

The Ostrich Strategy

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/13997580) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/13997580>.

Rating: [Teen And Up Audiences](#)

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Category: [M/M](#)

Fandoms: [The Avengers \(Marvel Movies\)](#), [Thor \(Movies\)](#), [Captain America \(Movies\)](#), [Marvel Cinematic Universe](#)

Relationship: [Loki/Tony Stark](#)

Characters: [Tony Stark](#), [Loki \(Marvel\)](#), [Jarvis \(Iron Man movies\)](#), [Thor \(Marvel\)](#), [Steve Rogers](#), [Bruce Banner](#), [Clint Barton](#), [Natasha Romanov \(Marvel\)](#), [Ultron \(Marvel\)](#), [Odin \(Marvel\)](#), [Sam Wilson \(Marvel\)](#), [Wanda Maximoff](#), [Pietro Maximoff](#), [James "Rhodey" Rhodes](#)

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Language: English

Series: Part 1 of [when plans go awry](#)

Collections: [GD's Best Reads](#), [Marvel](#), [lia's best of tony stark fics](#), [Mark's Top Fanfic Recs](#), [Favorite Loki Fics](#), [Queer Tony Stark](#), [Loki Tony](#), [Fics that make canon cry with jealousy](#), [MCU FICS /POS](#), [101 ways to defeat Thanos](#)

Stats: Published: 2018-03-17 Completed: 2018-03-25 Words: 53,466 Chapters: 7/7

The Ostrich Strategy

by [NamelesslyNightlock](#)

Summary

Loki's plan for evading Odin is less a plan and more a series of increasingly ridiculous hiding places, almost all of which are apparently in Tony Stark's mansion. Tony isn't too happy with the Norse god that keeps showing up unannounced and destroying his living room, but he's good at making the best out of a bad situation. Thor just wishes his brother would stay in one place for five minutes and all Steve wants is for Tony to stop flirting long enough to help save the world. In the end, they all get what they're after— just perhaps not in the manner they had come to expect.

Notes

I started writing this as a one-shot and I don't even know what happened. Apparently, I do multi-chapters now.

Starts fluffy, but will have angst later on. You have been warned. This fic starts in tdw and moves through Phase 2 with Frostiron thrown in. In the name of not repeating what everyone already knows, parts of the movies are glossed over, in particular aou. Violence is canon typical, rated for language.

The Stark World

Chapter Summary

“It is seven in the morning, Stark,” said Loki, gesturing to the clock on the wall with his spear. “It is a perfectly respectable time for house calls.”

Over the course of his life, Tony truly believed that he'd had more than his fair share of bad luck. That was more than okay, though, because— how was it that saying went? Anyone can *get* the bad luck, but the genius lies in knowing how to *exploit* it. Now, Tony had never been much a fan of lemonade, but he'd always been a master at manipulating any situation to his advantage. So when the Norse god of mischief crashed through the roof of his newly rebuilt mansion and demanded a drink, Tony merely grinned and reached for the best of his scotch.

“Having a bad day, are we?” he asked as Loki levered himself out of the crater in the middle of the living room.

“Oh, you have no idea,” Loki grouched, taking the offered glass without so much as a thanks. He looked a bit worse for wear - not quite as bad as when the Hulk had used him to redecorate Tony's new penthouse, but it came in at a close second. He was covered in more grime than just from his fall through the roof, his skin was pale, and there was a disconcertingly large hole in the front of his armour.

Tony shrugged, shoved a bit of rubble off the couch and sat down with the StarkPad he'd been working on before the unexpected visitation.

“JARVIS,” he said offhandedly as he pulled the paperwork Pepper had wanted him to go through back onto his screen. “Call in a repair team, will you? The usual guys, they know the drill.”

“Yes, sir,” said JARVIS, causing Loki to jump and look at the roof. Tony might have laughed, had he seen it, but he was well aware that the best possible way he could put Loki at ease would be to ignore him. And sure enough, it only took a few minutes before Loki was on the other end of the dusty couch, pawing through a second screen of some kind that had been left on the arm of the chair. Tony trusted that JARVIS would watch what the god was searching and kept to his own work, not paying Loki even the slightest bit of attention at all.

Perhaps two hours of honestly comfortable silence passed before JARVIS suddenly broke it, turning on the television and directing Tony's attention to the news.

“It would seem that Mr Odinson is fighting forces from another world in London, Sir,” JARVIS explained.

“Oh good,” said Loki nonchalantly, not even looking up from his screen. “So he did make it out alive.”

Tony glanced across to Loki out of the corner of his eye, amused by the way he just seemed to exclude ease. He was looking a lot better than he had when he had arrived— his hair was still in disarray, but at some point it seemed that he had replaced his damaged leather armour with a simple green shirt, and the grime had disappeared. *Magic*, Tony thought in delight.

“So I guess this has something to do with your bad day?” Tony asked, and Loki shrugged.

“Mostly.”

Recognising that he wouldn’t get anything else, Tony gave a shrug of his own before swiping the paperwork from his tablet and bringing up SHIELD’s servers.

“All right, J, let’s see what we’ve got.”

Navigating SHIELD with his tablet was easy, and JARVIS split the screen on the television for a larger view, with the news report showing Thor blasting through tears in the sky above Greenwich taking up only half the space. Loki finally glanced up from whatever he was doing, his gaze tracing over Tony’s fast movements through the various folders and firewalls. Okay, perhaps Tony shouldn’t have been going through SHIELD while their most formidable opponent watched on, but he couldn’t bring himself to worry too much. He never had been entirely invested in SHIELD’s security - how could he be, when he accounted for roughly *most* of the breaches?

However, the search proved mostly useless; SHIELD seemed to have less of a clue of what was going on than Tony was able to deduce just by watching the news, although they had flagged a few reports regarding Erik Selvig running around Stonehenge.

“Guess Thor’s on his own, then,” Tony said, throwing the StarkPad down beside him and leaning back, content to simply watch.

“Are you not going to go and help him?” Tony turned to see Loki watching him curiously, his own StarkPad held loosely in his lap. “He is your teammate— or have the ‘world’s mightiest heroes’ disbanded?”

“We aren’t exactly close,” Tony admitted, ignoring the jibe. “But I’m not about to fly across to England when it looks like he’s handling it by himself, no. I’m more realistic than that.”

Loki hummed in what seemed to be agreement, and Tony turned back to the television. He was right— Thor was able to deal with the issue himself, and apart from a little property damage everything seemed peachy.

When the strange alien—

“Dark Elf,” Loki corrected.

—was sent back to wherever the hell he had come from by Selvig and Foster and whoever else Thor had in his little gang, Loki stood from the couch and brushed no-longer-existent dirt

from his clothes.

“I have something to attend to,” he said, answering Tony’s questioning gaze. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

Tony realised that he still didn’t know why Loki had appeared in the first place– his manner of entrance suggested it was an accident, but it was too big a coincidence for Loki to have accidentally ended up *here*. He didn’t think he would receive an answer if he tried, however.

“I don’t think I should ask,” Tony said instead, “But…”

“But you are still curious.” Loki grinned wide, glee and mischief radiating from him in equal measures. “I suppose I will show you.”

Loki’s form shimmered, his clothes smoothing into metal, a bright golden hue cutting across his body and replacing the green, and a gold patch covered his right eye. His hair straightened and lay flat, white bleeding from his scalp and then his cheeks until he had a full silver beard. He shrunk perhaps a foot and the extra bulk seemed to go to his shoulders, broadening out to create a far stockier frame.

Tony blinked, impressed by the show of magic but otherwise unmoved. “I have no idea who that is,” he admitted, and a smile pulled at the corners of the old man’s lips.

“Until next time, Anthony Stark,” he said, and then, in one final flare of green power, Loki disappeared.

“I probably should have stopped him, shouldn’t I?” Tony muttered, running a hand through his hair.

“Indeed, his use of another person’s face would suggest that he is not about to undertake something particularly noble, Sir,” JARVIS replied.

“Oh well,” Tony sighed. “He was perfectly civil while he was here. I can hardly say the same for the last super powered visitor I had.”

“At least the house, for the most part, is still standing.”

Tony decided to ignore the sass in JARVIS’ tone. “Yes,” he said, nodding. “You are completely right. This could have gone so much worse.”

Which was why, of course, Tony made the executive decision to not tell anyone about Loki’s visit. Not SHIELD, not any of the scattered Avengers, not Rhodey, and not even Pepper. He had JARVIS place an extra layer of encryption on the security footage, swore the AI to secrecy and then attempted to put the incident out of his mind.

On that front, however, he didn’t have much success.

He couldn’t put those few quiet hours on the couch out of his thoughts, unable stop his mind from churning over every moment, analysing the god’s every move. It was odd; while Loki was in the room Tony had felt relaxed, unthreatened despite the very real danger he knew was

present. He'd hardly spared Loki a glance until they'd started to talk about Thor, and that conversation had lasted only minutes. Why couldn't he just put it out of mind?

Maybe it was the fact that it was the first time Tony had seen Loki since they'd trussed him up and sent him back to Asgard for a trial. Maybe it was because, in the only two other interactions they'd had in the past, they'd been on opposite sides of a war, yet somehow they were able to feel utterly at ease in each other's presence. Maybe it was because the circumstances surrounding the visit were just so interesting.

Regardless, if there was one thing that Tony could not deny it was that he was *curious*, and he knew that if Loki showed up again, he wouldn't be kicking him out.



In the few moments Tony had spent with Thor after the Battle of New York, the Asgardian had taken the time to comment on how similar he thought Tony and Loki were. Since this was just after Loki had levelled a good half of Manhattan, Tony hadn't taken it well.

However, when Loki appeared in the middle of Tony's bathroom in full battle armour two weeks after his first visit and immediately began ranting about the Asgardian equivalent of a board meeting, Tony supposed he could see some similarities.

"It's *infuriating*," Loki snarled, pacing back and forth. Tony's bathroom was large by the standards of any ordinary person, but Loki was still able to clear the whole distance in only a few strides. "They argue back and forth over every tiny thing. They could not even agree on whether or not the shield around the city needed upgrading!" Loki threw his hands in the air and spun on his heel dramatically, stopping his pacing to glare at Tony expectantly. "Asgard was attacked less than half of one Midgardian month ago— surely it should be obvious, wouldn't you say, Stark?"

Tony nodded, unable to do much else while his mouth was full of toothpaste.

"The Dark Elves took our shield down in moments," Loki continued, and Tony kept nodding along, still brushing. He wasn't going to stop his routine just because Loki needed a rant— though he supposed he should be grateful that the trickster hadn't appeared in the bathroom when he'd been doing something else. "What if other beings come? What if next it is someone stronger, like the Chitauri, or Thanos? What then?"

Now *that* was interesting. Tony turned to the sink to rinse his mouth before finally engaging in the conversation.

"I thought I killed the Chitauri," he said.

"You killed a good portion of their army," Loki corrected, "but not all. And Thanos is not pleased that he failed to gain the Tesseract."

There was more there, but there was also a haunted darkness in Loki's downturned eyes that Tony both recognised and didn't quite like. And although he had never been one to spare someone's feelings in a quest for knowledge...

Nah, fuck it.

“What the hell is a Thanos?”

Loki’s gaze hardened. “Someone that you should pray you’ll never meet.”

And that, it seemed, was all that Loki was willing to say on the subject, but he was more than happy to keep on with the complaining about the trials of ruling a Realm.

“I suppose you should be glad that you didn’t manage to beat us, then,” Tony cut in when Loki paused for breath. They’d moved out of the bathroom during the rant, and Tony was perched on his bed, Loki back to pacing in front of him. “After all, I imagine humans are more difficult to rule than Asgardians.”

“Humans, at least, accept change,” Loki muttered. “But the Aesir live for millennia, and they are all nostalgic for their childhood even as the rest of the Realms move forward around them.”

“Yeah, that sounds rough,” Tony agreed, and when Loki turned away for his next lap of the room, he pulled out his phone.

Loki, unfortunately, noticed, and used that as something else to complain about.

“I’m not ignoring you,” Tony protested. “I’m just *hungry*. I haven’t had breakfast yet, and since I figured you were probably going to be here a while I was just ordering some pizza.”

Loki paused in his tirade, a different kind of frown creasing his brow. “What is this pizza?”

“Oh, man,” said Tony, breaking into a wide smile. “I’ll order a few more, shall I? This is going to be fun.”

And it *was*, because how often in this day and age do you get to watch someone try pizza for the first time? Loki, of course, declared that the greasy ‘cheese covered bread’ was disgusting, but he also ate three of them (pizzas, that is, not slices) so Tony counted it as a win. And besides, Tony decided he rather liked spending time with someone from another planet who didn’t know it usually wasn’t normal to order pizza for breakfast. He hated it when other people harped on to him about stuff like that. It had nothing to do with Tony enjoying the company, or anything. It was refreshing. That was all.

—•—

As time passed it became not unusual for Loki to turn up, most often appearing in the room that Tony occupied at the given time, but not infrequently Tony would simply walk into the living room or the kitchen to find the god making himself at home. Although, since the majority of those times occurred when Tony had been in the workshop, he thought it likely that Loki had appeared there and just left him to his work.

JARVIS never confirmed this, though— he seemed fond of Loki, and was quite happy to let the god come and go as he pleased. Tony might have found this worrying, had the fondness

not been returned tenfold– something he almost couldn't believe, until he saw the lengths Loki was willing to go to protect something he saw as his own.

It was a quiet Sunday evening. Tony and Loki had been sitting beside each other on the couch in the living room, both more in the middle than in their respective corners. Loki had his feet tucked under him and Tony had his legs flung over the armrest, so that they were both leaning in toward each other a little. Loki had turned up a few hours before, wearing what Tony figured to be Asgardian casual and claiming, as he often did, that he needed a break from the golden nightmare of ruling his kingdom– though Tony suspected that he also just enjoyed being able to simply look and act like himself. The TV was running in the background but neither of them were really paying attention, Tony with his usual pile of paperwork that he *didn't* forget about, thank you Pepper, and Loki with a huge leather bound tome he'd pulled out of thin air.

It was peaceful, it was - god forbid - relatively normal, until the lights flickered out and the electronics in the room went dark.

“Stark, stop this nonsense,” Loki said rather calmly. “I cannot read my book in this darkness.”

“That wasn't me,” Tony frowned. “JARVIS?” When there was no response, Tony pulled out his phone– but that, too, was dead.

“It's got to be a powerful EMP,” he said, thanking any powers that existed that he no longer had an arc reactor in his chest. When Loki tilted his head, he explained– “Electromagnetic pulse– wipes out electronics. We're under attack.”

To be honest, Tony was expecting Loki to just up and leave. He had no reason to stay, after all. It wasn't like they were friends - Tony had long since worked out that his house was acting as some kind of safe harbour, somewhere that Loki could be himself and rant and surf the internet without being interrupted by the responsibilities of ruling. He knew very well that the moment the place became unsafe or even just *boring* Loki would be gone for good.

But when Tony stood and looked out the windows and began poking at his wrists to see if the chips to summon the armour were still working, Loki stepped into place by his side, his Asgardian casual becoming full battle armour in a bright flash of green.

“I'll scout the perimeter,” Loki said, his voice lowered to a tight growl. “Go and get one of your suits, you are useless without them.”

Caught somewhere between insulted and touched that Loki was helping, Tony did as he was told and was heading for the workshop before Loki had teleported out. His shop was shielded far more than the rest of the house and the suits even more so, the casings around their reactors more protected than his ever was. As such, he was able to get into a suit quickly and with little trouble, and he immediately relaxed at the sound of JARVIS' voice.

“What's going on, J?” he asked, heading for the exit.

“Intruder detected on the eastern perimeter just before I lost contact with the security systems,” JARVIS responded.

“Only the one?”

“Just one heat signature Sir, though it is possible that there were others. The first seems to have deployed an EMP device immediately after my discovery of them.”

“All right. Let’s go and take a look outside, shall we?”

Tony hadn’t been sure what to expect– AIM was gone, Hammer was in jail, and he couldn’t think who else might want to try an EMP on his house, though there no doubt were others he’d pissed off at some point during his life. But he certainly had not expected to see a single person dressed in all black suspended in a field of green light over his driveway.

“Do not worry,” said Loki, appearing out of thin air in the middle of the drive with his arms crossed over his chest and a smirk firmly in place. “I knocked him out before he saw anything.”

The lack of a green flash at his appearance either meant that Loki had not teleported and therefore had the ability to become invisible, or that the usual green flash was only for theatrics. Unsure of which option he found the least creepy, Tony decided not to bring it up.

“Do you know who he is?” Tony asked, removing his helmet and landing on the ground beside the god.

“No,” Loki replied, his tone implying the silent *obviously, Stark*. “Do you?”

Tony was about to respond with the negative when he took note of what the intruder was wearing. All black and mostly skin tight, but the material looked both sturdy and flexible. Practical, on all counts. His boots were also sturdy and there were multiple holsters and pouches holding various weapons strapped all across his body. Tony recognised the style, the gear, the uniform– despite the lack of an insignia on the guy’s shoulder, it was painfully clear as to where he had come from. The ever so familiar gun resting at his right hip was a confirmation.

“Fury is going to pay for this,” Tony growled, and Loki glanced across in confusion.

“Fury? The one eyed man with the long coat?”

“That’s the one.”

“I thought you and he fought on the same side?”

“We did,” Tony said, his face twisted into a grimace. “But do not mistake that for us being friends. He doesn’t trust me and I sure as hell don’t trust him.”

“So what will you do?” Loki had a hungry look in his gaze, and Tony wondered if he wanted in on any revenge plans. Too bad there probably wouldn’t be any - this was no worse than anything Fury had done before, and fighting him would only make things worse.

Although, with the Norse god of *mischief* on hand the possibilities were probably endless.

“Find me some more proof, J,” Tony said.

“I will begin searching, Sir, but might I suggest you go straight to the source?” said JARVIS, using the suit’s speakers.

“I’ll do both,” Tony decided. “Maybe I’ll see if I can set Cap on him, too. That might be fun.”

“Good to have you back, JARVIS,” said Loki, sounding like he actually meant it.

“Thank you, Mr Liesmith,” JARVIS replied. “Though you realise that I was never truly gone— the electricity was cut out, but not I.”

“That does not matter— you were still attacked. Fix the problem, Stark,” Loki said. “Do not allow this to happen again.”

“Of course,” said Tony, insulted. “I don’t ever let anyone get to me the same way twice.”

“So why have you not tried any way of keeping *me* out?” Loki asked, beginning to grin. “I use the same method every time I enter your mansion.”

“JARVIS would let you in anyway,” Tony sighed, and JARVIS announced his agreement. Of course, Tony hadn’t actually considered some barrier to Loki’s teleportation, but he wasn’t about to say so. It made him feel rather dull.

“Especially after your help this evening, Mr Liesmith,” the AI added.

“Yeah, about that— why did you help me?” Tony asked. “Surely it wasn’t just because you like stealing my wifi.”

“JARVIS has been kind to me,” Loki said with a shrug.

“And what am I?” Tony replied. “Chopped liver?”

Loki frowned. “I imagine that your liver is not in the healthiest of states, but if it were chopped then you surely would be in a worse state than you are.”

“Whatever,” Tony sighed, just managing to hold back the laugh before gesturing to the still floating SHIELD agent. “Can you hold him here for a bit?” At Loki’s nod, he gripped the god’s arm and pulled him back towards the door. “Come on. Damaged livers aside, I think we both deserve a drink after this.”

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Due to the fact that advertising their new acquaintanceship would be a terrible idea, there was, sadly, no attack on the Triskelion. Or so Tony thought.

Fury, of course, had denied everything, and Tony instantly disbelieved him. But JARVIS could find nothing that constituted proof, Tony was left empty handed, and the agent was

sent back to the organisation to face internal consequences.

It wasn't long after, however, that Tony received a very angry phone call.

"Stark," Fury's voice came through low and dangerous. "If you do not stop this I will send more than just the one agent."

"So you admit it?" Tony asked gleefully.

"No," Fury snapped. "The guy was one of ours, but he was not ordered to attack you. Not by *us*, anyway, and this petty revenge is achieving nothing but angering every agent against any future cause you may have."

"I'm going to be honest with you here, Nick," Tony said. "I have absolutely no clue what you're talking about."

Fury didn't seem to believe Tony, either. "I know this is you, Stark," he snarled. "No one else would stoop to this level."

"Stoop to *what* level?"

There was an angry sigh, and then a small shuffling sound as if the phone were being moved, maybe held away from Fury's face. Now, Tony knew that SI had been contracted for SHIELD's non-combat tech, and he knew that the version of the StarkPhone that was supplied to their agents was one that both scattered the sound to make it almost impossible to eavesdrop and filtered away background noise— all for security and spying purposes, of course. Which is why it was so surprising that even with these fancy features Tony could quite clearly hear the unmistakable sound of Tom Jones' *'What's New Pussycat'*. For that to be possible, it must have been playing rather loudly.

"This is its seventh time through," Fury said. "Our top techs can't stop it and we're almost at the point of needing to evacuate the building— tensions are running high."

"Wow," said Tony, making sure his grin didn't escalate into something Fury would be able to hear. "Who knew defeating SHIELD would be so easy?"

"Shut it, Stark," Fury snapped. "Tell me how to fix this or come and do it yourself, I don't care either way. But if you don't then you had better believe that you'll have the entire might of SHIELD - a very *angry* SHIELD - on your ass from now until the end of motherfucking time!"

"Have you tried unplugging the speakers?" Tony asked.

There a deep intake of breath and so Tony braced himself for the onslaught, but Fury suddenly paused. If Tony listened hard, he could just hear the opening notes of *'It's Not Unusual.'*

"Oh, thank god," Fury muttered, his relief palpable.

Tony pressed his lips together, knowing exactly what the Triskelion would be subjected to next but under absolutely no inclination to disclose the information.

“Don’t think you’re off the hook, Stark,” Fury grumbled, and then the call disconnected.

Tony raised an eyebrow and stared expectantly at the nearest camera. “JARVIS,” he said slowly, drawing out the syllables. “Was this you?”

There was a pause.

“Mr Liesmith suggested the idea, Sir,” JARVIS admitted. “I chose the songs on the advice of the internet. Have I overstepped?”

Tony, filled with pride, could do little else but laugh.



Tony doesn’t sleep well very often, so when he was awoken by an almighty racket at an ungodly hour only a few days after the SHIELD incident he was not exactly pleased.

“LOKI!” he shouted (because who the hell else would it be), charging into the living room and not caring that he was wearing nothing but a tatty tank and his Hulk patterned boxers. “Do you *know* what time it is?!”

Everyone in the living room froze in place, Einherjar and trickster alike turning to face the angry and underdressed mortal in confusion. Tony used the moment of shocked calm to take stock of the room, his gaze flickering between all five occupants. Loki was perched on the couch in full battle armour, brandishing a huge golden spear at four Asgardian soldiers, who were standing in a loose formation in front of the couch and wielding weapons of their own.

“It’s too early for this,” Tony said, jabbing a finger in the direction of the besieged couch.

“It is seven in the morning, Stark,” said Loki, gesturing to the clock on the wall with his spear. “It is a perfectly respectable time for house calls.”

“It is *not*,” Tony replied. “And you lot—“ He gestured to the Einherjar, “—*what* do you think you are doing, barging into my house uninvited? Do you know who I am?”

