tony couldn't help but tense at the mention of his arc reactor. Apparently he'd hit a sore spot by bringing up the hospital, okay. He dropped that line of conversation and tried another.

"You told me a story about seducing some important leader's husband."

"Mm? Ah, yes, Alfheim."

"So..." Tony raised his eyebrows. "Obviously you get the concept of wives and husbands. How does that work when you're pretending romance is the same as being friends or coworkers?"

Loki raised one of his own brows, though his eyes were still unfocused. "You're mixing two concepts together when you say it. There is an alliance intended to raise children, and there is the deep partnership which is elevated among all others, the partnership which has not one shared goal but mutual dedication."

"I'm pretty sure that's what marriage is meant to be," Tony said doubtfully. "I mean, some couples don't have kids, sure. And there's still political marriages even though everyone pretends we're totally past that as a society..."

Loki snorted lightly. "Paper alliances. You cannot *pretend* to be blood-brothers."

"Wait a minute, this train just jumped its tracks." He frowned up at Loki curiously. "We were talking about marriage. What's blood-brothers got to do with it?"

Loki paused, drawing his hand back as he peered down at Tony's expression. "What do you mean, what-- Say that again."

Tony lifted his head off the couch back. "Marriage or blood-brothers?"

"The second time didn't have the implication of child-rearing," Loki said, cocking his head. "How many ways do you have to say this?"

"They're completely different things," Tony said, staring at him. "Marriage is-- okay, depending on the state gay couples can get married too, but-- I mean, I'm no expert but I'm pretty sure blood-brothers don't have sex."

"That again," Loki said, rolling his eyes. "It's ridiculous. You don't have sex with your allies because sex signifies a special kind of alliance. What is that special alliance? Why, it's an alliance that includes sex. It's completely circular."

"It is not," Tony protested, feeling profoundly unqualified for this conversation. "There is a distinct, qualitative difference between the way people feel about their friends and the way they feel about romantic partners. It's just... different."

"If you say so," Loki said, in one of his most patronizing tones, and put his hand back on the injured shoulder.

Tony briefly considered trying to elaborate further, but given that he would absolutely bang Rhodey if given the chance he figured he maybe wasn't the best person to try and define a distinction. Honestly, he'd bang most people if given the chance. But that wasn't about romance, that was just a healthy enjoyment of sex.

The people he cared about, though... did he care in different ways, or was it more about levels of intensity? He felt differently about Pepper than he did about, say, the Avengers - but he felt differently about Rhodey than the team, as well.

This was messing with his head. Although it was good to know there was maybe something not to hate about Asgard, at least. The idea of expressing affection with sex in general was something that Tony had to admit appealed to him.

Aloud, he commented, "For someone who claims not to understand our weird Midgardian sex customs, you're strangely adept at exploiting them."

Loki's eyes flickered to Tony's, and a sly smirk crept over his face. "Am I? Please, do elaborate."

"Yeah," Tony said dryly, trying to pretend he didn't like that smirk as much as he did. With all sensation muffled, it felt weirdly like he was dreaming. "Just like that."

"You can't make up your minds," Loki said, voice low and amused. "Midgard used to appreciate a good bit of bedsporn. Now, you've half-convinced yourselves it's something shameful. You have all these rules about when and how it's acceptable. Contradictory notions of purity and frigidity. None of it fits with the rest."

Tony paused. "You're actually not wrong, I'll give you that."

Loki's smirk broadened and he leaned in a little closer. His voice lowered further. "I happen to find it... enjoyable... watching you squirm. You want it, but you pretend you don't. You want it, but you think you shouldn't."

Tony swallowed. He could smell the perfume again. In this position it was way too easy for his eyes to fall on Loki's mouth. He cleared his throat, staring fixedly at a stray wisp of hair by Loki's ear. "By, uh, 'you', you mean 'Midgardians', right?"

"Do I?" Loki murmured.

Good heavens, this was so unfair, and so much fun. There were very few people in Tony's life who could give him any challenge.

He needed a good response, and then his brain zeroed in on the confusion over marriage or blood-brotherhood or whatever the in-between Asgardian equivalent was, and-- *huh*. "Closest equivalent concept," he mused. "That's why you jumped to curse-breaking when I said therapy."

Loki leaned back a little, frowning. "What?"

"No, wait, hear me out." Tony went to put a hand on Loki's thigh to stop him pulling his vanishing act, and got momentarily distracted by the detached, half-numb sensation from the medicine. Then he realized his hand was *on Loki's thigh*, and pulled it back. "Um. Anyway. Quick question, does Asgard have-- No. On Asgard if someone goes a bit, ah, unwell in the mind... is that always because of a curse?"

"Yes," Loki said, eyeing him warily. "What else is so vile as to turn someone's own mind against them?"

Tony exhaled slowly, feeling more stunned than he really should, considering he'd half worked it out already. But that meant... whether or not 'curses' were a real thing, Asgard *believed* they were, and hadn't found one on Loki, so they all assumed... Even *Loki* must have assumed...

"It's not," he said carefully, watching Loki's expression. "Here on Earth, anyway. There are other things that can cause it, and that means there are things other than trying to break a curse that can help."

Loki stared at him, eyes wide.

"There are, um, medicines... tablets, pills, they work on neurotransmitters or the receptors or something - I have no idea what you hear when I say that, and now I'm going to second-guess everything I say, that's just great - and there's other treatments, things with talking and hypnosis and, uh, cognitive techniques, I'm not really... up with the latest research, beyond the fact that Freud is totally out of date and for some reason some people still swear by him..." Tony trailed off. He was a little worried he'd broken Loki.

Finally Loki scowled and looked away. He muttered bitterly, "And what treatments have you for being *Jotun*?"

Tony sighed a little. "I know you think--"

"I need to concentrate," Loki interrupted, focusing very pointedly on Tony's shoulder.

Well, maybe that wasn't the worst idea. Tony didn't know what he'd have done if Loki had asked more about therapy; it wasn't like he could just send Loki to an actual human therapist. Maybe... maybe processing time would help. That would make sense. It was probably a lot to take in.

He gave up on his attempts at conversation and just sat quietly, doing his best to endure the disconcerting feeling of pressure in his left arm.

Finally Loki said, "Try that," and pushed back off the couch without waiting for an answer. He maneuvered around the coffee table, putting distance between them, a little too quickly to be casual.

Tony raised his left hand nervously. If this was a trick - he couldn't think to what purpose - but now would be the time when it would show up.

The fingers twitched. He wasn't even sure he'd done it; he made a conscious effort to wriggle them and they *moved*. Tony let out a breath, staring at his hand as he curled and uncurled the fingers in turn.

"It may need some fine-tuning," Loki said tightly. "I trust that will suffice for now--"

"Loki," Tony interrupted, looking over at him.

"What?" Loki snapped. His whole body was tense and defensive. He looked like he was about to bolt.

Tony rolled his lower lip between his teeth and reconsidered what he'd been about to say. It seemed like Loki had probably reached about the limit of what he could handle right now. And Tony could *move his hand*, he could be generous, he didn't need to push too hard.

"Thank you," he said instead. Which was admittedly kind of messed up given that Loki had injured him in the first place, but there was time for grudges later. Right now relief and gratitude won out.

Loki hesitated, looking all kinds of conflicted. Then he muttered, "It was simple enough," and turned; disappeared into thin air.

Tony grimaced ruefully. "I feel so emotionally competent," he murmured to himself. "That's just not right."

He looked back down at his left hand. It was hard to tell if it felt right or not - he should have asked Loki how long until the painkiller wore off - but it moved and that was more than it had done in weeks.

Also, Loki had totally worn hair perfume for him and that was downright precious. It was only a shame he hadn't sat on the whoopee cushion. Tony kept on flexing his fingers, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

--

He did have a plan. He'd lay low for a little while, not spend too much time around the other Avengers until he had this deal with Hansen sorted out. Then, cellular regeneration provided the perfect cover; Thor problem neatly avoided.

Obviously, the first thing that happened was that Natasha asked to see him.

"Naturally," Tony muttered. He rubbed his forehead briefly, considering. It wouldn't be out of character for him to refuse. He was feeling pretty good though, felt like playing nice. He put the brace back on his left hand and told Jarvis to let her up.

Natasha stepped out of the elevator, eyes automatically sweeping the room. Tony thought about teasing her that the exits hadn't changed, but decided to be generous. He gestured at one of the espresso machines instead: "Coffee?"

She shook her head, then cleared her throat and said, "No, thank you."

Alright then. Tony waited for a moment, keeping his braced hand down by his side, still. When she didn't say anything else, he prompted, "You just missed this handsome face? I mean, that's understandable, I understand that. I *am* compelling."

That got a brief smile out of her, but it quickly disappeared. Squaring her shoulders, Natasha walked further into the penthouse, looking at the view out the windows. No doubt she was keeping a close eye on him in her peripheral vision. "Director Fury told me to talk to you."

Of course he did. Tony refrained from rolling his eyes. "Let me guess. If I make Loki anything, he's going to throw me into the deepest darkest pit known to man. No? Illegally seize my tech? What's the unimaginative threat, do tell."

Natasha glanced at him, actually looking a little taken aback. "That would be ridiculous. You're not going to make Loki anything."

Tony blinked, reassessing her expression and posture. She hadn't told Fury that Loki offered to heal him? Or she had, but Fury hadn't immediately defaulted to intimidation and bluster? Huh. "You're awfully sure."

Natasha raised an eyebrow slightly. "You shut down the entire weapons manufacturing division of your company because you couldn't fully control where your weapons wound up. You consistently put your personal moral code ahead of your own wellbeing. It would be extremely uncharacteristic for you to strike that kind of bargain with Loki."

Her confidence was... weirdly touching, despite the analytical tone of it. Tony wondered briefly what it said about him that he wound up liking such deeply dysfunctional people. Maybe it made him feel less screwed up, in comparison? "Thanks, I think. So what are you supposed to talk to me about? Is it the getting stabbed thing again?"

Natasha looked away from him again and startled prowling around the penthouse, to all appearances aimlessly inspecting the artworks. "I am impressed that Loki offered you reparations. That's a big step. Have you heard from him, since the incident at the hospital?"

Loki actually reaching out was a *huge* step, but that wasn't why Natasha was bringing it up. The way she was moving actually reminded him of Loki, a bit. Restless, ill at ease, looking for traps.

Tony felt a smile creeping over his face. "Are you-- avoiding something? My god, are you actually uncomfortable?"

Natasha stilled for a moment. She turned back to face him, face wiped of all expression, and admitted, "I have a request to make."

"If it's about a steamy night of passion, I'm afraid that ship has sailed." He gave a charming grin. "Strictly a one-woman man."

"I would... appreciate it if you don't kill Thor."

What. Tony started to speak, realized he had no idea what to say, and stopped.

No, *what?*

Maybe he hadn't heard it right. "Come again?"

Natasha exhaled audibly. "I realize it's somewhat hypocritical to ask you to put up with feeling threatened so that I don't feel threatened. I intended to make contingency plans and just see what you decided to do, but Fury said he refused to be my Agony Aunt and that--"

Tony just about managed to choke on nothing but thin air. "I don't even know where to start. Wait, I do. Nick Fury called himself an Agony Aunt?"

"And then threw me out of his office and told me to speak to you," Natasha said flatly. "Yes."

"Because you think I'm going to kill Thor," Tony said. That seemed important to clarify.

"You *might*," Natasha corrected. "I haven't ruled it out. It would be risky to underestimate you."

Of all the things that Tony might have expected, after Thor's attack on him, this... had not been any of them. "Um. Just a question, but what happened to a minute ago when you were so convinced my morals outweighed my own wellbeing?"

Natasha inclined her head slightly, looking him over. "Deliberately arming a violent terrorist is on a somewhat different scale to eliminating a direct threat in your own home."

Privately, Tony didn't really disagree with that, but he'd known who and what Thor was when he'd invited the guy to move in. The second apology, the more sincere one, had gone a long way towards defusing his anger. "I like to think I'd start with something a little less extreme, like telling him to live somewhere else."

Natasha paused, apparently thinking that over, then nodded. "Right. Non-violent or less violent solutions first; only escalate if necessary."

Tony was reminded suddenly of their conversation about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, about that strange feeling that Natasha was checking in with him to see if she'd gotten the answer right. He suppressed a frown, studying her carefully. "Alright, but if I killed Thor, how would that threaten *you*?"

Natasha let her brow furrow a little, probably to show him she was trying to figure out the best way to phrase herself. "I... was trained..." she said slowly, "with other girls. We competed against each other. The weakest were eliminated."

Tony gave a small, careful nod. He was vaguely aware of the background. To be honest he preferred not to hear too much about Natasha's childhood Battle Royale, because it was, well, pretty horrific. The worst part was that Natasha seemed to not entirely grasp how horrific it was.

"SHIELD taught me to work with a team," she continued, "but it can still be... difficult. To remember that people won't try to fight me for my place."

She'd told him - that she wasn't originally intended to be part of the Avengers Initiative. That she-- oh. That little comment about working in groups. Feeling threatened.

This, this was why he hated hearing about Natasha's childhood, *shit*. They'd taken a kid - a whole group of *children* - and taught them that it was kill or be killed.

"In-fighting bad," Tony said faintly. "Got it."

Natasha gave him a rueful smile. "It's actually better here than at SHIELD. Fewer people. You don't care about my reputation."

"I make a point to never judge a girl by her reputation," Tony said automatically, then went back to being serious. "Wouldn't it be a plus at SHIELD, though?"

Natasha wrinkled her nose in a miniature grimace. "They assume I can find out all their secrets, and it makes them tense. As if I care who's looking at porn on work computers or pulling sick days when they're hung-over. But when everyone around you acts like they're hiding something it's easy to get..."

"Suspicious?" Tony suggested.

"Paranoid," Natasha said bluntly. She flashed that rueful smile again. "Or so my integration therapist tells me. They can't *all* be cheating on their wives," she added with a touch of resentment.

Tony had to smirk at that. "Pretty sure they can, actually," he pointed out. "Human nature being what it is, by which I mean: selfish. But hey, maybe there is a secret SHIELD conspiracy--"

"I'm supposed to refrain from conversation that risks reinforcing my reluctance to trust," Natasha said, deadpan.

"Well, we wouldn't want that." Tony paused, watching her. "Romanoff... How old were you when you defected?"

She frowned at him curiously, like she genuinely couldn't understand why he would ask that question. "Does it matter?"

"It's just..." He didn't know how to explain the sour feeling in his gut. "You had some time, right? Before they put you in the field?"

"Of course," Natasha said in surprise. Tony made the mistake of relaxing before her next words reached him. "They had to verify my info and ensure they had some leverage over me - they wouldn't just put me straight in the field."

"Right. Of course." Tony pressed his fingers to his temple, remembering to keep his left hand motionless at his side. "I really don't know what answer I expected."

"You don't need to worry about me, Stark," Natasha said, sounding amused.

Maybe not, but *someone* ought to. Tony let the skeptical expression on his face speak for him.

Natasha gave a faint eyeroll but she smiled kind of fondly. "Thanks for the chat," she added dryly, and headed for the elevator.

Tony waited until the elevator closed then rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. "Yep," he told himself. "That just happened."

Deeply, deeply dysfunctional people.

Really, he was *way* more well-adjusted than people gave him credit for.

#

Merchant's Legacy

Chapter Summary

Everything is not magically fixed, because life (and people) are more complicated than that. But, Tony does get cuddles out of it. All he has to do is solve this 'Extremis' thing before Thor figures out that he's still tainting Loki with his depraved Midgardian morals.

"I looked at some of her published work," Bruce said, frowning. "It's only on plant cells, Tony. The leap from that to vertebrates-- let alone *humans*--"

"I know that. You know that. Thor is not going to go digging around ten-year-old biochemistry journals and argue over the plausibility of human cellular regeneration." Tony had a stress ball in his left hand and was squeezing it rhythmically, working on building his muscle strength and coordination back up.

They should definitely market Hulk-themed stress balls. 'Squeeze, don't smash!' Bruce would never go for it. They could argue Hulk was a public figure, but people tended to get cranky when Tony only looked at things from a business viewpoint. It would be little more than pocket change for S.I.; not worth alienating Bruce over it.

"It doesn't take a biochemist to notice that nothing's being rolled out to the public," Bruce objected. "You really expect Thor to believe that there's some amazing medical technology that's available to you and only you, coincidentally coming right after Loki made a very public demonstration--"

"It needs—" As if to demonstrate, Tony's forearm spasmed. It had been doing that off and on since Loki had regrown the nerve. It didn't hurt exactly, but the jolt ran right through his wrist and jerked at his hand.

The interruption made him fumble, and the stress ball slipped out of his grasp and rolled a couple of yards across the floor. Tony sighed, rising to go pick it back up. "As you can see," he deadpanned, "it could do with a little more fine-tuning."

"So Lo--" Bruce glanced at the door, then lowered his voice to an urgent whisper. "Loki used magic on your arm and you don't even have full control? Tony..."

Oh, for crying out loud. Tony adored Bruce, he did, but the guy's constant pessimism was really not helpful. It was one thing when Bruce first busted him using his arm (having ambushed him to check on his 'mental state'); a little wariness was understandable where Loki was concerned. It had taken some smooth talking to convince Bruce to go along with the cover story. But since then, when they were alone, Bruce *wouldn't let it go*.

"Bruce," Tony said, forcing a patience he didn't feel. "It's fine. I don't have an evil, mind-controlled arm. I have some minor nerve spasms and muscle twitches, because it's recovering from a *major injury*--"

"Which Loki caused," Bruce interrupted pointedly.

"Which Loki caused and so I don't go unarmed around him." Tony tapped his watch meaningfully. He was still wearing it on the right wrist; he wouldn't switch it to the left until he'd finished the programming for his gauntlets to differentiate between a nerve spasm and a deliberate movement. The last thing he wanted was for some kind of misfire and someone to get hurt. "Can you at least credit me with more sense than a twelve-year-old?"

Bruce, still seated, looked up at him with a somber expression. "We thought we were going to lose you, Tony."

Low blow.

"And I know the nerve damage was a big deal for you, but..." Bruce sighed and rubbed his temples. "I mean, that's the problem. It was a big deal. You weren't coping. I... I'm worried that you grabbed for the first possible fix without thoroughly considering the risks."

Well, this was an uncomfortably serious level of conversation.

It would be easy to lash out. Tony steeled himself against the instinctive, defensive response that tried to rise up in his throat. There were a thousand things he could say to Bruce about taking *risks*... a thousand ways to slice into Bruce's vulnerable spots.

Instead, he gave a bright, stage-performance smile. "Risks? Loki is nothing *but* risk. If he has any shred of patronizing fondness for me as a mortal ant, you better believe I'm going to milk it for all its worth. Since, chances are, it's going to wear off the moment I backtalk him one too many times."

Bruce gave him a hard look that suggested he saw right through the dismissive tone. That was a concern. Tony wasn't comfortable with the others thinking too deeply about Loki's interest in him.

In a slow, deliberate voice, Bruce said, "You know... we don't even know if he's actually capable of affection, at least in the way we would understand it."

Tony's eyebrows shot up incredulously. "*Seriously* now? He's not a complete psychopath, I thought we established--"

Bruce held up a hand, forestalling his objection. "Just-- listen. We act like he's an Asgardian because he was raised there, but there's more to the picture than that. Socialization only goes so far. We don't know anything about his species, Tony. We don't know how Jotuns work, biologically. We don't know how attachment functions in Jotun infants - whether being removed from his planet at such a young age had any impact on his development. We don't know how he even experiences emotion. We've been making a lot of assumptions and... it's not safe to rely on those assumptions."

"I think we know how he experiences emotion," Tony retorted. "By which I mean: intensely and violently."

Internally, he felt like his mind had done a record skip. Bruce... actually had a point. Loki was different on a fundamental, biological level and they *didn't know* how far that went.

Did Loki's species even bond the same way people did? What was that hormone, the love thing - oxytocin. They had no idea if there was a Jotun equivalent. For that matter, they didn't really know if there was even an *Asgardian* equivalent.

Even for humans, environmental factors could have a huge influence on personality and brain growth. What about things like... lead poisoning? Other chemicals? Nutrient deficiencies?

Loki did like him, Tony was pretty sure of that. But it hadn't stopped Loki from physically attacking him. Maybe that was just the Asgardian tendency to violence, but maybe it was something deeper. Maybe Loki would betray his trust just like Obie had; turn around and sell him out--

No, because he wasn't going to be stupid enough to trust Loki in the first place. Tony squared his shoulders a little, keeping his thoughts off his face. "It's interesting conjecture, Bruce, but it's just that: conjecture. Believe me, I know better than to rely on the goodwill of someone who basically consists of one giant murder impulse on a good day."

Loki liked him, enough to heal his shoulder despite all the cultural baggage - which would also make sense if Loki still planned to manipulate him into making something; weapons, some magical device.

One last golden egg...

Bruce gave a heavy sigh. "Just... keep an open mind. Okay?"

"Yes, *mom*," Tony said, playing it up with a smile. His skin felt too tight and he couldn't shake the feel of Obie's breath in his ear.

Now would be an excellent time for a drink. He could really go for a scotch. He passed the stress ball back to his left hand and squeezed it firmly as he turned away from Bruce's seat.

"Are you seriously working with Maya Hansen?" Bruce asked, finally returning to the previous conversation.

"Sure." Tony dropped back into his own seat, working away at the ball. Squeeze, release. Squeeze, release. "Why not?"

He didn't remember any obvious red flags, from what he knew of her. She didn't seem to be the clingy type, and thank goodness for that.

"The idea of you digging your hands into plant genetics is a little bit weird, you have to admit." Bruce's mouth quirked into what was almost an actual smile. "I mean, you have someone whose entire job is literally just to water your potted plants."

"First of all," Tony objected, holding a finger in the air, "they're Stark Industries' potted plants, and that's not Andy's entire job. He has-- he does a wide variety of tasks. Second of all, quit fishing. I'm not going to tell you about the research."

The research had come a long way since Hansen had presented her super-charged ficus at that medical conference, but Tony had never broken an NDA in his life. If he hadn't done it back in his party days, he wasn't going to start breaking them now.

"Just give me a hint," Bruce suggested, grinning a little.

"Uh, yeah, it's to do with cellular regeneration." Tony smiled, tossing the stress ball in the air and catching it. He only fumbled the catch a little bit. Reactions were still slow in the left hand, but it was a lot better with exercise and practice.

"Aw, come on..."

Bruce's voice deepened a little when he was being playful; got a little rougher, slower. It worked for him. Pity it was so rare for him to loosen up.

"No can do, Doctor Banner," Tony said smugly. "You'll have to wait and see, just like everybody else."

The sound of the elevator made them both pause, wanting to check who was there before they continued the conversation.

Thor's firm tread was easily distinguishable. Tony found himself rising back up from his chair, as if to head off the upcoming test. The other Avengers weren't such a big deal, but Thor was the one who really needed to buy this story about Hansen's research.

"Thor, come join us," he greeted cheerfully. "I was just filling Bruce in on this biochemist I found, works in cellular regeneration. Check it out!" He tossed the ball and yeah, getting his aim back was going to need more practice.

"This scholar has aided you?" Thor strode forward, face lighting up in sheer delight. His hand seemed to dart towards the stress ball and pluck it out of the air more as an afterthought than anything else. "But this is tremendous news! I am overjoyed!"

A moment later, Tony found himself wrapped in a giant bear hug. He could *feel* the care Thor was putting in to remembering to control his strength. It was... touching. Would have been nice to get such wholehearted joy from Bruce... or Pepper.

Admittedly, Thor didn't know where the nerve repair had *really* come from, but was it too much to ask that Pepper just be happy for him for a few minutes before freaking out about all the things that could go wrong with Loki?

Belatedly, Tony mumbled, "I mean, it still needs a little work..."

It was hard to reconcile the Thor who'd taken a swing at him over 'luring' Loki into a life of magical sin - or whatever - with this version of Thor, who was so genuinely and utterly

delighted for him right now. Was that an Asgardian trait? Both Thor and Loki seemed to feel things so intensely in the moment...

Tony was a businessman; he'd had plenty of practice compartmentalizing. Go out for drinks with a guy then snipe a contract out from under him. There was social, and then there was professional. (Tony had always been very, very good at professional.) What Thor and Loki seemed to do was something else.

The hug was lingering a little too long. Tony laughed and clapped Thor on the back as a gentle hint. "Easy, big guy."

Thor let go immediately, but he was still beaming. "This is truly marvelous, my friend. I cannot imagine what you must have felt." His hand twitched by his side like he still wanted to reach out and draw Tony towards himself.

Tony hadn't really bothered to think much about it before, but now he was wondering just how much Thor held back from touching them. Cultural stuff had never really interested him in the past, except for what he needed to know to do business with foreign companies, but he was starting to see how some people could find it... well, not as interesting as, say, mechanical engineering, but at least a *little* interesting.

With a completely straight face, he asked, "Would you like to cuddle?"

Thor said immediately, "I would," with a grin that said he knew he was being teased but wasn't above taking advantage of it.

Tony actually quite liked physical contact, so long as he had some say in it, so he dragged Thor to the nearest sofa and curled in against Thor's side, wriggling until he found a comfortable position. Bruce was eyeing them both with the raised eyebrow and half-smile that people always got when they thought Tony was being '*eccentric*'.

"You snooze, you lose," Tony told Bruce flippantly, and pulled Thor's arm a little tighter around himself.

Dryly, Bruce said, "I think I'll be okay."

"It does seem a lonely way to live," Thor mused; "so limited in what measures of touch you consider acceptable – but Jane assures me you do not feel the lack."

"It's, uh..." Bruce awkwardly rubbed the back of his head. "I guess I never really thought of it like that. Being around Tony I get touched a lot more than I used to, I can tell you that."

"Why, Doctor Banner," Tony drawled, and put a hand to his heart dramatically, "whatever are you implying?"

"Not whatever *you're* implying," Bruce retorted.

"I *am* pretty happy about getting my sex life back," Tony quipped. The truth was a little more complicated, of course, but it was the right joke for the moment. He looked down at his hand as he flexed his fingers, needing to *see* them working.

"I... don't understand," Thor said slowly. "Do Midgardians refrain from sex while injured?"

Huh. Tony grimaced, glancing at Bruce, who immediately looked alarmed and leaned backwards as if he could physically escape the conversation.

How to explain? "Not as a cultural thing," Tony finally settled on. "It's more... if we're very upset, it might be hard to, well, get in the mood. It hasn't exactly been top of my mind."

"On Asgard, times of great distress are all the more reason to seek intimacy with our dearest companions," Thor said pensively. A moment later, a soft little snicker betrayed his change in mood. "Then, this is all the more reason to celebrate your recovery!"

Tony snorted in amusement. "Not that I disagree, but don't let Pepper hear you say that."

"A private matter. I understand."

"So--" Tony ignored the expression that said Bruce was desperately hoping for a change of subject. "Does the whole thing of, you know, prostitution, is that really confusing to you guys?"

"Pleasure for trade is a common practice on many realms," Thor said, his chest shifting under Tony as he shrugged. "Midgard is no more peculiar than any other... at least in *that* respect. Although, the careless manner in which you treat your hair--" He broke off, sounding genuinely repulsed.

Bruce leaned forward a little. "Wait, hold on... our hair?"

"The handling of hair is deeply intimate," Thor said, sounding like he thought that should be obvious. "Yet you let-- even *pay* strangers to cut..." He sucked in a breath, then let it out slowly. "Your ways are... different, on Midgard. That's... it's fine. Whatever works for you."

Tony could feel his eyebrows creeping up again. He exchanged looks with Bruce.

Thor's hair didn't seem to have grown much since they'd met him. He was obviously having it trimmed regularly; on his trips to Asgard, or to his girlfriend, or wherever. The same couldn't be said for Loki. If haircuts were as intimate as all that, who would even do it? Asgard's prison wardens? Not his parents. Not Thor-- Well. Thor would probably offer, but there was no way Loki would let him, if it meant all that.

Tony knew that Loki kept insisting he was all alone, but he hadn't realized that the long unruly hair was a visual declaration of it. He just knew, next time they ran into Loki, he was going to have serious trouble keeping his eyes off it.

To distract himself, Tony said, "So, does Foster cut your hair?"

"Now, that *is* a private matter," Thor said firmly, a hint of warning in his voice.

Tony made a faint noise of acknowledgement, frowning to himself. Ye-ah, definitely something they took seriously.

There were things he'd been meaning to ask Thor; things about... the Chitauri, about peace hostages and other Asgardian crap. Right now, he couldn't quite bring himself to broach any of those topics. (Especially not the Chitauri.)

Still, it could wait. It wasn't like any of it was going to disappear if he just ignored it.

...Unfortunately.

--

Despite what he'd told Thor and Bruce, 'getting his sex life back' was... more of a work in progress.

Tony had been telling the truth about not wanting to get laid when he was still dealing with the shock and newness of his injury. He'd been preoccupied, stuck trying to wrap his head around the numbness and loss of motion (*paralysis*, somehow so much worse when he used that word).

Now, he could use his hand again, but he still felt... damaged. Hyper-aware of the shoulder scarring and the feel of new skin stretching every time he moved. (And each time it caught his attention, it brought with it the confusing double-memory of Loki both inflicting the damage, and healing it. The whirl of black and green, kicking the knife in; then the slow pulse of magic through his arm. Loki's hair tumbling loose between them, long and dark and richly fragrant.)

Pepper didn't get it. He knew she was trying to help but he really didn't need to hear her well-intentioned joking about men being 'allowed' to have scars. She said nobody would write articles about him getting 'frumpy' or 'letting himself go', and that wasn't-- well, for a start that wasn't even true; there would absolutely be some trashy tabloid printing that vapid garbage. Tony didn't bother to argue, though. It was true that crap like that was never going to be as much of a threat to his reputation as it was to hers. His reputation was never going to be held against him the same way hers was.

This wasn't about 'reputation' or 'looks'. This was... It was *his body* and people kept cutting it apart. For all that Bruce and Pepper were horrified he'd let Loki anywhere near him, at least it had been a decision he got to make himself. Loki's healing hadn't been something *done* to him while he was in and out of consciousness.

Helpless.

That wasn't something he felt like he could properly explain. It was easier to just fake a bit more enthusiasm than he really felt and pretend that everything was fine.

Apparently his subconscious wasn't convinced. He dreamed that the new flesh in his shoulder was rotting, falling out in chunks. When he tried to hold it in, the rot transferred to his fingers. From there, everything he touched began to decay and crumble into disgusting, moist lumps of putrefaction.

Well, he'd never claimed his subconscious was subtle.

In the morning, he lingered in the bathroom, staring at his reflection in the mirror. Arc reactor shoved in his chest where Yinsen had cut a hole in his ribcage, leaving the cartilage and intercostal muscles constantly aching and inflamed. Sunken mesh texture in his shoulder where the infection had been worst, where they'd cut dead tissue out of him and covered it with grafted skin.

“Not much of a gym body anymore, huh?” he muttered under his breath.

These scars were a little bigger than a slip with a welding iron or a kitchen knife. Or even that time he fell off the fence trying to break back into school after a night out, and took all the skin off his elbows.

People cutting holes in him while he was too passed out to stop them... and then... Loki. Loki braced in his lap, practically draped over him. From rampage killer to, what, personal nurse? The strange throb of healing magic. Sly, honeyed smirk.

Loki had *stabbed him* in the first place. Tony gripped the edge of the bathroom counter, glaring at himself in the mirror. Just because it was nice to be able to consent to a medical procedure for once, that didn't cancel out the *truly ridiculous* levels of interpersonal violence.

Dammit. Well, at least working on this cellular regeneration thing of Hansen's was another project to help distract himself from his poor life choices.

--

The primary workstation in the workshop was surrounded by maps: color-coded blocks of light, showing at a glance which states and counties needed extra wheeling and dealing before an arc reactor was likely to receive sign-off. (The short answer was: too many of them.) Somebody in the fossil fuels sector was putting up a hell of a fight, with a dirty whispers campaign alleging all kinds of toxic radiation effects that were going to be hell to disprove. Tony would be impressed if it weren't so *fucking annoying*.

"I see Thor hasn't murdered you for corrupting me, yet." Loki's voice came from a few yards away, rich with cruel amusement. "Or have you hidden away from him to avoid revealing yourself?"

Tony tapped a couple of buttons on his keyboard interface, prompting Jarvis to secure the workshop. This would be a bad time for Pepper to drop by. Or any of the Avengers.

"Now, that's mean," he drawled, slowly turning his chair around. A familiar little frisson of adrenaline shivered through him as he met Loki's eyes. "I think you'll find you would be *distraught* if he killed me. At the very least it would be a waste of your investment, am I right?"

Was it wrong that, right now, the idea of talking to Loki seemed like a really fun distraction from dealing with this stupid propaganda campaign?

Loki gave a sharp smirk. "Oh, but it would be extremely entertaining. Midgard's great defenders turning on one another."

Yeah... admittedly, from Loki's perspective, the fall-out would be a hell of a blast. Chaos as far as the eye could see.

Still. Tony leaned back in his chair. He faked a yawn, scratching the side of his goatee, to give himself a moment to properly take in Loki's body language. Coiled strength, tension, poised to pounce - but this was Loki, so 'predatory' was basically interchangeable with 'defensive'.

"Your lack of confidence in me is insulting. I told you I could handle Thor." He waved his hand dismissively. "As a matter of fact, he was delighted to hear that I found a biochemist who works in cell regeneration."

"You *did* lie to him." A hint of real pleasure - gleeful and smug - crept into Loki's over-acted smile. "For *shame*, Avenger."

Tony directed a smug grin right back at him. "If you want shame, you *definitely* came to the wrong Avenger."

Loki strolled closer, long green coat swirling around his legs. For once, he didn't look dressed for battle. For one thing, the outfit lacked the thick leather shoulder-plates - spaulders? - that he usually favored.

The dark base layer still looked like leather: the really high quality stuff, snug and buttery-soft, practically crying out to be fondled. The coat, though... probably silk, if Tony guessed correctly. Smothered in embroidery and decorative braid, green on green on green, to a degree that wouldn't look out of place at the Met Gala. Loki could play both halves of the movie cliché: the leather-clad delinquent on his motorbike and the sheltered beauty queen riding pillion, clinging tight.

Tony bit back the sudden urge to invite Loki to watch Dirty Dancing with him.

He should offer something, a snack. Since 'hospitality' was one of the few reliable cards Tony could play, he made sure to keep things around that he could offer Asgardians: muesli, fruit bites, mixed nuts, basically anything that could be reasonably classed as edible.

"Here." Tony opened a packet of dried apricots and held it out, determinedly ignoring the over-eager drumming of his heartbeat.

Loki reached directly through the map, disrupting the border between Georgia and South Carolina. His body was a graceful arc, long and lean. His hair fell in loose waves past his shoulders, tumbling down to perfumed curls.

'The handling of hair is deeply intimate...' Thor's explanation echoed in Tony's mind.

Tony tore his gaze away and cleared his throat, annoyed with himself. It was none of his business whether Loki had any 'intimate' friends or not. Barbering arrangements of the Asgardian royal family were not exactly his highest priority issue.

"So, uh. You just drop by to check if Thor choked me out?"

"Something like that," Loki murmured, eyes sliding across the maps to smoothly avoid his gaze.

Tony wasn't entirely sure what he thought of... all this. Loki was a violent criminal and this whole situation had spun wildly out of control probably from that very first night they got drunk together. It was one thing to try to encourage Loki to work through a few issues or at least take them out on a different planet, but actually agreeing to-- he didn't even know what he'd agreed to do. To let Loki try to win his friendship?

He wasn't sure that was something he could actually offer. But he didn't like the idea that he was leading Loki on, either. It felt cheap. Dirty.

Then there was the fact that it was so easy to slip into a comfortable banter with Loki. It was just *refreshing* to feel like he was talking to somebody on his wavelength. Someone who wasn't judging him. Loki didn't think he was a selfish asshole; if anything Loki probably thought he was *restrained*.

Although, it was a little worrying that his libido apparently couldn't tell the difference between a gratifying challenge and a category five disaster.

Loki ran his index finger along the bottom coast of Lake Erie, glancing sideways at Tony as he did. "Last time I was here I believe we were discussing your Midgardian perspective on, ah... 'trickster archetypes'."

"Right," Tony echoed, quirking an eyebrow. He'd kind of thought Loki would follow up on the therapy thing first-- but no, of course not. That damned Catch-22: if Loki considered that he might not be a monster, then he had to consider that what he'd done to Jotunheim was monstrous.

There was no way Loki was anywhere near close to ready enough to go down that rabbit hole.

God of lies and chaos, though, that stupid Asgardian 'destiny' system... that was something they could probably poke around the edges of.

Tony cast his mind back, trying to recall some of the inflated claims he'd strung together in his college essays. It was a long time since anyone had been in a position to force him to take a Humanities paper. "Well, lots of cultures, at least here on Earth, have some kind of trickster figure in the mythology. Usually to do with pushing boundaries and breaking rules... it's the character that questions authority... ah... Basically, it's how any progress happens. You don't advance, as a culture, unless someone's willing to challenge the status quo."

Loki slowly lowered his hand, looking... almost suspicious.

"And fire," Tony added helpfully. "Usually the trickster figure is associated with bringing humans fire, I remember that part."

"Is that so," Loki said, tonelessly.

Tony swallowed. It took a lot of self-control not to shift uncomfortably. "I'm finding it kind of difficult to get a read on you right now. You think you could maybe give me a little something to work with...?"

Loki looked at him a moment longer, then started to move towards him, taking slow and deliberate steps.

Tony didn't mean to tense up - but it was too easy to remember his shoulder. Too easy to remember Loki's rage, the whirl of green and black, flying backwards through the air.

Tensing, in turn, made Loki's expression draw tight and flat... which didn't exactly help put Tony at ease.

New York City, Belgium, Kentucky, so many other places and people and lives. Tony gritted his teeth, trying to pull himself together. He had... he had a responsibility to those people, to try and stop all this.

Loki made a little mocking sneer, a self-deprecating expression that was regrettably familiar. "So you suggest, what, that as a God of Chaos it is in my *nature* to do these things...? 'Break rules'. 'Challenge authority'."

The air quotes were practically audible.

Tony decided to adjust his tactic slightly. He raised his chin, keeping his eyes locked on Loki's. "No, I'm not suggesting that."

Loki faltered, almost stumbling. "What?"

"I said, I'm not suggesting that." Tony shrugged expressively. "No one knows your nature but you, pal. I can tell you all about little ole' Midgard and what kind of personality traits we value. You're the only one who can say whether it feels right for you."

He could see the incipient eyeroll and quickly charged ahead before Loki could dismiss him entirely. "I mean, do you have any idea where that Merchant of Death name came from? The guy who invented dynamite. Allegedly - it's a bit of an apocryphal story actually." He paused to make sure Loki was actually going to listen.

"The way it goes is, the newspaper published his obituary early - they mixed him up with his brother or something - that kind of stuff used to happen. Anyway... they made a big deal of how the Merchant of Death had been responsible for all these weapons, and more efficient ways of killing. I guess on Asgard you're all fine with doing one thing and doing it really well, but this guy, he wanted more of a legacy than that."

Tony pushed himself a little upwards on the balls of his feet, trying for a smidge more height. "This guy took his entire fortune, and he set up a foundation to give out prizes after his death. I doubt the name is going to mean much to you, but if you have some free time on your hands, go look up a little something called the Nobel Peace Prize. Trust me... 'Merchant of Death' is not how that guy is remembered. We're not limited to one role or one legacy. Which

is good, because crossing those boundaries and mixing those streams - that's where the real innovation happens."

Loki looked... well, frankly he looked kind of underwhelmed, but he did at least look thoughtful enough that Tony figured he might actually go research the Nobel Prizes later. "And I suppose you claim to have done something similar."

Tony let himself drop back onto his heels, and spread his hands wide. "Privatized world peace, baby."

If Loki could try to use that line against him, he could damn well turn around and use it right back.

"Of course," Loki said, voice dripping with sarcasm. "How could I forget."

"Merchant of Death," Tony repeated, backing towards his chair again. He dropped down into it with a little flourish. "Yeah, on the one hand, I was responsible for some incredible advances in defensive technology, in targeting systems, you name it. But just like the man who bore that name before me, I made sure my legacy stretched farther than that. Medical technology. Agricultural technology. Clean energy. Even things as simple as new mapping techniques. You wanna know the real reason they called me the Merchant of Death?"

He shifted his weight so he was sitting on the front half of the chair, leaning forward and gazing at Loki intently. He was reassured to see he still had the guy's attention, at least, even if Loki didn't look entirely convinced. Yeah, he'd made some mistakes in his time - but he'd achieved a hell of a lot that he could be proud of.

"Because I *wouldn't stop*. I wouldn't settle for one legacy, or one pigeonhole. Everything I saw, I wanted to improve." The fact that people had been comparing him to Nobel, even *before* Afghanistan, before he got out of weapons design... That spoke volumes. "I still do. I'm never satisfied. And all scientific advancement," Tony declared, tapping his workstation a little pompously, "comes from challenging the status quo."

A bit of an exaggeration, sure, but the basic principle had a *fair* amount of truth to it. "For humans, in the stories we tell each other, our myths and legends? That gets represented by trickster figures. Creative thinkers. For Asgard-- well, I honestly don't know what Asgard does to bring in new ideas, but that's not really my problem."

Loki shot him a truly filthy look for that comment. Tony wound up having to bite his tongue to keep a straight face. Probably he should try to tone it down a little. He wasn't sure how much self-righteous preaching he could actually get away with before Loki would just get fed up and either turn violent or leave.

Instead, Loki looked away and muttered, "Very little," in a voice Tony wasn't sure he was meant to hear. Apparently dissing Asgard won out over dissing 'Midgardians', this time.

Tony turned his chair and wiped a hand through the maps to clear them away. Maybe it was a good time for a change of subject.

"I still think ruling an entire planet sounds *astorishingly* boring." Probably not *that* subject, but Tony's mouth was blithely continuing on. "Why do you even want...?"

"To prove--" Loki started, and stopped again almost before Tony even registered the interruption.

Huh. Looked like neither of them were really thinking before speaking today.

Loki grimaced and itched at his palm. "Because I can. What does it matter. I would have your realm, you would stop me."

Tony looked him over, taking in the tension in Loki's posture, the frustrated twist of his mouth. "I'm asking."

Loki gave him an evaluating look, but didn't say anything right away.

Tony leaned back in his chair. Okay, this wasn't *much* more than the 'born to rule' spiel, but it was a little more and that was enough to make him curious. Maybe he could get at it sideways. "Back in Kentucky, did you mean what you said? About if we... weren't at odds?"

For a moment, Loki's brow furrowed a little, then he seemed to get the reference. He gave a wry huff, not quite rolling his eyes but close. "I am not such a fool as to think you would give up your kingdom so easily."

"But, I mean." Tony wasn't sure what he *did* mean. He didn't want to be Loki's 'favored advisor'. Mind you, he hadn't wanted to bleed out into his armor, either. Life was full of surprises. "If there was a way for us to work together. You'd want...?"

Loki gave another small huff, and looked away, as if the conversation had become incredibly boring. "I would have thought that much was implicit in courting your friendship."

Right. Work together, courting, allies: the blurred lens through which Asgardians viewed interpersonal relationships. Friends that kill together, thrill together? Homoerotic warrior bonds, oiled men wrestling in the nude; admittedly that was ancient Greece, not Scandinavia. Huh. Tony cocked his head, distracted by that line of thought. "Is Thor really weirded out that we don't have team orgies?"

Loki scrunched his nose a little in distaste, then smoothed his expression into something more patronizing. "I daresay he finds it somewhat odd, but he's familiar with the concept of different realms having different customs. All it means is that he's unlikely to truly *commit* to your little team, in his heart." A sly-edged smile. "Oh, I'm sure he's fond of you all in his way, but... it's hardly a real partnership if none of you share skin."

Tony found himself more amused than he should be by Loki's passive aggressive posturing. He didn't take it seriously; Thor's vague feelings of Asgardian superiority were more of a barrier to team-building than anything to do with how much physical contact was or wasn't happening.

"We're a meaningless vacation fling, huh?" he said, with a smile to show he was just playing along. "So what you're telling me is if we really need something, we should get Doc Foster to ask him."

Loki jerked around to glare at him. "That trifling child," he sneered resentfully. "Thor is deluding himself if he thinks he can build anything meaningful with such a wretched creature. He's had hounds with longer lifespans--"

That was a lot less amusing. "Wow," Tony said, raising an eyebrow and keeping his tone mild. "You really know just what to say to woo a Midgardian."

Loki looked down and away. "It's not the same," he muttered sullenly.

Tony folded his arms. This was it, right here - Loki looking down on humans, calling them pests or animals. That was a direct route to mass murder. There was no way Tony was going to let that stand. "Why, is that one of those 'double standards for Loki' you keep complaining about? Humans *you* like matter, but none of the others do?"

Loki scowled fiercely. "You might not be so quick to leap to Thor's defense, if you heard the things he used to say about Midgardians I valued."

Wait, hang on-- Midgardians that Loki *what*?

"They have never mattered! Thor has never respected any realm but his own, never listened to any voice save that which told him what he wanted to hear. Yet one little interlude with *her* and all of a sudden he has abandoned his old wars and decided to *better himself*."

Loki should give master classes in sarcasm, because that-- that sneer was truly something. Still, there was a story here, and Tony added it to his ever-expanding mental file of things that needed to be followed up.

"Just because some fragile mortal fawned all over him... What makes her opinion so valuable? Hm? What is *so* compelling about his precious Doctor Foster that he should suddenly decide to listen, when he has never done so before?"

Unbelievable. Actually, completely believable. Loki would be the exact kind of ex to make a public scene in a crowded restaurant, screaming 'what makes *her* so special?!' and throwing glasses of water in people's faces. Well, probably throwing knives instead of water.

Tony still intended to get the rest of the story sometime, but for now he said flatly, "You're jealous."

"I spent a thousand years being derided for my counsel," Loki snapped, striding towards him. "A few fleeting days with her and he finally decides to question himself. Explain to me why I should *not* resent that!"

"Sure. Because he didn't change because of *Jane*, doofus." He'd really just said 'doofus' to Loki's face and-- actually, no regrets, totally worth it.

Loki was staring down at him incredulously. Tony spread his hands wide, 'picture this', elaborating: "Thor went from the middle of a coronation, top of the world, to... in the middle of a foreign country, his brother sends a giant destruct-o-bot-- Nuh uh, save it, this is Thor's perspective. He thought everything was fine and then out of nowhere you're telling him B.S. about his dad being dead, you're sending death machines, you're trying to blow up a planet, he has *no idea what's going on*."

It seemed so obvious, but Tony supposed that Loki was just too close to the picture to see it clearly. Especially with everything going on at the time, the frost giant thing, the (alleged) treason.

"And ever since then, he's been trying to figure out how much stuff he missed. If he was so wrong about one of the *most important* relationships in his life, what else was he wrong about?" Tony shook his head. "He didn't change because of Jane Foster! He changed because of *you*."

Loki drew back a little, eyes wide and stunned. He seemed lost for words.

It struck Tony, suddenly, that he'd never seen Loki look hopeful without also looking scared. And yeah, there were times Tony had found himself thinking of hope as a loaded gun, but Loki went straight through cynicism into kicked puppy territory.

He wasn't a kicked puppy though. Rabies puppy, if anything. Loki was a dangerous rabies puppy and Tony definitely wasn't feeling guilty about putting that wounded look on his face.

Alright, someone had better say something. "Look. Whatever you think you have to prove..."

Loki turned his face away, shoulders tensing. "Spare me." His voice cracked slightly, but rapidly firmed up. "The sight of me on the throne of Asgard was so abhorrent to those who *claimed themselves my allies*, they would rather commit treason than spend Odin's sleep under my rule! Open treason--" He gave a short hiss then continued, voice bitter. "Had I not sent the Destroyer after them, I may as well have surrendered any shred of authority I still held."

That... did make sense, actually. To let a bunch of people openly flout his authority would have invited nothing but trouble. Although, it still seemed pretty plausible that Loki had provoked them in some way.

"Explains a lot," Tony murmured. He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, and added, "Except for the thing about telling Thor his dad was dead."

Loki whirled back around, fists clenched. "I wanted him to know what it felt like!"

Yeah, that... was dickish enough to actually ring true.

"I lost *everything*!" Loki cried out, half-snarling it. "No-- no family, no realm--"

Tony almost objected to that description, but nitpicking over how much of Loki's world had really been ripped out from under him seemed a little callous. Thor hadn't been in on the lie,

at least... but Thor *had* been pretty anti-frost giant. Loki had all but admitted being afraid Thor would try to kill him over it.

"Everything I thought, everything I believed-- was a lie." Loki's voice shook a little. He was staring down at his left hand; there was clearly some significance to it. "My own body..."

And Jotunheim had just re-declared war on Asgard, so it wasn't like Loki could go there for any answers...

Oh... oh, crap.

Father in some sort of meditative coma. Brother exiled to another planet. Loki suddenly dumped in charge, with a war to fight... against people who turned out to be his own species. Probably feeling alone and desperate and... *that* was the moment in time that other bunch of Asgardians picked, the closest people Loki had to friends, to abandon him and instead go looking for Thor.

No wonder Loki was fixated on 'proving' that he could rule... it had wound up representing every single thing that had gone wrong. If he proved he could rule, he probably felt like he'd get his friends' loyalty back. If he proved he could rule, he probably felt like Odin would take him seriously. If he proved he could rule, then probably that guy Heimdall...

Tony felt a strange surge of vertigo in his gut. He still had so many questions about what that Heimdall guy actually knew or didn't know, and when. The way Thor spoke, it sounded like Heimdall had been the Royal Gatekeeper for pretty much Thor and Loki's entire lives; kind of like a - not a father figure exactly, they had one of those, obviously - but... but something...

'suppose I should be grateful he tried to kill me to my face...'

Tony shoved those thoughts aside, unwilling to think about the Heimdall crap right now. It was strangely difficult to focus. "Yeah," he made himself say, feeling a little numb. "That sucks..."

Wow. 'That sucks', really, that was the best he could come up with?

Loki only gave a short, bitter laugh. "Let no one of Asgard hear you say that. No, we must not speak of the great lie. Oh, Loki, you are still my brother; oh, Loki, you are still our son; Norns forbid we admit that I am *not!*" That last part came out a little like a scream, half-directed at the ceiling. "Just for one moment, just *stop--!*"

Tony stared at the frustration on Loki's face, suddenly hearing the echo of a hundred well-intentioned comments. Pepper joking that men were 'allowed' to have scars... Thor was always so quick to reassure Loki that adoption didn't 'change' anything... There was a very thin line between reassurance and dismissiveness.

Loki didn't need to hear that 'nothing has changed' because for Loki, things *had* changed. He didn't need reassurance; he needed to *grieve*.

Without letting himself think too hard, Tony blurted, "Did anyone ever just... let you be mad about it?"

Loki gave another bitter laugh, one that sounded almost like a sob. "I be angry, with all my crimes? So that all can see how *ungrateful* Loki is - a thankless, selfish wretch, a *Jotun*--"

"Right," Tony mumbled. The arc reactor hurt. The ribs around it, anyway; a dull, persistent ache in his chest.

Inhale. One, two. Exhale. "Actually. I'm pretty sure anyone in your situation would be a little angry." He swallowed. "I'd be *furious*."

At that, Loki's attention snapped to him.

It wasn't the kind of smug vindication that Tony might have expected. Instead, the expression on Loki's face was something fiercer, almost desperate. With a strange thud around the reactor, Tony realized he was certain now. *This* was why Loki kept coming back.

It wasn't just that Loki was amused by him or entertained by his weird Midgardian perspective, not anymore. It wasn't even that Loki wanted to manipulate him into building more gadgets - although he should still definitely keep his guard up. But this...

Good god, if anyone else had looked at him the way Loki was looking at him right now, Tony would have expected them to kiss him.

It was... really not helpful that a part of his mind immediately tried to imagine that. How little movement it would take to close the distance between them. How easy it would be to just... curl a hand behind Loki's head, slide his fingers in. Loki was wild and primal and dangerous and Tony had *made* Loki like him, through sheer force of personality. He'd done that.

It was what he always liked to do to people who were on someone else's side; turn it around on them and rub it in their face. He made them need him, made them regret it. It wasn't always sex, but Loki-- oh, god, *Loki's* issues gave off vibes that came across just like self-hating closeted lawyers who had tried to file suits against Tony in the past, and Tony wanted to *own* him, he wanted to get Loki in his bed and underneath him, wanted to *win* even though he wasn't at all sure that Loki would consider that dominance--

Tony cleared his throat. Times like this, it was more than a little inconvenient that he had essentially trained himself to hide from emotional issues using physical... distractions. His heart was pounding hard and fast, and he was uncomfortably aware of the heated flush in his skin.

He just... had to breathe. Okay, and maybe not get busted staring at Loki's mouth. That would help too.

Okay. He was not going to sleep with Loki. He was in a relationship. And Loki invaded the planet. Those were both- uh. Important things.

(He definitely wasn't wondering how Loki would kiss... if Loki liked his hair pulled...)

Tony took another breath, slower, and counted it back out.

Loki sagged a little, looking tired. "It's not as if it matters. If I am angry, that only serves to prove Odin right. That my birthright--" He stopped, gave several rapid blinks, then swallowed. "And if I am not, then it proves him right again. Proves he was able to take a child of the enemy and raise it from its beastly nature..."

"Odin wins either way," Tony murmured.

It felt *wrong* for Loki to sound so defeated. Loki, of all people. It just... there had to be another option.

"Well," Tony said thoughtfully, and held up a finger to emphasize his point. "You could ignore the Big Giant Head, and decide to follow a completely different moral code. Not Jotun. Not Asgardian. If you're good by someone else's rules entirely, it's gotta be hard for him to claim a win, right?"

"Something you suggest out of purely altruistic motives, I'm sure," Loki drawled, with a facial expression that was somehow even more sarcastic than his tone of voice.

Tony gave a small, playful grin, because admittedly it *would* be really convenient if Loki decided to pick up Earth morals. Still: "There's, how many, at least nine realms to choose from? Probably more, given the size of the universe - you know, statistically, it would be wildly unlikely that the only nine to develop civilizations all linked together. For that matter, it's not necessarily one moral system per realm, either; Earth has a whole bunch of different moral philosophies, some of the others might - there's gotta be *something* out there that appeals..."

Loki was smiling, a fond little curl of mouth, obviously waiting for him to run out of steam.

"Asgard's not the be-all and end-all," Tony said, a little more belligerently than he intended. It was hard not to resent that tiny sign of condescension. Not because he was being laughed at, but because Asgard's superiority complex had caused all this in the first place. Odin taking kids from other planets and lying about it. Treating Earth like some penal colony for misbehaving princes. Look how well that had all gone. In fact-- "It's about time they learned that. Give Odin some of his own medicine."

Loki raised an eyebrow, a cool mix of wariness and intrigue. "And how do you propose to do *that*, hm?"

Good question. It wasn't realistic, but Tony said stubbornly, "See how he likes it if someone starts exiling people on *his* planet without asking. Tell me, your little..." He made a walking gesture with his fingers. "You take passengers?"

Loki tipped his head back and gave a peal of pure laughter. "Oh, that's *marvelous*."

"I'm serious," Tony insisted, fighting to suppress his own grin.

It was nonsense, of course; he couldn't just kidnap some prisoners and decide to banish them. He didn't have the right to make that call. Especially not knowing what Asgard would do to them. Oh, but if he *could*... then Odin would deserve every bit of it.

And dammit. Making Loki laugh like that - so bright and delighted - felt... good. It felt better than Tony could have anticipated, actually.

What in the hell was wrong with him.

He was still thinking about it later, when he was alone in his rooms. Thinking about his talks with Loki, every time Loki looked young and happy... Loki playing with magic, talking about pranks, the *potential* there...

The little trickle of completely inappropriate smugness that he felt whenever he thought about the idea that Loki liked him better than Thor...

"Yay," Tony muttered, in his best sarcastic deadpan. "I'm winning."

"Sir?" Jarvis asked, obviously not following his train of thought.

"Nothing. Disregard." Tony rubbed his face with his better hand, groaning a little. "Feelings are terrible. Bring on the robot revolution."

"I live for the day, sir," Jarvis said dryly.

Tony did manage a smile at that. He lifted his coffee mug, mostly empty now, in the style of a toast. "You and me both, buddy."

#

Space Oddity

Chapter Summary

Loki trying to be subtle sets off alarm bells for Tony; footage from the invasion reveals details he really didn't want to know.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the incredible delay, I've been having medical treatment. Will try to get this updating a little more regularly.

Tony had a few go-to solutions for those times when he didn't want to think too much. He'd considered going straight for the booze, but if he was drunk when Pepper got home from work then she'd either be seriously pissed off or smother him with concern, and neither of those were worth it. He'd briefly considered sending a message to Loki, but dealing with Loki usually meant a *lot* of thinking, so it would be a little counter-productive. In fact, given that one of the things he was trying not to think about was Loki stabbing his shoulder, it would be extremely counter-productive.

Plus, the mood he was in, he'd likely wind up provoking Loki into stabbing him all over again.

So, Tony was in his workshop, trying to focus on the practical challenges of creating an armor that used nano-technology to repair itself in battle. It wasn't working as well as he'd like. Both the design challenge, and the distraction from thinking.

With a sigh, Tony saved his notes and wiped away the holograms. "Hey, Jarvis, is Thor around?"

"Yes, sir."

"Check if he's up for a visitor, will you?"

A brief pause. "Mister Odinson is in the common area with Agent Romanoff, and would welcome further company."

"Tasha too, huh?" Tony eyed his left hand, the one he'd told most of the Avengers was 'healing' with the aid of AIM's Extremis project. So far, Natasha didn't seem to suspect anything about that explanation was fishy. "Sure, let's make this a three-way."

He headed for the elevator, and shortly after was strolling into the common room with a swagger in his step and a flashy smile in place. "Hey, kids! Did you miss me?"

"Desperately," Natasha said in a bland voice. Tony let his grin widen in her direction.

"Greetings, Stark," Thor said, more cheerfully. "Your Jarvis said you wished to speak with me."

"Mm." Tony joined them on the sofas, leaving Natasha in between himself and Thor. Not that he thought Thor was going to swing a punch again, but... any conversation that mentioned Loki had the potential to go sideways in unpleasant ways. "I was working on some armor upgrades and I wanted to run something past you about this... craftsman business."

Any suit he made had the potential to be used in battle against Loki. 'Wooing' or not, Tony wasn't naïve enough to think they wouldn't wind up fighting Loki again at some point.

"Ah." A hint of wariness crept into Thor's expression. "...Go on."

Tony found himself reaching up to touch the arc reactor without really thinking about it. He grimaced at himself and forced his hand back down. "What are the limits on this thing? If I'm thinking about fighting Loki when I make something, is that gonna give him access to mojo it up? I really don't want to have to press pause on all my projects, you know?"

If so, that was going to put a serious crimp in the whole Iron Man thing, because there was no way in hell Tony was going to put weapons in the hands of someone as crazy and dangerous as Loki.

Thor grimaced slightly, apparently not loving this topic of conversation, but didn't argue. "No... that would not be enough to give Loki the access you speak of. Think of it as relying on your intent. If Loki is not to use it or contribute to its making, you need not fear him bending it to his powers."

Tony breathed out a sigh of relief. "Alright, well, I still don't know if I believe the whole magic toy story, but that's a reassuring answer. What about those rune things, if I get some of those off Loki does that count as him 'contributing'?"

"Rune things?" Natasha asked, looking interested.

"Magic, apparently." Tony waved a hand dismissively. He had the sudden mental image of all of SHIELD wearing neatly stitched runes on their uniforms. "I haven't tested them yet, don't trust 'em."

"They are nothing to fear," Thor added, looking between them both. "As I said, your craft relies largely on your intent. And you are not likely to be given anything further from Loki, are you?" he added pointedly.

Tony bristled despite his best intentions. Natasha shot him a warning look and he said, teeth only slightly gritted, "Nope. Like you said. It's best if we don't *talk* anymore."

"Thank you," Thor said, and leaned back in satisfaction.

Tony opened his mouth to say something he was probably going to regret, but Natasha jabbed him with her fingers. He huffed and said instead, "In that case, I should probably get back to upgrades." He climbed to his feet and stretched. "Nat probably wants to pick your brains about runes now, you don't need me for that."

"Have fun," Natasha said with a smile, and Thor nodded in farewell.

Tony headed for the elevator, thinking about nanites again.

--

Tony dreamed he could fly - without the armor, just himself floating along a couple of feet above the ground. Some teenagers wandered past and one stole his laptop. He floated after them, yelling "You're a thief! You're a thief!" so that all the people around turned to stare until the kid gave up and gave back the laptop.

It was kind of a weird dream, but it wasn't a nightmare so Tony was pretty happy with that.

He spent some more time in the workshop, playing with ideas around nanotech armor in between reviewing satellite schematics. It was early afternoon by the time his phone buzzed with a message from Loki: *Are you busy?*

Tony stared at the screen for a moment, rubbing his left hand, then he typed back *nah, swing by* and hit send before he could think better of it.

There was nothing for a while, long enough for Tony to secure the workshop and hide anything sensitive, and then Loki showed up... in the elevator. Again. He had to be just messing with Tony at this point. Tony tried very hard not to give a reaction.

"What are you working on?" Loki asked, coming to stand... still a couple yards away. Huh.

"Company stuff," Tony said vaguely. He eyed Loki, assessing the guy's body language. Restless. Wary. First things first: hospitality. "Do you want, uh..." He rummaged briefly until he found a bag of mixed nuts he could hold out in offering. Loki came close enough to take a small handful from the bag, then backed up again.

Tony grabbed a couple for himself, then said, "So what's up, Tears for Fears? Any evil plans I should know about?"

"If I simply tell you, that will take all the fun out of it," Loki countered, but it got a smile out of him, at least, and he drifted a little closer.

Elevator. Hang on. Tony tilted his head, frowning at Loki. "I didn't say where I was."

"Oh, did you not?" Loki said innocently. "It must have been a lucky guess on my part. You do spend an awful lot of time here, after all."

Tony really, really wanted that to be true, which - knowing his luck - probably meant it wasn't. Well, that was creepy. Was it one of Loki's regular abilities, or something to do with the cell phone? Maybe Loki had just asked Jarvis, that was a possibility. He could hope.

"What would you have done if I'd said I was busy?"

"Probably something impulsive and regrettable." Loki paused and, presumably spurred by Tony's expression, added, "Vanaheim has been crying out for a little chaos."

It was probably a little wrong that Tony appreciated that addition, but the honest truth was that he *didn't* care about distant worlds he'd never go to. If Loki chose to cause shit somewhere else instead of Earth, just to appease Tony, then that was great. Terrific, even.

To avoid thinking about that, he decided to change the subject. "So, did you perfume your hair for me today?"

Loki rolled his eyes and said, "*No.*" It sounded more playfully annoyed than seriously touchy, so that was probably okay.

"So much for trying to court me." Tony batted his eyelashes deliberately. "You didn't even bring flowers. Expensive chocolates? I like the dark stuff, for the record."

Loki's lips quirked and he produced a large bouquet from thin air, blooms in shades of orange, yellow and peach. Everything about his expression said 'Happy now?'

Tony grinned, a little surprised to realise that he *was* happy. Sure, it was a joke, but... it was... kind of nice. "Not going to lie, there are definitely times in my life when that would have been an *extremely* useful trick to have up my sleeve."

He looked around the workshop for something he could put the flowers in, and there was a smoothie glass on that bench over there that he could use. Had anyone given him flowers before? Hospitals, get well soon, flowers and cards. Not like this. Not that *this* was like this either, Loki was just making fun of his babbling, but... still.

He took the glass to Loki and let Loki put the bouquet in it, and that was enough that he didn't feel like he was being handed something. It was a little embarrassing to realise he had no idea if they were Earth flowers or Asgard flowers. There was a mix of shapes, but none of them looked like tulips or roses and that was about as far as his flower recognition skills went. Oh, and they weren't daffodils, either.

Tony set the flowers down on one of the workbenches, enough to the side that they wouldn't get in the way while he was working. "There. Brightens up the room, don't you think? Nice touch."

"Lovely," Loki said dryly.

Tony grinned and leaned back against the workbench. "Right, well. That brings us back around to: what's up? Just wanted to see this handsome face?"

Loki clasped his hands behind his back. "I find myself in need of a... distraction."

"Yeah." Tony had already figured that; he grimaced a little in sympathy. "I get that. How active a distraction are we talking, here? Idle chit-chat while I look at satellite plans, or...?"

"Satellites?" Loki asked, hands coming back to his sides.

Tony nodded, deciding that it was harmless enough information. "Yeah, SI's got a bunch of them up there but they're Earth-focused; I wanna start looking outwards."

There was a faint snort, and Loki muttered without looking at him, "You can't even defeat me, you'll stand no chance against the forces out there."

"We've defeated you often enough," Tony said, mind whirring. Loki didn't mutter things to himself. Loki's remarks were always for an audience. He was *meant* to hear it, to think that it was a casual comment...

Loki cocked his head and spread his hands wide, presumably indicating the fact that he was currently standing very much *un*-captured in Tony's workshop. "And yet."

Tony tried very hard not to be amused by that cockiness. "I seem to remember kicking the ass of the last alien army you brought here."

Loki lowered his hands, smile getting a little less impudent and a little more tense. "Maybe Doctor Selvig is not the only one who managed to build in a failsafe."

Oh, this should be good. Tony folded his arms. "You're saying you were mind-controlled too?" Given that Loki had kept saying all the same things after the invasion, still wild and angry and all too insistent that 'mortals' were *beneath* him... No, if Loki wanted to pull the 'mind control' excuse he should have tried it back when it might have been a little more believable.

"No," Loki said, surprisingly straightforward. "That, I would have noticed. Believe me, I chose to attack your world. That time and every other."

"So what *are* you saying?" Tony said uneasily. He remembered what Loki had said about being crazy, that on Asgard they thought it was something that came from a curse. "That the scepter made you cuckoo for coco puffs?"

Loki took a step towards him, and another, slow and intent. "Perhaps. Perhaps I watched that portal close and was strangely relieved, though I could not say why." Another step. "Perhaps I saw the Chitauri soldiers fall, and felt some small measure of triumph. Perhaps I'm just trying to gain your sympathies."

"Perhaps you're a sore loser," Tony muttered. Wouldn't it be overkill, anyway? They'd *persuaded* Loki, got him to agree... There were a lot of things that Tony wasn't sure whether to believe, but he was pretty sure of that. "They tortured you," he said aloud. Then again, he was living proof that torture alone didn't always get the job done.

Loki rolled his eyes. "I've been tortured before."

"Yeah, me too," Tony said, then told himself he'd totally said that on purpose. "Then I killed the people who did it. It still sucked."

That brought a wry smile to Loki's mouth. "Yes... and you duelled Thor for my custody, then flew a missile to the heart of my enemies. It seems you make a habit of such things. I did not expect to have a king's protection over me..."