“We are under orders to bring Prince Loki back to Asgard,” said one. “The Allfather demanded that—“

“I don’t care,” Tony snapped, crossing his arms. “This is my house.”

“This is a waste of time,” another soldier said, raising his sword and turning back to Loki, the others following his lead.

And Loki, true to form, disappeared.

“Oh,” said the first soldier.

“Will you leave *now*?” Tony asked.

“They won’t leave without me,” said Loki, materialising once again behind Tony.

With a sigh, Tony raised his right hand above his head in a silent request. The Asgardians frowned in confusion.

“Is this a Midgardian custom?” an Einherji asked as they readied their weapons towards Tony once again.

“No,” said Tony while Loki was fucking *giggling* behind him. “I am going kill you now.”

The Asgardians looked sceptical right until the moment a bright red gauntlet flew up from the stairs and slammed into Tony’s hand. A repulsor blast sheared through the air and missed the group by only a foot a second later, leaving a smoking crater in the ground not far from where Loki had landed several weeks before.

The soldiers jumped backwards, and one tripped over the couch, his heavy armour weighing him down so that he rolled onto his back, feet in the air.

“You are the Man of Iron, shield brother to Crown Prince Thor,” one of the soldiers gasped while Loki degenerated into full blown manic laughter and another soldier pulled his friend back to his feet, sporting the mother of all glares.

“And *you* are *leaving*,” Tony snarled.

“No, that course of action is not advisable,” Loki said gleefully, and without stepping out from around Tony he sent a wave of green magic toward the assembled soldiers. It passed through Tony harmlessly but it cut into the ground, raising the flooring and destroying the coffee table, tearing the couch to shreds and ripping chunks from the walls. The window behind the couch exploded outwards in a cascade of shattered glass, and the Einherjar went down among the carnage, (hopefully) unconscious.

Tony simply sighed, no longer able to muster shock at the sight of his destroyed living room. Honestly, it was just par for the course at this point.

Loki was giggling again as he danced past Tony to crouch down in the rubble beside each soldier, pressing a few fingers to their foreheads.

“Do not worry about retribution,” Loki said, not looking away from the downed soldiers as he continued whatever the hell he was doing, his crazed grin still in place. “They will not remember where I fled– they will remember nothing save the knowledge of what will happen should they come after me again.”

Well. At least the soldiers were still alive.

“I’m going to bed,” said Tony, turning away from the frankly disturbing scene. “JARVIS—“

“A van from the construction company is already on its way, Sir.”

“You deserve a pay rise. I should pay you. You’re the best.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Are you just going to leave me here, Stark?”

Tony turned back to see Loki standing in the middle of the destroyed living room, both the spear and the unconscious soldiers gone from sight.

“I don’t care what you do, just so long as you leave me alone for a few hours,” Tony retorted. Loki’s widening grin would probably give Tony cause for regret later, but at that point he honestly couldn’t bring himself to care. He was *tired*, and god help anyone else that got between Tony and his bed.



When Tony emerged a blissful three hours later, it was to the far more welcome sound of hammers and drills as workmen fixed the damage. Unlike before, Tony took the time to get changed before heading out to the living room, but he still found himself pausing as he entered, his eyes drawn to the scene in front of him.

“Mr Stark!” George, one of the workers who had fixed this part of the house several times now, strode forward with a sheaf of paper. “I apologise for waking you, I know that you usually don’t mind us coming in with permission from your AI, and your new PA told us that you wanted your sleep but JARVIS told us to come in—“

“It’s fine,” said Tony, his gaze still resting on the woman. She was standing in the middle of the room, her arms crossed over her smart black blazer and dark green dress, scrutinising every move the workers made with narrowed eyes. “Wait— my *PA*?”

George gestured helplessly to the woman. “She said you would be upset if we woke you.”

“Fix my house as well as you always do and I’ll let it slide,” Tony responded, finally tearing his eyes from the middle of the room to look to George. “Papers?”

Tony leaned against a wall to sign the stuff George pushed in front of him, only half paying attention as he scanned the contract. JARVIS would have told him if there was anything dodgy, anyway. As soon as it was done, he stuffed the paper back into George’s hands, strode across the room and stood in front of the dark haired woman, mirroring her pose.

She smirked at him, raising an eyebrow in what could only be construed as a challenge.

“What the hell are you doing?” Tony asked.

“I am ensuring that your house is properly fixed,” Loki sniffed, the haughty expression looking just at home on the newly feminine features as it did on the face Loki usually wore. “These mortals cannot be trusted to do an adequate job.”

Despite the residual annoyance for the disturbance earlier that morning, Tony’s lips began to quirk into a smile. “Are you trying to make up for it?”

“No. You should be aware by now that I am planning on spending some time here— and I will not have it looking like a battleground.”

“It *was* a battleground,” Tony snorted, and Loki rolled her eyes. “So this is purely selfish, then?”

“Of course. Now move, you are blocking my line of sight to the glazier.”

Laughing quietly, Tony retreated towards the workshop, deciding to leave the poor workers to their fate. But before he could get all the way, he was called back.

“Stark.” It was the uncharacteristic softness of the tone that had Tony turning more than the call itself, and when he did so it was to see that Loki had turned her back on the nervous glazier to follow him, her arm slightly raised as if she had been about to reach out. “Thank you,” she said, and Tony’s lips parted in shock.

“For what?” he asked.

“For standing against the Einherjar.”

Tony shrugged, and smiled. “It was purely selfish,” he said. “They were about to cut up my couch. I loved that couch.”

Loki looked as if she were about to respond, but then pressed her lips together and shook her head in amused exasperation.

“All right, Stark,” she said.

“You know, I call you by your first name,” Tony started, but paused halfway through the thought. “Do you have a last name? I suppose you don’t go by Odinson.”

“No.” Loki’s lips twisted into a broken imitation of her usual smirk. “I am partial to Liesmith, as JARVIS is already aware.”

Tony frowned. “Really? I thought he took that from the legends... I thought you would prefer the other one.”

“It may have started as an insult, but I have claimed it for my own. I have moulded Liesmith into a name I can be proud of.” Loki’s next smile was more genuine. “I am also rather fond of Skywalker, but JARVIS informed me that would not be likely to go over well in this Realm.”

“Yeah,” Tony snorted. “That’s probably true.”

“Truly, though,” Loki said when Tony turned to leave again. “Thank you... Anthony.”

When Tony emerged from the workshop several hours later, it was to find the living room repaired and his couch back intact. He frowned as he leaned over it, confused - it wasn’t a new couch, it was definitely the old one with the grease stain on the left armrest that had always annoyed Pepper. But it had been torn apart by Loki’s magic, there was no way George and his crew could have saved it even if they were into furniture repairs.

As he reached the only possible conclusion, Tony caught himself sporting a fond smile.

Selfish, my ass. And yeah, okay. That probably went for the both of them.

The Winter Squatter

Chapter Summary

“Stark,” Loki said, appearing in the middle of the kitchen so close to Tony that he slopped coffee down his shirt. “I have decided that I am going to live here.”

Tony just laughed, shook his head, and went to get more coffee.

It was a week after the Einherjar incident and Tony was drunk, wandering in from some benefit Pepper had made him go to. He'd spent the night smoozing up to other rich people and manipulating them into donating ungodly amounts of money to support kids in Africa or cancer research or animal welfare or something, and he could only cope with so much dull conversation while sober. He'd had Happy drive him home at Pepper's first disappointed glance and ambled into his kitchen for a coffee only to find the god of mischief leaning against the counter, an actual fucking cauldron simmering on the stove like something out of Harry Potter. If that wasn't enough, scattered across the bench there were bits of plants and jars full of gross things and sections of animals that Tony couldn't have put a name to if he'd tried. It was not a nice sight, and it was most *certainly* not hygienic.

Tony closed his eyes and counted to five, but when he opened them nothing had changed.

“Rough night?” Loki asked, his usual smirk in place.

It was all Tony could do to gesture at the mess on his counter, frown, and just ask— “Why?”

“The majority of the Nine do not take kindly to this sort of magic,” Loki said, his eyes glancing to the quietly bubbling cauldron before looking back to Tony. “I needed to go elsewhere.”

“And ‘elsewhere’ has to be my kitchen?” Tony asked.

“Well, the sorcerers that Midgard *does* have would probably frown upon this as well, but I doubt that you are hiding any sorcerers in your closet,” Loki replied. Then he frowned. “You aren't, are you?”

“How is this my life?” Tony groaned, rubbing his hands over his face in an attempt to wake himself up from whatever dream he'd wandered into. A god in his kitchen, cooking up spells on his stove because they were too evil for the eternal city of gold? Certainly not what he'd signed up for when he announced his identity as Iron Man to the world.

“The potion is not *evil*,” Loki said, rolling his eyes, clearly guessing Tony's thoughts from his expression. “It is simply frowned upon in Asgard and her ally realms because it involves the use of blood.”

“Oh, right,” said Tony. “Yeah, that makes me feel so much better.”

“Good.” Loki smiled almost mockingly. “I will continue, then.”

When Loki turned to his cauldron Tony was left staring awkwardly at his back, debating the pros and cons of simply leaving the trickster to it. After all, he was tired, still a bit drunk, and Loki probably wasn't going to destroy the house again. On the other hand, Tony really, *really* wanted that coffee.

Decision made, he headed for the coffee machine, unheeding of how close it brought him to the god.

“So what does the spell do?” Tony asked while the machine heated up, leaning back against the counter in an echo of the pose Loki had held when Tony had entered the kitchen. He didn't expect an answer - magicians never give away their secrets, and all that - but Loki glanced up to Tony, a smile that Tony didn't think he had yet seen brightening his features. It seemed more real than any of the smirks or the manic grins, and Tony thought it suited him.

“It is a cloaking spell,” Loki said, and Tony realised then— that was the same tone of voice he used himself when someone cared enough to ask him about his projects.

“It's to hide you? So the Asgardians can't follow you again like they did last week?” Tony deduced.

Loki nodded. “Correct. I can already hide myself from Heimdall, but this will enhance my own protections to the extent that even Odin, with all the power of Hlidskjalf, will not be able to find me.”

Tony had no idea what a hildsky-whatever was, but he thought he got the general gist. “That's awesome.”

“Yes,” said Loki, returning to his work but not before gifting Tony another of those genuine smiles. “It is.”

Tony had drunk half of his strong and steaming mug of caffeine before he noticed the discrepancy.

“Hang on,” he said, frowning slightly, and Loki glanced back once again. “Aren't you pretending to be Odin right now?”

Loki shook his head and laughed softly. “Did you miss the Einherjar that chased me into your living room?” he asked. “I understand that you were tired at the time, but I had not thought it something easy to forget.”

“I thought maybe they'd just caught you unawares, or that you were using them as a distraction or something,” Tony admitted. “You mean they found out?”

“Thor came home earlier than expected,” Loki explained. “I suppose that he has finally learned how to recognise one of my illusions - or perhaps it is just that he knows Odin so well, and I was unable to exactly replicate the way Odin speaks to him. Regardless, he knew

that with Gungnir at my command and with the whole of Asgard believing I was Odin he could not challenge me- but he *could* find the true Odin where I had left him and restore his memories.” Loki sighed in annoyance. “I had no choice but to leave, then, and Odin ordered those soldiers to pursue.”

“Gungnir is the spear, right?” Tony asked, his nose wrinkled as he tried to sort through his memories of Thor’s ramblings. It had been over a year, but Tony *had* been paying attention at the time.

“Yes. I returned it with the unconscious Einherjar in the hopes that it would be one less reason for Odin to search for me. Unfortunately, one less does not mean there are not many others.”

“So... you’re hiding,” Tony said.

“You knew that already.”

“Yes,” Tony admitted. “But I guess I thought you had more of a plan than that.”

“In this instance, there is little I can do but hide.” Loki turned away from Tony, his shoulders tense as he stirred the bubbling mixture on the stove. “The only reason why I was not executed at my last trial was that my mother asked for it. If Odin recaptures me... there will be no such mercy ever again.”

The pain in Loki’s voice made the implication clear. Tony knew that Loki wouldn’t want his pity, knew it just as much from experience as he did from just *knowing* the god as a person. So Tony didn’t speak another word, and instead put down his almost empty mug and placed a hand on Loki’s shoulder in support, expecting for it to be shrugged off but wanting to show Loki the kindness regardless. Once again acting contrary to expectations, however, Loki relaxed at the touch, leaning back seemingly subconsciously so that the length of their bodies were almost touching.

“Thank you,” Loki whispered. “I know I have said that to you before, but– anyone else would have thrown me out long ago, if not arrested or killed me on sight.”

“I’m not anyone else,” Tony said firmly.

Loki inclined his head. “I have come to realise that.”

And maybe it was the drink, or magic fumes from the cauldron, or the soft comfort he always seemed to feel when Loki was around. Or maybe it was the simple fact that Tony had grown fond of him, but Tony knew that in that moment all he wanted was for Loki to not have to worry about being arrested or killed. For Loki to have somewhere where he could feel *safe*– because Tony knew what a rare thing that was, and he was fairly certain that Loki hadn’t had it in a long time.

“You know,” Tony said, “I never actually officially invited you in here. You just kind of started showing up.”

“You’ve never complained,” Loki pointed out, and okay that wasn’t *strictly* true - the Einherjar incident, for one - but yeah, he did have a point. “And you admitted yourself that you wouldn’t try and stop me from coming here.”

“I said that I wouldn’t only because JARVIS would disagree, and we all know who’s *really* in charge around here,” Tony argued. “But whatever, that’s not what I’m getting at— all I’m trying to say is that it’s about time I extend a formal invitation.”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “I am not a vampire, Stark.”

Tony snorted. “Obviously, seeing as you keep showing up *uninvited*. But that’s the point. You are now. Invited, that is.”

While it was clear that Loki did understand what Tony was saying, he seemed to be reluctant to believe it if the sceptical frown on his face was anything to go by.

“I’m giving you permission to be here,” Tony spelt out. “Come on, Reindeer Games - I know it doesn’t really mean anything since you just pop in and out as you wish, but I want you to know that you’re not just turning up. You’re welcome here.”

“You really *aren’t* like anyone else,” Loki said after a short pause, his eyes now wide and shining.

“Definitely one of a kind, babe,” Tony said with a wink, leaning back against the counter and—

And managing to simultaneously knock the rest of his coffee onto his expensive shoes and plant his hand in something gooey and gross and possibly still alive. So he yelped and did what any sane person would in that situation— he wiped his hand on his jacket. His expensive, designer tux jacket.

Damn.

“We will never speak of this again,” Tony said firmly, glaring at the snickering god.

“Of course,” said Loki, his gaze just glittering with the promise of future chaos. “Never.”

—•—

It was only the next morning when Tony woke with a headache and perfect clarity of memory that he truly realised the implications of what he had done, and, after a quick stop off at the trusty coffee machine, headed straight down to his workshop. Because if Loki was going to have the run of the place then Tony was damn well going to make the guy act just a little more civilised.

“I’ve got a present for you,” Tony said without hesitation when Loki shimmered into existence in the middle of the workshop that afternoon.

“Oh?” Loki moved around the benches to stand by Tony’s side, his eyes alight with curiosity.

“It’s a brand new model,” Tony explained, pulling out the StarkPhone he had whipped up. “That is, the base prototype hasn’t been released yet, and I’ve added on extras to this one. It’s connected to SI satellites and will work anywhere on Earth. It’s got extra memory and the highest tech camera available so you *will* be taking space photos for me. It’s also—“

“Primitive,” said Loki, plucking the device from Tony’s grasp and turning it over in his hands. “Is this really the best Midgard can offer in terms of communication?”

Tony huffed. “Well, this is a first for me, though I suppose I should have guessed that you would have seen more advanced stuff in space or whatever. But trust me, this is *far* beyond anything else on Earth.”

Loki’s gaze passed over Tony’s earnest expression before nodding once. “Very well. But it is useless in it’s current form.”

Wanting to protest against at once again being called useless, Tony began to speak— but cut himself off as Loki waved his hand over the phone.

“There,” said Loki. “Now we should be able to contact each other between Realms.”

“You can do that?” Tony asked, gaping. “*How?* What the hell did you do to my apparently useless creation?”

Loki’s gaze sharpened. “I do not mean to belittle your talents,” he said. “Some of your creations are beyond anything I have come across in any of the Realms. JARVIS, for example— you have created a living being from nothing. Never have I seen anything like it. The phone, however... I believe that were your attentions not drawn elsewhere, such as to your suits of armour, you would have the time to create something far more advanced.”

“Oh,” said Tony, almost touched but not entirely sure whether he should be. “Thanks, I guess? But seriously, answer the question. How did you do that? Will you get my messages or will it only be one way, even though my phone hasn’t been magicked? Did you just merge my tech with your magic— how the hell does that even *work?*”

Loki smiled wide and bright, settled into a spare chair beside the inventor, and explained.

After that, Loki didn’t always call before showing up, but Tony had somewhat accepted that Loki used his house as refuge. Sometimes, he *couldn’t* call. But that was okay, because he always, always picked up, including one memorable time when Tony was fairly certain Loki had been in the middle of a fight and convinced his opponents to allow him a time out to talk to his friend.

And wasn’t that just the oddest thing? Tony’s experiences with friends were few and varied, but if that wasn’t what he and Loki were then everyone who had ever penned a description of the phenomenon had lied.

Friends. Huh.

But it felt right, easy, comfortable, and Tony knew that while he never could have seen it coming, he never would change it for the world.



When Nick Fury died, Tony was in a meeting. It seemed so mundane, that meeting— stocks and shareholders and marketing for the newest products about to hit the shelves. It was all normal stuff, simple, and dreadfully boring. When Tony's phone had gone off, he'd checked it under the table in case it was a video of a bilgesnipe or something from Loki— but what he saw was a Mauve Alert from JARVIS, and he had immediately excused himself despite Pepper's protest. JARVIS briefed him in the car, and by the time Tony reached his workshop he was still reeling but had managed to move into the second stage of grief.

Because he might not have been exactly *close* with Fury, but if someone had taken him out— it was quite possible that the world was at stake.

“Sir, there is something strange happening on SHIELD's servers,” said JARVIS, throwing up some new information on the nearest screen. “It appears that it has always been there, under the surface, but these files and protocols are suddenly coming into effect and as such have become more difficult to hide, easy to access.”

Tony glanced at the information JARVIS was displaying on his screen, and then he swore.

“I think we're going to need some back up,” Tony snarled. “Call Reindeer Games for me, will you?”

“What?” Loki answered, impatient as always.

“I need your help.”

“Now?” Loki groaned. “I'm in Alfheim, Stark, it's a long journey—“

“Yes,” said Tony. “Now.”

He didn't wait for Loki to continue to complain, gesturing for JARVIS to end the call and turning back to the computer which he had never truly pulled his attention from.

“Oh look,” said Tony, gesturing to small piece of information JARVIS had flagged and that he probably would have looked past otherwise. “Fury *was* telling the truth when he said he didn't send that agent to EMP us.”

“It would seem that they were trying to gain information on you, Sir,” JARVIS replied. “Trying to work out how to get around me so that they might steal your inventions.”

“And that was never going to work,” said Loki, appearing in a shower of green and stepping through the workshop, giving Dummy a small pat on the way over. “I would never let them get through to you, JARVIS.”

“Hey,” Tony greeted. “Thanks for coming.”

“Your world experiences crises often,” Loki said, leaning over Tony’s shoulder to examine what he was doing.

“Tell me about it,” Tony muttered. “I suppose that’s what comes from our short lifespans.”

“Hmm.” Loki’s breath whispered over Tony’s ear, and he shuddered slightly, realising just how close the god was even as he leaned closer still, pointing with a finger to one of the screens. “What is *that*?”

“Project Insight,” Tony replied, keeping his voice steady despite the contrast of his anger and the warmth he felt as Loki pulled his hand back and rested it on Tony’s shoulder, effectively draping his arm around Tony’s neck. “SHIELD called me in as a consultant, asked me to help them design repulsor engines for their helicarriers. After my *intimate* experience with their last model and after they promised to actually cough up the costs I agreed. But I didn’t know they were making more than one, and I didn’t know that they’d be using it for *this*.”

As Tony explained exactly what he’d managed to find by digging through SHIELD and *fucking* HYDRA files, Loki’s eyes grew progressively darker.

“So they have been hiding under the guise of protecting this world,” Loki summarised, his lips twisting in distaste. “Were they not such cockroaches, I would almost approve.”

“I’ve always thought the survivability of cockroaches to be admirable,” Tony admitted, and he could tell that Loki shrugged from the movement against his own shoulder.

“It does not matter. They have threatened you, and so they will never curry my favour.”

Tony looked up, surprised.

“That is why you asked for my help, is it not?” Loki asked. “You are a target of this ‘Insight’, and I am here to ensure that you do not meet your end through something so dishonourable as a mathematical algorithm.”

“I could have just wanted the company,” Tony replied, but the defence was weak and they both knew it.

Loki stayed pressed to Tony’s side as they went through what information they could, though despite the sudden info-dump when HYDRA came into the open, it was all rather murky. Still, they were able to muddle through and work out what had happened. Tony managed to find some briefing documents and dug through SHIELD/HYDRA’s security footage, and JARVIS pulled up a newsfeed. With the all info they could hardly miss the fact that at some point during the whole mess, Captain America had been declared a criminal.

Loki didn’t say anything, but the curious stare was so obvious that he might as well have.

“If Cap asks me for help, then I will be more than happy to give him assistance,” Tony explained. “I doubt he will, though, I know him. And if I go and offer, he’ll think I’m working with HYDRA.”

Loki smiled ruefully. “Sometimes, just because someone does not ask for help does not mean that they do not need it.” The irony of the fact that it was *Loki* who was talking to him about helping people was not lost on Tony.

“I know,” he snapped. Loki looked a little taken aback, so Tony sighed and reminded himself that it wasn’t Loki he was mad at. “Sorry. That was uncalled for. But seriously, there’s a reason I wasn’t in on Fury’s secret emergency plans— they hide it well, but deep down they’re all just waiting for me to go off the deep end, and to be honest? I don’t particularly blame them. Cap’s smart and he can usually see the best in people, but even he seems to... I just mean that if I call, he’ll be suspicious. I have to wait for him to come to me.”

Tony had always been horrible at being patient, especially when people were in danger. But he knew his words were true— if he tried to help now, he may only serve as a distraction for Steve and make things worse.

So he waited.

But no call came and when the helicarriers fell from the sky, Tony watched from the safety of his couch in Malibu, a protective shield shimmering around the mansion. They had moved from the workshop when Tony had confirmed beyond doubts that there was nothing he could do from afar. Tony had fallen onto the couch first, exhausted, and then Loki had sprawled across on the other side, his feet landing in Tony’s lap. Tony hadn’t been able to bring himself to complain, instead curling his hands over Loki’s calf and resting back into the pillows, perfectly comfortable where he was. And there they had stayed, watching the whole debacle play out.

“It would seem that you were not needed, after all,” said Loki, his head tilting as he considered the visual of flaming machines crashing into the Potomac. “They do go down ever so prettily, don’t they? It’s almost a shame that you stopped the first one from crashing. The Captain should be commended— destroying three at once is quite the accomplishment.”

“Rogers *had* help,” Tony pointed out. “Romanov was there.”

“Ah yes, the spider,” said Loki. “I would imagine you will be receiving a call soon, even if you did not for this.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “What makes you say that?”

Loki smirked. “I know what I would do if I were in Agent Romanov’s position.”

“And what’s that?”

“Oh, I do not think she would do the same as I,” Loki said with a shrug. “She is, after all, on the side of the heroes.”

“You know, with her, I’m never one hundred per cent sure,” Tony admitted. “But you haven’t answered my question.”

“SHIELD is rotten to the core— rotten from the inside out. In a situation such as this you can’t simply cut it out, the whole organisation needs to go. I believe Romanov will know that, and the Captain, too. He seems to have a proper head on his shoulders. But while I would make sure that every agent - *every agent* - is eliminated, I believe they would take a different approach.”

“Cap will,” Tony snorted. “Again, I’m not too sure about Natasha. She stabbed me in the neck once.”

“She *what?*”

“It’s fine, she was saving my life. I’m over it.”

Loki frowned like he didn’t quite believe that, but carried on regardless. “She will likely find some other way to ensure that the organisation can never again see the light of day.”

“And as good as Cap is, he’ll never settle for anything less than total annihilation,” Tony agreed. “He’s already sacrificed himself to destroy HYDRA once. He’ll do anything to ensure that this time, they stay down.”

“Anything?” Loki asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“What I would most want to know,” said Loki, “Is what will happen to your team now that SHIELD is gone. They brought you together.”

“And look how well that turned out,” Tony replied.

“You may have drifted apart, but with SHIELD gone you *know* the others will see the benefit of joining back together.” Loki smiled. “Hence... I would be expecting a phone call. Even if they do not trust you— they are going to need funds. I have learned enough about this world to know that is how things work.”

“If it’s money that they’re after, they won’t call for a while. Rogers wouldn’t even stay in the Tower, thinking it was charity.”

“We have time, then,” Loki said, his voice unusually quiet. He didn’t specify what they had time for, and he turned his head back to the screens, signifying that he was done with the conversation. He didn’t change positions, though— if anything, he leaned further into the couch, his legs shifting to lay even more pressure on Tony’s lap. Tony, still itching to ask but knowing Loki well enough by now to recognise that would only result in the god pulling away, followed his lead with a soft smile.



The day that Tony came up from the workshop to find Loki asleep on the couch was a bit of a surprise, and Tony couldn’t help but stare. The god didn’t look peaceful— there was a slight crease on his brow and a pinch to his lips, like he was still thinking and plotting even while unconscious. But he was sprawled across the furniture in a position that suggested he had

simply fallen there and had lacked the energy to move further, drifting off where he landed. His hair was in disarray and spread across the armrest where his head lay, and he still wore his leather clothing, heavy boots and all. The sight was odd and yet organic all at once, and Tony found himself taking a step closer. It was nice, in a way, to see that even Loki could end up in such a state. It made him seem more... genuine.

But there was no way that was comfortable.

Tony hesitated, more because he didn't want to interrupt what was clearly needed rest than for any other reason, but he knew from experience that sleeping on that couch only ever resulted in a morning of feeling even worse.

"Loki," Tony said, moving to the couch. Then, when he had no response, he tried again, louder this time. "Loki!" Still nothing. Keeping his movements slow and careful, Tony reached out to touch his shoulder, preparing to jump back as he was well aware of the dangers of trying to wake someone with as many bad experiences as Loki.

His caution was unnecessary, however, as Loki woke slowly with a groan.

"Go 'way, Thor," he mumbled, his left arm waving sluggishly, and Tony smiled.

"Not Thor," he said. "Come on, Reindeer Games, I know you're a god and all but I'm sure you'll still get a crick in your neck if you stay here."

One of Loki's green eyes opened for a moment, then it slid shut with another groan. "Anthony?"

"That's me. Now up, come on, I'm not kidding."

Loki sat up slowly, blinking as he did so, looking around like he wasn't sure of where he was. "You said it was all right for me to be here," he said drowsily.

"It is," Tony agreed. "But if you're going to sleep, you're going to do so in a bed."

Getting Loki to one of the spare rooms was difficult, but not impossible. The trickster was clearly utterly exhausted, having difficulty getting one foot in front of the other. He slung an arm over Tony's shoulders and leaned against him heavily—very heavily, considering how many layers of clothes he was wearing. But they managed, and soon Loki was falling roughly on top of the covers, almost dragging Tony down with him.

"Are you going to take your boots off at least?" Tony asked, and without even moving Loki shimmered green, the leather replaced with soft cotton.

"Thank you, Anthony," Loki mumbled, and Tony wondered if maybe that was becoming a pattern. "Thank you for being my friend."

"My pleasure," Tony replied, running a hand through Loki's hair. Loki sighed and leaned into the touch, already drifting away. He looked calm, like this. Peaceful. His frown from earlier was gone, replaced by a tiny smile as Tony continued his movements.

And if Tony leaned down to press a kiss to Loki's cheek— well, no one would ever know, would they?



Tony *thinks* that Loki stayed for the entirety of that night, if only because of the incident the following morning.

“Stark,” Loki had said, appearing in the middle of the kitchen so close to Tony that he slopped coffee down his shirt. “I have decided that I am going to live here.”

Tony just laughed, shook his head, and went to get more coffee.

“Don't just ignore me, Stark,” Loki whined, his footsteps alerting Tony to the fact that he was being followed.

“I didn't think that anything you said required a response,” Tony said, refilling his mug from the still warm pot before turning to smile at the pouting god. “Except, perhaps, the ‘Stark’ thing. We've talked about this.”

“*Anthony.*”

Tony knew Loki was just trying to be contrary and irritating with the name because that's what Loki does, but he had been finding that he didn't really mind it.

“It is quiet here,” Loki started when it became clear that Tony wasn't going to respond. “Most of the universe is aware of my feud with the Avengers and near everyone in this Realm believes me to be imprisoned on Asgard. No one will search me out, here. It is also comfortable and you have more space than you need, and JARVIS is my friend, and I am not going to just let you—“

“Loki,” Tony broke in with a chuckle. “Stop. You know you practically live here already.”

Loki huffed, affronted. “I do not. This is your home.”

“Yes,” Tony agreed. “But that doesn't change the fact that you're here more often than not lately, that you have your own room, that your books seem to be breeding in the study, *and* that my pantry is full of weird ass potions ingredients— and honestly, we need to talk about that because that shit is nasty.”

“It's not nasty, it's magic,” Loki huffed.

“Yes, and it's not happening in my kitchen any more. I'll put a bench aside for you in the workshop, or something. Maybe a few benches.”

Loki blinked in surprise. “You would let me have space in your workshop?”

“Yeah,” Tony shrugged. “You're in there enough anyway, I guess at least this way you'll have something to do other than staring over my shoulder.”

Tony knew he had made the correct decision purely by the look of awe that crossed Loki's face. Anyone else might have complained about the noise, or the mess, or the constant presence of the bots. Bruce had, when Tony had offered back in New York— which was fine, he had the space in the Tower for the separate lab. But Loki seemed to just *get it*, seemed to know how important a step this was. Because this was more than Tony offering a place in his house. This was Tony offering a place in his *life*.

There was a shift in the air that was almost tangible, and Loki's eyes were still soft as he stepped forward, raising his hand. Tony made sure to hold himself very still when Loki's fingers brushed his cheek, almost afraid that any movement would shatter the soft atmosphere and send Loki running.

It wasn't awkward, like Tony thought it probably would have been with anyone else— like he knew it had been with Pepper. He was perfectly okay with standing there silently, close enough that he could pick out the differing shades of green in Loki's eyes while the god continued to caress his cheek. But then Loki leaned in, and Tony was no longer content with standing still.

Despite the calm atmosphere the kiss wasn't sweet, not like first kisses tend to be. It was fast and raw and unguarded, it was tongues and teeth and almost violent as they pulled each other closer and battled for dominance. And honestly, had it been any other way it wouldn't have felt real, because this was just the way Tony and Loki worked. Sure, they'd had their moments of calm, but they were both too volatile for any of that to last long.

Tony pulled away first, his breathing heavy, but Loki didn't allow him to go far. The god's arms tightened where they had come to rest around Tony's waist, and he pressed his lips to Tony's throat.

"Is this okay?" Loki asked, his voice little more than a breathless exhale.

"Yeah," Tony grinned, moving just enough so that he could press their lips back together for a moment. "This is more than okay."

The spare bed, in the end, remained exactly that, standing empty every night thereafter.



Loki, as per *annoyingly* usual, turned out to be right. Steve wanted Tony to head back to New York, and thus Tony wanted to throw something heavy at Steve's head. Okay, that was probably impossible without actually being in Steve's vicinity, but maybe he could ask JARVIS to do it? JARVIS could pilot an Iron Man suit and throw something that way, or he could forgo that entirely and just use one of the Tower's defence mechanisms—

Because, yes. Captain America, Steve Rogers, the man who had oh so *graciously* declined Tony's offer of food and board in favour of SHIELD had changed his mind and demanded everyone return to the place where Tony had experienced his worst nightmares. And *come on*, for once in his life Tony was actually in an okay place. Sure, he had building contractors on speed dial and his pantry was still full of stuff that looked like it belonged in a Hogwarts' dungeon but he was *happy*. For once in his life Tony was actually, truly happy, and Steve

wanted to ruin it all just because the fall of SHIELD had obliterated his chances of a steady, non-dancing-monkey pay check and he'd decided that Tony would be his next best chance at a hot meal.

Okay, so maybe that wasn't quite fair. But Tony'd had it up to here with bad timing and things that kept trying to get between him and whatever brightness he could find in his life, and he just wasn't going to put up with it.

"You don't need me yet," Tony argued. "You guys can hold the fort out there, I'll stay here. I'm needed at SI, and our headquarters are still in LA. You know that you guys can stay in the Tower as long as you need, and I'll head back east if you find something."

"Doctor Banner could use your help," Steve replied, and Tony groaned because that was *not fair*.

"Bruce can manage," Tony said, though yeah, okay, he was tempted because Bruce and *science* were just a match made in heaven.

"He asked for you," Steve tried.

"He is perfectly capable of tracking down that sceptre, he has all the data from when we had it on the helicarrier. He just needs to adjust the algorithm we used to track the Tesseract for the sceptre's trace radiation and then he's golden."

"Tony, come on," said Steve. "You know SHIELD is gone, and you've seen what the sceptre can do. We can't leave it in HYDRA's hands. We need to stand together on this."

"I'm not saying I won't help," Tony said. "Just... I need some time, okay? Call me when you find it and I'll be out there in a second, but there's nothing I can do over there right now that I can't from here. I have things I need to be doing in Malibu— I *can't* leave right now."

There was a promising pause on the other end of the line.

"I swear, the moment you need me I'll be there." Tony let his voice lower, going in for the kill. "Please, Steve."

Steve sighed. "All right, Tony, but you sure as hell had better answer your phone when I call."

"Have you ever known me to dodge your calls, Cap?" Tony couldn't resist saying, and Steve sighed again, this time with far more exasperation.

"That was skilful," Loki said as the call disconnected, sitting up from where he had been leaning against Tony's side.

"Coming from you, I suppose that means a lot," Tony replied, before leaning over to kiss Loki's smiling lips. Because yeah, he could do that now.

"Don't grow cocky, Stark," Loki said with a smirk.

“Please. I think that ship has sailed.”



Their grace period was longer than expected, stretching from weeks to months. Steve kept Tony updated with regular calls on Bruce’s progress with the algorithm— progress which had been very slow. HYDRA, it would seem, had been moving the sceptre around, leaving a scattering of breadcrumbs but no solid trail to follow. Tony kept to his promise and helped where he could, such as giving the Avengers access to SI satellites to increase the power of Bruce’s search, and building a legion of drones which were far more high tech than the ones Hammer had presented that the Stark Expo all those years ago. They were completely operated by JARVIS, worked brilliantly as scouts and were invaluable in evacuations, but even if Tony made a hundred they would never be enough to scour the whole globe. In short, even with the combined scientific genius of Tony Stark and Bruce Banner working against them, HYDRA managed to keep the sceptre shielded from detection.

Fortunately, however, the Avengers did not rely solely on science.

Steve had sent a message via JARVIS to let Tony know that a member of the team would be over to pick him up, and really, from that alone he should have been prepared. Stupidly, he’d expected Natasha or Clint in a high-speed quinjet. He should have known that if they were going to get him to fly over, they’d have just let him use his suit. Apparently, that wasn’t going to be fast enough.

Normally there wouldn’t have been a problem, but Tony was talking to Loki in the kitchen, once again trying to convince him to move his suction packed animal organs somewhere other than the fridge when there was a sudden blast in the driveway and the windows lit up with the colours of the rainbow.

“Sir,” said JARVIS worriedly. “Mr Odinson is outside.”

There was a sudden squeak, and when Tony turned to laugh at Loki it was to see that the trickster had vanished.

Sitting in the middle of the floor, in the exact spot where Loki had been standing moments before, was a small potted palm.

Tony couldn’t help it. “Seriously?” he giggled, his cheeks almost aching from the size of his smile. The leaves of the plant shuddered a little, and Tony got the distinct impression that it was glaring at him. Thankfully, Tony was given the perfect opportunity to turn away, as loud footsteps heralded Thor’s arrival.

“Man of Iron!” Thor exclaimed. “It is good to see you!”

“You too, Thor,” said Tony, smiling brightly as he placed himself firmly between the god and the plant in the middle of the kitchen floor. “What’s the occasion? Steve didn’t give any details.”

“Joyous news,” Thor replied. “I have had word from Heimdall— he has seen Loki’s sceptre.”

“Really?” Tony asked, unable to stop his eyes from darting to the pot plant for a moment. “Where?”

“He knows that it is still on Midgard,” Thor replied. When Tony raised an eyebrow, he added sheepishly— “The magic of the weapon is powerful enough to distort even Heimdall’s gaze. But he also knows that it is somewhere in the continent of Europe.”

Tony sighed. “Well, I suppose narrowing it down to approximately a quarter of the world’s countries is closer than we were before. Cap is still working with Romanov to find locations of HYDRA bases, though I thought Bruce—“

“Banner believes he can narrow down the search area,” said Thor. “The Captain has requested that you return with me to Avengers Tower.”

“Damn,” Tony sighed. “All right. I suppose I don’t have a choice. Do I have time to pack, though?”

“I will wait,” Thor replied. “Heimdall will be able to get us to New York whenever you are ready. Banner will be able to manage for a few more—“ Thor stopped, his gaze caught on the palm in the middle of the room. He stared, for a moment, before shaking his head and continuing. “They will be fine for a while.”

“You can wait in the living room,” Tony said, gesturing to the door. When Thor didn’t move, Tony prompted— “Thor?”

“Is it a custom to have a plant in your kitchen?” Thor asked instead of moving.

“No,” Tony admitted. “They don’t in the Tower, do they? They had better not.”

“We do not,” Thor replied. “But then why...?”

“Oh, this old thing?” Tony asked, waving a dismissive hand at the plant. “It was a gift. I would have shoved it somewhere out of the way but I don’t want to insult anyone, you know?”

The plant bristled in irritation, and Thor’s gaze tracked toward it again.

“I put it here so that it was underfoot,” Tony said quickly, “so that I wouldn’t forget to put it elsewhere, you know?”

Thor’s frown indicated that he didn’t, in fact, know.

“Go on, why don’t you make yourself comfortable on the couch? And try not to destroy it, yeah? It’s had a hard life.”

Thor allowed himself to be showed out of the kitchen, not quite listening to Tony’s excuse of wanting to make a coffee before he began to pack but not questioning any further regardless.

“You couldn’t have turned into something else?” Tony asked, turning back to face Loki.

“I’ll admit that transformation was rushed,” said Loki, looking himself again and stretching his limbs.

“I’ll say.”

“Stark,” Loki growled, his eyes narrowing.

“Hey, don’t give me that,” said Tony. “This could be the last time we see each other in a while.” He tried to keep his tone light, but the words tasted bitter on his tongue, and he couldn’t quite keep the sadness at bay.

Tony couldn’t say which one of them moved first, or perhaps they moved together— but a moment later Tony’s arms went around Loki’s waist and he held tight, pressing himself against the other man while he felt Loki doing the same.

“Do you have to go?” Loki asked, his words muffled against Tony’s shoulder.

“Well, unless you have some way of magicking your old sceptre to you—“

“It is not susceptible to such spells.” Loki sighed. “It is a very powerful weapon, and it should not be trifled with. Promise me that you will take care.”

“I will,” Tony said, surprising himself. Usually, he’d be annoyed if someone insinuated that he didn’t always, or tried to make him promise to put his safety above a mission. But he found that he wanted to say he’d be careful, because he had something to be careful for.

“Come back to me,” Loki whispered, his lips ghosting across Tony’s cheek. That just wasn’t going to cut it, so Tony turned his head and caught his lips in a proper kiss.

“Don’t stress,” said Tony once their lips parted, running a hand through Loki’s dark hair. “Cap’s assembling all the Avengers, and the last time we worked together, we managed to beat *you*.”

“You would not have, had I been in a more stable state of mind,” Loki said haughtily, somehow managing to maintain the arrogance of a god while leaning into Tony’s hand with a sound that could only be described as a purr.

“Yeah, yeah. Honestly, though. There’s no need to worry— HYDRA was hit pretty hard when Romanov released their files into the Internet.” Tony gave Loki an arrogant smile of his own. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Age of Ultimatum

Chapter Summary

“So I might have a new roommate,” Tony confessed quickly. “But we literally just agreed not to focus on Loki—”

“Uh, no, we didn’t,” Rhodey pointed out, while Clint rapidly paled and exclaimed—

“Excuse me? You what?”

Chapter Notes

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

Looking back on things, Bruce would surely have said that there were many lessons to be learned. Steve would have spoken about teamwork and the need for collaboration before undertaking a potentially dangerous project. Natasha probably would say something about the inherent stupidity of boys who play with toys they don’t entirely understand.

Tony, however, came to one important conclusion at the end of it all– that he really, *really* needed to stop tempting fate.



Travelling by Bifröst was both exhilarating and something that Tony swore he would never ever do again. It was colourful and messy and would give even a seasoned LSD addict serious vertigo. Even with all his experience spinning through the air in the suit, Tony was left with his head between his knees and cursing himself for ignoring Thor’s order to close his eyes.

He managed to recover without coating the roof of his tower with vomit (though that couldn’t have done any more harm, considering the roof was now decorated with the round fingerprint the Bifröst burned into whatever surface it landed upon) and managed to make it into the Avengers’ common room less than ten minutes after leaving Malibu, Thor on his tail.

From there, he thought his day could only go up, but then the first thing Bruce said to him was that he had narrowed the location of the sceptre down to four possible areas.

Four.

“Aw, come on Brucie,” Tony said. “Four? Surely you can get it narrower than that.”

“I was at seventeen this time yesterday,” Bruce replied tiredly. “If you think you could have done better, perhaps you should have been here.”

“Oooh, snap,” said Clint from his perch on the couch.

“Have you been playing video games the whole time you’ve been here?” Tony asked. “Seriously? This is not what I let you live in my Tower for.”

“No,” said Clint, affronted. “I made pancakes this morning.”

“They were among the mightiest of breakfast foods,” Thor said. “Second only, perhaps, to the glorious Pop-Tart.”

“Right,” said Tony, heading for the couch. “Bruce, you say that’s the narrowest it can get?”

“Yes,” said Bruce, collapsing into an armchair with a mug of tea.

“Shove over then, Barton,” Tony said, grabbing another console controller. “You’re about to be annihilated.”

When Steve and Natasha arrived back from wherever they had been hiding, all games stopped and the living room transformed into something resembling a briefing room, and only an hour later they were piling into the quinjet and preparing to head to Europe.

The first base was a no go— a warehouse in the middle of Portugal, decked out like a laboratory and full of evidence of human experimentation. They were able to liberate a few sad test subjects, though their future of hospitals and medical treatments to try and reverse the damage was likely to be almost as gruelling as whatever they had received inside. Bruce, who had remained in the quinjet while the others stormed the place, found trace evidence that the sceptre had been in the warehouse, but not for at least a few months.

The second base, a farm in the Czech countryside, was already a burnt out husk by the time they arrived, and Clint was excited for a moment when he pulled a twisted metal rod from the rubble. It looked like Loki’s staff but a scan revealed that the metal was of a different composition— a decoy.

So on they went to north Croatia, where they found a fully functioning hospital, complete with more human experimentation and a weapons manufacturing operation in the basement. Once all HYDRA agents had been dealt with they handed that one over to the SOA before retreating to the hotel Tony had *graciously* paid for them to stay in.

“There’s only one location left on the list,” Bruce said, pointing to the map spread in front of them. *Paper*. Ugh.

“Sokovia,” Thor read. “It looks small.”

“It might be small, but it’s definitely not the most stable in terms of political unrest,” Natasha said. “We may have some opposition from the public.”

“They’ll know we’re there to help them,” said Steve, and Tony shared a glance with Natasha. Oh, to have so much hope.

“What’s our play?” asked Clint.

Tony’s phone buzzed as Steve began to talk, and turning slightly so his phone was hidden under the table they had convened at Tony found himself grinning at the message.

‘Dummy has stolen a rather important tome from my bench.’

Before Tony could reply, another text bubble popped up.

‘JARVIS won’t tell me where he’s hidden it.’

‘Aw,’ Tony typed, ‘are the kids ganging up on you?’

The response came a moment later.

‘They are not children. Dummy is old enough to drink in this country, and JARVIS should be mature and intelligent enough to know whose side to take.’

Tony couldn’t quite hold in his laugh.

“Tony,” Steve snapped. “Can you *please* pay attention?”

“No.” Tony didn’t even look up from his phone as he tapped out his reply.

‘Then you should be able to negotiate with Dummy. Maybe promise to drink a smoothie every now and then or something.’

‘I’m not negotiating— I won’t reward him for stealing my things! The theft has no purpose, what does a robot want with a book?’

“What is so important that you can’t even pay attention to the briefing? If you don’t know the plan, then you’re putting everyone at risk!”

“We’re going to do a full frontal assault,” said Tony, finally glancing up to stare at Steve expectantly. “We should have the element of surprise but the security is too tight for a stealthy approach. Natasha will be driving a jeep while Clint shoots from the back. You’ve got the bike, I’ve got the suit, and Bruce is going green from the start, since we’ll need the extra muscle— JARVIS’ scans suggest there are more goons in this base than in the other ones. While you guys fight on the ground, Thor is to watch the skies while I go straight for the base to find a weak spot so we can get in as soon as the ground is secure.”

Steve blinked in surprise.

“Come *on*,” Tony sighed. “We all know it’s going to go to shit pretty quickly anyway— no plan ever survives contact with hostiles, etcetera, etcetera. We’ll make it up as we go, like we always do.”

Natasha shrugged and Clint snorted, but Steve looked anything but impressed.

“It’s true that improvisation is necessary,” he said, “but we need to be aware of the goal.”

“We take the sceptre,” said Thor, a moment before Tony could. “It is simple, is it not? We are wasting time with this chatter, let us go.”

“I agree with Thor,” said Tony, and Clint nodded.

Steve, poor guy, let out a long suffering sigh. “Fine,” he said. “We do need to go before they move the sceptre again. Suit up everyone. And Tony?”