It was soft and amused and might have even had some truth to it, and wouldn't *that* add another layer to this fucked up cat and mouse thing they had going on - if Loki had some kind of twisted gratitude over Tony nuking the Chitauri.

Defeating an army was definitely the kind of thing that Asgardians were impressed by, if Thor's tales could be believed. Still, Tony wasn't sure how he should feel about it. "Yeah, well, I wasn't expecting a nuclear missile to come into play, but life comes at you fast."

"Indeed it does," Loki murmured, eyes on him.

Ye-ah, the whole way Loki was looking at him was making Tony kind of uncomfortable. In the sense that it was making him kind of warm under his skin and *that* was just a bad idea.

A step or two more and Loki would have him pinned up against the workbench. Tony cleared his throat and headed for the bag of mixed nuts he'd left on the other bench, to give himself an excuse to move out of the way.

"So, uh..." Racking his brain for a change of subject, he remembered something that had puzzled him. "Last time you were on Asgard, when you let yourself get 'captured', why didn't you steal something more powerful? Thor said it was a weapons vault."

Loki made a face like he'd eaten something distasteful. "It's a delicate balance. At the moment, Asgard seeks my capture, as you're aware..."

Tony nodded along, playing his role of attentive audience.

"But there is a limit to the resources the All-Father is prepared to commit. Whereas, some of the treasures in that vault - there are relics there that Odin considers *truly* valuable." The bitterness in Loki's voice spoke volumes. "I have no desire to provoke the full might of Asgard... yet."

"You just had to add that 'yet', didn't you?" Tony said with a sigh.

Loki grinned, but it didn't reach his eyes.

It wasn't like Tony didn't know what it was like to feel way down the list of his dad's priorities. He liked to think he handled it a little better than Stabby McMurderface, though.

He popped another cashew nut in his mouth while he contemplated his options. He probably could pull the satellite schematics back up and look them over while chatting with Loki. So long as he paid enough attention to stop himself bringing up Jotunheim and frost giants. Or ruling planets. Or Thor. Or... half a dozen other sore spots.

Maybe more like a dozen.

"Oh, don't look so alarmed," Loki said, half-rolling his eyes. "Tell me about your satellites, if you want."

Right. He could do that. Tony nodded, pulling up a hologram of Earth. "So, we've got this network..."

--

He didn't mention the weirdness about the scepter when he called an Avengers meeting - minus Thor - later that afternoon. It was too vague to be useful and it would just stir Clint up. He did tell them about Loki's little mutter, about the warning there might be worse threats still to come.

He summed up, "At worst, he's telling the truth and we've got bigger enemies out there. At... other worst, he's trying to con me into making him space weapons."

"Don't make him space weapons," Clint said helpfully.

Tony rolled his eyes a little. "I'm not going to make him space weapons."

Natasha started, "If you're going to make space weapons--"

"No one's making anyone space weapons," Steve interrupted. "Can we focus?"

"To be honest, Cap, I'm not sure we can," Tony said, just to be an ass. The dirty look Steve shot him was hilarious.

--

He thought about nuking an army, and the soft smile on Loki's face, and late night talks with Natasha about morality. He watched the compiled clip from the New York battle over and over, watching the Chitauri all fall down again and again, trying to figure out what he felt about it. If he felt anything about it.

After way too many repeats, he noticed something that he'd been a little too busy to pay attention to at the time, and his stomach went cold.

--

"Here's something interesting. Your giant bug army, back in the invasion." He pointed at Loki with the stylus he was holding; saw the way Loki minutely stilled. "The ones with the mid-air jet-skis... they were *chained* to them. Now, you've got your black leather bondage thing, you do you, but being tied up while invading another planet is a weirdly specific kink."

"I don't know what you want to hear." Loki's voice was soft in that dangerous way, eyes glittering. "That they were forced to serve? That they were slaves to a greater master, and you destroyed them all without *mercy*?"

'Mercy' was pronounced with more derision than Tony had ever heard, and whoops, apparently this was a touchy subject. Loki's gaze was malicious, but his face was pale.

They knew that someone *sent* Loki, gave him the minion stick and didn't exactly put out the fine china for him while they were persuading him to do it. If there was a *someone* with enough power to enslave an entire army-- and Tony felt his stomach roil, but he needed to *know*.

He made himself say, "Forced to serve *by who*?"

"You soft-hearted fool," Loki hissed. "You'll believe anything, won't you? They served *me*. I came for this realm and one day you'll slip up, make one tiny mistake and that's all I'll need - I will *rule* you and the rest of you squabbling mortals--"

Tony thought about caves and deserts and bulky metal suits of armor. "That's why you're making a weapon, isn't it?" he said quietly. "It's not to use against *us*. It's to use against whatever's out there, the Big Bad."

Loki jerked forward, and Tony felt an immediate rush of adrenaline and panic as he cursed his inability to just *keep his mouth shut*-- but instead of attacking, Loki snarled and disappeared into the air.

"Oh sweet mother of god," Tony said to the empty room. "I have *got* to learn some self-preservation tactics." He pinched the bridge of his nose and wondered if Loki was going to go 'cause chaos'... exactly how badly he'd provoked him. "Jarvis. The usual news alerts, please."

There was someone out there that had the power to subjugate an entire army, someone Loki was *terrified* of - and Loki scared was dangerous enough on his own. This was... bad. Space weapons suddenly didn't seem like such a stupid idea.

--

Days passed, and nothing about Loki came up on the news. Tony wasn't sure if he was relieved or even more worried. He had another meeting with Maya Hansen, and they got into a little more detail this time.

Naturally, trouble came when he was in the main room of the penthouse, looking for the repulsor watch he'd left... somewhere. Loki's voice, dark and resentful, came from behind him.

"I do not require your *approval*."

"Um," Tony said, having managed to refrain from shrieking at an embarrassingly high pitch. Instead he slowly turned to face Loki and tried to decipher the expression on the guy's face. "That's good? Take it from me, approval seeking leads to really poor life choices, like choosing to spend even the *smallest* amount of time with Nick Fury..."

Loki stared at him in a way that, not so long ago, would have been accompanied by some sort of accusation of mocking and threats of violence. But the threats didn't come. Loki drew closer, fire in his eyes. "I am sure your computers and your monitoring programs have told you that I have taken no action against anyone on Midgard, these past few days."

On Midgard, Tony noted, left a lot of room for other kinds of trouble.

"Yeah," he said, trying to remind himself to choose his words *carefully*. For once. Just for the novelty value, if nothing else. "I-- and yeah, you don't need my approval, but I do... appreciate it."

Loki's glare made him *really* wish he could remember where he'd left his repulsor watch.

"Don't be like that, you wouldn't be any happier if I said I didn't appreciate it," Tony said, folding his arms. Self-preservation was overrated, anyway. "There is literally no answer I could give that would satisfy you right now and you know it."

"Oh," Loki breathed, a smile flickering over his face, "I'm sure if you thought hard enough, you could find a way to... *satisfy* me."

"Well, I'll take innuendo over you trying to flay me with your eyes," Tony said lightly, trying to decide if he could relax a little or if Loki was in a stabbing kind of mood. He had to find a way to shift this conversation to the workshop, get Loki out of the main part of the penthouse. It wasn't that Pepper was likely to come home in the middle of the afternoon but it was the principle of the thing; he tried to keep Loki out of her spaces as much as possible.

Loki's eyes were still fixed on him kind of creepily. "You mentioned, once, weapons that were sold into the wrong hands... weapons you spent time hunting down and destroying."

Tony took a slow breath in and out. "I remember."

"And you mentioned taking up arms against those who would attack your city... how you wait until they make the first move, so that you are the noble hero defending his realm." The light, mocking tone really didn't match the intensity in Loki's gaze.

"Where are you going with this?" Tony asked. He had a feeling he knew.

"You know, when the Bifrost was repaired, Thor was sent about the Nine Realms to 'keep the peace'," Loki murmured. "Were I to do the same I would be imprisoned yet again."

Danger, Will Robinson. "As I'm pretty sure I've said before," Tony said, "I can't speak for Asgard, but you know down here if people treat you differently from Thor it's because you and Thor have treated *us* pretty differently."

Loki's mouth curled up into a sly grin. "And you, little king? Do you treat me differently than Thor?"

Tony huffed a laugh at that. "In a few different ways, yeah."

Loki paced sideways, circling Tony, making him turn to keep face-to-face. "And tell me, if I were to set myself to hunting down *your* enemies, would you 'appreciate' that?"

And there it was. Tony let out an unsteady breath. There were... so many ways he could answer and probably most of them would get him some seriously horrified looks from his friends. It would be so easy to justify. Any illegitimate Stark weapons still out there, they

were hardly going to be in the hands of *good* people. Or threats to the city, Avengers call-outs, oh god the mental image of Loki showing up to one of those was *hilarious*.

"I'm... not sure I should be encouraging you," were the words that actually come out of his mouth, and wow. *Wow*. He deserved a reward for getting that out.

"Cleaning up after my attack, perhaps?" Loki murmured, stepping closer. "There is still Chitauri technology being traded in the alleyways... would you have me hunt it down?"

"Um," said Tony, tilting his head back a little because Loki was *too damn tall* and doing the sexy predator thing and offering to hunt down leftover Chitauri tech, what the fuck--

"I would not take this for granted if I were you," Loki warned, low and dangerous and leaning in close.

"I'm not," Tony said quickly, because he wasn't a complete idiot, even if the six foot whatever of leather-clad alien currently in his personal space did *things* for him that were all kinds of stupid. "I'm just, uh. Are you seriously offering...?"

"It seems only fair," Loki said in that same low voice, the very definition of *unfair* if they were being precise about terminology--

But then Tony forgot all about terminology, because Loki was kissing him.

It took Tony a moment to react, then he jerked his head back and his voice was higher than he meant it to be, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up--"

"Oh *my*," Loki exclaimed, oozing false sincerity, and still all up in Tony's personal space; "of course, your little Midgardian customs, I *do* apologise..."

Tony put his hands on Loki's chest to try and push him back a little, but of course Loki didn't budge; instead wrapped his hands around Tony's wrists and gently, gently plucked them free. Anything could happen and Tony didn't know what to do with the adrenaline pounding in his veins; he still had his lips parted, breathing through his open mouth, and his eyes felt stupidly wide but *what the fuck--*

And Loki took a step backwards, let go of his wrists, and smirked some more. Bastard.

"I can't believe you apologised for something," Tony said, because it was the only thing he could think of to say. He could still feel the echo of Loki's fingers curled around his wrists. What the hell was-- was that offering an alliance? Sealing one? Just fucking with his head? All of the above?

"Do try not to let it go to your head," Loki said dryly.

"Are you kidding? I just kissed a god." It was easy to fall into the rhythm of the banter, something that didn't require much thought - which was good because Tony wasn't sure he was capable of much thought at the moment. He really, really hadn't expected Loki to escalate like that and that was probably exactly why he should have. Fuck.

Loki's smirk widened. He practically purred, "Oh, it is nice to hear you acknowledge that, little king."

He'd just called Loki a god. Was there anything about this conversation that was going to go *right*? Tony grimaced and wished he was closer to a wall so he could beat his damn head against it.

"Regardless," Loki continued, "I should take my leave of you. I'm sure you were doing something dreadfully important before I interrupted."

"I was, actually," Tony lied, and then Loki did his stupid vanishing trick. Tony made a noise of deep frustration and scrubbed his hands over his face. Stupid Asgardians with their stupid magic and predilection for screwing with him. *Figuratively*. Hopefully Loki would be entertained enough by this not to escalate again for a while.

This was the sort of thing he needed to make sure the other Avengers *never* found out about.

"Jarvis," he said with a groan. "Penthouse security camera TL-03, last ten minutes, wipe it."

The briefest of pauses, and then Jarvis confirmed, "Footage erased."

That was a start, at least. Tony rubbed his wrists and tried not to imagine Loki using them to hold him down. Bad thoughts. He could at least save it for the shower.

Fuck.

#

Regeneration

Chapter Summary

That awkward moment when your girlfriend finds the flowers that your mass-murdering alien suitor gave you. Also, Tony finds out what AIM's been hiding.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: non-consensual medical experimentation with sharp cutty things.

Tony was surprised by how many of the others *weren't* surprised at the news of chains on the Chitauri. He'd been kind of operating in a haze of *threat - shoot - threat - shoot* but he supposed the others had had more of a chance to fight up close and personal. Or far away and personal, in Hawkeye's case, but still with more of an eye for detail than Tony had been working with.

And then there was Bruce.

"Let me get this right," Bruce said, looking around the table. "Half of the alien army that invaded us was literally *in chains*, and this is just coming up now?"

"It was in the reports after," Steve said, "but since the portal was closed and the Tesseract sent to Asgard for safekeeping, it didn't seem that important."

Natasha nodded. "The assumption was that whatever remained of the alien forces didn't have a way of getting here."

If anything remained of the Chitauri forces. Tony bit that back. "Here's hoping," he said instead.

"That's..." Bruce let out an unsteady breath and looked at Thor. "Do you know if that's normal for the Chitauri? Is that-- Do they usually fight like that?"

"I don't know," Thor said simply. "Heimdall's gaze is limited to the Nine Realms. It was only once Loki came to Midgard that we knew he was not dead."

Yeah, Thor had told them that before. Loki had seemed less convinced, but Loki did tend to take the worst possible interpretation of everything. Still... if Thor was wrong about the limits of that guy's sight, it would be good to know.

"He didn't tell us much about them," Clint said, almost expressionless. "Just that we were going to open a portal for them, and a bunch of crap about greater glory."

"It does... raise some questions," Tony said, shifting in his chair. "About if there's someone or something more powerful that was pulling the Chitauri's strings."

Clint tapped the fingers of one hand against the table. "Aside from Loki, you mean?"

Thor was frowning, Clint and Bruce were both twitchy, and Tony was trying to forget how pale Loki had gone when he'd started asking questions. Yeah, there was something bigger out there. The question was what to do about it.

"Thor," Steve said, leaning forward, "could you go to Asgard and ask Heimdall what he did manage to see, about the Chitauri? Maybe there was something mentioned that would be useful, or..."

"I will consult my father as well," Thor said. "Perhaps there is some knowledge from Asgard's history that can help us. Though I must confess I don't understand why this is so urgent now. As you said, any remaining forces have no way of getting to your realm."

"If the army we were fighting was made of *slaves*, that's something I'd like to know," Bruce said tightly.

Tony tried not to flinch at hearing it put so bluntly, but given the way Natasha's eyes flicked to him he wasn't sure he succeeded.

"They got here once," Steve said seriously. "We have to believe there's a chance they could find another way. Tony's right, we should try and find out who's left and how strong they are."

Loki had gotten defensive and left when Tony had come right out and asked about the Chitauri. But, before that had been that little comment about space forces, about being unprepared. So: Loki *wanted* them to prepare, enough to give them a nudge, but... didn't think it was going to be enough? That could fit. Tony chewed on his lower lip thoughtfully.

"We can ask Director Fury for an update on the scepter," Natasha said. "Maybe the science guys can tell us something useful."

Steve nodded at that. Personally, Tony was a little sceptical that kind of information would be what the science guys had been working on - given SHIELD's priorities - but that did remind him of something else.

"Tell him I want my knife back," he told Natasha.

"Your knife?"

"The one Loki stabbed me with." There, he could even say it without cringing. "It was buried in my shoulder, it's mine, I want it."

Clint turned his head to Natasha and said, "It's hard to argue with that."

Natasha shook her head but said, "Fine, I'll tell Director Fury you want the knife."

"My knife," Tony insisted. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that Bruce still looked unhappy but at least a little less tense. That was a start.

Steve cleared his throat. "Is there anything else we need to cover?"

Technically yes, but there was no way in hell Tony was going to tell the rest of the team that Loki had kissed him. For once, Thor's reaction wasn't the scariest. Tony stayed silent while the petty formalities and meeting wrap-up took place, then was getting ready to leave when Natasha jerked her head at him to stay behind.

Well, that was... unfortunate. He was prepared for this, though. Just a bit nervous. Tony waited until the others had filed out then raised his eyebrows at her. "What's up, beautiful?"

"You were holding something back," Natasha said, getting straight to the point.

"Remember to use your spy powers for good." Tony sighed and showed his open palms like he was coming clean. The key to lying to someone like Natasha was to tell just enough of the truth. "He offered - kind of - to hunt down Chitauri weapons for us." No need to specify who 'he' was. "I'm about... sixty-three percent sure it's just a ploy to get me onside, but there could be another layer to it, I don't know yet."

Natasha actually looked surprised; Tony mentally awarded himself a point.

"That's... soon," she said. "Given-- what happened to your arm..."

Yeah, that did make it look pretty odd. Tony shrugged. "You know how impulsive he is."

That was true enough that Natasha didn't push it. Instead, she came closer and put a hand on Tony's arm. "Tony, are you okay with this? You're obviously having sessions with Loki again - it can't be easy."

"It's not," Tony agreed. He managed a half-smile. "But I don't have a lot of choice, do I?"

Yeah, maybe he'd-- *definitely* he'd bitten off more than he could chew. But by now, he was in so deep that he couldn't imagine a way to back off without Loki flipping his shit. And, god help him, he *wanted* to keep talking to Loki. He liked being the only one who could burrow under those layers of defensive spite. He liked knowing he was slowly winning Loki over, making Loki crave his friendship, crave time with him. He liked...

He liked puzzles, loved putting the pieces together to make something gorgeous and whole, and what was Loki but one giant pile of broken pieces?

"Try not to take it all on yourself," Natasha said, with a look that meant she knew he was going to do exactly that. "At least talk to Colonel Rhodes or Pepper."

"What makes you think I don't?" Tony said, which admittedly was not the most convincing thing he could have said. Natasha rolled her eyes at him.

--

well, the avengers are now officially getting ready for space trouble

Good luck with that.

have you considered just being straightforward and asking for what you want?

I grew out of that useless habit some time ago.

Tony sighed and shook his head at his cellphone. He wasn't in the mood to try and argue with Loki's martyr complex tonight. He put the phone back in his pocket and frowned absently at the window.

He heard the tapping of Pepper's shoes as she came into the room. He still hadn't figured out how to tell her about... Loki. That whole... incident. No matter how he rehearsed it in his head, it didn't sound good.

Maybe at dinner-- no. Maybe not at dinner in a public restaurant, that was a terrible idea.

"You ready?" he said, getting to his feet.

"Yes, let's head out." Pepper came to join him and they got in the elevator together. She glanced at him and said, "You're awfully quiet today."

"Thinking nanotech," Tony said, hating himself a little. "I'm still trying to get this design right."

Pepper hummed lightly in acknowledgement, apparently happy with that explanation. Tony was almost tempted to blurt it out there and then, but the moment passed. The elevator, he had to admit, was probably not a lot better than the restaurant.

The elevator slowed much sooner than he was expecting; one of the Avengers must be about to use it. Tony grinned to himself and got ready for the doors to open--

"But why do *you* always get to wear the maid's costume, when is it my turn to wear the French ma-- oh, hi Steve," he interrupted himself, trying to look innocent.

Pepper smirked; Steve blinked once and then said, "Nice try, Tony."

Tony grinned, shifting to make room in the elevator. He'd got what he wanted; Pepper looked a lot more reassured about his state of mind now.

--

Friday was one of those days when everything *flowed*. The nanotech started coming together, the bionic eye for that woman in Belgium was making progress and working on it gave Tony the inspiration to design neural implants he could use to control the armor, he finally got a look at some of the data for Extremis - apparently there was some feedback loop, overheating issues when regenerating.

Much to his surprise, Natasha actually brought him the knife he'd been stabbed with, a pretty little thing of alien metal and sharp, glinting edges. He'd expected to have to kick up more of a fuss.

The knife was made out of something incredibly durable; it seemed to be heat-resistant to ridiculous temperatures, and nothing Tony had in his workshop left so much as a scratch on it. He set up a series of scans of its composition and tapped his chin thoughtfully.

Loki passed as Asgardian. Anything designed to work on Thor should work on Loki. And... anything designed to work on Loki should work on *Thor*.

There was one tool that had jumped into Tony's mind not long after Thor had swung that punch at him. Something that was intimately tied to grief and betrayal. A part of him wanted nothing to do with the damn thing, but another part said it would be foolish to pass up a potential weapon.

He tried not to think about that second part sounding a lot like Loki.

Tony hesitated a moment longer, then decided that hiding from it wouldn't help him protect himself. He dug out the schematics for the sonic paralyzer that Obie had used on him, and set about recalibrating it for Asgardian body density.

He would not be caught off-guard in his own home again. Not by Loki and not by Thor. Not by *anyone*.

There was time to run the recalibration, machine the parts, and start assembling the device before Pepper came to drag him out of the workshop for dinner. That might have been alright, except she went straight for the bouquet of flowers that was still sitting on one of the workbenches.

"Oh, these are lovely, Tony! Where did you get them? They don't look like the ones from the usual place." Her fingers hovered over the cheerful-colored blooms.

"Ah," Tony said uncomfortably. Okay. It wasn't something to be guilty about, he hadn't done anything wrong. He cleared his throat and blurted, "Loki gave them to me."

Pepper went very still, and then she slowly turned to give him an unreadable look.

"I was joking about him showing up, I said he should bring me flowers or expensive chocolates, so he did this," Tony gestured vaguely in the air, *magic*, "and pulled them out of thin air, it was just a joke."

Pepper looked distinctly unimpressed by that explanation. "Just how often is he showing up?" she asked, with an edge to her voice.

"The flowers was, let's see, about a week and a half ago?" Tony left out the other visits since then; this was definitely not the time to bring up Loki kissing him, not with Pepper already tense over the flowers. "Which, come to think of it, should they even still be alive? That's weird, right?"

He was going to tell her. He was definitely going to tell her. He was just waiting for the right time.

Pepper pinched the bridge of her nose and slowly exhaled. "A joke. Okay. You know what--okay. Let's just have dinner."

Tony frowned. He took a couple of steps towards her. "Pep, did something change? You're..."

"He nearly *killed* you," Pepper said, voice rising as she stared at him incredulously.

Tony winced. "Yeah, but then he healed me as well, so--"

"Maybe you don't remember the hospital but I had to sit there while you just kept getting worse - until SHIELD swept you away and I couldn't even sit with you--"

"I'm the one he stabbed," Tony said defensively. "If anyone should be mad about that, it should be me--"

"It *should* be, but you're not, are you?" Pepper snapped. "Even when you were half-delirious the thing you were most worried about was telling me not to let you turn into him--"

"Of course I'm mad, I shouted at him, I shouted at him a *lot*." Tony blinked, catching up to the second half of her words. "Wait, I told you what?"

"You heard me," Pepper said. She lifted her chin a little, eyes defiant.

Tony stared back, uncomfortably aware of the half-assembled sonic paralyzer beside him. "...You can't blame me for things I say while delirious," he muttered belatedly.

Pepper looked tired. "Let's just have dinner, alright? You said the flowers were a joke, I believe you, it's not important."

"Yeah," Tony agreed. The back of his neck itched with the feeling that the conversation was unfinished, that too much was still unsaid. He ignored it and followed Pepper to the elevator.

After dinner, he went back to the workshop to finish putting the sonic paralyzer together. Whatever it said about him that he could contemplate using something that Obie had used on him (*I worried that I was killing the golden goose*), at least he'd be protected.

--

The next week, there was a pile of Chitauri weaponry in his workshop. Tony stared at it for a moment while he tried to figure out what to do with a dozen alien guns. He couldn't just turn them over to SHIELD-- no, wait, he could, because he'd told Natasha about Loki's weird offer. Huh, sometimes telling the truth had benefits; who knew?

"I am really curious," he said experimentally, "what you get out of this."

There was no answer. Presumably that meant Loki wasn't lurking invisibly in here somewhere to watch his reaction. Tony pulled out his phone and typed *thanks sweetie u*

shouldn't have.

It was a few minutes before Loki's reply came through. *Nothing is too good for my darling Midgardian.*

Tony snorted an extremely inelegant laugh, and then he thought about the kiss again and felt his cheeks heat up. Maybe joke-flirting was a bad idea. Like. A *really* bad idea.

u could at least have washed the blood off

But then how would you know they were won in noble battle?

don't do that, u sound like thor

"You really know how to take the fun out of a conversation," Loki drawled, appearing in the middle of the workshop.

Tony raised his eyebrows, aware of the sonic paralyzer tucked snugly in his pocket. "Got your attention though, didn't it?"

Loki moved towards him, long coat swaying. He looked tired. "As I believe I've mentioned before, having my attention is probably not something you should strive for."

"Probably not," Tony agreed. "But I've never really been much of a 'should' kind of guy."

Loki stopped a few feet away and studied him. After a moment, he said softly, "Why are you doing this?"

Oh, apparently they were doing this now. Tony considered and discarded about three different flippant answers. It didn't feel right, with Loki all tired and subdued. But the truth was... he wasn't sure what the truth was. There were a hundred different things that drew him to Loki. A hundred more that made him want to figure out how to take Loki apart and put him back together again.

"I look at you and I see someone I could have easily turned into," he finally said, wondering yet again if Loki could tell lies from truth. "I still could. I look at you, and... I want to know who you are, under all the pain and the family issues and the-- the other stuff. Not that that stuff isn't part of you, because it is, god knows I know *that*, but."

He was rambling. Tony took a breath. "I want to see the whole picture. I want to know you. I want you to get the same chance I did. I want you to stop blowing up my city. I want..." *Everything.* He trailed off, running out of words.

Loki was watching him, quiet and intent. "You're awfully certain there is more to me than rage."

Tony looked pointedly at the flowers, then back at Loki. "We both know there is."

Loki took a breath like he was about to say something, then turned and started pacing the room. Although, he didn't back up a few steps before showing his back this time, that was

interesting.

Tony raised his voice a little. "So why are *you* doing this?"

Loki stopped and glanced over at him. Instead of answering, he said, "You should be more careful, Tony. Betrayal is in my nature."

Tony rocked his hand from side to side in the air. "Ehh. Bit of a cop-out, if you ask me."

Loki raised an eyebrow but it was like he didn't even have the energy to be properly menacing. Tony wondered if he should be worried about that.

"It's a nice line, because it takes all the responsibility off you. Oh, a bit of murder, a bit of betrayal, what did anyone expect, it's in your *nature*." Tony shook his head. "You choose what you do. It's always your choice."

Loki scowled and sneered at the same time; it was kind of amazing to see. "That's easy to say when your choices have made you a *hero*."

Tony shifted on his feet, remembering the device in his pocket. It didn't make him feel like much of a hero. "Uh, there are... a lot of people out there who would disagree with you, actually. I've made plenty of bad choices and other people have paid the price." Those kids in the Humvee. Yinsen. So many more. "All I can do is try to make the next choice better."

Loki gestured between them. "And is that what this is?"

"Loki." Tony shook his head again. "This is friendship. But I can't do it on my own. It takes both of us, you've got to choose it."

Loki watched him silently for a few moments, still looking tired. It was a little unnerving.

"Are you hungry?" Tony went to rummage in his desk for snack food. "I should have some... something..."

"No," Loki said, but he came closer, and ha, wasn't that a metaphor for this whole damn thing.

"So what's the deal with the Chitauri gear," Tony said, finding a bag of dried fruit and tossing it at Loki. "Is it going to turn out that you're expecting something from me and then get violently angry when I have no idea what I'm meant to be doing?"

Loki rolled his eyes, showing a bit more spirit. "You already flew a missile into the heart of the Chitauri. I made an offer to you, not a deal."

Oh, wow. So Loki *did* have some weird gratitude over Tony nuking the Chitauri. That implied a lot of things, some of which were kind of worrying.

Tony dropped into the chair behind his desk and swiveled back and forth, watching Loki figure out how to open the dried fruit. "So what do you get out of it?"

"It does give me something to do with my spare time," Loki said, flashing a quick smile with teeth that Tony didn't trust one bit.

"Well, it's better than the mass killing sprees," he said. Loki's expression turned into a grimace and Tony sighed. "...Okay, are we going to talk about Kentucky?"

"You've said quite a bit about it already," Loki said stiffly.

"About you stabbing me, yeah, but I was thinking more about the people in the church. Does Asgard have a difference between soldiers and civilians?"

Loki seemed to draw into himself a little, looking down and to the side like he was seeing something that wasn't there. "Yes," he said quietly. "At times. It... depends on the situation."

"Honor," Tony guessed, and Loki nodded. "Well, that might fly on Asgard, but down here things are a little different."

Loki's jaw clenched, and he looked up at Tony with a scowl. "I did not come here to be lectured by a *Midgardian*."

Tony scowled right back. "Asgardians. Aren't. Better than us."

Loki flinched a little, and looked back at that spot on the floor.

"It doesn't matter what people say to you, about you - you can't just kill them. That's murder, it's a pretty big deal. Believe me, I understand the impulse--"

"I am not bound by your ridiculous Midgardian laws," Loki snarled, the bag of fruit crumpling in his hand as he took a step forward.

Tony reminded himself of the sonic paralyzer in his pocket, and kept his voice level. The desk was still between them. "You keep calling me a king. Are you going to follow the rules of my kingdom, or not?"

Loki made a sound of frustration and tossed the dried fruit onto the desk in front of Tony. "I'm not hungry."

"Are you going to follow the rules of my kingdom," Tony repeated in a harder voice, "or not?"

Loki held his gaze for several seconds, then looked away. "...I'm trying," he muttered.

Wow.

Tony took a slow, steadying breath. That was... actually amazing. That was what he'd wanted, right? Loki trying (*for him*, said the selfish little voice in the back of his head; Loki was trying *for him* and what did that say about his ability to win people over?) and reduced casualties.

It was worrying to think that Kentucky was an example of what happened when Loki was 'trying'. "If that's trying, I'd hate to see what happens when you don't give a shit," Tony muttered. He probably shouldn't have said it out loud, but Loki just gave a short, dark laugh.

"I believe you've seen it, Warsmith. I had an army, if you'll recall."

Yeah... there was that.

Tony scrubbed his hands over his face, trying to figure out how hard to push right now. "We've got to get you a better way of dealing with stress," he said absently.

Loki glanced at the pile of Chitauri guns and back at him, speaking volumes without saying a word. Letting Tony make the assumption, which just made Tony suspicious. There was more to this little offer than just stress relief and wooing or courting or whatever the fuck it was that Loki was doing to show friendly intentions.

...But Loki was actually *trying*.

"Right!" Tony jumped to his feet and clapped his hands together. "This is all very nice and depressing, but I could use some lunch. Any preferences? I'll order in."

Loki hesitated, then shook his head. "I'll take my leave."

"Try to get some rest," Tony said before he could think better of it. Ugh, he sounded like Bruce. At least Loki didn't make fun of him for it, just did the usual neat magic trick of vanishing into thin air.

Tony reached for the bag of dried fruit and popped some raisins into his mouth.

--

He visited AIM's New York offices to work on Extremis with Maya. The CEO was some guy called Aldrich Killian, and he gave Tony the creeps. The guy wasn't there for long; just had a brief conversation with Maya, glanced at Tony a few times, and left.

His smile, though. Killian had Obadiah's smile, and it made Tony's hackles rise and alarm bells ring in his head.

--

Thor came back with exactly zero useful information from Asgard. Steve said SHIELD had nothing useful from the scepter. More bits and pieces of scavenged Chitauri tech showed up in the workshop. Loki sent some joking text messages, but didn't show up in person again. Tony wasn't sure what he'd done that had scared Loki off but it bothered him. He wanted Loki to be *there*, all screwed up and fascinating and challenging, full of so many, many shiny puzzle pieces.

He did a little research on AIM, when he wasn't at their office. On the surface, they seemed like just another biotech company, nothing special. A little more digging showed an

unsettling pattern; when they acquired patents, the original patent holders often seemed to wind up having 'accidents'. Not every time, but there were enough deaths to be suspicious.

Well, that wasn't good.

Tony frowned at his computer screen. It was suspicious, but not damning. He needed more. The best way to get that was from the inside. He sent Steve a quick email with an overview, made sure to strap on his repulsor watch, and headed over to AIM.

Maya was surprised to see him. "I didn't think we had a meeting today."

"I felt inspired," Tony said, giving her a charming smile. "You don't mind, do you? I can just work in a corner if you're busy--"

"No, no, it's fine." Maya closed some things on her computer and shifted over, gesturing at him to pull up a seat. "What's your idea?"

She didn't notice him slip a thumb drive into her computer, a variation of the decryption program he'd used on the SHIELD helicarrier all the way back during Loki's little invasion. Tony talked through an idea he knew wouldn't work, something easy for Maya to troubleshoot while the decryption program did its thing. They kept talking, bouncing ideas off each other while Tony surreptitiously watched the time.

Half an hour before the decryption program was due to complete, the office door opened. There stood Aldrich Killian, holding a handgun down by his side.

"IT tracked a security breach to this office," Killian said, and shook his head. "It's a shame, Stark. I was hoping you'd be of some use before this had to happen."

"What is it about the crazy ones?" Tony muttered, looking between Killian and Maya. Maya looked regretful but not surprised. Well, fuck.

Killian used the gun to gesture at the corridor. "If you'd come this way, Stark."

Tony raised his right hand, flexing to trigger the transformation from watch to repulsor. "You might want to reconsider."

Killian just smiled that creepy smile. "Go right ahead."

Tony paused, caught off-guard by that reaction. "I'm serious," he insisted. He slowly got to his feet, keeping his hand and repulsor aimed squarely at Killian. His heart pounded. "I'll shoot."

"Let me make it easy for you," Killian said, and lifted his gun.

Tony adjusted his aim to Killian's right shoulder and fired the repulsor. It seared away at shirt and flesh - and then the flesh started *growing back*, a rolling wave of embers that - shit - must have been Extremis in action.

The repulsor watch only had enough power for two shots. The second one had to count. Tony aimed straight for the head and flexed his hand to fire.

Oh, god, that was what a burnt face looked like reconstructing itself. Gross.

Killian thumbed the safety off. "Put your little toy on the desk, and your hands in the air."

Tony swallowed. This was... not ideal. Slowly he unfastened the repulsor watch and tossed it on the desk. "You know, historically, this kind of thing doesn't end terribly well for the people threatening me."

"I've got a few advantages they didn't have," Killian said, and smiled again. "Your cellphone, too."

"I don't have it," Tony said, holding his hands up like he'd been told. He felt like he could smell sand. His breath was coming too fast, he needed to get it under control.

"Maya," Killian said, and Maya stood up to pat down Tony's pockets until she found the cellphone and put it on the desk beside the repulsor.

"You know, I really thought we had a better time than anything deserving *this*," Tony told her flippantly. He should have known... It was too easy, making the contract with AIM. They should have put up more of a fight for something as valuable as Extremis had the potential to be, they should have negotiated harder. He should have had his guard up.

"Nothing personal," Maya said.

"Now." Killian wiggled the gun again. "This way, Stark."

Tony concentrated on his breathing as he walked out into the hallway. Breathe in, two, three, four; out, two, three, four. *He wants you to build the missile, the Jericho missile that you demonstrated.* He walked where Killian told him, aware of the gun at his back. Breathe, two, three, four.

They went halfway across the building and down a level, and the whiteness of the walls made Tony's skin crawl long before Killian told him to open a door and he saw the gurney with ankle and wrist restraints. The echo of Obie's voice whispered in his ear.

"Come on, don't get cold feet now." Killian's voice was lightly mocking and the muzzle of the gun prodded Tony in the back.

Tony stepped forward reluctantly. He could hear more voices from behind, Killian giving instructions, then two guys in lab coats came past him.

"Yeah, this isn't going to work for me," Tony said, eyes on the restraints. "Little bit of medical anxiety, pretty reasonable on my part--"

The gun prodded him in the back again. "Up," Killian said, voice dangerous in a way that almost reminded Tony of Loki, except it had none of the sheer *emotion* that Loki packed into his threats.

"Well, this sucks," Tony said, and climbed up on the gurney. He was not at all convinced this was better than getting shot. It really depended on what they planned to do with him. He met Killian's eyes while the guys in lab coats were doing up the restraints. "So this is the part where you tell me your whole evil plan, since I'm at your mercy, right?"

"The same thing you were already here for," Killian said. "You're going to help us test Extremis."

"It's not even close to ready," Tony said, jerking against the restraints despite himself. "It's unstable. I don't know what the deal with yours is but you can't--"

"Gag him," Killian said, sounding bored.

All Tony could hear was rushing water, he was drowning, he couldn't breathe-- people were grabbing at him, his clothes, they were pushing up his sleeve. They injected something in his arm, a line of stinging heat that *burned*. He thrashed, pulling desperately against the restraints. Someone was saying something and he couldn't think, he couldn't breathe. It hurt, it hurt, everything was too hot and he was burning up... except for a cool patch across his chest.

He blinked sweat out of his eyes, trying not to whimper. The burning hurt. Cool patch, think - that had to be the arc reactor, didn't it? Keeping away alien infections and now this Extremis serum. It gave him something to focus on.

He just had to wait. He'd sent the details to Steve; the team would notice when he didn't come home. He just had to hold on long enough for the team to get here. Bruce could help him reverse the effects.

A scalpel flashed in the light. One of the lab coat guys drew it along Tony's arm, sharp and vicious. The flesh *burned*, regenerating with that same ripple of embers that Killian's had shown. Tony tried to swear, but the gag muffled it.

"Three point eight seconds," said the other guy, and made a note on his clipboard.

The first guy lifted the scalpel again.

--

Steve came. The team came. By that point Tony was alone, trembling on the gurney, but he could hear the sounds of conflict getting closer. Clint was the one who found him, and immediately holstered his gun in favor of unbuckling the restraints.

"I've got him," Clint said, presumably for the benefit of his comm unit. "Conscious but restrained. Undoing them now."

As soon as Tony was free he slid off the gurney and ripped the gag out of his mouth. "Killian," he gasped. "CEO. He regenerates."

"Apparently there's a hostile in play who regenerates," Clint reported, and slung an arm around Tony's shoulders. "Come on, lean on me. I've got you."

"I really..." Tony shuddered, stumbling a little as Clint helped him out of the room. He was still too hot. "Really fucking hate torture..."

Clint's arm squeezed a little tighter. "I've got you, man," he repeated.

Tony just focused on breathing.

--

Back at the Tower, he let Bruce take blood samples, wincing afterwards as Extremis healed the tiny wound. He was exhausted and all he could remember was staring up into Obadiah's face, paralyzed, everything he knew about his life in tatters around him.

All these things he kept surviving... and why? What more did he still need to *do*?

Tony was getting really tired of near-death experiences.

"I don't know which version they gave me but I know it's unstable," he told Bruce, voice coming out raspy. "Need to either stabilize it or purge it out. Ah... otherwise there's a good chance I explode."

Bruce stared at him for a moment. "I really have no idea how you get yourself into these situations."

"Natural luck," Tony said, and let his head loll back against the lab chair. "M real tired, Bruce. Just going to take a nap, okay?"

"Yeah, Tony," Bruce said softly. "I'll work on these while you get some sleep."

Tony wriggled halfway onto his side and closed his eyes. He trusted Bruce. No one dangerous would be able to get past Bruce.

Later he heard voices, and opened his eyes to see Pepper and Bruce talking near the lab door. That meant Pepper was going to get worried and upset. Tony winced and pushed himself back up to a proper sitting position. "Pepper."

"Tony, you're awake." She hurried over and hovered next to him, eyes wide and tear-filled. "Are you okay? Bruce told me--"

"I'm mostly just tired," Tony said, semi-truthfully. "We just need to clear the virus out of my blood, then I'll be fine."

"Oh, thank god." Pepper wrapped her arms around him and gave a gentle squeeze. "I'll take care of dinner, don't worry about anything. Do you want something to drink? I'll grab you some bottled water. Is there--"

Water in his mouth and lungs, *drowning*, and Tony shook his head. "Juice or Gatorade, there should be plenty up on the team level. Something really packed full of artificial color."

"Juice or Gatorade," Pepper repeated, calmer with something to focus on. "Is there anything in particular you want to eat?"

Tony thought about the flash of the scalpel and swallowed. "Something we can eat with our hands."

"I'll get on that right away, Mister Stark," she said with a small smile.

Tony breathed. "Thank you, Miss Potts."

Pepper left. He was so tired. Tony rubbed his face with his hands and grimaced at the oiliness of old sweat on his skin. Now that he could think more clearly he realized there were things he'd left behind. "Bruce, tell me someone snagged my cellphone and repulsor?"

"Over there," Bruce said, pointing at a spare desk where the objects in question sat. "I think Natasha seized the computer from the room they were in, as well. And Aldrich Killian is in a special SHIELD holding cell."

"It's not even my birthday," Tony said, getting up carefully. He was still a little unsteady on his feet, but hopefully dinner would help with that. The repulsor watch would need its power core replaced. That could wait until tomorrow.

"I think I can clean Extremis out of your system," Bruce said. "It'll take a little while to synthesize the counteragent, but there shouldn't be any problem."

"That's what I like to hear," Tony murmured, snagging his cellphone off the desk. It didn't show any messages. He tucked it into his pocket and made his way back to the chair he'd all but collapsed in earlier.

Bruce was watching him. "How are you doing, Tony? Really."

Ugh, were they really going to do this? Dammit. Tony sighed and said, "I don't love being held captive, but it was just a few hours, I can deal with it."

"Clint said you were tortured."

"And *that's* how you decided to bring it up?" Tony said in disbelief. He expected better from Bruce. "Look, it's not my first rodeo. It wasn't even torture, really. It was science, they wanted to analyze how fast I healed."

Bruce sucked in a breath and, right, medical experimentation probably wasn't the best angle to take. Tony winced.

"Like I said, it was just a few hours," he said, redirecting the conversation slightly. "I'll be a little jumpy for a couple of days, then I'll be fine. Right now my main concern is getting that stuff out of my bloodstream before it destabilizes."

"You're going to keep playing it down, aren't you?" Bruce said, with something like a wry smile.

"Yep," Tony said easily. He gave one of his best showman's smiles. "Control of the narrative, Brucey-bear. I know what I'm doing."

Bruce raised his eyebrows. "Is that why you went into a potentially hostile situation without backup?"

"I was information gathering. Natasha does it all the time." Tony sighed. "Steve's going to lecture me, isn't he."

"Natasha doesn't get caught," Bruce pointed out, a little meanly in Tony's opinion.

Steve was absolutely going to lecture him.

Pepper came back with orange juice and PB&J sandwiches, which was actually genius and Tony told her so around a mouthful of bread. It was pure comfort food and he hadn't realized how much he wanted comfort food until it was there in front of him. The juice was sugary enough that it didn't make him think of water.

He left Bruce working on the counteragent and went upstairs with Pepper to watch some mindless action movie that didn't require any brainpower.

His sleep, when he did sleep, was restless and piecemeal. That wasn't much of a surprise, but if he woke with too much of a jolt it disturbed Pepper, so he muttered something vaguely apologetic and went to sleep - or at least rest - on the sofa in the main room.

After a long enough stretch of tossing and turning, Tony gave in and retrieved his cellphone from the bedroom. He stood in front of the huge windows, looking out at the landing pad on top of Avengers Tower and the city beyond that.

awake? he typed, and hit send.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there, staring out at the city. His phone didn't buzz and he was weirdly disappointed by that.

Well, it probably meant that at least *one* of them was getting some sleep.

#

Guardian Devil

Chapter Summary

Tony tells Pepper about the kiss, Natasha has news from SHIELD, and more of Loki and Tony sitting in a room talking.

Chapter Notes

I wasn't meant to post this until tomorrow, but I couldn't resist and I don't think anyone's going to complain. Enjoy!

Bruce's counteragent hurt almost as much going in as Extremis had. Tony hummed through clenched teeth, forcing himself to sit there and endure while it went through his body and hunted down the unstable cells.

He sat through Steve's lecture on recklessness, too. It wasn't, admittedly, as painful as Extremis. Tony listened and nodded in all the right places and pulled his best contrite face until Steve ran out of steam and he could escape to his workshop. There, at least, he had his bots, who didn't know how to pity him and wouldn't even if they did.

He made a new power core for the repulsor watch and carefully replaced the used one. The watch went back on his wrist, ready for another threat.

Tony closed his eyes. Breathe in, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four.

The next task was programming nanites for a super-portable, self-healing armor. That kept him nicely occupied until sometime in the afternoon when he heard a footstep behind him. He didn't even think before whirling around, repulsor at the ready.

Loki raised an eyebrow sardonically. "Is this a bad time?"

Tony felt something inside him ease, something he didn't want to examine too closely. He retracted the repulsor and lowered his hand. "Nothing personal, Blitzen. I had kind of a big day yesterday."

Loki's eyes dragged over his body. "Is that why you sent me a message in the middle of the night?"

"Something like that," Tony admitted. "Couldn't sleep, figured you might be awake as well."

Loki cocked his head slightly, looking curious. "What happened?"

"Got myself made a prisoner for a couple of hours, until the team came to bust me out," Tony said dismissively. What had he told Bruce? Controlling the narrative. "Nothing I haven't dealt with before."

And Loki, Loki didn't look at him with pity, Loki just nodded in understanding. "Your captors, are they dead now?"

"You know, I am supremely unsurprised that that's your question," Tony said. It shouldn't make him feel fond, but it kind of did. He tried not to think about what that said about him. "No, locked up in a SHIELD facility somewhere; officially not my problem. I really don't need more to deal with at the moment so that's fine by me."

Loki looked thoughtful for a moment, then did a little twist with his hands and produced a small cloth bag. "I invite you to share my table."

"We can share an actual table if you want," Tony pointed out, gesturing at the nearby workbench. "What have you got for me?"

What Loki had for him turned out to be little round cakes of some meat he couldn't identify. They weren't half-bad, once he got over the strangeness of the texture. Kind of crumbly and briny at the same time.

"These are extremely weird," he said, just to make sure Loki knew. "How many you got?"

"Plenty, I assure you," Loki said, smirking at him. "I take it you're in favor?"

Tony gave an exaggerated shrug. "They're definitely edible." There was something relaxing about sitting here with Loki, no expectations. Just weird little meat-cakes.

"That is rather the point of them, yes," Loki said, rolling his eyes.

Tony bit into another one and chewed thoughtfully. The meat had a deep, tangy flavor and there were herbs mixed in with it. It occurred to him that he was almost certainly eating alien meat from another planet. Oh, wow. Hopefully it wasn't going to fuck up his digestive system. He'd done pretty well with food from Loki so far.

"I knew the team were coming," he said abruptly, keeping his eyes on the meat-cake in his hands. "I only had to hold on until they got there. It wasn't like-- the first time. When I had to get myself out."

Loki made a faint noise, prompting him to continue.

"Asgardians heal pretty fast, don't they?" Tony pulled a piece off the little meat-cake, and carefully didn't think about why he was doing this. "They made me heal, yesterday. And kept... cutting me. Do you know what that's like, I..."

"Yes," Loki said flatly, and oh.

Tony flicked his eyes up to Loki's face; saw that Loki was studiously looking down as well, not making eye contact. "When you-- Before the invasion, right?"

"When I was given the Chitauri," Loki agreed quietly. "I was not allowed the escape of death."

Tony let out his breath in a rush, shuddering deeply. He pulled his meat-cake into a few more pieces, not particularly hungry anymore. "There's something worse, isn't there."

Loki stared at the bench for several seconds, then said tightly, "I don't know what the point of discussing this is. It's not as if there's anything you can do."

"Not if you don't tell me, no," Tony said with more irritation than he'd intended. He took a breath to calm himself. "Look. I know you think no one's going to come through for you, but until you give me a chance it's just a self-fulfilling prophecy--"

"There's no point," Loki said again. He picked up a meat-cake then put it back down.

Tony sighed, figuring there was no point pushing it right now. "Okay." He could see Loki's eyes flicker to him in surprise. "Shit happened, you don't want to talk about it. I can relate to that."

Loki eyed him, then said, "You are the first one who has asked."

Wait. Did that mean what he thought it did? Tony leaned forward a little, frowning. "When you say asked..."

"Why. What happened after I fell. Why I came to Midgard. Any of it. They knew it was my *nature*," pronounced with a mixture of sarcasm and resentment, "so why waste the time? Even my-- the woman I thought was my mother--" Loki stopped and looked away.

Tony stared at him for a moment, thinking. "That's... really fucked up."

Loki gave a soft laugh, looking down at the workbench again.

"But - and correct me if I'm wrong - I'm going to guess you didn't exactly go out of your way to volunteer the information either?"

Loki clenched his jaw briefly, not answering that. Which was basically an answer by itself.

Tony rubbed at his temples. "Yeah. That's kind of what I'm talking about. I guess it's easier to play the role than take the risk of reaching out and getting smacked down, huh? Rings a bell, I might know a little something about that myself."

"Stop it," Loki muttered, pushing back from the workbench.

"Really?" Tony leaned back in his chair, looking Loki up and down. "You really want me to stop, or is it just that you don't know how to handle someone actually looking and seeing you?"

"You think very highly of yourself," Loki snapped, glaring at him.

"Uh, yes?" Tony gestured at himself. "Tony Stark, pleased to meet you."

Loki glared a moment longer, then a reluctant smile broke through. "You're ridiculous."

"I'm fabulous," Tony countered with a smirk.

"Ludicrous," Loki muttered, shoulders visibly relaxing.

"Extraordinary. See, I've got a thesaurus, too." Tony picked up a piece of meat and threw it at Loki lightly. Loki raised one eyebrow, and Tony had just long enough to think that maybe starting a food fight with the God of Mischief was a bad idea before he was being pelted with broken up pieces of meat-cake.

It was stupid, and childish, and exactly what he needed. Tony laughed, failing utterly to dodge as he threw pieces back at Loki, until all the food was on the floor. Loki looked amused, and Tony grinned at him.

Loki twisted his hand in the air, and all of the food - and the cloth bag - disappeared. Another handy trick. "I wish I could do that," Tony said, mimicking the hand movement. "All that magic stuff seems really useful."

Loki shot him a look that Tony was starting to recognize; a fierce, yearning sort of expression. Tony shifted uncomfortably, and made up his mind: he had to tell Pepper about the kiss tonight. If he didn't tell her, that implied that he'd done something wrong and he didn't-- couldn't let it mean anything. It was just Loki messing with him and Pepper would understand and everything would be fine.

"If you are well, I will take my leave," Loki said, running his hands down the front of his outfit as if wiping off imaginary meat crumbs. He glanced around the workshop, eyes seeming to linger briefly on the bouquet of flowers. "I have more work to do."

Tony nodded, crushing the tiny little core of disappointment in his gut. "Uh, thanks, I guess, for the weapons and things - I don't really know what the protocol is for rounding up leftover bits of your army..."

Loki paused for a long time, and then gave a little sigh. "Thor had already made up his mind," he said flatly. "His first words upon finding me on Midgard were to tell me how unfit I was to be a king. I had little interest in wasting my time appealing to hearts already hardened against me."

Loki was actually explaining himself? Seeking approval? Tony opened his mouth, and then stopped short. "Uh, when you say Thor's first words, do you mean literally the first time he saw you after you tried to-- after you fell off the Bifrost?"

Loki gave a thin smile. "Well, no. The *first* thing he said was to demand the Tesseract."

Tony hesitated, uncertain. It didn't sound like Thor, who still called Loki 'brother' and tried to talk him down. It sounded like more of Loki's martyr complex and revisionist history... but

what if...? "That doesn't exactly sound like Thor."

Loki paused, motionless for a moment, eerily like a statue. Then he tilted his head and pinned Tony under glittering eyes. "Of course not. They thought me dead, after all. He embraced me and proclaimed how much he had missed me, and then I made war upon Midgard to spite him."

It was the 'to spite him' that gave Loki away; Tony narrowed his eyes and stepped forward. "Loki, what did he say?"

Loki quirked a smile. "Before or after you knocked him off the cliff?"

Tony felt a surge of entirely inappropriate satisfaction at the reminder. One way or another he *had* to ask Thor about this, though. If it was true, then it was... well, it was still stupid and stubborn of Loki not to explain himself, but it did make a bit more sense.

"Until next time, Tony Stark," Loki said, and pulled his usual vanishing act.

--

After dinner, he sat down with Pepper on the sofa. "So, hypothetically. If someone kissed me and I didn't do anything to provoke them and I stopped them right away. That, ah, wouldn't be my fault, right?"

"Hypothetically," Pepper repeated dryly.

"Maybe a bit less hypothetical," Tony admitted. He rubbed his hand against his pants, more nervous than he wanted to be. Not that he wanted to be nervous at all, but... unease sat heavy in his stomach.

"That... certainly sounds like not your fault," Pepper said, frowning a little. "Was this a fan on the street again?"

Tony winced. "Not exactly."

"Then who--" Pepper stared at him, realization dawning on her face. "No. *No.*"

"He just likes messing with my head," Tony said, without much hope that it would help. He could feel the conversation going downhill. "I stopped him as soon as he did it, Pep. I just thought I should tell you and be, you know, open and honest."

Pepper gave a sharp, unhappy laugh. "You have an alien killer who's giving you flowers and kissing you--"

"Well, it sounds bad when you put it like *that*--"

"How am I supposed to put it?" she demanded.

Tony sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. He was starting to wish he'd waited a little longer, just so he wasn't still jumpy from what Killian had done to him. At least waited until

he'd slept properly. "I liked it better when you weren't jealous of guys," he muttered without thinking.

"You think I'm upset because I'm *jealous*?" Pepper said in disbelief. "You're talking about someone who has nearly killed you, *more* than once, and you talk about him like he's a puppy that peed on the bed--"

"Well, that's a mental image that's going to stick with me," Tony said reflexively. He knew it wasn't a good idea, but he couldn't help himself; Pepper upset made him get defensive and that made him want to joke. And he was *trying*, dammit, he was trying to do the right thing and it was just all coming to pieces.

"What about Phil?" Pepper was saying, and for a confused split second Tony wondered what Phil Seymour from the SI Board had to do with this, then he realized she meant Phil Coulson.

Right. Tony bit back his immediate retort, because-- Pepper. Coulson had saved Pepper's life, and that had higher priority than a little bit of illegal detention. It wasn't even, that wasn't what had happened, it was just really shady babysitting, a few threats between friends, Tony wasn't so *sensitive* that he couldn't stand being (*held captive*) told not to leave his house.

"What?" Pepper said, and damn, she really knew him too well. "What's that look for?"

"Nothing," Tony said. "You're right, he killed Phil, we liked Phil, Agent Sarcasm had a lot going for him--"

"Are you really trying to hide something right now?"

"I'm not hiding anything!" Tony threw his hands up in disbelief. "What do you want from me? So I have a couple of mixed feelings about one of SHIELD's flying monkeys, he locked me up in Malibu and threatened me with a taser, that doesn't mean I think he should have died. He *saved* you, Pepper. That will always be more important--"

"That, that is exactly the problem!" Pepper interrupted, stabbing a finger at the air between them. "You do this, you bury any bad thing that happens to you, you put everyone else ahead of whatever danger to yourself--"

"Wait, now I don't have *enough* ego?"

"It's not about ego, I don't want to sit here and watch you get yourself killed!"

"I'm not going to let him kill me! I mean, sure, he takes 'treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen' to a whole new level, but--"

"Are you even *listening* to yourself?!"

"Well, you're clearly not listening to me, so I don't see why *I* should."

"Oh, I'm listening," Pepper snapped. "I'm just waiting for you to say something sensible."

Tony folded his arms, tired and annoyed. "I wouldn't have told you if I'd known you were going to react like this."

"That's not making it any better," Pepper warned him.

Tony slouched against the back of the sofa, feeling utterly drained. "Just - what do you want to hear, Pep?"

"I'd like to hear that you don't have a super-powered stalker," she shot back, a flush of anger in her cheeks.

"He's not stalking me, come on--"

"No, because stalking's unwanted, isn't it? You like--" Pepper stopped short, staring at his expression. "You do. You *like* him? Tony, are you *insane*?"

Tony... really couldn't argue with that. He did like Loki, much more than was safe or sensible or *moral*. Loki was adrenaline and danger and quick wit and a pattern of emotional wounds that were all too familiar to Tony. Loki was someone who didn't have all the same *expectations* that normal people had, expectations that chafed. Loki was half-wild and deadly and compelling in ways Tony still couldn't explain.

"I need..." Pepper pinched the bridge of her nose briefly, then shook her head with a look of hurt and bewilderment. "I don't... I need a couple of days. I think it's a good idea if I just, if I stay at a hotel for a couple of days, just to clear my head."

"A couple of days," Tony repeated, heart sinking. He'd screwed this up. He'd screwed this up *badly*.

"I'll just..." Pepper shook her head again. She stood up, not looking at him. "I'm going to pack a bag."

Tony watched her head into the bedroom, then groaned in frustration. "Well, that went fucking fantastic."

--

The following morning he finished the nano armor, building a casing for the nanites which fit over his arc reactor. Then it was the firing range for hungover weapons testing and competing for the fanciest trick shots with Clint. Natasha found them there early in the afternoon, wearing her black SHIELD uniform.

"Anything exciting happening?" Clint asked.

"Some interesting rumors from underground circles," Natasha said, coming to join them. "Loki's been making friends and asking questions."

"Well, that makes sense," Clint said. He nodded at Tony. "If he's rounding up Chitauri tech, like you said."

"I still can't believe he's really doing it," Tony admitted. "I just feel like he's gotta be getting something out of it, you know?"

"Yeah." Clint grimaced.

"There's another thing," Natasha said, turning a little so she faced Tony directly. She arched an eyebrow. "Liquid nitrogen?"

"Neon gas," Tony answered flippantly. "Solid beryllium. Do I want to know?"

"That's what I thought." She gave him an almost apologetic look. "Director Fury wanted me to check."

"Check what?" Tony asked uneasily. Spy stuff was never good news, especially when it involved Fury.

"Aldrich Killian was found dead in his cell." Natasha paused for a beat. "Frozen. Whoever did it managed to bypass the security system."

"Frozen," Clint repeated. "Must have been a hell of a snowstorm to overpower that regeneration bullshit."

"There was a *lot* of ice," Natasha said dryly.

Tony scratched at the back of his head as a slow-growing suspicion nagged at him. Someone who they knew could mess with security systems. Someone with-- well. All kinds of powers.

"You've got an idea," Natasha said, eyes on him.

"Maybe," Tony said reluctantly. He wasn't sure how SHIELD would react to the idea of Loki out killing on his behalf. "I-- Loki knows that AIM had me prisoner."

"Dude, what the fuck," Clint said. Natasha tilted her head, no doubt running through all sorts of possibilities and hypotheticals in her mind.

"Eloquent," Tony told Clint. He thought about explaining about the Chitauri, that Loki might be paying him back for nuking them, and then he thought about what SHIELD would think of Loki doing him *favors* and how quickly they might decide he was getting to be too much of a threat. "It makes sense. He wouldn't want SHIELD figuring out how to stabilize Extremis, it would be a huge advantage in a fight."

Loki might have killed Killian. For him. It should probably bother him. Hadn't they just had the murder talk? No doubt Loki would argue that Killian was a soldier, not a civilian, and Tony couldn't really argue against that. Or maybe he just didn't want to.

Ohh, he was so screwed up.

"Clint," Natasha said, almost gently. "Can you give us a moment?"

Clint looked between them, then nodded. "I could use a snack anyway."

Natasha waited until the elevator doors were closing behind Clint, and then she looked Tony dead in the eyes. "It's funny. Maya Hansen said Extremis wasn't at a point where you could safely use it for your arm, yet."

Well, shit. Tony resisted the urge to squirm, trying to think of a good cover story, and fast. "Yeah, alright, I adapted an earlier version maybe a *little* sooner than I really should have--" He tried to make it sound like he was confessing something. "Technically I didn't breach the terms of the contract, I didn't share it with anyone--"

"Tony," Natasha interrupted, shaking her head. "Loki healed you, didn't he?"

"Warriors don't use healing spells, remember?" Tony didn't know why he was still trying, she clearly didn't believe him, but he stubbornly went on. "It's-- what did you say about the hospital, that he was breaching his own remaining boundaries - that argument probably isn't helping my case. Look--"

"Be careful, Tony," Natasha said quietly. "Healing your arm, killing someone who attacked you? That's painting a dangerous picture. SHIELD already thinks you're a threat."

"I know that," Tony said flatly.

Natasha held his eyes for a moment longer, then smiled in a way that was genuinely indistinguishable from the real thing. "It's great that you were able to adapt Extremis the way you needed, especially given how unstable the full version is. Being able to heal your arm like that is amazing. I'm impressed."

Tony blinked in surprise and some relief. Was she saying what he thought she was saying? "Yeah, well, I probably shouldn't have been experimenting on myself, but life's so dull without a little risk."

"Personally I think we could use a little more dull," Natasha said dryly. She started heading for the door, but tossed one last comment over her shoulder. "I *am* impressed. You've managed a lot with something that's... not exactly your specialty."

Loki. Tony felt his eyebrows rise at the implication there. Natasha Romanoff thought he was doing a good job. Well, that was flattering. He could only hope it would last.

--

The penthouse felt empty without Pepper in it. Something about knowing that she was still in town, just not there, with him. Because he'd screwed up, again.

Tony pulled his cellphone out with a bitter smile, aware that he was probably proving her point. *we haven't had a good drunk talk in a while. u got any of the good stuff?*

An answer didn't come right away. He spun the phone in his hands for a while, then decided he might as well have some scotch. It wasn't as strong as Loki's Asgardian mead, but he did prefer the taste. Anyway, Loki probably had better things to do than get drunk with him again. Like go kill people.

Was that what Loki had been talking about when he'd said he had work to do?

Tony shivered lightly and poured a second glass of scotch. Killian had held a gun on him, had ordered those guys to experiment on him - and worst of all, that damn smile. Obie's smile. He wasn't exactly sorry to hear the guy had met a sticky end.

"You've started without me, I see," came a low, amused voice.

Tony shivered again and lifted his eyes. Loki was clad in casual leathers, mostly black and without the heavy gold ornamentation. It made him look leaner, less intimidating. But still dangerous.

"I wasn't sure you got my message," Tony said after too long a pause. He took a mouthful of scotch, relishing the burn of it across his tongue.

"How could I resist such a *charming* invitation?" Loki drawled. He sounded more mocking than annoyed, but then again if he'd been annoyed he probably wouldn't have shown up at all. "So tell me, what inspired this sudden desire for alcohol to dull your wits? I *do* hope you haven't squabbled with your little team."

"Girlfriend, actually," Tony said before he could think better of it. "Is that really what you want to talk about? We can do better."

"I'm open to suggestions," Loki said, coming closer to the bar.

Tony took another sip, a little longer this time. "Did you kill Aldrich Killian?"

"Yes," Loki said.

Well, that was easy. Tony blinked, slightly thrown by the direct answer. "Why?"

"Are you not going to lecture me about killing mortals?" Loki's lip curled in a sneer. "Another tiresome speech about attacking those who are weak and defenceless?"

"Wasn't planning on it," Tony said easily. He sipped at the whisky and enjoyed the brief startlement on Loki's face. "He wasn't exactly defenceless. Plus, he really pissed me off." Another sip. "So, you didn't kill him to earn points with me. Was it honor? Payback for the Chitauri?"

Loki stepped right up to the bar and leaned over it, in nice and close. "Is that what you'd like?" he murmured, reaching out to slide two fingers along Tony's jaw. "For me to destroy your enemies? Perhaps you'd like to command me to hunt down those who hurt you. You want to see them stopped, after all. You want to see them *burn*."

Tony made himself step back, away from Loki's touch. He had to remember the kind of person he was trying to be, the better kind. "That's not how we do things."

"But you don't have to do a thing." Loki smiled darkly, and suddenly he was there on the same side of the bar as Tony, taking up too much of the narrow space. "You can sit back and

be so *terribly* well-behaved. Meanwhile... those curs would not get away with what they've done."

"You're dangerous," Tony murmured back. He shouldn't be so tempted. He could see the scalpel coming down, again and again. And it was so damn unfair and what was the point of being rich and powerful if he couldn't *do* something about people who dared to use him that way. He shook his head and said weakly, "I don't have a choice."

"But I do." Loki's smile promised terrible things. "All you have to give me is but one word." His eyes flicked down to Tony's mouth then back up, while his hand stroked lightly up the lapel of Tony's jacket. "One word against your enemies... no more than that."

Tony stared at him. He could feel the tension coiled in his body, could feel his blood thrumming, his own heart beating. Every time it did he remembered the shrapnel around it, and wasn't that a hell of a metaphor, because he wanted nothing more than to just say *yes*.

"Just... just the two who gave me Extremis," he said, and tried to pretend his voice wasn't shaking. "No one else."

Loki's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. His hand caressed the side of Tony's throat before he pulled back, drawing a bottle out from nowhere. "I thought we might test your tolerance for Asgardian wine," he said brightly, as if they'd been discussing nothing more sinister than the weather.

"Great idea." Tony drained the rest of the scotch, suddenly feeling the need to be a lot drunker. He pulled out two clean wine glasses and watched while Loki filled them.

Maybe this was why he'd befriended Loki all along. Because he hated playing by the rules. Because he knew what it was like to want to take over and just get shit done. Iron Man was born as a vigilante.

He'd wanted Loki to trust him. He hadn't thought about the kind of person he'd need to be, for Loki to trust.

Loki pushed one of the filled glasses towards him and picked up the other. Tony clinked their glasses together then tossed back a decent mouthful of the wine. It felt like light on his tongue, dizzyingly potent.

"Good heavens, I think that's what inhaling pure drunkenness must feel like," he said, and immediately had some more. Oh yeah, that was *strong*.

Loki appeared on the other side of the bar and settled on one of the bar stools, while Tony took the long way around. He sat down next to Loki and had a smaller, more careful sip of the wine. That was liable to get him very drunk, very quickly.

"You know," he said, aiming for a lighter tone, "Thor thinks I'm a bad influence on you."

Loki gave a short, bitter laugh. "Of course he does."

"I don't know what that's supposed to mean," Tony said honestly. He hoped it wasn't what Loki was aiming for. He didn't want Loki to be creepily obsessed with him just to piss off Thor. He wanted Loki to be creepily obsessed with him for *him*.

He probably shouldn't want Loki to be creepily obsessed with him at all. Whoops. He had the uncomfortable feeling it was way too late for that.

"Thor and I were... close, as children." Loki grimaced and drank some of his own wine. "Ever has he disliked when I paid too much attention to someone else."

"He punches me again and I'm still going to kill him in his sleep," Tony warned, not sure how serious he was. Okay, probably not that serious, but he'd *think* about it. Whereas Loki would go right ahead and-- no, he didn't want to think about that.

Loki only gave another short laugh and muttered, "You might try."

"Rude," Tony said, playing up being indignant. "Where's the faith, Starman? I'm a resourceful bastard when I need to be, trust me on that."

Loki gave him a half-smile, eyes bright and dark hair framing his face. "Oh, I do."

An honest compliment, and Tony never knew what to do with those, especially from Loki. He took another sip of his wine, aware that he should probably slow down if he wanted to still be talking sense in a half hour or so.

Loki, on the other hand, took the opportunity to drain his glass. Tony raised an eyebrow.