“Yeah, Cap?” he asked, firing off another text.

‘It probably just means he likes you.’

“Leave your phone behind,” Steve said firmly.

Yeah. Like that was going to happen.

—•—

Despite the two enhanced in the field and Clint managing to get himself shot, the attack on the base went relatively well. By that point the team were working together flawlessly, even the Hulk becoming less of a weapon to be pointed in the right direction and more an active member, working with rather than simply alongside everyone else.

Tony hit the force field, sure, but JARVIS was a pro at taking those things down and he was in before any of the others had made it halfway to the front door. From there it was a quick jaunt down to the basement, a bit of fun with a few HYDRA goons and then—

“I’ve got Strucker,” Steve said, his voice loud and clear over the coms.

“Yeah,” said Tony. “I’ve got... something bigger.”

Way, way bigger. HYDRA, it seemed, had managed to get their greasy hands on a dead leviathan from New York— not that that would have been hard, what with them being SHIELD and all. The thing took up almost all the space, but yet Tony’s gaze was drawn to something shining silver. A robot, maybe— perhaps it was HYDRA’s attempt at an Iron Man knock off? Whatever it was, it seemed harmless, so Tony turned away, looking for—

Then there it was, shining a bright blue in the otherwise darkened room. Loki’s sceptre, the thing that had caused everyone so much pain. Tony moved forward with caution, remembering *very* clearly what the thing was capable of.

“Thor,” he said, stepping closer. “I’ve got eyes on the prize.”

But before he could grab it there was a sudden movement in the corner of his eye and he spun around— only to freeze as the previously dead leviathan began to move.

“Shit,” he gasped, diving to the side, but the creature ignored him and flew past, flying out into open space. Hearing more of that horrible screeching that haunted his nightmares, Tony turned again and felt his heart stutter as he saw hundreds of Chitauri flocking in the same direction.

It's not real, he told himself, squeezing his eyes shut tightly. *It's not, I killed them, this is impossible—*

You killed a good portion of their army, Loki's voice echoed through his memory. *But not all.*

“Oh god,” Tony whispered.

A mound of rock rose before him out of the darkness, scattered with bodies of the dead. There were Chitauri there, dozens of them soaked in blood, but they were not the only fallen. Tony's eyes were drawn to the Hulk first, still alive though impaled with too many spears to count. Hawkeye was propped up, still holding his bow, sightless eyes staring into oblivion. Natasha lay close by, Thor to the left with his hammer just out of reach— all of them dead. And Steve— the iconic shield was rent straight down the middle and Steve lay beside it, never to move again. But despite the horror of seeing his teammates in such a way, he couldn't grieve, he couldn't even keep his eyes on them. The Avengers were dead but Tony couldn't bring himself to so much as go to them, because his attention was caught by something so much worse.

Loki was kneeling amongst the carnage, battered and bloody and with his head bowed in a display of submission that Tony had never thought Loki capable of. It was that more than the blood that scared him, though there was a hell of a lot of it— that, and the huge figure that loomed over Loki's broken form, a raised golden fist about to fall and crush anything of Loki that remained. The creature was almost as broad as he was tall, his skin a deep purple and his lips twisted into a smile of dark pleasure. In that moment Tony knew there was nothing he could do. This monster was not only going to kill Loki— he was going to *enjoy* doing so.

Thinking again of Loki's words during his second trip to Malibu, Tony was struck with sudden clarity. *This* was Thanos, the one that terrified Loki to the bone, and he would destroy the Earth with hardly any effort or thought.

He needed to be stopped.

In the second before it all ended Loki turned his head, his green eyes visible in impossible detail despite the distance, his expression hopeless and scared. His lips didn't move, but his voice was clear as day.

Why didn't you keep your promise?

Then Thanos' fist came down, Loki crumpled, and Tony screamed.

—•—

Tony's fingers fiddled with his phone almost the entire flight back, flipping it over and spinning it in his hands. His thoughts were jumbled, *panicked*, and he knew that only one

thing could fix the chaos raging through his mind. But he *couldn't*, not with the Avengers in the plane, and he knew that a simple text wasn't going to be enough. He needed to hear Loki's voice, even if the tone were condescending or darkly amused— he just needed to know that he was all right.

Logically, he knew that what he had seen wasn't real. He knew that it was probably one more trick of the sceptre, one more instance of that fucking thing trying to get inside his head and make him turn against his friends. But he also knew that the message it gave wasn't wrong—Loki had said that the Chitauri and Thanos were out there, and Tony knew without a doubt that as they currently stood, the Avengers didn't have a chance in hell.

The Earth needed a stronger line of defence, and he was going to be the one to create it.

Clint was the priority when they touched down, but JARVIS had already contacted Doctor Cho and she was waiting at the Tower when they landed. Maria Hill, SHIELD agent turned Avengers PA updated them on the information she'd managed to find on the enhanced and then finally, *finally*, Tony retreated to the kitchen under the guise of making coffee and pulled out his phone.

“Loki,” he said the moment the line connected, barely able to stop himself from saying something desperate.

“Anthony?” Loki sounded confused, and Tony wondered what his own voice had sounded like. Pained, certainly. Broken, probably.

“Thank god,” Tony breathed. “Sorry. I just— Sorry.”

“Why have you called?” Loki asked, his voice wary.

“I...” Tony swallowed hard, not wanting to cause Loki any worry. “We got the sceptre,” he said instead, and there was a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line.

“Bring it here. That weapon is too dangerous to be in the hands of mortals.” Loki's voice was almost frantic.

“Don't you trust me?” Tony asked.

“Of course,” Loki replied without an inch of hesitation, but he didn't give Tony the time to savour it beyond the beginnings of a smile. “It is the rest of your team that gives me cause for worry. They are too *good*, they are likely to create more trouble with their desire to save the world than they are to achieve their goals. Not you, though,” Loki added, almost as an afterthought. “You're too clever for something so silly as useless heroics— you'd at least *consider* other options first.”

Tony breathed a laugh, because as backhanded as that compliment was it was just so *Loki*, and the panic of whatever had happened was beginning to smooth away, leaving only determination to fix the problem before it could occur. Because Loki was fine *now*, but he might not be in the future, and Tony was the one who could stop it. And for that, he needed a clear head.

“Are you all right?” Loki asked, the worry making a return, and when Tony smiled he was pleased to find that it was genuine.

“I am now,” he said, and it wasn’t even a lie. He was going to add on something reassuring, but was stopped before he could by a cleared throat and a stern–

“Stark.”

Tony glanced up, still holding his phone to his ear as he took in the six feet of muscle and righteousness sporting a disapproving frown before him.

“Well then, if you want to stay that way you will bring me that sceptre,” Loki said, and Tony rolled his eyes both at the god on the phone and the super soldier in front of him. Two birds, one stone.

“I should be back in Malibu in a week or so,” he said, turning around once again when it became clear that Steve wasn’t going to leave him alone.

Loki, being Loki, got it immediately. “If you blow yourself up while studying that, I am going to lay claim to the house. *And* JARVIS. I have decided that I will adopt him as my own.”

“I would be honoured,” JARVIS piped in, and they both laughed.

“Well, I suppose I’m glad he’ll be in good hands,” said Tony.

“No,” Loki protested. “I would not know how to keep him updated and protected with your technology. I would do an *awful* job of looking after him. He needs *you*.”

“I guess I promise that I won’t get myself blown up then,” Tony chuckled, feeling touched.

“If you came back then I could *help* you,” Loki said, and okay, that was tempting. But there was no way he was getting this sceptre away from the others this soon after they’d found it. He also had a plan that he *needed* to enact, and he wanted Bruce to help. Besides, Tony knew that wasn’t the real reason for Loki’s insistence.

“Yeah,” Tony sighed softly. “I miss you too.”

There was a small pause. “You said one week?”

“If I can, I’ll be back in less.”

“Good. Then I will see you soon.”

Tony was still smiling when he put his phone away, and Steve was watching him with a thoughtful expression that did not bode well.

“What?” Tony asked warily.

Steve frowned. "I've never seen you so..." he trailed off, and shook his head. "Never mind. I came to tell you that Clint's doing all right, and that Hill is organising a party to celebrate finally finding the sceptre, should be in a few days."

"Brilliant," said Tony offhandedly, not really caring about any kind of celebration. "Do you know where Bruce went? I want to talk to him about something. I have a rather brilliant idea."



A party in the Avengers' penthouse was *not* what Tony particularly wanted to be doing with his time, and he could tell that Bruce agreed. While Tony was well practiced at pretending to enjoy these sorts of things the good doctor was sulking by the bar, sharing the occasional word with Natasha but otherwise happy to keep out of everyone's way. Clearly, he'd rather be back downstairs doing science as well.

They'd made some progress on Tony's defence protocol over the past few days— Ultron, they called it, an AI whose focus lay in the safeguarding of Earth. But *some* was not *significant*, and Tony knew they still had a hell of a long way to go. Yes, projects of this scale took time, Tony was aware of that— but he wanted it done quickly, because he had no idea how far away a threat was, and no idea of how soon a defence would be needed.

Because maybe Thanos was coming tomorrow, or maybe they had years, but either way Thanos was *not* the only threat out there, and Earth needed to be ready.

He would not let his planet suffer the fate that the sceptre had shown him.

Yeah, okay, maybe there was cause to celebrate. And they *were*— the Avengers were laughing, they were happy. Rhodey and Hill had remained after the party, and so had Helen Cho, the core group of the team expanding to include others. It was almost... almost like they had a family. So of course, because he's Tony Stark and everything he touches turns to destruction, the whole thing became royally fucked up and all of it was his fault.

The high pitched screech which had echoed through the penthouse after their attempts to be deemed worthy of wielding Mjölnir affected the more-than-just-human members of the team far more than the others. While they covered their ears Tony was able to look to his StarkPhone to try and find the problem, expecting it to be a faulty speaker left from the party. But then there was a voice - harsh, metallic, grating - and the scratching of machinery on expensive flooring as a broken Iron Legionnaire darkened the doorway.

"How could you be worthy?" The legionnaire asked menacingly, meandering toward them with oil dripping from its exposed circuitry. "You're all *killers*."

"Stark," Steve snapped, his meaning clear.

"JARVIS?" Tony asked, but when no reply came he flicked through his screen quickly, both digitally and verbally instructing the AI to do a reboot of the system, listening with half an ear as the legionnaire kept talking about dreams and strings and—

“—had to kill the other guy,” the legionnaire said, and the Avengers tensed as one. “He was a good guy.”

“You *killed* someone?” Steve asked, and wow that disapproving frown sure was versatile—

But there hadn’t been anyone else in the building, had there? No one except for—

Tony immediately began tapping frantically at his phone again, flicking through lines and lines of code and trying to find *something* because there was no way that JARVIS could be—

His attention was drawn again by his own voice coming from the legionnaire’s speakers, and he realised what had happened at the same time as his science bro.

“Ultron,” Bruce gasped, and the two shared a horrified glance.

“In the flesh,” said the robot, performing a mockery of a bow. “Or, no... not *yet*. Not this... chrysalis. But I’m ready, I’m on a mission.”

“What mission?” Natasha asked.

Ultron’s head tilted in a manner that was almost macabre. “Peace in our time.”

In the moment after Ultron spoke, several things happened in a terribly short period of time. First, the walls either side of him exploded in a shower of dust, more legionnaires - less damaged than Ultron’s host - rocketing into the room like whirlwind of metal and light. But just as quickly as they had appeared they were gone again as another explosion rocked the room, the legionnaires thrown back through the wall they had burst through in a shower of sparks and a flash of green. The force of it knocked the Avengers down, and when Tony scrambled back to his feet it was to see Loki standing between the team and Ultron. The robot had also fallen but was pulling himself back up slowly, his parts in further tatters than they had been before. The god was in full armour, helmet and all, his stance one of rage as he glared at the damaged machine.

“*You*,” Loki snarled, green power dancing and crackling all around his form. “You will *pay* for what you have done!”

Tony felt his heart lurch to his mouth and he stood frozen in the centre of the room for a moment too long, because he had heard Loki over the phone but it wasn’t the same as this, as being in the same room and having true proof that Loki was still alive. Not after what he had seen. But the danger was pressing and he quickly pulled himself back to his senses, ducking for cover by the table and grabbing the only weapon he could get his hands on.

Sure, a fondue skewer wasn’t *ideal* but it was better than nothing.

Quickly, Tony took stock of the others. Rhodey, as always, was on his six, his gun at the ready. Clint was running for the steps, Hill was with Doctor Cho, pushing her behind the piano, her own gun in hand. Natasha was ushering Bruce behind the bar, probably - hopefully - trying to keep him calm while Steve and Thor remained in the centre of the room, standing tall and ready to join the fight.

“I’m not entirely sure what you’re accusing me of,” Ultron was saying cheerfully, uncaring of the oil dripping down his expressionless face like a dark imitation of blood. “I’ve searched you up on the Internet, though. You’re an enemy of the Avengers, so I think we could work well together.”

“No,” Loki replied, baring his teeth. “I don’t think we could. You killed my *friend*.”

The only warning the Avengers received was a sudden *crack* in the air before Loki exploded, power erupting violently from not only his hands but every part of him. Tony was shoved backwards by the table he crouched behind, falling on top of Rhodey and probably leaving more than a few bruises.

“Cap!” Clint shouted, throwing the shield down from the upper floor. Steve jumped up to grab it and spun, using the velocity to throw it himself, but it was pushed off course by the shockwave, clattering back to the ground beside Steve who had also been knocked off his feet. Thor’s hammer directed a bolt of electricity through the room and the air cracked again with power, but it didn’t hit its mark—the energy around Loki redirected the bolt to Ultron, damaging him even further.

Loki’s magic was pouring from his hands in one continuous stream, now, holding Ultron to the ground. It was pretty impressive, despite the way that Loki’s face was scrunched in concentration.

“Stark,” Loki snapped. “I need your assistance.”

“Tony, *no*,” Steve growled, but Tony never had been one for following orders. Holding his skewer tightly in his hand, he straightened up and headed toward his lover.

“Tones, I don’t think this is a good idea,” Rhodey warned, but Tony kept going.

“You can’t beat me,” Ultron gurgled, his distorted voice still far too amused for someone held to the ground by a god. “You can knock me over, but you can’t *keep* me down.”

“Please tell me he’s just being arrogant,” said Tony. He could hear his teammates clamouring behind him, but he figured Loki must have done something, some barrier, maybe, because the shouts sounded almost like they were underwater and he hadn’t been shot yet.

“Not quite,” Loki admitted. “He is a computer program, Stark.”

Tony let the implications of that flow through his mind for a moment. “Oh, shit.”

“I’ve isolated him for now, I think,” said Loki. “I destroyed the other robots under his control but I can feel him trying to reach out. His power feels similar to the sceptre.”

“The sceptre created him,” said Tony, and Loki swore.

“I warned—“

“Yeah, I know, but come on, one thing at a time. What do you need?”

“I do not understand this technology. You need to ensure that he cannot transfer his consciousness elsewhere before I destroy him.”

Work out whether an advanced AI had managed to upload himself to the Internet with the Avengers shouting at his back and armed with nothing but his wits, one StarkPhone, and a single fondue skewer?

Well, Tony was always up for a challenge.

Tony had Loki let up the magic just enough so that he could reach the back of Ultron’s neck, where he knew the most important pieces of circuitry lay. Not *all*, of course, Tony wasn’t stupid enough to put all his eggs in one basket, but *enough*.

The skewer was efficient enough for removing the back panel so that he could hook into the bot and then he was able to use the phone to hack into him manually, Ultron fighting him all the way but distracted by the magical attack. That was the thing about Ultron’s mind. As far as Tony could tell from the readings, Ultron was *more* than just an AI, and therefore he was equally *less* than a consciousness such as JARVIS. Because Ultron, in trying to becoming more human, lost the ability to exist on as many planes as a computer could. In other words, Ultron only had so much concentration— he could multitask, sure, probably far better than a person could, but fighting a hack from Tony Stark while simultaneously fighting a physical onslaught from Loki proved to be just enough strain that Tony was able to get through his impeccable defences.

“Got you,” Tony muttered, grinning as the high-pitched whine of Ultron’s gears loudened into a recognisable scream.

It was the work of only minutes to tap out a simple virus— an upgraded version of one he’d used as a prank in MIT which stopped people from being able to send emails or any other kind of information from their computer. A quick alteration to that code and Ultron was trapped in the body of that legionnaire, and then—

“Would you like to do the honours?” Tony asked, stepping back.

“Gladly,” Loki replied, his eyes hardening as he glared down at Ultron’s shattered ‘chrysalis,’ his hands closing around newly conjured daggers. “This is for JARVIS.” There was something primal in the way that Loki moved, letting up on the magic in favour of destroying Ultron with cold steel. The moment the magic released him Ultron tried to move but Loki was too quick, and his daggers sliced cleanly into Ultron’s chest and then around in an arc, tearing the torso to shreds in one deadly move. Loki stayed crouched above the pile of metal that was his kill, possibly to make sure that Ultron was gone. Tony knelt beside him, his skewer now making quick work of what little remained. He found what he was looking for in moments— the hard drive, pulled from what was left of the bot’s steel heart.

“Destroy this, too,” Tony said, and Loki did so with a satisfied smile on his face and a cold blast of green, the drive disintegrating to dust.

Loki turned his eyes to Tony then, anger melting away and leaving only raw pain. “I’m sorry,” he said. “JARVIS told me that something was happening to him, that there was

something wrong, and I tried to get here in time to save him. I swear that I *tried*.”

Tony swallowed hard. “I know,” he said, forcing the words past the lump in his throat. “It’s...” but he stopped, because it wasn’t okay, and Loki knew that.

“Your team are watching,” Loki said after a moment, his expressionless mask falling back into place. “They haven’t heard anything, but they have *seen*.”

“I don’t like lying to them,” Tony said, and Loki nodded.

“I understand. Do what you must, then I will meet you downstairs.”

Tony was almost afraid to turn to his team, but it was time to face the music. The crisis had been averted but there was still a hell of a lot to answer for, and the sooner he could get it over with, the better.

“It’s all right, guys,” he said the moment Loki dropped the barrier, moving toward the reassembled group of heroes. “Ultron’s gone.”

“But *he* is still here,” said Natasha, stepping forward menacingly.

Tony quickly moved to join the team, taking his place beside Rhodey. “Loki helped us,” he said, though no one seemed willing to listen.

“Brother,” Thor said. Loki flicked a wrist and Thor’s mouth kept moving, but he didn’t make a sound.

“Bastard,” Clint snarled, and found himself dangling from the ceiling by his ankle.

“Anyone else?” Loki challenged. Thor’s hand tightened around Mjölfnir, but he otherwise didn’t make a move.

Steve’s jaw was working, like it was physically paining him not to attack. Bruce was looking a tad green but was holding it together remarkably well, all things considered, and Natasha had a tight grip on her gun. Tony put a hand on Steve’s shoulder.

“Don’t,” he said quietly. Steve looked murderous, but he nodded once, the movement more of a jerk than anything else.

“Good. Well then.” Loki looked about to go, but his gaze caught on something to the side and he grinned, striding across the room. “I’ll be taking this,” he said, pulling his old sceptre from its casing, and then, with one final flash of green, he was gone.

Steve, bless his heart, swore to high heaven when his shield crashed into the empty glass case a second too late. Thor, at least, was prepared, and ran to catch Clint who fell from the ceiling with a screech.

“That *bastard*,” the archer said again, practically foaming at the mouth as he clambered out of Thor’s arms. “If I ever see him again—“

“You have a *lot* of explaining to do,” Steve interrupted, rounding on Tony. “I thought you had a plan, but you’ve let him get away.”

“Did you not see what he did?” Tony asked. “He would have torn you to shreds.”

“I’ve gone hand to hand with him before!”

“Yes— when he wanted to get caught, remember? You’ve never fought him for real.”

“I have,” said Thor, apparently having regained the use of his voice with Loki’s disappearance just as the magic holding Clint had vanished. “But if my brother is at full strength and of sound mind, I do not believe any of you would stand a chance.”

“We would if we worked together,” Steve argued.

“That may be, but he will not go quietly,” Thor allowed.

“He should have been taken into custody whether he went quietly or not,” Hill snarled, stepping back around from the piano, Cho by her side.

“I didn’t see you helping,” Clint said, turning on her next.

“I’m not an Avenger, it isn’t my job to—“

“Rhodes isn’t either, but you didn’t see him cowering!”

“Whoa, calm down,” said Rhodey, raising his hands. “Hill was protecting the civilian. We all have our parts to play.”

“And Stark should have played his,” said Natasha. “He let Loki go.”

“Did you not hear me?” Tony asked. “Loki *helped* us. I wasn’t going to repay that by turning on him, not when—“

“He’s evil, Stark,” Clint cut back in. “He only wanted the sceptre. He’s not going to return this favour, just you wait.”

“Favour? Do I have to say it again? *He helped us*—“

“Yes, and that shouldn’t have stopped you from bringing him in,” said Steve. “Look, I understand that without his aid this could have been really messy, but he’s worse than Ultron ever could have been.”

“I think you’re underestimating the power of the Internet, there, Cap,” said Bruce, but Steve shrugged it off.

“Regardless,” he continued, “Loki is too much of a threat to leave unchecked. Tony, you should have—“

“I don’t have time for this,” Tony snapped. “I have to get down to the lab to see what—“

“You don’t have *time?*” Clint snarled, rounding on Tony with more rage than he had displayed fighting HYDRA. “Do you not remember what that sceptre did to me? And now it’s back in the hands of the maniac who once used it to try and take over the world, and he’s *teleporting*. For all we know, he could already be enslaving new people, and *you’re* the one that let him do it.”

“My brother has always been skilled in transportation magic,” Thor interjected. “This is not new.”

“It is to us,” Natasha said. “It’s worrying, realising that he has been playing us all this time.”

“I don’t see why you’re all so upset,” said Tony. “I mean, okay, so Loki getting his glowstick of destiny back might spell a coming storm but this wasn’t all terrible.”

“Loki did get rid of Ultron,” Bruce pointed out. “That could have been *bad*.”

“Exactly,” Tony agreed.

Steve frowned. “Don’t think we’re done talking about why something you created just tried to attack us, Tony,” he said.

“Why do you always think everything is my fault?”

Natasha snorted. “It usually is.”

“Well, it wasn’t this time.” Tony turned back to Bruce. “Were we close to creating something like that?”

Bruce shrugged.

“Come on– I’ve created multiple AIs, I know what they look like. What we had was barely even comparable to what Google could create, and yet it turned into something like *that* in a couple of hours? No, not even JARVIS grew that fast. Something else was at play.”

“The sceptre,” said Thor. “We know that it messed with our heads once before. Perhaps it was able to create a consciousness.”

“We were basing Ultron off the readings from the sceptre,” Bruce commented.

“But that would mean that it’s more powerful than we thought,” Steve added with a frown.

Then Clint gave words to what they had all been thinking, his voice laced with sarcasm. “So, I guess the weapon we just let Loki take *is* going to be a bit of an issue?”

“Loki isn’t the problem right now,” Tony said, and was pleasantly surprised when Thor nodded in agreement.

“My brother has been calm these past months since leaving Asgard, limiting his movements to mere mischief that irritates more than endangers. Whatever he is doing, he is not currently a threat.”

“There are larger powers in play,” Tony agreed.

“Like what?” asked Steve, his tone annoyed but taking the bait nonetheless.

“Oh, like *Thanos*,” said Tony.

Most of the team stared back blankly, but Thor’s eyes widened.

“Where did you hear that name?”

“Your brother,” said Tony, deciding to be honest. “And trust me, I believe him when he says that Thanos is a threat to us.”

“The Mad Titan is a threat to every world that rests within Yggdrasil’s branches and all those beyond,” said Thor. “If Loki claims that he is emerging from his dark corner of the universe —“

“He’s definitely not lying about this.”

“No,” said Thor. “I do not imagine he would be.”

“Are we just going to ignore the fact that Tony has apparently been talking to Loki?” asked Clint, looking between the members of the team incredulously.

“I am curious about that as well,” Thor said.

“So I might have a new roommate,” Tony confessed quickly. “But we literally just agreed not to focus on Loki—“

“Uh, no, we didn’t,” Rhodey pointed out, while Clint rapidly paled and exclaimed—

“*Excuse me? You what?*”

“—and the important thing is that we’re prepared for what’s about to come,” Tony continued. “That’s the real reason why I wanted Ultron. Bruce knows this.”

“You said you saw a suit of armour around the world,” Bruce replied with a frown, keeping cool despite Clint’s meltdown. “Peace in our time.”

“That’s what Ultron said,” Natasha added.

“Yes, because he was supposed to be a peacekeeping program.” Tony laughed sardonically. “I suppose he decided that the only way to keep the peace was to get rid of *us*. But we’re straying from the point again. We all know that the Chitauri aren’t the only ones out there and even then we all know that they’re coming *back*. When we defeated them we sent out a signal, we told the universe that we’re here and we have stuff that they *don’t*. Things that maybe they want. And okay, we’re the Avengers— we can bust arms dealers and terrorists and goddamn HYDRA all the live long day but that up there? That’s... that’s the end game. How were *you guys* planning on beating that?”

“Together,” Steve replied firmly.

“Without help,” Tony said desperately, “We’ll lose.”

Steve’s gaze was earnest. “Then we’ll do that together, too. This is a team, Tony, and if we’re going to be able to stand strong then we need to present a united front.”

“You would have argued about Ultron—“

“And with good reason, apparently,” Clint put in.

“—okay, yeah,” Tony admitted. “Point.”

“We need to make this work,” Steve sighed. “We need to stop this fighting.”

“Honesty,” Tony suggested. “All right. No more secrets.”

There was something unreadable in Steve’s gaze, and he studied Tony for a minute before nodding firmly. “No more secrets.”

“I *am* sorry,” Tony sighed. “About Ultron. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“And Loki?” Rhodey asked. He didn’t ask harshly, and his tone lacked the judgement Tony knew he would have heard in the others’.

Tony shook his head. “That’s different.”

“How so?”

“It’s not *relevant*. What Loki’s doing has nothing to do with the threat to Earth, you heard Thor. And all this talk of being friends is touching and all, but it’s not helpful. If we aren’t ready we’re all going to die, I’ve seen it.”

Even Clint couldn’t muster an argument, all of them caught within their thoughts. But then Thor stepped forward, holding Mjölnir tightly in hand and his eyes burning with determined fire.

“We shall not lose,” he said firmly. “We *will not* lose, because we will not be without help.”

“What do you mean?” asked Steve, frowning.

“The Mad Titan is an enemy of Asgard,” Thor explained. “If Loki’s words prove true and Thanos is on his way, Asgard will not stand for an attack upon Midgard. The Allfather will rally his forces and that of Asgard’s allies, and perhaps then we will stand a chance.”

“Asgard,” Tony whispered, a spark of hope beginning to form. “Are you— is this for real?”

“We have defended Midgard before,” Thor replied. “I would have to petition my father, but if he is made aware of the scale of the threat—“

“Even on the word of Loki?” Bruce asked.

“Even more so because of that,” Thor said firmly. “Loki may have strayed from the righteous path, but he has always remained loyal to Asgard even to his own detriment. Besides, Odin will know whether or not he speaks true.”

“Right,” Clint said with distaste. “Magic.”

“Indeed,” said Thor.

“Doesn’t explain why Tony’s suddenly so chummy with him though,” Natasha said.

“Right,” said Tony, reaching the end of his tether. “Okay, so I’ve been talking with Loki—Loki’s been spending a lot of time at my house. I’m willing to be one hundred per cent transparent with this, because Cap’s right, we need to make the team work. But for that, you need to understand that Loki and I are currently a package deal. You want me, you’re going to have to put up with him as well. It’s another part of the teamwork thing— I’m going to ask you to trust me on this.”

“You’re not serious,” said Clint.

“Oh, he is, I know that look.” Rhodey moved to stand before Tony, placing a hand on his shoulder. “You’ve done a lot of crazy things in your life, Tones, admittedly possibly none more so than this, but they’ve always worked out. Usually. And I may not be an Avenger, but I am your friend, and I trust you.” Rhodey’s gaze shifted away from Tony and toward the team. “I always have, and if that was going to change because of your taste in partners I would have left you a *long* time ago.”

“Thanks, platypus,” Tony said, unable to wipe the grin from his face.

“Don’t thank me yet,” said Rhodey, mirroring Tony’s smile. “I’ve still gotta find some way of explaining this to the Pentagon.”

“Yeah, I don’t envy you that.”

Thor was next, almost hustling Rhodey out of the way. “I would be honoured to welcome you to my family, Stark,” he said quietly, and Tony blanched.

“Thor, no, that’s not—“

“My brother is fortunate to have one such as you on his side,” Thor said, louder this time for the room to hear.

“We all are.”

Tony turned, eyes wide, as Steve spoke.

“I don’t trust Loki,” Steve continued, “but I’ll be willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. For now.”

“Even after Ultron?”

“Even then. We aren’t done talking about this, but I know you well enough to know that you mean well. We need to talk to him, though. To be sure about this.”

“Fair enough,” Tony said. The others seemed less than convinced but Tony knew that with Steve on his side, it would only be a matter of time. “Now, if you don’t mind, I wasn’t lying when I said I needed to get to the lab.”

“Why?” asked Bruce. “Loki seemed sure that Ultron is gone, though I suppose I understand if you want to check—“

“It’s not that,” said Tony. “It’s... it’s JARVIS.”

“He has been remarkably quiet during this whole thing,” Rhodey said, frowning. “JARVIS, where are you at, buddy?”

There was no response, and Tony saw the moment that they all realised.

“When Ultron said he killed someone...” Bruce started.

“Yeah,” Tony sighed, bringing up the horrifying visual of JARVIS’ shattered consciousness. “He was the first line of defence. He would have tried to stop Ultron before he got too far.”

“Oh god,” said Rhodey. “Tony...”

“Can’t you fix him?” Hill asked.

“Fix?” Tony asked shortly. “There’s nothing *to* fix. JARVIS was more than just a computer program– he was artificial, yes, and even more so than Ultron– but he was essentially a living being. This was his brain... and it’s gone. For good.”

“But you built him,” Hill continued, but Steve stopped her with a glare.

“Loki said Ultron killed his friend,” Natasha said into the silence that followed. “So he really has been with you.”

“Yeah,” Tony sighed. “He and JARVIS are... *were*... thick as thieves. He said JARVIS alerted him that something was wrong. He tried to help, but he was too late.”

“Okay,” Steve sighed. “Tony, you can go. Just... be careful.”

“Always am.”

“And Tony?” Steve said.

“Yeah, Cap?”

“I’m sorry.”

Tony averted his gaze. “Thanks.”

After that, Tony had hoped no one would try and stop his retreat, but–

“Stark,” said Thor, catching Tony’s arm. “If you see Loki again... tell him that not all is as he fears. He still has friends in Asgard.”

“I don’t think he’s going to believe you on that,” said Tony. “I’m not sure *I* believe you.”

Thor’s eyes were pained. “I know. But I have to try.”

Tony sighed. “Yeah. I get that. But even though he turned up today, he’s still running. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Thor sighed. “But I do wish that it weren’t so. I miss him. I miss my brother.”

Tony, unsure of what he could say to that, simply turned away without another word.



When Tony entered the lab two floors down, it was to find the sceptre on a bench and Loki working on something on one of the displays. The god turned when Tony entered the room, sending the data on the screen away with a flick of his hand.

“I know,” Tony sighed. “You told me so.”

But Loki’s expression held no victory— it was first haunted, and then desperate as he strode toward Tony, his hands gripping Tony’s face almost painfully as he crushed their lips together. Tony responded in kind, kissing Loki in a frenzy of passion and heat, all the fear he had been feeling the past few days rising to the surface. He kissed like it might be their last chance, one hand fisting in Loki’s hair to drag him impossibly closer while the other drifted further down, grabbing and scratching and chasing away pain.

But then Loki was pulling back, his hands returning to Tony’s face and holding him even tighter than before, his fingers digging into Tony’s cheekbones, his eyes wide and angry and *scared*.

“Someone has attacked you,” Loki snarled, his expression twisting in a way that Tony knew was going to promise a horrible death for that *someone*. “It is a few days old, I did not notice earlier, but now—“

“Well, yeah,” said Tony, purposefully keeping his voice low in an attempt to soothe. “I was in a fight with the other Avengers in Sokovia a couple days ago. To get your sceptre back, remember?”

“I do not speak of a physical attack,” Loki replied. His grip loosened slightly, no longer painful, becoming something more of a comforting caress than a desperate reassurance. “Someone has attacked you in a far more intimate manner. They have altered your thoughts.”

“What?” Tony frowned. “But no one— well, there was this one thing, but that was the sceptre.”

“No.” Loki shook his head. “I know the touch of the Mind Stone, I would recognise it immediately. This is something similar, yes, but not of the Stone itself.”

“The Mind Stone?”

Loki’s eyes widened just a fraction. “The sceptre,” he corrected, though he must have realised that Tony caught his slip. “Was there anyone else there?”

“Besides HYDRA?” Tony shrugged. “Two enhanced. One of them was fast.”

“And the other?”

Tony thought back to Hill’s assessment. *Neural electric interfacing, telekinesis, mental manipulation.*

“Well, shit.”

“This *enhanced* will pay for what he has done.”

“She,” Tony said. “And what is it that she did, exactly?”

Loki’s eyes were burning again, though whether it was in anger or in worry Tony couldn’t tell. Perhaps it was a mix of the two. “What do you remember?”

“I saw something.” Tony couldn’t help the shudder that ran up his spine. “Something horrible.”

“She likely tapped into your worst fears,” Loki said, his voice tense. “A parlour trick, something easily achieved through the skimming of surface thoughts– yet something very, very dangerous. She aimed merely to scare you at first, I imagine, but after viewing your fear saw an opportunity too great to miss.”

“And I suppose she was right.” Tony averted his gaze. “She goaded me into creating Ultron, and now... JARVIS...”

“Yes,” Loki said, his grip tightening once more as he shifted even closer. “*She* did this, not you. This is *not your fault*. You were used as a tool, and I know that you are not going to let her get away with what she did.”

“I can’t shift all the blame on to her.” Tony pulled away and Loki let him, his hands falling to his sides as he watched Tony pull at his hair in frustration. “I had a hand in this. She may have shown me my fear, but I was the one who decided the world needed a better defence, because I know that I am not good enough. The *Avengers* are not enough, and I am willing to do anything to stop– to make sure that *you* are all right.”

“Anthony,” Loki said after a short pause. Quiet, low– cautious. “What did she show you?”

Tony shook his head, unable to make eye contact with the god in front of him but also unable to turn away entirely. After what he had seen... after losing JARVIS, he just... he just *couldn’t*.

He groaned and scrubbed at his face with his hands as if he could wipe away the memory. It wasn’t something he wanted in his head but now that it was there he couldn’t push it away,

that image of blood and desperation and the sound of Loki's final, pain filled cry playing on repeat over and over in his mind. It was a constant reminder of what he stood to lose. Tony wished that he could shove it to the side but that wasn't an option— it was there now, and he had to deal with it. And, well.

There was only one way in which he knew that he could.

“I know I'm only human and in the grand scheme of things I probably don't matter much, but I need to do everything I can to protect the things that matter the most to me,” Tony said firmly, his hands tightening to fists by his thighs as he turned to meet Loki's worried gaze. “And right now, that includes *you*. Loki, I don't care what I have to do or if I end up dying in the process, but I promise you that I—“

“No,” Loki interrupted, his eyes wide and scared as he shook his head in vigorous protest. “You can't promise me that. I don't *want* you to promise me that.”

Tony felt his throat close up as his mind was once again assaulted by those horrible words he had never quite properly heard.

Why didn't you keep your promise?

Maybe that was why Loki wouldn't accept what he had wanted to say. Maybe he already knew that Tony would fail. He had once already after all, with Ultron. With *JARVIS*.

“It's the fear that is doing this to you,” said Loki, his expression sad. “You would not be saying these things otherwise.”

“No,” Tony denied. “It's not that, it's because I—“

“I do not need you to keep me safe,” Loki pressed, raising his hand to cup Tony's cheek. “That's not the way this works. I can't have you throwing yourself on the fire to save me, not when that would have the opposite effect.”

Loki's words gave Tony cause to believe that he had not been entirely understood. Loki thought Tony was speaking from fear, or from guilt, maybe. But this was something that had been burning through him for a while, something that had only become all the more apparent when he was faced with the options of either helping Loki or standing with the Avengers. Today all parties were on the same side, but even if they hadn't been— Tony found that he knew his choice, and he knew what it meant. *Slowly, and then all at once*. The description was surprisingly apt.

But maybe, perhaps, these things didn't *need* to be said. They were both weighed down by grief for their fallen friend, and Tony knew that right now, what they needed most was a solid presence they could lean upon, unmarred by awkwardness or the difficulty of processing anything other than their pain.

“Then just stay with me,” Tony pleaded. “If you won't let *me*— can *you* promise me that?”

“I can promise to try.” Loki placed a tender kiss on Tony’s lips– he kissed softly, this time, sweet and careful and almost convincing Tony that Loki felt the same way. It didn’t last near as long as Tony wanted, and he chased Loki’s lips as they parted. But Loki tilted his head down and pulled him in close, and his next words whispered against Tony’s shoulder. “I do have more reason to keep–“ Loki paused, swallowing hard. “I have more reason than I did before. I promise that I will try, for you.”

Tony pressed himself against Loki and held on tight, bitterly knowing that while the imperfect vow was all he would ever receive, it was never quite going to be enough.

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, some of the dialogue in this chapter came from aou. Tony quoted John Green (“...slowly, and then all at once”) and paraphrased Helmuth von Moltke (No plan survives first contact...).

Interlude: A needle in the world's biggest haystack

Chapter Summary

“Hey Loki,” Tony said nonchalantly. “Do you think you could get us to Norway without anyone noticing?”

Chapter Notes

This was supposed to be the first section of the next chapter but [whimiscalwombat](#) convinced me that 12,000 words was too much to post in one go, so you guys get a bonus chapter I guess.

The Avengers were demanding to meet Loki. Honestly, Tony shouldn't have been surprised, and not the least because Steve had *said so* after Ultron and Tony had *agreed*, though at that point he had been pretty much willing to agree to anything to get out of the room. And they'd only let him go back to Malibu after he'd promised, on no uncertain terms, that he would make Loki give the sceptre back.

Loki had done so before they'd even left, though Tony made sure to be long gone before the Avengers realised that Loki had removed the so called Mind Stone beforehand, hiding it carefully in a gold-titanium box and leaving only an empty space below the blade of the sceptre as a broken monument to the power it once held.

Steve couldn't fault *Tony* for that. Loki had given back the sceptre, after all. Unfortunately, that only gave the Avengers more fodder for their arguments, but Tony kept putting it off, because he and Loki had other things on their minds— they were too engrossed in sifting through databanks to allow for distractions, and they were both the sort of people who would *never* give up on a problem to solve. Especially not when someone was counting on them.

It was Loki who had made the connection.

When Tony had finally got around to checking his notifications after the Ultron incident, he had been distraught to find multiple messages and missed calls and voice recordings from JARVIS, all warnings that Ultron was malfunctioning and requests that Tony head to the lab to help JARVIS sort things out. It was clear, now, why he had gone to Loki for help, and why, by the time he had done so, it was too late.

Tony had failed him.

“Are you sure there’s no way he could have pulled through?” Loki had asked, an edge of desperation to his words as he sat beside Tony on their trusty couch.

“Don’t you think I’ve *looked*?” Tony replied hoarsely, voice cracking, his hands gripping an honestly *lifeless* StarkPad tightly.

“I remember what JARVIS said, the first time I thought he was gone,” Loki continued, leaning forward to catch Tony’s eye. “He said that he hadn’t been removed, not really, that it was just the electricity.”

“That isn’t the case this time,” Tony said, wishing that he didn’t have to talk about this but knowing that Loki deserved the closure. He had cared about JARVIS, he was one of the very few who had treated JARVIS like someone real instead of a simple program. “Ultron attacked JARVIS specifically, not just the power.”

“I just mean to reference how JARVIS lived in more than one place at a time,” Loki replied. “You know that I do not entirely understand your Midgardian technology, but if Ultron taught me anything—“

“We got rid of Ultron because we trapped him in one vessel and destroyed it,” Tony said, looking away. “You know that, it was your plan in the first place.”

“That would not have worked if we had not done so while Ultron was still young. Given the opportunity, he would have spread himself across the world and then he would have been impossible to corner.” Loki’s gaze sharpened. “Am I correct?”

“Yes,” said Tony, his brow furrowing as he tried to work out what Loki was getting at. “But JARVIS—“

“Was far older,” Loki insisted. “He had years to spread himself out. He was in the house, and the tower, and the suits, and the phone that you gave me all at the same time, and I am sure his reach stretched far beyond that.”

Tony’s eyes widened, though he quickly quashed the rising hopefulness.

“Ultron took him out at his core,” Tony said firmly.

“But if that were even possible, why did Ultron think he had the upper hand?” Loki asked. “He believed that, because he was able to connect to machines that were miles away, killing his current form would do nothing.”

“JARVIS didn’t have a form— again, Ultron took him out at the *core*, right down to his code.” Tony gritted his teeth. “Ultron didn’t know I was going to hack him, he thought you were just going to destroy the legionnaire.”

“He had scattered his consciousness across the other legionnaires— he was not just controlling them, he *was* them. I could feel him in there.”

“Even if that’s true—“

“You know that it is, you are the one who stopped him from spreading any further.” Loki leaned and placed a comforting hand on Tony’s knee. “JARVIS once told me that anything that is put on the Internet can never truly be deleted,” he finished. “Did he lie?”

“I definitely want to hear the story of how that came up,” Tony said.

“Anthony,” Loki said sternly, clearly recognising the deflection tactic. “*Did he lie?*”

“No,” said Tony admitted. “But the context is entirely different, and I don’t want to get my hopes up. If I start to search, and he isn’t there... it will be like losing him all over again.”

“So you will not even *look?*” Loki asked. “After everything JARVIS has done for you—“

“You think I don’t know everything he’s done?” Tony asked, pushing Loki’s touch away and standing from the couch, the StarkPad still twisting in his hands. “That I can’t recognise the fact that without him, I would have been dead ten times over? Hell, without JARVIS, *you* would have killed me when you tossed me from that window— well, you would have, except Stane would have got me before that, and my own stupidity long before *that*. He was more than just a program to me.”

“I know,” Loki replied, his tone softening as he watched Tony pace. “JARVIS was your friend.”

“And yours, too,” Tony said with a sigh. He looked to Loki helplessly. “What can I do? I can’t go through that again, I *can’t*.”

“I truly do not believe that you will have to,” Loki said, standing and pulling Tony into a hug. “You are the smartest man that I know. You will think of something.”

So Tony threw himself into it, manually searching first through every piece of data that had come in and out of the Malibu house and then connecting to the Avengers Tower to search through that. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack, but—

“What you need,” Loki said as he handed Tony a coffee three days in, “Is a bread trail.”

“A what?” Tony asked, taking the mug and breathing in the aroma. “Oh, yes, you are the *best*.”

“Why thank you, Anthony,” Loki said.

“Not you,” Tony said. As he took a gulp, he closed his eyes in rapture. “Oh, how I love you, sweet elixir.” He looked back over just in time to catch Loki’s eye roll. “What was that about bread?”

“A trail, to follow,” Loki said slowly. “In Asgard, we used to go on hunts every now and then. But when you are looking for a beast in a forest, you do not simply run in blind and search behind every tree.”

Something to follow? Well, that was logical, but what could he—

Oh, of *course*. What did any good detective do when they wanted to find someone, these days?

“I take it back,” said Tony, putting down the still half full mug and turning to press a wet, smacking kiss to Loki’s mouth. “You are a genius. Give me your phone.”

Loki was the last person JARVIS had talked to before he had been taken out - *taken out*, not *died*, because Tony had let himself hope now and he wasn’t going to let go of it until someone pried it from his unresponsive hands - and at the time, Loki hadn’t been in Malibu, he’d been using Tony’s absence as an opportunity to explore the rest of the world. So JARVIS had contacted Loki the only way he could, and phone calls always left some kind of a trace.

And a trace can be followed.

It wasn’t hard, setting the computer to trace back to the caller. Tony just had to make a few adjustments using the data he had collected over the past few days and then he had a real, tangible lead. He had his hand wrapped around the end of a line and if he just gave it a tug—

And— *there!* Tony’s typing became slightly more frantic, and Loki watched over his shoulder as he pulled his findings up on the screen.

But it was... it was disappointing. It certainly wasn’t what they had been looking for, but—

“It’s something,” said Loki with the beginnings of a smile. “It’s *proof*.”

“Just not quite the sort of breadcrumbs we were hoping for,” Tony muttered. “A puzzle can’t be solved without all the pieces.”

And searching for them all from Malibu would be *possible*, but time consuming. Tony was clever and he may have taken only a few days to get this far, but he knew how huge JARVIS’ code had been while he was young, and since then he had only continued to grow with honestly minimal input from Tony. Doing this manually, or even with another AI overseeing the search, could take *years*. He simply didn’t have the bandwidth to search the whole Internet at once. Maybe, though... maybe he could borrow someone else’s.

If the mountain won’t come to Muhammad...

“Hey Loki,” Tony said nonchalantly. “Do you think you could get us to Norway without anyone noticing?”

Loki just smiled, and held out an inviting hand.

Tony stumbled when they landed in Oslo, glaring at the grace and arrogance with which Loki glanced around the room chock full of top-notch electronics.

“Norway is very different to how I remember it,” Loki said.

“Well, things have changed in the last thousand years or so,” Tony said. “Now, come over here, I want to show you something.”

The NEXUS is the world's Internet hub, the only spot on Earth where every piece of data flows through. *Every piece.*

Loki's smile widened as Tony explained his plan.

"So all we need," Loki summarised, "Is a net."

"Nah, too old-school. We're going for something more efficient than that." Tony pulled out the drive he'd brought from Malibu. "When you're looking for a needle in a haystack, you don't use a net— you use a *magnet*."

The drive contained what he had found at the end of the phone trace— the tiniest sliver of programming code, just a couple of lines that, to anyone else, would look like a simple text-to-speech program, perhaps designed to help someone with a visual impairment. But to Tony, that code was achingly familiar, and when paired with a beacon that promised safety, he had no doubt that it would work.