"Apparently I have some catching up to do," Loki explained, smile playing over his mouth as he refilled his glass.

"Can't argue with that." Tony swirled the wine around in his glass, trying not to think too hard. He was starting to feel pleasantly light-headed. "It's your turn for a question."

Loki opened his mouth, then hesitated. "Perhaps after some more wine."

"Oh, so an easy one then," Tony quipped. "Okay, I can go again. Um, let's see... what's the weirdest animal you've ever shape-shifted into?"

"Ooh." Loki took a sip, looking amused and thoughtful. "Hmm. I think it would have to be a boar."

Tony stared at him. "Why did you shape-shift into a boar?"

"To see if I could, of course." Loki grinned. "And perhaps to play a small trick on Thor."

Tony snorted, and then laughed as something occurred to him. "Well, at least you didn't say a mare."

"That story," Loki muttered, rolling his eyes. "No, *Glowheart*, I did not take the form of a mare and give birth to my father's best horse."

Tony decided for the sake of his continued existence not to point out that Loki had just called Odin his father. "Well, that's encouraging," he said instead. "I don't like to kink-shame, but some things are a little extreme, even by my standards."

Loki drank some more wine and then very deliberately licked the remnants off his upper lip. "You bring up *kink* quite often," he said, voice dipping sinfully low. "Perhaps that should be the subject of my question."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Tony said, keeping his tone flippant. "Really. There are probably more people who know what I'm into than people who don't, by this point." He grinned, remembering something from grad school. "There was this guy I used to know, got off on the feel of saran wrap. He liked to be wrapped, basically cocooned from the neck down, and then rubbed--" He looked at Loki's raised eyebrow. "The point is, no matter what you're into, there's always someone into something weirder."

"Someone you used to know," Loki repeated, smirking at him, then leaned back slightly and wow, yeah, the way Loki's gaze slid over him was fucking indecent. Tony wasn't sure whether he wanted to climb on him or stand in front of the mirror practicing until he'd perfected that look himself. "I *see*."

"I will find more meat to throw at your head," Tony told him, rolling his eyes. "It wasn't me."

"Of course." Loki sipped at his wine, the picture of innocence. "So what *are* you... into?"

"Oh, no." Tony shook his head and pointed a finger at Loki. "I just had a fight with my girlfriend, I am not going there with you."

Loki topped up both their glasses, then ran a finger around the rim of his. "Is this where I'm supposed to ask what the fight was about?" he drawled, sounding bored.

There was something reassuring about Loki not taking too much of an interest in Pepper. Tony shook his head anyway, and mimicked Loki's words from before. "Perhaps after some more wine."

Loki made an acknowledging sound and dipped his finger in his wine, stirring it briefly. Tony knew what was coming but it was still horribly distracting: Loki drawing the finger into his mouth, sucking the alcohol off it.

"You're a tease, is what you are," Tony said, and petulantly drank some of his own wine.

Loki tapped his fingers on the countertop. "Tell me," he started, then hesitated again.

Tony frowned. "What?"

Loki picked up his glass of wine and took a long drink. He put it back on the bar and didn't quite meet Tony's eyes. "Tell me more about your Midgardian illnesses of the mind."

Oh. Well, that was... a more serious topic, yeah. Tony let out a slow breath, aware that he needed to tread carefully. "I'm not an expert," he said slowly, "but I can do my best. There's things like depression, when you basically can't enjoy life. And anxiety, pretty self-

explanatory, that one. Post-traumatic stress, that's a, uh, personal favorite." He winced a little. "Happens to some people when they get captured and tortured, among other things. There's a bunch of fun symptoms: hypervigilance, self-destructive behavior, intrusive thoughts, insomnia, flashbacks..."

"And these just... happen. Without curses," Loki said, frowning slightly.

Tony had another sip, watching Loki closely. "That's right."

Something in Loki's expression hardened. "It's ridiculous for a race to have such weaknesses. No wonder you mortals are so chaotic."

"Easy there, Ming the Merciless." Tony tugged at the neck of his shirt, starting to feel a little warm. "Anyway, you're supposed to like chaos."

"A poor choice of words," Loki sneered, standing up to turn partly away. "Your people are a shambles. At constant war with one another, squabbling over resources and petty feints for power--"

"You can just say you want to change the subject," Tony said, supremely unimpressed with the posturing.

Loki shot him the sort of glare that usually meant the guy was feeling touchy over being called out. Without breaking eye contact, Tony took a swig of wine. He hoped Loki appreciated the dramatic flair.

Loki's jaw worked a couple of times. Sullenly, he said, "Very well," and sat back down.

Tony let out a breath, releasing the tension he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Shit, the sonic paralyzer was down in the workshop. He did have his repulsor watch, though, and the nanite suit if things got really desperate.

Loki picked up his wine glass and stared at it for a moment. "There are spells which allow one to call forth the worst memories of one's opponent. Curses which leave the victim frightened and perceiving nothing but threats and danger."

"Well, that sounds fucking brutal," Tony said lightly. He tried to imagine doing that to someone on purpose, and didn't like it. There was fighting and then there was just cruel.

"Yes. But curses can be broken," Loki said, and drained his glass.

And the Asgardian healers, magicians, whatever - they hadn't found any curse to mend, Loki had said. Tony wondered if it would be in poor taste to buy Loki a bunch of self-help books.

As Loki poured more wine into his glass, Tony had some of his own. "Soon I'll be the one who has catching up to do," he joked awkwardly.

"Entertaining as it might be to watch you drink yourself into oblivion, you probably shouldn't try to keep pace with me," Loki said dryly.

True enough. Tony didn't feel the need to rush, anyway. He felt pretty good at the moment, all warm and fuzzy. "So should I ask about the second-weirdest animal you've ever turned into?"

Loki snorted lightly, good mood apparently restored. "I could spend a great deal of the night listing various beasts and shapes, or you could simply accept that I can take whatever form interests me."

"Really?" Tony asked, perking up. "Like what?"

A moment later he was staring at his own face, as 'he' placidly sipped wine. It looked just slightly off compared to his reflection in the mirror. It was eerie as fuck.

"That's amazing," Tony breathed, leaning in to study 'his' face. Everything was there, from faint lines around his eyes to the few silver hairs. "The level of detail... that's incredible."

Loki gave a pure Tony Stark smile and raised his glass in a toast. "I'm fabulous," he mimicked, and it even *sounded* like Tony, that was fantastic. Then Loki dipped his head and looked up from under his - Tony's - eyelashes. "It does make for an interesting time in bed," he added, with a slow, sly smirk.

"You are really not subtle," Tony declared, pulling back again. "And you weren't very subtle to begin with. I bet it does. Can you do anyone?"

For a moment Steve sat in front of him, then Natasha, then Thor. Loki shifted back to himself with a slight bow, the consummate performer.

"I," Tony announced dramatically, "am in awe. You've awed me, good job." He was also going to try not to read too much into Loki's choices of who to imitate. God, they were so lucky Loki never pulled that shit in fights, that would be a nightmare to deal with. To think it was just weird Asgardian taboos saving them.

"Just tricks," Loki said, but he looked openly delighted by Tony's reaction. "One pretty little lie can lead to so much entertainment."

"You must be such a menace in a prank war," Tony said with a laugh. "I'd hate to be up against you."

"*Would* you?" Loki asked, practically dripping with innuendo. "I'm afraid I cannot say the same."

Tony laughed again, and repeated, "Not. Subtle."

Loki smirked and had another sip of wine. "What happened with the tricks between you and your teammates?"

Tony grimaced, feeling his good mood drain away a little. "It kind of got abandoned after... you know..." He gestured vaguely at his shoulder.

Loki stilled awkwardly. "...Ah."

Tony bit his lip, staring into his wine. He thought about asking if Loki regretted it, but he already knew the answer. Loki wouldn't have bothered to heal him otherwise. But that didn't just wipe the whole nightmare away.

He didn't want to talk about that again, go round and round in circles. It would just make Loki defensive and vicious, and that was the exact opposite of what Tony wanted. He looked back up at Loki and said with a lightness he didn't really feel, "You just turned into Natasha. You can be a woman, so have you ever had sex as a woman?"

"Naturally," Loki said, as if it should be obvious. Well, Tony had to admit that he'd definitely try it out if he could.

"Wait." He sat up straight, staring at Loki. "Is that-- You asked me what my preference was. Guys or girls or both. You meant, literally, *both*."

"Now why would I do that," Loki said, grinning at him.

Tony let out a low whistle. "Damn, Handlebars. You sure you're not the God of Sex?"

Loki's expression froze, and Tony remembered Thor's reaction at the idea of an Asgardian trading in their super-special domain. Right. Things one does not say. "As well," he added quickly. "As well as lies and mischief, not instead."

Loki inclined his head, apparently accepting that. "I'll take that as a compliment," he said, but he didn't turn it into a stupid flirtation and he looked a lot less happy.

"Well, now I feel bad," Tony muttered irritably. He picked up his glass and took a long drink, just for something to do.

Why did he feel bad? It wasn't worse than the fucking stabbing, for crying out loud. Tony let out a breath, annoyed with himself and annoyed with Loki. Well, at least this was accomplishing his goal of avoiding thinking about Pepper. Probably a little too well, if he was honest.

Tony slid off his stool and only stumbled a little. He patted Loki on the shoulder on his way past. "Top me up, I gotta take a leak."

In the bathroom he caught sight of his reflection; skin flushed with drink. He should probably try to take it easier on the wine. So far he was still talking in coherent sentences, he was pretty sure, so that was something.

When he was finished, he wandered back out to the bar area and climbed onto the stool next to Loki again. "I think it was your turn to ask a question," he offered.

"Hmm." Loki leaned one leather-clad forearm along the bar, wine glass in his other hand. "When was the first time you saw death?"

"Parents, when I was a teenager," Tony said. He was a little surprised at how steady his voice was. "But the first time I fired a gun I was something like six. Dad helped me, obviously."

"I was under the impression Midgardians didn't take up weapons practice until they were grown," Loki said curiously.

"We don't, usually." Tony shrugged. "Weapons is - was - the family business."

"I'm aware." Loki frowned slightly and drank some wine, fingers curled lightly around the stem of the glass.

"My turn," Tony declared, watching him. "What're you thinking?"

Loki's eyes flicked towards him, then back to the wine. "I was just wondering if that lay behind your interest in me. That I am a weapon."

"You're drunk." Tony wiped his hand across his mouth. "You're not a weapon, Loki. You're a person. A deeply screwed up person, but a person. And I already told you why."

"I'm not drunk," Loki said sulkily, and had another mouthful of wine, as if that proved anything.

Tony wasn't so sure of that, but it wasn't worth arguing. Especially when his own glass had been obligingly topped up and the wine tasted so good. "Let's move this to the sofa. More comfortable."

Loki stood up and god, that bastard was tall. Tony followed him to the sofa, flopping down beside Loki with a sigh of relaxation. Yeah, that was better.

The conversation was kind of fuzzy for a while, but he remembered asking Loki what Asgard looked like - mostly because Loki gestured and the 3D replica of an island city appeared on the penthouse floor. It was all golden turrets in a way that reminded Tony weirdly of a pipe organ, surrounded by sparkling water and with a shimmering bridge leading to what was apparently a dome in the middle of nowhere.

"This is Asgard?" Tony asked, sliding off the sofa and onto his knees - ow, slate - to examine it more closely. "...It's smaller than I expected."

"Well, if I made it to scale it would hardly fit in your tower, now, would it?" Loki teased.

"You know what I mean." Tony cocked his head, studying the illusion. It was like one of his holograms - and that gave him an idea. "It's missing something. Jarvis, project the Mark XV, one twentieth size, approximately two feet above the floor. Randomize flight pattern."

A little Iron Man hologram appeared, looping and swooping through the city's golden spires. Tony grinned in satisfaction and looked up at Loki on the sofa.

Loki was watching him with a disturbingly soft smile. "True enough. Asgard is sorely lacking one of those."

Tony flushed despite himself. He didn't know what to do with a Loki being *nice*. He was a lot more comfortable with defensive walls of sarcasm, he understood those.

"You can't just say stuff like that," he muttered, bringing his wine glass to his mouth.

"My mistake." Loki's smile widened into something with a lot more teeth. "Should I have said how lovely it is to see you in your proper place... on your knees before me?"

Tony just about dropped his glass. "*No!* I don't even know if you meant that in an evil way or a sexy way but *no*. My god, you're a menace."

Loki was laughing at him, because that was the sort of bastard Loki was. Tony got back up on the sofa, though he left a little more space between them this time. His head was definitely swimming. Maybe stop the wine now.

"You look good when you're laughing." Tony rested his glass against his thigh, and leaned his head against the back of the sofa. "Suits you..."

"Oh, Glowheart, you *are* drunk," Loki murmured. He reached out and stole - stole! - Tony's glass, and disappeared it into the air. "Quite enough for you, I think."

"Rude," Tony said, although he felt too good to muster up much indignation. "Jarvis, you can ditch that projection now."

Apparently taking that as a signal, Loki made the mini Asgard vanish as well. Tony gave a small sigh of regret, and wriggled around on the sofa until he was sitting sideways, facing Loki. "Do you miss it?"

"...No," Loki said, but he was staring at the floor where the illusion had been.

"Yeah," Tony murmured drowsily. "I don't miss my dad, either."

There was a crystalline snap as Loki's hand tightened on the stem of his wine glass. With a sound of irritation, Loki twisted his hand so that glass disappeared too. Then he stood, and reached out to clasp Tony's arm. "Come along. You could use some sleep."

"You're coming too?" Tony asked, letting Loki haul him to his feet. "You know. Sleep better."

"Yes, you ridiculous Midgardian." Loki led him to the bedroom, and didn't even make a dirty comment when Tony kicked his pants off.

Tony climbed into the bed and scooted over so there was room for Loki too. He didn't want to be on his own tonight. "Jarvis, get the lights."

He could feel the bed dip as Loki got in. He closed his eyes, prepared to sleep, when he heard something in the darkness.

"His name is Thanos."

Tony blinked his eyes back open, feeling an unaccountable chill. "Who-- wait, the other player? Final Boss guy?"

"Yes." The sheets rustled as Loki shifted. "He has... powers beyond your reckoning."

Tony swallowed. "How long do we have?"

"I don't know." Loki's voice was small. "You believe me?"

"I'm not a fucking moron, so yes." Tony stared into the darkness. "When you say powers, what kind of--"

Loki gave a soft hiss, and his hand came to rest on Tony's shoulder. "Enough. Go to sleep."

"You can't just drop something like that and then tell me--"

"I said *enough*," Loki snapped, and there was enough of a tremble in his voice that Tony shut up.

Thanos. Someone powerful enough to apparently scare the shit out of Loki, who was no slouch in the power department himself. Well, that was terrifying.

They were going to need a lot more wine.

#

En Passant

Chapter Summary

Tony figures out who the pawns are, and comes up with a fun new idea for how to defend Earth.

Chapter Notes

[EmuSam](#) did some art of Loki's secret [turducken shrine](#)! It's got a bunch of the artifacts he's been collecting as well.

The lobby of Stark Tower was checkerboard tiles, and Tony was a bishop surrounded by other chess pieces; black pieces with the other side white.

"Queen's bishop to F5," said someone behind him, and Tony moved to his new square. It brought him close to Loki, a white pawn, and that didn't make sense.

"This isn't right," Tony said. "You're not a pawn anymore, you reached the end of the board." He turned and looked behind himself, knowing--

Loki, there, controlling the black pieces: Asgard the King, Tony and Thor and Earth and Rhodey and Mrs Mitchell from fifth grade. Loki was sprawled in a throne, one leg draped over an ornate armrest. Tony looked back in front of himself where the pawn Loki was at his diagonal, wielding a sword that was smile-sharp.

The other player was shrouded in shadow, but his pawn stepped forward and cut off Tony's head in one smooth motion.

Tony woke up. It was still dark. There was a crazy Asgardian sleeping next to him. At some point he'd kicked the blankets off himself, and he needed to pee.

Loki wouldn't be a pawn, anyway. Loki would be a knight. Move unpredictably across the board.

Tony shook his head - ooh, that didn't feel good - and pushed himself out of bed. Bathroom first. Nonsensical dream bullshit later.

--

The next day Tony went to the team level, where he found Thor, Clint and Steve watching a movie and debating vigorously. They broke off as soon as they saw him; Steve got a concerned look on his face and said, "Tony, how are you feeling?"

Tony decided not to dignify that with an answer. He planted himself in front of the television and said, "Hey, Thor, does the name 'Thanos' mean anything to you?"

Thor looked at him with a curious frown. "Yes, an old tale. Thanos the Mad Titan travels the galaxy, slaughtering half the inhabitants of every world he finds. How did you come across his name?"

Half the inhabitants? Well, shit. "It was something Loki said back when I was talking to him," Tony said, truthfully enough. Clint rolled his eyes, but Thor seemed to accept it. "I just remembered it while I was in my 'shop."

Steve hit pause on the movie. "What did Loki say about him?"

Tony squared his shoulders, looking Steve in the eye. "I'm pretty sure that's where the Chitauri came from."

Thor's frown deepened. "I suspect Loki was just spinning tales, my friend. He did not speak of the Mad Titan at any of his trials--"

"Yeah, but he's also a self-martyring idiot who's allergic to asking for help." Tony regretted that at the suspicious looks Clint and Steve both gave him. He should probably try not to sound too close to Loki. Whatever 'too close' meant anymore.

"That is true," Thor said with a brief, wry smile before turning serious again. "I still would not be too hasty to believe everything my brother says. Thanos is a tale--"

Tony paced in front of the television restlessly. "He had to get them from *somewhere*, he didn't just persuade a whole army to go conquering with him."

"But you think he persuaded this Thanos fella?" Steve said.

"Other way around," Tony said, shaking his head. "You remember his breakdown, that stuff he was saying about dancing to someone's strings. It's pretty obvious he was tortured," and Tony was proud of himself for getting that out in a calm voice, even if it made the others give him that concerned look.

"He was injured when he arrived at the Project PEGASUS facility," Clint confirmed, not looking particularly happy to do so. "And a couple of times he used that scepter to communicate with someone, but that could have been just coordinating with the army."

"But why would he not just tell us?" Thor said in frustration.

Tony stopped pacing. "Uh, self-martyring idiot ringing any bells? It's like you don't know him at all."

"And you do?" Clint retorted.

"That's not what I meant," Tony backtracked, grateful that Natasha wasn't there to get too much information from his slip-ups. His sleep hadn't been great the last few nights and it was making it harder to keep track of his words. "Just, come on. You know how he mouths off if we capture him; it's not a stretch to think he does that on Asgard as well."

"He does kind of come across as his own worst enemy," Steve said, shooting a glance at Thor. "But Tony, he's been pretty clear that he thinks humans are all beneath him. Even if that first attack wasn't entirely his idea, he hasn't exactly changed his behavior since then."

"I'm not saying he's not an asshole," Tony said. "I mean, I've been tortured and you don't see me trying to take over the world. Except in the normal, corporate way... I'm getting off-track. The point is, there might be another threat out there that we need to be ready for. Just because everyone knows that Loki wants to take over Earth--"

Chess pieces. Pawns. *Your proper place... on your knees.* Tony felt cold realization wash through him. "Oh... shit."

Steve sat up straighter. "Tony?"

"He came here the first time on orders, little bit of torture. Only, like you said, Steve, he hasn't exactly changed his tune." Tony smiled through his nausea, wiping clammy hands against his hips. "If you were a big scary space alien with armies to spare, and you wanted to hunt down someone who'd failed you, where would you go? His home planet? Unless, of course, he was more interested in somewhere else. If he made a lot of noise about wanting to rule the same place he failed the first time."

"You think he's using Earth as some kind of cover?" said Steve, at the same time as Thor said doubtfully, "You think he seeks to protect Asgard?"

Tony pointed his index fingers at both of them. "Bingo."

"Son of a bitch," Clint said, something like admiration in his voice. "That's a hell of a long game."

Tony glanced over at him and raised his eyebrows. "Not to an Asgardian." He started pacing again, mind whirring. "Think about it. He's proud. Why Earth? Why keep doing the same thing the people who tortured him *wanted* him to do? He definitely thinks humans are beneath him," or beneath Asgardians at least, and whether Loki classed himself as an Asgardian varied depending on his mood, "so why does he want to rule *us* so badly? Why not someone more worthy of his mighty bullshit? Unless he's throwing us into the line of fire to buy time."

Loki was more than capable of using stealth and trickery to get what he wanted; the cellphone showed that. But every time he attacked Earth, it was messy and public and direct. Tony was still pretty sure there was an element of wanting to prove himself wrapped up in it all - Loki *did* want to rule - but the how and where? Elements of a greater scheme? Yeah, that was disturbingly plausible.

"It's an interesting idea, but you have no proof," Thor said, frowning. "We do not even truly know that Thanos was involved. Just because Loki--"

Tony stood still. "Thor," he said, keeping his voice very calm. "I need you to believe me when I say Loki is *shit-scared* of this guy. I'll admit the Earth thing is a theory, but it's right up that scheming bastard's alley. Which means we have *major* trouble coming."

Thor looked him dead in the eye. "You have spoken to Loki more recently than you pretend, haven't you?"

Fine. Tony lifted his chin and met Thor's gaze. "Yes."

Steve sighed and Clint muttered something. Thor looked incredibly displeased. "I thought I made myself clear--"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going to corrupt him with my filthy Midgardian morals." Tony waved that away, since it seemed like Thor was relatively under control. "We've got bigger issues. We need to know what kind of force this guy Thanos is bringing to the party, and how far away he is."

"The Tesseract is safe in Asgard," Steve objected. "We don't even know he *can* get here without it. It's a whole lot of speculation--"

Tony turned his eyes on Steve. "You really want to take that risk?"

"I suppose you would have me return to Asgard for answers," Thor said, looking resigned.

"It's a start." Tony paused, wondering if it was really the right time to indulge his curiosity. "Just a... random question. While we're talking about the invasion. I don't suppose you happen to remember what the first thing you said to Loki was?"

Thor's brow furrowed. "When I arrived upon your realm? I believe I commanded him to tell me where he had hidden the Tesseract. But the cube is safe now, as Steve said. Why do you ask?"

Tony stared at him for a moment. "Are you serious?"

Thor frowned. "Yes. The cube is in no danger--"

"I don't give a damn about the world's worst Rubik's cube right now," Tony said. It came out a little angrier than he'd intended. "You *thought he was dead*. And the first thing you said to him when you found him alive was 'hey, where's the Tesseract?', am I getting this right?"

"Dude, who cares," Clint said with a scowl. "Their family issues--"

"Their family issues have taken out chunks of this city, Barton," Tony snapped. "And maybe if Loki didn't feel like Thor had already assumed the worst, we might have found out a little sooner about this guy Thanos who wants to *wipe out half of all life*."

"Loki already had other crimes to answer for," Thor growled, narrowing his eyes. "It is not for you to pass judgement on how I speak to my brother."

"Your fucked up family dynamics became our business when you set foot onto our planet," Tony shot back.

Steve sat up straight, frowning at him. "Tony, maybe now's not the time to--"

Tony felt like tearing his hair out. "You know what - fine. I don't have the energy for this shit." He took a breath to calm himself, and then another. "Thanos is coming. Loki made sure of that. And we need to be ready when he gets here."

--

Natasha and Bruce took the news with the sort of equable calmness that Tony envied. Bruce took his glasses off and started polishing them. Natasha clasped her hands on the table and looked thoughtful.

"You remember when I asked you about ISRO?" she asked Tony. "They're working on something. Top secret."

Huh. Tony cocked his head to the side. "You think it's related?"

"They're not the only ones. China's working very hard on something, and both of them are trying to get eyes on the other's programs. It's almost as if someone's playing them against each other."

"You think Loki's going to someone else for space weapons?" Clint asked.

Natasha gave an elegant shrug. "It's a possibility. It fits."

"I mean, I have to applaud his ambition." Tony sat at the table and ran a hand through his hair. "He doesn't aim small, no. He's manipulating entire worlds."

They sat in silence for a few moments, then Bruce spoke up. "You don't think maybe you're being a little paranoid? You were in a highly stressful situation just a couple of days ago, and--"

"I trust Tony's judgement on this," Natasha said evenly. "He's got an insight into Loki that the rest of us don't. Barring Thor."

"I'm going to choose to take that as a compliment," Tony said, a little uneasily. Natasha's warning from the previous day still rang in his ears.

Clint snorted. "Loki's also tried to kill him more than any of us except Thor. That insight's not doing a lot of favors, from where I'm sitting."

Tony shrugged. "He gets a little defensive, I'll give you that."

'A little defensive,' Bruce mouthed incredulously.

"Alright," Steve said, cutting into their banter. "Thor can ask Asgard for whatever information they have on this... Thanos. We'll take this to Fury. SHIELD must have protocols for the possibility of another invasion. Tony--"

"Let me guess," Tony said with a small sigh. "Talk to Loki?"

Steve nodded almost apologetically. "Whatever information he'll give you would be a massive asset."

"Don't worry." Tony gave a grim smile. "I've got a few things to say to him, as well."

"Don't get killed," Clint said, a little too cheerfully. Tony stuck his tongue out.

--

Bruce came with him back to his workshop. Tony wanted to talk him through his idea for a defensive network of satellites in orbit around the planet. If Creepy Alien Menace came the long way round, the network would serve as a first line of defense.

"Huh," Bruce said, making his way through the room. "I didn't really pick you for the flowers type. Are they from Pepper?"

"Loki," Tony said absently, scrolling through his project list on a convenient tablet. "I think they're Asgardian."

There was silence, and he looked up to see that Bruce was staring at him.

Oh, great. "Not you, too," he sighed. "It was a joke, okay? Loki likes messing with my head, don't read too much into it."

"He gave you flowers," Bruce said slowly, "and healed your arm."

Tony wrinkled his nose. "It's not like that."

"For a genius, Tony, you can be pretty stupid."

"He likes to make it weird," Tony insisted, trying not to remember the press of Loki's mouth on his. "The best way to respond is just to take it in stride and not give a reaction. He'll get bored and switch to something else."

"That... does actually sound like Loki," Bruce admitted.

"Thank you." Tony found the schematics he was looking for and threw them up as a holographic projection. "I've already got Pepper freaking out because she thinks I have a crush on Loki, I don't need it from you too."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "*Do* you have a crush on Loki?"

"What? No!" It felt uncomfortable on his tongue. Tony flushed and looked down at the tablet he was holding. "He's insane. And violent. And insane, did I mention that? All the leather

pants in the world aren't worth that level of crazy."

"Oh my god," Bruce said in disbelief. "You *do*."

Tony grimaced to himself. "Well, this is about to get uncomfortable."

"This isn't Beauty and the Beast, Tony," Bruce said, in that steady voice that meant he was anything but calm. "If you kiss him, he's not going to turn into a handsome prince."

Tony couldn't help himself. He mumbled, "Technically he's already a handsome prince, so..."

Bruce didn't take his eyes off him. "Then maybe you'll turn into the Beast."

Tony flinched. A layer of something cold settled in his stomach. He looked at the tablet in his hands, then back up at Bruce. "You know, I think we can do this another time."

"Tony," Bruce started, sounding apologetic.

Tony didn't want to hear it. "Thank you for your time, Doctor Banner. Don't call us, we'll call you."

Bruce looked at him for a moment longer, then sighed and walked away.

--

Tony was frustrated and tired and guilty, and he wanted to vent at someone. There was one obvious thing to do.

im in workshop he sent.

A little far away at the moment, I'm afraid.

A little far away? Tony felt his eyebrows rise. *u on diff planet?* Interstellar texting was still a ridiculously cool concept.

Yes. I'll bring you a souvenir.

make it quick, i want 2 yell at u

It was several minutes before a reply to that came through. *That does not inspire haste.*

Tony started to type a response, then paused and gave his cellphone a cynical look. Natasha had rescued it from AIM for him. Of all people... He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "Jarvis? Scan my phone, would you, and check for any anomalies?"

"There appears to be a small surveillance program running, sir. Shall I erase and reinstall a clean operating system?"

"Yeah, back up the contacts and data, you know what to do." Tony sighed in irritation. SHIELD couldn't help themselves, could they? This day just kept getting better and better.

Would Natasha keep the phone number for herself, or pass it on? If he had to guess, he'd put money on her keeping it quiet... but not a *lot* of money.

Did he have a crush on Loki. It was a ridiculous question. Crushes were something that fumbling, awkward teenagers had, not grown businessmen. Was he attracted to Loki? Well, sure, but he was attracted to a lot of people. There was nothing wrong with that, so long as he didn't act on it.

There were things, particular things, that Tony enjoyed in porn but that he never wanted to try in real life. Until recently, he would have put Loki in that category - hot fantasy, but no more than that. The problem was, he was less and less sure that was really the category that Loki belonged to.

--

Pepper came back with exhaustion in her eyes, still not exactly happy but calmer about it. She was quiet until about halfway through dinner, then she said, "I can't just stop worrying about you."

"I can take care of myself," Tony tried to argue, but Pepper just looked down at his shoulder and raised a tired eyebrow.

She had a point. Tony didn't like to admit it, but Loki was - what was the word Natasha had used? *Volatile*. Sure, there were good moments when Loki looked at him with something like tenderness, but then there were other times when Loki flipped out and didn't know how to do anything except attack without mercy. And the latest thing hadn't even been Loki, just regular human beings.

"I know," Tony made himself say, and sighed. He was tired too. Not all his dreams lately had been as peaceful as the chess dream - and he'd had his head chopped off in that one, so that was saying something. "I'm sorry, Pep."

"I know," Pepper echoed, and smiled sadly.

Tony pushed his food around his plate with his fork. "Have you still got that college talk coming up or did that happen already?"

"That's next Wednesday," Pepper said, and didn't even get annoyed with him for not remembering the date.

Tony made a joke out of it because the tension was getting to him. "I could do an inspirational talk. I have done inspirational talks. Yours can't be too different. Let me guess: 'Men suck. They *will* grab your butt. Make sure you make it your job to make the coffee, so you know which cups to poison.'"

Pepper managed a warmer smile. "You weren't supposed to notice the poison, Mister Stark."

"Educated guess," Tony replied.

They finished dinner in a more comfortable silence, and afterwards settled on the sofa to watch a movie. It was Pepper's turn to pick. While she was flicking through titles, Tony thought about asking if they were going to talk about the Loki thing. But he was a little afraid. It seemed safer to just... let Pepper take her own time.

In the back of his mind, he knew he was only delaying the problem. But delay was the best he could get right now. He'd take it.

--

Thor returned from Asgard in a considerably more sombre mood than when he'd left. He gathered them all in the meeting room and declared, "It seems that Thanos is more than just a tale."

"You don't say," Tony muttered, ignoring the chiding look that Bruce sent him.

"According to my mother's scrying, he does indeed have plans to come to Midgard," Thor said unhappily. "He brings his children, creatures of no small power themselves, and a mighty army."

"Anything about Loki?" Tony asked, trying to pretend he hadn't heard the 'scrying' bit.

Thor looked grim. "Indeed, Loki has placed all the realms in danger by withholding the truth--"

"Oh my *god*," Tony blurted in disbelief. "Are you seriously blaming--"

"*Tony*," hissed Bruce and Steve in unison.

"That's great, that's a great double act. You two should take it on the road." Tony spread his hands wide. "In the meantime, Thor over here is going to blame a torture victim for not acting totally rationally about it. That's just terrific, it really is."

Steve's face softened in that 'oh, Tony's been tortured, everybody tiptoe' way that Tony was really beginning to hate. "Look, now's not the time--"

"Funny how it's never the time." Tony glared back at Steve. "I get it, I do. Loki's dangerous and he's screwed us all over more than once. But you don't think maybe we're looking at part of the reason for that?"

There was a clap of thunder outside. Thor said in a low voice, "Have a care, Man of Iron."

Tony met his eyes defiantly. "Yeah? You first."

Thor clenched his hand into a fist. "You *dare* imply--"

"Boys," Natasha drawled, eyes hard as flint. "Let's keep this friendly."

Thor glowered for a moment longer then pointedly uncurled his fist. "As I was saying. Thanos turns his eye towards Midgard. This realm needs to prepare."

So basically the same thing Tony had already told them. He opened his mouth to say as much, then caught Natasha glaring at him and closed it again. She was downright scary when she wanted to be.

Steve leaned forward. "Do we have any idea what kinds of weapons they have? Numbers? How soon they'll arrive?"

"Nay." Thor finally looked away from Tony. "Scrying is difficult at the best of times, and my mother said that Thanos eludes her sight. She will continue to find out what she can."

Steve nodded crisply. "Keep us updated. Tony, have you got anything?"

Tony shook his head. "Loki's off-planet at the moment. I'll try for more next time he drops by, but I don't know when that will be."

"Alright. It's not a lot to go on, but we'll just have to be patient." Steve paused, eyeing Thor and Tony. "We can't afford to be fighting between ourselves. If you two--"

"Don't worry about it, Cap," Tony interrupted, and smiled with his teeth showing. "I'm feeling a need to spend a lot of quality time in my workshop."

"That wasn't exactly what I meant," Steve said, looking unimpressed.

"And yet, it's happening anyway. Magic!" Tony got up from his chair and headed for the door. As he left the room he could hear Steve addressing Thor; no doubt a solemn talk about how Tony was *sensitive* at the moment and not to take anything personally.

Yeah, Tony was sensitive; sensitive to *bullshit*.

He was getting worse at this, he did recognize that. Showing more and more sympathy when it came to Loki. At this rate, he might as well print off his SHIELD file and scrawl 'compromised' on it in giant crayon letters.

Thor wasn't even wrong; Loki could have saved everyone a whole lot of trouble - including himself - if he'd just been a bit more forthcoming from the start. But Tony knew what it was like to self-sabotage out of paranoia and hurt. Hell, he was practically the king of it. He couldn't blame Loki for having defensive walls, not when his own were so strong.

The workshop. The workshop was where he needed to be, thinking of ways to defend Earth against whatever it was that was coming. They had to be ready.

--

It was dark. Someone was shaking his arm. "Tony. Tony, wake up!"

Tony jolted awake and flexed his wrist to activate the repulsor watch. Nothing happened. He blinked at his bare wrist blearily. "What time is 't?"

"The time is two twenty-six a.m., sir," Jarvis said.

Tony scowled, tired and head aching. It hadn't been that long since he'd gone to bed in the first place. "Seriously? What is so important at half past two in the morning?"

"Your *project* is on the deck," Pepper hissed.

"My--" Tony blinked, pushing the blankets down to sit up in bed. "The nanite suit? No, look, the casing's right here--"

"*Loki*," Pepper said urgently.

Project. Right. Tony rubbed his eyes and then got up with a groan. He pulled on a long-sleeved tee and some less threadbare pants, and went to have a look out the window.

Loki was, indeed, on the deck-cum-helipad. He was lying on his back, hands under his head, staring up at the sky. His skin looked nearly white in the dark, just a face surrounded by black clothes and hair.

"Is *not* appropriate visiting hours," Tony muttered, grabbing the sonic paralyzer from his bedside drawers.

Pepper shot him an incredulous look. "You're not going *out* there?!"

"Well, what did you wake me up for, then?"

Pepper opened her mouth and closed it again, obviously at a loss. Tony sympathized a little; it must have scared the crap out of her to have seen Loki outside in the middle of the night. But the quickest way of solving the problem was to go out and talk to the guy, and that was what he intended to do.

Tony went outside and along the pathway to the helipad. "Nice night for stargazing?" he asked.

"Not really," Loki said with a slight shrug. "Your city has too much light, it reflects from all around."

Tony walked up from Loki's feet to beside his armpits. "Looking for Asgard?" he guessed.

"Not in the least." Loki gave a crooked smile. "I'm not looking at the stars, Glowheart, but rather... at what lies between them."

Tony looked up reflexively, but couldn't see much of anything. Loki was right about the city being too bright. "Uh. Nothing?"

"Exactly." Loki didn't take his eyes from the sky. "Isn't it peaceful?"

Tony looked up again at the massive stretch of darkness. Loki had fallen, tried to kill himself and fallen through the stars - what could that have been like? Was that what Loki was remembering now? Tony had floated out in those stars himself, an incredible expanse of *nothing*, the utter absence of life. He'd known he was going to die there, thousands of parsecs

from anything familiar or warm. Utterly alone. The emptiness so vast around him. He was floating, alone and so small, and the blooming explosion of the nuke--

"...ony. Tony. Can you hear me?"

Hands on his face, a voice. Tony blinked. Ground under his feet, the planet around him, gravity cradling him.

"I'm sorry," Loki said, standing in front of him now. "I didn't realize you would... react in such a way."

"Me neither," Tony said, a little shakily. He nudged Loki's hands off his face, kind of sorry to do it. The wind chill up here wasn't insignificant. "It happens sometimes. Little parting gift from your invasion."

Loki looked stricken, Tony observed with some satisfaction. It would do the guy good to remember that his bullshit had consequences.

All the same, he wasn't in the mood for a deep heart-to-heart about it. "How the hell do you find that *peaceful*?" he asked instead. "Doesn't it remind you of falling?"

Loki glanced upwards again. "Falling *was* peaceful," he murmured. "It was landing that led to more unpleasant things."

"Well, that's depressing." Tony frowned, remembering that he was still mad at Loki, even if he kind of admired the guy's devious resourcefulness. "Hey. I still need to yell at you."

Loki drew himself up, six foot something of shadowed leather, and gave a thin, mocking smile. "Oh, *do* tell me, what is my latest trespass?"

Defensive. Tony kicked him in the leg, and then made a noise of pain. "My *toes*."

Loki didn't look at all sympathetic. "Your idiocy aside, what crime would you lay at my door?"

"You're using Earth as bait," Tony said, wriggling his bruised toes. He was still uncomfortably aware of the expanse of sky above his head. "Aren't you?"

"Bait?" Loki gave him a pitying look. "Why would anyone want this trifling realm?"

"*You* do," Tony pointed out. "So someone with, say, a grudge against you for losing their shiny mind-control joystick..."

Loki's controlled expression slipped a little, but was quickly covered up by defensiveness and anger. "Whatever attention this miserable realm may have garnered can hardly be blamed on me," he said coldly. "You deployed a mighty weapon in defense of Midgard and Th-- there are those who will be greatly intrigued by such potential for destruction."

It all came back to the nuke. Tony swallowed, despite knowing that he was showing a weakness Loki wouldn't hesitate to target. "Yeah, well, whose fault is that?"

"Whose indeed?" Loki's voice was poison-soft. "You are the one who said your family's trade was weapons. Death follows in your very footsteps, Warsmith."

Tony folded his arms, comforted by the solidity of the sonic paralyzer in his right hand. It was too damn cold out here. His feet were freezing. "And of the two of us, which one goes on killing sprees when he's having a bad day?"

Loki's eyes narrowed. "If you'd prefer, I can do so on good days as well."

"Don't start that shit, tough guy." It didn't escape Tony's notice that he'd been nicely sidetracked. "You. Earth. Bait. I haven't forgotten."

Loki held still for a moment, then turned away with a scornful huff. "Why would I bother to have Midgard draw attention? Asgard is no longer my home. I do not care what danger might threaten it. Perhaps they will finally see the folly in their arrogance."

"I didn't say anything about Asgard," Tony pointed out.

Loki whirled back furiously. "I don't care what happens to them!"

Tony took a moment to look at him; the wind catching at his hair, the telling sheen over his eyes. "Kind of don't really believe you, big guy."

Loki's jaw clenched. "Why bother to speak to me at all, if you are so sure that everything out of my mouth is a lie."

"Not everything," Tony corrected. He swapped the sonic paralyzer to his left hand and slowly reached out with his right. When Loki didn't pull back, he put his hand on the guy's upper arm and gently squeezed. "Hey. Hey. I know. You're pissed as hell at them, all wound up inside... but they're still family. Even when you wish they weren't. Maybe especially then."

"They're not my family," Loki insisted, a crack in his voice.

"You know what, sure." Tony let go and stepped back, giving Loki a little space. "That's your call. But you still painted a big red bullseye on little ol' planet Earth."

Loki bristled, and Tony rubbed his thumb over the sonic paralyzer. Loki demanded, "What would you have me say?"

Tony ran his free hand over his face. "Honestly? I don't know. It's a smart move. But it puts a lot of people in danger, including people I care about." At that, Loki's jaw clenched again, and it wasn't hard to guess what he was thinking. "Yes, you count as people I care about, you giant pain in my ass. God help me."

That sounded just about right, actually. Tony stood a little straighter and jabbed a finger at Loki's chest. "I do know. You, you made this, you are going to help fix it."

"I'm *what*," Loki said, eyebrows climbing sky-high.

"You're going to help me with my satellite defense network," Tony insisted. "That's what you want, right? Mashing up your magic and my tech? You're going to help us prepare, and in return we maybe stand a chance at stopping Space Invader when he comes."

Loki gave a bitter laugh. "You stand no chance. He is death."

"Then why are you wasting your time trying to provoke us into getting ready?" Tony shot back.

Loki looked down for a moment, actually looking thoughtful. Probably this was what he'd wanted from the beginning. Tony wasn't naïve enough to think this situation didn't play right into Loki's hands. But, maybe they had a common goal here. At the least, a common enemy.

"I will consider your proposal," Loki finally said.

"That's fine," Tony said. He had a few extra conditions he was going to add before they came to any kind of final agreement. He wasn't going to just let Loki mess around with his tech without some safeguards in place, and he had the feeling Loki was going to absolutely hate what he had in mind.

Right now, though, it was the middle of the night and he was freezing his ass off. "I'm going back to bed. I'll contact you in the daytime sometime and we can talk about it properly."

Loki inclined his head, every inch the gracious prince.

Tony reached out and patted Loki's arm. "And get off the roof, you're creeping Pepper out."

He waited until Loki turned and disappeared, and then he went back inside where Pepper was waiting. She was watching him with a weird look on her face.

Tony decided distraction was the better part of valor. "He ruined my grudge," he said, tossing the sonic paralyzer back onto the bedside drawers. "I was working up a really good grudge, and he ruined it."

"You're very... comfortable around him," Pepper said.

"Um, did you miss the part where I took a weapon out there?" Tony gestured at the sonic device. "I know he gets all up in my space, but how many times have you told me I have no concept of personal space? I get closer than that to Bruce."

Pepper's lips quirked a little at that. "Bruce... Thor, Steve... members of the Board... delivery drivers..."

Tony grinned back. "Exactly."

"Hmm." Pepper's small smile faded but she didn't say anything else, just got back into bed.

That seemed like an excellent idea, so Tony did the same.

#

Desperate Measures

Chapter Summary

Not everyone loves Tony's brilliant plan. Okay, they sort of hate it. And he's a little sleep-deprived but honest, he's got everything under control.

"You're out of your mind," Bruce said bluntly.

"How can you tell?" Clint muttered.

Steve chimed in, "Tony, I don't know if you've thought this through..."

Thor was frowning. "It does not seem wise to allow Loki such an opportunity."

Natasha was, predictably, silent, just watching the discussion unfold.

"Okay," Tony said, holding up his hands placatingly, "I'll admit it sounds a little... risky."

Clint rolled his eyes at that. "Didn't we agree you weren't going to build him space weapons?"

"They're not space weapons," Tony insisted. "It's a defensive grid--"

"Of weapons." Steve put his hands flat on the table. "Tony, with that kind of power in Loki's hands--"

"Which is why everything will be done under supervision," Tony cut in smoothly, nodding at Thor. "By someone who knows about all this 'magic' and 'intent' garbage and can make sure we build in appropriate safeguards."

"It's still unwise," Thor said, but he looked a bit more thoughtful.

"Look at it this way," Tony suggested. "Think about how unwise it would be if I did it anyway, *without* supervision, and then think about how much safer it would be if you were in there to keep an eye on things."

Thor grimaced. Natasha arched an eyebrow. "You think Loki's going to agree to that?"

"...Eventually," Tony admitted. "There'll be some shouting first. Hopefully no stabbing." He was joking about that last part. Mostly.

"That is a great deal of hope," Thor muttered. Tony's mouth twitched in amusement.

"Tony," Steve chided. He was getting exasperated early this meeting; it usually took longer to get under his skin. "It's not a good idea."

Tony fixed his eyes on Steve's, putting on his best soulful-but-serious expression. "It's the best one we've got."

Bruce shook his head. "Letting Loki influence something like that... it's asking for trouble."

"You want to talk trouble?" Tony looked around the table, making sure he had everyone's attention. "A hostile alien army came charging through a hole in space, and we - we got lucky. Now there is something out there with even more power and it's coming for us. Power beyond reckoning. And what we need? Is a first line of defense. A suit of armor around the world. Loki can help us make that happen."

He looked back at Steve. "Take it to Fury. You know he dreams about that kind of power at night, and I do mean that in the dirtiest possible way."

Steve gave a rueful smile. "Are you actually going to wait for Fury's answer?"

"Cap." Tony put a hand over his heart. "You're getting to know me so well, I'm touched."

"What about Asgard?" Natasha asked, glancing between Tony and Thor. "If we have Loki in our custody without returning him to Asgard, how are they going to react to that?"

"Maybe don't call it custody if we don't want me to get stabbed," Tony suggested.

"That's a big 'if'," Steve said under his breath.

"If we capture Loki, I am bound to return him to Asgard," Thor said, before Tony had the chance to retort. "However, experience suggests that just because Loki is present in this Tower, does not mean we will capture him. I would not want to endanger Tony by striking up battle while he was unarmored and vulnerable."

"Sneaky," Tony said, pointing at Thor. "Technicalities. I like it."

"I did grow up with Loki," Thor said mildly.

Bruce had a look of despair on his face. "Does anyone else have a really bad feeling about this?"

"Oh ye of little faith," Tony said, shaking his head. "This is going to be beautiful. You'll see."

--

There was, of course, shouting.

"Absolutely not!" Loki snarled, practically vibrating with fury. "I want nothing to do with that witless oaf."

"Too bad," Tony said, faking a calmness he didn't feel. The sonic paralyzer was tucked in his pocket and the case of nanites was attached to his arc reactor. "This one's a dealbreaker, take it or leave it."

"Then I leave it," Loki snapped. "Good luck facing the Mad Titan's armies without my power--"

"And when he's finished with us, and comes for you--" Tony saw the flash of fear in Loki's eyes, and moved his hand to his pocket. "You think you'll be allowed death this time?"

Loki jerked forward. Tony wrapped his hand around the sonic paralyzer, heart pounding. Loki didn't pull a weapon, though; just glared at him with a level of hatred that was like a flashback to old times.

Tony waited, staring at Loki with a challenge in his eyes. He didn't actually have a plan for what to do if Loki turned him down. But without Thor, the chance was too great that Loki would slip something past him again. Even with Thor, Tony suspected there was still a reasonable chance, but there wasn't much he could do about that.

The question was whether Loki's pride outweighed his survival instincts. Tony figured it was about fifty/fifty.

"Thor will be of no use to you," Loki tried, even managing to pull out a persuasive smile. "He knows little of the mystic arts or the workings of craftsmen--"

"He knows more than I do," Tony said steadily. "I mean, unless you've got a better suggestion. Someone from Asgard you'd like to nominate? No?"

Loki scowled at him.

"The way I see it," Tony continued, "is you need us as much as we need you. You've been trying to prod and manipulate me into this. So here's your chance to get what you want - and all you need to do is put up with Thor being there."

Loki's scowl deepened.

"And since you don't care about him or what he thinks of you," Tony clutched tightly at the sonic paralyzer while faking a sweet smile, "that shouldn't be a problem. Right?"

Loki's eyes promised slow, painful murder. "Fine," he gritted out.

The fact that Loki was that desperate was more than a little terrifying. Tony murmured, "Why do I feel like I'm going to spend most of my time putting you two in time out?"

That was a good name, Time Out Protocol. He'd program Jarvis to emit the frequency that would paralyze Thor and Loki. Hopefully he wouldn't need it... but they both had quicker reflexes than he did, and better safe than sorry.

In a normal tone of voice, he said, "So, do you have any other brilliant schemes I should know about?"

Loki gave a hard, sharp smile. "If I told you, that would rather defeat the purpose, wouldn't it?"

Tony made a noise of irritation. "I am *trying* to be on your side. You could make it a little easier for me, you know."

Loki looked shocked for a fraction of a second, before returning to bitchy evil face. Tony supposed they hadn't put it in words quite like that yet.

"Your poor choices are hardly my responsibility," Loki said coldly.

"Okay," Tony conceded, "that might be a conversation for a time when you want to stab me a little less."

Loki narrowed his eyes for a second, like he was thinking about stabbing Tony right then and there. "Very well. I will see you at the agreed time."

"And Thor," Tony prompted, knowing he was pushing his luck.

Loki pressed his lips together tightly, then gave that sharp, dangerous smile. "And *dear* Thor."

Oh yeah, Tony thought as he watched Loki disappear. This was going to be an absolute trainwreck.

--

The day they were due to begin, Thor came down to the workshop with Tony, where - naturally - the first thing he did was walk over to the flowers that Tony hadn't thought to hide. They were finally starting to look a little bedraggled, edges of the petals curling inwards.

"These are Asgardian," Thor said, examining one of the yellow ones.

Great. Round three. Tony sighed to himself. "It's not what it looks like, okay?"

Thor glanced over at him, looking mildly confused. "Loki did not give them to you?"

"No, he did, but--"

"Are flowers considered untoward on Midgard?" Thor frowned, putting a hand on Mjolnir. "If he has insulted you with these, I will make it *quite* clear to him--"

"No, no," Tony said hastily, "nothing untoward. A couple of the others... didn't like the idea of Loki giving me things, that's all. It's fine."

Thor got his usual 'Midgardians are weird' expression, and shrugged a little. "As you say."

Tony felt something kind of hysterical bubbling in his throat. Oh, this whole experience was going to test his sanity, he could tell, and Loki wasn't even here yet.

They waited a few minutes, then Tony said, "He's going to be late to prove a point, isn't he?"

"Oh yes," Thor agreed. "And I imagine he will have much to say to you, to show how few words he has for me."

"Sounds about right," Tony nodded. He paused, trying to think of something to fill the awkward silence. "Sooo, how's Jane?"

"She is well," Thor said brightly. "She has been introducing me to the films of a man called Hugh Grant."

"That's great." Tony tapped his fingers against the nanite casing on his arc reactor, shifting restlessly. "That's, ah... really great."

They both fell silent again. Tony pulled out his cellphone and contemplated sending a rude text. Or making an impatient call, that would work too.

"And how is the lady Pepper?" Thor asked.

"Yep, she's well." Tony fidgeted and put his cellphone away. "Do you ever... well, I guess Jane doesn't need to worry about you in a fight, what with the whole..." He made a vague motion to suggest 'muscles'. "Asgardian. Thing."

"On the contrary," Thor said, shifting to face him more squarely, "Jane has often said she worries for my welfare when I battle. It is a sign that she cares, and so I am learning to welcome it, and not take it as a slight against my skills."

Great, the space viking had a healthier relationship than he did. Tony grimaced to himself. "So what do you tell her when she's worried?"

"I tell her that I cherish her too, and that I will always return to her," Thor said. "And then we usually have sex."

Tony choked on his breath for a moment, and thumped his chest. "That's, uh... that's great, buddy. That's great advice, thank you."

"You're most welcome," Thor told him agreeably.

There was another lull, then Tony figured he should be using this opportunity to say some things to Thor. He took a breath and braced himself a little. "Listen, Thor... I know you don't trust him, and I'm not saying you should, but - try to keep an open mind, okay?"

"He has betrayed my trust so many times," Thor said, staring into the distance. "I no longer know if there is anything left of the brother I remember."

"Some of that's not his fault," Tony reminded him. "Some of it is, but... just... Nothing's going to change while you're both assuming the worst of each other."

Thor looked at him sidelong. "I didn't expect you to be so in Loki's favor, after the injury he gave you."

Tony gave what felt like an awkward laugh. "Yeah, well. I felt a lot better about that after I fixed it up. And don't pretend you haven't wanted to stab me now and then yourself."

"I wouldn't stab you," Thor said, a smile playing across his lips. "I'd strike you with Mjolnir."

"Exactly." Tony grinned. "It's a feeling I'm used to people having around me."

"Nonetheless," Thor started, and then the elevator doors opened.

Loki strolled out, dressed in some flash-looking duds that Tony guessed were Asgardian formalwear. The pants were still black leather, but there was a green tunic and the same long embroidered coat that he'd seen once before. With the dark hair against it, it was... striking. Tony resisted the urge to wolf-whistle.

"You come dressed for peace," Thor said, sounding surprised.

Loki didn't spare him a glance. "My king," he said, addressing Tony, "I believe I promised you a souvenir. Allow me to present this gift, from the artisans of Vanaheim." He pulled an ornament out of thin air with a flourish and a deep bow.

My king. Tony felt his mouth go dry and reminded himself that Loki was just trying to piss off Thor. It didn't mean anything. Even if it was weirdly hot.

He cleared his throat and said awkwardly, "Um, thanks."

Thor was staring. At least Tony wasn't the only one totally thrown by Loki's shiny new attitude.

Loki walked closer and passed the carved ornament to Tony, who turned it over curiously in his hands. It looked like amber, elaborately carved into the shape of a wingless dragon, with individual scales marked out. The fine detail was kind of impressive.

"What were you doing on Vanaheim?" Thor asked, a little suspiciously.

"Well," Loki said, smiling widely and ignoring Thor entirely, "let's begin, shall we?"

"Loki--" Thor stopped and visibly calmed himself. "I'm sorry we did not question further when you first made your attack against Midgard..."

"Oh, I look forward to hearing Odin has rescinded the orders for my arrest," Loki said without looking at Thor. "I must say, Tony, I have been greatly anticipating this opportunity to work so *closely* with you."

Tony was *this* close to making a joke about sex magic, but he figured that with Thor and Loki in the room he was probably meant to try to be the responsible adult. "I'll bet," he said instead.

Thor tried again. "Loki, be reasonable--"

"I suggest you tell Thor to stop speaking, if you'd like me to stay," Loki said, still smiling.

Tony looked at Thor with an apologetic expression on his face. Thor sighed and nodded.

"Okay." Tony put the dragon aside and called up a hologram of Earth, with a lattice of objects - the Ultron network - in orbit around it. "Let's get started. This is what I'm thinking..."

--

An hour or two later, Tony was beginning to consider just shooting himself in the face.

Loki was being aggressively up close and personal, with a tendency to press himself against Tony and a voice full of purring satisfaction. The deferential little 'my king's he kept throwing in weren't any less distracting. In contrast, Loki's comments to Thor - when he spoke to Thor at all - were terse and clipped.

If it stayed at this level, it would be... manageable. Not comfortable - at this rate, Tony was liable to spend the entire project half-hard - but tolerable.

Loki seemed to enjoy playing with holograms; illusions made by someone else. He seemed to particularly enjoy standing pressed up behind Tony and reaching around him to play with holograms, perfectly positioned to murmur comments in Tony's ear in that damned *voice*.

Thor mostly just sighed, but Tony had a feeling it was starting to get to him.

"I must disagree, my king," Loki was saying now, with a courteous smile. Judging by Thor's face, 'my king' had some deeper Asgardian connotation that Tony was missing. "If he brings an army then a great deal of it is likely to get past this network - it makes sense for it to be able to target enemies on the ground as well."

"There's too much potential for misuse," Tony said firmly. "My weapons are not going anywhere near Earth's atmosphere. If you're worried about taking out the army, help me extend the range so they have more time to chip away at it."

Loki pressed his lips together tightly, then bowed his head. "As my king commands."

There should be a law against saying things like that in that low, suggestive voice. Not that Loki really cared about breaking the law.

Thor gave a frustrated huff. "He is Midgardian, Loki; he is no king of yours."

"While I am on Midgard, should I not heed their customs?" Loki said innocently. "Tony Stark has great power on this realm, he deserves the appropriate... respect."

"Great, I'm feeling super respected, can we focus on what we're here for," Tony interrupted without much hope.

"Of course," Loki said, all but batting his eyelashes. "You wanted to extend the range of the network. I can enchant the devices so their energy pulses travel both further and faster, to minimize the ability of the enemy to dodge."

"Sounds good," Tony said, and glanced at Thor. "Thor?"

Thor nodded. "If they cannot be aimed at Midgard, that should be harmless enough."

Loki's expression suggested he didn't take very kindly to the use of the word 'harmless', but he continued ignoring Thor and paying all his attention to Tony. "Do you want a limit to the devices' reach, or simply as far as we can build?"

Tony made a note in the project file, then looked sidelong at Loki. "Give me some context. How far are we talking, here?"

"Taking what's built into your schematics, and allowing for some additional range due to your natural talents, then amplified by myself..." Loki tilted his head from side to side. "Perhaps a half, perhaps three quarters of an astronomical unit?"

Tony stared at him. "*Half an AU?* Are you messing with me right now?"

Loki raised an eyebrow. "I'm quite serious. Did you perhaps underestimate what we might accomplish?"

"I think I need to sit down," Tony said faintly.

Half - or three quarters - of an AU. Between halfway and three quarters to the sun. That was a *huge* amount of space.

There was a nudge behind his knees as Loki placed a chair behind him, and Tony sank into it gratefully. Half an AU. That was impossible. That was...

He took everything back. Magic was *awesome*.

"You're showing off," Thor was saying.

Loki responded in what had to be a deliberately obnoxious tone, with possibly the longest thing he'd said to Thor all day. "I'm merely assisting Tony to the best of my abilities. Surely you wouldn't want me to hold back, when the safety of his world might be at stake?"

"And whose fault is that?" Thor snapped, apparently done with being patient. "You have put this realm in danger--"

"I have encouraged this world to build up its defenses," Loki said smoothly.

"You have attacked the innocent!" Thor declared, striding closer. "Again and again!"

Loki gave a little laugh. "And you wouldn't know anything about that, would you? It's funny how petty crimes suddenly matter when *Thor* is the judge and executioner."

Tony groaned softly. "Guys, play nice. Don't make me send you to your rooms."

"You always have an excuse, don't you?" Thor growled, hand on his hammer. "Always some reason why you are the victim."

Loki shimmered and was suddenly dressed in battle leathers, knives in hand. "That's where you're wrong, Thor. I'm the monster, remember?"

"Hey!" Tony stood up again, but wasn't quite foolhardy enough to step in between them. "Last warning! You're not going to like what happens--"

"If you are a monster, Loki, it is because you choose to be," Thor said, drawing the hammer back, and Loki was raising his daggers. Neither of them were listening to Tony, but he hesitated, reluctant to use the big guns.

"I am as I was raised," Loki declared, and dodged the first blow from Mjolnir. He struck out with his right-hand knife, but Thor moved too quickly. The second blow from Mjolnir knocked Loki backwards, knife tearing through the arm of Tony's shirt, and fuck this shit--

"Time *out*," Tony declared.

The sound was meant to be too high-pitched for humans to hear, but he swore he could *feel* it, drilling into his skull. Tony covered his ears, swearing under his breath. Thor and Loki hit the ground with two heavy thumps; three if you counted Mjolnir, plus a clanging rattle for Loki's daggers. The pain stopped.

"Well," Tony said, mostly to himself. "That worked." His arm had a bit of a scratch, but the shirt had copped the worst of it. Fortunately it wasn't a favorite.

Neither Thor nor Loki said anything, but then, that was kind of the point. Tony stepped closer to look them over, just to make sure that they were okay. They were Asgardian; they could probably be dropped head first onto concrete and still be fine.

"It's not for long," he told them. "About fifteen minutes for the human version, so Asgardian? Maybe five. I'm guessing, obviously; I haven't had a lot of opportunities to test it."

Thor seemed okay, maybe a little confused and frightened. Loki, though... Loki's eyes were way too wide, chest moving too fast. Damn. Tony felt a stab of guilt and regret, and went to crouch by Loki's unresponsive form.

"Hey," he said softly, putting his hand on Loki's shoulder. "It's just for a few minutes, I swear. You guys were about to trash my workshop. And possibly me."

Loki's eyes darted to him, then away again, shifting rapidly back and forth. Slowly Tony became aware of the faintest tremble in the limb under his hand.

"You're okay," he murmured. "You're safe here. It's going to wear off, and you can yell at me, and then you can go back to driving Thor up the wall, okay? Just take it easy. It's not for long."

Loki kept trembling. A tear slipped out of his eye and rolled sideways down to his hair. After a while his hand started to twitch, like he was almost able to move it properly. Tony stroked along his arm.

"You're okay," he repeated, trying for a soothing voice. "Just breathe--"

Breathe, Tony.

Tony gagged, bile rising in his throat. He managed to swallow it back down. Loki's eyes were focused on him again, watery and frightened. Tony rocked back on his heels and ran a shaking hand through his hair.

One last golden egg...

"Not long," he said again, trying to focus. "You're nearly-- Not long now."

The twitches of Loki's hand were starting to look a lot more like deliberate movements, and then there was a twist that pulled a familiar green cellphone out of the air. Loki pressed his thumb to a couple of buttons and disappeared.

"...Huh," Tony said. He stared for a moment, then picked up the daggers Loki had dropped and left behind.

Thor was making the little twitches too, but he didn't have a magic cellphone to call on. Tony slowly stood up again, eyeing Thor warily.

"You too, Van Der Graaff," he said. "A few minutes, and it'll wear off. Try to keep your cool, I appreciate it." In the meantime, he put Loki's daggers over in the corner with the knife he'd been running scans on.

It was, indeed, just a couple more minutes before Thor was able to push himself up to a sitting position. He panted from the strain, then looked at Tony with something that was, if not fear, at least a decent amount of apprehension.

"What... sorcery... is this?" Thor managed to get out. He looked shaken.

"My kind," Tony said, more honestly than he'd like. He still felt nauseous. "I did warn you."

Thor panted some more, but slowly returned to more normal breathing. He made no move to stand up. "I don't... understand. How..."

"Trade secret," Tony said. "A little something to level the playing field. Excuse me a moment." He made his way to the trash can and threw up.

"Are you well?" Thor rasped out, and Tony felt a wave of affection for the big lug, that he was still recovering but managed to be concerned for Tony.

"I will be," he lied, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

After a while Thor got unsteadily to his feet and picked up his hammer. "I suspect we have achieved all that we will today."

"Yeah," Tony said reluctantly. "I don't think Loki's gonna come back anytime soon."

"We both underestimated you," Thor said, looking at him with a disturbed expression.

"No big deal, that's usually how I like it." Tony waved a hand as if wiping the conversation away. "Get some rest, you're going to feel like re-heated crap for a little while. We'll come back to this tomorrow." Assuming Loki was ready to come back then. Tony had the feeling he'd accidentally tapped into something nasty.

Thor made his way to the elevator, and Tony watched him go. Once he was alone Tony pulled out his own cellphone and sent a quick message. *u ok?*

There was no response. Tony wasn't really surprised.

--

That night he had nightmares, strapped to the gurney with Yinsen cutting open the arc reactor, over and over while he healed around it; the cave and the scalpel and water, and Killian who was sometimes Obadiah, and a blackened, deathly infection - or maybe it was palladium - that spread through his veins like a brushfire.

He buried his face in his pillow and used it to soak up the tears.

--

Tony got up about half past five, still exhausted but unwilling to waste more time lying in bed too scared to close his eyes. It had been barely a week since AIM; he'd gone longer without decent sleep before. This was nothing.

He made himself a coffee on the odd-days coffee machine and took it with him down to the workshop. There were things he could work on, but instead of going to his computer he found himself drawn to the Asgardian knife that had been buried in his shoulder. It had stood up to everything he could think to throw at it, and then some.

Tony picked the knife up carefully and turned it in his hands. If he could make an armor that would stand up to *this*, then maybe he'd be safe. Or, wait, if he could make an armor out of this metal... he'd need more of it, though, and he'd need tools that actually worked on it, and he wasn't likely to get those things from either of the people that might be able to help.

Experimentally, he picked up one of the knives Loki had dropped the day before, and tried to drag the point of it along the first one. Did that make a scratch? He rubbed his thumb over the mark and part of it seemed to linger, ever-so-faintly.

"Jarvis," he said, for the sake of trying, "text E.T.: what are your knives made out of? Send." All the same, he reluctantly admitted to himself that the idea was probably a fantasy.

He put the knives down and moved on to the amber dragon Loki had brought him from Vanaheim. It was small and he wondered if that was another subtle dig about his height. He wondered if Loki was okay, after the little 'time out' the day before. He wondered...

God, he was tired. Tony drained the last of the coffee and put the cup down on the edge of the nearest bench. At least, he tried; it was too close to the edge and when he tried to catch it he fumbled. The cup hit the floor and shattered.

"Great," Tony muttered to himself. "Now I've got to clean this up."

He dropped into a chair instead, and slumped over the table with his head on his arms. Steve was right; it had been reckless to go into AIM on his own. He should have been more careful. He should have done something different.

"Fuck," he told the bench. Then again, more emphatically, "*Fuck!*"

The elevator doors opened, and Tony looked up blearily at the sound. Pepper shouldn't be up yet, he must have made too much noise getting up. "Didn't mean to wake you, I just..."

Loki strode in, wearing his casual black leathers and looking much too put together. "Then perhaps you shouldn't have sent me a message at such an hour."

"Oh. Sorry." Tony blinked a few times, trying to wake himself up. He shifted his weight slightly, pulling his arms closer to himself. "You use the elevator a lot."

Loki raised an eyebrow sarcastically. "That is what it's for, is it not?"

"Are you okay?" Tony blurted. "After... yesterday. Or did you come here to kill me?" he added, trying to make a joke of it.

"I will confess," Loki said in a quiet, dangerous tone, "I did not enjoy the effects of your little... device."

Tony winced. "Ye-ah. I kind of noticed that."

Loki narrowed his eyes. "What was it?"

Tony hesitated. He hated the idea of it, hated the idea that he might use it again, but on a practical level he couldn't deny that a fast, non-lethal way of subduing Asgardians was good to have. Reluctantly he squared his shoulders and said, "Insurance."

Loki's lips tightened. His right hand flexed a little in that 'I want to stab something' tell. "I see."

Tony folded his arms defensively. "Both of you are faster and stronger than I am. I'm not going to apologise for making sure I can defend myself."

"I didn't ask you to," Loki snapped, then grimaced. He looked away for a moment, taking a breath, then looked back at Tony. "I see the need of it. That doesn't mean I like it any better."

"Yeah." Tony sighed, then looked Loki over. "So *are* you okay?"

"I am well enough," Loki said, a little stiffly. "If I weren't, I would hardly have answered your message this morning."

Tony decided to let it go - for now. "Technically you haven't *answered* it, just showed up in my workshop. I asked what your daggers are made from."

That got a better reaction. "Metal," Loki said, lips quirking briefly.

"Yeah, yeah, you're a laugh riot." Tony found himself smiling despite the tiredness weighing him down.

"Tell me one thing." Loki watched him with a guarded expression. "You said that I was safe here, in your workshop. Did you mean that?"

"Yes." Tony swallowed, looking up at Loki's face. "Yes, I wasn't going to let anything happen to you, I just-- I had to make you both stop--"

"And so you turned your crafts against Thor, your own shieldbrother," Loki murmured, an odd tone in his voice that reminded Tony of the time Loki had said he'd 'dueled Thor for him'. Did Loki think Tony had been defending him yesterday?

Admittedly Thor *had* just managed to land a fairly hefty slam of his hammer, but Loki didn't usually tend to believe good things. Was this like the Chitauri, where Tony doing what he needed to had just happened to work out in Loki's favor?

"Don't you usually jump to the worst possible conclusion?" Tony asked, slightly bemused.

"You try my patience," Loki said, giving him a dirty look. "But I do believe your intentions were... not hostile. You are fortunate I like you as much as I do."

Tony scratched the back of his head. "Well, thanks, I guess."

Loki regarded him for a moment, then pulled up a chair that Tony was pretty sure hadn't been there a few seconds ago. Whether that was down to magic or sleep deprivation was a separate question.

"You're tired," Loki told him, stating the obvious.

"It's not a big deal," Tony said automatically. "Da Vinci only slept two hours a day. ...Do you even know who Da Vinci is?"

Loki looked decidedly unimpressed. "What troubles your sleep? Your recent capture?"

Tony flinched slightly, and pulled a face. "It just brought up a few things from... last time. I've gotten over it before, I'll get over it again."

"Tony," Loki said, more gently. "You have seen me in the grasp of nightmare - both sleeping and waking. I hope you don't believe I will think any less of you."

"The others do." Tony bit his lip, knowing it wasn't exactly like that, but it *felt* true. "They just-- all look at me with pity on their faces. I don't need pity, I fucking survived shit that would break a lot of people. I had open heart surgery with no anaesthetic. I invented the Iron Man armor in that cave. I had-- the guy who was basically my second dad tried to murder me. I survived all of it."

"Of course you did," Loki agreed, reaching to clasp the side of his neck. Tony might have leaned into it a little. "You became Iron Man. You became a king. Pity would be wasted on you."

Tony made a faint sound, feeling the beat of his heart against the warm curve of Loki's hand. With his own hand he reached for Loki's free one, and laced their fingers together.

"Promise?" he whispered. He was too tired to feel stupid. He just wanted someone to tell him that he hadn't imagined it, that he had survived and thrived and the people who'd tried to hurt him didn't stand a chance.

Loki leaned close, almost touching their foreheads together. "Little king," he murmured back. "Your majesty, I swear it."

Tony swallowed. Loki was so close, and he wanted... he wanted Loki's mouth on his again, he wanted to just bury himself in touch and sensation for a while, and *forget*.

"You are remarkable," Loki said, still speaking in hushed tones. "I fear that one day when I'm... trapped in my thoughts, I'll do you an injury you cannot forgive. But in the meantime, I treasure this friendship. I thank you for it. And I treasure you."

So kiss me, Tony thought fiercely, and felt an immediate stab of guilt. There was a part of him that wanted Loki to kiss him again because then he could pretend it wasn't his fault. But that wasn't true anymore, was it? He wanted it too much.

Fuck, he was so screwed.

"Smooth talker," he said instead, faking a laugh.

Loki's thumb rubbed over his jaw, then Loki let go of his neck entirely and pulled back to a more appropriate distance. "Uru."

Their fingers were still laced together. Tony debated letting go, but decided it was harmless enough. "Gesundheit."

"The knives," Loki elaborated. "My best knives are made of uru. It's a material that's particularly open to enchantment. Thor's precious hammer is made of the same stuff."

The brief fantasy of making a suit of armor that could withstand Asgardian weapons withered. "I don't suppose it's really easy to come by?" Tony said anyway. For the sake of trying.

"Not unless one is on *considerably* better terms with the dwarves than I currently am," Loki said in a dry voice that suggested entertaining stories to be had.

"Well, it was worth asking." Tony looked down at their joined hands. It was stupid to make himself so vulnerable in front of Loki, he knew that. Loki was unstable and would almost certainly wind up using any weakness against him. But right now... Tony just wanted this.

"You used that cellphone to teleport," he said, remembering. "Is that how you know where I am when you visit? Do you come to my phone somehow?"

"Sometimes," Loki said.

Tony cocked his head. "If I had a magic phone, could I teleport?"

That earned him a faint smile. "Within particular constraints, yes."

"Whoa." Tony felt his eyes go wide. "You really should have led with that, we could have been doing creepy tech magic ages ago."

"You didn't trust me enough," Loki said, which was probably accurate. "You shouldn't trust me now, either."

Tony tightened his hand on Loki's reflexively. "Is there something specific or is that just a general 'I have low self-esteem' thing?"

Loki shook his head, looking away. "Anyone will tell you, Loki is not to be trusted..."

"If you say it's 'in your nature' again, I will be forced to punch you in the face," Tony informed him. "And given that'll probably break my hand, I'd appreciate it if we just bypassed that whole thing."

Loki gave a small laugh and looked back at him fondly. "You absurd little mortal."

"Feel free to keep calling me your king," Tony offered with a grin. "That was nice, I liked that."

"Oh, I'm aware." Loki looked very pleased with himself. "Don't think I didn't notice your interest."

"It means something that didn't translate through, right?" Tony asked curiously. "I'm a popular guy but I don't think Thor got that teed off because of *me*."

Loki gave a thoughtful hum. "Remember when I told you about Alfheim, and seducing the High King's husband?"

Tony nodded.

"Offering alliance to foreign royalty has implications of..." Loki scrunched his face up to think in a way that was probably more adorable than it should have been. "If it's not a formal treaty, it implies that you are putting foreign royalty equal to or above your own. Implications of disloyalty. Hence the scandal."

"Sooo you weren't just thumbing your nose at Thor, but at all of Asgard?" Tony translated.

"Essentially," Loki said, watching him for his reaction.

Tony thought about being annoyed - he hadn't asked to be stuck in the middle after all - but it was really too funny for that. "I already thought pretty highly of myself, but that's a whole new level," he said with a grin.

Loki relaxed again, smirking at him. "Don't take it personally. It's just a bit of fun to rile up Thor."

"Too late," Tony said cheerfully. "I know the truth now. I'm your king, baby. I promise my rule will be mostly benevolent."

Loki started to lean closer, but Tony put his free hand up in the air between them. There were still... there had to be lines he wouldn't cross. Even if there were fewer and fewer of them.

Loki straightened up and carefully disentangled their hands. "Ridiculous customs," he muttered, sounding disgruntled.

To distract himself, Tony said, "Is now a better time to ask you about your wicked schemes?"

Loki's eyes slid away from his and Tony sighed. Loki absolutely had some other schemes. Dammit.

He tried another angle. "Are they schemes that endanger human lives?"

Loki paused, then hesitantly shook his head. "No more than they're currently at risk."

"Close enough," Tony muttered. He rubbed his face with both hands, suppressing a yawn. It was probably a good sign that Loki wasn't lying about it? Or maybe Loki had just figured it would be implausible to deny being up to something. Ugh, he was too tired for this shit.

"You should be in bed," Loki told him.

"What are you, my nanny?" Tony sat up a bit straighter, trying to look awake. "I'm fine."

"You are not." Loki stood and then the fucker *picked Tony up*, carrying him across the workshop.

"Cheating!" Tony yelped, hitting the heel of his hand against Loki's chest. "Cheating!"

"It's not my fault Midgardians are ridiculously light." Loki smirked a little and deposited them both on the well-worn sofa in the corner.

"Um," Tony said, finding himself with a strong arm holding him close to Loki's side, "we're usually drunk for this part."

"So we are," Loki said, leaning back against the sofa. "Don't make me change my mind."

Tony contemplated arguing some more, but he *was* tired, and maybe he'd be able to rest a bit like this. He pulled his legs up and wriggled until he was slightly more comfortable, head basically pillowed against Loki's chest and that arm still wrapped around him.

"Rest," Loki murmured, and Tony did as he was told.

#

Pretty Vegas

Chapter Summary

Tony keeps working on his satellite defense network, Loki keeps being a little shit, and Important Conversations are had.

Chapter Notes

If you missed it, there's another side story from Loki's point of view, "[The Devil in the Details](#)". This one overlaps the end of chapter 19 and the start of this chapter.

Loki's presence didn't magically make Tony's sleep peaceful; he still woke up from nightmare several times. But it was... nice. He shifted position a few times, too, winding up with his head on Loki's thigh and a couch spring jabbing into his hip.

"...can stop pretending you care for his welfare," someone was saying, and Tony stirred groggily.

Loki's hand ran down his side soothingly. "Obviously. But I have reason to want these satellites to be well-crafted, and that won't happen if he is asleep on his feet."

Tony groaned and pushed himself up to sitting. He still felt exhausted, but that was par for the course. Less usual was Loki peering into his face and asking, "How do you feel?"

"Terrific," Tony said flatly. "I take it it's time for creepy magic games?"

"Perhaps it would be best if you were to have a little more sleep," Thor offered, standing over them both.

"Nah, I'm good." Tony took another moment, then stood up. "The sooner we finalize the designs, the sooner I can start building. Do you two think you can play nice today?"

"I will try," Thor said, eyeing Loki warily.

Loki stood up as well, doing so a hell of a lot more smoothly and elegantly than Tony had. "Of course..." he drawled, and the little sparkle of mischief in his eyes let Tony know what was coming, "...my king."

Tony gave a huff of frustrated amusement. "Yeah, this is going to go well," he muttered, making his way over to the holographic interface. "Where were we at?"

That was mostly rhetorical, but Thor spoke up anyway. "You should give thought to securing who can give the network commands and how they do so."

Loki gave a dramatic sigh. "Well, there goes my fun."

Thor frowned at him. "This is not a game, Loki."

"Of course it is," Loki said cheerfully. "And it's one I intend to win."

"Stop baiting Goldilocks," Tony said, pulling up schematics. "Let's talk interfaces."

--

That day went marginally better than the day before. Thor and Loki were both more cautious about their tempers, shooting wary looks at Tony and deflecting more than escalating. There was still a lot more passive aggressive sniping and posturing than Tony would have preferred, but, well, you couldn't have everything.

Meanwhile, Tony tried to figure out the boundaries of this craftsman thing. "Do I really have to make every single one by hand?"

"If you want them to be more than dull metal boxes, yes." Loki came to stand close behind him and reached around to point at the holographic schematic. "You should use cameras that detect a broader spectrum of light, my king. With your intent, and some enchantment, we should be able to bypass most of the more common invisibility spells."

"And what of your own invisibility, Loki?" Thor asked, watching intently.

Loki's voice took on a touch of amusement, all too close to Tony's ear. "I said *most* of the more common spells."

Tony took a step sideways to put a little more space between himself and Loki. "UV and infra-red, check. Should I just aim for maximum frequency range for any of the detectors?"

"That would be best, my king," Loki agreed.

"These are going to cost so much," Tony muttered to himself, adding the note to the project file. This 'my king' thing was going to be the death of him. "Oh well, not like I can't afford it."

"Can you put a price on the safety of your realm?" Loki asked smoothly, idly twirling the hologram of Earth.

"You'd be surprised what I can put a price on," Tony said wryly. "Comes with being this rich. Okay, I think we've covered most of the design. What next, actual construction?"

Loki nodded. "You can machine the parts if you need, so long as you assemble them by hand. The best results require a... *personal* touch."

"Well." Tony smirked at the schematic. "Let nobody say Tony Stark turned down a personal touch."

"Sir," Jarvis piped up with flawless timing. "Captain Rogers is requesting access to the workshop."

"Ten bucks says he's talked to Fury and the answer's no," Tony said cheerfully. He gestured at the holograms to collapse them down.

Thor shook his head. "I will not take that wager."

Tony glanced at Loki, who outright laughed at him. "Don't look at *me*."

"Neither of you are any fun. Jarvis-- hang on." Tony grabbed the bouquet of flowers and stuffed them behind the sofa in the corner. He didn't have the energy for that conversation again. "Okay, send him in."

"And I believe that's my cue," Loki murmured, bowing slightly. "Let me know when you are ready to begin crafting the devices."

Steve came out of the elevator a couple of moments after Loki disappeared, looking surprised to see Thor there. "Oh, hi, Thor. Tony... I talked to Fury."

"Aaand he salutes my genius and says it's an incredible plan?" Tony guessed.

Steve gave him an incredibly quelling look, about three times more quelling than usual. "He said no. It's too risky."

"Huh. Good thing we definitely haven't already started, then," Tony said, all exaggerated innocence. He shouldn't, but messing with Steve was just so much fun.

"Tony," Steve groaned. "Just this once, just go along with the team. We can't trust Loki, you know that."

Tony folded his arms and met Steve's eyes, turning serious. "No, Steve; what I know? Is that the Ultron network is our best chance at protecting this world, and that Loki can help me give it the power it needs."

Steve shook his head. "Tony, I don't know what this thing is you've got going on with Loki, but--"

"I do not have a *thing* going on with Loki!"

Okay, in retrospect, that could have been more convincing.

Tony cleared his throat and continued before Steve had a chance to break out the Disappointed Eyes. "Look, I'm taking precautions. Thor's checking over everything before we put it together." Thor looked a little alarmed to be dragged into it. "We need this, Steve."

"Tony, I..." Steve trailed off helplessly. "At least *wait*. Until we have a bit more information, can you do that?"

Tony hesitated. It probably wouldn't hurt to delay the project just a *tiny* bit. He still wouldn't wait on Nick Fury, but... maybe a little more information from Asgard. Besides, more info would help in finetuning the operating protocols.

"Okay," he said reluctantly. "Fine. I won't put anything together until we know some more."

Steve gave him that damned Captain America smile, all patriotism and sunshine. "Thanks, Tony. It's for the best."

"Yeah, yeah." Tony waved him off dismissively. "I want extra credit for the next team bonding activity."

Steve left looking a lot happier. Even Thor looked more relaxed. He nodded his head slightly to Tony, saying, "It is a good thing that we wait. Every piece of information before a battle may be vital."

Tony gave a light hum, unconvinced. "I guess let me know when you hear something more from Asgard," he said. "I'll keep trying to get something out of Loki." Gently. Gently and carefully.

"...Yes," Thor said, wearing a complicated expression.

Tony sighed. "Okay, what?"

"It's just that..." It was weird to see Thor so hesitant over his words. "I have not seen him act so friendly towards someone in quite some time."

'Friendly' was one word for it. Actually, Tony realized, to an Asgardian 'friendly' probably *was* the word for it. Huh. That put a new perspective on Loki's more egregious flirtations. "He was just doing it to get under your skin, I thought we covered that."

"If I have learned one thing, it is never to assume Loki has only one goal," Thor said dryly.

True enough. Tony leaned his hips against the closest workbench, pondering. He had a feeling Loki'd had at least two other goals: get under Tony's skin, and also be vaguely (if exaggeratedly) sincere.

"I don't know what you want me to say," he told Thor honestly.

Thor gave him a penetrating look. "Do you care for my brother?"

Too much. Tony shifted his weight uncomfortably. "I think that's pretty obvious." A thought struck him and he added, "Is this the shovel talk? Are you giving me the shovel talk right now?"

Thor sighed. "I just wish that he felt he could come to me."

"That's not going to happen while you're blaming him for this guy Thanos," Tony pointed out, pretty proud of how level he was keeping his voice.

"It is hard to..." Thor shook his head. "Chaos and war follow in his footsteps, and I wonder how much is in his nature--"

Tony folded his arms, unsurprised to hear the 'nature' argument rear its ugly head again. "Maybe you should spend more time remembering the thousand years when he was your brother, and less time thinking about what you expect from a frost giant."

Thor jerked and raised his eyes to Tony's, startled and vaguely guilty.

"When he's being a little shit," Tony continued, "consider whether he might be defensive about something, rather than just destructive."

"You are very sure of what you know of him," Thor said with a hint of scepticism.

Tony gave a bitter smile. "What can I say, some of what he does is awfully familiar."

"I will think on your words." Thor's eyes lingered on him a moment longer. "Take care, Tony Stark. Defensive or not, Loki is capable of terrible things."

Tony touched his shoulder lightly. "I'm aware."

Thor's gaze swept around the room, then back to Tony. "Are you, though?"

Tony didn't know what that was supposed to mean. Thor had been right in here with him, helping work on the Ultron designs. "Um, yeah, I'm pretty sure I am," he said flatly.

"That's good," Thor said softly. In a more normal tone, he added, "I will take my leave then. Don't forget to eat something."

"Mother hens, all of you," Tony said with a smile. He was hungry though; he hadn't had any breakfast and Thor and Loki had eaten most of the Chinese he'd ordered for lunch. He made a quick decision and followed Thor to the elevator.

--

Things went well enough until about halfway through the evening; Pepper was picking up stray clothes around the bedroom and came across the shirt with the slice across the arm. "Honestly, what do you get up to when I'm not around?"

"Ah," Tony said, scratching the back of his neck, "that... was an accident. But I can paralyze Asgardians now?"

Pepper looked at him with a dangerous look on her face. "When you say accident..."

"Thor smacked him and I was a little too close," Tony said, a bad feeling crawling up his spine. "It really was just an accident. I'm not even hurt."

"What were you doing with both of--" Pepper stopped and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Tony. *Please* tell me you do not have Loki helping build your satellites."

There were times when Pepper really was too smart, Tony reflected. "Uh... I do not have Loki helping build my satellites. Currently. The project's on hold."

Pepper bundled up the shirt and threw it at him. Tony caught it and tossed it onto the bed, then followed her out into the living room.

Pepper stopped in the middle of the room, her hand across her forehead. "I can't do this," she said.

The bad feeling in Tony's spine crystallized into ice. "The laundry?" he tried to joke. "Because I told you I don't mind--"

"Tony." She turned and looked at him, eyes brimming with tears. "I can't watch you do this to yourself. I can't..."

"Pepper, it's safe." He took a step towards her, hands out, pleading. "I've got the Time Out Protocol, it paralyzes them, I've got back-up weapons, I've got safety measures. I'm doing everything I can--"

"It's not just Loki," Pepper said. The tears started to spill over and she wiped at her cheeks. "It worries me how he is with you but that's not-- You take so many risks, Tony, and I can't... Ever since you came back from Afghanistan... It's not fair to ask you to change, and you're not going to, we both know that."

"Pepper," Tony repeated. He didn't know what else to say. He didn't know how to make her stay. He'd always known on some level that he couldn't be what she wanted, but he'd thought... he'd thought he'd have a little more time.

"Tony, please." Pepper came closer. She placed a gentle kiss on the corner of his mouth and whispered, "I do love you. I just can't..."

"Can't be with me," Tony said softly. His own eyes were watering, a little. Seeing this coming didn't make it hurt any less. Even if it was nothing he hadn't heard a hundred times before - Tony Stark, too self-obsessed, too narcissistic, too *difficult*.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"No." Tony swallowed, and grasped her hands. "Better to rip the bandaid off now than... whatever the rest of that metaphor is, I don't know."

Pepper gave his hands a squeeze then let go. She wiped under her eyes again and sniffed a little. "I'll take a bag and... go back to the hotel. We can-- I don't know if you want to make an announcement--"

"No," Tony said again, knowing that the tabloids would pick up on it soon enough anyway. "It's nobody's business."

"The stock will--"

"I don't care about the stock!" Tony took a breath and slowly let it out again. Fine. Everything was fine. "Just do what you need, Pepper. The company can take care of itself."

"Alright," Pepper said. She kissed his cheek and said again, "I'm sorry."

Tony stood still as she walked past him, heading back to the bedroom presumably to pack a bag. Weirdly, he felt... numb. Just numb. He'd been expecting... he didn't know what he'd been expecting. To feel something more, probably.

One thing he did know was that he didn't want to be here when Pepper left. He strode to the elevator and took it down a level to his workshop. There were plenty of things to tinker with and if he really ran out of things he could do, there was still the coding for Ultron. On hold or not, it wouldn't hurt to get the program ready.

Yeah, an all-nighter in the workshop sounded perfect right about now.

--

Tony stumbled to bed around six in the morning, and a nightmare woke him a bit after twelve. He showered, dressed, and used the small penthouse kitchenette to put together a wrap for lunch. He didn't want to go to the team level and risk having to *talk* to someone.

After lunch he went straight back to the workshop and immersed himself in Ultron's coding. The project file was open with all his notes, different ways to limit Loki's access to the finished AI. Tony was... semi-confident in the results. He and Thor had done a lot of brainstorming, but Loki was clever. It was actually kind of fun, trying to think like Loki; to come up with gaps and loopholes, and then plug them up.

There were a lot of things Tony screwed up, but this defense network... if he could just get *one thing* right, let it be this network. That might, finally, make everything worth it. Everything since he'd woken up in a cave in Afghanistan with a car battery and a fresh hole in his chest.

He worked until late; ignored an invitation to the team level for shared dinner. That wasn't out of character. He wasn't in a rush for the team to find out that he'd broken up with Pepper; the thought of all that overly-solicitous concern made him shudder.

He knew exactly who *wouldn't* treat him with kid gloves, but contacting Loki felt like proving Pepper's point and Tony wasn't quite ready to do that to himself.

Instead, he worked on the Ultron network, rolled into bed and got what sleep he could, then got up in the early hours of the morning to do it all again.

--

Sometime on day... number whatever, Loki showed up. "You have been ignoring my messages."

"I wasn't ignoring them," Tony muttered, hating the part of himself that was just so *pleased* to see Loki. "I just didn't respond."

"I see. My mistake," Loki said in a voice laden with sarcasm.

Tony focused on the holographic screens of code in front of himself, keeping his tone light. "No hard feelings. You can leave the way you came in."

In the corner of his vision he could see Loki approaching with that swaying predatory gait. Probably it wasn't a smart idea to antagonize the temperamental super-powered alien, but on the other hand, Tony was getting really good at screwing things up so why not this?

That was when Loki grabbed him by the arms and hauled him to his feet. "You will address me with *respect*."

Tony gave a short, clipped laugh. His arms hurt; Loki's grip was too tight. "Again - have you *met* me?"

"Listen to me, you insolent wretch," Loki snarled, squeezing tighter. "I *will not* be ignored. You can force me to *make* you pay attention but I assure you, you will not like my methods."

His arms *really* hurt; he was going to have to use the Time Out Protocol if this kept up. It was that more than anything that made Tony drop the antagonistic posture and try for a more reasonable tone. "Loki. Arms. You're hurting me."

Loki glared a moment longer, then Tony's words seemed to penetrate. Loki looked down at where his hands were wrapped around Tony's upper arms.

"You need to let go," Tony said, holding his voice steady. "You're stronger than me, remember?" It was too much, he was going to have to use the Protocol and he didn't want--

Loki let go, staring at his hands like he'd never seen them before. Tony let out a silent sigh of relief. He was going to have some vicious bruises after that.

Loki looked kind of dazed. Tony frowned. "Hey. Rudolph. You with me?"

"I... yes?" Loki seemed to shake himself. "Yes, of course."

"Uh huh," Tony said, choosing not to give that the sarcastic answer it deserved. "Anyway, sorry about the silent treatment, I just wanted to concentrate on programming."

"The Ultron network," Loki said, nodding. "Of course. In that case--"

"Wait," Tony blurted. Now that Loki was actually here, the idea of being alone in the empty penthouse was a lot less attractive. "I mean... you're here now, you might as well stick around."

"What a charming invitation," Loki said dryly.

"I'm a charming kind of guy," Tony said, with irony so thick he could practically taste it. Pepper was gone, he was in the middle of alienating all the Avengers, Loki was about to leave; even Rhodey was too busy to talk to him most of the time. He got most of his interactions from a computer program.

Loki looked him over and said, "How much alcohol must I feed you before you simply tell me what's wrong?"

Of course Loki would be able to tell, because they'd spent so much time together, and that was *part of the damned problem*. Tony managed a slightly bitter laugh. "I take too many risks."

"That's probably true," Loki agreed calmly. "However, my supplies of Asgardian drink are not infinite, so if you would be so good..."

"We broke up," Tony snapped, then almost immediately regretted the angry tone. "Pepper and I broke up. So I buried myself in here and that's what I've been doing the last few days."

"Ah," Loki said, and looked weirdly hesitant. "I'm... sorry to hear that?"

"Don't ever let anybody tell you to become an actor," Tony said, forcing himself to be flippant. "I think everyone saw it coming, it just... sucks."

Loki tilted his head, looking thoughtful. "Do you want commiseration or distraction?"

"Distraction," Tony said immediately. "Definitely that one."

"Well, then." Loki pulled out a bottle and two glasses. "Let me tell you about a place called Knowhere..."

--

Tony wasn't sure it was good that Loki knew of a place with so many powerful artifacts, but he had to admit the guy knew how to tell a story. They'd wound up sprawled on the sofa together, Loki topping up their wine glasses as needed. For all that he claimed not to have an infinite supply of booze, the bottle sure seemed to be bottomless.

"What other cool stuff can you do with your phone?" Tony asked, after Loki mentioned using it to hack into an alien library. "You can teleport with it, what else?"

"Send information," Loki said, which was a lot like what he'd said the first time. Then he added, "and objects," which was decidedly *not*. "The distance it spans is greatly increased, you've seen that."

Tony nodded, remembering texts and calls from alien worlds. "So - how much battery life does it take to teleport?"

Loki grinned, enough to get little crinkles at the corners of his eyes. "You could find out..."

It was tempting. Except also a little intimidating. Tony didn't like the idea of trusting something he didn't understand to propel his body through - what? A wormhole? The *phone network*?

"Rain check," he said, twisting to lean one arm along the back of the sofa. "I've already got one magic project - against my better judgement I might add - so let's just see how that one goes before we get ahead of ourselves."

"I suppose we could finish the current project first," Loki said, as if that was some kind of great hardship for him.

Tony had another sip of wine; rolled it around on his tongue, rich and tart. "I told Steve I'd put Ultron on hold," he remembered to say. "Just until we have a little more info."

"I see," Loki said, going tense.

"That's not a... well, it is a request for info," Tony amended, "but only if you feel up to it."

Loki had a long draught of wine then rested his glass on his knee. "I don't," he said flatly.

"Okay." Tony tilted his glass, watching the play of light in the wine as it moved. "Anyway, I'll go ahead and machine the parts so we're ready to roll as soon as Cap clears it. Between that and coding, we prob'ly won't even lose any time."

"I would prefer not to wait on Captain America," and the level of disdain Loki packed into that name was truly astonishing, "but if you think it's best..."

"Not really, but at the moment 's not worth the hassle." Tony smiled a little. "Don't worry, if he takes too long we'll just do it behind his back."

Loki chuckled. "Now that's a plan I can get behind."

Tony lifted his glass and took a long sip, savoring the taste. He glanced sideways at Loki, wondering, then decided to just ask. "Did you kill those scientists?"

The idea that someone had had a worse day than him was incredibly appealing.

"Yes," Loki said, looking both dangerous and extremely satisfied.

Tony let out a breath between his teeth. "Good," he said, and ignored how much that meant there was something wrong with him. Those fuckers deserved it. They were just as bad as Killian, maybe even worse.

"Bloodthirstiness suits you," Loki said with a dark smirk.

"Not sure that's a compliment," Tony murmured, taking another sip.

"Oh, it is." Loki considered his own glass, then drank a little more. "Never apologize for doing what you must to protect yourself."

Tony snorted. "Revenge... protect... tomayto, tomahto."

"You're an Avenger, are you not?" Loki pointed out, lightly mocking. "You have done nothing more than make sure you were avenged."

Tony gave a bitter laugh and lifted his glass in a toast. "To avenging."

"To vengeance," Loki agreed with a purr, and there was something slightly terrifying about his smile.

Tony put his glass down on the floor, figuring he'd probably had enough for now. His head felt nicely groggy. He had a feeling he was going to do something extremely reckless and prove Pepper's point. It was hard to care that much.

Loki is dangerous, he reminded himself. He looked down at his left hand and slowly flexed all the fingers, watching them move. Healed. That didn't stop the memories, but to be fair... he had worse memories.

"How is it?" Loki asked in a low voice.

"Fine." Tony stared at his hand a moment longer, remembering the doctors, the physical therapist, the fear. He curled his fingers and looked up at Loki. "I got you with the paralyzer, so we're even."

"And because I granted you reparations," Loki said, tone mild but for a hint of warning.

"And reparations," Tony amended, smiling without any joy. The people in the hospital had been enough to skew the balance in his book of survivors versus lives taken. Unfortunately it was the sort of thing he was pretty sure didn't reduce down to maths. The dead were still dead.

He was dangerously close to getting mopey-drunk. Tony pushed his glass away from himself along the floor. "D'you think the satellites are going to work?"

Loki took a slow breath. "They stand a chance. They will be extremely powerful. It remains to be seen if that will be powerful enough."

Tony nodded. That was about what he'd figured. Loki was too frightened of this guy for him to be anything but a major threat. What Thor had told them had only added to that picture.

To vengeance. At least they could be pretty confident of Loki's motivations on this one.

"We have... some time. Not as much as we might if..." Loki trailed off, obviously struggling to get out whatever he wanted to say.

Tony put a hand on Loki's thigh to calm him. "It's okay. We're going to kick this bastard's ass."

"You don't understand," Loki said in frustration. "It's because of me. The Other... I told him. I told him how to find the secret paths between the realms. When they come--"

"Hey, hey, it's okay." Tony gently squeezed the thigh under his hand. "It's not your fault."

"I told him," Loki repeated, looking desperate. "Without the paths it would take decades to reach Midgard. With the paths-- they might only be months away."

Tony sucked in a breath, but didn't lift his hand. That was not great news, but they'd just have to manage. "Ultron will be up and running by then," he said, aiming for a confidence he didn't entirely feel. "And *that's* because of you, too."

Loki fixed wide eyes on Tony's, silently pleading. Tony shuffled over to press more of his body against Loki's.

"You and me," he said firmly. "We got this. Maybe we'll let the Avengers punch a couple of things, but that's just a bonus extra. We're going to make this work."

Loki let out a shaky breath, closed his eyes, and nodded.

"To vengeance," Tony reminded him.

"To vengeance," Loki echoed, opening his eyes again. He looked a little calmer; more so when his mouth quirked in a playful smirk. "Does that make me one of your Avengers?"

Tony snorted a laugh. "That would be amazing, Steve might actually have a coronary. No, the Avengers is Fury's little after school club. I think we can come up with something better, don't you?"

Loki's gaze softened to something warm and lingering. Tony took a slow breath, feeling a familiar curl of desire in his gut. Except that--

Except... nothing.

"Oh, who'm I kidding," he muttered, and wrapped a hand around the back of Loki's neck to pull him in for a kiss. Loki came willingly; kissed the way he did everything else, fierce and intense and a bit like a dance. Loki's hands came to rest on Tony's waist, holding him in place. Tony made a soft noise of hunger. This was... right now, this was exactly what he wanted.

He slipped his mouth free to murmur, "You know, smart move would be to tell me I'm too drunk. Play the long game, earn trust, stuff like that."

"Yes," Loki agreed, "but it wouldn't be nearly so much fun." He gave a devilish smile that made Tony's pulse quicken, then nipped at his jaw a couple of times on his way to whisper in Tony's ear. "And I believe you had a suggestion as to how my helmet might be put to use?"

Well. Tony gave up on resisting his bad impulses, and melted into Loki's hands.

--

It wasn't the first time the workshop sofa had been used for adult purposes. It would definitely go down as one of the best. Turned out hundreds of years of experience was great

for giving blowjobs, go figure.

Tony was pretty sure he was still drunk, but he was also self-aware enough to realize this situation was... not ideal. Although it was just the sort of selfish, irresponsible thing that people expected him to do.

He wiped a hand over his face and groaned to himself, "This is definitely going to bite me in the ass."

"Well, I'm certainly not opposed to it," Loki said cheerfully. He shimmered and was once again fully dressed, hair smoothed back and altogether much too presentable. Tony had preferred him a lot more rumped.

Tony reached down to pull his pants back up. He felt calmer, weirdly. Or, well, maybe not so weird. "Not exactly what I meant, Valmont."

Loki's jaw tightened a little. "You could at least save the regrets and self-recriminations until *after* I've left."

"Okay, that's fair," Tony conceded immediately. Then he thought about the sorts of things that Loki usually believed, and it was his turn to frown. Very carefully, he said, "Let's just be real clear first. Any self-recriminations would have nothing to do with... who you are..." and that was as close as he dared imply to the absolute mess that was Loki's self-image, "and everything to do with the huge numbers of human beings you've killed."

Loki's eyes flicked over Tony, seeming to linger on the dark bruises on Tony's upper arms. His mouth twisted unhappily then he made an acknowledging noise. Tony picked his t-shirt up off the floor and put it back on, then stood up so he was at least mostly on a level with Loki. He needed a shower. And to brush his teeth.

"Hey," he said, and patted Loki on the arm. "Thanks."

Loki's mouth twitched in amusement. "Believe me when I say, it was my genuine pleasure."

"Should hope so," Tony muttered, and stretched his limbs. "Oh, my knees are not going to thank me for that later. We can't all be eternally young, you know."

"You flatter me," Loki said with a smirk. "Not that I'm complaining; feel free to keep doing it. Are you planning on doing more coding tonight, or shall we move this to your bedroom?"

Tony looked over at the computer and thought about it. The bedroom, missing all the little signs of Pepper's presence. "Yeah, you know, I think I'm going to do some more coding."

Loki raised an eyebrow, but said only, "I will continue seeking out Chitauri weapons. Contact me if you need my company."

"I will," Tony said softly. He still couldn't quite believe what he'd done, and the fact that it was Loki of all people he was turning to should have been terrifying... but he did actually kind of trust Loki to be there for him.

He watched until Loki disappeared, then made his way back over to the computer interface.

#

Til Someone Whispers

Chapter Summary

Tony continues to cope Extremely Well with the breakup, and has a couple of wee revelations about Loki.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is late, have been unwell.

Another team meeting. Tony was getting really sick of team meetings.

"Latest info puts the threat at months away, not years," he told them. "So, you know, it would be really good if we had some kind of defense network up and running--"

"I assume this information came from Loki," Natasha said calmly. At the sound of Loki's name, Tony tried to look intensely focused and not like he'd slept with one of their most dangerous enemies. "Do you think it's possible he was manipulating you?"

Tony made a derisive sound, because he was pretty sure that's how he'd have reacted if he had nothing to hide. "Of course it's *possible*. In context? I'm pretty sure not."

Natasha looked thoughtful. Bruce said, "How are they even going to get here? Do they have another object like the Tesseract, or some break-through in interstellar travel, or...?"

"Something about secret paths between the realms," Tony said in a carefully casual tone. He suspected Natasha would see through it, but hopefully it would work for the others. "Loki's used them before and apparently these guys know how to use them too."

Thor frowned, looking reluctantly suspicious. "It is true that there are additional pathways between the realms, known only to a few."

"There." Tony gestured vaguely at Thor. "Verification. So can we talk about what we're going to do?"

"Whatever we do, we'll do it together," Steve said firmly.

"Oh, that's great," Tony said, before Steve could really get started on some inspirational speechifying. "I'm sure all the people who are going to die will be happy to sacrifice their lives, knowing that at least the Avengers were *together*." He sneered, frustrated - this was

always the part he hated, planning ten steps ahead and having to talk the others through all the early steps. "'Together' isn't a strategy, Cap; it's a slogan. We're not going to patriotically punch our way out of this one."

"Can we have the punching as *well* as a plan?" Clint asked. "Because if Loki's involved..."

Tony managed a smile. He was pretty sure Clint was doing it mostly for show at this point, to scale back the tension, and that was probably a good idea.

"Shouldn't the Air Force be involved in this?" Bruce asked. "It's all very well to say we'll handle it together, but alien invasion seems like it should be kind of a bigger picture thing."

"Air Force, Army, everyone else's armies," Tony ticked off on his fingers. Focus on the topic at hand, not on things he wanted to hide. It sounded so easy, and yet.

"World Security Council is in talks," Steve confirmed. "The updated timeline will change things. It would still be helpful if we had some idea of numbers or weaponry."

Yeah. Tony was reluctant to push Loki too hard, because a) it would just make him clam up and b) it was obviously pretty distressing for him to talk about. But getting drip-fed information as Loki felt up to it wasn't, admittedly, the ideal process.

Tony glanced at Thor with a questioning look. Thor shook his head. "I have no further news from Asgard."

"So we've just got Loki's word," Clint said, sounding unenthused. "And no detail."

Tony sighed, deciding he might as well just switch off at this point. Steve was talking about taking the new information up the chain of command, which meant he wanted Tony to keep holding off on Ultron, which was fine because there was still coding to do and parts to prepare. Tony waited diligently until the meeting was done and then he caught Natasha's eyes so she'd stay behind.

She murmured something to Clint, then waited until everybody else had left the conference room. "What's happened?"

Tony grimaced, immediately thinking of two pretty major things. He still intended to keep the breakup with Pepper to himself for a while longer. Although he could legitimately say now that he had a rebound thing. That might not stave off everybody's concern.

That wasn't what he wanted to talk to Natasha about. "What would you say my weaknesses are?" he asked bluntly. "Specifically, if you were Loki. What angles would you take?"

Natasha cocked her head, thinking about that for a few moments. "Your morals are strong," she said eventually. "You're willing to sacrifice to protect the innocent. The best angle to attack that would be to undermine who counts as innocent."

Well, that was... disturbingly accurate. Tony hoped his face was blank enough.

"Likewise, you can be targeted through the people you care about." Natasha paused, then quirked a smile. "Then there's the intellectual appeal: the opportunity to build something new and unique, break barriers, advance technology..."

So, basically Ultron. Tony sighed, shaking his head. "That wasn't as helpful as I'd hoped."

"Sometimes it's not possible to tell if you're being manipulated or not," Natasha told him. She seemed like she was being pretty sincere. "You just have to be prepared for both contingencies."

"Yeah." Tony gave a rueful smile. "That's the plan."

--

Between machining parts and writing code, Tony's days (and some nights) were gratifyingly busy. It didn't entirely take his mind off Pepper, but it certainly helped. And when it got really bad and he couldn't quite understand how he was such a screw-up - then he could text Loki for company. Loki usually brought a bunch more Chitauri tech, and they took turns supplying the booze.

They hadn't had sex again (yet?) and Tony wasn't sure what was stopping him, or *if* something was stopping him. At the same time, he hadn't entirely wrapped his head around doing it in the first place. It was easier when Loki was there; it felt like just the two of them existing in some kind of parallel dimension of their own. Separate.

The rest of the time, Tony was stuck in the real world with a team who would be furious and betrayed if they knew, an ex-girlfriend who would be furious and betrayed if she knew, and... probably some other people who would be furious and betrayed, like the whole of New York City.

Loki seemed perfectly content to just follow Tony's lead, which would have been great if Tony knew what the hell he was doing.

Pepper called him - she wanted to meet up to talk about the company and some upcoming public events, so Tony sat through an agonizing lunch meeting in which they both studiously avoided discussing their relationship or lack thereof. Tony privately thought they could have done it by email, but he found that he couldn't turn down the chance to see Pepper in person, see how she was doing.

Pepper didn't bring up Loki, even though she was practically vibrating with tension, and Tony sure as hell wasn't going to.

Afterwards he hid in his workshop and tried to breathe calmly and steadily, or at least steadily, and yeah, he sent a message to Loki. He wound up sprawled on the workshop sofa with him, trying not to contemplate anything too hard.

"You have romantic relationships on Asgard, right?" Of course, there were dangers to just letting his mouth run without supervision. "You've got marriages, and Thor's dating Jane, so you must do."

"Of course we do," Loki said, looking at him like he was an idiot. It was weirdly reassuring.

"So if you sleep with your friends, do you have something that's just for romantic relationships?" Tony sat up straighter as he put a few things together. "Oh - it's hair stuff, isn't it? Hair cuts are a big deal and all."

Huh. While he'd been blowing Loki, he'd moved Loki's hand to his head because a little hair-pulling was a great addition to oral sex, and Loki had made the most *delicious* sound. At the time Tony hadn't thought much about it except to note that it was an emphatic yes for hair-pulling, but thinking more in an Asgardian context...

"It need not be romantic," Loki said, a little warily. "Children have their hair cut by their parents. Adults may have theirs cut by family as well. The important thing is the intimacy of the relationship."

"Right," Tony said. And then, because his subconscious hated him, he said, "Would you... want... that? From me?"

Loki was very still for several long seconds, then he said flatly and dismissively, "I doubt I would believe it."

"Oof," Tony said, drawing away from Loki a little. "Well, good to know where I stand, I guess."

Loki made a frustrated noise and shifted around on the sofa to face him better. "That's not what I meant."

"It's okay, just-- forget I even brought it up, I was just wondering; I do that, I wonder things." Tony stood up, intending to pace, but Loki grabbed him by the wrist.

"If it was anyone, it would be you," Loki said intently, and that stopped Tony short. "But you are still grieving your woman, and-- This is difficult enough - and yes, I'm aware you have been more than generous with me. That doesn't mean..." Loki closed his eyes for a moment, then looked up at Tony. "It is difficult."

Tony let himself be tugged back down to the sofa. Yeah, he wasn't exactly in a position to be complaining about a lack of trust. And it wasn't like Loki didn't have good reason to be a little wary. They were both probably a bit too messed up to be jumping into something right now.

He didn't know if he even *wanted* anything right now. Let alone with Loki. He wanted the option, he wanted to be wanted. That wasn't the same thing.

"It's okay," Tony mumbled, leaning against Loki's side. "This is good." Aside from the minor detail that he didn't really know what 'this' was... besides maybe treason. Well, he'd probably crossed that line a while back.

There was a pause that was probably Loki weighing up different responses, different avenues of conversation. And then, "I have... looked into some writings. On the Post-Traumatic Stress

you talked about."

A gesture of trust.

Tony made an encouraging noise, not wanting to push too hard. Although while Loki was looking things up, 'racism' was another pretty relevant topic. Come to think of it, Loki had done that big speech in Germany during the invasion; how much did he know about World War II? Had one of his mind-controlled minions suggested the symbolism, or was it just coincidence?

"On Asgard, healing is not something that stretches out over time. You simply attend the healing halls or the soul forge, and it is done."

"Yeah," Tony said, now that he saw where this was going. "Unfortunately there's no magic wand for human brains. It takes work. Sucks, I know."

"I'm not Midgardian," Loki said tensely. But he wasn't Asgardian, either - not biologically - so he was probably thinking about that and feeling all inferior.

"Question," Tony said. He put his hand on Loki's thigh, pressed against his own, and gave a reassuring rub. "You don't have to answer, just think about it. Does no one on Asgard *really* have mental health issues, or do you just not call them that?"

Loki's frown was audible. "What do you mean?"

Tony shrugged, deliberately casual. "Well. Are there people who... change a lot from who they used to be? Or people who act cursed, or whatever?"

There was silence for a while. Finally Loki said, "I... I don't know."

"That's fine. Like I said, just a question."

"You're not as subtle as you think you are," Loki said, but he sounded thoughtful, so Tony chalked that up as a victory.

"Subtle's not really my thing," Tony said, smiling. "I like a bit more flair."

"A *bit*," Loki repeated derisively. "You like to announce yourself with music blaring in that suit of yours."

Tony had to laugh. "Oh, you of *all* people do not get to complain to me about showboating. Who is it who stands around delivering dramatic monologues?"

"Merely expressing my thoughts," Loki said faux-innocently. Tony twisted a little to see Loki's face and was unsurprised to see the smug, playful grin there.

Grinning back, Tony retorted, "You fight like you're auditioning for La Scala Ballet."

Loki smirked at him. "You're simply envious that my style is more graceful than yours."

"Hey, I'm graceful," Tony protested. "My suit corners like a dream."

"Nimble is not the same as graceful," Loki corrected.

Tony floundered for a moment trying to think of something really witty to come back with, but his brain was blanking on him. Instead he figured he might as well double-check protocols and make sure he didn't get himself stabbed during sex or something equally mood-killing. "So I shouldn't mess with your hair, right? I mean, you can grab mine, you're in fact welcome to, we established that, but I'm not Asgardian so it's not quite the same. I should leave yours alone? Or is it just the cutting that's a no-no?"

Loki stared at him for several seconds, long enough for Tony to panic that just asking the question was somehow offensive. Then Loki moistened his lips and slowly said, "I... would not ask you to cut it, no. But if you like, you could..." Trailing off, Loki raised his hand and ran it gently through Tony's hair.

Loki, Tony realized with a jolt of insight, had no idea what the fuck 'this' was, either.

"Okay." Tony's heart was pounding. It was a little ridiculous. "Okay." It was a lot ridiculous. Tony reached up, flicking his gaze continually between his hand and Loki's eyes. He half-expected Loki to stop him. Instead Loki sat very, very still, and Tony slid his fingers into that slightly wavy, ink-black hair, and all the way down to the ends of the soft strands.

Loki let out a very shaky breath.

"That was embarrassingly wholesome," Tony said, because he felt weirdly shaky himself and all he'd done was *stroke Loki's hair*, for crying out loud. "I feel like I'm thirteen again. I mean, talk about keeping it above the belt, that was above the collar. Is that even a thing? I'm making it a thing."

"You're talking nonsense again," Loki said, but it lacked any bite.

You love me, Tony nearly joked, but stopped himself in time. He missed Pepper suddenly, and felt like he was betraying her somehow even though she'd been the one to... to make the call. This, whatever 'this' was, was all too easy. It shouldn't be, should it? Not if he loved Pepper properly, *enough*, enough to do the right things.

"Stop thinking," Loki murmured. He pulled Tony back against his side, an arm curled behind Tony's shoulders, around and up - to softly play with his hair. Tony swallowed, feeling warm. For once, miraculously, he managed not to say anything to ruin the moment.

--

Pepper must have found an apartment, because Tony came upstairs from a coding binge one day and the rest of her stuff was gone. He stumbled when he noticed it; stopped and stared around the living room, then immediately went to the bedroom to double-check.

Everything, gone. From the little ornaments that she'd chosen to her share of the wardrobe. Just blank and empty space.

Tony went to the bar and had a glass of whiskey, drinking it much faster than it deserved. He pulled his phone out to text Loki, then saw the message from Pepper. Whoops.

He hung his head, realizing that this would be a great time to know whether he and Loki were friends or something more. There was a hell of a difference between 'hey, buddy, I was feeling bummed about my ex-girlfriend moving out' and the same thing to a new... whatever.

He grimaced to himself and put the phone back in his pocket.

Maybe it was time to let the team know about Pepper. As awkward as it was going to be, he couldn't keep putting it off forever.

He didn't understand how he wanted to text Loki so much. It was terrifying, how fast he'd gotten addicted to having Loki around. Loki who had brought an army to New York - albeit not all that willingly - Loki who had hurt them all in so many ways, Loki who was sharp and brittle and vulnerable and utterly enthralling.

Loki was damaged in such *familiar* ways, and Tony desperately wanted to figure out how to put those pieces back together because then maybe he could do the same thing to himself, but what if he couldn't? What if he couldn't help *either* of them? Maybe instead of giving Loki the same chance Yinsen had given him, he'd just ruin them both.

Well, this was a fucking cheerful mood. Tony poured himself another finger and a half of scotch and tossed it back. "Jarvis, who's on the team level?"

"Doctor Banner and Agent Romanoff, sir."

That was... possibly the worst combination of people. Tony could still remember what Bruce had said to him about Loki and it was eerily close to Romanoff's line about undermining who counted as innocent.

In the end, Tony went back to the workshop.

--

He wasn't sure how long he'd been there - vaguely remembered stumbling upstairs to eat and nap a couple of times - but Tony was working hard when there was a sudden thump behind him.

He yelped, jerking around in his chair. There was a pile of black leather on the floor and the smell of something charred. Then the pile said distinctly, "Ow."

"What the fuck," Tony said, eloquently.

Loki groaned, pulling himself to his feet and oh thank god it was only his *clothes* that smelled charred. The right side of Loki's outfit looked like it had spent some time on a barbecue grill.

"Wow," Tony said, impressed. He got up, ready to lead Loki across the workshop. "Need to collapse on the sofa?"

Before he got his hands on Loki, Loki jerked away from him and snarled. Tony took a couple of rapid steps backwards, holding his hands up in the air to show peaceful intentions. He could take a hint. "Hey, hey, easy there. I don't know what happened but we're all friends here, remember?"

"Barbarians," Loki muttered furiously, starting to pace. "Misbegotten *brutes*. One of a kind, immeasurable power - and they melt it down for a thrice-damned *crown*."

That... was probably a good thing, to be honest, but Tony wasn't idiotic enough to say that out loud. "So... bad day?"

"A word of advice," Loki snapped, heavy with angry sarcasm. "If someone ever offers you untold and ancient knowledge, try to find out if the passing aeons have rendered it *completely and utterly worthless!*"

Tony swallowed, not liking the furious rise in Loki's voice. He slowly lowered his hands. "You know what, I think I'll take your word for it."

Loki whirled, coat flaring. He flicked his hand like throwing bolts of magic, and Tony flinched - expecting the wall to explode - but instead the bolt unfurled mid-air into what looked like a map of a solar system. Loki threw another, another, muttering angrily as he did so, a name with each one. "Muspelheim, Vanaheim, Svartalfheim--"

The maps overlaid each other in some weird optical illusion; if Tony shifted his head slightly it flicked between the layers. They were shimmering and translucent like his own holograms, but hurt his eyes in a way his own tech never did. It was like the layers were in the same place but out of phase with each other.

"Nothing," Loki muttered, "nothing, *nothing*." He was agitated, ill-contained; even when he stood in one place he was still moving, muscles restless, shifting. *Swaying*, Tony realized; Loki was exhausted, barely holding himself upright.

Tony didn't know what the best thing to do was, here. Not get too close while Loki was jumpy and half-feral, yeah, but how to calm him down? Maybe draw Loki into conversation? "If it was so powerful," he asked, "why'd they melt it down?"

"Too *dangerous*," Loki sneered, voice full of scorn and anger. He slurred a hand through the maps, wiping them away with a noise of frustrated rage. "No one *listens*, they won't listen."

Tony cocked his head, sensing an opening. "I'm listening," he prompted.

Loki gave a low, dark laugh. "Lies," he whispered, "lies, lies. You would take a lie and name it friend and never see the knife coming."

No, this was all kinds of Not Good. Tony took another step backwards, giving Loki his space. "Look, do you wanna lay down on the sofa maybe, get a little sleep--?"

"As if I am such a fool," Loki declared, and *what*. Loki had never, not even when they were awkward drunk enemies at the start of all this, hesitated to sleep near him. Tony had kind of

assumed the guy had some magic way of detecting threats, but either way, for Loki to balk at it now made worry and hurt curl together in Tony's gut.

Loki was starting to stumble on his feet, obviously exhausted. He made a motion as if to teleport away, but only swayed. He scowled heavily and pulled out his green cellphone; pressed some numbers and disappeared.

Tony stared at the empty air half in shock. It occurred to him that it hadn't been anger fuelling Loki's little rant, or not only anger. It was fear. For all the good it did him, figuring that out. No, he was basically helpless, just standing by while Loki had a... whatever that had been.

And the only thing he *could* think of came from the utterly cold and calculating part of his brain. The part that made him open his mouth and say, "Jarvis, did we get the number he just dialled?"

"Yes, sir," Jarvis said with satisfaction, and brought it up via holographic projection.

Along with a map.

It took Tony a moment to realize what he was seeing. Avengers-- no, *Stark* Tower, the company part under the Avengers levels. One of the floors that had been converted to storage. But there were still phone jacks and Loki must have commandeered one for a... teleportation reference point?

Maybe that was where he'd intended to go all along; maybe he'd hit the wrong buttons to appear in Tony's workshop, or just hit the last-used number, or something. Showed up accidentally, in a moment of danger, and then realized it wasn't where he wanted to be.

"Don't be an idiot," Tony muttered to himself, scrubbing a hand over his face. They weren't... a thing like that. Too many trust issues and other issues and of course Loki wouldn't think this was a safe place, Tony had used the Time Out Protocol on him. When that had happened Loki hadn't been able to get away fast enough.

Without letting himself think too hard, Tony headed for the elevator. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, restless, as the elevator travelled. It slowed to a stop, and then... nothing happened. Tony frowned. He put a hand on the closed door and said, "Jarvis? Override, open up."

The doors opened. Tony wasn't sure what he'd expected to see, but it wasn't Loki butchering what had probably started out as quite a nice leather sofa. Loki was stabbing at it over and over, bits of gray leather and stuffing flying, while making a sound that reminded Tony of a big cat growling.

Tony stepped out of the elevator, looking around. If he'd had any doubt about what was going on here, the contents of the room dispelled them. There were books, an empty glass, a potted plant--

For some reason it was the potted plant that did it. Tony started to laugh, helplessly and with a touch of hysteria. Loki was living in one of the sealed floors of Stark Tower, in secret, with

a fucking *potted plant*.

Loki whirled, something finally penetrating his sofa-murdering haze. He bared his teeth at Tony, knives in hand. "How did you get here?"

"I *live here*," Tony said incredulously. "...And apparently, so do you."

Why hadn't Jarvis told him? Loki must have prevented it, somehow, and that was just as unsettling as every other time Loki had messed with Jarvis.

Loki wavered for a moment, knives dipping, then he jerked and raised them again. Okay, bad day. Very bad.

Tony held both hands out in front of himself, open palm, no threat. "Easy, Wüsthof. It's okay. We're friends."

Loki moved faster than he had any right to do, striding to Tony to hold a dagger at his throat. He was breathing heavily. "Why do you keep *calling* me that?"

Tony could feel the sharp tip of the blade but he fought to keep the fear from his expression. Flatly he said, "No stabbing. We've talked about this."

Loki snarled, and the knife tip slipped; Tony could feel a drop of blood trickle down his throat.

Time Out, he thought to himself; *Time Out, Time Out*, but that was just going to terrify Loki more. "Loki, think," he said, trying to keep his voice calm. "I'm human, Midgardian. I can't hurt you."

"Midgardian," Loki repeated, looking unsure. The tip of the knife stopped pricking against Tony's skin. Loki's breath was starting to even out a little. "A weak people. Born to be ruled."

Tony bit his tongue hard to avoid saying something that would get him stabbed. He couldn't quite resist a muttered, "So much for calling me your king."

"Thanos is my king," Loki snapped back, eyes fever bright in a way that usually signalled danger. "I will bring him the Tesseract. He will-- oh. He will be so *angry*..."

Well, shit. Tony shivered, feeling helpless. It had been a long time since he'd seen Loki this bad, and he was not equipped to deal with it. He didn't know what he was meant to do, here. "Loki. Listen to me. The Tesseract's not here. You don't work for Thanos. You're going to stop him, remember?"

"Little Asgardian lie," Loki murmured, swaying a little. "I should be honored he has a use for a monster like me."

"No, you should kill him," Tony said, surprising himself with how hard his voice came out. There was a hot, protective anger thrumming in his blood. Loki wasn't perfect by any means, but no one deserved what had been done to him.

Loki lashed out suddenly, grabbing Tony's t-shirt and slicing through it. Tony yelped, words on the tip of his tongue until he realized he wasn't hurt. Loki had only cut his t-shirt. And was... staring at his chest?

Face lit up in blue. Staring at the arc reactor.

"*Glowheart*," Loki breathed.

Tony felt sick with wasted adrenaline. "I liked that shirt," he said, because otherwise he was going to unleash a string of swearwords on Loki and there was still time for him to get stabbed.

"Look at you," Loki said, voice low and dangerous. "You've come into the lair of the beast without so much as a single weapon."

"I've got a weapon," Tony said steadily. "I just don't want to use it."

Loki looked confused for a moment, before his eyes lit with realization, and then fear. "And now we come to the truth of it," he spat back at Tony. "What do you think you can threaten me into doing?"

"I'm not actually here to threaten, this time." Tony reached out deliberately slowly and gave Loki's hand a gentle push, just enough to nudge the knife a little further away. "Come on, you know me. We're friends. You remember?"

"Friends *lie*," Loki said bitterly, but he seemed like he was coming back to himself.

Tony took a breath and threw caution to the wind. "But I didn't take Thor's side, did I? I attacked him as well, you saw that."

Loki paused at that, and looked at Tony's arc reactor again. The remaining knife shimmered away into nothing. "King..."

"That's me, King of Stark Industries." Tony managed a smile. Still moving slowly, he grasped Loki by the forearm. "You wanna go sit on the sofa with me?"

Loki gave an obedient, jerking nod and let himself be guided to the remains of the sofa. Presumably in another room there was a bed. Tony sat them both down and draped an arm across Loki's chest.

"You're in Stark Tower," he murmured, figuring it probably wasn't the best time to call it anything to do with the Avengers. "Where you've apparently been living because you're a cheeky son of a bitch. You just got back--"

"I did tell you," Loki mumbled.

"You did *not*," Tony said in disbelief. "I think I would have noticed--"

Loki gave a sleepy smirk. "More or less."

Sneaky bastard. Tony shook his head. "We'll leave that for now. Try to relax."

"Can't..." Loki looked like he was falling asleep anyway. "Have to be ready. The monsters..."

"We'll fight them," Tony promised. "But not yet, okay? We're going to be ready. There's time for a nap."

"Can't," Loki whispered again, but he didn't struggle. Eventually, his eyes drooped closed.

Christ. Tony took a steadying breath. What the hell had Loki been *doing*? Well, besides visiting other realms hunting magical something-or-others that had been melted down.

"You're a worry," Tony murmured quietly. "What am I going to do with you?"

Loki made a tiny sound but didn't otherwise respond. Mostly asleep, then.

"Can't believe you're living in my damn Tower," Tony told him. "Freeloader. You're lucky you're cute."

--

After a while, Loki jerked awake. He looked around but his eyes quickly focused on Tony.

"Hi," Tony said, helpfully.

Loki scowled. "You're an idiot."

"Well, good morning to you too," Tony retorted, pretending to be indignant.

Loki pulled away from him slightly. "I could have killed you."

"One: you came to me." Tony lifted his chin, refusing to be intimidated. "Two: you weren't going to hurt me."

"Neither one of us believes that," Loki said, voice laced with danger and scorn.

Tony huffed and folded his arms. "Excuse me, of the two of us, which one has been living here in a secret lair, rent-free?"

Loki paused, then frowned at him in open confusion. "What has that to do with it?"

"Nothing, I just felt like bringing it up." Tony made a show of rolling his eyes. "And you called *me* insolent."

Loki gave a smile that covered uncertainty with smugness. "I thought it would be funny."

It *was* funny, but Tony would be damned if he'd give Loki the satisfaction of seeing that. "Rent-free," he repeated. "Squatter. Manhattan real estate doesn't come cheap, you know."

Loki's smile turned sly and his fingers came to play with the sliced open neck of Tony's t-shirt. "Perhaps you'll let me make it up to you... my king?"

Tony sucked in a breath, pulse quickening. Looked like it was really time to make that decision about whether he was going to sleep with Loki again, sober and fully aware of what he was doing.

The offer was tempting as hell. But it was a sharp change of mood, so what was Loki doing? Trying to distract him? Seeking comfort, maybe? Or, no; reassurance. Checking the friendship after holding a knife to Tony's throat.

"I don't know," Tony said slowly, studying Loki's face. "I wouldn't want to reward bad behavior."

A small smirk played over Loki's lips. "Then I'll have to be very, very good..."

Testing a theory, Tony lifted his hand and brushed it softly through Loki's hair. Loki froze, eyes flaring wide with surprise.

"You're *blushing*," Tony said gleefully.

"I am not," Loki said, going pinker.

Tony found a smirk of his own, feeling a little evil. Two could play at this game. He took hold of a handful of Loki's hair and tugged, watching the rapid succession of expressions on Loki's face - shock, outrage, desire. "What happened to 'my king'?"

Loki stared at him for a moment like he wasn't quite processing. Tony raised his eyebrows, prompting. "Well?"

Loki scowled, still pink-cheeked and eyes dark. "I was the rightful king of Asgard, I will not *demean* myself to you."

Ooh, defensive. Tony let his smirk widen, then let go of Loki's hair. "Okay."

Loki blinked, obviously taken aback. "What?"

"Okay," Tony repeated agreeably. "Wanna cuddle?"

"You are maddening," Loki said, flopping back against the damaged sofa dramatically.

"Secret lair," Tony said again. But he was getting off topic. He clasped his hand around the side of Loki's neck and leaned in to kiss him, open-mouthed and soft. "Here's how this is going to work," he said quietly. "If you're not well, I'm going to try to help. Because we're friends, and that's what friends do. Understood?"

Loki shifted, looking displeased. "You're--"

Tony moved his hand up to give another tug to Loki's hair. "Is that understood?" he repeated, louder.

Loki gasped slightly. "Y-yes," he said breathlessly.

"Good." Tony let go of Loki's hair and ran his hand through it a couple of times, soothingly. "You've got someone who'll look out for you. But you've got to let me. It's a two-way street."

"I am not well practised at it," Loki admitted, and gave a quiet sigh when Tony lowered his hand.

"Yeah, I know the feeling. We've both gotta work on it." Tony kissed him again. "You got a bed stashed away here?"

"In the next room," Loki confirmed, looking hopeful.

Time to decide. There were no excuses, there was no secret advantage to be gained from this; Loki had made it obvious that he knew humans had different customs and was willing to be friends without sex... albeit with a lot of frustrating teasing. It would horrify everyone, Tony knew. Although apparently, maybe not surprise them. But this was too important to be just about playing down to expectations.

Then there was... Loki did seem a little more confident with them having had sex. Tony had always sought comfort in more physical ways and it wouldn't surprise him if Loki was similar. But there were no backup plans for this, no safeguards or contingencies. It was just... them.

"Question," Tony said, rubbing his fingers against the heel of his hand. "You said once that Asgardians used to come to Earth and bang the groupies. How do you not, you know, break people's pelvises?"

"By being very, very careful," Loki said dryly. "Which they weren't, always." He paused and met Tony's eyes. "But I have another option. I can... shift into a weaker form. Which will not injure my bedmate."

Shapeshifter; Tony remembered with a jolt. The words sunk in and he realized - Loki was literally making himself vulnerable. It was hard to catch his breath for some reason. Part of his brain was already whirring away on implications and ramifications and he tried to shut that part down.

The shapeshifting... that decided him. He wasn't so self-absorbed that he didn't realize that was an incredible risk for Loki. It probably felt utterly nerve-wracking to make himself vulnerable like that. The least Tony could do was offer the same.

He kissed Loki again and said, echoing Loki's words to him, "You're remarkable."

Loki ducked his head and muttered, "That is not the word most use to describe me, I assure you."

"Most people are idiots," Tony said. "I *know* you agree with me on that one."

Loki quirked a smile at that, not arguing.

"So..." Tony cleared his throat, feeling strangely self-conscious. "Shall we take this to the bedroom?"

Loki stood up, and pulled Tony up after him, straight into a kiss. "Let's," he murmured warmly, and led the way.

It was surreal, to see a massive king-size bed contrasted against the bland walls and carpet of Stark Industries office space. The sheets were green, of course. Tony stripped off his ruined t-shirt and licked his lips. This was a lot weirder sober.

"You don't have to." Loki was eyeing him.

Tony stepped forward; clasped Loki's neck and drew him in for another kiss. "I want to," he said, more confidently. He watched the tension ease out of Loki's body; watched Loki shimmer and make his clothes disappear; watched Loki get onto the bed and sprawl, exposed and unself-conscious.

Tony kicked off his shoes, stepped out of his jeans and underwear, and followed Loki onto the bed. He kissed his way down Loki's body, used hands and mouth to properly express the awe he felt, until Loki was breathing heavily and pulling at the sheets. Then Tony reached blindly for one of Loki's hands and moved it to his scalp. Loki's grip tightened; Tony hummed lightly and was rewarded by the arch of Loki's body and an exultant cry.

After a few moments, Loki tugged him up. Tony gave himself over to Loki's hands and talented fingers, letting them draw him to his own bliss. He smiled, and ran a shaky hand through Loki's hair. Loki let out a soft sigh of contentment.

"Remarkable," Tony murmured again.

Loki smiled back, and together they drifted off to sleep.

#

Makes You Wonder How the Other Half Die

Chapter Summary

Tony actually socializes. With people. Who aren't Loki.

...And a bunch of socializing with Loki, too.

Chapter Notes

Sorry, took me longer than I expected to catch up after being sick. Will try not to have such a delay before the next chapter!

Huge thanks to all of you who've been leaving comments, they are lovely and make me feel lovely. <3

Tony woke before Loki, and he slipped as quietly as he could out of the bed. He dressed - well, half-dressed, that t-shirt was a write-off and he should really start billing Loki for those - and went back out to the other room to satisfy his curiosity.

Books on a low table: PTSD, mental health, ethics and philosophy, mythology (oh right... trickster archetypes), and for some reason one about migratory birds. The potted plant, obviously flourishing, with lush, variegated leaves. A standard Stark Industries office desk. The murdered sofa. A fruit bowl full of pears.

What was interesting was what he *didn't* see. None of the artifacts they knew Loki had stolen, no creepy magic tomes or scrolls of wisdom or whatever. All that stuff must be tucked away in that personal pocket dimension Loki seemed to stash things in.

Tony liked to think he'd find a pocket dimension useful, but realistically, he'd probably just leave everything laying around the workshop anyway.

He hummed lightly to himself, flicking through one of the mythology books curiously. It didn't actually seem to be about trickster gods, but instead gods of fertility. There were so many jokes that could be made there, but Tony figured baiting Loki about his mythological exploits might not go down so well. The stories were a bit... drastic.

A bitten-off cry from the room with the bed caught his attention. Tony tossed the book down and immediately headed back in. Loki still looked asleep, but Tony definitely hadn't imagined that sound. He hesitated, not sure if he should wake Loki or not.

Hmm, Loki had been pretty exhausted... maybe better to let him sleep for now. Tony slowly left the room, casting a look over his shoulder as he went.

He really was overdue for a shower. And some clean clothes. And maybe some food. Tony sent a quick text to Loki's phone so it wasn't like he was just disappearing without a note, and took the elevator up to the penthouse.

When he was clean, dressed and fed, he tipped his head back and addressed Jarvis curiously. "Jarvis, I'm guessing you had an instruction not to tell me Loki was staying here?"

"I did, sir," Jarvis confirmed.

Tony thought about the elevator and tapped his chin thoughtfully. "If I had told you to override that instruction, would you have been able to?"

"I believe so. However, that would have required knowledge of the very thing you were asking about."

"You tried to give me a clue, didn't you?" Tony gave a wry smile. "During the prank war, when you were only supposed to shift your vocal range around people who lived in the Tower."

"That is correct, sir," Jarvis said.

For something that had started as a straightforward vocal interface, Jarvis had grown really very smart. Tony wondered how much of that was the skill of his programming, and how much was that weird magic touch he supposedly had.

"Is there anything else you're not supposed to tell me?" Tony asked.

A brief pause. "I have two hundred and seventy-three commands registered not to address particular topics with you--"

"From Loki," Tony clarified, not needing a history of how many times he'd told Jarvis to shut up on one thing or another. Come to think of it, if anything it was a surprise the number was so low.

"Sir, I have no commands registered from Mister Silvertongue."

No commands registered, not 'no commands not to tell'. Tony cocked his head, suddenly interested. "Wrong question, huh? Okay, let's see..."