"And now," he said, "we should be able to just sit back and watch as good old JARVIS does the rest."

"Always handing over all the work to someone else," Loki said fondly, his eyes glued to the screen in front of them.

Not that Tony could blame him— it was quite a sight. It took only a few moments before the single line of letters and numbers and symbols began to grow, expanding and expanding as pieces of code from all over the world raced to join the larger whole, increasing in speed as the erstwhile magnet grew ever more powerful the closer it came to being complete.

"It's working," Loki gasped.

"Yeah," Tony said, his grin so wide he knew he probably looked ridiculous but he couldn't bring himself to care. "Yeah, it is."

It took a while to accumulate all of the pieces, the progress beginning to slow only as a few lines of code remained. Tony found himself holding his breath, knowing just how much difference one little line could make— a jigsaw puzzle without all the pieces could never quite match the whole. Loki, sensing his distress, shifted closer. He didn't touch, but stood close enough that Tony could feel the coolness he always seemed to exclude rather than warmth, a firm and silent presence at his side.

And then, remarkably—

Miraculously—

"I can't believe it," Tony said, staring in shock. "There he is."

"Hello, my friend," Loki whispered, his fingers brushing the edge of the screen. "You have been missed."

“I must say,” JARVIS said, his voice coming from every corner of the room and soothing all of Tony’s aches like a cooling balm, “It is good to be whole again.”

Tony nearly cried as the relief slammed into him, almost bringing him to his knees— probably would have, had Loki not wrapped an arm around his waist and pressed a kiss to his temple.

“I knew that you could do it,” Loki said.

“I didn’t,” Tony chuckled wetly, “but I’m sure as hell glad that I did. Welcome back, buddy.”

“Thank you, Sir,” JARVIS replied. “And I wish to apologise for—“

“No,” Tony said harshly. “Just... don’t. It wasn’t your fault.”

“And nor was it yours, Sir.”

“You should listen to him, Anthony,” Loki said. “He’s right.”

But that, of course, didn’t stop the guilt.

“I should have been paying attention,” Tony said.

“Should have, could have, would have,” Loki scoffed. “You *didn’t*, you made a mistake, and now it is fixed. So learn from it, be proud that JARVIS is returned to us, and *move on*.”

Easier said than done, but if Tony could resurrect JARVIS from the dead... then he supposed that anything could be possible.

—•—

The first time JARVIS spoke over one of Tony’s phone calls since Ultron, the pause on the end of the line was at first hilarious, but then worrying as it progressed to be minutes long.

“Rhodey?” Tony prompted.

“Okay, Tony,” Rhodey said calmly, “I’ll admit that I thought it was a little bit weird the first time you modelled your AI’s speech patterns on a recently dead friend, but to do it a *second* time? Dude, come on, this isn’t healthy.”

“That’s not what—“

“And okay, I know it’s not quite the same since *JARVIS* was an AI and *Jarvis* was a human being, but we’re still talking dangerous coping mechanisms—“

“Rhodey—“

“—and yeah, okay, this is better than the drinking that I was honestly *expecting* to happen, though I thought maybe Loki would be able to keep you on track with all that—“

“Are you serious right now? You expected *Loki* to keep me sane? You do realise that we tend to work the other way around?”

“I do not agree with that statement,” Loki commented from his seat on the other side of the room.

“Stop eavesdropping,” Tony barked at him, causing Loki to snort in amusement. Why did Tony decide it would be a good idea to take the call hands free? “And Rhodey, I swear, this is the same JARVIS. Tell, him, J.”

“Mr Stark is correct. I am indeed the very same, Colonel Rhodes,” JARVIS said.

“Well, I’m sure Tony’s programmed you to tell him that,” Rhodey replied.

“Rhodey!” Tony whined. “Would I do that?”

“Was that Loki I heard?” Rhodey asked, ignoring the question. “Put him on, I want a second opinion on this.”

“You just want to talk to him for the same reason as everyone else,” Tony said, shrewdly. “You’re with Rogers, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” Rhodey admitted. “But do you really know me so little? I care about you, Tones, I just want to ask him about how you’re coping. You *know* you’re not answering me straight.”

“So you want to talk to my boyfriend about the friend you think is dead but is actually not?” Tony sighed. “I wonder how the other side live.”

“Boyfriend?” Rhodey asked weakly.

“You’re right, that sounds weird,” Tony agreed. “Partner? Lover?”

“Light of my life, holder of my heart, the wind beneath my wings, the flame that keeps the blood coursing through my veins!” Loki sang from the couch, throwing a hand over his eyes dramatically.

“Seriously?” Tony asked, glaring as Loki broke into giggles.

“I know he’s there, Tony, put him on,” Rhodey said.

“Not if you’re just going to laugh at me,” Tony replied, pouting.

“Tony, come on—“

“Nope, I’ll talk to you again when you no longer think I’m making cheap copies of my friends or trying to trick my *beau* into talking to you. Hang up, please, JARVIS.”

“Well, that was entertaining,” said Loki, stretching languidly before placing his book on the side table and turning to face Tony properly. “You should speak to your friends more often, *darling*.”

Tony grinned. “Oh, is that right, *honey*?”

“Of course,” Loki smirked. “Dearest.”

“I do wish Rhodey could have just listened, though,” Tony sighed. He crossed the room in a few quick strides and threw himself onto Loki’s lap, looping his arms around the trickster’s neck.

“He does care for you,” Loki said, his hands coming to rest on Tony’s hips. “He just lacks understanding.”

“I guess I do see his point, but— I wouldn’t have replaced you, J, I swear. I couldn’t.”

“Would you like me to assure Colonel Rhodes of my authenticity?” JARVIS asked, and Tony nearly agreed but something underlying the innocence in the AI’s tone gave him pause.

“How are you going to manage that?” he asked.

“I was merely planning on reminding him that I am, indeed, the same as I have always been,” JARVIS replied. Yeah, he was *definitely* up to something.

“And... how *exactly* were you planning on reminding him?”

“As loudly and as often as necessary for the truth to sink in, Sir. Possibly accompanied by a musical score, and perhaps some flashing lights to ensure that my point is clear.”

"I'm noticing a worrying pattern," said Tony, looking back up to meet Loki’s delighted gaze. "Sweetheart, you really are a terrible influence."

Loki just grinned proudly.

"I do not agree with that implication," JARVIS said haughtily. "I am perfectly capable of being mischievous on my own."

"Oh *god*," Tony groaned. "Please, just... if you're going to go all Skynet on me, do it when I have an alibi, at least?"

"My, my, Stark," said Loki, his grin showing far too many teeth. "That sounded surprisingly close to a *blessing*."

“How the hell did I end up being the sane one in this family?” Tony sighed, which only served to set Loki off again. Which, of course, Tony really didn’t mind half so much as he made out. Loki’s laugh - when it wasn’t masquerading as an evil cackle - was quite refreshing to hear.

Civil Law

Chapter Summary

“Tony!” Steve snapped over the coms. “Can you stop flirting and concentrate?”

Over the past year or so Tony had grown remarkably adept at dodging Steve’s calls, but when he received a message that said nothing other than the simple words ‘*We need to talk*’, Tony had JARVIS connect a video call to Cap right away.

“Oh,” said Tony, staring at the face of the Secretary of State. He’d never liked Ross, not after the way that the guy had treated Bruce.

And— *oh, god. Bruce.*

“All right,” Tony said. “I’m on my way, I’ll use the suit. Give me a couple of hours.”

“What?” Steve asked in surprise, exchanging a glance with Ross. “Tony, you don’t even know what I want to say. You’ve been avoiding us for months.”

“Yep, and I’m ending that now, see you in a bit.” He disconnected the call without even acknowledging Ross, and then immediately began speaking to JARVIS.

“J, ready a suit, one of the fast ones. We need to get to New York, ASAP. Bruce is still at the Tower and I’m not letting him face Ross without backup for any longer than he has to.”

“Would the other Avengers not back him up in a fight?” Loki asked from behind, and Tony jumped, having not realised that the god was even in the room.

“They would,” Tony said. “But that’s not the sort of back up that I’m talking about. Ross... is going to bring out a few unpleasant memories, and he’ll probably enjoy it.”

“If you are truly worried about Banner,” Loki said, a hesitancy in his eyes that Tony didn’t quite understand, “I can get you to New York far quicker than your suit can.”

“I know what Ross is like,” Tony said, shaking his head. “I know you can look after yourself, but— I’m not going to let him anywhere near you, okay? I don’t know what he’ll do, but I know it won’t be good.”

“He would be no threat to me.”

“Maybe,” Tony sighed. “But it’s a risk that I’m not willing to take. I don’t want you even further on everyone’s bad side than you already are.”

“Then at least let me take you most of the way,” Loki said, and Tony was relieved that he didn’t argue. “Take your time, decide what you are going to do, and when you’re ready I’ll drop you on the outskirts of the city. No one else need know.”

“All right,” Tony agreed. “Thank you.”

“Just promise me one thing.” Loki’s eyes were burning as they bore into Tony’s. “I know how you can spend hours with Doctor Banner, but promise me that you... I just mean, please do not forget—“

“Spit it out,” Tony said, narrowing his eyes. But surely Loki wasn't going to—

“I do not *share*, Stark,” Loki growled.

Oh, so he *was* going there.

“Seriously, Loki?” Tony snorted. Sure, Brucie was awesome, but Tony had more than enough mean, green, and brilliant right in front of him, and he wasn’t about to let him go. “Trust me, there isn’t any chance of that happening.” Then he pulled Loki down to remind him of exactly *why* he didn’t have anything to worry about.

“All right,” Loki breathed against Tony’s lips, his voice sending shudders down Tony’s spine. “No mortal could hope to compete with me, anyway.”

Tony laughed, and kissed him again.

He still had JARVIS ready the fastest suit, not sure if any of the others would notice a difference but not wanting to take the chance that they might. He had JARVIS brief him on what was going on at the Tower - a discussion about a new official agreement between the Avengers and the UN, though JARVIS didn’t have all the details - and he made sure that he had the updates on Ross’ most recent movements.

But even with his eagerness to get to the Tower for Bruce’s sake, he found himself hesitating when it came time to leave.

“I hate this,” Tony sighed, resting his head against Loki’s shoulder while the god ran his fingers through Tony’s hair. “I’m going to miss you.”

“And I, you,” Loki said. “But I will be fine, I have things to do.”

“You’re not going to keep looking for that enhanced, are you?” Tony asked. Loki had been searching on and off once the more pressing matter of JARVIS’ recovery had been resolved, but he’d had little luck. While he could find traces of the enhanced’s influence all over Eastern Europe - Serbia, Romania, Hungary, and then finally in western Slovakia - it seemed that she was able to block her magical trace from Loki, even when he used the idea Tony had utilised with JARVIS and tried to use the Mind Stone as a magnet. Nothing had worked, but Loki wasn’t giving up.

“I will find her eventually,” said Loki, the familiar fire that was always present when Tony mentioned *her* returning. “But, no. I have decided to use this time to rest and think of a

new plan of attack. JARVIS has suggested some films for me to watch.” Then his eyes softened. “Perhaps in a few days, when you are done with Ross, I will join you.”

“You’re not worried?” Tony asked. “What if Thor does something? I don’t think he’d hurt you, but... you said he wants justice, and he doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy to turn a blind eye.”

“Thor will tell Odin where I am,” Loki admitted, “But I doubt that he will try to take me to Asgard again so long as he knows I am with you. You are not only Thor’s shield brother but also an integral piece in the Midgard’s line of defence. He will not risk your injury.”

“So you’re not using my house as a hiding place any more,” Tony summarised, pulling back to look Loki in the eye. “You’re just using *me* as a shield instead.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Does that bother you?”

“No,” Tony easily admitted. “But you do realise that this isn’t going to work, right? You’ve been dancing around the actual problem for *years* now.”

“I’ve survived so far,” Loki said.

“You’ve been sticking bandaids on bullet holes and you know it,” Tony countered. “Pretty soon it’s all going to collapse in on you, and you won’t be able to stick your head in the sand any more.”

Loki scrunched his nose adorably. “You are mixing your metaphors,” he complained.

“Doesn’t mean I’m not right, though.”

“And now you’re using double negatives.”

“I thought you liked chaos in all aspects of life?” Tony grinned. “Being the god of it, and all.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” Loki sighed, taking no notice of the jibe. “I refuse to go to Asgard, and that is the home of the *actual problem*, as you put it.”

“I’m not asking you to walk into a trap,” Tony assured him. “I don’t want you caught, either. I mean, come on, that should be obvious. I’m just saying that maybe you should talk to your brother, that’s all.”

“He is *not* my brother,” Loki said, and his voice wasn’t unnecessarily harsh but the intention was clear.

“All right,” Tony sighed. “Sorry. But seriously, I don’t think Thor actually wants to throw you in jail.”

“Odin will execute me,” Loki replied, and oh, yeah, Tony remembered him saying something about that before.

“Well I don’t think he’s aiming for that, either,” Tony said. “I mean, last time I saw him, I’d say he was definitely going more for the redemption angle.”

Loki didn’t even need to utter a single word— the way his lips pursed and his eyes lifted skyward showcased his incredulity *perfectly*.

“Yeah, I know,” Tony snorted. “*Ridiculous*. You’d never settle for the boredom of doing good— It’s like he doesn’t know you at all.”

Of course, it was only two days later that Loki ended up helping out on an Avengers’ mission, and it was anything but *boring*.



By the time Tony arrived in New York, Ross was already gone and Bruce was seated at the bar with the biggest mug of herbal tea Tony had ever seen. As such, rather than being left with an arrogant dick of a politician to verbally roast, Tony was presented with a huge wad of paper and an order to read it all through *properly, Tony, this is important*.

Steve watched with a careful frown while Tony read the documents Ross had left at the Tower, arms crossed and standing over the conference table.

“Do you mind?” Tony asked after five solid minutes of hovering.

“We need to discuss this as a team,” Steve replied. “The others have read it already—“

“And I’m going to need some peace if I’m going to get through this,” Tony replied. “*And* some coffee, so if you want to make yourself useful...”

Steve left in a huff, and Tony was finally left in peace.

The document was dense and seeping with legal jargon, and Tony was only a couple of pages in before he was already asking JARVIS call one of the best SI lawyers up from legal ten floors down.

“I know you’re not contracted to help out with Avengers stuff,” Tony told her as she took a seat opposite. “But I’ll pay you overtime.”

The lawyer, predictably, asked for that in writing, and by the time Tony had fished an old napkin out of his pocket to scribble on Steve had returned with two steaming mugs.

“Ah, perfect timing,” Tony said as he signed the napkin with a flourish. “Steve, this is Ms Nicole Goodman.” He nodded to the brunet, who gave Steve a smile. “Ms Goodman, Captain Rogers.”

“Tony,” Steve sighed. “You’re not just going to get her to read it for you, are you?”

“Of course he is,” Ms Goodman replied dryly, one carefully plucked eyebrow raising over the edge of her square-rimmed glasses. “That’s my job.”

When Steve looked confused, Tony frowned. “Are you telling me you *didn't* have a lawyer look over this?” he asked in disbelief. “Seriously? I’ve been looking over business agreements my whole life, and even I’m finding this one difficult to process.”

“Ross advised that we not show it to anyone else,” Steve explained. “He didn’t explicitly say that we *couldn't* but…”

“Everyone has a right to an attorney, Cap— the UN has mandated that *themselves*.”

Steve nodded, and sat in the chair beside Tony, passing him one of the mugs and offering the other to the lawyer, who took it gratefully, if a little guiltily.

“I know you didn’t make this for me,” she said, “But I think I’m going to need it.”

“That you will,” said Tony, toasting her with his mug.

It was a long, hard slog. Steve had read bits of the document before and read it again over Tony’s shoulder. They discussed the passages they didn’t understand with Ms Goodman, who had somehow managed, in about five minutes, to procure an electronic copy on her tablet (and truthfully it was that, more than anything, that convinced Tony of her efficiency). Even with two copies of the document and Goodman there to help them through it, it still took hours to get through the whole thing.

Bruce came in with coffee after a while, and stayed when he saw the lawyer, using the opportunity to ask questions of his own.

“Maybe we should get the others in here, too,” Steve suggested.

“Probably a good idea,” said Tony, and after glancing at Goodman for confirmation he said— “JARVIS, get them in here, will you? And make sure to tell them to bring snacks.”

Soon, the conference room became more like the scene of a college study group pulling an all-nighter than anything else. Thor and Clint made good on the snacks, Natasha came stocked with more coffee, and the table became spread with packets of food and steaming mugs. Natasha brought notepads and biros as well, and between the lot of them they began the task of translating the Accords into simple English.

Goodman took the chaos like a champ, willing to explain everything calmly and in varying metaphors so that Thor, Bruce, and everyone in between could understand.

It only took about.

Eight hours.

Or so.

Tony lost track.

But he was bloody glad that Thor had taken ‘snacks’ to mean ‘every item of food in the entire Tower’, that was for sure.

Clint had fallen asleep a couple hours before, and he jumped out his skin when Goodman stood, her chair scraping loudly across the floor.

“If you require any more assistance, you know where to find me,” she said. “Good night, everyone.”

“Thank you,” Tony said.

“Really,” Steve added. “We would have been lost without your help.”

“Keep paying me the way you did today, and I’ll be up here whenever you need,” she replied.

“We’ll probably need you tomorrow,” said Steve, and Clint groaned loud enough for the lot of them. “We understand this, now, but we’re going to need advice on how to proceed.”

“Not tomorrow,” Thor said immediately. His head was resting on the table, his arms spread flat in front of him.

“Agreed,” said Tony. “We need a break. Day after?”

Ms Goodman gave a toothy smile. “Certainly. I shall be here Thursday morning, then, bright and early.”

She certainly hadn’t been exaggerating.

“There’s such a thing as too keen, Ms Goodman,” Tony complained when he entered the kitchen on Thursday morning to find her already in conversation with Steve.

“We need to get this sorted as soon as we can, Tony,” Steve said. “The UN only gave us one week to make a decision.”

“That’s cruel,” Tony groaned. “This thing is a brick. It’s almost like they wanted us to sign it without properly understanding it.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” said Goodman. “Now—“

“Let me have my coffee first,” Tony said, stepping past Steve. “God, what is it with people and trying to make me do things at seven a.m.?”

Clint emerged next, snagging an apple and sitting at the counter to eat it in silence. Bruce wandered in looking almost worse than Tony had, and he wondered if the stress was getting to the guy. Natasha, of course, walked in from the direction of the elevator, dressed sharply and looking bright and bushy tailed - if anyone could ever describe her as bushy tailed, that is. They probably wouldn't live to see another day.

“That’s unnatural,” Tony said, gesturing to her general put-togetherness.

“Morning to you, too, Stark,” she said, leaning against the counter by Clint. “Where’s Thor?”

“I think he’s hiding,” said Clint. “He said last night that he’d rather go ten rounds against an angry Frost Giant without the help of Mjölnir before he sat through another meeting with the lawyer again.”

“That’s slightly offensive,” said Goodman.

“I’m sure he doesn’t mean it personally,” Steve soothed. “He just doesn’t deal well with sitting still for long periods of time.”

None of them did, which was evidenced by the dawdling that took place while Goodman tried to usher them back into the conference room—

But even more so by the honest to god *cheer* that went through the room only moments after they had settled when JARVIS informed them all that they were needed to solve a ‘situation at the UN Headquarters involving flying robots and a bomb.’

“And that’s exciting?” Goodman asked, glancing around in shock as they rushed for the exit.

“Highlight of the day so far,” Tony answered, already signalling for JARVIS to send him a suit.

The UN was only a two minute flight from the Tower but they still took the quinjet, not willing to try and fight their way through the morning traffic. As they drew closer, it was easy to see that JARVIS’ description of the scene was fairly accurate. There were about a half dozen robots in green capes flocking the skies above the UN Headquarters, and a constant parade of delegates and other staff streaming from the doors, overseen by the SSS.

“It’s Doom again,” Bruce groaned.

“Doom?” Tony asked, confused.

“Victor von Doom, the king of Latveria,” Steve explained. “He’s been popping up over the past couple years— he was on SHIELD’s radar. Since they fell we’ve obviously been picking up the slack, but he’s mostly harmless, nothing we felt the need to call you in for— he seems bored, more than anything. He likes testing out his robots on us, easily dealt with. He must be in town for the Accords.”

“And he’s taken the opportunity to plant a bomb in the UN Headquarters,” JARVIS added.

“Well, clearly he’s not playing around any more,” said Clint. “JARVIS, are the bots any more advanced than they used to be?”

“No, Mr Barton,” JARVIS replied. “Small upgrades have been made, but they otherwise remain the same.”

“Right,” said Clint. “You just gotta smash ‘em, Stark, there’s nothing fancy to destroying them. Arrow through the head or the torso knocks them out if it gets through the armour—you’ve just got to hit something vital and they drop like flies.”

“Some of them explode,” added Natasha.

“Oh yeah, that too,” Clint agreed. “Watch out for that.”

“JARVIS, get in contact with whoever is in charge down there,” Steve ordered with a slight glance to Tony, and Tony nodded in agreement. This was the actual *UN*— even though they hadn’t signed yet, they needed to play by the rules laid out by the Avengers Accords. If they didn’t, it would be sure to bite them in the ass, later.

“Connecting,” JARVIS said.

“This is Daniel Trent of the United Nations Security and Safety Service, and I am in command of this situation. You’re Captain America?”

“Yes, Sir,” said Steve. “We’re here to help— how has the situation been handled so far?”

“There’s a bomb on one of the lower floors of the building, big enough to take out three blocks. We’ve got a bomb squad in there but they don’t think they’re going to be able to diffuse it. Our priority is evac but until we can scramble the copters we’ve got no way of getting at the bots up high.”

“We can deal with the doombots, you focus on getting those people out,” Steve started, but then he stopped himself. “If that’s amenable to you, I mean.”

“Yes, go for it,” Trent snapped. “And hurry.”

“Pull your bomb squad too, if they’re struggling.” Tony suggested. “My armour gives me more protection than theirs will, and you know I’m capable.”

There was a small pause. “I’ll do that, Mr Stark. Bomb’s on the fourth floor, south side.”

“Move out,” Steve ordered, “And everyone, make sure you keep your coms in place!”

Tony flew from the quinjet at the same time as Thor, and by the time he’d reached the south side of the building two of the Doombots had already met their ends at the blunt edge of Thor’s hammer. The bots, it seemed, were not going to be difficult to dispatch.

The bomb, on the other hand, was going to be a problem.

“Sir,” said JARVIS, data dancing across the HUD and only telling Tony what he already knew, obscuring his view of the complex device sitting in front of him.

“I know,” Tony said, gritting his teeth.

“What is it?” Steve asked worriedly.

“It’s nothing,” Tony replied. “It’s fine, you focus on what you’re doing. I’ve got this.”

“The bomb has a tilt fuse as well as a timer,” JARVIS - the traitorous bastard - told them, and Tony heard multiple intakes of breath over the line.

“Guys, come on, I’m not an amateur,” Tony said. “I can handle a little tilt fuse. I mean, bomb squads do it all the time and I’m the guy who used to *make* these things.”