Filter out commands from key sources? Himself, the Avengers, Pepper... Ouch, that still caused a pang. Anyway, it wasn't reliable, because Loki could shape-shift. Wait, how did Jarvis interpret that Allspeak thing that Asgardians did? Humans heard it as their native language, but Jarvis' native language was the code he was programmed in.

"Okay, J, filter out any commands given in English. Is there anything *else* you're not supposed to tell me?"

"Indeed, sir," Jarvis said, sounding pleased. "My assistance has been requested on a number of information-gathering tasks, most pertinent of which is a command to identify a link between the deceased in Georgetown, Kentucky and employees of Stark Industries."

Tony gave a triumphant hoot, a broad grin breaking over his face. "Got you now, sneaky."

"I have also been consulted on the nature of Care Bears, and I have been instructed not to inform you of requests to identify well-reviewed books on a number of topics."

"Got it," Tony said, lining that up with what he'd seen in Loki's secret lair (he was absolutely going to keep calling it that). "Anything I should worry about?"

"I believe the topics to be fairly harmless."

Tony dropped onto the sofa, sprawling out comfortably. "And these commands don't register as coming from Loki?"

"No, sir," Jarvis confirmed.

"Who do they come from?"

Jarvis paused. "They do not have an associated voice print. I am unable to answer that question, sir."

Now *that* was interesting. Loki definitely had his own voice to human ears. Was it to do with being heard in code? "Does Thor have a voice print? Hang on, rephrase. Do you have a voice print on file for Thor?"

"I do not."

"Huh." That was a potential security problem, if Jarvis couldn't distinguish Loki from Thor. Not that Loki couldn't just shape-shift into Thor anyway, but at least weird Asgardian magic hang-ups might stop Loki from doing that for strategic advantage. If there was no difference in their regular speech, that... could be a problem.

Security for the Ultron network didn't hinge on voice print anyway, but this gave Tony some new factors to consider. He had to keep his eyes open. Just because he'd slept, was sleeping, with Loki... he couldn't let anything slide because of whatever their relationship was. He had to be alert to any signs of trouble.

"Oh, we're going to have some fun with this one," he murmured aloud.

--

Tony wound up in the workshop updating the security protocols for Ultron; that was where he was when Loki, looking much more rested, found him.

"Sleep well?" Tony asked, closing the program files down.

"More or less," Loki said. "You don't need to close that on my account."

Tony smiled at the attempt. "Nuh-uh. You don't get to work on Ultron without the supervisor here, that's still the rule."

Loki gave an exaggerated pout, but instead of arguing pulled up a chair. "Have you done much but work on that program?"

"No, that's basically it." Tony tilted his head and gave Loki a more serious look. "So are we going to talk about that thing where you called Thanos your king?"

"Preferably not," Loki muttered, looking away with a grimace.

"You're still getting..." Tony gestured vaguely. "Kind of lost in your head sometimes, huh?" That was probably obvious, nothing had happened that would stop it. "Anything in particular set it off?"

Loki looked back at him, brows lightly furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Well, my stuff happens with certain smells, or when I'm feeling helpless in some way, or..." Tony shrugged, carefully casual. "A few different things, really. I thought you might have noticed a pattern."

Loki drew back, starting to scowl. "And, what, I should tell you so that you can use it against me?"

"See, like when you're scared you get angry and defensive," Tony said wryly. "Patterns."

"I'm not afraid of you," Loki snapped, glaring at him.

"Of me? No. Of the way I talk to you?" Tony raised his eyebrows. "Just a theory."

Loki started to respond then stopped and closed his eyes. He let out a very controlled breath, then opened his eyes again. "I am... not accustomed to being addressed with such... insight."

Tony reached out and patted the side of Loki's arm. "I know. It's weird when someone comes along who sees through all the crap."

Pepper had done that, for him; seen through all the bullshit and the masks he put around himself. Maybe he should have left it as a working relationship, but he couldn't bring himself to regret the time he'd had with her, not really. If it weren't for Loki he'd probably be coping a lot worse than he was.

Admittedly, from another perspective he *was* coping 'worse'.

Eh, questionable life decisions were practically his main industry at this point.

"To answer your question, I'm not certain," Loki said quietly. "Sometimes it seems as if..."

Tony waited a moment, then gently prompted, "What?"

"If... there is something which threatens my life," Loki said, obviously choosing his words carefully. "Or if there is something which reminds me too closely of how I felt when I fell from the Bifrost."

Tony sucked in a quick breath, knowing he had to tread carefully here. "Both of those are pretty big deals."

"Not to a warrior of Asgard," Loki said, but it lacked the bite Tony would have expected. "I should not cower from battle."

"Uh, quick question, *do* you actually cower from battle? Because I've never seen you back down from one. If what you mean is that you sometimes get side effects, well, that's something different."

Loki paused, looking like he was taking some time to absorb that. "You have a point," he said, almost curiously.

"No need to sound so surprised," Tony joked lightly.

"You're right," Loki said, and got a wicked grin. "How do you say it on Midgard? Even a stopped clock is correct twice each day."

Tony laughed, reassured that Loki felt well enough to mercilessly mock him. "Ouch. I'm wounded, Gargamel."

Loki put a hand over his heart. "My deepest apologies, Glowheart."

That reminded Tony that Jarvis had said Loki wanted to learn about Care Bears, and that wasn't a train of thought he wanted to encourage. But there was something he'd been wanting to ask about, while Loki was feeling somewhat forthcoming. "Loki... the Chitauri. Did I really kill them all, or were you just trying to make a point?"

Loki hesitated for a moment, eyes wide. "Truly, I don't know. I know all the soldiers from the hive-ship you destroyed were killed, but I don't know how tightly their hives are linked to each other."

"Huh." That was not an answer Tony had expected, though in retrospect it made sense that Loki wouldn't be an expert on the Chitauri. He wasn't sure what he felt about it. Hopefully they weren't all gone... but at the same time, he didn't want them to be a threat Earth might have to deal with. He didn't know what made them obey Thanos, whether they were conflicted about it - there were still those chains to explain, did they send prisoners to battle on the front lines or were the Avengers reading too much into it? Tony had too many questions, and no answers.

Loki leaned forward a fraction. "Does it really trouble you?"

Another good question. Tony frowned, thinking about it. "...Yeah. Yeah, it does. I'm not sorry I took the nuke through the portal; war is war and I had to protect the city. But if a whole species is wiped out...? I don't know if they had art, if they had culture; if they had scientists

we could have got along with; if they had tacky street vendors, any of it. Maybe they had really awesome music, we don't know. And if they're all gone, we'll *never* know."

Loki looked confused and unhappy and thoughtful, all mixed in together. "And what if they had none of those things? What if they were just savage brutes that only know how to fight?"

Well, it didn't take long for the conversation to shift to frost giants. Tony moistened his lips, trying to think about his words before letting them out of his mouth. "Well, first I'd be a little sceptical - someone invented those guns they were using. Even without the guns, you can't spend *all* day fighting - they must do something with their downtime; do they pass down stories of ancient battles, do they have complicated funeral customs? If they speak, if they have language, then they must have some kind of culture."

Loki didn't like that answer much, hunching in on himself and looking for all the world like a kid who didn't understand why Tony was being so cruel. Tony was trying not to remember the battle footage, the collective howl (of grief?) the Chitauri soldiers had let out when the first of their Leviathans was killed.

"I'm not saying they're great people," he told Loki, hoping that he was taking the right tack with this. "But they're people. And that means they have value."

Loki got up out of his chair, turning away from Tony's gaze. "That's a ridiculous notion."

"Is it?" Tony got up as well, making sure to make plenty of noise as he approached Loki. He rested a hand on Loki's shoulder, on the brass-colored epaulette. "What if I knew one of these guys? And he was smart... and funny... and determined..."

"Stop," Loki breathed, but he didn't move away.

"You can't change the past," Tony said. He tugged a little on Loki's shoulder, but Loki resisted the pull. "But people like you and me? We can change the future."

"What a charming sentiment," Loki sneered, and that wasn't really a surprise but Tony hoped he'd at least think about it.

"Next time you're looking stuff up," Tony said, dropping his hand back to his side, "you should add 'racism' to the list. Might be useful."

"You've said that before," Loki said, and finally turned back to face him. "The difference is, for all your petty squabbles, you are all still Midgardians. The Jotunn are not simply another kind of Asgardian, they are another race entirely, a barbaric and repugnant one."

Tony slid his hands into his pockets, raising an eyebrow at Loki. "Kinda weird then that your Allspeak thing translates it to 'race' instead of 'species', isn't it?"

Loki jerked back as if he'd been slapped. For a moment he looked almost betrayed, until his expression smoothed out into something bland and controlled. "A minor quirk of the Allspeak proves nothing," he said flatly. "And this conversation is a waste of time."

"Just think it over," Tony said. As Loki was drawing breath to argue, he added quickly, "You know what's really interesting? You don't have a voice print."

Loki blinked, taken aback.

"Yeah, see, *I* hear you, the others hear you, we hear Thor, but Jarvis doesn't register a voice print." Tony deliberately dropped the mention of Thor in so he wasn't singling Loki out as doing something strange. "Something to do with the way you Asgardians speak."

"Interesting," Loki said, a little warily but mostly good-humored.

"Exactly what I thought!" Tony stepped back to the computer interface and called up a couple of files. "See, there's my voice - and there's Steve's - you can see the sound waves. And then an Asgardian..." The file he pulled up just showed a mess of code. "Direct communication, no vocalisation. At least nothing that looks like any kind of vocalisation a human would recognise."

"I'm not sure I see the point of this," Loki said, staring at the holograms.

"No point," Tony agreed easily. "I just thought it was interesting. Gives a little more insight into that thing you call a language."

Loki reached out to play with the holograms, shifting them back and forth. "It seems to understand me well enough."

"Yeah, I've noticed," Tony said dryly. Loki shot him a playful grin. Tony rolled his eyes but couldn't help smiling back.

--

They hung out in the workshop for a while, chatting and throwing holograms at each other, which was at least a step up from throwing food at each other. Eventually Loki decided to go hunt more Chitauri loot and Tony figured he should probably show the Avengers he was still alive.

On the team level, Tony ambled out of the elevator like he was there every day. It looked like Clint was teaching Bruce some card tricks. "Hey, great, poker? Deal me in," Tony said cheerfully.

"Tony," Bruce said in surprise. "It's, ah... it's been-- a few days."

"A few days, he says." Clint snorted. "We thought you might have gone trekking to Kilimanjaro to seek enlightenment or something. Good to see you're not being a greasy hermit anymore."

"For now," Tony said. "I might head back to the hermitage later. Anyone else around, or is it just you two troublemakers?"

"Nat and Steve are in the gym," Clint said. "You actually just missed Thor, he's gone home to see if they have any more intel for us."

"Here's hoping," Tony said with a frown. He should have stopped in the penthouse first for coffee; he couldn't deal with the coffee machine on the team level and he hated the teasing he got when he tried. Come on, everyone put their mitts all over that thing, it was downright unsanitary.

With forced casualness, Clint asked, "Any news from our local supervillain?"

"No." Tony pretended he didn't see Bruce grimace and look down at the table. "It's been pretty quiet. I think he's mostly rounding up Chitauri tech still."

"Well, at least he's making himself useful," Clint muttered.

"Listen... Tony." Bruce looked up at him with earnest eyes. That expression really ought to be banned, it was completely unfair. "About... what I said--"

"Forget about it," Tony said, waving a hand in the air. "Water under the bridge. We're all good. Now is someone going to deal me in or do I have to do everything around here?"

"You want to play poker with a marked deck?" Clint said, arching his eyebrows.

"That sounded judgemental," Tony informed him. "And why not? I'll have you know, I can still kick your ass."

"This I have to see." Grinning, Clint gathered up all the cards and started to shuffle.

--

Obviously, Clint wiped the floor with both of them. Still, Tony had achieved his goal of socializing with teammates, and he'd managed not to get in a fight with either of them while he did it. Bonus points.

Afterwards, he retreated to the penthouse to drink coffee and wallow in guilt. It had taken Clint a long time to deal with what Loki had done to him during the invasion. There was something about how they'd apparently had the Tesseract in their heads as well? Which Tony didn't entirely understand, but he'd seen that Clint was screwed up from it and that was enough.

It was all very well to say that Loki had been tortured and maybe influenced by the scepter - Tony wasn't sure on that one; he'd seen the same half-crazed look in Loki's eye plenty more times since then - but Loki had still chosen his course and there were plenty of people with good reason to be pissed about it.

...When the time came, Tony was really going to enjoy blowing this Thanos guy to bits.

Enough. Either keep sleeping with Loki or stop, but there was no point dwelling on it like this. He'd done what he'd done and that was just how things were. And there was something to the Asgardian view of things; if Tony was honest, he could admit to himself that sex was not the real problem. He'd gotten attached.

Maybe he should take some time off, review a few things from R&D, clear his head. That wasn't a bad idea. Next month they were breaking ground on the reactor for Colorado, he could check over the plans for the ceremony. There was plenty he could do. He might not like how company stuff reminded him of Pepper, but he did have responsibilities.

Just... maybe down in the workshop. Not the empty penthouse.

--

"Falling down the mountain..." Tony crooned to himself as he typed up some notes on the next model phone prototype. "End up kissing dirt. Look a little closer... Sometimes it wouldn't hurt."

The elevator doors opened and huh, now that Tony thought about it he had a vague recollection of Jarvis announcing that someone wanted access. He waved a distracted greeting while the music kept playing.

'Playing in the dirt, we find the seeds of fun...'

"How's it going?" Bruce asked, sounding like he was stalling.

"I'd say pretty well. Just reviewed the entire R&D backlog." Tony wiped his hands against each other. "I'm on a roll. Tell me you've got some science for me."

"Actually..." Bruce grimaced. "Well, Pepper dropped by my office the other day."

"And there goes my good mood." Tony sighed and gestured to send off the file he'd been working in. "Let me guess. She wanted you to check up on me."

"Just to let her know how you're doing," Bruce said, which, yes, was the very definition of 'check up'. "I haven't mentioned anything to the other Avengers, but--"

"Are you sure that's how you want to play it?" Tony asked, seeing an opportunity. "I think you should probably tell them. I give my full permission. No, wait, you're just going to tell me I should do it myself. I forbid you to tell them. It must be kept a closely-guarded secret."

Bruce gave a faint little smile. "To be honest, they all mostly suspect. Once the tabloids found out Pepper was staying in a hotel..."

That had probably been kind of inevitable, but Tony made a face, resenting the hell out of it anyway. He was surprised the Comms team hadn't got in touch; Pepper must have addressed it with them. She probably wanted them to tread a little more carefully than Tony would have bothered with.

"Let me know if there's anyone I need to sue the pants off," Tony said, only half-joking. "And you can tell Pepper I'm doing fine. Not 'fine' fine, I just mean... look, I'm eating regularly and maintaining basic hygiene, I'm a functioning human being."

"Do you... want to talk about it?"

Tony paused uncomfortably. What could he say? 'Yeah, I'm living down to every worst expectation you guys ever had of me.' "You know what, I think I'll pass."

"Yeah." Bruce gave a small, unsurprised laugh, then sobered again. "Are you... I mean, have you seen..."

Tony sighed. "Loki?" At Bruce's nod, he shrugged. "I don't know what you want me to say here. He stops by now and then to drop off Chitauri tech--"

"What is he getting out of that?" Bruce mused.

"Haven't figured it out yet," Tony admitted. He took a moment to stretch his back. "So that's happening, Ultron's on hold until Steve pulls his head out of his ass--"

"That's a bit unfair," Bruce butted in. "I know you think Loki can be trusted, but--"

"Whoa, whoa, stop the train." Tony held both of his hands in front of him, palms out. "Loki can categorically *not* be trusted. I never argued any different. The key is to know that and build in safeguards."

Bruce looked confused and it was kind of adorable how innocent he was. "But... I thought you..."

"Bruce." Tony shook his head, smiling with a tinge of sadness. It had been a long time since he'd had the luxury of thinking of the world in such simple terms. "You can think someone's attractive without trusting them. For example, I'm sure I haunt Nick Fury's nighttime fantasies, and he doesn't trust me as far as a hamster can throw me."

"I was a lot happier not thinking about Nick Fury's nighttime fantasies," Bruce said dryly.

Tony smirked a little. "I can go into more detail--"

"Please don't," Bruce said, holding up a hand to forestall him. "I get your point."

Tony grinned, but decided to have mercy. He beckoned Bruce closer and called up the incomplete program file for the Ultron network. "Let me show you some of the checks I've put in, you'll see what I mean."

--

Later on, Tony wound up on the sofa with Loki, surrounded by empty boxes of Chinese takeout. "I've got to take you to a restaurant sometime," he said as he thought of it, "a really nice one. You'd have to shape-shift-- is that a bad thing for me to ask, is it offensive?"

Loki paused briefly then decided, "Not for you."

"O-kay." Tony raised his eyebrows but didn't argue. "I'll take it. So then, restaurant, yes? Expensive food, being waited on, the whole experience?"

"If you'd like," Loki said, smiling faintly in a way that suggested he thought Tony was being weird again.

"I would," Tony said, a little surprised to realize how true it was. But that wasn't anything out of the ordinary, he liked to treat his friends, plus it was always good to try to convince Loki that Earth had good things about it.

Yeah, that sounded weak even inside his head.

Loki pulled him close and said, "You spoke of recognizing patterns, for when your mind... rebels against you."

Tony tipped his head back to peer up and across at Loki. "Yeah. It took me a while, but I worked out the kinds of things that sometimes set it off. Mind you, sometimes I still can't tell what did it, but I'm getting better at it."

"Hm." Loki's brow furrowed a little in thought.

"You seem to be... how can I put this." Tony bit his lower lip briefly, drawing it into his mouth. "A little more comfortable, talking about it?"

"Hardly," Loki said with a grimace. "But I do recognize that you are... making an effort to be open with me."

Vulnerable, Tony translated mentally. He leaned his head against Loki's shoulder. "Yeah. I'm trying. And I know you're trying too. I appreciate it, I do."

Loki's voice dropped a little. "Does knowing what might cause it give you any aid in defeating it?"

"Well, I can try to avoid those things. But sometimes they're not all that avoidable." Tony raised a hand to scratch at his jaw. "You know what... I think it does. It helps me kind of brace myself... I'm not explaining this very well."

"It's fine," Loki murmured. "You brace yourself. That makes it easier?"

"Sometimes," Tony said. He had to admit, sometimes it... didn't. That wasn't a real helpful answer. "Don't your books talk about this stuff?"

"They prattle on," Loki said, sounding disgruntled. "I'd rather hear it direct."

"I think I'm flattered," Tony said lightly. God, he was not equipped to be someone's reference on all things PTSD. He tended to just muddle through, he wasn't an expert - he was *so far* from being an expert it was ridiculous, for crying out loud.

"When aren't you?" Loki said with some amusement.

Tony huffed a small laugh at that. "Fair," he conceded.

Loki was silent for a couple of breaths, then said, "I've given thought to your question. About whether Asgard has these illnesses of the mind."

Tony twisted to look at Loki again. "Yeah?" he said gently.

Loki looked... young. Young and uncertain. "I'm not sure... There are stories of old, that are supposed to be about curses, but they were never broken. It could be the strength of the caster, or it could be that they are stories which have grown distorted over time. Or..."

"It could be that maybe they were sick," Tony finished. "Which would mean it *is* something that happens to Asgardians."

Loki bit his lip and looked away. "Even so, to be so frail..."

Tony choked a little and thumped himself on the chest. "I'm sorry, did you just call yourself 'frail'. Because the shit that you have survived-- I'm not even blowing smoke here, I am dead serious. You're one of the toughest son of a bitches that I know, and I know some pretty tough people."

Loki frowned at him. "I'm not talking about physical strength--"

"Neither am I." Tony shook his head. "And I'm pretty sure I don't know half of what you've been through, because you're - understandably - a little reluctant to talk about it. 'Frail' is the last word I would use to describe you, believe me."

Loki's eyes moved over Tony's face, absorbing his expression, his seriousness. "I wasn't actually fishing for compliments," he finally said, giving a half-hearted smile.

"It's never the wrong time for compliments," Tony said, going along with the diversion.

Loki's smile turned a little more genuine. "Oh, by all means, don't let me stop you."

"Well." Tony climbed up to straddle Loki's lap, and kissed him lightly. Because that was a thing he could do, unbelievable as it was. "You're incredibly handsome. Almost as handsome as me." Loki snorted in amusement. "And you're devious, which is sometimes a real pain in the ass but still secretly fun."

"Do continue," Loki encouraged, grinning at him.

"You're witty." Tony kissed him again. "A menace in a fight." Another kiss. "Unbelievably talented."

Loki clasped a hand round the side of Tony's neck, pulling him in for a longer kiss. "You know," Loki murmured, "some people might think you had an ulterior motive for such flattery."

"It's not that ulterior," Tony said dryly.

Loki laughed softly, but picked Tony up and dumped him back on the sofa. "Save your enticements. I have a lead to pursue. You no doubt have some task to work at far later than

you should."

"Buzzkill," Tony accused, but he was mostly just playing. Loki's smirk said he knew it.

"Pleasant dreams," Loki said, ever-so-sweetly, and headed for the elevator. Tony started picking up the empty Chinese boxes, smiling to himself.

#

Flash, Savior of the Universe

Chapter Summary

Loki and Tony make some satellites! Steve's got a bright idea, and Thor's got some learning about Midgard to do.

Chapter Notes

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

Bruce must have confirmed to the team that the tabloids, on this rare occasion, were right, and Tony and Pepper had broken up. Steve made a point of inviting Tony to join them for meals. And movies. And any other excuse under the sun.

Tony went along to some of them; it was a good idea to show team cohesion and all that, and he didn't want the team to jump to assumptions about his mental state, at least until he got the Ultron network up and running. Speaking of which, he didn't like the way Natasha was looking at him lately, all serious and thoughtful. Then again, that meant she didn't feel a need to pretend; if she was hiding her suspicions, then he'd really need to worry.

Thor came back from Asgard all somber and talking about a giant stormcloud gathering, which was apparently a metaphor for ginormous alien armies and also *not* what they wanted to hear. The only upside was that Steve got a little closer to admitting that a satellite defense network was actually a good idea. If Tony hadn't pissed off all his Air Force contacts he'd just launch it with them, but since S.I. stopped selling them weapons... well, his stock with them wasn't too high. So, getting Steve to agree to it was the option that involved the least yelling.

Loki... well. Loki still had a decent streak of mischief in him, as evidenced by him leaving a bright red Care Bear toy, with an image of the arc reactor embroidered on its chest, sitting on the sofa. Tony put it in his bedroom to make sure none of the Avengers saw it, and then Loki saw it in his bedroom and smirked at him over it, and the damn thing was stupidly cute. Tony kind of hated it and loved it in equal measure.

Loki was also really good at keeping Tony from brooding. It was just... *easy* to spend time with him, in a way that Tony wouldn't have expected. Sure, he knew that he connected with Loki to a degree that should probably worry him, but there were still plenty of minefields-- the key point was probably that he knew what the minefields were and actually bothered to tread carefully around them.

Tony wound up spending an inordinate amount of time curled up with Loki on the workshop sofa, rambling about everything and nothing at all. The day came, though, when all the satellite parts were ready, and the code was as secure as Tony could make it. One way or the other, he needed a decision from Steve.

"We can't keep stalling forever," he told Steve, who he'd dragged into the conference room for a one-on-one. "We've got a limited window to get these things in orbit before this army comes."

"It's just..." Steve shook his head. "Trusting Loki is a big ask, Tony."

"I'm not asking you to trust Loki. I'm asking you to trust *me*." Tony gave as sincere an expression as he could. "Trust me when I say that Loki wants this guy's head more than any of us. Trust that I'll build in safeguards. Trust me to know what I'm doing, and what's at stake."

Steve still hesitated, but he'd been worn down enough by Thor's grim predictions that he finally agreed. Not that Tony had been relying on that, but it certainly made things a lot easier. He didn't have to hide going to Thor to arrange a starting time.

Unexpectedly, making the arrangements also made it feel undeniably *real* in a way it hadn't before. Tony kept it together long enough to make a polite retreat from the team level, then hid away in the workshop to have a quiet panic attack. It didn't last too long, comparatively, but it left him feeling shaky and nauseous and just kind of *off*.

" N equals TLR over W_x ," he muttered to himself. "Shear strength times length times displacement, over soil weight times distance... uh, distance from center of gravity to center of failure arc."

Concentrating on engineering and formulae helped settle his nerves. Tony kept reciting them under his breath until he didn't feel like his heart was thumping right up against the arc reactor anymore. Okay. He was okay. They had this.

He blew out a long breath and scrubbed his face. Okay. Distraction. He called up the hologram of the car he'd been idly designing in bits and pieces of free time. Yeah, that would do.

He immersed himself in that and didn't pay attention to how much time was passing; at some point Jarvis passed on Steve's invitation to a team dinner, and Tony declined. He was on a roll by then, just how he liked it, everything coming together smooth as jazz.

Finally he raised his head when he heard Loki's voice cut across the workshop; "Your familiar said you haven't eaten."

"Jarvis isn't my familiar," Tony said, but he abandoned the hologram and crossed the room to meet Loki. "J, secure the workshop."

"Isn't he?" Loki challenged with an amused smile and a sparkle in his eye. He swung something Tony could only describe as a *sack* onto one of the nearby tables and opened it up. There was a hunk of meat that looked for all the world like a pork roast, crackling and all, and some leafy vegetables on stems that reminded Tony vaguely of silverbeet.

"Is this more alien food?" Tony asked with interest. "I'm really impressed that my digestive system seems to-- whoa!" He flinched back against the table as Loki pulled out a knife, and

realized a little too late that it was probably for cutting the meat.

Loki's smile faded at Tony's reaction, and his voice came out a little flat when he answered. "Yes. These are from Alfheim. The beast is a herbivore something like what you call a rabbit, but larger. And the female has a pouch to carry its young."

"A marsupial," Tony said in surprise. He moved closer as Loki sliced the meat, trying to show that he wasn't afraid. "Other planets have marsupials, that's kind of cool."

"The skin is dried and salted," Loki continued explaining as he sliced, "so it may not be quite to your taste, but I thought you'd at least like to try it."

"We have crackling on Earth, too," Tony said, reaching out to swipe a piece, "and it's delicious." He took a bite, feeling the familiar crunch, except-- "Holy fuck, that's salty. You weren't kidding."

"I did warn you," Loki said, smiling a little again.

"I know." Tony ate some more, not sure which of them he was trying to spite, then tried some of the meat. It had an intense, gamey sort of flavor. Kind of like venison, he mused, but stronger.

Loki finished slicing and stabbed a piece to bring to his own mouth. The knife wasn't *that* unnerving; he'd just taken Tony by surprise, earlier.

Tony tried one of the pseudo-beets next, and was pleasantly surprised. It was crisp and sweet, like really fresh lettuce. "You eat this raw?"

"It develops quite a bitter taste when cooked," Loki said, spearing himself another piece of meat, "so yes, we tend to prefer it raw. Sometimes cut up and mixed through a spiced sauce."

Now that he'd started eating, Tony found that he was actually quite hungry. He finished the beet-thing he was working on and ate several more slices of meat, with only the occasional question to Loki about where the food had come from. He finished with a second of the beets, its crispness refreshing after the intensity of the meat.

When they'd both eaten enough, Loki vanished the sack away back to his pocket dimension or wherever, and proffered a pair of glasses. "Mead, ale, or wine?"

"Wine," Tony said, because that meat was crying out for a good red. "Thanks."

Loki poured for both of them and set one of the glasses on the table in front of Tony. Tony took a sip and sighed with contentment. "Oh, this is good."

Loki took a drink of his own, and settled back against the table. "Is there a reason you hadn't eaten, or were you just distracted with that?" He nodded over at the wireframe hologram of the car.

"Little from column A, little bit from column B," Tony admitted. "I had a bit of a rough patch earlier but I'm fine now. I meant to text you, actually; we're a go on the Ultron satellites."

"Ah," Loki said, perking up but at the same time looking slightly apprehensive. "Tomorrow?"

Tony nodded, keeping his thoughts on Loki's expression to himself. "Thor's going to meet us down here at eight."

Loki grimaced. "We really don't need Thor for this--"

"Non-negotiable," Tony enunciated. He suspected that Loki was actually right - that whatever trick Loki was going to try to pull wouldn't be something that Thor could easily stop - but it was worth it for the slim chance of extra security. Plus, maybe being in a room together without killing each other would help Thor and Loki a little.

Okay, probably not, but slim chances were kind of an Avenger thing.

Tony turned so the table was at his back and he was leaning next to Loki. "What about you, how was your day? You seem in a pretty good mood - at least until I screwed it up."

Loki frowned at him. "I can hardly fault you for having misgivings at the sight of a blade in my hand."

"Well, it's moot now, you put the knife away." Tony gestured like he was sweeping that part of the conversation aside. "C'mon, what have you been up to?"

"I'll admit, my day was fairly productive." Loki took a drink of his wine, then said with perfect casualness, "Oh, and there's now a Chitauri glider up on your deck."

Tony had to laugh at that delivery. "They're called flying jet-skis," he insisted. "And how did you even get one there-- you know what, don't tell me, it's more fun trying to imagine. I'm not going to wake up to a bunch of tabloid photos of you flying it up there, am I?"

"Not this time," Loki said, smirking lightly, "but I'll remember that idea."

"Menace," Tony said fondly. He should probably plan some excuses in case Loki actually meant that. For a mischief god, Loki had been awfully well-behaved lately... with the minor exception of the Care Bear.

"Just making sure I keep you on your toes," Loki said, with a friendlier version of his shark smile.

"How selfless of you," Tony said dryly. "Well, at least that's one jet-ski less on the streets." He bumped his arm against Loki's, enjoying the contact. "Hey. Thanks."

Loki turned slightly towards him, passing his wine to his other hand. "It is my pleasure," he said softly, and reached up to gently run his hand through Tony's hair.

Tony leaned into it, letting his eyes drift closed for a moment. The way Loki did it, he could kind of see how Asgardians thought it was so intimate. Oh, it was nice to be touched with such care.

Loki's hand dropped to the side of his neck, squeezed gently and then fully lowered. Tony smiled up at Loki, warmed. He really, really enjoyed spending this time with Loki. It should be concerning but he couldn't bring himself to care that much. It was too relaxing to be with someone who *got* it, who didn't need all the layers and masks, who just accepted him and all his screw-ups.

Tony had some more wine, then said, "Tell me. That book on birds, is that for something or were you just interested?"

"I was interested," Loki said. "Nothing on Asgard migrates, the realm is not big enough. These creatures cross worlds to find a place that suits their needs... it's fascinating."

Oh, hello, subtext. Tony raised his hand to brush lightly through Loki's hair, and Loki let him. "We're stubborn, here on Earth."

"Evidently so," Loki murmured.

Tony leaned in and gave him a one-armed hug. Loki's leather gave a soft little creak. Tony smiled at it and sipped some more wine.

--

The next morning they came down to the workshop together, which maybe wasn't the smartest move. Thor, already waiting for them, looked from one to the other with a slightly wary expression.

Tony decided the best option was just to ignore it. "Morning!" he said cheerfully. "Are we all ready to make history?"

"Good morning," Thor said, a little slowly. He was still looking between them, but didn't say anything about it.

"You can take that look off your face," Loki said defensively. "No, I did *not* misuse myself."

"I didn't say you did," Thor protested.

"It was clear enough what you were thinking--"

"Oh, good god," Tony interrupted. "It's too early for you two to be going at each other already. Just, everyone calm down and think nice thoughts."

Loki looked at him with an arched eyebrow, and Thor looked at Loki. Tony closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Satellites," he said, and opened his eyes again. "We're going to make some satellites. Loki, tell me what you need."

"Self-fulfilment," Loki said thoughtfully. "Freedom. Thanos' heart on a stake."

"Funny guy," Tony said, not quite able to fight off a smile. "I take it you can do your magic thing without accessories, then."

"If I needed anything, don't you think I might have mentioned it before now?" Loki pointed out. "Start putting one together, and I will enchant it as you do so."

"Okay," Tony said. He took a measured breath. This was... incredibly weird.

They wound up setting up with Loki and Tony standing on opposite sides of one of the workbenches, Tony screwing and wiring pieces together while Loki slowly ran his hands over each part. It left faint markings behind, reminiscent of the marks on Thor's hammer. Thor was seated at the end of the workbench, watching Loki intently.

Tony focussed on his safeguards as he worked. No attacks in atmosphere. Restricted access codes. All the rest. Supposedly, holding these things in his mind would help secure them in the 'nature' of the finished satellites. Tony was sceptical, but he was willing to jump through a lot of hoops for the sake of a slim chance.

"So you've done this before, right?" he asked Loki, in one of the lulls when he didn't need to concentrate as hard.

"Attempted to enchant an entire intelligent network of satellites in the hopes of defeating a Titan?" Loki said archly. "No. Worked with a craftsman, yes."

"It did not go well," Thor chimed in.

Loki didn't spare him a glance, but his body posture tightened up. "On the contrary," he said with a false smile, "it went extremely well. Up until Hodur got his hands on my arrows, that is."

"You would make light of what happened?" Thor said incredulously, rising from his seat. "Loki--"

"Deep breaths, big guy." Tony stabbed his screwdriver into another screw, watching Thor from out of the corner of his eye. "You let him get to you way too easily."

Loki snorted. "I've been telling him that for years. Don't expect him to start listening now."

"And you," Tony said, pointing the screwdriver at Loki, "do you have to deliberately provoke him? We're going to be at this for a while and it would be a *lot* easier if I didn't have to worry about family drama turning physical."

Loki shot him an unimpressed look, which morphed into a sly smile. "Apologies, my king."

Tony probably should have seen that coming. He bit his lower lip, hard, and looked down at the guts of the satellite laid out before him. He could practically hear Loki trying not to snicker.

"I am not cut out to be the responsible adult," he muttered, tightening the screw he'd been placing.

"You are very familiar with my brother, Tony," Thor said, resting his hands on the end of the bench.

"I am not your brother," Loki snapped.

Tony sighed and rubbed his face.

"You may believe that," Thor said, "but it does not change that I see you as my brother, that I love you as my brother - though I may not particularly like you lately."

That... actually wasn't the worst thing Thor could have said, which was kind of impressive. Tony picked up another screw, flicking his eyes between his work and Thor and Loki.

"How generous of you," Loki sneered. "I suppose I am meant to be grateful that your heart could extend to one such as I?"

"No," Thor said. "It is the way of things. It always has been. How could I ask for gratitude for something which comes so naturally?"

Loki's body language was getting *really* tense and defensive. Tony put down his screwdriver and said, "Thor, buddy, let's take a five minute breather, okay?"

Loki looked at him in surprise. Thor looked at both of them then slowly nodded. "I will go fetch a drink to quench my thirst."

Loki waited until Thor was gone, then said, "You didn't have to do that."

"I know," Tony said, choosing not to draw attention to the wet sheen over Loki's eyes. "But it didn't seem like that was what you wanted to hear."

"I don't need to be patronized," Loki snapped.

Tony raised his eyebrows. "Okay, then. Thor loves you, deal with it."

Loki flinched minutely, then gave a ragged laugh. "Perhaps. But he loved me rather more when he thought that I was dead."

Tony walked around the workbench and tugged Loki into a hug. "C'mere. I'm sorry. I know I don't get it, I never had a brother, although I had a pretty good run of disappointing my dad. Would it hurt so much to just... let Thor in, just a little?"

"It would be pleasant," Loki murmured, "up until the next time he remembered I am a frost giant, and that all my motives must be war and destruction, and that I cannot be trusted--" His voice shook, and he broke off.

"I kind of thought that might be it," Tony said with a sigh. Unfortunately, Loki kept *doing* things that were all about destruction. It was a vicious, self-fulfilling prophecy.

He let go of Loki and stepped back a little. "You wanna keep working on this today, take a longer break, or what?"

"I can continue," Loki said. He reached out and clasped the side of Tony's neck. "I will... try to argue a little less."

Tony wished Loki was doing it for himself rather than him, but he'd take what he could get.

--

True to his word, Loki was a little more subdued with Thor, a little more guarded and distant. Thor didn't look like he preferred it, but it was at least less likely to escalate into a full-on fight.

A couple more times, Thor's words cut a little too close to Loki's issues, and Tony found himself stepping in to talk things down. Overall, though, it probably went as well as it could have.

As Tony was screwing the last panel onto Satellite One, Loki dropped his hands to the table and made a faint noise. Tony shot him a sharp look.

"I'm fine," Loki said, voice oddly distant.

"You're *swaying*," Tony told him.

Loki blinked and took a firmer grasp of the workbench. "I am well. I simply forgot what it feels like."

Thor took a breath, then caught Tony's look and shut up.

"Why don't you remember while sitting down," Tony suggested, coming around the bench to take Loki by the arm. He led Loki to the workshop sofa, frowning when Loki stumbled slightly along the way.

"I wish you could feel it," Loki breathed, surprisingly cooperative as Tony pushed him down onto the sofa. "The power we have created... it's a wondrous thing, Warsmith."

"Is this going to happen every time we finish one?" Tony asked. He could feel Thor's eyes on them and tried not to be too self-conscious.

"Yesss." Loki blinked slowly, pupils heavily dilated. "Oh, it's glorious."

"You still look like you're about to fall over." Although, Tony reflected, if Loki fell over now, at least he'd still be on the sofa.

"I think not," Loki said, looking haughty and also extremely high.

Trying not to laugh, Tony looked over at Thor again. "Is this normal?"

"In truth, I do not know," Thor admitted, watching Loki with a frown. "I wasn't there the last time he... did this. He doesn't seem worried..."

Yeah, Tony figured that if it was something new then Loki would be freaking out more about feeling out of control. That frown of Thor's didn't sit easily with him, though. The last thing they needed was Thor deciding this was an inappropriate use of magic and overreacting.

"It's a simple surge of power," Loki drawled, leaning heavily against the back of the sofa. "It will pass soon enough."

"Okay," Tony said. It felt weird not to be sitting beside Loki, sharing the sofa, but that would probably look strange in front of Thor. He wandered back to the workbench restlessly. The satellite didn't 'feel' any different to him; only the faint markings on its surface told him anything was out of the ordinary about it. Besides in the technological sense; it was efficient and compact to a degree that was light-years ahead of the competition.

Craftsman. Tony grimaced slightly, thinking about it. He didn't like the idea that there was anything magical about his creations. What he did took *skill*.

"Tony," Thor said, jolting him out of his thoughts. "You are still spending much time with my-- with Loki, aren't you?"

Tony tried for a casual shrug. "Now and then," he said ambiguously.

Thor didn't look fooled; maybe because it hadn't been much of a question in the first place. "And do you talk much about magic when you do?"

Uh oh. The last thing he needed was for Thor to think he was leading baby brother astray. "Not really," Tony said carefully. "We talk about a bunch of stuff. Life on Asgard, weird foods from across the realms, how to beat a Chitauri army, the usual."

Thor tilted his head a little, prompting. "Life on Asgard?"

A heavy sigh came from the sofa. "I can still hear you, you know."

Tony quirked a smile, then shrugged at Thor's look. "Some of the cultural stuff is really interesting."

"I see," Thor said, a little too grimly for Tony's tastes. "I imagine so."

Loki called over, "Yes, it's nice to discuss matters with someone who doesn't constantly ridicule me for not measuring up."

Thor set his jaw and all but rolled his eyes in Loki's direction. "Of course, such ridicule never bothered you so long as it was at someone *else's* expense. I suppose it's different when you're the one making the jokes?"

"When others made them, they weren't *jokes*," Loki snapped, rising from the sofa to stride towards them.

Tony suspected it was a case of which came first, the chicken or the egg. Loki definitely had a sharp tongue when he wanted, and had no doubt dished out his fair share of nasty comments. Whether he'd been provoked or was doing the provoking, probably it was too long ago to know.

"Of course," Thor said, voice thick with sarcasm. "Whereas your words were always so kind and gentle."

"Thor," Tony said, interrupting before they got too hostile. "Not helping."

Thor just switched his angry gaze from Loki to Tony. "I notice you say that a lot more on Loki's behalf than on mine."

"Uh, yeah." Tony rolled his eyes. "You want to be on better terms with Loki, your words aren't achieving that. Loki wants to push you away and he *is* achieving that. I don't need to tell him anything."

That earned him a glare from Loki but Thor subsided a little, possibly recognizing the truth of his words. Tony turned to face Loki more fully.

"How are you now?"

"Recovered," Loki said a little tersely. "As scintillating as this conversation is, perhaps we should continue? We have much to do."

Yep, Loki was feeling like himself again. Tony turned back to the workbench. "Okay, can you give me a hand with this thing to get it closer to the freight elevator?"

Loki picked the satellite up as though it didn't weigh anything, and Tony exhaled through his teeth. He kept forgetting how strong Asgardians were. The satellite might be much smaller than anything else up there, but it was still plenty heavy and unwieldy enough. Loki lifting significant weights while calling him 'my king' might actually make his head explode.

Tony showed Loki where to put the satellite, then they set back up on the workbench to start another one. Thor had his seat at the end of the bench, and looked like he was mulling a few things over. That was good, probably.

The early satellites were probably alright, Tony figured. If Loki made a play too early Tony would stop building satellites and that didn't suit Loki's purposes. It made more sense that trouble would hit either just before or just after launch, when the whole network was ready. That didn't mean he wasn't keeping his eyes open, but... he figured they had some time, still.

They got about a third of the way through the second satellite, then Loki insisted they stop so that Tony didn't skip dinner. Going by the paleness of Loki's face and the slight hints of exhaustion in his expression, Tony guessed that the magic part was more intensive than Loki wanted them to realize.

Thor left to eat on the team level. Loki looked at Tony and said, "You should probably do the same."

"So they don't think I'm eating with you?" Tony shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with it. Plenty about the satellites we could be talking about."

"It will be easier for you if they are less suspicious," Loki pointed out. "And I believe Thor will attempt to speak to you in private."

Yeah, that was definitely going to happen. Tony sighed. "Alright. But it was your idea."

Loki clasped the side of his neck briefly. "You know how to contact me if you need anything."

Tony was not above making the cheap joke. "Anything?"

Loki grinned at him, then summoned his cellphone and disappeared.

With a considerable lack of enthusiasm, Tony headed for the elevator to take him up to the team floor.

--

Steve was actually the one who cornered him first. "I was thinking, two sets of eyes are better than one..."

"Not if you want to wear off-the-shelf sunglasses," Tony said.

Steve shot him a look but didn't acknowledge the comment. "*Anyway*, what if someone else was in the workshop with you while you and Thor and Loki are doing this... thing?"

"That's a terrible idea," Tony said, shaking his head. Not just because he didn't really want the other Avengers seeing how he interacted with Loki, but because it was a genuinely terrible idea. "Okay, backup, I get it, but - Thor and Loki basically spent today one snarky comment away from going at each other. Adding another person into that mix is just going to make Loki feel ganged up on and make him even touchier."

"That... makes some sense," Steve said, looking like he was thinking it over. "What about Natasha?"

Did Steve not hear what Tony had just said? "Natasha is one of the few people who's openly manipulated Loki, and you want to put her in a room with him and *not* have him get defensive?"

"Alright," Steve admitted, "I can see how that might not work."

Tony spread his hands in front of him. "Bruce is out because of the Hulk, Clint's out because he won't be able to resist poking at Loki with sticks; the only real option would be you, and no offense, Steve, but Loki doesn't respond well to big, muscular blonds who are loved by the people."

"None taken," Steve said, with a confused sort of smile that said he wasn't sure whether that was a compliment or not.

"I know you all think I just love to take risks," and that brought up painful thoughts of strawberry-blonde hair, "but I do actually put some thought into these things, Steve. I got Loki to agree to Thor, let's just take the win and quit while we're ahead."

Steve didn't like it but he didn't really have any more arguments. Tony clapped him on the shoulder and walked back out to the dining room.

Thor at least let Tony finish his meal before pulling him aside. "I would know what your relation is to Loki."

Oh boy. "Chill," Tony said, making calming motions with his hands. "Yes, we're friends, but even if we weren't I'd still be trying to make sure you two don't level my workshop."

Thor's eyes went wide and oh, that was a good point, Tony hadn't really admitted that much to any of the other Avengers.

"You mean, you call him a friend?" Thor said doubtfully.

Tony narrowed his eyes briefly, absorbing the implications of Thor's phrasing, then shook his head. "I mean, *we're friends*. Goes both ways."

"But how..." Thor looked so confused. "After the injury to your arm, surely..."

Tony took a breath, reminding himself that he had to get through this without Thor guessing Loki had been the one to heal his arm. "That was a big problem, I'm not gonna lie. Extremis helped, getting it fixed helped. And he was genuinely sorry. He gets a bit... you might have noticed, when he's freaked out he gets angry, starts seeing everything as a threat--"

Thor was shaking his head. "He is not cursed, Tony. He is manipulating you--"

Tony ground his jaw for a moment, then forced a friendly smile. "Sooo, fun thing about Midgard: down here, people don't need to be cursed to have mental problems. I don't know about Jotunheim but apparently there are some old stories on Asgard about people whose curses were so powerful they couldn't be broken - or maybe they just weren't curses in the first place? Food for thought. Anyway, I know from being manipulated and this isn't it."

Thor's brow furrowed and he stared at Tony. "You have... curses that aren't curses? How does that work?"

Tony laughed; had to laugh, so he didn't cry. Great... now he had two of them. "The same way bodies sometimes get sick or injured... our minds sometimes get sick or injured. For some of it there's medicine that can help with the symptoms, some of it you've just got to try to heal yourself. I've got one of those, the injury sort, from the things that happened when I became Iron Man."

Thor looked genuinely flabberfaced. "And you're sure this was no curse?"

"One hundred and ten percent," Tony said with perfect sincerity.

Thor blinked several times. "I have never heard of such a thing. I... I must think on this." He frowned, turning somber. "Nevertheless, Tony, you must be cautious with Loki. He is still dangerous, and it would still be easy for you to say something which is not proper, for one of Asgard."

"He might stab me and I might lead him astray," Tony summed up. "Got it."

"I must speak to Jane," Thor mumbled, starting to move away.

Tony called after him. "Hey, Thor. That other thing... the f-word. Maybe don't mention that to the other Avengers, yeah?"

Thor raised an eyebrow at him but said, "I see no reason to make trouble where none exists."

Tony kind of thought that trouble *did* exist in his closeness to Loki, but he sure wasn't going to argue that.

He headed back to the penthouse and took a thorough shower, then pulled on some sleep pants and a t-shirt and sent a text to Loki. It might have been a tad suggestive. Then he got on the bed and got comfortable.

Loki arrived only moments later, with a drawled, "Fancy finding you here."

"Well, hello." Tony grinned up at him. "Cultural question. All your life and death duality of existence stuff is just for Asgardians, correct? It's not a problem for me to make stuff *and* be a warrior and whatever else."

"That's right," Loki said, cocking his head slightly.

"So if I was, say, on the receiving end of anal sex, that wouldn't be a problem like it would for an Asgardian warrior."

Loki's expression took on a new intensity. "That's right," he said again. "Are you... do you..."

Tony's grin broadened. "Well, you know. I thought it might be fun."

Loki climbed onto the bed, on all fours over Tony's body. "I should warn you," he said with a smirk, "I have put a great deal of thought into how I might go about this."

"Oh, I was hoping you'd say something like that," Tony breathed.

Loki shifted his weight; brought a hand up to tug, ever so gently, at Tony's hair. He leaned down and kissed Tony; soft at first, then more intent. "I do enjoy you," he murmured.

Tony smiled, gazing up at him. "Feeling's mutual."

Loki kissed him again, then let go of his hair. With a brief shimmer, Loki was nude. Tony really wished he could learn that trick. "Have you oil?" Loki asked.

"Top drawer." Tony pulled his t-shirt off and shimmied out of his sleep pants. In retrospect, bothering to put them on after the shower had been kind of pointless. "How do you want me?"

Loki paused at the drawer, looking him over with glittering eyes. Clearly, enunciating every word, he answered, "Every way you'll have me."

Tony licked his lips at the blaze of arousal that rushed through him. This was such a terrible idea and god, he wanted it. "It's been a while," he said, a little hoarsely, "so I might..." His mouth was dry. He gave up on words and got onto his hands and knees.

It was easier this way for more than one reason; he didn't know what his expression would give away if they were face-to-face. This was just supposed to be a bit of fun, dammit. Friends with benefits, Asgardian-style. It wasn't like Tony was new to the idea of casual sex. He'd just stupidly decided to mix it with something decidedly *un-casual*.

Well. At least he was pretty sure that Loki was just as screwed as he was.

He closed his eyes and grounded himself in touch; the feel of the bed underneath him, of Loki's slick fingers, of a warm mouth on the back of his shoulder blade. The air-conditioned air on his skin. Graze of teeth where his shoulder met his neck. Finally Loki sinking into him, deep, drawing a long, low moan out of him.

Loki nipped a little harder at his neck, which, yes, Tony definitely wanted to encourage. Soon the world was a haze of Loki's steady movements and the sharp flare of bitten skin. Tony made little moans and sounds of pleasure, urging Loki on; heat rose to the surface of his skin; he dropped down to his elbows, panting. *Fuck*.

"Loki," he gasped, drowning in sensation. "Oh that's... that's good."

Loki's fingers pressed a little tighter against Tony's hips, maneuvering him just right. Loki sucked sharply at the side of his neck, then mumbled against his skin. "More. My name. More."

"Loki," Tony moaned, aware of the prickle of sweat at the back of his neck. "*Loki*. Just... fuck."

Loki gave a possessive growl that sent another rush of heat through Tony's body. Tony braced himself on one arm so he had a hand free to touch himself. He shuddered in pleasure, feeling it grow, building to that perfect crescendo. Loki was moving faster, panting against Tony's skin. It was good, it was so good, he was close... and then tumbling into ecstasy, his whole body tensing as he gave an open-mouthed sob.

One of Loki's hands moved, sliding up Tony's back and grasping a handful of damp hair. Tony gave an encouraging moan, and earned himself a bite on the back of his neck. He whimpered a little; managed Loki's name again, and was rewarded by the hand in his hair tightening. Loki was breathing hard, moving harder, and finally pressed against Tony with a cry of bliss.

Tony felt pleasantly drained. He was back to supporting himself on both arms, trying not to just collapse into the wet spot. "So that was pretty great," he said breathlessly.

Loki unclenched his fist from Tony's hair and slowly rolled sideways, landing on the mattress with a thump. "Hnn," he said coherently.

Tony snickered and draped himself half over Loki, ignoring how sticky and sweaty they both were. "Did I break you?"

"*Trying* to enjoy the afterglow," Loki muttered, but he was smiling.

Tony tilted his head up so he could kiss Loki's jawline. "Yeah," he murmured contentedly. It was pretty enjoyable. And maybe this was all going to go to hell in a handbasket, but until then, he was going to take what he could get.

#

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: Don't have unprotected sex with space aliens, fam, even the humanoid ones. Maybe especially the humanoid ones. Tony's not a good role model in this regard.

Nine Lives

Chapter Summary

Work on Ultron continues, and Natasha has questions for Tony. Tony makes a side-trip to Colorado for Stark Industries business that someone takes exception to.

This time, it was Tony's nightmares that saw them cuddling in the middle of the night. Loki murmured soothing things while stroking Tony's hair - he was really making the most of that. More importantly, he didn't get cranky or imply that Tony wasn't working hard enough to *get over it*.

In the morning, Tony put on a proper collared shirt to hide his hickeys, while Loki smirked and looked extremely self-satisfied. With good reason, Tony reflected; marks wouldn't last the same way on an Asgardian so this was probably kind of a novelty for Loki.

They didn't go down to the workshop together this morning. Tony took the elevator first, though when he got to the workshop Thor wasn't there. That gave him time to make sure all his equipment was lined up ready for the day's work, and check over the progress they'd made on the second satellite. There was a phone SIM card tucked behind the radio array and Tony laughed to himself, shaking his head.

If he understood how this whole thing worked, then he was pretty sure the satellites didn't *need* SIM cards to communicate; they were filled with plenty of other communications tech that would be getting a magic boost. Being able to teleport to one of them didn't really benefit Loki, so most likely he'd planted the SIM so that Tony would find it while they were all there, and make Thor think Loki was scheming something dire.

Tony pulled the little card out and pocketed it, because he had no interest in worsening relations between those two. It was a cute attempt, though.

Thor arrived not long after that, looking very serious. Tony greeted him with a brief wave and kept checking over the unfinished satellite.

"I spoke with Jane last night," Thor said. "She explained much to me."

"Good," Tony said, a little relieved. He didn't know Jane Foster that well, and there was always the chance that someone was going to turn out to be an asshole over mental health stuff. He was glad she hadn't turned out to be one of them.

"It has given me a lot to think about," Thor added.

Good, Tony nearly said again, but that was when Loki appeared - not using the elevator this time - and Tony mentally hit pause on the conversation. "Morning," he said instead.

"Good morning." Loki took up his place on the other side of the workbench. "Are we ready to begin?"

"Yep." Tony picked up his soldering iron, ready to pick up where they'd left off the day before.

They worked in silence for a while, Tony and Loki concentrating on what they were doing, and Thor looking lost in his thoughts. The problem was that his thoughts were all about Loki, and after enough of being stared at Loki turned to him and snapped, "*What?*"

"I am attempting to think," Thor said with a weak smile, "as you have so often urged me to do."

"And you never took my advice, so you can see why I might be somewhat suspicious of it now," Loki said angrily.

Tony paused, looking Loki over. That wasn't a good tone so early in the day.

Thor rested his hands on the end of the workbench, keeping them in sight and away from his hammer. "I'll stop, if it disturbs you so," he said, voice mild the way it got when Thor was being his most sarcastic.

"Hey," Tony interrupted hastily, reaching across the workbench. He couldn't quite reach Loki from his side, but the movement caught Loki's attention. "Let's focus up, okay?"

Loki's jaw worked for a moment and he shot one last glare at Thor, then turned back to the unfinished satellite. "Very well," he gritted out.

Tony breathed a quiet sigh of relief, and shot Thor a look of his own. Thinking things over was great, but the staring at Loki while doing it, not so much.

Thor nodded, Tony and Loki kept working, and they progressed onwards through the day.

--

Shortly after lunch, Thor cleared his throat and looked at Loki. "Why did you not tell us about Thanos sooner?"

"As if you would have believed me," Loki said incredulously, glaring down at the satellite.

Thor looked saddened by that answer. "I'm sorry that you felt you could not come to us--" he started.

"Thor," Tony interrupted, before Loki could get his daggers out. "Real quick, if I punched you, hypothetically, because I don't have a death wish, at least not currently - the point is, I could say sorry for punching you, or I could say sorry you felt hurt when I punched you, and you see that those aren't quite the same thing, right?"

Thor blinked at him, then said, "He knows what I mean--"

"Thor," Tony repeated steadily. "Are they or are they not the same?"

Thor gave a rather begrudging sigh. "They are not."

"Thank you." Tony glanced at Loki briefly, then back at Thor. "Do you want to rephrase your answer?"

"This is ridiculous," Thor said, frowning. "It is a small, petty distinction."

Tony threw his hands in the air. "I tried."

"As have many," Loki muttered.

Tony gave him a slightly scathing look. "Are you including yourself in that, because no offense, Blue's Clues, but you're not exactly straightforward and direct when something's bothering you."

Loki opened his mouth then stopped; inclined his head, conceding the point. Tony was pretty sure Loki had been about to say something about learning that being direct didn't get him anywhere, and he was quite glad not to be having that argument again right now.

"You really are friends," Thor mused, looking between them.

Loki tensed up, whirling on Thor. "And what of it? Am I *embarrassing* you?"

Thor stood up slowly, voice hard. "I have seen the error of my ways since then."

"How convenient," Loki sneered. "Now that *you* have interest in some Midgardians, we must *respect* them."

"Loki," Tony said carefully, because he didn't like anyone's body language right now. "Remember that conversation we had about what changed Thor's mind?"

More specifically - that it was *Loki*, not Jane Foster, who had caused the biggest changes.

Loki scowled and didn't say anything. Thor looked puzzled. Tony took a deep breath and let it out again. "Alright, if you two want to duke it out, we can go to some old weapons-testing land and make that happen. But it's not going to happen in my workshop, okay?"

It looked like both Loki and Thor remembered the Time Out Protocol then, because they gave the same grimace and lowered their eyes. Tony waited a moment to make sure they were both standing down, then picked up his soldering iron again. Loki turned back to the half-built satellite and placed his hands back on it. Thor sat back down and went back to watching them in silence.

Okay. Good. Incredibly awkward, but good.

--

One night on the team level, when Tony was preparing to make his escape after dinner, Natasha caught his eye and nodded towards the conference room. Tony's first mistake was that he actually obeyed.

"Don't worry," Natasha said, closing the door behind them, "the others think I'm checking up on you for Potts."

"Aaand now I'm worried," Tony said, eyeing her warily.

Natasha looked at him steadily and said, "Loki."

Tony's second mistake was that he froze. He shook it off quickly enough, but he knew that Natasha had seen it. "What about him?"

"You're working reasonable hours, eating regularly, *not* consistently hungover, and you've worn shirts with collars the last five days in a row," Natasha said, arching an eyebrow at him. "You haven't been out on the town..."

"Let me get this straight," Tony said incredulously. "You're suspicious because I'm coping *too* well?"

Natasha met his eyes without hesitation. "Yes."

"Wow." Tony swallowed, heart pounding behind the reactor. This had the potential to get very very bad. "That's... that's just great. Remind me again why I bother?"

"Are you sleeping with Loki?" Natasha asked bluntly.

Shit. Tony shook his head, icy fear running through him. "How can you think I'd-- This is *Loki* we're talking about. It's not--" Breathe. Remember to breathe. And that the best way to lie to Natasha was with the truth. "Alright. This thing with Loki... he's kind of a friend now. I know it's a bad idea and I know what he's done, but--"

Natasha was shaking her head. "I'm not criticising you, Tony. You wanted to reduce the threat he poses; I'm not exactly squeamish about how that's done."

"Um," Tony said, confused. "But... Clint."

"Is doing a lot better," Natasha said patiently. "And Clint knows what it's like to bring an enemy agent into the fold. He wouldn't like this, but he wouldn't kill you for it."

"There's a lot of ground between those two options," Tony couldn't help pointing out.

Natasha cocked her head, looking him over. "The question is, are you doing something self-destructive because you think it will only affect you, or do you understand it affects everybody?"

"I know everyone will be pissed, if that's what you mean," Tony said.

Natasha shook her head again. "The drawback to this kind of operation is that the target's loyalty is pinned to one figure. If anything happens to you..."

"Loki will take it out on everyone else," Tony realized. That... really wasn't good.

"Exactly."

Tony grimaced, ducking his head. "Alright. I'll... keep trying to get him to see humans as people, but I guess I'll try to be careful, as well."

"If you can," Natasha said, actually cracking a smile.

"I can be careful," Tony said, pretending to sulk. "Why doesn't anyone ever believe me?"

God. He wished he could swap Natasha's reaction for Pepper's. That calm acceptance. Instead...

"You didn't answer the question," Natasha pointed out, no doubt deliberately distracting him. Chances were pretty low she actually needed an answer.

"I told you, we're friends," Tony insisted.

"And he's Asgardian, and you've got a history of casual sex." She raised her eyebrow, waiting.

Tony rolled his eyes. "No, I'm not sleeping with Loki."

"Thank you," Natasha said. He had no idea from her expression whether she believed him or not, but... probably not. "If you need a sounding board for any of this, you know where to find me."

She was taking this way too calmly. "Thanks, I guess," Tony said uneasily.

Natasha opened the door and slipped back out. Tony stared after her for several seconds before he finally moved.

--

Working on the satellites, and supervising Thor and Loki, was surprisingly tiring. Tony found himself actually grateful when the time came to head to Colorado for the arc reactor ground-breaking ceremony, even if it meant getting up at a truly hideous hour of the morning.

He also had to share the jet there with Pepper, which was... both fantastic and terrible, all at once. He missed her, missed her smile, missed her no-nonsense demeanor, everything. He just wanted to live in a world where he could keep being Iron Man and still have Pepper (*and* Loki, and everyone would be happy), was that too much to ask?

"Bruce said you were doing well," Pepper said gently. "You look well."

Tony bit back a sharp comment about actually knowing how to be a responsible adult. That wasn't what she'd meant. "Working on it," he said instead. "Keeping busy."

"I know the feeling," Pepper said, with a sad smile, and looked down and away.

Maybe he was being optimistic, but Tony liked to think that he and Pepper could be friends again. It would take a little time and awkwardness, but he cared about her too much to lose her entirely from his life. He suspected - hoped - she felt the same way.

They touched down in Boulder, headed to the location, Tony made a nice speech and Pepper did the same. Big smiles for the cameras.

"Mister Stark, Ms Potts," said their security guy for the event, coming over to them. "Can I just ask you to--"

A shot rang out.

Tony lunged for Pepper instinctively, pulling her down and beneath him. The security team swarmed them. The lead guy - fuck, Gregory, that was his name - had a hand clasped over his upper arm, where it was bleeding. "Get them out! Go, go, go."

There was a rush of activity, security guys surrounding them, trying to bustle them towards the car. Tony smacked his hand over the casing for the nanotech armor, and it poured out to envelop him in moments.

"Get Pepper out," he ordered security, and took to the skies.

There was a second shot, and a wireframe of the suit flashed in the HUD with red showing where the bullet had bounced off. Tony narrowed his eyes, flying in the general direction the bullet had come from, scanning the area as best he could.

"Sir, you have an incoming call from Miss Potts," Jarvis informed him.

Tony kept scanning. He was breathing hard, heart racing. "Put it through."

"I'm in the car," Pepper told him immediately. "We're getting out of the area. Have you found anything?"

"Not yet," Tony said grimly. "The guy who got shot. Does he have family? We need to contact his family."

"It'll be taken care of," Pepper assured him. "He'll be taken to hospital and treated there. We'll get an update from the security team. We'll need a hotel, we can't go straight back to New York, we'll have to give police statements..."

Right. Pepper would take care of the details, Pepper was brilliant at details. Tony clenched his jaw inside the helmet, trying to think. Who would have ordered the hit? His list of enemies wasn't exactly a short list, even if he limited it to people who might want to oppose the arc reactor build. Expand it to include people who might want to kill him for other reasons, and it was astronomical.

There was a high-pitched ringing in his ears and Tony shook his head a fraction, trying to focus. He was fine, Pepper was fine, the security guy was... not fine but would get the best medical care. He did not need to be thinking about Obie's fucking golden goose right now.

"I'll call you back when we've confirmed a booking," Pepper was saying, and Tony made some bland acknowledgement. He was still looking intently, trying to find a sign of something, anything. Not to be just *useless* while people around him were getting shot.

He searched and he searched, until eventually it was clear there was nothing to be found.

--

At the hotel, after dealing with the police, Tony finally had room to breathe. He almost got out his phone to contact Loki, but felt strangely reluctant. Loki probably wouldn't react well to someone shooting at him. Oh, god, this was just what Natasha had warned him about.

He took a shower instead, and there must have been something wrong with the extractor fan because the bathroom got horribly humid. He could feel the pressure on his lungs. He pressed his forehead against the shower wall and closed his eyes, counting out the Fibonacci sequence in his mind. Zero, one, one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen, twenty-one...

At 28,657 he turned the shower off, calmer but feeling strangely detached from his body. He towelled off and got dressed on autopilot.

Food. That would help. Tony went to find the room service menu. He placed an order then checked his phone and saw a message there. A single question mark. Yeah, Loki had probably been expecting to hear from him this evening.

Tony rubbed his forehead and then replied, *sorry still in CO; shot at & had 2 talk 2 police. back 2moro.*

Shortly after, his phone began to ring.

Tony winced slightly, but if he didn't answer he'd just be delaying the inevitable. He brought the phone to his ear, bracing himself. "Yeah, it's me."

"I'm used to much more dramatic tales," Loki said in his ear. "You would be a laughingstock on Asgard if that's the quality of your battle stories. Are you injured?"

"No, I'm fine. Security team lead took the bullet. He's in surgery." Tony blinked a little. "You're not going to lecture me about risk-taking?"

"Is that the customary response?" Loki asked, sounding faintly baffled. Tony could just picture the look on his face; that sceptical 'Midgardians are so weird' expression.

"Uh... no. No." Tony realized just *why* he was expecting it, and winced again. "Not important. Like I said, I'm alright, I just had to give a statement to the cops and they were *not* quick about it. We decided to grab rooms for the night and fly back in the morning."

A brief pause. "Are you interested in company?"

God, yes. Tony swallowed, clutching his phone a little tighter. "Company would be great, but I'm not really up for any of the fun stuff tonight, if that's okay?"

A moment later Loki appeared in front of him. "Of course that's alright."

Oh, it was good to see him. Tony breathed out, tucking his phone back in his pocket, and took the couple of steps needed to wrap his arms around Loki; Loki's arms came around him in return, squeezing gently.

Tony pressed his face against Loki's shoulder, taking in the comforting smell of leather. "Before I was Iron Man," he murmured, "I was in a... military convoy, riding in a Humvee with these two soldiers, real young. The missile, targeting me, it killed them. My security guy got shot today, another bullet meant for me... it just reminded me. Of that."

"Oh," Loki said softly, one of his hands rubbing soothingly over Tony's back. "Did it kill him?"

Tony shook his head, or rocked it side to side slightly. "Got his arm. He'll be okay."

"That's good," Loki offered, sounding a little uncertain. Tony smiled, letting go of Loki and taking a step back.

Before he could speak, there was a knock at the door. "That'll be room service," Tony said. "Gimme a sec."

He went to the door and opened it. There was a guy standing there with long brown hair and dark smudges under his eyes, but Tony didn't have time to notice much more than that because the guy grabbed him by the throat and pushed him back into the room. Tony scrabbled at the arm that held him because he couldn't breathe and metal, who the hell had a metal arm, what the fuck was going on--?

Loki ripped the guy away and smashed him against the wall hard enough to leave a dent. Tony gasped for air, rubbing at his throat. "What the--"

"You order odd services to your room," Loki said dryly, crouching over the - unconscious? dead? - assassin.

"Let me see his face," Tony said, coming closer. "I swear I recognized him. Yeah, this guy definitely looks familiar. Where the hell do I know him from?"

"He's still breathing," Loki said, sounding disappointed and puzzled. "He must be much stronger than most Midgardians." He pulled out a dagger.

"Wait." Tony put a hand on Loki's arm. "He might have info. If he's a hired gun, we need to find out who sent him."

Loki scowled briefly but put the dagger away.

Tony pulled his phone back out and took a picture of the guy's face, sending it to Jarvis with a query. The response came back a moment later: *Facial recognition identifies the subject as*

Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes.

"Well, that can't be right," Tony said aloud.

Loki cocked his head. "What?"

"Apparently he looks like someone who died years back. Must just be a fluke." Tony tapped his phone against the palm of his other hand. "Cops... or SHIELD? Eeny, meeny, miny mo."

The mystery man stirred, and Loki grabbed him by the hair and slammed his head against the ground. It left another dent. The guy's chest was still moving up and down.

"Okay, what the hell," Tony said, staring. "What is he, the Terminator? Pop culture reference," he added at Loki. "That settles it, this is out of the police's league. I'm calling SHIELD."

"I'll make myself scarce when they arrive, but no sooner," Loki told him firmly.

Tony nodded, already dialling.

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SHIELD came, asked a bunch of questions, and took Mystery Man away in reinforced handcuffs. Loki shimmered back into sight as soon as they were gone, frowning after them.

"I know SHIELD's not exactly on your Christmas card list," Tony said, "but they're my allies, theoretically, and they've got resources I don't."

"That's not it," Loki said, frown deepening. "There was something about them..."

Tony waited, but it didn't seem like Loki was going to follow that up with anything. He shrugged a little and turned his attention to a more pressing matter. "I wonder if my meal is going to show up."

"Or whether another assassin will come to your door?" Loki said archly.

Tony inhaled sharply, realizing that theoretically whoever was after him could just send person after person to his door. "Well, great. I didn't want to sleep tonight, anyway."

"I can take you from here," Loki said, watching him intently. "Back to your Tower, where you are more secure."

"...I need to check on Pepper," Tony said, mind stalling over the fact that Loki had just offered to *teleport him*.

He headed for the room's landline and dialled the extension for Pepper's room. She answered sleepily, "Hello?"

Tony sagged in relief. "We've got a security problem," he told her. "An assassin came to my room. SHIELD have taken him away but who knows if he had back-up."

Pepper sucked in a quick breath, and he could just *hear* her switching to awake and alert, all focussed. "I'll be there in five minutes."

"Wait, what? No, I--"

She'd already hung up. Tony put the phone down and turned to Loki, who looked particularly unimpressed. "Uh... she's coming here?"

"I see," Loki said flatly.

Tony sighed, pressing his hand to his forehead. "Look. She still works for me, and this is a company security issue. We-- why am I even explaining myself to you? Just... make sure she doesn't see you."

"Are you sure *she's* not behind this?" Loki asked, folding his arms.

"...Yes. I am approximately eight hundred percent sure she is not behind this." It said a lot about Loki that *that* was where his mind went. Tony shook his head and tried to let some of the tension out of his body. "This was supposed to be such a nice little trip. Give a pretty speech, dig a hole, everyone cheers." Loki had called it a 'royal appearance' when Tony had first described it, and that really wasn't too far off. "That guy really did look like Barnes, it's freaky. Maybe a distant relative? That would be so weird."

Loki just stood, watching him while he rambled, which was a little unnerving but Tony needed to talk the tension out of his system so he kept at it until the next knock at the door. He gestured at Loki and took a couple of steps towards it. "Who's there?"

"It's me," came Pepper's voice.

Tony let out a breath and opened the door for her. "Pep, am I glad to see you. No one came near your room?"

"No," Pepper said, walking in as he closed the door behind her. "It's been perfectly--" She stopped.

Why-- oh. Tony's shoulders slumped and he turned around, already knowing what he'd see: Loki, standing very much visibly in the middle of the room.

"Hello again, Ms Potts," he said, with an equanimous smile.

"Do you want to throw a paperclip at him again?" Tony asked out of the corner of his mouth. "I bet I can find one if you want to, the desk here is pretty well stocked."

"That was *one time*," Pepper hissed back. She put on a very forced smile without moving forwards and said, "Your highness."

Loki inclined his head graciously. "SHIELD have taken the assassin for questioning. I was just proposing that I take Tony back to the relative security of Stark Tower."

Pepper's eyes widened a fraction. "Teleportation."

"It's so cool, Pep," Tony said encouragingly. It made sense that she was wary of Loki but... it bothered him anyway. If he could convince her she didn't need to be so on guard... "He can teleport through the phone network, it's incredible."

He wasn't quite sure how to interpret the look that Loki gave him. He was a lot more familiar with the glare/eye-roll combo that Pepper sent his way. And yeah, maybe he should focus a little more on the problem at hand.

"Hey - could you take both of us?" he asked hopefully.

"No," they both told him at once.

Tony looked from one to the other. "Okay, I'm not sure which of you to start with first. It's the safest option--"

"It doesn't feel very safe," Pepper gritted out, in a hushed kind of voice that Loki could no doubt hear perfectly.

"And I would not dream of transporting the lady if she is unwilling," Loki chimed in, with a smile about as fake as Pepper's.

"I'm glad we understand one another," Pepper said tightly. "I would-- Is that hole in the wall from--?"

"That's where Loki smashed the assassin into it," Tony said, scratching at the back of his neck. That didn't really make Loki sound low-threat.

"He was stronger than is usual for Midgardians," Loki said, sounding a little disgruntled. "Otherwise he would not have survived."

Pepper stared at Loki a moment, then turned to Tony and put a hand on his arm. "You go. I'll call the security team and relocate, but so far the attack's been targeted at you."

"So you're okay with him teleporting me but not you?" Tony said incredulously.

Pepper's eyes flicked between him and Loki. "Desperate times," she said, a hint of tiredness about her eyes. "You're clearly not safe here."

From her perspective, better the devil you know, Tony supposed. He didn't like the idea of leaving her here in danger, though.

"Tony," Pepper said, giving his arm a squeeze. "Go. I'll call security right now."

"Call from your room," Tony said. "If it's me they're after, you shouldn't stay in here."

Pepper nodded, and with one last troubled look at Loki, headed out the door.

Tony took a breath and turned to Loki. He was slightly terrified and simultaneously excited at the prospect of teleportation. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Loki strode to him and took his arm. "Brace yourself."

Tony had time enough to draw breath, then the world swirled around him in a rush of vertigo and color. He stumbled and almost landed on the floor of the Tower level Loki had commandeered.

"Wow," he said, gazing around in astonishment. "Wow. That was so fast. Is it always like that? What a trip, and I mean that with all puns intended."

"You really don't mind it," Loki said, staring at him.

"Mind it? That was awesome." Tony frowned, and poked a finger at Loki's chest. "Is this one of those stupid Asgardian things again?"

"It's not *stupid*," Loki said, a touch defensively. "It's just... never mind."

"Uh huh." Tony cocked his head at Loki. "Is that why you didn't want to take both of us?"

"I am not some beast to be used for transportation," Loki snapped peevishly.

"But you'd already offered to take me, I just thought--" Tony stopped and stared. "Are you jealous?"

"Don't be absurd," Loki said, glaring at him.

Oh... wow. Oh wow. Tony blinked a couple of times then shook his head. "I am so not equipped to address this right now. I'm freaked out and it's the middle of the night and strangers are trying to kill me, *again*. Can we just go to bed and pretend everything's fine and deal with this mess in the morning?"

"You still want my company?" Loki asked, a note of disinterest in his voice that Tony didn't believe for one second.

He reached out and took Loki's hands into his. "I've had a really lousy day and right now the best thing I can think of would be to be cuddled up in bed with you." He squeezed Loki's hands and let them go.

Loki followed him to the elevator and up to the penthouse. Tony realized he still hadn't had dinner, but by this point he was too tired to care. He changed into sleep clothes and crawled into bed with Loki and mumbled to Jarvis to turn off the lights.

In the darkness, Loki finally, quietly, spoke. "I should applaud your adventures, but I find I do not enjoy hearing you have been in danger."

It had been pretty dramatic lately. Tony winced, drawing in on himself slightly. "Look, I'm sorry, but--"

Loki put fingers over his mouth, hushing him. "You are hardly to blame. It just frustrates me that I wasn't there. Again."

...Right. Loki didn't blame him, because Loki had a whole different attitude to battle and risk and... all of that stuff. Tony didn't really know how to respond, and he wondered if Gregory was out of surgery yet, and it had been such a long day but he didn't know if he could sleep. Then Loki pulled him close and wrapped an arm around him, and Tony just concentrated on breathing in and out, slow and steady, safe.

--

In the morning, Tony figured he should probably tell the Avengers what was going on. Plus, eat something. He told Loki and made his way to the team level, where Steve, Thor and Clint were chatting.

"Team meeting," Tony said, grabbing some bread and dropping it in the toaster. "As soon as I've eaten. It's urgent."

"Urgent indeed," Thor teased.

"Don't be fooled," Tony said, rolling his eyes. "Jarvis, contact Nat and Bruce and give 'em a heads up, okay?" To Thor he continued, "It'll take at least that long for Bruce to get here, I've got time to shove a couple of bits of toast down my throat."

"Speaking of your throat," Clint said, nodding towards him and the bruises showing. "Should we be worried, or are you just into a little choking with your rebound sex?"

"A little from column A, a little from column B," Tony said, to tease right back. He turned more serious then and added, "Sneak preview: someone has a hit out on me. They failed, obviously."

"What happened?" Steve asked with a faint frown.

"May as well wait until the gang's all together." Tony stifled a yawn and tapped his fingers on the bench impatiently, waiting for his toast.

Steve gave an impatient little huff. "Tony, this is serious--"

"Which is why I've called a team meeting." The toast popped and Tony started slathering it with the good jam.

Natasha arrived while he was partway through his first slice, and Bruce when he was nearly finished his second. "Called it," Tony said around a mouthful of toast. Steve rolled his eyes.

They assembled in the conference room, Tony standing at the end of the table with his fingertips resting on it lightly.

"Yesterday at a Stark Industries event in Colorado, a shot was taken at myself and Pepper, and the head of the security team was injured. I activated a portable Iron Man armor and swept the area, but didn't find anything useful. We reported to the police and went to a hotel for the night, where either the same or another assailant came to my room and attempted to choke me to death." Tony took a breath. "SHIELD have the man in custody. As far as they're concerned I fought him off."

"As far as they're concerned?" Natasha said sharply.

Tony braced himself. "Loki happened to be there and took violent exception to the man in question."

At least three of the others all tried to speak at once. Tony rapped on the table for attention.

"I sent him a message about the first assassination attempt; he was concerned, or curious, so he showed up in person. I do not consider it likely that he was involved." Tony ignored the questions being thrown at him, and the glint of interest in Natasha's eye, and plowed ahead. "The assailant who came to my hotel room had a metal arm and enhanced strength and durability."

"Metal arm?" Clint said. He and Natasha exchanged glances.

"Correct. I have here a picture of the man in question." Tony threw the photo up as a hologram. "Facial recognition is--"

"Bucky," Steve said, staring at the picture.

Tony pointed at Steve. "Got it in one. Facial recognition is a dead end, the target bears what I can only describe as an uncanny resemblance to James Buchanan Barnes."

"That's not a resemblance, Tony," Steve said, still staring. "That's Bucky."

"Um, Steve." Tony paused awkwardly, not knowing how to say this. "If Barnes was still alive, he'd be over ninety. I don't think..."

"Technically, so am I," Steve pointed out.

"There's an operative," Natasha said slowly. "Most of the intelligence community doesn't believe he exists. The ones that do call him the Winter Soldier. He's credited with over two dozen assassinations in the last *fifty* years."

Thor and Bruce both frowned; Thor's frown said 'is that all?' while Bruce said out loud, "That's impossible."

"Believe it," Natasha said. "I've seen him."

"That's one word for it," Clint muttered, making a little finger gun with his hand.

Natasha ignored him and nodded at the hologram of the assassin. "Dark hair, metal glove."

"This doesn't make any sense," Steve said. "Why would Bucky-- who did you say he worked for?"

"He uses Soviet slugs, no rifling," Natasha offered. "I can't give you more than that."

"Well." Tony looked around the table. "I guess we need to make a little trip to SHIELD."

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"What do you mean, he *escaped*?"

#

The Sky is Switching With the Ground

Chapter Summary

Tony is full of brilliant plans. The author is singing "What shall we do with the Winter Soldier?" to the tune of "What shall we do with a drunken sailor?" and that probably covers all you need to know.

"I let you turn him over to those incompetent swine because you said they could get information from him," Loki snapped, looking pissed off.

"You 'let' me?" Tony repeated sceptically.

"You *said* that they had resources you did not. If all you meant was that you were too squeamish to make use of them--"

"Hold on." Tony held up both hands, focusing closely on Loki. His 'Asgardian bullshit' detector was going off in a big way. "What, exactly, do you think I was too squeamish to make use of?"

Loki scowled unhappily. "Must I spell it out? You're Midgardian, you're not supposed to *care*--"

"Magic," Tony surmised, lowering his hands with a sigh. "You can... what? Use magic to make him talk?"

"To search his memories," Loki said, subsiding a little.

Wow. "I... am honestly not sure what I think of that," Tony said. "Not because it's magic, just because it's kind of freaky. I didn't think you could do that sort of thing without that scepter."

"It's difficult," Loki admitted. "Recent memories or significant memories are easier, but it's still not something to be undertaken lightly."

Well, that was good? Probably? Tony frowned a little and rolled his shoulders. "And in terms of 'squeamish', is that the good or bad kind of magic? Because last time you thought I was asking you to do the bad kind, you got *very* dramatic about it."

Loki lowered his eyes at the reminder. "That's... true," he said reluctantly.

Tony waited to see if Loki was going to say anything else, but nothing was forthcoming. "Listen. I don't know where the boundaries are with magic - I know, there's something I don't know, it's a bit of a shock. I can ask about it, but I need you to give me the benefit of the doubt when I do. Is that okay?"

"Of course," Loki said, with a smooth smile that screamed uncertainty.

"We'll both try," Tony said reassuringly.

Loki's smile softened into something more genuine. Tony thought about Thor and wondered just how often people in Loki's life had offered to try to adapt their communication to *him*, rather than expecting it all the other way round. Given that the major figures in Loki's life were his parents and his *older* brother, Tony didn't have high hopes.

"Alright," he said, more confidently than he felt, "let's start with... is there a magic track and trace to find out where our murderous parcel's been delivered?"

Loki didn't entirely meet his eyes. "I could try to scry for him..."

"Is that the bad kind?" Tony guessed.

Loki nodded slowly. "It's a little hard to justify as lies or mischief."

"Oh, I don't know," Tony said with a smile. "If he's gone into hiding, that's basically lying about his position, right? And you'd be trying to find the truth about where he is."

He'd meant it as a joke, but Loki's eyes snapped to his with a look of wonder in them. "That... fits."

Tony opened his mouth, then hesitated. "If I say something about how stupid and arbitrary these rules are, are you going to take offense?"

"Most likely," Loki said, smirking at him.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Well, if you're going by that, then looking in his head should count as sniffing out lies as well."

"If he speaks," Loki said, eyes narrowed dangerously. Looked like someone was holding a grudge.

"That's my little attack puppy," Tony cooed, patting Loki on the arm and enjoying the look of outrage that crossed his face. "So what do you need for this scrying business?"

"Space," Loki said, still looking a little resentful about the condescension. "And these." He lifted a small pouch of something that clacked together... marbles? Tony had a sudden mental image of playing marbles to find out where this Winter Soldier - he was still sceptical it was actually Bucky Barnes - was hiding out.

It turned out not to be marbles, but stones with runes carved into them. They were, creatively enough, called 'rune stones'. Tony thought about making fun of the name but Loki had let him off easy for the puppy thing, so he bit his tongue. This time.

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Tony shut the conference room door behind him and turned to the rest of the team. "I've got good news and bad news."

"Should we be worried?" Steve said with a smile.

"You decide. Good news is, if we can get our hands on your buddy Bucky, I've got someone who can take a look at what's going on in his head."

Steve actually started to look interested, then his eyes widened in realization and he said warily, "Tony..."

"Bad news is it's Loki."

Thor levelled a heavy frown in Tony's direction. "Explain."

"If we ask Barnes questions, and he lies, Loki can dig out those lies," Tony said, smiling serenely to cover his nervousness. Loki had been very sure that framing it this way upfront would stop Thor from punching him again.

Indeed, Thor was still frowning but he wasn't coming out swinging. "Many of your plans lately seem to involve my brother's magic," he said, a little resentfully.

"Two," Tony corrected. "That's not many, it's *two*. And it's part of his weird Asgardian designated hobby, so just chill."

"Uh, joining the team of not-chill with letting Loki loose on someone's head," Clint said, raising a hand. "You can't be serious."

Bruce took his glasses off, looking tired. "Tony... it does seem a little reckless."

"It's a moot point until we've found Barnes," Natasha said, face not giving anything away. "Shouldn't we come up with a plan for that, first?"

Tony opened his mouth, but before he could speak a familiar voice drawled, "Actually, I've spared you the trouble."

Everyone shot to their feet; Clint and Natasha pulled guns, Thor drew his hammer, Bruce just looked braced for a fight. Tony rolled his eyes and shot a chiding look at Loki, who was standing with an arm around Barnes' throat, looking completely unfazed. Fucker couldn't resist the dramatic entrance.

To be fair, Tony could kind of appreciate that motivation.

"Let him go," Steve said tightly.

"You don't want me to do that," Loki replied in a pleasant tone.

"Put your guns down," Tony told Clint and Natasha. "He's here to help... mostly."

Natasha looked thoughtful then lowered her gun, but kept hold of it. Clint kept his aimed at Loki's head.

"I said, let him *go*," Steve repeated, starting to look angry.

Loki sighed and let Barnes go. Immediately, Barnes whirled and swung a fist at him, which Loki easily caught and twisted Barnes' arm up behind his back, then got him back in a headlock. "You were saying?"

"Never thought I'd say this, but so far I'm rooting for the Winter Soldier," Clint said.

Tony shook his head in disbelief. "You remember that he's trying to kill me, right?"

"Enough," Thor said in his most commanding voice.

Steve came around the table, eyes wide and confused. "Bucky... it really is you. How...?"

"Who the hell is Bucky," Barnes rasped out, struggling a little against Loki's hold.

Steve looked like he'd been punched in the gut.

"This man tried to kill one of our own," Thor declared. "He is our enemy."

"He's my *friend*," Steve insisted. "Something's wrong here."

Tony exchanged glances with Loki, waiting for everyone to get the arguing out of their system. Barnes - the Winter Soldier - whoever he was - kept struggling, but it looked like Loki had managed to find and strip all his weapons.

Steve surprised him, then; turning to Loki with a wary but almost plaintive look. "If you... will it hurt him?"

"What the *fuck*, Rogers," Clint said flatly. "I thought you just said this guy was your friend."

"He is! We need to find out why he's doing this."

"You said it yourself, *something's wrong here*. How do we know Loki isn't the one who messed him up?"

"Uh, his fifty-year kill history, for one," Tony interrupted. "Unless you think Loki came down here fifty years ago to set this whole thing up just on the extreme off-chance that he was going to later be hanging out on Earth and want an assassin who he would then stop from assassinating anybody."

There was a pause.

"To answer your question, Captain," Loki said with a silky smile, "no, the process will not damage him."

"Steve," Natasha said in a low voice. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"No," Steve said, glancing in her direction. "But we have to do *something*."

"I'm out," Clint announced in disgust, lowering his gun. He shot Steve a hard look, then headed for the door. "I can't be here for this."

"Goodby-ye," Loki called after him in a singsong voice.

"Stop it," Tony muttered out of the corner of his mouth. He got that Loki was probably nervous and uncomfortable here, but antagonizing the team wasn't going to help that any.

"I'm... not really comfortable with this either," Bruce said, his expression more apologetic. "No offense, Steve."

"Bruce," Tony started, but Bruce was already shaking his head.

"Don't, Tony. Look at him - he's in no state to consent. I just... I really don't think I can stay and watch this. I'll go check on Clint."

Fair enough. Tony nodded reluctantly. He looked at Natasha next, but she raised a sardonic eyebrow and said, "Oh, I'm staying. Someone needs to keep an eye on you morons."

"What are you going to do?" Barnes managed to get out. Was it Tony's imagination or did he sound a little nervous?

"Nothing drastic," Loki said, in a voice that wasn't at all reassuring. "Just take a little look at your memories. A bit of mischief, nothing more."

Thor made a displeased sound. "It is not mischief just because you call it that, Loki."

"He has lied," Loki said smoothly. "I would know. I am entitled to examine that, am I not?"

"Entitled?" Natasha asked curiously.

Thor shifted uneasily. "Still..."

"Either come hold the man, or cease your whining," Loki snapped, losing his patience. "Preferably both."

Thor sighed heavily and started walking around the table. Steve said, "Wait, why does Thor need to hold him?"

Loki passed Barnes over to Thor, who grasped Barnes firmly by both arms. Barnes, in response, smashed his head back against Thor's face, then rolled forward and flipped Thor over his back onto the floor. Loki made a grab for Barnes, who swept Loki's legs out from under him. Steve went to punch Barnes, who caught the fist in his metal hand and squeezed.

Tony tapped the casing of the nano-armor, activating it. The fight continued while the armor swarmed over his body. Barnes was holding his own fairly well; Thor knew how to fight with Steve and how to fight with Loki, but both at once was throwing him off and the three were getting in each others' way.

Tony took aim with his repulsor and blasted Barnes against the wall.

Barnes stumbled and for a moment Tony thought the guy was just gonna shake it off the same as everything else, but it was enough of a pause that Thor managed to get a grip on Barnes again and get him into the headlock-style hold Loki had been using. Barnes moved to elbow Thor in the gut, but Thor grabbed that wrist with his free hand and twisted Barnes' arm up behind his back, between their bodies.

Loki said to Steve, very dryly, "Does that answer your question?"

Tony deactivated his armor and glanced at Natasha. "Didn't see you doing much, there."

"You boys had it under control," she drawled with a smirk. "I could have used some popcorn, though."

Tony grinned back at her then turned serious, looking at Barnes. "Who ordered the hit on me?"

He'd already asked, of course, but the show was for Steve and Thor, so they'd see that Loki doing his magic thing was necessary. Indeed, Barnes responded the same; face twisting into a scowl, mouth closed tight.

"One moment," Loki murmured, moving around in front of Barnes. He raised a hand and pressed it to Barnes' head.

Tony watched intently. A part of him was glad Clint was out of the room for this; it would be the perfect time to try to turn the tables on Loki. But Steve was invested, Thor was busy restraining Barnes, and Natasha... was probably watching just as intently, wanting to get information on this power of Loki's that they hadn't seen before.

Suddenly Loki reeled backwards, gasping. Tony hurried closer, reaching out. "Loki--?"

He realized his mistake just before his fingers touched Loki's arm. Loki whirled, grabbing his arm and snapping it with a sickening ease. Tony yelled and backed up rapidly, clutching his arm.

"Loki!" Thor bellowed, letting go of Barnes and summoning his hammer.

"No!" Tony shouted desperately. Oh, fuck, his arm hurt. "Thor, no! Everyone stay back!"

He was vaguely aware that Barnes dropped to the floor, covering his ears. It was Loki he was worried about, Loki who was hyperventilating and shaking and looking around, glassy-eyed, for an attack that had come in the past.

Tony gritted his teeth against the pain and used his uninjured arm to fumble with the buttons on his shirt. Normally he'd have no trouble undoing it one-handed but that was with his right.

"Tony, do you really think now is the time?" Natasha asked, suddenly right beside him.

"Get your mind out of the gutter," he muttered, finally getting enough buttons undone to get at the casing for the nano-armor and remove it, exposing the reactor's light. "Loki. Look at the arc reactor. You remember the arc reactor, right?"

"Uh, Tony, what are you doing?" Steve asked, still looking braced for a fight.

"Trying to calm this the hell down," Tony snapped. He didn't know if this was a full flashback, or a panic attack, or something else, but he knew that the others would only make it worse. "For crying out loud, *stay back*, and don't corner him."

Steve was turning his attention to Barnes anyway.

Natasha asked, "Loki recognizes the arc reactor when he's having a flashback?"

Tony grimaced. "Well, once. And he was sort of coming out of it anyway. Look, it's all I've got."

"How's Barnes?" Natasha asked, and it took Tony a moment to realize she wasn't speaking to him anymore.

"I don't know," Steve said, crouched beside Barnes. "Whatever Loki did to him--"

"--Will pass," Loki said, voice weak but haughty.

"Loki!" Thor said immediately, striding forward. "What have you done?"

Loki shot him a poisonous glare. "Exactly what was asked of me. I should have expected it would earn me no favor."

Tony leaned heavily against the table, resisting the desire to swear a lot, and loudly. His arm throbbed white-hot. "For the love of god, can you two give it a rest? Just once."

"Hold still," Natasha said, and then the next thing he knew she was slicing open the sleeve of his shirt to examine his arm.

"What is with everyone cutting off my clothes?" he demanded, aware that his voice was rising to a slightly hysterical pitch. But - come *on*.

"Watch it," Natasha murmured under her breath.

"Leave him be," Loki snapped, striding over. He grasped Tony's shoulder, pulling him closer. Then came the blur of disorienting vertigo that Tony was coming to recognize, and they were on the level where Loki had his secret lair.

Tony bit his lip hard to keep from swearing. His arm had not enjoyed the trip. He felt a little like he was going to throw up. "Jarvis, hide our location," he said weakly.

"As you wish."

Loki, still looking pale, reached for Tony's arm and then paused with his hand hovering over it. "Is it alright if I...?"

"Good god, yes," Tony said, then bit his tongue with a muffled yelp as Loki's hand came to rest on his broken arm. There was that stinging, pushing sensation that he remembered from the last time Loki had healed him. The pain ebbed. Slowly, Tony let out his breath.

"You'll have to answer to Thor," Loki warned him.

Tony gave a lazy half-shrug. "Don't know what he's talking about. Broken arm? You just bruised it."

Loki looked sceptical but didn't argue. He still looked too shaky for Tony's tastes.

"How are you doing?" Tony asked, replacing the nano-armor casing and buttoning his shirt back up. "You found something nasty in Barnes' head, didn't you?"

Loki let out an unsteady breath. "He was molded for their needs."

Oh, shit. Tony shifted and pressed himself to Loki, wrapping his arms around him. "I should have thought of that," he groaned. "I'm sorry."

"I should have been prepared," Loki said stiffly, but he brought his own arms around Tony in return.

"You know," Tony mumbled with a smile, "your track record with butchering my arms is really something. I gotta start keeping them away from you."

"Oh?" Loki said archly. "What do you propose, that you keep them handcuffed behind your back?"

If Loki was feeling well enough to flirt-taunt, he was doing relatively okay. Tony snorted and pressed a brief kiss to Loki's jawline. "Tell you what, let's keep that idea tabled for later."

He felt kind of shaky himself. He gave himself another couple of moments in Loki's arms, then let go. "Did you get enough?"

"I believe so," Loki said, stepping back and running a hand through his hair. "At the very least, a place to start."

"Don't leave me hanging," Tony said with a smile.

What Loki told him next made his blood run cold.

--

Tony burst into the interrogation room with his heart in his throat and his mind whirling. Barnes was there, in the reinforced restraints, and Steve was trying to sweet-talk him or something. Natasha was leaning against the wall and Thor was standing near her with his arms folded.

Tony ignored all of them and stood straight in front of Barnes. Through gritted teeth he said, "Hail Hydra."

Barnes' head jerked up. He narrowed his eyes at Tony and said suspiciously, "Hail Hydra."

"*What?*" Steve said, staring at Tony in shock.

"They're still around, aren't they?" Tony kept his eyes on Barnes. "They're just in hiding. Laying low. They brainwashed you and now they're planning something big, or why risk showing their hand?"

"That's impossible," Natasha said.

Tony gestured at Barnes. "*That's* impossible. Secret Nazi cult hiding out, that's pretty plausible. Hell, there are Nazi cults in this very country, losers with face tattoos and everything."

"Hydra's gone," Steve said, sounding suddenly very young. "They have to be."

Thor said, "Tony, what has happened to your arm?"

Natasha gave Thor an incredulous look. "Is that really the priority right now?"

Tony gave a sharp, sarcastic smile, his pulse rapidly quickening. "My arm? You must be confused, Thor, it was just bruised."

"Um, guys?" Steve said.

Thor unfolded his arms and took a couple of steps towards Tony, looming ominously. "I see no bruises."

"They're slow to show up," Tony said, faking calm. "It's a Midgardian thing."

Thor's loom intensified. "What have you *done?*"

Tony looked him square in the eye and said clearly, "Nothing."

Thor looked horrified and furious. "This is exactly why I wanted you to stop speaking to him! You-- you *lure* him into these despicable acts--"

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Just what are you implying Loki did, Thor?"

Thor opened his mouth, then closed it again. He glared at Tony, obviously frustrated but not quite willing to accuse Loki out loud.

"Did Loki heal your arm?" Steve blurted.

"No," Tony and Natasha chorused, and Thor snarled, "He did *not!*"

"Right," Steve said slowly. "Because that would be wrong."

"He's an Asgardian warrior," Natasha said with a shrug. "He's supposed to stick to things that cause death."

Steve cocked his head with a small frown and said, "Doesn't Asgard keep arresting him for causing death?"

Tony snorted a little. He spread his hands and said scathingly, "*Asgard*."

"You people are crazy," Barnes said flatly.

Tony paused, then looked around the room and said, "Well, you kinda have to give him that one."

"This is not over," Thor threatened in a low voice. "I would have words with you, Tony Stark."

"If those words are your fists you can keep them to yourself," Tony shot back, more annoyed than he'd expected by Thor's attitude. "You're not the only one with an *unfair advantage*, remember?"

Thor flinched at the reminder, but stood his ground. "I will not allow you to entice him--"

"Excuse me, 'allow' me?" Tony repeated indignantly. "Just who--"

"*Tony*," Natasha said pointedly. "Hydra's trying to kill you?"

Right. That. Tony shot Thor a resentful look, then turned back to Barnes. "So I guess we have to work out how to fix the brainwashing."

"Can L... oh," Steve said, glancing at Thor. "Uh. Never mind."

'Never mind' just meant Steve was going to ask again later, when Thor wasn't around, and Tony scowled. They'd just seen what happened when Loki tried going inside Barnes' mind. They weren't doing that again.

Natasha had a dangerously thoughtful look on her face, and Thor still just looked kind of pissed.

Tony took a breath. "Actually... there's more. We need Bruce and Barton for this."

Steve looked reluctantly at Barnes, but nodded. "Jarvis, could you ask Bruce and Clint to meet us in the conference room, please?"

--

Clint was slumped sideways in his chair, looking stressed. "So what's the bad news?" he said tiredly.

Tony rubbed at his eyes. He wasn't looking forward to this. It didn't help that Thor was just sitting at the end of the table silently glaring at him. "Loki saw who ordered Barnes to

assassinate me."

Bruce said uncertainly, "That's good, isn't it?"

Tony smiled bitterly. "He projected an illusion - we were going to have Jarvis run facial recognition. But, we didn't need to."

"Who was it?" Natasha asked, watching him closely.

Tony met her eyes and said bleakly, "Alexander Pierce."

Natasha's eyes widened a fraction. Steve said, "What?"

Tony glanced down the table at Steve. "Hydra's back, and Alexander Pierce is one of them. He's got access to everything in SHIELD. We're screwed."

"You can't be serious," Clint said. "Loki says the freaking Secretary of Internal Security, the top guy's top guy, is a Nazi and you just believe him?"

"Listen," Tony started.

Clint stood up and slammed his hands on the table. "No, *you* listen. He's probably trying to set us up to do something incredibly stupid-- hell, he'd probably do it just for shits and giggles, this is Loki we're talking about. There is no way that Pierce is dirty, it's ridiculous. As for this Hydra bullshit--"

"Yeah?" Tony folded his arms, aware that his sliced open right sleeve was still hanging loosely. "Explain Barnes, then. Explain how Barnes has been alive this whole time if Hydra didn't experiment on him and duplicate Erskine's serum."

"Sure," Clint retorted. "Someone other than Hydra experimented on him. It's not like there's any shortage of shady organizations in the world."

"Barnes corroborated the Hydra part," Natasha said. "But that doesn't mean Loki's telling the truth about Pierce. Tony, you're--"

"Don't say it," he warned her.

"You're compromised," Natasha said, looking ever-so-slightly regretful. "You have to know that."

"Then tell me one thing," Tony said, staring her down. "Why now?"

Bruce blinked a couple of times and said what a few of them looked like they were thinking. "Uh, why what now?"

"Hydra tried to have me killed," Tony said, and no, it didn't get any less surreal when he said it out loud. "Why now? What triggered it? I've been out of the limelight for months. Unless..." and he leaned forward, narrowing his eyes at Natasha, "there have been reports

going up the SHIELD foodchain saying that Tony Stark is getting worryingly close to having an Asgardian under his thumb."

Natasha didn't look away. "They're incomplete reports," she said steadily. Tony knew it was the closest thing he'd get to an apology, and he also found that he didn't really care. It had been a long day, and he was just... empty.

"Whatever." Tony leaned back in his chair, exhausted. "Whether it's Pierce or not, there's a mole in SHIELD. That's a massive problem."

Clint flopped back down in his chair sullenly. There was silence around the room. Even Thor seemed to have picked up enough about Hydra from context to understand that this was bad.

"God, I need a drink," Tony muttered.

Bruce gave a light snort. "I don't think that's going to help."

"I don't know," Natasha said dryly. "I can see Tony's point on this one."

Steve stirred. Staring at the table, he said, "We need a plan."

Tony sat there, hoping someone else would say something. He didn't have the mental energy left for this right now. Maybe Thor would suggest using Loki to sniff out the lies-- alright, admittedly it would be hard to smuggle Loki into SHIELD but-- hang on, Loki could shape-shift. This... wasn't an entirely stupid idea after all.

"Oh," Tony said out loud.

The rest of them focused on him. Natasha said, "What is it?"

"Clint's not going to like it," Tony said.

"Oh, Jesus fucking Christ on a pogo stick," Clint muttered, putting his head in his hands.

"*Tony*," Bruce said in disbelief.

"That would be an enormous security breach," said Natasha, which wasn't a no.

"I don't believe we're having this discussion," Steve said, rubbing his forehead.

Thor's scowl deepened. "Loki has shown how unreliable he is, and it would give him the opportunity to learn too much of SHIELD's defenses."

"Alright," Tony said, not in the mood to go through the arguments. "Waiting for a counter-proposal."

The silence was immediate and awkward. Tony rolled his head back, staring at the ceiling as everything started to sink in. Hydra. SHIELD. Barnes. Assassination attempts. And they still had an alien invasion to prepare for. Good god, how was this his life?

"Natasha," Clint started hopefully.

"I can tell you who's hiding something," Natasha said, letting herself sound tired too. "And the answer's most of SHIELD, because we're a paranoid bunch. That won't help narrow it down. I won't get a meeting with Pierce, especially not if he's Hydra; I can try, but I'll just get redirected to Fury."

"You can't," Tony said slowly, tipping his head forward again, "but the owner of Stark Industries can."

Natasha focused her eyes on him. "You'd propose a business deal."

"Maybe I'm thinking of getting into weapons again," Tony said. Even the idea of it tasted sour on his tongue. "He'd lap it up."

"Weapons will make him suspicious," Natasha said, shaking her head. "Something a little less extreme. Arc reactor technology."

"Power the helicarrier?" Tony suggested. "Those engines are not the most efficient thing out there, I'm just saying. And I bring you as my bodyguard because I got shot at in Colorado."

"Plausible," Natasha conceded.

"It's not the worst thing I've heard," Clint admitted.

"Set up the meet," Steve said decisively. "We need to know what we're facing. Once we've confirmed whether it's Pierce, we can come up with a strategy."

It was Pierce, it was definitely Pierce, but Tony knew arguing about it wasn't going to get him anywhere. All it would accomplish would be to make the team more suspicious of *him*. It wasn't like he could explain exactly *why* he believed Loki, why he trusted him about this. He couldn't describe the look on Loki's face when Loki had ripped Barnes off him.

God, Pierce was Hydra. The Secretary of Internal Security. That was beyond horrifying.

And he was going to need to find a way to calm Thor down so they could keep working on the Ultron network.

Tony slumped forward and let his head rest on the table. Out loud he mumbled, "We are so fucked."

Nobody disagreed.

#

Worm in the Apple

Chapter Summary

Thor doesn't like how things are going, Loki and Tony totally go on a date, and the team further investigate Hydra.

Chapter Notes

If you missed it, check out [Written in the Starlight](#), a Thor-pov side story that overlaps the whole main story up to the start of this chapter.

Better get this over with. Tony sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Jarvis... ask Thor if I can come down and see him."

There was an unusually long delay before Jarvis answered, "He agrees, sir."

Tony gave a mental shrug and headed for the elevator, only dragging his feet a little.

When he got there, Thor was sitting in an armchair, arms resting on his knees, looking tireder than Tony had ever seen him.

"Uh. Hey," Tony said awkwardly. "I didn't really get a chance to touch base with you after the arm thing and--"

"I do not believe you should continue the Ultron project," Thor interrupted. He gave a small, hollow smile. "I imagine you will regardless. But I will no longer take part. I cannot in good conscience stand by while Loki..." He looked away, closing his eyes.

Well... fuck. Tony stood still for a moment, trying to figure out how to change Thor's mind. Making the satellites with Loki was like walking a tightrope blindfolded; he couldn't even see the dangers. Thor was his safety net, and he couldn't afford for that to be whisked away.

"I thought it was okay, the Ultron thing," Tony said. "Because it's weapons." He didn't like thinking of it that way, but for the sake of Thor's assistance? He'd suck it up and call them Jericho missiles if he had to.

"It is," Thor said, looking back at Tony with eyes deeply shadowed. "But it is very close to the boundaries of what is acceptable and Loki... should not be given motive to cross those

boundaries." Thor's eyes flickered downwards briefly. "If it is as you say, that his mind is injured, then all the more reason you should not be encouraging him while he is vulnerable."

It was deeply creepy to have Thor so somber instead of shouting and threatening. Tony shifted on his feet uneasily. "I would have thought you'd want revenge on the folks that injured his mind in the first place," he said challengingly, trying to provoke a reaction.

Thor gave him a hard look. "And I will fight them when they come. But I will not do their task for them, and stand there *supervising* while my brother loses himself entirely."

Clearly time for a different tack. Tony cleared his throat, and said carefully, "Thor, just out of curiosity, what's Loki's, uh... domain, exactly? Because in some of the myths here he gets called God of Chaos."

"Yes," Thor said, brows drawing together slightly in puzzlement. "Lies and Mischief."

What? Tony blinked, then mentally cursed the hell out of Allspeak and said, "Quick check, when I say mischief do you hear chaos? Or the other way around? Hell, that question's probably meaningless to you, isn't it?" The way Thor was staring at him suggested yes.

Well, if Asgardians really believed their lives were woven in some sort of magic tapestry of fate, then 'chaos' could well be the tapestry weaver having a bit of fun at their expense. Tony could kind of see how the two concepts might overlap.

What he didn't want to do was tell Thor that he'd already brought this up with Loki, because that would probably count as the kind of encouragement that Thor disapproved of. Aggressively.

"I'm not suggesting anything," Tony said delicately, "but I did wonder whether trampling boundaries might fall into the definition of chaos or mischief or whatever."

Thor's eyebrows furrowed even more. "That makes no sense."

"A lot of things make no sense," Tony said. "I wasn't even Time's Person of the Year last year. Can you believe that? In comparison, your Asgardian cultural baggage is like a perfect equation."

"I am in no mood for your babbling," Thor said in a dangerous voice.

"Wow, harsh." Tony bit his tongue and physically forced himself to stop before he said something regrettable about how Thor's brother liked his babbling *very* much.

Thor clenched his jaw then looked away again. "I think," he said slowly, "we will achieve little more through conversation this day."

"That's because *you don't want to*," Tony snapped. "You keep trying to fit Loki into this box that isn't made for him and then getting surprised when it falls apart. Just *think*, for crying out loud--"

"Ah yes," Thor said bitterly, shaking his head. "The answer to everything lately. Think upon it. I am sorely tired of dwelling on all these things." He stared into the air ahead of himself. "Perhaps it is foolish, but I long for the kind of problem I can solve simply by striking it with Mjölfnir."

Tony grimaced, and said grimly, "Depending how my and Nat's meet with Pierce goes, you might get your wish."

--

After touching base with Pepper, telling Steve in no uncertain terms that Loki would *not* be going near Barnes' head again, and then the futile conversation with Thor... after all that, Tony was relieved to spend a quiet evening tinkering with designs in his workshop while Loki sat on the sofa and read one of the PTSD books.

Tony was just in the middle of deciding where to put the electrical inputs when Loki said, apropos of nothing, "You've had your hair cut."

"Uh." Tony paused awkwardly. "Yeah, for the ground-breaking ceremony. Is that... a big Asgardian faux pas?" Was he managing to screw things up in two cultures now? That was impressive, even by his standards.

"No." Loki shook his head slowly and looked back down at his book, although he didn't really seem like he was taking in the words. "Even had it been a proper cutting, not something you paid for - on Asgard one does not..."

Tony waited a few moments, then prompted gently, "Does not what?"

Loki stared, unseeing, at the book. "One does not have a single person who cuts your hair. It would be... deeply unusual to have only one person in all the realms that you were so intimate with."

Oh. And Loki didn't even have one. Tony wiped his holograms away and made his way over to the sofa. He pulled the book out of Loki's unresisting hands and set it aside, then dropped - okay, clambered - to his knees.

Loki arched an eyebrow. Tony leered up at him. "You wanna play with my hair?"

Loki snorted, startled into smiling. Fondly he brought his hand to Tony's scalp, running his fingers through the short strands. "You are ridiculous."

"Hm." Tony leaned into the touch, closing his eyes in contentment.

"I thought you were going to suggest something else for a moment there."

"Oh, I definitely want to blow you while I'm down here. But for right now, this is good."

Loki snickered at him but kept stroking his hair; long, lingering touches and gentle caresses. It wasn't long before he started stroking with both hands, and Tony pretended he didn't hear Loki sniffing back tears.

Stereotypical lonely Disney villain, he'd once described Loki, and it was mind-boggling how he'd been so wrong and so right at the same time.

"I suppose your satellite project is on hold again," Loki said after a while, voice slightly hoarse.

Tony couldn't help but tense. He opened his eyes and found himself staring at the angled leather over Loki's abdomen. "No. We can pick that up again tomorrow morning, if you want."

"Was Thor not angry?" Loki asked, sounding startled.

Tony swallowed, his eyes tracing the neat seams. "Thor's not going to be there."

Loki's hands faltered momentarily, then resumed stroking, but slower. "I thought you did not trust me to work my magic unsupervised," he said warily.

Yeah, well. "Don't have much of a choice," Tony said. His chest ached. He knew Loki was going to try something, he knew it, but he also knew how badly they needed this project and what the hell was he supposed to do? It was a shitty situation and no, he didn't really have a choice.

Loki gave a small sigh, just a soft exhalation of breath. "It cannot have gone too poorly, for you still live."

It was a weak joke, if it was a joke at all. Tony grimaced a little. "Could have gone worse. Could definitely have gone better."

Loki was quiet after that, just working his fingers slowly through Tony's hair in soft, repetitive motions. Tony hummed, resting his arms on Loki's thighs and diligently ignoring the growing ache in his knees.

"I can hear you coveting from here," Loki finally said, which meant he'd had enough and was after a different sort of comfort, and Tony smirked.

"Well, you know," he said, reaching for the fastenings on Loki's pants, "I'm a covetous kind of guy."

--

Tony had managed to get reservations pretty soon at Le Bernardin, only a few weeks since he'd suggested to Loki that they have a night out. He wore the casing of the nano-armor to be safe, and Loki was always a split-second away from bristling with sharp cutting implements, but Tony was really hoping that nothing would go wrong and they could just have a nice night in a restaurant eating good food and enjoying each other's company.

Loki wore a suit, an Earth business-suit that looked indecently good on him, and he didn't shape-shift until they left Stark Tower so Tony had plenty of time to take it in. When he shifted, the suit shifted with him; a little shorter (though still taller than Tony), a little broader in the shoulders; light brown hair, a nondescript face.

Tony wanted to ask all about it but that was probably not the best conversation for the taxi, so he held back on all his questions. At Le Bernardin he was greeted by name and led to their table for the night.

"You're going to love this," Tony said confidently. "Their sea trout is a work of art."

"I look forward to it," Loki said pleasantly, and there was something about Loki just... taking his word for it that made something warm fizzle low in Tony's gut. All the more so when they looked at their menus and Loki just shook his head and told Tony to order for him.

"We'll have the tasting menu with the paired wines," Tony told their waiter, handing the menus back. He figured the best option was to give Loki a lot of different dishes to sample.

Loki looked around the room with interest. "If you visit an inn on Asgard, you get what food is available."

"Chef's choice," Tony nodded. "There's places like that here, but it's... a bit fancier, probably, than what you're thinking of."

Loki gave a light hum of acknowledgement and took a drink of his water. Every so often his gaze swept the room, looking for threats. Tony couldn't really blame him for that one. Things were pretty wild at the moment.

When their first dishes arrived, Loki took one bite of the tuna and his eyes lit up. Tony kind of wished he could see it on Loki's actual face; the expression wasn't the same on this stranger's face Loki was wearing. But it was still pretty good.

"This is delicious," Loki declared. He'd kept his voice the same, deciding that it was not as recognizable as his face was.

"I'll admit I'm kind of relieved. It would be a shame to finally get here and then discover that you hate seafood." Tony took a bite of his own tuna and chased it with a mouthful of the dry white wine that came with it. "It's not all that sweet though...?"

Loki gave him a look. "I hope you don't think all that I eat is sweet, just because I told you once that I enjoy mead."

Well, sure, it sounded stupid when Loki put it like *that*. Tony gave a sheepish grin and a shrug, and laughed when Loki fondly rolled his eyes.

They chatted while they ate, and Tony noticed Loki quietly copying the little things he did - like putting his knife and fork together on an empty plate. It seemed cute until he thought about it too hard, Loki trying automatically to fit in, and then it seemed a little sad, and Tony mentally kicked himself for overthinking everything.

"Can I ask some magic questions?" he said, to distract himself.

Loki paused partway through a drink of wine, a Hungarian white that was quite tasty. "Yes," he said, putting the glass down.

"That would be more convincing if you didn't look like you were bracing yourself to hear that someone's dog was dead," Tony told him. "Don't worry about it."

"No, ask me," Loki insisted. "I want... It's better that you understand."

I want you to understand, and Tony felt that warm fizzy response in his gut again. "Well, if you're using the phone to teleport, then it doesn't need to be lies or mischief, right? Because it's a magic tool doing the work."

"That's right," Loki said, spearing another mouthful of lobster on his fork. His eyes flicked back to Tony almost immediately, watching him.

"A while back Thor said the phone just helps you do stuff you could already do. So how does teleporting fit?"

Loki looked thoughtful while he chewed, then he swallowed and set down his fork. "There are a few answers to your question," he said. "There is walking the hidden pathways between the realms, which is not casting my own magic and is something almost anyone could do. There are times when I have used teleportation to aid some piece of mischief. And then there are the times - most of the time - when in fact I did not teleport at all."

"What," Tony said flatly.

Loki grinned. "Bending the light so that it appears I have suddenly appeared or disappeared is an easy lie, Tony. And so very convincing."

Tony stared at him, taking that in. "Do you mean that in San Francisco, when you were stealing that vase, you just-- you didn't even *leave*, you just turned invisible?"

"And walked away," Loki confirmed, smirking at him.

"You son of a bitch!" Tony exclaimed, a little too loud; conversations nearby stilled for a moment and people looked over at their table, then went back to what they were doing. Tony had to laugh, shaking his head. "Sneaky asshole. That's awesome. So you wanted the cell phone so you could teleport and still be all..." He waved a hand vaguely in the air. "Within the rules?"

Loki bit his lip briefly. "More or less," he said, though he sounded hesitant.

Tony frowned. "What's that mean?"

Loki looked at him consideringly for a long moment. Finally he said, "My power is... not what it once was. I think that... they wanted me reliant on the scepter as much as possible."

No need to ask who 'they' were. Tony rested his hands on the edge of the table, looking back at Loki. "Why tell me that?"

"I want you to trust me," Loki said, and looked down at his plate.

Tony took a slow breath. That was a little painful, especially with Loki refusing to meet his eyes afterwards, either guilty or vulnerable or both. Tony wanted to trust him, too, but he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something Loki was planning, and he wasn't sure he should.

"Thank you," he said softly.

Loki glanced up and gave him a slightly pained smile. Tony's heart ached. He looked down and used his fork to prod at the lobster tail on his plate.

"Is it... coming back?" he asked, fidgeting with his fork. "I don't know how it works, I mean..."

"I am recovering," Loki said. "More slowly than I would like, but recovering nonetheless."

Tony snorted slightly, thinking of everything that had happened in his life since that first trip gone wrong in Afghanistan. "I know the feeling."

Loki looked like he was about to say something to that, then apparently changed his mind and continued eating. Tony took a sip of wine then followed his example. "What do you think of it?" he asked, gesturing at Loki's plate.

"It's pleasant enough," Loki said, then paused thoughtfully. "I like the sauce more than the meat of this one, I think."

"Okay," Tony said, flicking back through his memory of the menu. "I think you'll like - not the next one, but the one after - that's got some good flavor to the sauce. Actually I'm keen to see what you think of the merluza, too - that's the last one before the desserts."

"I'm sure they will be delightful," Loki said, smiling across the table at him.

Tony really wished Loki could have been himself for this. He understood that a disguise was necessary; hell, he'd been the one to propose it. But it blunted his enjoyment somewhat, to smile and not have *Loki* be the one smiling back at him.

"So, got any plans for after we finish up Ultron?" he asked.

Loki grimaced a little. "Several, all of them conflicting with one another. I'm not sure yet."

Tony rubbed at a spot of grease on the table. "But will you still have things to do on Earth, or are you going to go catch up on your mischief on the other realms, or...?"

"I hope you're not under the impression that you're being subtle," Loki said, a smile in his voice.

"Discreet." Tony looked up at him. "I'm being discreet, thank you very much."

Loki said wryly, "Well, *discreetly*, I'm sure I can be persuaded to spend some more time here."

Tony looked down at the table again, grinning to himself.

--

"Tony," Pierce said warmly, and shook his hand. "And... Agent Romanoff." There was a hint of question in his voice.

"Personal security," Tony explained. "Oil lobby's getting serious, someone took a shot at me in Colorado. But that's not what we're here to talk about."

"That's right, I saw that on the news." Pierce smiled at him, seeming friendly enough. "Glad you made it. We'd hate to lose Iron Man. Take a seat, take a seat."

Tony thought of Obie's little note, *Thank God it wasn't your time*, and made himself smile back.

He sat down in the offered chair; Natasha went to the window and peered between the blinds. She'd had to disarm when they went through security, but Tony had smuggled his nano-armor in, as they'd planned. The arc reactor already set off the metal detectors; an extra plate over top made no difference.

Pierce's office was spacious enough, though Tony hadn't been in it before; he'd visited the Secretary of Defense more than once, and after the invasion there'd been that Avenger photo op in the Oval Office, but dealing direct with Fury for Avengers business meant that Internal Security had never been particularly relevant.

"Alex," Tony said; "you mind if I call you Alex? You've got the rough outline of my proposal. I think we can come to a... mutually beneficial agreement, here."

It was clear from Pierce's expression that he did, in fact, mind Tony calling him Alex, but he let his opportunity for correction slide. He must really want the arc reactor technology. Or maybe he was consoling himself with thoughts of sending another assassin after Tony.

They danced around the proposal for a couple of minutes, each trying to get the other to be first to make a firm offer. Finally Pierce said, "What's your capacity? It's not much help if you'll take the better part of a year to build just one."

Tony smiled, crossing his legs at the ankles and leaning back in his chair. "I don't know what gave you *that* impression, but I assure you, Stark Industries has a much higher rate of production than that. We're not Hammertech, after all."

Pierce steepled his hands and got serious. "We'd be looking at three helicarriers."

"Six months," Tony said immediately.

Pierce raised an eyebrow, challenging him.

Tony smirked a little but shook his head. "The company does have pre-existing schedules to maintain. Commercial obligations. Six months is my best offer."

Take it or leave it, he didn't say.

"Then there's the price," Pierce said, tapping his finger on a sheet of paper on his desk. "Is that your 'best offer'?"

Tony pursed his lips, looking Pierce over. New engines for three helicarriers, design work, materials... "For three I could do a five percent discount."

"Ten," Pierce countered immediately.

"Seven," Tony said without blinking. "We've got margins to meet."

Pierce surveyed him for a moment, then smiled and stood up. "Sounds like a deal. Have your guys send the contract through to my guys." He held out his hand. "I look forward to working with you."

"Likewise, Alex." Tony grinned, shaking Pierce's hand. "I'll show myself out. Nat, we good?"

"Fine," Natasha said, doing an excellent impression of 'bored and a little resentful and mostly trying to hide it'. "Secretary."

"Agent Romanoff." Pierce smiled broadly. "Good to see you again. Keep up the good work."

Natasha fell into step beside Tony and they left Pierce's office. Under his breath Tony asked her, "You get what you needed?"

"Not here," she murmured back - so, yes.

Tony waited until they were alone in the jet heading back to NYC, which he thought was pretty good restraint, all things considered. Of course, he knew the answer, but he wanted to know that Natasha knew it too.

Before he had to prompt her, Natasha said, "He was too smug. He thought he was pulling one over on us."

"You're sure that wasn't just the helicarrier deal?" Tony checked, because Steve would.

"Both of us," Natasha reaffirmed. "Bozhe moi. He's Hydra."

Tony figured he would leave her alone then, let it sink in. But something about her expression stopped him. "What is it?"

"I don't think he's the only one," Natasha said. "I don't think there's a mole in SHIELD, I think there's an infiltration."

Tony blinked, unease stirring in his gut. "You wanna run that one by me?"

Natasha frowned at him slightly. "You saw how he was."

"For the most part, he was a guy making a business deal. There's a reason you came along, remember?"

"He was too calm," Natasha said, settling back in her seat as she explained. "When he talked about the attack on you in Colorado, when he said he'd hate to lose Iron Man. He's definitely the one who sent the Winter Soldier."

"I already knew that," Tony muttered.

"But then he let you call him Alex. He negotiated with you, but he didn't feel a need to compete for dominance. His assassin failed, but he still felt secure and smug. There's something up his sleeve."

When she spelled it out like that, Tony could kind of see it. He opened his mouth and then he stopped, remembering what else had happened in Colorado. "I called SHIELD to deal with the Winter Soldier," he said, feeling cold. "Loki thought there was something odd about the SHIELD agents."

"Loki met the SHIELD agents?" Natasha pressed, looking concerned.

Tony waved that aside. "It's okay, he was invisible. But he's the God of Lies. What if he really could sense something about them? What if some of them were Hydra?"

Natasha looked even more concerned. "You're bringing Loki invisible around SHIELD agents?"

"Is that really the most important detail right now?" Tony protested.

She shook her head and mouthed something he couldn't make out. Then she looked at him intently. "You said Loki fought Barnes off you. Did Barnes get a good look at him?"

"I don't know," Tony said, heart sinking. He was pretty sure he could see where this one was going. "And if some of the agents were Hydra, and they let him go on purpose..."

"They would have debriefed him first," Natasha finished for him. She tilted her head to one side, considering. "It's not necessarily the worst thing that could happen. SHIELD already knows you have semi-regular contact with Loki."

But right after an assassination attempt, in a private hotel room, with civilians nearby? That would raise Tony's eyebrows if he was the one finding out about it. Then again, there was a reason he let people think he was irresponsible; maybe this wouldn't raise any suspicions at all.

"What they will know is that you lied about it," Natasha continued, "but again, that's plausible. It will suggest that you're closer to Loki than I've presented in my reports, though. I'd say they'll make another assassination attempt."

"Goodie," Tony said, unenthused.

"If it helps," Natasha said, "they'll probably wait until this contract is signed."

"It doesn't," Tony said.

--

Thor didn't come to the team meeting. The message through Jarvis was that he didn't want to see Tony at the moment. On the one hand, Tony thought that was incredibly childish, but on the other hand, it did save a lot of awkwardness.

Natasha presented her report to the rest of the team and some creative swearwords were exchanged.

Clint, of all people, buried his face in his hands and said, "Fine. I give up. Bring Loki back in. It can hardly make any of this worse."

"Don't tell him that," Tony advised, pulling out his phone. "He'll take it as a challenge." He paused and waited for Steve to nod before hitting dial for Loki.

"How did your trip go?" Loki asked when he picked up.

"About how we expected," Tony told him. "You want to gatecrash another meeting? Thor's not here."

There was a pause. Loki said in disbelief, "You can't mean I'm *invited*."

"Surprise, Mister Popular," Tony said cheerfully. "I'd say good boys get treats, but a meeting really isn't a treat, so I'm not even going to try." Bruce was giving him the weirdest look. Natasha rolled her eyes.

This time the pause was even longer. Loki said, "I'm tempted to agree, if only to see the expressions on your team's faces right now."

"Worth it, I promise," Tony said.

"I'll see you shortly," Loki told him, and hung up.

Clint rested his chin on his hand and regarded Tony with narrowed eyes. "You have issues, Stark."

"Not exactly breaking news," Tony said flippantly, tucking his phone away. "One Asgardian secret weapon en route. What next?"

"Any progress with Barnes?" Natasha asked Steve.

Steve looked unhappy. "He doesn't remember me. Or, he remembers that he's seen me before... but that's it."

"And we can't bring in SHIELD's deprogramming experts because they might be the people who sent him in the first place," Clint said with a sigh.

"You two must have some secret spy contacts somewhere," Tony said, gesturing at Clint and Natasha. "Some CIA agent who owes you a favor, that kind of thing."

"Your average CIA agent doesn't know any more about deprogramming than a SHIELD agent," Natasha said, totally not answering the question.

There was silence for a moment while they all tried to think of alternatives and Steve brooded manfully. That wasn't fair, Tony thought to himself, this all must be a hell of a shock to Steve. But still, he really knew how to look like a Gothic romance hero.

(Tony blamed Pepper for his knowledge of anything to do with Gothic romances. And wow, thinking of Pepper didn't hurt quite so much.)

The conference room door opened and Loki swaggered in and spread his arms wide. "My friends! What a delight it is to see you all."

"I hate you," Clint said to Tony, "*so* much."

"Hey, it was your idea this time," Tony told him.

Loki looked absolutely delighted and Tony pointed at him warningly. There was antagonizing the team, and there was starting a fight, and too much more would go directly to being the latter.

Loki amazingly kept his mouth shut on that one, and strolled around the conference table to stand at Tony's shoulder. "I take it Thor decided he would have nothing to do with my involvement?"

Tony sighed and rolled his head back to look up at Loki. "He's not talking to me."

"Really?" Loki got that delighted look again, but his eyes were much more wary. "Do tell me what you did so I can achieve that same good fortune."

"You know what I did," Tony said with a grimace.

"Uh, I don't." Clint raised a hand. "If there's a team problem--"

"Thor believes that Tony persuaded Loki to breach an important cultural barrier," Natasha said smoothly. "But Loki would never do that, and we can *discuss it later*."

"Well said, little spider," Loki said, with a fake smile. "Why don't we discuss what has you all so desperate that you agreed to my coming here?"

"Why *did* you agree to come here?" Bruce said, frowning slightly.

"Not to be interrogated," Loki said, staring him down.

"Oookay," Tony declared, straightening up in his chair and swiveling it to face Loki. "Like you told me, Pierce ordered the hit on me. Nat and I went to see him, and Natasha thinks the

infiltration is more than just Pierce. Those agents who took Barnes away, you said there was something off about them."

"They were lying about much," Loki agreed.

"So we're worried that there might be more double-agents in SHIELD. A lot more. Do you want to sit down? I'm gonna get a crick in my neck."

"Thank you," Loki said, eyes briefly sweeping the room. "I'll stand."

Fair enough.

Steve leaned forward slightly. "What you did, pulling up Bucky's memories--"

"Steve!" Tony hissed furiously.

"--could you do that with older memories, that are stuck under the brainwashing?"

"No," Tony snapped. "I told you, he's not going back in Barnes' head--"

"You are not my master," Loki said in a low, warning voice. Startled, Tony jerked his eyes up to meet Loki's.

"I wasn't trying to-- I just meant--"

"I know." Loki looked at him a moment, more softly, then looked back at Steve. "I am surprised that you would trust me on such a *delicate* thing, Captain."

"We don't even know that Barnes still has those memories," Bruce said, looking uncomfortable.

"He almost recognizes me," Steve said stubbornly. "He's in there, he's got to be."

"Hm." Loki looked thoughtful, almost calculating. "That wasn't why you called me here. The snake inside your organization, you don't know how to handle it. Betrayal is such a bitter taste, isn't it?" He gave a dark smirk.

"This is not about you and your daddy issues--" Clint started.

"Any ideas?" Tony interrupted, before that could get nasty and probably violent.

Loki rolled his eyes a little. "What else do you do with a snake? Cut off its head."

"Two more will grow in its place," Natasha said grimly.

Loki shrugged. "Then burn the thing."

"That's very helpful," Bruce said, in the mild tone his sarcasm usually took. "Did you have any ideas that were a little less metaphorical?"

Loki slowly looked Bruce over. Bruce drew back a little, looking creeped out. "I suppose you want them left alive," Loki said.

Nobody rushed to speak. Bruce shot an accusing look around the table. "Yes."

"...Yeah, of course," Tony agreed halfheartedly. "Ah. Fair trials and all that jazz."

"I see," Loki said.

"Was that judging? That sounded judging. Look, it's complicated. Most of us grew up hearing how evil Hydra was--" Tony heard himself and immediately froze.

"Oh," Loki said, eyes gleaming with that 'found a weakness' look, and Loki really must be feeling nervous around the Avengers to be going on the attack like this. "The monsters of your childhood, are they?"

"You really wanna do this right now?" Tony asked, raising his eyebrows. 'In front of these guys?' he didn't need to say.

Loki's eyes flicked round the room once more, then he inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement. "So you want to know who is part of the snake, and ideally have proof of their involvement," he summarized.

"Oh yeah, that would be swell," Clint said sarcastically.

Loki smirked. "And what's in it for me?"

Clint blinked. "Wait. Are you saying you can...?"

"Well, I would certainly need further motivation than I've been given so far," Loki drawled.

Natasha raised an eyebrow at him. "They tried to kill Tony, and it will make them angry."

Loki scowled briefly. "I hope you don't think--"

"I'm sure you know what I think," Natasha said, a hint of steel in her voice. "But maybe we can sweeten the deal."

"Act now, and get a free Ginsu steak knife," Tony murmured. Loki and Steve both gave him baffled looks.

"The problem is, Agent Romanoff, you have nothing I want," Loki said then, smiling smugly.

"Oh, I think we do," Natasha countered. She flicked her eyes to Tony in a meaningful way that he didn't like at all.

Loki pressed his lips together in a tight line, looking extremely displeased. "I am hardly going to shed a few tears if he is cut loose from your incompetent organization."

"He'd be a little more than 'cut loose' and you know it," Natasha answered.

Loki glared at her, then said curtly, "I'll think on it."

Loki disappeared then, and Tony thought of their conversation at Le Bernardin; wondered if Loki was still standing there, invisible.

"I don't appreciate being used for blackmail," he told Natasha.

Bruce pulled his chair a little closer to the table. "Was that what I think it was?"

"Nat just told Loki that if he helps us, SHIELD won't throw Tony in a hole for getting friendly with the enemy," Clint said.

"As if I couldn't break out of any hole SHIELD could throw me into," Tony added, but he didn't like the uncomfortable feeling Natasha's 'offer' had left in his gut.

"Would Loki even really care?" Steve said doubtfully.

"He did say he'd think it over," Natasha said mildly, sidestepping the question.

Bruce said, "Huh."

Tony paused a moment at that. "Bruce?"

"We should probably talk about what to do about Hydra," Bruce said evasively.

Oh, that wasn't good, probably. Tony sighed and resigned himself to a deep and meaningful conversation at some point later on.

"We should assume that Hydra have access to any of SHIELD's resources," Steve said, looking serious. Natasha and Clint both winced.

"Oh, shit," Tony said, as his background thoughts about Clint's grudge against Loki coalesced into a horrified realization.

"Exactly," Natasha said. "All the information, every--"

"No." Tony shook his head, feeling sick. He hoped Loki really had left the room. "SHIELD have the scepter."

All the blood drained from Clint's face. "We are not sending Loki anywhere near that thing."

"That means anyone could be under Hydra's control," Bruce said in alarm.

"We're going to have to tread very carefully," Natasha said. She was a little pale herself.

Steve said shakily, "We need more information. Tony, during the invasion you hacked SHIELD's systems--"

"They'll have boosted security since then," Tony said, and made himself smile. "A challenge. It'll be fun."

#

Precision Work

Chapter Summary

Declarations of love are exchanged, more or less. SHIELD is haunted.

Hacking SHIELD during the invasion had one key component: Tony had been on the helicarrier in person.

He could get Natasha or Clint to plant a bug easily enough, but getting the data out again was going to be... interesting. Tony turned the problem over in his mind while his hands worked on putting satellite pieces together, Loki on the other side of the workbench doing his magic.

Loki was quiet today, still kind of disgruntled about Natasha's blackmail or manipulation or whatever it was meant to be. Tony didn't really know what to say about it because, well... he did want to dig Hydra out.

The real question was what data to look for. Hydra double-agents weren't exactly going to flag it on their personnel files or in their mission reports. Presumably, if there was anything obvious to give them away then other SHIELD agents would already have picked it up.

If they were dumb enough to use SHIELD systems for Hydra business, though... there might be something encrypted, something hidden. He'd basically need to look for whatever was hardest to find.

The easiest option would be to exploit Loki's ability to turn invisible, but Tony could understand the team not wanting Loki to get the opportunity to get near the scepter.

Except. Loki had had the ability to turn invisible all this time and hadn't recovered the scepter yet.

Natasha said the scepter wouldn't be at the Triskelion or on the helicarrier; long-term artifact study was done in specialized facilities. So either SHIELD was actually competent enough to have secured the hell out of those places, or there was some Asgardian cultural taboo stopping Loki from chasing the scepter.

Or... he just didn't want it.

Maybe there was some truth in what Loki had said about the scepter influencing his mind. Maybe he didn't want that to happen again?

Tony frowned to himself, mulling it over.

"You're thinking hard," Loki commented, eyeing him.

"There's a lot going on," Tony said vaguely.

Loki said, "Hm," and gave him a sceptical look. Then he pursed his lips and said, "Your Agent Romanoff is very sure of herself."

"She's not *my* Agent Romanoff," Tony protested. "And she always acts like that, she doesn't like showing weakness."

"She thinks she understands what is between us," Loki said sourly.

"I don't even understand what's between us," Tony joked. "Look, all in all, that could have gone a lot worse. You don't have to help out--"

"So long as I have no care for what happens to *you*." Loki glared down at the half-assembled satellite. The whole set was nearly complete, now; three of four batches launched, courtesy of Stark Industries. "I dislike people thinking they can *control* me."

Tony winced a little, recognizing where that sentiment came from. "Yeah... I understand," he said with a sigh.

"For all the good your understanding does me," Loki muttered, still glaring at the satellite.