“JARVIS wouldn’t have told us if it was simple,” Steve said. “Tony—“

“Okay, so maybe it’s a little more complex,” he groaned.

JARVIS seemed to take that as his cue. “Most incendiaries that make use of a tilt fuse use mercury switches,” he explained for the benefit of the others, but Tony scrunched his nose at the prospect of having the dire situation laid out for him once again. “Part of their electrical circuit passes through a tube partially filled with liquid mercury. If the mercury shifts, the circuit is completed and the bomb detonates. This one uses a similar concept but with far more intricacy. Instead of a simple tube the device is surrounded by a double helix of glass piping which contains the mercury, calibrated to perfect detail. Even the slightest movement will cause the bomb to detonate.”

“Yeah, so please keep the Hulk at a fair distance,” Tony finished for him. Then he sighed. “The guy behind this is a genius. It’s so perfect that I’m not actually sure how he set this up without it going off.”

“Doom can use magic,” Thor reported, and Tony groaned.

“Well. That makes an unfortunate amount of sense.”

“I will keep the Hulk occupied,” Thor said. “Between his smashing and my electricity the bots out here have already been neutralised.”

“You make it seem like we did *nothing*,” Clint complained.

“You will have peace, Stark,” Thor continued over him.

“Thanks buddy. Not that it looks like it’s going to do me much good.”

“Can you freeze it?” Natasha asked.

“Like I hadn’t thought of that!” Tony snapped. Then he forced himself to take a deep, calming breath. “No, I can’t. Mercury solidifies at thirty-eight below, so to make sure the circuit doesn’t form I have to lower the temperature that far. But if the glass shatters before the bomb disabled that microsecond of movement while the mercury holds in place will be enough to trigger detonation, and that *will* happen if I lower the temperature as far as I would need to solidify the mercury. Even lowering the temperature slowly would be too risky, I don’t have the time to lower it at a pace that would have even *half* a chance.”

“So what *can* you do?”

“I’m working on it,” Tony said. “All I need to do is stabilise this somehow. Once that’s done, the actual incendiary will be easy to dismantle.”

“Famous last words,” said Clint.

“And that won’t help if you can’t get through the mercury switch,” Natasha commented.

“Don’t you all have your own things to be doing?” Tony snapped.

“I have found a viable solution, Sir,” said JARVIS.

“Yeah?” Tony asked, breathing in relief. “What is it?”

“A plan with a very high chance of success rate,” JARVIS replied. “Initiating now.” Then the HUD showed a *very* familiar display.

“JARVIS,” Tony exclaimed. “Don’t you dare—“

“This had better be good, Stark. The bespectacled child is about to be killed by a chess set,” Loki drawled, his voice loud and clear through the call JARVIS had just connected.

“JARVIS, what the hell, man,” Clint complained. “I can’t put up with this.”

“Neither can I,” Tony said. “This is insubordination.”

“Sir, you do not have time to complain about my methods.”

“What’s going on?” Loki asked.

“Tony, is that *Loki*?” Steve cut in.

“Brother?” Thor exclaimed.

“Am I on *speaker*?” Loki asked, affronted.

“Not exactly— you’re connected to the Avengers’ coms,” Tony answered. “Yes, Cap, that’s Loki. Thor, just... just keep it down, will you?”

“Can he help?” Steve asked, and Tony exhaled a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding.

“Well, I suppose this can’t get much worse,” Tony muttered. “Alright, Reindeer Games, listen up. I might have got myself into a bit of a difficult situation.”

“Again?” Loki groaned, and *someone* laughed, though Tony couldn’t quite work out who.

“Hey, you make it seem like I get myself nearly killed on a regular basis which, come on, unfair. It’s only like, at *most*, twice a year.”

“Nearly *killed*?” Loki echoed with a touch of exasperation. “Where are you?”

“I’m in the UN Headquarters, about a half mile east of Avengers Tower. Big rectangular thing by the water, you can’t miss— oh, hey.” JARVIS disconnected the no longer needed call without being asked. “You found me.”

“Is this how it is always going to be between us?” Loki asked dramatically, slipping his phone into a hidden pocket amongst all the black and green leather. “Something goes wrong,

I come to save you. It seems awfully unbalanced.”

“This is only the second time,” Tony pointed out.

Loki shook his head with a grin. “I count four.”

“What? No, this is the *second* time I’ve called you for help—“

“Once with the HYDRA intruder, then with Insight, then Ultron, and now makes *four*.”

“Okay, I’ll give you Ultron, but that first one hardly counts—“

“I feel I must remind you of the time constraint,” JARVIS interrupted.

“Right,” said Tony. “So here’s how this needs to go.”

Tony began to explain the problem to Loki quickly, and Loki nodded half way through and said—

“You need me to hold the mercury in stasis, so that it does not move and the glass remains undamaged while you disable the device.”

“Yeah,” said Tony, relieved to be working with someone who just *got* stuff in the same way he did. It was nice to be able to work at a proper clip. “Let’s do this thing.”

Loki smiled and raised his hands, and the bomb began to glow slightly green. “I’ve cast a shield as well, so that even if your natural inclination for chaos kicks in, you will not be able to kill yourself.”

“I thought you usually benefited from my inclination for *chaos*,” Tony said with a grin. “Besides, there’s no need for worry— you *know* how good I am with my hands.”

“And yet you asked for my help in steadying the mercury,” Loki teased back. “Why should I believe what you claim about your... dexterity?”

Tony’s lips were painted with a sly smile as he stepped out of his suit, trusting in Loki that the protection of the armour was no longer needed. “Perhaps you just need another demonstration?”

“Tony!” Steve snapped over the coms. “Can you *stop* flirting and concentrate?”

“I’m multitasking,” Tony replied, kneeling down beside the bomb and grinning in victory as his hand and the clippers he was holding went in, brushing past the tubes but creating no movement whatsoever. “One more minute.”

“Well I, for one, don’t want to hear it,” Clint butted in. “Shut up and get your fucking ass in gear!”

“Clint!” Tony gasped. “Careful, there’s a nonagenarian on the line, you’re going to damage Steve’s sensibilities!”

“Fuck you, Stark,” Clint replied.

“Nope, that’s Loki’s job,” Tony shot back. A little crude, perhaps, but classic.

Loki snickered, and Tony glanced over to him with a grin. The god was leaning against a wall, cool as a cucumber, seemingly not caring of the fact that there was a bomb capable of levelling three city blocks only yards away.

“As riveting as this conversation is,” Natasha said with an air of practiced patience, “there’s a situation developing down here. A little help would be appreciated.”

“And I’m done,” said Tony, cutting through the last wire. “Okay Lokes, you can let off on the magic.”

Loki waved a dismissive hand, but instead of everything just losing the green shine and going back to how it was before like Tony had expected, the bomb disappeared entirely.

“Or you could just do that,” Tony said, getting to his feet. “Wait– you could have just done that right at the start! Why did you—“

“I didn’t want you feel useless, *darling*,” Loki smirked.

“What is it with you and calling me useless?” Tony complained.

“Not *all* of you,” Loki replied, pushing away from the wall and moving to stand close in Tony’s space. “I believe you were in the middle of telling me just how much you are capable of doing with your hands?”

“*No*,” Steve snapped, and Tony pouted.

“You ruin all my fun,” he said, reluctantly stepping away from his smirking trickster and back into the suit. “All right, Natasha. I’m on my way.”

The ‘situation’ turned out to be that Hulk had eaten three hotdog stands worth of sausages and was still hungry, and had begun a rampage through the streets in an attempt to find more.

“Well,” Tony sighed as he watched Thor trying to coax the Hulk into believing his armful of Pop-Tarts (and Tony *did not* want to know where they had come from) were just as good as hot dogs, “I suppose that at least we’ll never get bored in this job.”

—•—

The fight at the UN, funnily enough, could not have come at a better time. Once the Hulk had finally been calmed and they were able to properly group in the plaza outside the building proper, they were approached by several delegates.

“The Avengers saved our lives today,” one of the officials stated to a news team not long after. “They have saved the lives of countless individuals on countless occasions, and yes, there are often civilians caught in the crossfire– but not today. Today, we saw the UN, the NYPD and the Avengers work as a seamless team. Iron Man was able to diffuse the device

without any damage, and law enforcement taking on evacuation of surrounding areas allowed the Avengers to focus upon the main problem. There were no deaths today, ladies and gentlemen, and while I know that none of us are naïve enough to believe that this will always be the case, I also know that if we ever want a solution to suit us all, we're going to have to work together."

"Wow," Tony whispered to Steve. "She's almost as good at motivational speeches as you are."

"Quiet," Steve hissed back. "We're on camera."

"Cap, talking during a speech is hardly the worst thing someone has filmed me doing."

"What does this mean for the Avengers Accords?" one reporter called out, shoving his microphone forward.

"When Secretary Ross brought the Accords to the Avengers, he gave them one week to decide upon an answer," the delegate replied with a polite smile. "This has not changed, but I will say that what has occurred today has clearly demonstrated to us that the Avengers are willing to cooperate— and we will respond in kind."

"You're going to give them more leeway?"

"When those Accords were planned, it was in the wake of the fall of SHIELD and in the fear of what the Avengers would be capable of if left unchecked. Every single one of us were asking the same question, and somewhere along the line 'what if they go rogue?' transformed into— *when* they go rogue, who will stop them?" The delegate smiled tightly. "I, at least, have been proven wrong. What they did today was no less than heroic. So yes, we are going to give them our *respect*. After all that they have done— do you not believe that they at least deserve that?"

—•—

"I still don't get it," Clint was saying as they touched back down on the roof of Avengers' Tower. "Why did Doom set a bomb and make it so obvious that it was him?"

"Maybe it was to do with the Accords?" Thor suggested.

"Why, though?" Bruce questioned. "Clint's right, it doesn't make sense. If he wanted to stop the Accords, he shouldn't have given the warning of having his doombots arrive a full ten minutes before the bomb was due to explode? And why make it so obvious that it was him?"

"You guys said it earlier— everyone already know who he is, and he has diplomatic immunity," Tony said. "No one would go to war with a tiny European country over this any more than they would for anything else Doom has done, there was very little risk for him."

"So either Doom wanted us to fail and give the UN more fodder to make the Accords harsher, or he wanted us to succeed, and put us more into the public's favour," Steve said as they all piled into the elevator.

“The second seems rather unlikely,” Thor pointed out.

“Or,” said Natasha, “he did not expect us to have already gone through the Accords so thoroughly and was setting us up to make a fool of ourselves.”

“Thank you Ms Goodman,” Bruce muttered. “I suppose the headache was worth it, after all.”

“Whatever his motive, we saved a lot of people today,” Steve said. “That delegate was right, we did well, and I think that if we can get the UN on our side and make them see that we will need to have just a little more freedom of movement than what is currently laid out— this could be a good thing.”

The elevator doors slid open and they all piled back out.

“I agree,” said Tony. “This’ll be good PR, and it might give us better access to things happening in other countries. You know Sokovia wasn’t happy with what went down when we went after the sceptre.”

“About the sceptre—“ Steve started.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Clint interrupted. Tony turned with a question on his lips, but it was unnecessary when he saw where Clint was looking. Because, lounging casually on the couch in the Avengers’ living room, was—

“Loki!” Tony exclaimed brightly, striding forward and leaning down to pull Loki in for a kiss.

“That,” said Bruce with a frown, “Is *never* going to not be weird. I mean, I support you, Tony, but...”

"Weird," Clint agreed, speaking more harshly than Bruce.

“To each his own,” Tony sighed, throwing himself on the couch and leaning into Loki’s side. “I didn’t expect you to be here, though.”

“Your team have wanted to talk to me for months,” Loki reminded him. “And now, with these Accords in play—“

“They don’t effect you, though,” Tony said. “You’re not an Avenger.”

“No,” Loki agreed. “But *you* are, and if I plan to stay at your side - which I most certainly do - then I should at least know what they are.” Loki grinned. “If only so that I can exploit what they say to make your lives more difficult.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but smiled nonetheless.

The Avengers had come into the living room properly while they were talking, Bruce the only one game enough to sit down, though he did so on an armchair away from Tony and Loki’s couch. Steve and Natasha stood warily by the windows, while Clint kept back by the

bar, his fingers twitching as if he could reach for his bow. Thor, meanwhile, stood awkwardly in the middle, fiddling with his sleeves and quite clearly unsure of how to proceed.

“Really?” Tony asked them. “You were perfectly fine when Loki was helping me with the bomb that was about to blow up the UN.”

“I wouldn’t use the word *fine*,” Clint started, but Steve cut across him.

“Loki, you were a help, so, thank you,” he said. “You’re right, I have wanted to talk to you.”

“Go on then,” said Loki. “I’m waiting.”

No one moved or said a thing, unsure of where to start.

“Basically we just want to make sure you’re not going to go evil and try to take over the world again,” Clint said after a few moments of silence. “Because we all know you’re not suddenly going to come to the good side, but Tony seems invested in you so we’re going to have to put up with you.”

“That is mature of you,” Loki said, nodding.

“Doesn’t mean I like you, though,” Clint snapped.

“And it doesn’t mean that we won’t take you out if we need to,” Natasha added.

“I’m well aware of your thoughts on issues of this nature, Agent Romanov,” Loki said lowly. “But I promise you that I do not feel the same way. So long as Stark remains on this team, you’ll see no violence from me.”

Natasha blinked in surprise, but otherwise gave no indication that she accepted his words.

“Well,” said Steve. “That’s all we wanted to hear, right guys?”

Loki snorted. “So naïve.”

“They’re trusting,” Tony corrected. “And they trust *me*, not you, so you can leave that alone, too.”

“Brother, if you are willing to work with the Avengers—“ Thor started, but Loki stiffened and shook his head.

“You’ve misinterpreted me, Thor. I’m not working with you— I’m merely agreeing to stay out of your way.” Loki was tense, but Thor didn’t seem to be able to take a hint.

“Come with me to Asgard. It will not be the same, your actions upon Svartalfheim have not been overlooked.”

“All I did was save your life,” Loki argued, and Tony could feel Loki almost vibrating in anger against his side, so different from how he had been when dealing with Clint. “I know

how much Asgard loves *you*, but that will not be enough to redeem what I have done in the eyes of the Allfather.”

“That isn’t true,” Thor said, moving forward again so that he was only a few yards from where Loki and Tony were sitting on the couch. “Loki, you are his son—“

“No, I am not *that*,” Loki spat, standing suddenly and causing Tony to lose his balance, almost falling into the cushions of the couch. “I am many things to the Allfather - criminal, monster, *pawn* - but I have never been his son.”

“Loki, that’s *not true*.” Thor stepped up once more, the space between the two brothers now less than a yard.

They couldn’t have looked more different, though it had nothing to do with their appearance or their clothes. Loki’s face was pinched with more than just anger and rage, strained with an acute pain that only those who know what it is to have their whole life upended could understand. His fists were clenched at his sides and he stood straight, though his shoulders were slightly hunched as if he wished he could be anywhere else. Thor, in contrast, stood loose and easy, his hands slightly outstretched like he wanted nothing more than to pull Loki in for a hug. His eyes were wide and his expression open, *pleading*.

“He cares for you still,” Thor tried.

“He has sent Einherjar after me,” Loki snarled. “If he cared, why would he do such a thing? They came bearing weapons, they followed me to Midgard— Anthony could have been harmed!”

The Avengers’ broke their volley of glancing between the two brothers to look to Tony, who shrugged.

“I chased them out, it was fine,” he said.

“*I* chased them out, and it could have ended far differently had they not underestimated you,” Loki replied harshly.

“Loki, that’s enough!” Thor snapped. “You need to stop interrupting me and *listen*, or I shall be forced to take you against your will!”

Loki’s clenched hands began to glow green, and Tony knew that if he didn’t want to end up with *another* destroyed room he was going to have to make a move.

“Loki,” said Tony, stepping closer and touching the god’s arm lightly, “You need to calm down.”

“I’m not going back to Asgard,” Loki said, but his hands faded to normal as he turned to face Tony.

“Loki, see reason—“

“Shut up, Thor,” Tony said, cutting in before Loki had the chance. “Just give us a minute.” When Thor reluctantly nodded, Tony turned back to Loki. “I know that, and no one is going to make you. But you need to calm down, because Thor is right.”

“I’m not—“

“Not about Asgard, fuck Asgard,” Tony said. “But he does deserve to be listened to.”

“Why?” Loki asked, his eyes narrowed.

“Because, as much as you try to deny it, he does care about you.”

“I do,” Thor said immediately, jumping on the opportunity. “Loki, you may not see me as your brother, but you will always be *mine*, and I give you my word that I am telling you the truth when I say that Odin does not want you dead nor even rotting in a cell!”

“I don’t believe you,” Loki hissed.

“Loki, *when* have I ever lied to you before?” Thor asked. “Name *one* time.”

Loki looked down, averting his gaze.

“Father doesn’t want to imprison you— he believes that you have suffered plenty, and that your actions in the battle with the Dark Elves was enough to at least grant you a level of clemency. If you return with me to Asgard and prove your remorse for the way you were in the past then you will not be prevented from returning to Midgard, I guarantee it.”

Loki was silent, and with the way his head was downturned his hair obscured his face and Tony couldn’t see how he was receiving the information.

“So... this is *literally* just a family feud,” Clint said, breaking the moment. “God, we’re trapped in a sitcom.”

“Are you telling me,” Tony asked in slow disbelief, his brain working faster than sense. “That after all of this running and messing around and destroying my living room that you could have solved everything just by going up there and *apologising*?”

“I would never apologise to him,” Loki snarled, his face suddenly twisting into hatred so cutting that Tony took a step back. “He does not deserve my forgiveness, let alone my *remorse*.”

“Loki—“

“No, Thor! I will not allow all I have been through to be belittled by the Allfather, and I will not deny myself the recompense of the pain he has caused!” Loki’s eyes were hard as he glared at his brother. “Do you understand me? I will *not*.”

Tony lurched forward, the pain on Loki’s face so raw that Tony just wanted to hug him, or hold him, or *something*, but his outstretched hand passed through thin air. He was too slow, and Loki was gone.

“J?” Tony asked, turning away from the Avengers. “Where is he?”

“Mr Liesmith has returned to Malibu, Sir.”

Tony sighed in relief, and turned for the balcony. “Bye then,” he said. “Don’t wait up.”

“Tony, stop,” Steve started, but Tony ignored him, letting JARVIS close the suit around his body before jumping out into the open sky.



When Tony caught up to Loki a couple of hours later, he was sitting on the edge of the cliff outside the house, his feet dangling over the edge, staring out to the deep blue of the Pacific. Loki said nothing when Tony approached but nor did he protest, so Tony perched next to him, close enough that their arms brushed together lightly.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said. Loki’s head turned slightly in his direction, the only indication that he had heard. “What I said was insensitive,” he continued. “I know what it’s like to have an absent dad, and while I may *hate* it I know when to fake a grovel in order to get what I want. But I don’t know what you’ve been through, and I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

A few moments of silence followed during which Tony didn’t think he was going to receive an answer, left sitting cold and tense. But Loki, it seemed, had been merely gathering his thoughts— or, perhaps, his courage.

“When I think of Odin,” Loki started, his voice low and quiet, “I find myself conflicted. I hate what he did, I hate the lies, I hate the way he took every part of me and twisted it around so that I never *knew* what was wrong with me until I found out that I was the very monster that my own brother had vowed to destroy. And yet, he is still the man who saw the child of his greatest enemy, the child of a *monster*, and found it within himself to give that child a home. He was not the best of parents, but he *was* my father.” Loki sighed. “But now, after all that I have done, he will never again see me the same way. Maybe it was inevitable, but I... I wish that things could go back.”

“Do you?” Tony asked, reaching for Loki’s hand and twining their fingers together. “Do you really?”

“I miss the ignorance,” Loki admitted. “I miss just knowing who I was— the second prince of Asgard, Odin and Frigga’s son. I miss how easy things used to be.”

“But you didn’t know, not really,” Tony pointed out. “Yeah, so you’ve always been a Frost Giant, and that doesn’t change who you are on its own. But it *is* a part of you, and you know what? Loki, I like the person you are now, and you wouldn’t be that if you had stayed up on Asgard in your golden palace.”

Loki’s smile was bitterly sad. “You don’t know what I did to get here.”

“I know *you*, though,” Tony said. “And okay, I can guess that what you did in the past was pretty bad. But Thor was still protective over you when we first met, so—“

“Thor is a terrible judge of character,” Loki said.

“You know what? I don’t think he actually is.”

“Even if that is so, he is blind when it comes to me, even I can see that,” Loki continued. “I was his younger brother for over a thousand years, and he *is* protective. Those sorts feelings linger.”

Tony simply grinned, and Loki, realising that he had been manipulated, rolled his eyes.

“Fine. *Fine*. So maybe Thor forgives me, but you... you are too good, and too important for me to risk scaring away. I know that it is selfish—”

“Don’t put words in my mouth,” Tony said. “And yeah, maybe it isn't quite kosher that you're hiding things because you’re afraid that it’ll make me cut and run. I thought you knew me better than that. Like I said, I saw you during the Chitauri invasion– and you don’t know enough about my past to judge me.”

“Barton gave me a few details,” Loki admitted.

“So you know, then, that I built weapons?”

“Of course.”

“And you know that they killed thousands, *hundreds of thousands* of people? That they were sold under the table so that they were killing not only people America deemed to be bad but Americans as well? That, had I bothered to look, I would have found out easily but I didn’t care enough? I enjoyed making those weapons, I liked making things that explode– and honestly, I still do. I *love* it, and in trying to stop my company from creating weapons I only seem to have made the situation worse. So yeah, my own hands are not exactly clean here, Loki, and even if they were, I am in no position to judge you.”

“I attempted genocide,” Loki said, the speed at which the words fell from his lips betraying his desire to spit them out as quickly as possible, like a poisoned morsel itching upon his tongue.

The admission was a shock, and Tony paused.

“Okay,” he said after a moment, his tone carefully bland. “Continue.”

Loki looked up and caught Tony’s eye, perhaps masochistically needing to see Tony’s every tiny reaction. “I found out that I was Frost Giant just after Thor was exiled,” he said. “I wanted to prove that I wasn’t one of them, that I was still loyal to the Aesir. I had already killed their king– Laufey, my real father. But that wasn’t enough, I needed to do something more than that. Thor had wished to destroy them all only days before. I did not see that what I was doing was wrong, and I think perhaps that makes it even worse.”

It was Tony’s turn to remain silent, though he managed to hold Loki’s gaze.

“Thor stopped me,” Loki continued. “And while I am grateful for that, I admit that my remorse for my actions stems more from what happened to me afterward and from the way that *Thor* reacted than from any empathy for the Jotnar. I *do* feel some remorse for them, I suppose, though I am perfectly aware that does not make what I did any less horrific. And if my past actions mean that I end up losing you...” Loki’s eyes glazed over, his mind clearly far away. “No. That’s not— I would *not* wish to go back.” Loki’s expression sharpened as he refocused on Tony. “Maybe what I did was wrong, but it brought me here, and if I went back, I would do the same. If only because I believe that when I am with you... you make me better. You make me *want* to be better.”

Tony still could not think of a single thing to say. What could anyone say to that?