"Wow, love you too, sugarbuns," Tony said sarcastically, then his own words sunk in and he froze. "I mean. I was. That was. A joke. Not that how I feel is-- I just, um--"

"Good grief," Loki said, giving him a scathing look. "You Midgardians didn't use to be nearly so shy of basic emotions."

"Excuse me," Tony said indignantly. "Saying the words is a big deal, okay? Don't pretend you're in a rush to say it either."

Loki looked at him incredulously. "Of course I love you, and dearly so. I would hardly let you handle my hair otherwise."

Tony blinked. This was not what he had expected today. Or any day. Oh... god. Loki loved him. And just... came right out and said it. That was not supposed to be the thing they had. And *yeah*, okay, so he was maybe a little more deeply attached to Loki than he was meant to be, but there was a difference between *feeling* and *saying* and just, what the hell had just happened?

"Okay," he said, putting his tools down, "I think I need to have a slight panic attack now."

"Midgardians," Loki muttered, and Tony would have taken offense if he wasn't having a minor mental meltdown because Loki had said he *loved him*.

He felt suddenly, intensely, as though he were betraying Pepper, and Tony blinked rapidly, trying to hold back the pain in his chest. He spent nearly all his time with Loki these days, and it had somehow just... crept up on him. All of it had snuck up on him, and now he was forced to actually look at it, it scared the hell out of him.

Loki sighed and came around the workbench. "Tony," he said, grasping him by the upper arms, "I'm well aware I'm not the most... desirable friend--"

"Shut up," Tony said, more fiercely than he meant to. "That's not it. I just..."

He let Loki pull him closer and rested his forehead on the top of Loki's shoulder while Loki's arms wrapped around him. "I don't want to lose you," he mumbled, stomach tight with anxiety. He'd never meant for Loki to become so important to him. And Ultron so close to finished... yeah, he was afraid.

"Nor I you," Loki said, but he sounded quietly bleak.

Tony stayed there a few moments, getting himself back under control. Maybe it was going to be fine, maybe he and Loki were both just assuming the worst. Maybe it would all go well.

He took another moment, then raised his head and smiled half-heartedly. "We should get back to work."

Loki swallowed, then said, "Yes, of course." He clasped the side of Tony's neck briefly then returned to his spot on the other side of the workbench.

Tony picked up his tools again, feeling the warm echo of Loki's touch. Love. There was a hell of a difference between the uncomplicated way Thor spoke of loving his friends, and the tangled, complicated *thing* between him and Loki.

"You know I, um." He cleared his throat. "I..."

"I know," Loki said, smiling at him in fond amusement. "Take your time, I understand you are hampered by your backwards customs."

"Oh, you." Tony threw a screw at him. "Don't get all smug with me, your culture's *stupid*."

Loki's smile faded and Tony kicked himself, mentally. Way to kill the mood.

"I wouldn't know," Loki said quietly, avoiding Tony's eyes.

Oh. A willing Jotunheim reference, that was rare. Tony thought rapidly, trying to salvage the moment. "Well, on the bright side, I'm pretty sure they haven't done anything as awful as *Galactica 1980*, so you're ahead of me there."

"I hope you're not under the impression I care about whatever travesty you're referencing," Loki said, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Travesty is about right," Tony said cheerfully. "Trust me, you're better off not knowing."

Loki shook his head, looking reluctantly amused. "Until you have had to sit through an hours-long rendition of The Epic of Aelhivar's Blade, you have not known true suffering."

"Oh, that's how you want to play it, is it?" Tony grinned across the workbench. "Buddy, let me tell you about a little thing called private school prizegivings...."

They bantered back and forth for a bit, until Jarvis interrupted them. "Sir," Jarvis said, "Doctor Banner inquires as to whether you might be free to talk."

Tony coughed slightly. "Now's not a great time. Ask him if I can swing by at the end of the work day."

He glanced at his watch and yeah, Bruce would have just come onto his lunch break. They should probably eat something too. One thing Tony had noticed through this whole process was that Loki was not real great at admitting when he was tired from too much magic; probably didn't like showing a sign of 'weakness'. Making sure they took regular breaks for food seemed to help, though.

"He looks forward to your visit, sir," Jarvis informed him.

"Subtle," Tony muttered. Bruce must really want to talk to him, and Tony had a nagging suspicion that he knew what about. He ignored that issue for now and glanced across at Loki. "What do you want for lunch, Green Bean?"

"Noodles," Loki said, already looking around eagerly as though the food would just appear the moment he called for it. Tony grinned and pulled out his phone to put an order through for pad thai.

It didn't take long to arrive, and lunch was spent coming up with ever more elaborate and ridiculous descriptions of boring functions they'd each had to sit through. Loki was in a much better mood by the end of it.

"So, SHIELD," Tony started. "Ignoring what Natasha said--"

"Your team will tolerate my assistance because it's convenient, and to humor the one they truly care for." Loki gestured at Tony, then gave a sardonic smile. "I'm familiar with the concept."

"I will point out," Tony said carefully, "it was Clint's idea to call you in."

"And I'm sure he was overjoyed to do so," Loki said, lightly sarcastic. "Fear not, Glowheart; in this case it suits my purposes to give you aid. What do you want done?"

Tony bit his lip. He wasn't entirely happy about the circumstances, but Loki's help *would* make it a lot easier. "If I give you an external drive to take in invisibly and attach to a computer, then bring back a few hours later when it's collected enough data..."

"Not exactly complex," Loki said dryly. "I think I should be able to manage that much."

"I've got to make a couple of tweaks to the program, but that won't take long, I can do it after dinner tonight." Tony sighed. "We really thought we beat these guys. Turns out, not only were they lurking underground this whole time, they infiltrated the same organizations that were built to fight them. Doesn't feel good, let me tell you."

Loki was silent for several moments. Finally he said quietly, "I imagine not."

Tony tossed away a balled up serviette. "Well, not that this didn't turn super cheerful, but let's get back to work, shall we?"

"Very well," Loki said, in the same quiet tone.

--

Around five, Tony went to go talk to Bruce like he'd agreed. He shoved his hands in his pockets and tried not to be distracted thinking about how ridiculously adorable Loki was when on a magic high from finishing a satellite.

"Tony," Bruce said seriously, "I wanted to talk to you about Loki."

Yyyep.

"Alright," Tony said with a sigh. "What is it this time? Let me guess, you don't think we can trust him digging around in SHIELD--"

"Actually," Bruce said, adjusting his glasses slightly, "based on how he reacted to Natasha, I think maybe we can."

"What?" Tony said.

"He's obviously... gotten attached to you." Bruce cleared his throat. "I just wondered if you had a plan for how to handle that."

"Of course I've got a plan," Tony said, letting a little irritation show through. "You people never trust me to know what I'm doing. Come on."

"That's because you usually just charge right into danger," Bruce pointed out. Unfairly. Deeply unfairly.

"Look, everything's fine," Tony said firmly. "I'm teaching him to tolerate humanity, everything's under control. Just trust me."

"Yeah, I was kinda worried you were going to say something like that," Bruce said with a sigh. "You know he's not the most stable of personalities."

"You'd be surprised," Tony said. "Avoid the obvious sore spots, and he's pretty good. If he acts unstable it's usually because he's feeling defensive."

Bruce gave him a wary, thoughtful look. "You're getting to know him pretty well."

Oh, Bruce had *no* idea. Tony managed to keep his smile calm. "Just ply him with alcohol and he gets talking."

"Sounds like someone else I know," Bruce said dryly.

Tony feigned indignance. "Excuse me, I do not need alcohol to talk your ear off."

"Oh, I'm aware." Bruce shook his head with a smile. "Just... be careful, okay? He's not exactly known for handling hurt well."

"I keep saying, trust me," Tony repeated insistently. He'd made it this far, hadn't he? Admittedly, there had been a small patch of nearly dying there in the middle, but he was mostly sure that wasn't intentional, and it had all worked out eventually.

"Yeah." Bruce glanced at his computer screen. "Well. If you think you might need the other guy, let me know."

"I will," Tony promised, and beat a hasty retreat.

--

Loki took the external drive to SHIELD that night, after Tony had updated the program. If Tony was honest with himself, he was a little uneasy about it, but surely Loki wouldn't do anything to jeopardize getting the full Ultron network up and running?

What was there to even go wrong? What was there that Loki could do, that he couldn't have done at any time in their years fighting him already?

Tony told himself to relax, and tried to focus on the launch plans for the last batch of satellites. So long as the weather behaved, they were on track to get it done this week. And then, unless Loki did something unhelpful, Tony would be able to breathe easy in the knowledge that Earth had some protection.

He wasn't going to overthink Loki's behavior lately. He wasn't going to assume the worst. He was going to just-- wait and see. And be ready.

He'd told Loki to bring the data straight back, so he wasn't surprised when Loki appeared in the workshop shortly after midnight. Loki didn't make a comment about him still being up, either, which Tony appreciated.

"Let's see what we've got," he murmured, strolling over to the computer he used for testing tweaks to Jarvis' code, the secure unit without an internet connection. He attached the tiny drive and started delving into its contents.

"I'll leave you to it," Loki said, probably recognizing that Tony wasn't going to be great conversation for the next little while.

"Did you have any trouble?" Tony thought to ask.

"No, it was fairly quiet. A couple of lower level agents may now be under the impression that one of the offices is haunted." Loki grinned shamelessly.

Tony laughed. "Okay, well, I'm glad you had fun. I'll catch you in the morning."

"Goodnight," Loki said, and used his phone to teleport away. He didn't bother to hide it around Tony anymore.

Tony turned his attention back to the computer. The decryption program had struggled, but he had more powerful programs he could bring to bear. The amount of computing power even this small, secondary machine had... Yeah, he'd crack this data.

Some hours later, swearing profusely, he was a little less convinced. He'd wanted whatever was most hidden, but the layers of encryption on this were just ridiculous. If he hadn't already been convinced that someone was trying to hide something, he sure as hell was now.

He vaguely noticed the elevator, and waved a hand. "Just gimme a minute, here..."

"You've been at this all night, haven't you?" Loki said.

"Maaaybe." Tony squinted at the screen. "Goddamn-- seriously? This better not turn out to just be someone's grocery list."

He glanced up but Loki was disappearing back into the elevator, obviously not in the mood to play second fiddle to complex math. That was fine, Tony would call him in a bit. He just wanted to break this one chain...

Sometime later, a plate shoved itself into his chest. Tony grabbed its sides automatically, then blinked - first at the omelette, then at Loki.

"Eat something," Loki told him.

"Did you cook this?" Tony said in disbelief.

"Obviously." Loki pulled up a chair and sat down. "I gather it's not going entirely well."

"Whoever encrypted this data is even more paranoid than I am," Tony said, taking a moment to appreciate the sight of legs in black leather, sprawled wide. He put the plate down on the desk and cut off a piece of omelette. He was pleasantly surprised by the taste. After chewing and swallowing, he said, "This is great. I didn't even know I had things that made these flavors."

"You don't," Loki said, half-smirking at him. "Your kitchen is woefully understocked. I took the liberty of retrieving some supplies from the larger kitchen."

"Oh good," Tony said, cutting off some more omelette. "You raiding the team level, that's not going to go horribly wrong."

Loki's smirk widened. Tony wondered if there was going to be a sudden resumption of the prank war. If Loki hadn't thought of that, best not to put the idea in his head.

Tony kept eating, finding that he was surprisingly hungry. In between bites he said, "So I guess today we can either work on the last satellite or I can keep trying to decrypt this data from SHIELD."

Loki frowned slightly. "You sorely need a defense against the Mad Titan. But... this Hydra is the more immediate threat."

"Depends how many brainwashed assassins they have on retainer," Tony said flippantly. From the slight glare Loki shot him, the joke wasn't appreciated. "Alright, jeez." Another mouthful of omelette. "How about I keep working on this for now, and then we re-evaluate at lunch."

Loki inclined his head in agreement. "In the meantime, I'll revisit your woeful organization and see how much I can learn about how deep the rot lies."

Tony wasn't sure that was a great idea, but he didn't really have a good counter-argument. Instead he said, "You just want to make them think the whole place is haunted."

"What a good idea," Loki said, grinning at him.

Tony had to laugh. "Yeah, alright, Mischief," he said. "Don't have too much fun without me. I'll see you for lunch."

Loki waved and teleported off, presumably to SHIELD. Tony shook his head, smiling, and quickly finished off the rest of the omelette before turning his attention back to the computer.

--

They wound up using the afternoon to finish the last satellite. Loki slowly got snappier as their work progressed. Tony put up with it for a while by reminding himself that they were both expecting the worst, and then he lost his temper and snapped back. That led to Loki giving him the silent treatment, which in comparison was not the worst thing that could happen.

They finished up a bit late, and Tony ordered them some dinner, while Loki looked grim and broody and stayed mostly silent throughout.

After dinner, Tony sighed and decided to take the bull by the horns, as it were. "Loki," he said.

Loki looked down rather than lashing out, which was a useful clue as to which way he was directing his bad mood.

"Loki," Tony repeated patiently. Well. Semi-patiently. "Whatever you're thinking... just, try to remember you're not that, okay?"

Loki glanced up at him and gave a thin, joyless smirk. "Not a frost giant?"

Ah. "Not a monster," Tony said, not looking away.

Loki held his gaze for a moment, then went back to staring broodily at the air in front of him. Quietly he said, "Then why do I want things which are so... wrong?"

"Standing by my argument that Gods of Chaos are meant to break rules," Tony said, because he figured that would get him a little further than 'fuck Asgard'.

Loki closed his eyes. "Tell me again."

Okay, no pressure. Tony took an unsteady breath. "Chaos gods cross boundaries. Blur the lines between one thing and another."

Loki let out a soft exhalation but didn't otherwise react.

"And question authority. Which I guess isn't exactly what you want from the son of a king, no wonder His Royal Babysnatcher didn't bring it up--"

That made Loki's eyes open. "You're suggesting that along with everything else he lied about, Odin would lie about my very domain?"

"Uh." Tony didn't know what to make of the tension in Loki's voice. "Maybe? I'm just making guesses."

Loki kept staring in front of himself, motionless.

Watching him, Tony thought of the time Loki had said he was better at Allspeak than Thor. Curiously he asked, "When I say 'chaos' and 'mischief', do you hear a difference between them?"

Loki slowly turned his head to regard Tony with a bemused expression. "One is on a larger scale than the other. Why?"

"Huh," Tony said, vaguely fascinated. "In English, they're totally different things."

Loki's brow furrowed. "How so?"

"Well. Mischief is... playing pranks and jokes and things. Chaos is about things being random."

"Disorder," Loki agreed. "Interfering with the proper structures for fun, be it by a child playing or built into the Norns' weaving."

"So," Tony said, "you believe chaos is intentional."

"Yes," Loki said, looking pleased that they were on the same page. "How would it not be?"

Tony opened his mouth then closed it again. "That's kind of a whole other conversation. Does Asgard have a concept of atheism?"

Loki laughed a little. "I'm aware that Midgard no longer appreciates the work of the Norns, fear not."

"What about chaos theory?"

"Studying the very warp and weft of the Norns' tapestries," Loki said with a nod; "down to the most minute of details and the most subtle of patterns, where a casual observer might think there was no pattern at all."

"I... guess you could describe it that way," Tony said doubtfully.

Loki smiled at him in amusement. "I know. You think chaos just *happens*, that someone doesn't look at her weaving and say 'Actually, you know what, I think I'll toss in some other colors there...' You think that rules break themselves and there is no greater force guiding the realms, despite the commonalities between them."

"Parallel evolution is not proof of the existence of God," Tony objected. "Not that you can't be a scientist and still believe in God, but... It's more like, the universe is a big, weird place and we don't understand it all yet."

"You never will," Loki said confidently. "It is far greater than you or I could comprehend."

"You say that like it's comforting," Tony said with a snort.

"Isn't it?" Loki stretched out, regarding Tony with a soft smile. "I do like your idea... that my role is to disrupt it. It feels..." He let out a sigh and shook his head wistfully.

Tony wasn't really in a position to rag on Asgardian beliefs, because didn't he feel like he'd survived everything for a reason? That he had been given a chance to make things right, to make the planet safe...?

"Tony," Loki said, looking unaccountably nervous all of a sudden. "I, ah... I wanted to ask you..."

"Yes?" Tony prompted carefully.

Loki bit his lip, and blurted, "Do you want to fuck me?"

"God, yes," Tony said. Then, "Wait. That's-- a really big deal, isn't it?" In the sense that Loki *wasn't meant to do it*, and oh Tony had better tread extremely carefully here.

"It's... improper," Loki said delicately. "But as you pointed out, my role is not constrained by propriety." There was a challenging look in his eyes.

Tony took a slow breath. "Only if you're really sure."

"Oh, so you are happy enough when it is my magic that may be of use to you, but when it's--" Loki stopped short and looked away, and the fact that he was having trouble even saying it didn't make Tony any less uneasy.

"I didn't say that," Tony told him gently. "If this is something you really want to try, then sure. But I don't want you to think that I expect it or that I'm putting any pressure on you."

Loki heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I assure you, I would not propose it simply for *your* benefit." It came out snide, and it didn't bode well that Loki was already this defensive.

Tony wasn't sure what the right thing to do here was. He had a feeling turning Loki down wouldn't go down well, but going through with it seemed... fraught.

Maybe just take it real slow and keep checking in with Loki to make sure he was okay with it?

He followed Loki into the bedroom, still trying to think. He almost wanted to suggested that he lie down and Loki ride him, so that Loki was in control and could stop whenever he wanted - but if this was the first time Loki had done this then that might be a bit... much.

"Well, I feel nervous," Tony said with a forced laugh. "I've gotta show you why people like this... no pressure."

Loki gave him a scathing look and flopped down on the bed, obviously not in the mood for small talk. Tony undressed, fleetingly envious of Loki's ability to just magic clothes away. He retrieved the lubricant from the bedside drawers and climbed onto the bed with Loki.

"You ready?" he asked gently.

Loki pressed his lips together tightly, then said snappishly, "Get on with it."

"Uh *huh*." Tony tipped some lube onto his fingers and reached between Loki's thighs. "Just try and relax, okay?" Nope, Loki was tense as hell. "This'll be better if you can manage to relax a little."

"I'm fine," Loki gritted out, tensing even further if that was possible.

Tony hesitated, looking Loki over. Loki's hands were twisted in the bottom sheet, clenched tight. Loki's expression was unhappy and grim.

"Alright," Tony said with a sigh, tossing the bottle of lube aside. He wiped his hand on the sheets and lay down beside Loki so they were on an even level. "We're not doing this."

Loki narrowed his eyes. "Don't pretend you don't want this."

"Not the point." With his clean hand, Tony ran his fingers through Loki's hair. "You don't want to do it, we stop. You don't feel comfortable, we stop. You have a fraction of a doubt, we stop."

Loki avoided his eyes, flushed with shame. "I want to," he said, almost angrily. "I just-- I *can't*."

"And that's fine," Tony said steadily. He really wanted to punch Asgard in the face. "You just take your time, and if you're never ready, that's okay too."

Loki hunched his shoulders a little, staring at Tony's chest, at the arc reactor. In a low voice he said, "There was another who was. Much more... persistent."

"Well, I'm not whoever that was," Tony said, uneasily wondering if he was interpreting that right.

"No," Loki whispered quietly. He flicked his eyes back up to Tony's. "You are not."

Tony wrapped his arm around Loki and pulled him into a loose, awkward hug. "We good?"

"Yes." Loki took a couple of breaths, roughly in time with Tony's. "Do you really think I'm a God of Chaos?"

Well, he didn't believe Loki was a *god*, so that was difficult. Tony grimaced, trying to be honest. "I think it suits you better," he came up with.

Loki's fingers played with the sheet in between them. "Cut my hair," he said suddenly.

Tony faltered, taken aback. "What?"

"If you want to," Loki amended, still pink in the cheeks. "You don't have to, I just thought maybe you'd like..."

"Loki," Tony said seriously. He waited until he was sure he had Loki's full attention. "Is this another thing you're not fully comfortable with but you're trying to do just to prove you can?"

"No." Loki shook his head, looking nervous. "I would... like you to."

Tony swallowed. "We're not 'just friends', are we?"

Loki shook his head again, slower.

Tony took a slow, steadying breath. "Okay. Yeah. Okay."

They met in the living room when Tony was dressed again; Loki in leather pants and a casual-looking green tunic. Loki had put a comb and a pair of scissors with weird open handles on the bar and was sitting on one of the stools, looking... well, shy.

"I have to warn you," Tony said, examining the scissors, "I don't have a lot of experience at cutting hair. I want to say 'how hard can it be?' but usually when I say that the thing turns out to be harder than I expected, so, uh, just maybe tone down your expectations, okay?"

"It's not about how it looks," Loki said. "I can tidy it afterwards, if necessary."

Tony felt weirdly kind of offended by that, even though he'd just been insisting he didn't know what he was doing. He shook it off and picked up the comb and scissors. "How much do you want cut?"

Loki bit his lip, going slightly pink again. "Just above the shoulders, if you would," he said, obviously trying to sound haughty.

"Alright. Scoot 'round." Tony stepped forward as Loki turned his back to him, heart thumping unreasonably hard. It was stupid to be nervous, it was just a haircut; he was used to precision work, how hard could it be?

He breathed carefully and slipped the comb into Loki's hair, sliding it against Loki's scalp and down through the soft strands. It hit a couple of snags along the way, just minor ones that parted easily. Tony licked his lips and brought the comb up again; slide down, find any snags, glide through.

"So," he murmured, feeling like he should signal what he was doing, "I'm just giving it a onceover, and then I'll start by taking a couple inches off so I feel like I know what I'm doing, and then I'll take it up to the shoulders, sound good?"

"Yes," Loki said, a little unsteadily.

"Been a while, huh?" Tony thought about restraining himself but the joke was practically begging to be made. "Don't worry, baby, I'll be gentle with you."

Loki snorted lightly. "You just finished telling me that you're not skilled with using your... implements."

Tony laughed, sliding the comb through Loki's hair again. It was weirdly satisfying. "Just because I'm used to handling a different kind of tool, doesn't mean I don't know how to get the job done."

"Promises, promises," Loki said archly.

"Damn straight." Tony slid the comb down and stopped it a couple of inches before the end, holding Loki's hair out far enough that he could line the scissors up with the teeth of the comb. "You're still sure about this?"

"Yes," Loki repeated. It sounded like he swallowed.

Tony carefully closed the scissors, cutting through the dark strands of hair that were held in the comb. The scissors were sharp; the hair fell easily to the ground. Loki was motionless.

"That wasn't so bad," Tony said faintly.

Loki murmured, "Keep going."

Tony drew the comb through Loki's hair again, and lined it up with the previous cut. It wasn't so bad. Accuracy, measuring by sight, he could do that. He lined up the comb, and cut, and lined up the comb, and cut, and eventually he'd taken off a couple of inches all the way round. It was a bit ragged and uneven in spots, but he'd gotten better towards the end.

"Alright," Tony said, a bit bemused to realize his mouth was dry. He wet his lips. "Take a look at that, and then if you want I'll do the shoulders thing."

Loki waved a hand through the air, a mirror forming in its wake.

"Yes," Loki said, meeting Tony's eyes in the mirror, his own eyes dark. "The rest, please."

Tony let out a breath, simultaneously excited and intimidated. He drew an imaginary line in his head, measuring the point at which he wanted to cut. It would be shorter than Thor's, but still on the long side. More like Natasha's. It was weird to imagine Loki with shorter hair.

He pulled the comb through Loki's hair again, sliding it down and lifting away from Loki's neck for better access for cutting. The cut ends landed on Loki's tunic and some tumbled to

the floor. Tony pulled the comb through again, slowly trimming uneven bits as he worked his way around.

About halfway, he brushed Loki's hair aside and gently kissed the nape of his neck. Loki shivered; his reflection was wide-eyed.

"You still good?" Tony asked, checking in.

Loki gave a slow nod, his hair shifting with the movement of his head. His gaze, via the mirror, was fixed on Tony. He opened his mouth then stopped and just breathed.

"Okay," Tony said, running first his fingers then the comb through Loki's hair. He took a breath and resumed cutting, using the comb to guide his movements, concentrating on making a nice, straight line. "Chin up a little?" he said absently. Yeah, that was better. Pull the comb, slide the scissors. Snip, snip. There was a rhythm to it.

He got to the end and stepped back to critically examine his handiwork. Couple of bits too long there on the right, near the back; he trimmed them carefully to line them up with the rest of the hair. It rested shorter than he'd cut it, due to the hair's natural waviness, but Tony kind of liked it. It looked like it was a good length for grabbing, too.

He leaned down and murmured next to Loki's ear, "What do you think?"

Loki's mouth quirked briefly, then Loki waved the mirror away and turned back around on the stool. "Thank you," he said softly.

"I'm not going to pretend I understand entirely what that means," Tony said, "but--"

Loki shut him up by the simple expedient of pulling him in and kissing him. Tony melted into it, sliding a hand into Loki's newly-cut hair to hold him close. This, he understood.

#

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Ultron.

They took the Stark Industries jet for the final satellite launch. Technically they didn't need to be there for it, but Tony really wanted to. It was kind of a historic occasion. And... if Loki was going to pull anything, this was going to be the moment.

The satellites were carried by an unmanned rocket designed for this project. Tony had reviewed the flight plans over and over again. The weather was clear and fine, not too windy. Everything was perfect. They'd watch this launch, then focus all their energy on rooting out Hydra.

The count came over the loudspeakers and through the earpiece Tony was wearing. "Ten... nine... eight..."

Tony found Loki's hand with his own, and interlaced their fingers. They'd made this, together. Earth was going to be safer, hopefully safe *enough*, because of what they'd built.

"Three... two..."

Ignition. Tony watched the engines on the rocket fire, watched as it slowly pushed upwards and left the Earth behind. Loki's hand squeezed his gently, then let go.

"Done," Tony said, feeling weirdly stunned. "It's all done."

"It is," Loki said, neck craning as he watched the rocket travel higher and higher.

Tony turned and started along the walkway from the observation area. "So now it's straight onto the next crisis. I want to take a look at the metadata on those encrypted files, see if anything there--"

Loki wasn't walking with him. Tony stopped, and sighed quietly. "Yeah, we're doing this," he muttered to himself. He wasn't surprised, but it still hurt.

He turned around and looked back at Loki. Loki, who was holding his cell phone, looking regretful but determined. Well. That answered the question of whether the cell phone could interface with the Ultron network.

"Let me guess." Tony shook his head. "You're going to send a few to Jotunheim, but just a few. Tell yourself that you're still leaving Earth protected because most of them will still be in orbit here."

"You said yourself that there were built in redundancies," Loki said.

Tony started walking back, his hands spread open, palms showing. "You can't command the network, Loki. It's built to keep you out."

Loki gave a wry smile with no joy, shaking his head. "You still underestimate your own abilities. You made it to be an artificial intelligence, Tony. I never needed to command it. I need only *persuade* it."

So that was the loophole. Tony kept walking slowly towards Loki, hands out. Nonthreatening. "You don't want to do this."

"They've attacked Midgard before," Loki said, voice getting a little less confident, a little more urgent. "Don't you see? This is the only way."

"So have you," Tony said, hating to use that. "So have I, depending how you look at it. That's not good enough."

He reached Loki and looked up at him, heart aching as he slid his hands into his pockets. "This isn't going to make you feel any better."

Loki stared back, looking almost hurt. He shook his head again, giving a sorrowful smile as he lifted the cell phone. "I am sorry."

Tony pulled the sonic paralyzer from his pocket. "So am I," he said softly, and activated it.

Loki collapsed to the ground, the cell phone dropping from his hand. Tony made sure to take that first. He touched his earpiece and said, "You guys can come out now."

"I'll wait here," Bruce said from the quinjet. Steve and Natasha emerged; Clint was no doubt finding his way down from somewhere high up.

Natasha had her gun out, though down by her side. Steve had his shield. Tony shook his head, unsurprised. "I keep telling you people I know what I'm doing."

Natasha stopped a few yards away, looking Loki over. Steve hung his shield on his back and pulled out a pair of reinforced handcuffs.

Tony tensed. "That's close enough," he said firmly.

Steve gave an exasperated sigh, still moving. "Tony--"

"Unless you want this used on you as well," Tony warned him, holding up the sonic paralyzer. It was pure bluff - the frequency it was set to wouldn't affect humans beyond a bit of ear pain - but bluff was good enough.

"We need to get him restrained," Steve said, but he didn't come any closer.

"And that can wait until he can move." Tony lowered himself to the ground to sit next to Loki, trying not to look too hard at the fear and panic in Loki's eyes.

Natasha took a couple of steps, coming to stand by Steve. "The satellites are secure?"

"Yeah." Tony looked down at Loki's motionless body, nothing but the tiny up and down of his chest with each breath. "I'll write a patch to deal with *persuasion* and upload it tonight, then implement the Fortress of Solitude Protocol."

"You name things the weirdest shit, man," Clint said through the earpiece.

Tony managed a small smile. He didn't really feel up to bantering with the team right now.

Steve was murmuring something to Natasha that Tony couldn't quite make out, and Natasha murmured back. So long as they kept their distance, he didn't really care what they said. He wasn't going to have them put Loki in restraints while Loki was already paralyzed and panicking.

"I did warn you," he told Loki quietly, holding the cell phone where Loki could see it, "if you turned this into a weapon, I'd make you regret it."

The pain in Loki's eyes was too much. Tony lowered the phone and looked back at Natasha and Steve.

They waited mostly in silence, until Natasha said, "Tony," and nodded her head at where Loki's fingers were starting to flex.

Tony braced himself, watching, and it wasn't long before Loki shimmered out of sight. Tony put his hand down on Loki's arm, and the invisibility dropped away like shattered glass.

Loki snarled and pushed Tony away, rolling unsteadily to his feet. Steve's shield smacked into his chest and knocked him back down. Steve was on him a moment later. The instant the shackles went on, it was as if all the fight drained out of Loki. He hunched his shoulders and drew in on himself, looking down.

"Tony," Natasha said, appearing at his side, "can we talk for a moment?"

"No," Tony said, and followed Steve and Loki to the quinjet.

--

They couldn't hold Loki at the Tower, because they were holding Barnes there instead. They took him to SHIELD but still didn't know who they could trust at the moment, so Steve stayed behind to 'watch Loki'. The rest of them flew back to the Tower; Natasha and Clint to tell Thor (and sleep), and Tony to go write the patch for Ultron.

The first thing he did was take apart the green cell phone, and methodically crush every bit of its insides. He got to the SIM card and stared at it, remembering some of the messages Loki had sent him, the ridiculous ones from other planets that were just to make him smile.

Focus. He put the bits of cell phone aside and started coding. It didn't take that long, all things considered. He uploaded the patch, then used his override codes to trigger the protocol

that shut Ultron down to external communication. Any more changes Tony wanted to make, he'd have to go up in person to program.

That was as secure as it was ever going to be.

Jarvis told him that Natasha wanted to see him, and Tony refused. She'd seen Loki's hair, of course, and of all the human Avengers, Natasha was the most likely to know what it meant. Tony was in no mood to discuss that.

He had other projects in mind, anyway. He locked down the workshop floor and went to work.

--

In the morning, Tony showed up at SHIELD. As he'd expected, Thor hadn't taken Loki back to Asgard yet; SHIELD had *questions*. Fury had been annoyed enough that Tony wouldn't turn over the sonic paralyzer; he wouldn't pass up the slim opportunity to get answers.

Not that Loki had told them anything, according to Steve. Tony nodded, his eyes on Loki through the two-way mirror. Loki was slumped against the far wall of the cell, looking both bored and dejected, completely ignoring his interrogator.

Tony pulled the Starkphone out of his pocket and tapped it against the palm of his other hand. "They really think they're going to get anything out of him?"

"I think it's more stubborn pride at this point," Steve said.

Tony snorted, then said, "I'm going in."

"Tony--"

Tony ignored Steve, stepping out into the corridor then into the small interrogation room. The agent there, not one he was familiar with, stood up. "Sir, you can't be in here--"

"I can't believe he hasn't broken your neck," Tony said flatly. He tapped the phone against his palm again, fidgety. "I'm taking five minutes with the prisoner. Scram."

"I can't do that--" the agent protested.

Steve's voice came from behind Tony, low and confident. "It's alright, Agent. It's been cleared."

The guy believed that instantly, and followed Steve out. God, it must be nice to be Captain America, Tony reflected. He put the phone back in his pocket and turned the chair the agent had been in around, straddling it backwards. Loki's eyes followed his every motion.

"So I figure you're probably not in a talkative mood," Tony said, pulling the surveillance jammer from his other pocket and putting it on the table. He flicked it on then looked Loki over - looking, almost reflexively, for any signs that SHIELD had mistreated him. "And that's fine. I can talk enough for both of us."

He smiled wryly, remembering a time when he'd told Loki that before. Long ago, before they'd gotten close.

"Here's the thing," he said out loud. "You made it so obvious that you were going to pull something. You barely tried to hide it. You *wanted* me to stop you."

Loki pressed his lips tightly together and looked away. Tony got up, rounding the table to stand in front of Loki and hold his full attention.

"You didn't want to go through with it," he said softly, "so *own* it. Stop trying to be the cartoon villain you've got built up inside your head, the villain Odin says you are, and just. Be *yourself*. You deserve that much."

Loki looked at the wall bleakly. He was still shackled and although Loki never put up much of a fight once he'd been cuffed, it was still weird to experience.

"I'm kind of mad," Tony said, guessing at what Loki might want to hear. "Kinda not. If you'd been a little more subtle about it, maybe. But the closer we got to the end, the jumpier you got. And--" Tony swallowed. The hair-cut, too. Loki taking that last piece of comfort while he still could.

"Mostly," he said with a sigh, "I'm mad you made me do that to you, the Time Out. And wow, that sounds like something my dad would say, that's not... ugh." He rubbed his eyes, annoyed at the glaring white light in here. "I guess I wanted to say, let go. Let go of who you think you're *meant* to be. Just be you."

Loki glanced at the mirror then, slowly, looked up at him. Tony held still, heart pounding. Then Loki lunged at him, knocking him to the ground. Tony gasped for breath, getting his hands between them reflexively, then hit the casing to activate the nano-armor - Loki scrabbled at his body, at his chest as the armor emerged, at his throat.

"You will pay," Loki snarled raggedly, even as the armor formed under his grip.

The door burst open and Steve's shield came flying through, knocking Loki back. Tony got to his feet, aiming the repulsors, but Loki held his shackled hands up in surrender.

"You okay?" Steve asked, retrieving his shield.

Tony sent the armor away, aware of the lightened weight where Loki had slipped the phone from his pocket before the armor formed. "Yeah, great," he said absently. "I'll take that," he added to the agent, who was examining the jammer on the table.

He paused at the doorway and looked back at Loki, who stared at him with an unreadable expression.

"Good luck," Tony said, and left the interrogation room.

--

Tony didn't want to leave Loki unsupervised in Hydra's hands; for that matter, he wasn't that keen on leaving Loki unsupervised in *SHIELD's* hands. He hung around in the observing room with Steve, avoiding any attempts at conversation and watching Agent Whateverhisname completely fail to get Loki to talk.

At one point Steve's phone rang. "That was Natasha," he said after the call. "Thor won't hold off any longer. They're coming in."

Tony nodded. He hadn't brought the sonic paralyzer with him, because he didn't want to give SHIELD the opportunity to steal it. But if he really needed to, he might be able to bluff through it.

"You're awfully quiet," Steve prompted.

Tony stared into the interrogation room, watching Loki ignore the agent with increasingly passive aggressive body language. "Not much in the mood for talking."

"Seems like it's going around," Steve said.

Tony didn't bother to respond.

When Thor arrived, he burst into the interrogation room, bellowing Loki's name. Loki rolled his eyes. Thor stopped short, suddenly, and stared.

Right. Thor hadn't seen Loki's hair yet. Tony touched the casing over his arc reactor and wondered if he should activate the nano-armor again, just to be safe.

In a low, dangerous voice, Thor said, "Who has abused him so?"

"What?" said the agent, sounding nervous.

"Tell me who has done this to him!" Thor shouted, hammer in hand. "I will strike them down. Loki has done many things, but nothing to deserve *this!*"

Loki looked startled. He tried to cover it, a tone of feigned boredom in his voice as he said, "Calm down, Thor; I asked him to."

Thor turned just enough that Tony couldn't see his expression anymore. Tony stepped closer to the mirror, stomach roiling uneasily. He couldn't see what Thor was thinking but Loki was staring at Thor with a wary expression.

"What are they talking about?" Steve asked.

Tony waved his hand in a shushing gesture. "Not now." He peered through the glass at the situation in the interrogation room.

"You cannot mean Stark," Thor finally said, and he didn't sound angry but *hurt*.

Loki lifted his chin defiantly, but it looked like his heart wasn't in it. "And what of it?"

"Tony, what did you do?" Steve said insistently.

Tony swore mentally and turned as he said peevishly, "I cut his hair, Rogers, calm down."

And of *course* that was when Natasha arrived, standing in the doorway with her eyebrow raised.

"I hate all of you right now," Tony said, and didn't care what they thought. He turned back to the two-way mirror.

Thor had moved closer to Loki, almost pinning him to the wall with Mjölfnir in a way that was at odds with his pleading tone. "Loki, you must know I would have-- no matter what has happened between us, I would have been willing--"

Loki scowled and turned his head to look Thor directly in the eyes. "I didn't. Want. *You*," he hissed, and Tony winced in sympathy.

Natasha moved up beside him, no doubt taking in every little detail and nuance. Tony was *not* looking forward to whenever she finally managed to corner him to talk about cutting Loki's hair. Compromised was the least of it.

He didn't regret it. Not in the face of what the Avengers would say, and not in the face of what Loki had tried to do with Ultron. If he could give Loki one last night of trust and caring, that was worth it.

Thor stayed still for a moment longer, then said, in a hard voice, "You are to be returned to Asgard. Your dungeon awaits you... again."

Thor turned away from Loki, and his eyes flicked to the mirror. He looked tired, beaten down. Tony bit his lip, feeling kind of bad for him.

"I look forward to it," Loki called after him, apparently determined to get the last word. Thor paused briefly, then continued out of the room.

"Tony," Natasha started in a deceptively pleasant voice.

Tony turned past her to face the door. "You're going to have to wait your turn," he said lightly, knowing who was about to come in.

Thor was still holding Mjölfnir when he walked in. He looked at Tony and set his jaw grimly. "I find myself torn... whether I should thank you or strike you."

"I'll choose door number one, please," Tony said.

At the same time Steve, frustrated, demanded, "What's going *on*?"

"It's a long story," Natasha said.

"Not that long," Tony said, and then cocked his head. "No pun intended."

Thor gave a little growl and shot him a resentful look.

Tony flung his hands in the air, exasperated. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Send him to *me*," Thor said, like Loki hadn't just shot that idea down in flames. He shot a look of grief at the mirror, then visibly pulled himself together. He turned to Steve instead and said tightly, "I will take Loki to Asgard now."

"Right," said Steve, with one last look around the room. Tony knew he'd be answering questions about this later.

--

Back at the Tower, after the Bifrost took Thor and Loki away, Natasha made sure to pull Tony aside. "You cut his hair," she accused.

Tony sighed. "Yes."

"He *let* you cut his hair," she elaborated, folding her arms.

"Also yes. Did you have a question, Romanoff?"

Natasha stared him down. "Have you considered how he's going to respond to what happened last night?"

"I can handle it," Tony said, sounding a lot more sure than he felt. Maybe Loki's little attack had been a show for SHIELD... maybe Loki had been genuinely threatening him. It would be a hell of a thing to get wrong.

"Have you considered how *Thor's* going to respond when he comes back? Or the rest of the team?"

"It's nobody's business but mine and Loki's," Tony said with a scowl.

"Loki's reactions are everyone's business," Natasha said firmly. "He made it that way the first time he attacked."

"What do you want to hear, Natasha?" Tony demanded. "Do you want to hear that my loyalties haven't changed? Quick question, where is Loki right now, and who got him put there?"

Natasha fixed a steely gaze on him. Almost angrily she said, "I'm worried about your *safety*."

Tony blinked. Okay. He hadn't seen that coming. That was... actually kind of nice. Go figure. "Oh," he said out loud.

"Yes, *oh*." Natasha rolled her eyes. "We don't know when Loki's going to escape, but he always does. Based on how that capture went down, you're going to be his first stop. And he knows that SHIELD has been infiltrated by an organization that specifically wants you dead."

Tony gave her a ridiculously fake smile. "It's your sunny optimism I really appreciate about you, Nat."

"He's got time and power on his side," Natasha said bluntly. "Between Loki and Hydra, I think you should start taking a bodyguard with you again. The line we fed Pierce wasn't a bad idea."

Tony stared into the air in front of his face, turning that idea over in his mind. Hydra was... a problem. He didn't have anywhere to go in the next little while, anyway; all his interviews and appearances had been cancelled after Hydra's assassination attempt. He was going to look at the metadata on the encrypted files and maybe go with the team to investigate anything useful he found, that was about it.

"I'll think about it," he finally conceded.

"Alright." Natasha looked at him a moment longer, like she was about to say something else, then she turned and abruptly left.

That could have gone worse.

--

Tony must have forgotten to lock down his workshop, because while he was pulling data from the SHIELD files - and, admittedly, a fair amount of scotch from its bottle - Clint arrived.

"Huh," Tony said. "'Was expecting Steve."

"Steve's with Nat," Clint said. "What does this haircut thing mean?"

Tony stared at him and thought briefly that Natasha had unleashed Clint on him on *purpose*. Vengeance was a bitch and it spoke Russian.

He pushed the bottle of scotch towards Clint. "You're going to want some of that."

Clint accepted that without a word and took a swig direct from the bottle. Tony would have objected but he wasn't really in a position to criticize. Clint set the bottle down and looked directly at him. "Now what?"

Tony rubbed a hand over his face. "Um. Asgardians... no, wait. Loki..." Oh, this was going to go so badly. He reached for the bottle and took another mouthful. Clint was watching him, sharp-eyed. Heh, hawk-eyed.

"Loki's been through a lot of shit," he started, trying to figure out what to say.

"So have a lot of people," Clint retorted. "I don't wanna hear excuses for him, I want to hear what the hell is going on now."

"It's part of it," Tony objected. "All the things, that've... they've screwed him up. And I talked... too much to him."

"And you started getting sympathetic," Clint said impatiently. "Like no one saw that coming."

Tony furrowed his brows. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"He's got issues, you've got issues..." Clint shrugged, grabbing the bottle for another swig. "It was always fifty-fifty whether you were going to kill each other or become best buds, and you weren't particularly subtle that it was heading towards option two."

Tony stared at him guiltily. Best friends. If that was all it was... that wouldn't be so bad. But here was Clint, and Tony was meant to look him in the eye and answer questions, and...

"Dude, what does that look--" Clint stopped short and stared back at him, something hard in his eyes. "What. Does that look mean?"

Lie with the truth. "I'm feeling guilty," Tony said honestly. He reached for the bottle and pulled it back to his side of the table. He needed it more anyway. "To your question. Hair-cutting's a big deal for Asgardians. It's... trust and... important stuff. Thor's hurt that Loki wouldn't go to him, even though they try to kill each other every other month--"

"Quit rambling," Clint told him. "When you say big deal, just how big are you talking?"

"I don't know, I'm not Asgardian." Tony clutched his bottle. His head was spinning a little.

"Big enough to support Bruce's theory?"

Tony frowned. "What's Bruce's theory?"

Clint gave him a penetrating stare. "That Loki's got feelings for you."

Oh. Tony clutched his bottle harder, not sure what he should say. He was still kind of... dealing with the whole love thing, it didn't seem fair that he had to acknowledge it to the team as well.

"Jesus," Clint said. "Give me that bottle back."

"I need it," Tony said automatically. He took a drink to prove it, but when he put the bottle down Clint stole it. "Rude."

"Deal with it," Clint muttered, and took a drink of his own.

Tony leaned his elbows on the desk and buried his face in his hands. "I didn't do it on purpose," he mumbled.

"And he killed that guy Killian," Clint remembered. "...Man, I really would have pegged Loki as having better taste."

Tony lifted his head out of his hands. "Excuse me," he said indignantly.

Clint gave a hard-edged smirk and slid the bottle back towards him.

Probably Tony should take it easy on the scotch, given how much he'd already had. He looked at the bottle wistfully. "Why is my life."

Clint turned serious again. "No matter how cosy you two got, he's going to be pissed you took him down."

"Yeah," Tony sighed, remembering Loki laying still and helpless on the ground. His stomach churned. Blame it on the scotch. Maybe have some more. He reached for the bottle but only succeeded in knocking it over. "Ah, fuck."

Clint picked it back up, and it was running low enough that not much had spilled. "We'll come up with a plan. Maybe when you're a little less drunk."

"Keep waiting," Tony muttered. He wanted to be drunk for a good long time.

Clint gave him a penetrating look. "So how cosy *did* you get?"

"Animl-- a normal amount," Tony said, stumbling a little over the words. It didn't change the look on Clint's face. "What sort of question's that?"

"Well, some of the team have been putting a few things together," Clint said. "And getting an interesting picture."

"Not my problem," Tony said, folding his arms. He just wanted to be left alone to play with his computers and avoid thinking about the sonic paralyzer.

"So what's all this," Clint shook the bottle of scotch lightly, "in aid of?"

"In aid of being drunk," Tony said, as annoyingly as he could. "Obviously."

"You don't look like you're celebrating."

Tony sighed. "I hate the parallelyze-- paralyzer. I've had it used on me. Natasha can tell you all about it, 'm sure it's in my file."

"Nat's holding out on us," Clint said, and that was a surprise. "She's got tells too, you know. Kinda makes a guy wonder what you and Nat are both holding back."

"Umm," Tony said.

"Stark," Clint said, and his voice was cold. "Tell me you were not screwing around with *Loki*."

"I wasn't screwing around with Loki," Tony said obediently. He didn't think it was very persuasive. It probably would have been better not to get so drunk but *Loki*--

Clint slammed his hand down on the desk. "Un-be-frigging-lievable."

Tony unfolded his arms so he could rub his forehead. He could feel a headache kicking in and that didn't seem fair, he hadn't even passed out yet.

"It doesn't matter anymore," he said bleakly.

Loki had attacked him in the interrogation room, but then again Loki had wanted to get the cell phone from his pocket... it could mean anything. There was no way of telling for sure until Loki did or didn't show up, angry or not angry.

"Oh, it matters," Clint snapped, and stalked off with the rest of the scotch.

Well, it wasn't like Tony didn't have more alcohol stashed away.

#

Black Sheep

Chapter Summary

Tony's in trouble and Loki escapes Asgard (again).

Steve was Very Displeased with him.

Tony had slept on the workshop sofa that night, for a certain definition of 'slept'. He had the feeling he might have technically been passed out for some of it. It had been... a while since he'd gotten that level of drunk.

Now he was thirsty, hungover, and Steve was giving him the Disapproving Captain America face.

"This is cruel and unusual punishment," Tony said, slumped in his chair in the conference room.

"You think *this* is punishment?" Steve said, a note of warning in his voice.

Bruce chimed in, "I just don't understand what you were *thinking*."

"He wasn't," Steve muttered in disgust, and it sounded so much like when they'd first met - *take away the armor, and what are you?* - that for a moment Tony's head spun from the déjà vu.

Maybe a little from the hangover.

"Not with his upstairs brain, anyway," Clint added sourly.

"This is bullshit," Tony said, pushing himself a little more upright. "You," he pointed at Steve, "are particularly full of it. You had no problem working with Loki when there was something you could get out of it--"

"Working with him, not shoving my dick in," Steve exclaimed, then half-turned towards Natasha and added, "Sorry."

"I've heard worse," Natasha said dryly. Heard worse from Steve, even; his time in the army had given him quite the vocabulary, even if he couldn't get out of the habit of thinking of it as a 'men only' thing.

"That's my point," Tony said, scowling at Steve. "You don't object to the principle, only where to draw the line. Well, it's all very well to say what Loki's done can never be forgiven,

but if he has no incentive to change, the people who will suffer for it are the people here on Earth."

"So that's what you were doing?" Steve said sceptically. "Giving him *incentive*?"

"Mostly giving him blowjobs, but you can call it that if you like," Tony said, because his head was killing him and why should he be the only one that suffered.

Bruce made a vaguely strangled sound. Clint glared deeply. Natasha sighed and said, "Tony, I can't help you if you're actively trying to get yourself killed."

"You know, Nat, I'm glad you said something." Tony gestured across the table. "While we're talking about giving people *second chances* and helping them *change*."

"That's different," Bruce said.

Steve said angrily, "Loki is nothing like Natasha."

Clint didn't say anything, just kept giving Tony stink-eye from across the conference table.

"Yeah?" Tony cocked his head at Steve, ignoring the pulse of pain that followed. "Prove it."

"Clint brought Natasha in because he saw something in her," Steve said, impassioned. "Something that could be *more*. She was who she was because of how she was raised. He knew that if they took her from that, she could be different."

"What the hell do you think I see in Loki?" Tony said, almost incredulously. "Get him out of that toxic environment. Give him a reason to *want* to change."

"It's a nice argument," Steve said, "but Natasha didn't try to invade the planet."

"Which brings us right back to where do you draw the line, and 'irredeemable' is only a useful concept if we have some other way of dealing with him." Tony rubbed his throbbing temples. "We've been over and over this. The best thing *for Earth* is to give Loki a second chance, *persuade him* to change."

"And where does sleeping with him fit into that?" Bruce asked sarcastically.

"I like him!" Tony snapped, exasperated. "He's smart and funny and good-looking and I like him. You can judge me if you want, you can probably arrest me for treason if you think that'll end well for *anyone* at all, but that's not going to change what's already happened."

"Yeah, that's not making me want to punch you in the face any less," Clint said.

Tony sighed and looked at Clint directly. "Do you want an apology? I already told you I didn't mean for any of this to happen. What he did to you - which, let's face it, we know he was tortured into - sucks. But I bet any of Natasha's victims would be pretty upset if they came face to face with her, too."

"Look, Tony's got a point," Natasha said, leaning forward slightly and looking around the table. "We do need a way of containing or stopping Loki, and until this most recent incident Tony was making real progress. Loki had his whole world destabilized, he's looking for something or someone to latch onto. He has the potential to be a powerful asset."

"How do you make everything sound so creepy?" Tony asked in disbelief. "I'm not brainwashing him, I'm teaching him about therapy and... and types of food, for crying out loud."

"You're an anchor point," Natasha said, like he was agreeing with her.

"Was an anchor point," Bruce pointed out. "This might all be moot if Loki thinks that what Tony did was some kind of betrayal."

Tony groaned and leaned forward to press his forehead against the blessedly cool table. "You're going to make me have a bodyguard, aren't you," he said unenthusiastically.

He was aiming it mostly at Natasha, but it was Natasha, Bruce, and Steve who all firmly chorused, "Yes."

Well, they still cared if he died, that was promising.

"He's still not a great fan of the Hulk," Bruce said. Tony sat back up and made an effort to look like he was listening. "Tony, I'll shadow you first, we can sort out a roster..."

"Ooh, sleepover," Tony said half-heartedly.

"You'll need to share your schedule with us," Steve said commandingly. "We need to know if you're going anywhere, even if you're going to Stark Industries, if you're going to SHIELD... anything."

"If you're planning on boning the enemy," Clint muttered.

Tony didn't say anything. What was there to say? He could understand why Clint was pissed off. He'd be pissed off if their situations were reversed. For all the pretty arguments about how bringing in Loki was just like bringing in Natasha, Clint hadn't been *working* with any of Natasha's victims when he'd done it. And there was, Tony could admit, a difference between bringing in and sleeping with.

The thing was, he just didn't care. If they hadn't had to get the Ultron network up and running, he'd have happily gone on lying to the team and being with Loki behind their backs. If they hadn't... if, if, if.

"Was it a rebound thing?" Bruce asked, leaning forward slightly. "Did the break-up with Pepper..."

"You can leave Pepper out of this," Tony said sharply. "*Right* out. This has nothing to do with her. In fact, isn't it time we switch to talking about what I found out about Hydra?"

Steve started, "We still haven't--"

Clint shoved a hand in the air. "I for one am in favor of a change in topic."

"Seconded," Natasha said, though from the look Clint gave her she wasn't entirely forgiven.

Steve didn't look pleased, but apparently not displeased enough to make Clint suffer through more talk of Loki. "Alright. What have you got?"

"Well." Tony stood up carefully and gestured at the holographic projector. "We have a threat analysis algorithm that was apparently designed to be attached to the Ultron network, for use against Earth - someone obviously wasn't sitting in on the safety planning sessions with Thor. We have video files of human experiments - Extremis, looks like Maya Hansen's working for SHIELD now; the scepter; some other artifacts I don't recognize."

"What makes you think this is Hydra and not SHIELD?" Natasha asked, and didn't *that* question say something.

Tony opted not to chase that up right now. Instead he wiped the videos away and said, "Well, here's where things get interesting." He brought up a world map to replace the videos. The movement made his head pound. "The metadata of each file includes a source location. The scepter videos start off in North America," he indicated the relevant markers, "but real quickly start getting made in Europe instead. The other artifacts are filmed in Europe as well."

"SHIELD doesn't have isolation facilities in Europe," Clint said, leaning forward and frowning.

"Right. Now, the Extremis experiments are filmed in the States," Tony pointed again, "so they could technically just be SHIELD. But they were under the same encryption as the other videos so it makes me think at least someone from Hydra is on that project, collecting the data."

Steve frowned. "What's that other marker?"

"I'm glad you asked," Tony said brightly. "That is where the threat analysis algorithm was generated. And the exact coordinates are of your old stomping ground, Camp Lehigh."

"You think Hydra has a base there?" Steve said, looking disturbed. Then again, Steve had been looking disturbed at him all morning.

"Inside a SHIELD base maybe?" Tony shrugged, and immediately regretted the movement. "Look, I'm just telling you what I found."

"We've got to stop them," Bruce said, looking upset. "They're experimenting on people."

"If we charge in, we'll tip our hand," Clint said flatly. "We need to make a plan."

"Sirs and Agent Romanoff," Jarvis said pleasantly. "Mister Odinson has arrived on the deck of the Tower."

"Oh, goodie," Tony muttered. "More headache."

"Also self-inflicted," Natasha said, with a deceptively mild smile.

"You're mean. Steve, Nat's being mean." Tony sank into the nearest chair, exhausted. To be fair, Natasha was the only one who didn't seem to have a problem with him today, so she got points for that, at least.

"Oh no," Steve deadpanned, clearly unsympathetic. "Are we ready to bring Thor up to date?"

"Up to date on what, exactly?" Natasha said cautiously.

"The intel on Hydra." Steve gave her a look that said he wasn't thrilled with her, either. "Although we should probably talk to him about the other thing, too."

"He's Asgardian," Natasha said. "I don't think he'll care. It's the hair that's problematic."

"Problematic," Clint muttered. "That's the word you're using."

Tony resisted the urge to cover his face with his hands. His head throbbed.

Thor, when he arrived, looked as exhausted as Tony felt. He gave a small bow of his head to the team. "My friends," he said. "What news has you gathered here?"

They exchanged glances, then Steve took charge of bringing Thor up to speed. Like Bruce, Thor was concerned about the experiments, though it turned out mostly because of the scepter. Tony's head was killing him and he just wanted to go take some more painkillers, but he stayed to take part in the futile argument over whether they should go after the scepter immediately or gather more intel first.

Tony stuck with the team for dinner, then Bruce followed him up to the penthouse. Tony gestured vaguely at the living room. "You know where everything is, I'm going to have an early night for a change."

"Goodnight, Tony," Bruce said with a small frown.

Tony went into the bedroom and changed, then dry-swallowed a couple of painkillers. God, the aftertaste was foul. He crawled into bed and curled up with the stupid Care Bear toy and missed Loki so much it hurt.

--

Tony was completely unsurprised to wake up in the middle of the night with Loki looming over him in the dark. There was a glint... yeah, Loki had a knife in one hand.

Raggedly Loki said, "Give me one good reason not to end your miserable life."

"You woke me up instead of just killing me," Tony pointed out. Loki sounded more likely to burst into tears than stab him, but a knife was a knife and it made Tony a little nervous. He could use Time Out but that was the last thing he wanted to do.

Loki forced out, "Maybe I just want to see the fear in your eyes before you die."

There was really only one answer to that. "Jarvis. Lights."

Loki gave him an incredulous look, like Tony was the insane one. It was very judgemental. Tony warned, "Bruce is in the other room."

"He sleeps," Loki said, with something that was probably meant to be his shark smile.

Well, shit. Tony pushed up a little in bed, teddybear tumbling to one side. "...Could you always do that?"

Loki's gaze followed the bear for a moment, then he looked back at Tony with a desperate expression, knife vanishing. "I had to. You don't understand--"

"They're people," Tony said tiredly. He didn't know how to get across that it mattered.

Loki's face twisted. "They're monsters." *I'm a monster.*

"Loki," Tony breathed, reaching out to touch his arm. Loki flinched away and Tony lowered his hand, trying to pretend that didn't hurt. "You have to stop trying to fit into the box that they made for you. You're more than that. I swear to you."

Loki blinked watery eyes. Derisively he said, "Because I'm the God of *Chaos*?"

"If that's what you've got to tell yourself, yes." Tony's mouth and throat were dry; he licked his lips uncomfortably. "You can't let them wrap you up in these stupid rules, you can't live like that. They're stuck and they want everything to stay the same, but life doesn't do that. You can't live without *change*."

Loki made a small, broken sound and sort of collapsed onto the bed next to Tony, pressing against him and burying his face against Tony's shoulder. "I just wanted to fix it. I thought..."

"I know." Tony carefully brought his hand up to run it through Loki's hair, and Loki didn't stop him. "But that's not going to fix anything, Loki. You know that. You just don't want to admit it to yourself."

Loki made another pained noise and gave a shudder, sniffing a little. Tony ran his hand down Loki's back. "You can do it," he murmured. "I know you can do it. Please, please try to believe me."

"I'm sorry," Loki whispered, clinging tightly to him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"You can do it," Tony repeated, rubbing Loki's back in slow, gentle sweeps. "You're already so much better. You know that, right? You're doing so well."

Loki lifted his tear-stained face and said very dryly, "I just tried to destroy Jotunheim."

"Yeah, I mean, aside from that." Tony brought his hand back up to massage the nape of Loki's neck. "You didn't try very hard."

"I lacked conviction," Loki murmured, resting his head back on Tony's shoulder.

"Yeah." Tony wriggled back down in the bed to lay down properly again. Loki followed, draping a possessive arm over him. Or, well, not possessive. Needy, maybe. Tony put his own arm over Loki's, holding it in place. Slowly, Loki's tension started to drain away.

"Other thing," Tony said regretfully. "You can't keep coming at me with knives. It's not-- down here, it's not how we deal with things."

"I'm sorry," Loki said again. "I know, it's just..."

"Habit," Tony finished for him. "And the paralyzer freaked you out, and you hate going to Asgard. I know. But..." His breath came out in a rush. "God, Loki, I don't want to fight you anymore."

Loki curled in tighter against him and said, almost whispering, "Why did you bring me another device I could misuse?"

"Because." Tony was tempted just to leave it there. He kissed Loki's forehead and made himself continue. "I love you, too."

Loki closed his eyes for a moment, taking that in. Then he said wryly, "For that, I am truly sorry."

Tony gave him a gentle shove. "Knock that off."

Loki stared into space for a moment, then said, "There are things I should say to you, but they're... difficult."

"You want to get drunk?" Tony joked, but instead of laughing Loki looked thoughtful.

"I think that would help."

"I'm not sure if that's worrying or grimly realistic," Tony said. "But we'll wake Bruce--"

"I told you," Loki said with a touch of impatience in his voice, "he sleeps."

Tony grimaced uneasily. "Ye-ah, I kinda don't want you casting spells on my teammates, so what's say we go to the workshop or your secret lair, and then you stop whatever sleep mojo you're running on Bruce?"

Loki lifted his head with a frown, and Tony could *see* the defensiveness start - and then Loki took a measured breath, and said, "Very well."

Loki rose in a fluid motion that made Tony feel very clumsy and old as he followed. He had his ratty old sleepwear to feel self-conscious of, too. They went to the elevator and Loki glanced at Tony questioningly.

"Wherever you'll feel most comfortable," Tony told him, and to his surprise Loki ordered the elevator to the workshop level.

"It is like... being on another realm, when I am with you there," Loki admitted. "Obviously Midgard is another realm, but it's... different, it's like the laws of Asgard cannot reach me there."

Tony didn't know how to respond to that. It was kind of heartwarming and also really, really sad. He shifted sideways so he could bump his arm against Loki's, a little nudge of affection.

When they got to the workshop, Tony locked it down, then Loki concentrated briefly and announced that Bruce was 'under a charm no longer'.

"Thanks," Tony said gratefully, and made his way to the sofa with Loki close behind.

When they were seated, Loki drew out a bottle and a single glass. Tony was about to query that but Loki filled the glass - white wine - and held it out for him, then took a long swig direct from the bottle.

"Okay, you're serious about booze making it easier." Tony took a much smaller sip of his own wine. It was dry and fruity, and reminded him vaguely of one they'd had before, but given how miserable he'd felt all day he wasn't in a hurry to get too drunk.

Loki stared into the air for a moment, then said, "I miss... the way things were, when I didn't know what I was. When I thought they were my family, and Asgard my home."

Tony leaned against him, hoping that was comforting. "I don't know a lot about adoption, but that sounds pretty reasonable."

Loki took another drink from the bottle. It seemed just the action of drinking was helping him, because he hadn't had enough to be drunk yet, even on Asgardian wine. "I wanted to prove I could do what Thor and Odin couldn't. I wanted to prove I could defeat any threat. I wanted to prove that I wasn't..." His voice dropped. "That I wasn't one of them."

"Oh, Loki." Tony shook his head, but Loki held up a hand and Tony let him speak.

"I can't go home," Loki said in a low murmur. "But I felt like if I could just do that one thing, then maybe I could."

Tony thought about subtext, and migratory birds, and Loki feeling free to be himself in the workshop, and he shook his head again. "I know you miss it, and it's okay to miss it, but it's okay to want a new home, too. One that's a better fit for you."

"I... thought..." Loki stared at the bottle in his hands. "That it would be better for you, if I did this one thing and then was sent back to the dungeon. Or if you managed to stop me, that you would defeat me and then... nobody would be troubled by me again."

Tony sat up straight, fingers tightening on the stem of his wine glass. "You wanna spell that out a little more clearly?" he said suspiciously.

Loki lowered his head, then took another drink of wine. He didn't answer.

"Loki," Tony said through clenched teeth. "Did you think I was going to *kill* you?"

"I was... not unprepared for it," Loki admitted.

"Goddammit," Tony hissed. He put his glass down on the floor and got up to pace, running a hand through his hair in agitation. "No. No. I can't believe you put me in that position, knowing how I felt-- no, I *can* believe it, that's the worst part, because your stupid warrior upbringing means you think it's totally noble to die in a fight, am I right, and it doesn't matter how *I'd* feel about it, like the paralyzer wasn't bad enough--"

"You have to admit it would be better for you," Loki said.

Tony whirled on him. "No, I don't! I don't and it wouldn't, for fuck's sake, my life would not be *better* without you in it!"

Loki stared at him, that half-beaten half-hopeful look that made Tony want to go to Asgard and personally punch every single person there. Tony shook his head and said, a little more quietly, "I don't want to fight you anymore, Loki; I sure as hell don't want to kill you."

Loki swallowed, but didn't say anything immediately. Tony sighed and ran a hand over his face.

"The other thing you said was the dungeon," he said. He thought about sitting in the conference room hungover and deliberately pissing off his team. "So tell me, did you think you should be punished for something you've *done*, or just who you are?"

Loki looked surprised and then paused, brow furrowing slightly. "I... had not thought of it quite like that."

"But it fits?" Tony guessed.

"I don't... think I should be punished..." Loki grimaced and looked back at his bottle of wine. "But at the same time, perhaps..."

"Yeah." Tony took the couple of steps back to pick up his wine glass and raise it in a sardonic toast. "Subconscious is a bitch. Welcome to the club."

Loki raised his bottle briefly and then took another long drink.

"Okay." Tony took a sip of his own drink because it seemed appropriate. "So, along with the 'no pulling knives on the sexy boyfriend' rule, can we institute some sort of rule about no schemes that involve me killing you? I mean, I'd prefer no schemes that involve *anyone* killing you, but especially not me."

Loki was dangerously slow to respond and Tony scowled. "Let me be clear, that was not actually a request. I do not want to kill you. Do not put me in that position. Alright?"

"I... alright," Loki said, in a wobbly sort of voice. His eyes started welling up and Tony quickly sat back down on the sofa and put an arm around him.

"Hey... hey. It's okay. Come here."

Loki took another desperate swig of wine and okay, even Loki had to be feeling that by now. He sniffed and said miserably, "I don't know how to make it right. Everything I do, I ruin."

"No, shh, that's not true." Tony squeezed him in a one-armed hug. "You helped me build protection for Earth, remember? Despite what happened, that's still there. That's still in place. Because of you. And if you weren't around, I'd probably still be a drunken mess from breaking up with Pepper. You make me want to be better."

"Can I... stay here a while?" Loki asked, and for a moment Tony thought he meant in the workshop, and then he realized Loki meant the Tower in general.

"Of course you can," Tony said, giving him another squeeze. "You might have to put up with me being distracted by Hydra. Currently trying to figure out how to investigate their dodgy human experiments without giving away that we know they're in SHIELD."

"What are their experiments?" Loki asked, looking relieved to have something else to focus on.

Oops. "They've... got... some artifacts that they're using on people, I don't really recognize them. And Extremis, the healing thing that I had." He shuddered. "Some of those don't end too well."

"Tony," Loki said. There was a frown in his voice but more importantly a note of hurt. "What are you holding back?"

Tony bit his lip. He didn't want to have to fight Loki again, he really didn't. He didn't think their relationship could take another hit like this. But his gut was telling him that Loki wanted nothing to do with that scepter. "They've got the mind-whammy stick from your invasion."

Loki tensed in Tony's grasp, looking unhappy. He was silent a few moments then said, "Tell your organization that Thor told you of it, that Frigga scried its location and saw that it was being misused."

"I feel so weird using magic as an actual argument," Tony said said, "but that might actually work. They'll be suspicious, but we just might pull it off."

"And then have Thor take the scepter to Asgard as soon as is possible," Loki said, voice oddly emotionless. "An object like that is too dangerous to be meddled with."

"Is Asgard really the best place for it?" Tony said doubtfully. "I guess it gets it away from Earth, but..."

"Odin will put it in his Vault with all his other stolen relics, and then think no more of it," Loki said roughly. "It's as safe a place as any."

"I'll bring it up with the team." Tony rubbed Loki's arm then shifted his own arm to drape along the back of the sofa. Loki leaned back against it seemingly unconsciously. "How you feeling?"

"Thrilled," Loki said dryly. "I have managed to upset you even more than I did with my actual attempt to subvert your satellites."

Tony sighed a little. He twisted round on the sofa slightly so he could bring his other hand up and tuck Loki's hair behind his ear. "Thank you for being honest with me," he said, feeling a little ridiculous, but then Loki gave a small smile and it was worth it.

Loki raised a hand and slid it gently through Tony's hair, then he cupped Tony's head and drew him in for a soft, sweet kiss. "Is this... alright?" he asked, eyes wide and worried. "I know you're angry with me..."

"No... well, yes... kind of." Tony sighed. "Mostly I'm frustrated that I don't know how to help you more. I wish you didn't feel like you had to do things like... you know."

Loki lowered his hands and pulled back a little. "You have helped," he said quietly, "a great deal."

Tony didn't know what to say to that. He leaned forward and kissed Loki to show that that was fine; more than fine. Loki slipped his hand back into Tony's hair and for a while they just sat there, trading kisses, partaking in each other's company.

Finally Tony pulled free enough to say, "Okay. Not that I wouldn't love to continue this, but I'm kind of worn out--"

"I am, as well," Loki admitted.

"--So we should probably hit the sack." As if to underscore his words, a yawn crept out of his throat. Tony made a face.

Loki rose and extended a hand to aid Tony to his feet. They took the elevator back to the penthouse, Loki invisible while they crossed through the living room where Bruce was sleeping, and then they crawled into bed and curled around one another once more. It didn't take Tony long to fall back to sleep.

--

Tony blinked awake to the sound of Jarvis announcing Asgardians on the Tower deck. He groaned and dragged himself out of bed while Loki was already striding to the window and peering outside.

"Damn," Loki said, half under his breath.

"Careful, they'll see you," Tony said, deciding to throw on some more appropriate clothes than his well-worn sleepwear. It looked like there were half a dozen out there, shiny armor-clad warriors with intimidating looking swords.

"They will not."

"The invisible thing, you can localize it?" Tony paused partway through buttoning up his shirt, staring at Loki. "That's so cool!"

"Be careful," Loki said, turning away from the window. "That's Tyr in charge there. He is Asgard's foremost warrior."

"I remember," Tony said with a frown. He straightened his shirt, then took a breath and headed outside. The Asgardians all came to attention behind one guy who was standing out in front, a heavy-looking sword in his only hand.

Tony clapped his hands together and put on a smile. "Welcome! Thor didn't tell me you were coming, I'd have got out the good china."

The one-handed guy, Tyr, looked considerably unimpressed. Tall, dark-haired and emotionally distant; he'd have been just Tony's type if he weren't gatecrashing.

"We're here to apprehend Loki Laufeyson," Tyr said coldly. "You will call a council of your... Avengers."

Tony didn't move. "Sorry," he said brightly, "don't know anyone by that name. Maybe it's a different Loki you're thinking of."

Invisible fingers jabbed him and he did his best not to visibly startle. So, Loki had followed him outside. All the more reason to be a dick to these guys. Plus, the beginnings of a plan were beginning to coalesce in Tony's mind.

"Where is Prince Thor," Tyr said, making it sound like it wasn't even a question.

"Ugh, fine." Tony turned back towards the doors to the Tower where Bruce was awake and watching. "Follow me."

He led them inside and to the team level, instructing Jarvis along the way. Wake the team, gather them together. Bruce was with them; Thor was the next to arrive.

"Tyr!" Thor broke out into a smile and strode forward to hug the new guy. "It is good to see you, old friend."

Friends, huh? Tony cocked his head, murmuring out of the corner of his mouth, "You totally boned that guy, didn't you?"

Loki jabbed him in the side again. Tony grinned, not taking his eyes off the Asgardians.

Thor drew back from Tyr, frowning. "But what has brought you here to Midgard? Nothing ails the Allfather?"

Tyr put a fist over his heart and bowed. "Your highness. We regret to say that the traitor has escaped his bonds. The Allfather has sent us to aid you."

"Wait, Loki escaped?" Bruce said in disbelief. "Already?"

That was a good point, Tony should probably pretend to be surprised by that. He put on a worried face and focused very hard on the Asgardians who'd brought the news.

Natasha and Steve were next to show up, and Thor introduced everyone to the other Asgardians with an air of pride. Clint was last to arrive, looking sleepy and grumpy, though he straightened up quickly when he saw they had company.

"And the great archer, Hawkeye, Clint Barton," Thor finished, beaming. "He rivals even Ullr with his skill."

The Asgardians looked more sceptical than impressed, but whatever. Tony threw himself into an armchair, stifling a yawn. Neither he nor Loki had slept all that well, after everything that had gone on.

To Thor, Tyr said seriously, "We are here to recapture the traitor. Your father says this has gone on long enough."

"Again?" Clint said, tone more anger than disbelief.

Natasha, on the other hand, unknowingly echoed Bruce; "Already?"

"From where I'm sitting, capturing him isn't the problem," Tony said with his best obnoxious smile. He really wished he could see Loki's expression right now, or at least his body language. "You're the ones who keep letting him go."

"I was told Loki holds affection for this... Iron Man." Tyr gave Tony a brief, disdainful look.

"He did," Thor said grimly. "But Tony was responsible for Loki's most recent capture; it is likely he will seek vengeance."

"Then we will accompany the mortal as he goes about his duties," Tyr said, like his word was final.

Tony raised a hand. "Does the Iron Man get a say in this?"

"It's not that different from our existing plan," Steve said in a conciliatory tone.

"Pretty sure getting followed by a squad of guys in shiny metal armor is going to raise a few more eyebrows than just having an Avenger with me," Tony argued.

"You said you weren't leaving the Tower in the next few days anyway," Natasha pointed out. "That gives us time to come up with a plan a little more solid than just 'wait for Loki to show up'."

This was a distraction they didn't need, not with Hydra still to deal with, but Tony could see that the others were leaning towards the idea of heavy security. He sighed and scrubbed his hand over his face. "I gotta take a leak," he decided, and headed for the restroom without waiting for a response.

Once inside, he leaned against the wall and waited. Loki shimmered into sight a moment later, not looking too happy.

"How much of a problem is this?" Tony asked, gesturing at the door behind Loki.

Loki looked grim. "Tyr is the most skilled fighter Asgard has ever known. If Odin has sent him..." He took a breath and looked away. "He no longer cares whether I am brought back alive."

Tony winced. "Damn."

"As if I care what that old fool thinks," Loki said tightly.

"Still a little transparent there, Handlebars," Tony told him. As hoped, the nickname got a small smile out of Loki. "So what's our plan? Just keep you hidden until they get bored?"

Loki shook his head slowly. "We would be waiting a long time."

"I really don't want a permanent escort that looks like a bunch of LARPer's following me everywhere I go," Tony said, frowning. "If you kick up noise on another planet will that lure them away there?"

"It depends on the Allfather," Loki said with a grimace. "He may well decide it is a trick and leave them here."

"Ugh." Tony rolled his head back against the wall. "Can we just set these guys against Hydra and watch the two of them go at it?"

Loki apparently took him seriously, saying, "That might work. You'll want evidence of my collusion; that should be easy enough to create."

Tony grimaced. Asgardians in general weren't great at de-escalating. They wanted to arrest and dismantle Hydra, not execute. Involvement of more aliens just made the legalities messier. God, what had happened to the days when he'd had *normal* problems?

"Tell you what," Tony said, straightening up. "We can multi-task. If I give you a location that might be Hydra's, can I get you to scope the area out for me? Without being seen." They didn't want Loki near the scepter - although Tony was pretty sure Loki didn't want to be near the scepter either - but there was still the potential base at Camp Lehigh to find out more about.

"Certainly," Loki said, a steely look in his eyes. "I have an interest in seeing this beast destroyed, as well."

"I love it when you're all protective," Tony said with a grin, crossing the small room to tug Loki down into a brief kiss. "I should go back out. It'll look funny if I take too long. But I'll get to my workshop asap and then I can give you that location. Sound good?"

Loki nodded and shimmered back into invisibility. Tony stepped past him and headed back to rejoin the others. "What did I miss?"

Very little, it turned out. Most of the Avengers were in favor of having extra security on Tony; Thor was a little more reserved about his thoughts. Tony declared that the Asgardians would have to buy him dinner if they wanted sleepover privileges, and that he was going to

his workshop to look at the Hydra files some more. He got into the elevator before anyone was fast enough to follow him, and locked down the workshop as soon as he got there.

Loki appeared a couple of moments later. "Alright," Tony said, pulling up a holographic view of Camp Lehigh from above. "This is the place. I'll text you the coordinates. It's apparently the source of a nasty little threat analysis algorithm that they wanted to load into Ultron. And as we know," he shot Loki a pointed look, "I don't like it when people try to weaponize my stuff."

Loki lowered his head, looking contrite. Tony believed it. Maybe he was being naïve but he was certain that Loki had told the truth last night and that he really wanted to try.

Tony handed over another small external drive for raiding any computer systems Loki happened to find. "If there's computers there, slap that on one of them, it'll do the rest. Give it a couple of hours before you disconnect it, if you can."

"I remember," Loki said, a little impatiently.

Tony felt his mouth curl up into a smile. He sent the coordinates to Loki's new phone and waved the hologram away.

Loki looked at the message and nodded. "Anything else?"

Tony put a hand on Loki's chest and leaned up to kiss him. "Go be spooky," he said fondly.

Loki smiled back at him and disappeared.

#

A King's Protection

Chapter Summary

Fun with Asgardians, Tony has a point to prove, and Stark Industries has staffing issues.

Chapter Notes

This is very late, sorry. I had trouble working on this one. I will try to catch up on replying to comments over the next couple of days, but I have been reading them and appreciating them as they come in. <3

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

Tony thought about staying locked in his workshop, but... he had a half-assed plan involving the Asgardians and that meant being there to unleash his full charm on them in person.

When he got back to the team level, Thor was off to one side talking animatedly to Tyr, Nat was in something resembling a huddle with Bruce and Clint, and the other Asgardians were still standing awkwardly in formation. Steve was nowhere to be seen.

"Tony," Natasha said, in a tone of mild surprise that contrasted with her narrowed eyes. "We didn't expect you back so soon."

"I've got *guests*, Natasha; gotta play the good host," Tony said, smiling broadly. "Anyone for drinks?"

"We require nothing," Tyr said curtly, and Thor laughed and shook his head.

"Nay, you would not reject my friend's hospitality, Tyr! Drinks for all! My thanks, Tony."

"I'm good," Clint said a little tightly.

"It's, ah, a little early in the morning for me," Bruce said uncomfortably.

"I'm in," Nat said cheerfully. "Tony, I'll help you pour."

She followed him to the drinks cabinet, far enough from the Asgardians that they could talk quietly together. The first thing Tony asked was, "Where's Steve?"

"With Barnes," Natasha said, lining up a row of glasses for him. "I told him we'd hold down the fort and call him if we needed him."

"Uh huh," Tony said doubtfully. "He didn't want you down there with him? You're the closest thing we have to an expert--"

"I can't be in two places at once," Natasha said with a slight shrug. "The greater threat is up here."

So, she thought the Asgardians were a threat too. Interesting, if not particularly comforting.

Tony poured from a bottle that Thor had brought back from Asgard one time - he suspected it was something of a prank gift but it would do for these guys. And significantly less for himself and Natasha.

"Welcome to Stark Industries," he said brightly, gesturing at the drinks. Thor shot him a slightly startled look. Natasha picked up several of the drinks and started handing them out, gliding between the Asgardians with an unassuming smile on her face.

"Hear, hear," Thor said, recovering. He raised his glass and declared, "To Stark Industries!"

"To Stark Industries," the Asgardians echoed, though they looked doubtful about it.

Excellent. Groundwork laid, kingly hosting duties taken care of. Tony picked up his own glass and took the tiniest of sips. Natasha had a larger sip of hers but Tony had seen her do things with straight vodka that didn't bear thinking of, so he wasn't worried about her tolerance.

"So, Tyr," Tony said in a conversational tone, wandering over. "You're here to capture Loki, right?"

Thor tensed a little, looking wary.

"Yes," Tyr said, eyeing Tony with vague disdain. "The Allfather has decreed that Loki must be stopped before he succeeds in actually destroying a realm. Maybe even yours."

Tony went for a condescending smile. "And has the Almighty Dad figured out how to do that, yet?"

Tyr scowled at him. "The Allfather commands a greater wisdom than you can fathom, mortal."

"I think what Tony meant to say," Thor interrupted hastily, "was that the Midgardians have some concerns around the possibility that Loki might escape."

"Sure, you could put it that way," Tony murmured, keeping his smile as he took another sip.

Natasha gave him a sharp, warning look, and he let a little warmth creep into his smile, letting her know that he was working on something specific. She eyed him suspiciously then let her body language relax.

"It must be weird for you," Tony said to Tyr, "hunting someone who was your prince for so long. Technically still is."

Tyr's eyes flicked towards Thor briefly, and it sounded like he chose his words carefully. "I am here to carry out the will of the Allfather."

"Ah, yes," Tony said, still smiling. "The Allfather. It all comes back to him in the end, doesn't it?"

Thor cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Tyr, Tony has developed an armor he can summon at will, much like our own armor."

"Yeah," Tony agreed cheerfully. "Wanna see?"

"I'm sure it is... adequate," Tyr said, and oh boy Tony was so going to enjoy wiping the floor with this guy.

One of the other Asgardians sidled in Tony's direction. "Is it true you're a craftsman?"

"Uh, yeah, apparently," Tony said, a little taken aback.

The soldier's eyes lit up. "My wife's sister is a craftswoman! She makes skyboats."

"That's... great?" Tony guessed.

"I can't wait to tell her I met you! I didn't even know Midgardians could *be* craftsmen," the soldier said confidently, then paused. "Er, I mean no offense by it."

Thor laughed. "None taken, my friend! Tell your wife's sister that Prince Thor will come to see her wares."

The soldier looked absolutely delighted. Tony wondered briefly if there was such a thing as autographs on Asgard.

He kept working on slowly antagonizing Tyr, chipping away at the guy's control. It was a lot like screwing with Nick Fury, come to think of it. The same impatience and thinly-veiled dislike. It made it all too easy to get under his skin.

After a while Jarvis said, out of the blue, "Sir, there is a news report fitting current specified parameters."

Tony frowned, stepping towards the end of the room. He had news alerts set up on the locations in the SHIELD files' metadata, and so far things had been pretty quiet. He didn't like a news report popping up right when Loki was scoping out one of those locations. "Play it here."

A hologram shimmered into being in front of him. 'And in breaking news, a mysterious explosion in New Jersey... The explosion seems to have been centered on Camp Lehigh, an abandoned army training facility...'

No. Tony stared at the holographic projection, worry gripping him tight and fast. What had happened? Was Loki okay? Had there been anyone there? (...Were *they* alright?)

"I've gotta... yeah." He stumbled towards the restroom and managed to wait until the door was closed behind him to pull out his phone. He sent a single question mark to Loki and waited, staring at his phone with his heart in his throat.

One breath. Two.

"We have to stop meeting like this," Loki said dryly.

"Oh thank god, you're okay," Tony said in a rush, closing the distance in two quick steps to wrap his arms around Loki.

"Obviously," Loki said, but he sounded pleased at Tony's concern.

Tony let go and took a step back so he could look up at Loki a little more easily. "What the hell happened? There was an explosion?"

"That is a longer story than is suited for these charming surroundings," Loki told him. "I recommend--"

Before he could finish, the door opened and Natasha slipped inside.

Well, fuck. Tony shifted in front of Loki, heart pounding. "What the hell, Romanoff, I could have been peeing--"

"You would have remembered to lock the door," Natasha countered. She looked past him and arched an eyebrow. "Loki."

"Agent Romanoff," Loki said, a hint of warning in his voice.

"This isn't what it looks like," Tony tried.

Natasha didn't even dignify that with a response, just rolled her eyes. Then she squared her shoulders slightly and said, "As far as the others are aware, you're having a panic attack due to something unexpectedly triggering about the Camp Lehigh news report, and I've come to help you."

Tony took a breath, trying to calm himself down. He studied Natasha, trying to figure out her angle here. "And have you?"

"Have I what?" she said blandly.

"Come to help me."

"That depends." Her eyes flicked to Loki and back to Tony again. "What's the situation?"

Loki leaned close from behind, murmuring in Tony's ear, "I suppose you don't want me to kill her."

"No." Tony swatted behind himself without looking. "Killing is not the solution to everything, good grief. Besides, Natasha's actually had my back more than once lately."

"Yours," Loki said, "not mine." He did sound like he was just playing, though.

"You'd be surprised," Tony said, glancing over his shoulder at Loki, then looked back at Natasha. "As I'm sure you've figured out, Loki went to Camp Lehigh for me. He was just about to tell me what happened there."

"There was a familiar," Loki said, taking his cue, "like the one which lives in this tower. Made by a craftsman. It called itself Arnim Zola--"

"What?" Tony blurted, whirling around to stare at Loki.

Loki cocked his head with interest. "You know this name?"

"Zola was a Nazi scientist in World War II, he was part of Hydra," Tony said numbly. "Hydra have an A.I. of Zola." It sounded absurd. Even more so when he realized that meant *Zola* had created the threat analysis algorithm.

"Had," Loki corrected with some satisfaction. "I believe a missile struck the facility shortly after my... *timely* departure. Apparently Hydra do not take kindly to rejection."

"Rejection?" Natasha asked.

"This Zola had information regarding my most recent capture," Loki said coolly. "It offered a partnership, believing I would be only too eager to oppose the Avengers."

Natasha raised an eyebrow. "And are you?"

"Not just at the moment," Loki said with a dangerous smile. He turned his attention back to Tony. "As I was saying, the familiar believed I would be set against you. It revealed certain things which we should discuss, later."

"What things?" Natasha said sharply.

Loki smiled thinly. "None of your business."

Tony sagged back against the sink, mind reeling. "So you turned him down, and Hydra blasted the place? They didn't want word getting out... and now they know you're back with me."

"Perhaps," Loki said. "What I told the thing was that I preferred to work alone. I can't be certain what it took from that."

"So we might still have a secret weapon," Tony said, then noticed Loki's grimace. Right... Loki feeling like just a weapon. "Please excuse the foot in my mouth. It's kind of a habit."

"It sounds like Hydra is better resourced than we thought," Natasha said seriously. "We need to tell Steve."

"Oh, yeah, that's going to go really well," Tony said sarcastically. He gestured at Loki. "And where are we going to say we got our information?"

Loki snorted. "Please. Your captain will be easy enough to placate if you tell him I can help his friend, just as he was before. Thor is the one who will be difficult."

"Clint and Bruce aren't exactly going to love it, either," Natasha said. "But it makes sense not to fight a war on two fronts if we don't have to."

"Sounds great," Tony said. "Quick question: how often do we do what makes sense?"

"We can start with Steve, then break it to the others," Natasha said. "Loki, is there really something you can do for Barnes?"

Tony bit his tongue, hating the idea of Loki going back into Barnes' head, but knowing that Loki wouldn't take kindly to him throwing his weight around.

Loki, weirdly, hesitated. "Perhaps," he said. "I need to speak to Tony, first."

Natasha frowned slightly, looking between them. Probably hated the idea of there being something she didn't know. But she gave a crisp nod and said to Tony, "I'll tell the others you need space for a little longer."

Tony watched her slip back out of the restroom, then looked up at Loki. "Alright, what is it?"

Loki looked troubled. "Please, do not be disturbed when I say I love you dearly," he said, reaching out to gently caress Tony's hair. "I do not relish any part of this."

"Okay," Tony said, pulse quickening, "now I'm worried."

"I know your relationship with your father was fraught--"

Tony caught his breath, anxiety rising. "What does my father have to do with this?"

"Both your parents," Loki said softly. "The familiar thought that I would be pleased to hear that Hydra was responsible for their deaths."

For a moment, all Tony could hear was a rushing in his ears. He clutched the sink he was leaning back against. "They died in a car accident."

"It was no accident," Loki said, in the same gentle, steady tone. "They sent an assassin. The same as they sent after you."

"Me-- wait." Tony stared at him. "You mean *Barnes*?"

"I thought that prying him from their control would prove an appropriate vengeance, but I understand that you might disagree," Loki said.

"I. I can't think." Tony scrubbed at his face. "Bucky Barnes, *the* Bucky Barnes, was brainwashed into a Hydra assassin who killed my parents. It sounds like the punchline to an incredibly bad joke."

"Dear one," Loki murmured, wrapping his arms around Tony. Tony clutched at him, shaking slightly and eyes watering. He took a deep, ragged breath, and then he found he needed another one, and another. Loki was rubbing his back, and Tony squeezed his eyes closed and tried desperately not to cry.

Eventually he managed to say, "Fuck. I can feel Clint's 'I told you so' from here."

"He told you?" Loki repeated, sounding confused.

"Well, I've got to agree to help Barnes now, don't I? Otherwise I'm a massive hypocrite." Tony swallowed, his eyes still burning. "Hydra used him. He didn't exactly have much choice in the matter."

"...Ah," Loki said tightly, drawing back.

"Just--" Tony wiped his eyes and swallowed again. "I don't mean-- fuck, I don't know what I mean. This, all of this, is insane."

"Take your time," Loki told him gently. "And when you're ready, we can wipe the serpent from this realm."

Tony suspected that destroying Hydra would be easier said than done, given it had already failed once, but he appreciated the sentiment. A lot. "Thanks," he said unsteadily.

Loki brushed his fingers against Tony's cheek. "I'm here."

Tony took a slower, calmer breath. "I suppose I should go back out there," he said reluctantly. At least it would be satisfying to antagonize the Asgardians.

Loki rocked his head mock-thoughtfully. "That, or I could whisk you away to some luxurious destination, on this realm or another."

"Don't tempt me," Tony muttered, letting the corner of his mouth tilt up. He turned around to the sink to splash some water on his face. It was shockingly cool against his skin.

Loki put a hand on his shoulder. "If you need me, I will come."

"I know," Tony said, and smiled at Loki in the mirror. That was one of the things he knew he *could* count on, even while everything else was turning topsy turvy. Natasha had called him Loki's anchor point; he wondered a little if maybe it wasn't the other way around.

He dried off his face, took a breath, and went back out into the main room.

--

Antagonizing the Asgardians was easy. It was something of a relief, being able to channel all his shock and confusion into being as annoying as possible. Thor tried to deflect when he could but he wasn't prepared for a full onslaught of Stark-grade obnoxiousness. Tyr got less and less careful with his words, and the little group of soldiers looked grumpier and grumpier. Clint and Bruce had disappeared for more peaceful surroundings.

Tony could tell he was getting somewhere when Natasha came up to his side and said with a forced smile, "Tony, you seem a little stressed. Why don't you spend some time in your workshop?"

Tony pretended to think it over. "I guess there are some armor tweaks I could work on..."

Tyr stepped forward, hand on the hilt of his sword. "We will accompany you."

"No, I don't think so."

Beside him, Natasha tensed.

Tyr frowned at him. "The Allfather has commanded us--"

"The king of Asgard," Tony said firmly, "is not king *here*. I am. And I don't need a constant escort."

Thor stared at him in shock. Natasha looked resigned to whatever she thought he was planning. Tyr looked *furious*.

"The Allfather is responsible for the Nine Realms--"

Tony stepped towards Tyr, staring up at him defiantly. "I am the king of Stark Industries and in this tower *my word is law*. I promise you, you do not want to start a fight with me."

Thor cleared his throat, probably remembering the Time Out Protocol. "Tyr, perhaps it would be best to allow Tony a little space..."

'Allow'? Tony shot Thor a sour look, but he saved most of his attention for Tyr.

Tyr's look at Thor was a little too resentful to be respectful, but he said, "Your highness, if we are kept from the craftsman and Loki strikes--"

"You let me worry about Loki," Tony said flatly, "given how I'm part of the team that usually *catches* him."

Tyr bristled, grip tightening on his sword. "May that fairy take your arrogant life," he sneered.

Finally.

"Tyr!" Thor snarled, striding forward. "You will recant your vile words--"

"Actually," Tony said, letting a grin out, "I'm challenging him to a duel."

"*What*," Natasha said, and it was extremely satisfying to actually surprise her for once.

"What," said Tyr, and he looked like he wasn't sure whether to laugh or be offended.

"That's how you guys operate, isn't it?" Tony could feel the adrenaline flooding his body and it felt like flying. He kept grinning. "People are allowed to duel on behalf of someone else?"

Thor said urgently, "Tony, Tyr is the *greatest warrior* in Asgard's history."

Tyr cast Thor a wary look, and if he slipped out of this because he thought it was a bad political move to kill one of Thor's 'shieldbrothers', that wouldn't do at all. Tony raised his eyebrows mockingly and said, "So, what, he can beat me with one hand tied behind his back?"

Natasha had her phone out, probably filling Steve in, and as long as she wasn't directly interfering Tony didn't really care.

Tyr glared at him. "Guard your words, mortal."

"Or what?" Tony folded his arms, unimpressed. "You'll *duel* me?"

"Tony," Thor hissed.

Tyr straightened, taking his hand off his sword. "You are Midgardian," he sneered. "You have no standing to challenge one of Odin's realm. Take your meaningless words and go."

That... wasn't really a surprise, all things considered. Tony glanced at Thor. "Is that true?"

"Yes," Thor said, looking relieved at the escape route. "My apologies, Tony, but there is simply no grounds for--"

"Right," Tony said, not interested in further explanation. This was an even better opportunity than he'd expected. "You'd better declare humans to have equal standing as Asgardians, then."

Thor stared at him in shock, again. "What?"

Tony made a show of snapping his fingers. "You're right. That's not fair to all the other realms. Better make it a ruling that *all* the races have the same legal standing as Asgardians."

"I don't have that authority," Thor started feebly.

Tony turned abruptly serious, crossing the floor to Thor. "Then *take* the authority, your *highness*. You need to make this ruling."

"Tony," Thor said, looking between him and Tyr.

Tony lowered his voice. "If you want to ever - *ever* - have a chance at getting him back, you need to do this."

"Your highness," Tyr said, sounding a little nervous, "you can't seriously be considering..."

Thor gave Tony one last pained look, then stepped backwards. "I..."

"Your *highness*," Tyr repeated incredulously. The other soldiers were murmuring to each other.

Thor hesitated - and that was when Loki appeared.

"What do you think you are *doing*?" he demanded, striding towards Tony to grasp his shirt and shake him. The Asgardians all drew their swords.

Tony smiled weakly. "Uh, challenging this asshole to a duel?"

Loki hissed, "Tyr is the *greatest warrior*--"

"Asgard has ever known, yeah, I got that." Holy fuck, Natasha hadn't been texting *Steve* - she'd texted Loki. She still had Loki's number from the spyware she'd put on Tony's phone after Extremis, and Tony had put the same SIM card into Loki's new phone like an idiot.

The Asgardians looked like they were going to advance and Tony shot them a scowl. "Loki's entitled to a duel first, or am I understanding that wrong?"

"He would be, if his honor were worth anything," Tyr sneered, which was a dumb thing to do in front of Thor.

"If this is about your parents," Loki began, and Tony immediately flinched.

"It's not, and also, we can save that conversation for *another time*." Tony ran a hand over his face. Time to get this back on track. "Look, you're here just in time for the good part, Thor was just about to rule that all the races have the same standing as Asgardians."

"He can't do that," Loki said impatiently. "Tony--"

"He can, and he's going to." Tony glared pointedly at Thor to avoid looking nervous. He was *mostly* sure Thor would pick Loki, but this would be a hell of a time to be wrong. "*Aren't you, Thor?*"

Thor looked at him, then looked at Loki, and hesitated again.

"Your highness--" Tyr started.

"Enough!" Thor snarled in a sudden enough temper that Tyr jerked back reflexively. "I am your prince! And I declare it to be so: from this day, each of the races of the Nine Realms shall have equal standing in the eyes of the law, with all of the rights that entails, and none shall overturn this word."

Loki stared at Thor, actually speechless.

"Great," Tony said brightly. He tapped the casing over his arc reactor, releasing the nanites to form into an armor. "Shall we duel?"

Loki jerked slightly, turning back to Tony. Before he could speak Tony interrupted in a firm voice, "*Trust me*."

Realization dawned in Loki's eyes. Smiling, he stepped back. Far back. "Well, by all means, don't let me interfere with a good duel."

Inside the armor, Tony said, "Jarvis, prepare for Protocols Thunderbird, localized Time Out, and Torpedo to the Face. On Thor's mark."

"Yes, sir," Jarvis said pleasantly.

"Very well," Tyr said, drawing his sword. "Since you are so insistent, I will give you what you want."

"Three supermodels in a jacuzzi?" Tony grinned inside his helmet. "Thor, why don't you back up a little and then count us in?"

Thor still looked deeply reluctant, but he moved backwards - hopefully out of range of the Time Out - then said firmly, "Let the duel commence, in three... two... one... now."

Tony closed his eyes; it was easier to go limp and let Jarvis guide the suit when he didn't have external input competing for attention. Despite the speed of computer reactions, he still heard the sound of a sword tip scraping against the armor before the distinct thump of a body hitting the ground and a high-pitched ringing. Then, as the armor repositioned his arms, the repulsors blasted. Hard.

The whole thing couldn't have taken more than a second. Tony opened his eyes again, flicking to the parts of the HUD that commanded the helmet to dissolve away. Tyr was lying in a small crater in the middle of the floor, and the Asgardian soldiers were all staring at him, flabbergasted.

"Right," Tony said cheerfully. "Anyone else?"

Loki quietly snickered.

To Loki, Tony added, "Sorry. I know you guys normally go for the kill, but that kind of thing gets a guy in trouble down here."

"Oh, have no fear," Loki said, eyes gleaming bright with glee, "this is more than satisfaction enough."

Yeah, Tony had suspected getting one's ass kicked by a 'Midgardian' was probably pretty humiliating.

One of the soldiers said hesitantly, "Tyr lives?"

"Yeah." Tony waved an armored hand in a deliberately casual way. "He'll be able to move again in about five minutes or so." That prompted more murmuring among the soldiers, and a few awed looks.

"Loki," Thor said quietly.

Loki tensed. "I will not go back to Asgard," he said.

"That was not..." Thor sighed. "Never mind."

Loki gave him a long, considering look. A moment later he glanced at Tony and disappeared. Tony could guess where he'd gone - assuming Loki hadn't just turned invisible. With another tap to the arc reactor, Tony triggered the armor to dissolve back into its casing.

"Prince Thor," one of the soldiers said nervously, "our orders--"

"Are obsolete," Thor said without looking at him. "King Stark has made his feelings on the matter plain enough. It is clear he does not require our aid."

Okay, it wasn't as sexy as when Loki did it, but there was still a definite thrill to having Thor refer to him as a king.

"Bags not telling Steve," Tony said brightly, and ducked towards the elevator.

Natasha tried to intercept him. "Tony, can we have a--"

"Sorry, very busy, lots of very important stuff to do," Tony said, flashing her a grin. He got in the elevator and miraculously she didn't follow him; probably had a fair idea what he was about to do next.

Tony went to the workshop and, as expected, Loki appeared a moment later. Loki was grinning in a way that suggested he had some quality ideas of things to do to Tony's body. Tony grinned back.

"Glowheart," Loki said, prowling towards him. "That was reckless..."

"Was not," Tony defended himself. "I had it covered. You saw what happened."

"Yes." Loki's grin broadened. "I did."

Tony tipped his head back as Loki leaned down to kiss him. His blood thrummed pleasantly. Then Loki kissed his jawline, kissed the side of his throat, and Tony gave a soft groan as he felt teeth scrape against his skin.

"I suppose you think you should be rewarded," Loki drawled, close by Tony's ear. Tony shivered lightly.

"I wouldn't exactly turn it down," Tony murmured back. He closed his eyes, letting himself be backed up against the workshop wall. Loki's mouth kept working at his throat, and he let out a louder groan. "Please tell me you're planning on fucking my brains out."

"In due course," Loki said, and slid to his knees.

"Oh," Tony breathed. "Yeah. This is good too."

"I think you'll find," Loki said, unfastening Tony's pants and pushing them down past his knees, "that it's a little more than 'good'."

"Terrific," Tony amended, hardening as Loki took him in hand. "Fantastic. Splendiferous--ohh." He let his head fall back at the feel of Loki's mouth. Damn, if this was what it got him,

he should duel Asgardian assholes more often.

Loki continued lavishing attention on him, hand and mouth and tongue, and Tony slid a hand into the soft curls of Loki's hair. It was everything he needed, and he lost himself in the wet, perfect sensation. His breath came harder and faster. He could feel Loki's tongue swirl against him, and finally he reached his climax with a shout.

Loki drew back, slowly wiping the back of his hand across his mouth with a self-satisfied smile. "I do hope that's not all you have in you."

"Oh, god," Tony said faintly. His legs felt shaky and he let himself slither down to his knees, on the floor with Loki. "You're going to wreck me, aren't you?"

"Thoroughly," Loki said with relish, and kissed him again.

--

Much later - after being reduced to a begging, sobbing mess - Tony lay sprawled on his bed with his whole body aching in the best way.

"Just out of curiosity," he drawled, "how pissed off is Odin going to be?"

"Extremely," Loki said, sounding very content.

"Oh, good." Tony thought about rolling over to cuddle up with Loki, but moving seemed like too much effort right now. He closed his eyes instead, drowsy and sated.

"He'll probably overturn Thor's ruling," Loki continued, and wait, no, not good. Tony opened his eyes again.

"That's not fair, I irritated the hell out of a squadron of Asgardians to make that happen."

"No doubt it's what Thor was counting on," Loki murmured a little bitterly.

Tony mustered his energy and rolled onto his side to look at Loki properly. "No. Thor did a good thing. He weighed it up and he wanted you to know he sees you as people. That's--"

"He risked your life," Loki snapped.

"*Yes*. He looked at me, and he looked at you, and he *picked you*." Tony reached out to tuck a curl of Loki's hair behind his ear. "Is he still going to say dumb stuff that hurts you? Of course. But this one thing? He had your back, Loki. He's *trying*."

Loki looked a lot like he didn't know how to deal with that, so Tony backed off a little. "You really think Odin's going to overturn it?"

"Mm, at the very least to keep Tyr happy." Loki sighed a little. "It will invalidate the duel, ensure Tyr retains at least a few shreds of honor."

"Fucking honor," Tony muttered. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Valid or not, I still had him in a crater in my floor."

"And I greatly enjoyed that," Loki said with a crooked smile.

Tony frowned, feeling a familiar irritation at Asgardian bullshit. If Odin overturned Thor's ruling, it ruined the whole point Tony had been trying to make about Asgardians getting all up in human business without asking. "There's got to be some way around it."

Loki was silent a long moment, thinking. He swallowed, then said, without meeting Tony's eyes, "You joked, once, of hiring me..."

That was about the last thing Tony had expected to hear. He blinked, taken completely aback. "Uh... what?"

"If you were... truly my king, then you would have the right to..." Loki trailed off, looking fidgety.

"Okay," Tony said slowly, eyeing Loki. He felt like he wasn't really getting all the implications here. But even taking that into account, he didn't like the look on Loki's face. "Just asking, but would there happen to be some way this could backfire horribly?"

"Technically," Loki admitted, "your kingdom would then be responsible for any further crimes I might commit."

That actually made a certain amount of sense. Tony wasn't overly concerned about antagonizing Asgard, anyway. They probably wouldn't be in too much of a hurry to start a fight now that he'd publicly shown how easily he could take an Asgardian down.

"Okay," he said. "Let's do it."

Loki stared at him. "But-- I just told you--"

Tony shrugged. "Thanks for being honest with me? I weighed it up, I'm okay with it. The fewer reasons Odin has to overturn Thor's ruling, the better."

Understanding dawned in Loki's eyes. "You want Midgardians to have equal status--"

"I can want more than one thing at a time," Tony said, and it came out a little sharper than he intended. He took care to soften his voice. "Loki. Yes, I want to prove a few things about humans, Midgardians. But I want this for *you*, as well."

"You're telling the truth," Loki breathed, eyes wide and surprised.

Tony pushed himself up on one arm and leaned in to kiss Loki softly. "It's up to you. But if this gives us an advantage I say we do it." He grinned. "Plus, SI offers fantastic employee benefits."

Loki stared at him a moment longer, then reached up to lightly touch his hair. "I, Loki," he said, voice trembling slightly, "...God of Chaos. Do hereby pledge my undying fidelity to

Tony Stark and to the kingdom of Stark Industries. On my honor and the honor of those who came before me."

"I, Tony Stark," Tony said, not really sure what he was meant to say, "do hereby accept you as my employee and... promise all the protections that come with that, including fighting the occasional duel when that seems like a useful thing to do. I'm also totally making you sign a contract. What even is your title going to be? I can't just make you my P.A., I mean I can but it seems a little beneath you--"

"Special consultant regarding magic," Loki said.

Tony raised an eyebrow. "You didn't seem to like that last time I suggested it."

"I find I am..." Loki swallowed, "more comfortable with the notion, now."

Loki had called himself the God of Chaos, Tony realized. Did that mean Loki was starting to accept the 'blurred boundaries' idea? That could only be good for him. Probably bad for the world, but good for Loki.

"We are going to have so much fun," he said, and watched Loki slowly smile.

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Chapter End Notes

The final scene is illustrated [here](#) by [Rabentochter!](#)

Immigrant Song

Chapter Summary

Bucky gets the gift of memory, Loki goes on a magical mystery tour, and Tony spends a lot of time filling other people in on recent events.

Chapter Notes

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

They spent a while in bed, talking through the possibilities. And oh... there were a lot of possibilities. The things Loki knew about... Tony had already made a mental note for a new subsidiary of S.I. - Stark Interstellar, had quite the ring to it. This was going to be *glorious*. Hydra weren't going to know what had hit them. Come to think of it... probably a lot of people weren't going to know what had hit them.

Tony grinned.

They shared a shower, and Loki insisted on washing Tony's hair. Tony wasn't sure if it was an Asgardian thing or a Loki thing, but he wasn't one to turn down a good scalp massage so he went along with it and tried his best not to melt into a warm puddle of contentment.

Afterwards he asked Jarvis where the team all were. Bruce had gone to work, Clint was in his rooms, Natasha was with Steve and Barnes, Thor was still on the team level with their Asgardian... guests.

"Steve first," Tony decided, getting some clean clothes on. "He'll be easier to deal with than the others."

"Have you given thought to what you want done about Barnes?" Loki asked, a little too casually.

Tony's stomach turned over. Hydra, he reminded himself; it was Hydra that had killed his parents. Barnes was just the weapon they'd used to get it done. "We should help him," he said, hating the part of himself that was reluctant to say it, the part that would rather just lash out and see someone - anyone - suffer. "Plus, you're right, it'll really piss Hydra off if we steal Barnes out from under them."

"I can bring his buried memories to the fore, so he remembers himself," Loki said. "Erasing the later memories is a more complex matter."

"So... he'll still be brainwashed?" Tony frowned a little. "I can see a couple of flaws in this plan."

"His mind will still be..." Loki gestured like he was reaching for the right words. "Injured. How well he recovers will be up to him."

Tony swallowed, oddly touched by that. Not only had Loki accepted that minds could be injured, he was extending that logic out to others. He believed *Tony* over the stories he'd been raised with.

"Well," Tony said, smiling up at Loki, "he'll have Steve to help him along."

Loki drew a breath, then looked like he changed his mind about what to say and smirked instead. "You're right, there *are* flaws in this plan."

Tony snorted in amusement. "Alright, smartass, making fun of Steve is my job. Let's head on down."

The idea was for Tony to go in and ease Steve gently into the idea that Loki was back. Tony was under no delusion that was actually going to happen, and he didn't think Loki was either. They were both a little too impulsive for that. Still, when he said, "I've got good news and bad news," and Natasha rolled her eyes, he couldn't help feeling a *little* offended.

Steve gave him a wry smile. "The last time you said that, you sprung Loki on us."

Barnes looked mildly alarmed, eyes flicking between Steve and Tony.

Tony slid his hands in his pockets and grinned so he didn't think too hard about Barnes. "Funny you should say that..."

"The good news is that Loki doesn't want to kill Tony," Natasha said bluntly. "The bad news is that Loki doesn't want to kill Tony."

"*Hey.*" Tony stared at her indignantly. Rude. "What I was *going* to say, was that Stark Industries has a special consultant who can help Barnes."

"And the bad news," Steve said slowly, "is that--"

"That I don't want to kill Tony," Loki said smoothly, appearing behind Steve's shoulder.

"Everyone's a comedian," Tony muttered to himself. Meanwhile, Steve had whirled on Loki and thrown a punch; Loki caught his fist and smiled pleasantly at him.

"Hello, Captain."

"Tony," Steve gritted out, "you better have a damn good explanation for this."

"Did you say Stark Industries?" Natasha said, staring at him.

"Yeah." Tony grinned across at Loki. "Loki's one of my employees now. Well, citizens. Something like that."

"Indeed," Loki said, extending his smile to Natasha as well as Steve. "And Tony is my king."

Tony felt a little shiver run down his spine; he said, "You're going to milk that, aren't you?" and Loki raised an eyebrow at him like the answer was obvious. Which, in retrospect, it was.

"This is to do with the duel, isn't it," Natasha said, looking between the two of them. "There are political ramifications. Something to do with what you got Thor to say?"

Steve didn't seem surprised, which meant Natasha had already filled him in at least partially. Tony was kind of disappointed; it would have been amazing to see Steve's reaction to the latest episode of the soap opera that was their lives.

"Trying to minimize the reasons Odin might overturn it," he answered Natasha honestly. "Plus, you know what Loki can do; any company would be crazy not to snap him up."

"Oh, that's what you think is crazy," Steve muttered.

"I do not expect your affection, Captain Rogers," Loki said, coming to stand by Tony's side. "The question is, are you willing to accept my aid?"

Steve stared at Loki for a moment, then switched his gaze to Tony. "Why should I trust him? He literally just tried to double-cross you to blow up a planet."

Tony winced slightly. "That was... complicated."

"Seemed pretty simple to me," Steve said.

Loki sighed. "What do you want to hear? I could tell you that Tony is currently the only thing standing between me and a very miserable death. I could tell you that I want vengeance against this force Hydra, because they dared to attack what was mine. I could tell you a hundred things, and you would still have no idea if any of them were the truth."

Steve raised his chin, looking Loki in the eyes. "Pick one."

Loki gave a thin smile. "Then I tell you that Tony Stark is my king, he asked me to be here, and so here I am."

"You didn't obey your last king all that well," Steve said cynically. He did look tempted, though.

"My last king stole me," Loki said coolly. "Tony invited me. I find myself a little more inclined to serve him well."

Tony felt a surge of warmth at that which he couldn't fully suppress. He gave Loki's arm a light squeeze then turned back to Steve. "Look, Loki can help Barnes remember who he is. It won't be a perfect fix, but it's something. You just have to swallow your pride and let him do it."

"This isn't about *pride*, Tony." Steve shook his head, looking incredulous. "Believe me, I wish it was that easy. But--"

In a gravelly voice, Barnes said, "Do I get a say?"

There was a moment of silence. Natasha raised an eyebrow. Steve looked shocked. As far as Tony knew, Barnes hadn't been all that talkative before now.

"Bucky..." Steve shifted on his feet uneasily. "You don't know who this is. He's dangerous--"

"I know who he is." Barnes cast a sidelong look at Loki. "I can read a newspaper. And I know what he did to me before. The memories..."

"You can feel it, can't you?" Loki said, a smile curving his mouth. "The past, beating at the edges of your mind, as constant and relentless as the tide. You want to know, you think it will give you a place to stand in the world. I can give you the answers you seek, but the rest is up to you."

There was a kind of hunger on Barnes' face, a drive that was undeniable, and suddenly it was as if Tony's vision realigned. *They molded him*, Loki had said, and Tony realized how true that was. Barnes had been stripped of his own mind and then deployed like nothing more than an automated weapon system.

Barnes really hadn't killed his parents. Hydra had.

With Barnes' agreement, the last of Steve's objections fell away. Tony watched as Loki approached and placed his hand on Barnes' forehead. There was nothing for a moment, then Barnes gave a full-body convulsion in his restraints.

Loki stepped back, panting. "That was... a little more difficult than I'd anticipated," he admitted.

Steve stared at him. "But you did it, right? You got his memories back?" His voice was a mixture of hope and fear.

Barnes opened his eyes, looking dazed. "Stevie?" he said in a small voice.

Steve whirled, face lighting up with delight. "Bucky?"

"Oh my god," Barnes said, looking pale. "Hydra... they want to use Stark's satellites. We've-- they've got an algorithm that'll target anyone on the planet, anyone that might be a threat to Hydra, and take 'em out. They've gotta be stopped."

"Actually, the satellites are already secured," Tony said, scratching at the back of his neck. The helicarriers he'd contracted to Pierce for, though... those needed attention. Some reason he couldn't finish them or couldn't turn them over.

Barnes' eyes darted towards him and widened a little. Tony looked back calmly, aware of Loki's hand coming to rest at the small of his back. He was surprisingly okay.

Steve started undoing Barnes' restraints, and Tony couldn't help but tense a little. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Natasha do the same. If Barnes' brainwashing was going to be a problem, it was going to show up when those restraints were undone.

But when they were unfastened, Barnes only shuddered and curled up on himself, rubbing his temples. "Feels like a goddamn mess," he muttered.

"Take your time," Steve said, laying a hand on Barnes' metal arm.

"Did Natasha tell you about Camp Lehigh?" Tony asked, and immediately realized the answer to his own question; she hadn't told Steve that Tony and Loki were still on good terms, so she must have been waiting on him before bringing that up.

"What about Camp Lehigh?" Steve said, confirming it.

Tony sighed a little, reluctant to speak in front of Barnes until they knew more about where his head was at. "We're going to need another team meeting. I feel like half my life is team meetings now."

"Stark," Barnes said, looking up at him with an unreadable expression. "Howard's kid."

"Yeah." Tony grimaced; he'd spent too much time proving himself to be happy about being reduced to 'Howard's son' once again, but in Barnes' case it was kind of understandable.

"I'm meant to kill you," Barnes said, tense.

Tony put on a smile. "You know, it's surprising how many people feel that way."

Loki huffed a short laugh. Steve looked between Tony and Barnes warily, standing between them with his arms up a little like he could physically keep them apart.

Barnes stared at Tony a moment longer, then smiled back. "We're gonna get along fine."

--

Thor was in the midst of explaining the US electoral college when Tony arrived back on the team floor. Tyr straightened when he saw Tony, putting his hand on his sword and wearing a look that mixed fear and anger.

"Good morning," Tony said in a sing-song voice. "Good afternoon? Something like that. Ooh, I should do lunch."

"Tony," Thor said, looking... conflicted. "A word, if you will."

Tony got the feeling that 'if you will' was more for politeness' sake than anything else, but he said, "A man after my own heart. Conference room?"

"As good a place as any," Thor said, and followed him there.

"Right," Tony said, as Thor closed the door behind them, "so--"

Thor turned to give him a dark look. "Apparently Loki holds no ill will towards you for thwarting his attack on Jotunheim."

"We talked it out," Tony said, unable to resist. "You people should try it sometime."

Invisible fingers jabbed at his side. He cleared his throat and amended, "Besides, it wasn't really like that. He set it up so I'd be forced to stop him."

Thor's brow furrowed. "Why would he do such a thing?"

Tony sighed. He didn't know how to explain the urge to be self-destructive, to go ahead and wreck everything *now* so he wouldn't be waiting on tenterhooks for it to be ruined later. He settled for, "You remember what I told you about mind injuries? Sometimes they make us do dumb things."

No jabbing fingers, but he could almost *feel* Loki's dirty look.

"Nonetheless," Thor said soberly, "now he must face the consequences of it."

Tony grimaced. "Thor, buddy, I get where you're coming from, and I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm kind of here to say 'actually, no'."

Thor sighed at him. "I understand you do not wish the einherjar to follow you everywhere, but they have their orders. Father is no longer willing to overlook his perfidy--"

"I think I should take offense that he was willing to overlook anything in the first place," Tony said, "given that it was *my planet* Loki was running around wreaking havoc on. But that's not really the point. I'm here to tell you... Loki's part of Stark Industries, now. He's one of my people."

Thor froze for a moment, then scowled and strode towards him. His hand had barely touched Tony's neck before Loki appeared behind Thor with a knife at his throat.

"Unhand him," Loki hissed.

Thor let go, rounding on Loki instead. "What is the meaning of this? Asgard is your *home*."

Loki scoffed. "Asgard was never my home. It was a pretty lie, but it's time to move on."

"And you think you will find it here on Midgard?" Thor gestured loosely at Tony. "Among mortals? Loki, be reasonable."

"That *mortal* has shown me more care than any other since I first fell from the Rainbow Bridge." Loki raised his chin, looking defiant. "He slew an army of my enemies while Odin sought only to blame me for falling into their grasp to begin with. He called me his friend. I choose Stark. Save your useless words - it is done."

Thor looked crushed. Tony actually felt a little bad for him. He knew that Thor cared, he just... didn't understand Loki, at all; didn't see how toxic Asgard was for him.

"Anyway," Tony chimed in, "we're telling you so you can take the word to Odin. I'm sure there's all sorts of political *things* to deal with, given Loki's kind of a wanted criminal back on Asgard. If Odin wants a meeting, I can probably schedule him in."

"Mortals aren't allowed on Asgard," Thor said, giving Tony a strange look.

"Then perhaps Odin will have to bring himself here," Loki said with relish.

Thor laughed a little, then stopped and stared at Loki. "You can't be serious."

"Why not?" Loki said, smiling viciously. "If he will not have Tony on Asgard, why should he not drag his almighty ass from that golden throne and come treat with him here?" His voice dropped to a sarcastic drawl. "King to king."

"You can hardly expect--" Thor stopped short, perhaps realizing that whatever he was about to say probably wouldn't go down so well. "I... will bring him the news."

Loki stepped back, still smiling. "Finally, a sensible decision."

Thor shot him a dark look, clearly beginning to reach the ends of his patience. "I am surprised you can recognize one, all things considered."

"Ookay," Tony said brightly, clapping his hands together. "That's actually quite a good zinger but how about we keep things nice and peaceful? That'd be terrific."

Loki made a show of sighing and came to stand behind Tony's shoulder. "Yes, yes."

Thor gave Loki a long look, then said in a low voice, "At least tell me this will make you happier."

If Loki had shown any surprise, it was gone from his face by the time Tony glanced back at him. All he showed was implacable calm. "It does."

Thor bowed his head at that, grief flashing across his expression. "Then I am glad for you," he said, looking about the furthest thing from glad Tony had ever seen.

Loki stared at him in silence. Finally he said in a challenging tone, "So did you forget about frost giants when you made your little proclamation earlier, or are you just that stupid?"

Thor just looked tired. He shook his head a little, and glanced at the door. Then he looked back at Loki and said, "I will accompany the einherjar back to Asgard to discuss with Father how he wishes to proceed."

Loki pressed his lips together like he was unhappy with that answer - it probably wasn't argumentative enough for whatever story he was trying to tell himself about the events of the day. Tony made a mental note to have a very gentle, very careful conversation with Loki about Thor's ruling. It would probably take a while to sink in.

"And Tony." Thor frowned slightly. "I fear I have treated you over-casually in the past. It seemed that was what you preferred, but..."

"It was," Tony assured him. "I mean, it is. Just don't confuse casual with underestimating me, and we'll be fine."

"Indeed," Thor said a little grimly, but he looked relieved. He gave them each a nod and left the conference room.

"Well, that could have gone worse," Tony said, turning to face Loki.

"I suppose." Loki looked like he still didn't know quite what he thought of the whole thing.

Tony slid his hands up to grasp Loki's upper arms. "Hey. How you doing?"

"I'm perfectly fine," Loki said with a bit of a grimace.

"You've been more convincing," Tony told him. He tugged Loki forward a little and leaned up to kiss him.

Loki brought one of his hands up to curl around the side of Tony's neck. He pressed their foreheads together, and sighed softly. "I am... unsettled."

"Yeah." Tony reached up to slide his fingers through Loki's hair. His neck felt warm where Loki's hand rested. "That's pretty understandable."

"You don't, though, not truly." Loki smiled unhappily. "What Thor said... I loathe how much I want to believe in it. I want to believe Odin would let it stand. But when has Asgard ever..." He sighed again and closed his eyes for a moment. "No matter how hard I try to resist the lure of sentiment, I find there is a part of me which dearly wishes to believe I am something more than what I am."

"You're the *God of Chaos*," Tony insisted, and realized his mistake when Loki pulled back to give him a scathing look. Living lie detector, right. "Well, you're something amazing, even if it's not a god."

Loki gave his neck a gentle squeeze. "At least I did not choose you for your wisdom."

Tony blew a raspberry at that. Loki looked so startled and affronted that Tony burst out laughing. Loki rolled his eyes, but his lips tugged into a more genuine smile.

"Alright," Tony said, "that's Steve and Thor. Still got to deal with team meeting and H.R. But first I vote lunch."

"The fish on rice," Loki suggested immediately.

Tony smiled back at him. "Sushi it is."

--

Phase two of their hastily concocted plan involved Loki going off-world, which Tony hated a little. But it was important to get the word out about Thor's ruling to as many realms as possible, to maximize the political pressure on Odin. With shape-shifting and illusions Loki could pose as a delegation from Asgard sent specifically to spread the proclamation.

(It occurred to Tony that Loki could also pose as a delegation from Asgard to make utterly fake proclamations, but that was a level of mischief that could wait until they had the current drama sorted out.)

Tony emailed H.R. to get papers drawn up for a new Special Consultant, then emailed Pepper to schedule a time to fill her in... at least partially. It would be safer for her if there were things she didn't officially know.

After that he had no excuse not to call for the team meeting he needed. Tony groaned quietly to himself, trying to think of a reason to put it off a little longer. There wasn't one, really. And Loki was out doing his part; Tony should do his own.

Rounding up the other Avengers didn't take too long; they were all a little on edge, given everything that had been happening lately. It seemed crazy that it was only a couple of days since Loki had tried to go for Ultron.

Tony started with Loki's suggestion for going after the scepter, the idea to claim Frigga had scribed it and the Asgardians wanted it out of trouble. Leaving out that it was *Loki's* idea, of course. Then he got to the issue of Hydra's A.I. Zola, and Bruce asked how he knew what was at Camp Lehigh.

This was... delicate. Tony licked his lips and started carefully, "The thing is..."

"I don't believe this," Clint said flatly. "I genuinely don't believe this. You're playing some epic prank in the worst possible taste and right when we're all sucked in you're going to turn around and reveal you are not actually so dumb that you can't keep your dick out of that asshole."

"Actually," Tony said, "the Asgardians have hangups about bottoming so in fact I have kept my dick out of Loki's--"

"I think what Clint is getting at," Natasha interrupted pointedly, "is that given recent events, it might help to know why you think we can trust Loki."

Why did people keep saying things like that? "I don't think you can trust Loki," Tony said impatiently. "But I have a pretty decent read on Loki these days, and I think you can trust *me*. He wasn't trying with Ultron, it was one last self-destructive hurrah, and my evidence for that is how unbelievably easy it was to stop him. All he had to do was wait literally half an hour and do it behind my back, and he couldn't even wait that long. Now he's stopped trying to prove how evil he is and come to work for S.I.--"

"He what?" Bruce exclaimed, while Clint made a show of beating his head against the table.

"Special Consultant for Magic," Tony said, refusing to admit he'd screwed up that reveal. "That's the other part of the plan for digging out Hydra. After the duel--"

"Wait, you dueled him?" Bruce demanded, eyes going wider.

"No, I dueled Tyr--"

Natasha sighed. "Tony provoked Tyr into saying something taboo about Loki, then dueled for his honor. The main purpose seemed to be to pressure Thor into declaring that all the races in the Nine Realms have equal legal standing as Asgardians. That gives us certain protections under Asgardian law that we wouldn't otherwise have. Politically, it was quite well done. Practically, it was a bone-headed move and he's lucky Jarvis has faster reaction times than Asgardians do."

"I had that completely under control," Tony objected.

"I heard that sword scratch your armor," Natasha said sternly. To the others she added, "I'm assuming that Loki joining Stark Industries has something to do with the political aspects, but I'm not clear how, or what that has to do with Hydra."

"Right now, Loki's on a tour of the Realms making sure everyone knows about Thor's ruling so there's more pressure on Odin not to overturn it," Tony said. "As Special Consultant to S.I., he'll give me the opportunity to study how he does things like that, the illusions, and how they work. Something SHIELD - and Hydra - would give their right arm for."

"It's the perfect cover for information gathering," Bruce realized.

Tony pointed at him. "Bingo."

"So... what?" Clint scowled across the table at him. "You want us to just stop trying to catch Loki at all? Let him get away with everything he's done?"

Tony couldn't resist the tongue-in-cheek answer. "If you would, yeah, that'd be great."

Clint didn't even throw anything, just rolled his eyes towards the ceiling and muttered something inaudible.

"Tony," Bruce said with a sigh. "That's a huge ask."

"It's the best option. Loki gets somewhere to settle down, he knocks off his bullshit, no more people die. If you want to stop him, this is the only way--"

"That's not entirely true," Natasha said, and shrugged when he glared at her. "You have a weapon that can incapacitate Loki. Using that we could imprison him indefinitely."

"No," Tony said flatly.

"It would be fair," Bruce said. "Any one of his incidents-- I mean, just take Kentucky--"

"*No*," Tony repeated, veins icy with rage. "He's been tortured, he has PTSD--"

"He's a mass murderer," Steve said without meeting his eyes.

"That mass murderer got your friend back," Tony snapped. "You might want to stop and think about that before you start something that won't end well for you."

"Is that a threat?" Steve said, a warning tone in his voice.

Tony laughed, not even caring how far this conversation had gone off the rails. "I will fight every single one of you if I have to."

"Boys," Natasha said lightly. Her eyes were cautious and tense. "This doesn't need to go that far."

Clint said abruptly, "How do you know he's not playing you?"

Tony looked at him, startled. He paused for a moment, figuring out how to answer. "He's been too vulnerable in front of me. More than someone like Loki could handle, even for a long con. Everything we know about Asgardian customs... he's genuine, Clint, I know he is."

"Loki's certainly got a sense of possessiveness when it comes to Tony," Natasha added. "As far as I can tell, the affection is real."

"Great." Clint sighed heavily. "Well, I hate it, but Natasha's right that Loki could be a powerful asset. Just don't expect me to be able to work with him."

"You're seriously okay with this?" Bruce asked, staring at Clint.

"This is a shit sandwich," Clint retorted, "but it might help us against an even shittier sandwich, even I can see that."

Steve bit his lip and looked down, presumably thinking about Bucky. Bruce stared around the table at all of them.

Finally Bruce's eyes settled on Tony. He said, "PTSD is not an excuse for murder."

"No," Tony agreed, "but Loki's not the only one who's had experience with *losing control*, is he?"

Bruce flinched. *That's right*, Tony thought to himself; *I don't need to throw on the suit to fight you.*

"Tony," Steve started angrily.

Bruce held up a hand. "No... he's right." He gave a bitter smile. "Fine. Promise me, then... promise me that Loki is trying now to stay in control. Promise me that he's actually trying not to just kill people whenever the whim takes him."

Tony relaxed a little, because he could do that. He didn't have to say that it was because Loki didn't want to disappoint his new king. The reason wasn't important; the important thing was that it was *true*. "I promise," he said, meeting Bruce's eyes.

"For what it's worth," Natasha added gently, "I think Loki really is trying."

"For what it's worth," Bruce echoed, mouth twisting unhappily.

Tony breathed. That could have gone a lot worse; Clint especially had been easier to sway than Tony had feared. "Natasha can write another super-secret report for SHIELD about the

progress I'm making with Loki, that he's letting me study his magic. They'll try to blackmail me into letting them get in on the action--"

"Blackmail?" Steve said dubiously.

Tony rolled his eyes lightly. "Asking really nicely isn't exactly SHIELD's style."

Steve grimaced but didn't argue that.

Natasha nodded slowly. "And that puts Loki in the perfect position to uncover who's Hydra and who's not, and to gather evidence against them."

"And we need evidence," Tony agreed. "We want to put these people away for a long, long time."

"What about Asgard?" Bruce asked, eyes on the table. He looked up at Tony. "They want Loki contained. Does your plan deal with that?"

"He's working for S.I.," Tony said with a half-shrug. "In Asgardian terms, I'm his king, and he's one of my citizens. Thor's gone to find out what Odin's going to want from me, but how easily I beat his 'finest warrior' should be a warning not to screw with me. I think I can handle it."

There was silence around the table. No one looked particularly happy. Tony held up a fist and said, "Go team!"

Clint shot him a dirty look. Bruce sighed and shook his head. Steve actually facepalmed.

"Yeah..." Tony lowered his hand. "I'll just... see myself out."

Natasha gave him a look as he got up to leave, and it was one he could read easily. He'd seen it on countless faces before: why do you have to be this way, Tony, why do you have to be so *you*?

Whatever. They'd get over it. They just needed time, and that was understandable. Natasha was already mostly on his side, and Steve owed Loki for helping Bucky. Thor was making progress, and that just left Clint and Bruce. Loki helping them deal with Hydra would go a long way towards changing their minds.

They'd get there. Tony just had to be patient.

God, he hated being patient.

Tony took himself to his workshop, where he tinkered for a while to keep his mind from dwelling over the expressions on his team's faces. It was past eight when Loki returned, looking tired and a little windswept.

"How'd it go?" Tony asked, unable to keep from smiling.

Loki smiled back at him. "I still have Alfheim, Niflheim and Muspelheim to go. I've visited Vanaheim, Svartalfheim, Jotunheim and Nidavellir--"

Tony just about choked on his own breath. "You went to Jotunheim?"

Loki made a show of examining his fingernails. "Yes. Now that they know, Odin risks outright war if he overturns Thor's decree."

Tony wanted desperately not to say anything stupid right now. He crossed the floor to Loki and grasped his hands. "Hey. I'm proud of you."

Loki pulled his hands free and scowled. "Don't patronize me."

"I'm not." Tony reached up and did the Asgardian neck-claspy thing, feeling incredibly awkward about it. "You did good, Houdini."

"Yes, well." Loki turned away, taking a couple of restless steps. "It was hardly any great achievement. Fool a few giants, nothing more."

Okay. Touchy subject. Tony held up his hands in surrender then said, "Have you eaten?"

"Not yet," Loki admitted.

"Let's take care of that then. Jarvis, is anyone on the team level?"

"Sir, Captain Rogers and his guest are the only two present."

"Works for me," Tony said with a shrug. Loki looked a little cautious but seemed happy enough to follow him into the elevator.

On the team level, Barnes was at the table, watching Steve empty the dishwasher. Steve did a double take when he saw Loki follow Tony in. "So that's a thing now," he said, somewhat uneasily.

"We're on the hunt for leftovers," Tony said cheerfully. There was something freeing about not having to hide Loki anymore. It was almost a relief.

"Lasagna's in the fridge," Steve said automatically, then shot Loki another unsettled look.

"And how is your friend the assassin?" Loki asked politely.

"Fine," Barnes said, eyeing Loki warily. "Thanks for asking."

Steve looked at Tony. "Is this... going to be a regular thing?"

"We usually get delivery," Tony said honestly, raiding the fridge for the lasagna dish, "but it was getting late and I'm hungry." He dished up a couple of portions then put the rest back in the refrigerator. "Loki, do you know how to use a microwave?"

Loki scoffed, "Why would I bother with such a device?" and waved his hand over the plates of food.

"Right," Tony said, staring down at the now-hot lasagna. "I forgot you can do that."

Loki smirked at him then took one of the plates and headed for the table. Tony grabbed cutlery for them and brought his own plate over. Steve was watching the whole time, clearly trying not to stare. Barnes just kept on looking wary.

"Tony..." Steve lowered his voice into a ridiculous stage whisper. "Maybe it's not the best idea to just... What if Clint had been in here?"

"I did check first," Tony said, cutting a piece of his lasagna. "I'm not a complete idiot."

Loki was happily eating his meal, occasionally glancing between Tony and Steve as if checking whether he needed to intervene. Tony flashed him a quick smile.

"I'm not even going to touch that one," Steve muttered. Barnes snorted briefly.

Steve finished up the dishwasher while Tony and Loki ate, then seemed to have a whole conversation with Barnes with just their eyes. It wound up with him jerking his head towards the elevator, and the two of them leaving.

Almost immediately Loki's shoulders slumped and he looked tired again, no longer feeling the need to hide it. He fidgeted with his fork and said, "Do you think Thor will fight Odin about this decree?"

Tony swallowed, startled by Loki actually asking the question - admitting he might not know Thor as well as he thought. "I... yeah. Yeah, I really think he will."

Loki made a faintly contemplative noise and resumed eating. He had a little sauce at the corner of his mouth and Tony smiled.

"You know," he said thoughtfully. "As Special Consultant to Stark Industries, you should really have an office."

Loki kept eating, but raised an eyebrow to show he was listening.

"We could recode that whole floor from storage to workspace... give you some official space of your own."

Loki swallowed his current mouthful and said dryly, "Does that mean you'll stop calling it my secret lair?"

"Oh god no, I'm going to call it that forever." Tony grinned at him. "But if you like, it can be *our* secret lair. The team's probably waiting for me to go full supervillain anyway."

"I am flattered, my king," Loki said in the same dry voice. "I look forward to sharing my Fortress of Evil with you."

"Giving it a cool name is not going to stop me referring to it as a secret lair," Tony said, although actually it might. "Hardly a Fortress of Evil, anyway; at most it would be a Fortress of Misguided...ness."

Loki gave him a deeply sarcastic look.

"Alright," Tony amended, "Fortress of Sex and Cuddles?"

"Closer," Loki conceded.

"That reminds me." Tony pushed a piece of lasagna around his plate with his fork. "I... don't really need a haircut at the moment, but maybe you want to give it a little trim?"

Loki froze with his fork halfway to his mouth. Combined with the little smear of sauce, he looked ridiculous. Tony adored it. Then, Loki lowered his fork and broke into a radiant smile. "I'm sure I could manage that."

"Great." Tony smiled back at him. "You, me, Hug Fortress, fancy scissors. It's a date."

There were still a lot of unanswered questions. That Thanos guy was on his way, Odin was going to be pissed at them, and SHIELD was infested with Nazis who were probably wondering where the hell their brainwashed assassin had disappeared to. But Tony didn't have to solve those problems on his own. He and Loki would be side by side, fighting as a team.

"It's a date," Loki echoed, smile softening and turning tender.

Tony wasn't stupid enough to think that Loki was all better. Hell, *he* was still all messed up and he wasn't dealing with half the crap that Loki was. But they'd come a long, long way. They had a long way still to go, but they'd do it the same way they'd done the rest of it.

Together.

#

Chapter End Notes

I AM DEAD.

So that is the main story arc and I am ending it there before it can accidentally grow another 200,000 words I wasn't expecting. There will undoubtedly be a sequel and more side pieces (I am halfway through a Loki piece at the moment, in fact) but for right now, that's a wrap, and a bit of a breather for me.

Thank you all so much for taking this journey with me and for your feedback and delight along the way. It's been an absolute blast.

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