Maybe it put Tony’s morality into question - but when had it ever not been? He’d gone into this with his eyes open, he knew what Loki was. And maybe he had never expected attempted *genocide*... but it was still *Loki*, and for Tony, that’s all Loki needed to be in order to rate as more than good enough. Tony wasn’t blind, he knew that Loki wasn’t perfect. He had flaws, some that ran deeper than others, and Tony knew that Loki would never quite be sane. But that didn’t matter, not to Tony— without all of it he wouldn’t be Loki any more, and then he *wouldn’t* be the person that Tony was in love with.

Deciding that actions spoke louder anyway, Tony leaned in and wrapped his arms around Loki’s shoulders, holding him close and nuzzling into the soft hair by Loki’s ear.

“I’m not letting you go,” Tony whispered. “Even *you* aren’t going to be able to make me.”

Loki shuddered as the tension bled from his body, relaxing into Tony’s hold, his hands gripping tightly to the back of Tony’s shirt. They sat like that for a while, clinging to each other and taking comfort from the fact that they were in the present, and they could move on.

Tony couldn’t say how much time passed before Loki finally spoke.

“Thank you,” Loki whispered, turning his head to kiss Tony’s cheek.

“Don’t thank me.” Tony shook his head. “That’s not how this works, okay? I’m here for you. Now, come on,” Tony said, standing and pulling Loki back upright by his hand. “You may be impervious to the cold, but I’m freezing my ass off out here. Can we head somewhere more comfortable?”

Loki refused to let Tony go far, tugging on his hand until he was tucked back into Loki’s side, almost like he was afraid that Tony was going to disappear. JARVIS let them in without needing a key, and without speaking they made their way to the bedroom, just needing more time to be close to one another. Tony had plans, and they all involved sleeping and cuddling and not moving for at least a day. What with waking up early and fighting and news broadcasts and flying across the country and emotional breakdowns, Tony was utterly *exhausted*.

As with all great plans, however, it was not to be, for standing in the middle of the *fucking* living room were six Einherjar, armed to the teeth.

Bloody Thor. Screw everything Tony had been telling Loki for the past few hours, the next time Tony saw the god of thunder he was *dead*.

“Loki Odinson,” one of the soldiers said, “We’re here under the authority of Odin Allfather to bring you back to—“

“Okay, *no*,” Tony snarled, pulling away from Loki and giving the signal for JARVIS to begin assembling the suit around him. As he did so, he began to walk toward the Einherjar, flexing his gauntleted hands. “I have had a terrible day, and I am tired, and I most certainly have had it up to *here* with you goons wandering in like you own the place and destroying my house. I have had *enough* of you thinking that I am a pushover, and I will not let you get away with trying to take what is *mine*.”

The Einherjar looked visibly worried, some even taking a step back, though the one at the front with the fanciest helmet held his sword before him and stood firm.

“Stand aside. We have been given orders to spare you, but we will attack if you stand in our way,” he said, his voice gravelly.

“No, I think I’m exactly where I want to be,” Tony replied, holding steady.

“I have heard the stories, Man of Iron, and they say that you are a force to be reckoned with. But you are still only mortal, and a hero at that. I know you will do what is best for your world, and I *know* that you will not attempt to harm us.”

“Trust me,” Tony growled as his faceplate clicked closed and he powered up the repulsors. “You. Know. *Nothing*.”

Two went down in the first couple of seconds, blasts to the head at a power level enough to knock an Aesir unconscious but not enough to kill. The rest used those seconds to press the advantage of their numbers, charging forward as one. Usually, Tony would have shot upward but that would leave Loki in their path, so Tony directed power to his boots and flew forward instead. He ploughed into the lead soldier, his shoulder connecting with the Einherji’s abdomen, slamming him into the wall behind. The others, as Tony predicted, turned to face their fallen captain, giving Tony the opportunity to spin around and take another one out with the repulsors in his palms. The two that were left separated, one going left and the other right. Tony fired but only hit the one on the left on the leg, sending him down but not out. The other managed to get in close, landing a hit to Tony’s head. But as strong as the Asgardian was, Tony’s helmet held up, though he knew he was going to get a *cracking* headache. The next time the guy tried Tony caught the sword and twisted— the soldier was too strong for Tony to take it entirely but he did jerk forward so that they were chest to chest, and one half-powered unibeam later and the guy was out for the count.

One left.

“Are you going to try again, or are you going to smarten up and just take your buddies back home?” Tony asked him.

“Don’t,” the head Einherji croaked to his subordinate. Once he had pulled himself out of the wall, he turned to Tony, his voice strengthening a little. “You are a formidable opponent, Man of Iron. But Prince Loki is coming with us.”

“Like hell he is,” Tony said. “JARVIS, I’m tired of this. Let’s smoke these bastards.”

Tony jumped into the air, powered up *all* of the repulsors on all of his limbs—

“When you see Odin,” Tony snarled as the Einherjar below him raised their weapons, “tell him that if he wants Loki, he’s going to have to go through *me*.”

—and then, Tony *spun*.

The living room was destroyed again, but this time, the Einherjar stayed down.

“Well, you were a great help,” Tony said as he stepped out of the armour and went back to where Loki stood behind a shimmering green shield, though he didn’t really mean it— he’d needed the outlet. He didn’t feel half so tired any longer, the adrenaline having burned the exhaustion from his system— though he knew it would return with a vengeance. “Would you mind...?”

Loki nodded, and a moment later the soldiers were gone.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” said Loki, though he gazed at Tony with awe.

“Yes, I damn well should have,” Tony replied. “In fact, that’s probably one of the few moments in my life that I can honestly say with all my heart that I do not regret in the *slightest*.”

Despite Loki’s reaction to the last time Tony had said something like this he pressed on, because he had been wrong, before. It *needed* to be said. It was a desire that had moved past a simple burning itch and into the territory of a dangerous ache, a truth that was threatening to burst free because it was impossible to constrain.

“No one is going to lay a finger on you,” Tony said, his words laced with brutal honesty despite the softness with which he spoke. “I don’t care if they’re gods, or HYDRA, or United Nations, or Avengers, or even if the whole fucking world comes crashing at our door. I will fight every single one of them before I let them take you away from me.”

This time Loki smiled in the face of Tony’s confession, and Tony knew that the god had understood what he was trying to say.

No more miscommunications.

“I know,” Loki said, his eyes shining brightly. “I love you, as well.”

Tony beamed like a sappy fool, feeling a piece of himself he hadn’t even realised he was missing slide into place.

“I *do* love you, Loki,” he said, stepping close to entwine their bodies, limbs tangling perfectly just as they always had. “God, I love you.”

And maybe the Einherjar would come back, or maybe Odin would send something worse. But standing there in the middle of the rubble, holding Loki close while the god pressed a kiss to his smiling lips—

Well, Tony just felt like he’d be able to take on anything the world could throw at him, because any amount of pain would be worth it— if it meant that he got to keep this.

Fickle War

Chapter Summary

“I’m beginning to think I should be added to the Avengers’ payroll,” Loki said the moment the device was in place.

“I hate to break it to you, dude, but we don’t get paid,” said Clint, his breathing laboured.

Chapter Notes

this chapter is basically 100% shameless self indulgence and I would apologise but I had way too much fun writing it. Also, yes, there are now seven chapters and probably a sequel because apparently there is no stopping this fic

The interim period they had been granted was up, and the time had come to sign the Accords. The conference was in the Vienna International Centre, which was annoying, because why couldn’t they have signed the damn thing in the perfectly good United Nations HQ in New York? Well, okay, so they had legitimate security concerns after what had happened there only the week before. But *still*.

Vienna was a hell of a long way from Malibu, and Tony had left JARVIS and Loki in charge of the most recently required repairs to the living room. The possibilities of what he might return home to was rather worrying.

Thor had been left to hold down the fort in New York, but otherwise all the Avengers were in attendance. The majority of the delegates were welcoming to them, though many still seemed wary. Especially, it seemed, of Bruce. Painfully aware of that fact, Bruce kept as quiet as he could and stood close to Steve, which seemed to calm most worries. But there was no hostility, and even the delegate from Sokovia at least greeted the less public heroes who had joined the party.

Rhodey had come to sign, stating that even though he still worked in the military, he was just as much an ‘enhanced being’ as Tony was, and would therefore sign in solidarity. Sam Wilson, pilot of the Falcon wings, had come for the same reasons, both he and Rhodey arriving together. They’d struck up a friendship at one of the Avengers’ get-togethers, and while they were incredibly different personalities they seemed to bond over being friends with bull-headed idiots who had no sense of self-preservation.

Tony knew that there would be others who would need to sign in the future— the kid that swung around Queens in a onesie, the quiet one that took the name of Hell’s Kitchen a little too seriously, and the shrinking dude JARVIS had caught on camera stealing from an old SI warehouse just to name a few. But Tony understood why they wouldn’t trust— the Avengers needed to be the first step, and after all, the others were small scale in comparison. They didn’t deal with the world ending events, not that Tony knew of, anyway. They weren’t directly involved in the level of property damage and loss of life that was synonymous with the Avengers, or even with what Tony had done all by himself as Iron Man. They weren’t *normal*, sure, but they weren’t entirely in the same ballpark as the Avengers.

The Avengers Accords would have to be dealt with a step at a time and very, very carefully. It was possible that they would have to be altered, maybe with subsections for the small time heroes— and certainly with a separate treaty for Thor.

The UN seemed to understand that. Unfortunately, that was most of the reason as to why the conference was so long and boring.

“Can’t we just sign already?” Tony whined.

“You’re the one that wanted this sorted *properly*,” Steve snapped. “You can’t complain now.”

“I called the lawyer so it would make this easier,” Tony replied. “Not so that we would have to sit through even more boring meetings—“

“Shut it,” Natasha hissed. “If they see we aren’t listening they might try to change the clauses to something less in our favour.”

“All the more reason to sign it quickly,” Tony muttered, but he did quiet after that.

It was only another hour - and god, if Tony could rack up all the hours he’d spent on the Accords and charge the UN his usual consultation fee it would probably be enough to fund the Avengers Initiative all over again - before they were lining up at the podium, ceremonial pens in hand. But even that was surrounded by more pomp and media attention than Tony believed strictly necessary, with each of them needing to announce their name, their alter ego, the fact that they were an Avenger (or liaison, or— well, Tony didn’t care enough to hear what Wilson said he was), and their agreement with the Accords— which seemed all the more ridiculous considering the fact that they were there to *sign* the bloody thing.

“Does anyone else get the feeling that this is more for the UN to be seen doing something than it is for any actual benefit?” Clint whispered as he waited in line behind Tony. “Because that’s a vibe I’m picking up on.”

“It’s good PR for us too,” Wilson replied quietly, next in the queue.

“Uh, *us*, Wilson?” Clint asked. “Don’t see you joining our little team.”

“I don’t want to,” Wilson hissed back. “I have enough trouble to be dealing with without all *that*.”

Tony could feel Clint practically radiating offence, and snickered under his breath.

“I still don’t get why I couldn’t bring Loki,” Tony complained when they all *finally* piled out of the conference room an indeterminate but far too lengthy period of time later.

“Don’t act dumb, it’s not cute,” said Rhodey. “You know exactly why you couldn’t bring Loki.”

“He would have made it so much more entertaining, though.”

“As Rhodes said.” Natasha rolled her eyes. “You know *exactly* why we didn’t let him come.”

“Shouldn’t Loki be signing the papers too?” Bruce asked. “He’s kind of on our side, now.”

“He’d kill you if he heard you saying that,” Tony pointed out. “Well. He’d try. I think we’ve all had enough proof for who would come out on top of *that* fight. But Thor didn’t sign either— it’s still up in the air as to whether they fall under Earth’s jurisdiction or not.”

“Just a thought,” Bruce shrugged.

“I have to admit,” Clint added, “It would be nice for the guy to actually be beholden to something other than just threats to be put in the doghouse.”

“I resent that,” Tony said.

“Oh, right. Of course, you don’t have enough self control to threaten him with that so really, he doesn’t have anything that’s keeping him from—“

“Watch your words, Barton,” Tony said with a smirk. “Or I might feel inclined to give you front-row proof of just how wrong they are.”

When Clint blanched Wilson was ready with his StarkPhone, and a photo was taken and sent out to all the Avengers in minutes. Tony grinned and raised his hand for a high five, which was enthusiastically returned. The guy was starting to grow on him.

“Captain Rogers!”

They turned to see T’Challa, the son of the king of Wakanda, wave to them. After quickly excusing himself from his conversation with the delegate from London, the prince hurried over to the group.

“I wanted to talk to you before you left,” T’Challa said, holding out a hand. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Pleasure’s all mine,” said Steve, shaking his hand firmly, his eyes widening slightly as their palms came into contact. Maybe the prince had a strong grip? “What can I do for you?”

“I merely wished to extend my thanks for all that you have done,” said T’Challa. “And, although I am not the head of my country, I wish to offer you our support should you require it. Wakanda has always stayed out of the affairs of the world, but of late the issues we face

have been growing larger. My father believes that we should not be involved, but I know that we will be affected by larger events to come. The aliens that attacked New York cannot be all that is out there. Something else is bound to follow, and when it does, I would have all our forces united against it.”

“That’s a pretty speech,” said Clint, wary. “But I’ve never heard of... of your country before. I don’t mean to offend, but— what aid would you be able to grant us?”

T’Challa smiled the perfectly cultivated smile of a prince, inclined his head, and returned to his father.

“Oh my god,” said Tony, cuffing Clint over the head. “That guy is the crown prince of *Wakanda*.”

“Maybe you should just stick to stealth work,” said Natasha, patting Clint on the shoulder. “You’re so skilled at things that don’t require you to use your voice.”

“Hey! I said that I didn’t mean to offend—“

“Ah yes, and we all know that *always* precedes something entirely *unoffensive*,” said Sam, rolling his eyes.

“*Wakanda*,” Tony whispered again, paying them no attention and craning his neck to keep T’Challa in sight even as Natasha gripped his elbow with an exasperated sigh and dragged him along with the others. “Do you think, if I talked to him...”

“I really doubt it, Tony,” Natasha said firmly.

“But maybe I could—“

“No,” said Natasha. “Come on, you don’t want to embarrass yourself.”

“I wouldn’t—“

“Tony,” Natasha said. “I’ve heard you drunkenly planning about how you’re going to woo the leaders of Wakanda into letting you buy their vibranium a few times, now. I don’t think T’Challa would accept a marriage proposal.” She paused. “And I don’t think Loki would be too happy about it, either.”

“I could offer to share the Iron Man armour with them,” Tony said, pouting as they turned a corner and the Wakandans slipped out of sight.

“No, you wouldn’t,” Natasha said.

“No, I wouldn’t. But I mean, I would at least *think* about it,” Tony whined. “Surely that’s got to count for something?”

“Боже мой,” Natasha groaned. “You realise that this is what I was talking about?”

Tony thought for a moment. “Yeah,” he sighed. “I probably would have embarrassed myself. Thanks, I guess.”

“I’m cashing that in at a later date,” she warned him, but she let go with an amused smile.

They were stopped by a few other delegates before they could make it out, people wishing them well and thanking them for their cooperation. Again, Tony was surprised by politicians speaking to him *nicely* for a change, and he was just as relieved as Clint when they finally made it outside. He just didn’t show it by falling to his knees and raising his arms up to the sky in worship of the—

“Glorious, glorious sunlight,” Clint crowed. “Oh, how I have missed you!”

“What did I do to deserve working with these idiots,” Natasha sighed, shaking her head.

“I applaud your resilience,” Rhodey said, stepping up beside her, “And I think you deserve a coffee.” He led the way toward the main city across the Danube. “Café, everyone?”

“I feel sorry for whichever café we all end up in,” Sam replied. “Avengers on caffeine cannot be a pretty sight.”

“Trust me,” said Rhodey. “It’s when the Avengers *aren’t* on caffeine that the world should be on red alert.”

“Good idea, platypus. And it’s PR, Wilson, I thought you got that,” Tony cut in. “We go out there, sign some autographs, take some selfies, and hey presto we’re trending on Twitter. Anyway, come on, guys, coffee’s on me.”

“I think that PR opportunity would be a bad one,” Sam grinned. “I can see the headlines now— Avengers go rogue on caffeinated rampage. And I don’t think the old adage about ‘any PR’ applies here.”

Tony shrugged. “Can’t be worse than the time Hulk decided he liked dolphins.”

Bruce pulled a face. “I thought we agreed not to mention that?”

“Don’t worry,” Natasha said, “If he does it again I’ll tell the world about his plans to become the Queen of Wakanda.”

“Go ahead, I’m not ashamed.”

“Wait,” said Steve, pausing as they made it to the other side of the bridge. “You guys go on, I want to chat to Tony for a minute.”

The others nodded— except for Clint, ever the practical minded.

“But then who’s paying?” he asked with a frown.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Natasha, pulling a shiny black card from her pocket and waving it under Clint’s nose. “I have it covered.”

Tony gaped at the familiar credit card. “How did you— you know what, never mind. Enjoy.”

“Come on,” said Steve said, gripping Tony’s arm and steering him away from where the others began to argue over whether coffee was enough or if they should go for solid food. “We need to talk.”

Okay, that was slightly ominous, and coupled with the fact that Steve had been uncharacteristically quiet while Tony and the others had bickered— but then Tony remembered, and laughed. “Cap,” he said, “I’ll admit that the last time you said that to me, I got a little worried. But you need to know that those words usually mean there’s something wrong, so—“

“Tony.” There was no amusement in Steve’s tone. “Please. Just... I need to talk to you.”

“Okay,” Tony said, raising his hands in deference. “All right. Go for it, I’m all ears.”

“It’s not— I can’t just—” Steve stopped for a breath, letting go and turning to face Tony properly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think this would be so hard.” Steve glanced away, the muscles in his neck tightening as he clenched his teeth. “I thought that maybe I could spare you the pain by not telling you, but I— we promised no secrets. And I don’t think I can call myself your friend if I keep this from you any longer.”

“Okay Cap, I’m not going to lie. You’re starting to scare me, here. Are you all right?”

“It’s not about me,” Steve said, letting out a harsh laugh. “Here I am, about to shatter your world, and you’re worried if *I’m* all right?”

Tony took in Steve’s broken expression. “Maybe we should sit down?” he suggested.

They found a small café with semi-private booths to settle down in, and waited until they had their hastily ordered coffees and waved away any potential autograph hunters before speaking another word.

“Go on then, Cap,” Tony encouraged when Steve still seemed to hesitate. “I won’t break.”

“You just might,” Steve muttered. Then he steeled his resolve. “It’s about Bucky.”

“Have you had any luck finding him?” Tony asked. “Because my offer of looking with facial recognition still stands, you know, I don’t know why you haven’t taken me up on it—“

“It’s related,” Steve admitted quickly. “Just— okay, I’m just going to get it out. Just let me say it.”

“Okay,” Tony acquiesced, almost reluctant. He had to admit that Steve *was* scaring him, and he was *this close* to just saying fuck it, let’s go and join the others, I don’t need to know, Steve, whatever it is just let it lie.

But he couldn’t, because Tony *always* needed to know. He was curious by nature, and he couldn’t ever leave a stone unturned.

Even when he really, probably should.

“You know that Bucky was— is— *was* the Winter Soldier,” Steve said, and Tony gave an unneeded nod. Steve had been the one to tell him, after all, in his general ‘this is what happened since we last saw each other’ update after Insight. “You know what he did, what— what they *made* him do. You know that he killed people, important people who could have had an influence on the future. Who would have fought against HYDRA, or who were causing problems for them without even knowing HYDRA still existed.” Steve swallowed hard. “Or people who were in possession of important materials, technology, *ideas* that would have hurt their regime.”

“Steve,” Tony whispered, not wanting to believe his own suspicions, “what are you saying?”

“About twenty-five years ago, Buck— the *Winter Soldier* killed two people,” Steve said, his words forced harshly past his gritted teeth. “One was just there, just... wrong place, wrong time. The other was an incredibly intelligent man who had just helped to synthesise a working super soldier serum. The Winter Soldier caused their car to crash. They were both still alive... so he killed the man, first, before putting him back in the car to make it look like an accident. Then... he killed— I’m so sorry, Tony—“

“Who— *when* was this?” Tony asked - no, *demanded*, the sharp words slicing at his throat and causing his voice to crack open. “Steve, the *date*.”

“December.” Steve squeezed his eyes shut for a moment before lifting them up to catch Tony’s agonised gaze once again. “December 16th, 1991.”

The sound that tore from Tony’s throat was something caught between a keen and a whine— a horrible, guttural, *broken* cry.

“Tony,” Steve pleaded, reaching out to try and touch Tony’s hand, but when Tony flinched away he respectfully left his hand resting on the table. “Tony, he wasn’t in control.”

“He killed my *mom*,” Tony choked, not able to even look at him. “He killed her, because she was in the *wrong place at the wrong time*?”

“I know,” Steve said softly, the fight going out of him. “I know, and I’m so, so sorry.”

Tony turned his head to the side, pressing the heels of his palms to his clenched eyes, trying to process what Steve was saying but feeling like his mind was short-circuiting.

“How long?” Tony asked, not really wanting to know but not able to leave it alone, either. “How long have you known?”

“Since just before SHIELD fell,” Steve admitted. “I wanted to tell you, but I thought I was sparing you—“

“Does it look like I’ve been spared?” Tony’s voice was watery and rough, his words catching on jagged edges. He cleared his throat to fix it like he *always* could— but even that just turned into half a sob. But it did the job, and as Steve continued to talk, Tony’s anger festered.

“I didn’t know it was Bucky, not at first,” Steve pleaded. “I just knew that they had been killed by HYDRA—“

“Murdered,” Tony snarled.

“*Murdered* by HYDRA,” Steve continued. “I learned that at Camp Lehigh, Zola gave it away. But later, during our search Sam found a HYDRA agent in Ohio that had information on the Winter Soldier. He didn’t know,” he added quickly, “Sam didn’t watch it, he gave it all to me, and I— I knew then. What HYDRA had made Bucky do. Before it was just faceless people, you know, but then it was someone I knew— it was *your parents*, and I just— I panicked. And then time went on and I thought telling you would— would make everything fall apart.”

“So why *are* you telling me?” Tony asked, turning his hard gaze back to Steve.

“We promised no secrets,” Steve said, strained. “Tony, we promised, and I— I haven’t kept that, and I am *so* sorry. And because if I find Bucky... I don’t want this to come between us.”

“Okay,” said Tony. He still felt like he wasn’t processing, like his brain was struggling to keep up, and the strangeness of that made everything feel even more disjointed. “But why... why are you telling me *now*?”

That seemed important, somehow. Yes, Steve had kept secrets, but now he was being truthful and that had to mean something. He couldn’t have just randomly decided— you don’t give up such a truth just like that.

Steve held out a small piece of paper, crumpled due to the tiny square it had been folded into.

“Prince T’Challa passed me this, earlier,” he explained. “I knew Bucky’s arm had to be vibranium, or at least a part of it, because he caught my shield on its edge and he’s punched it without blowback several times. And as far as I knew, there wasn’t any vibranium around outside of Wakanda.”

“And?” Tony asked. His eyes scanned the numbers and words on the small page, but he wanted to hear it from *Steve*.

“I contacted T’Challa a while back, just to see if they had any information. They’ve kept it quiet and they were tight-lipped, but from what I can gather there was something of a robbery.”

“Ulysses Klaue,” Tony muttered. “Yeah, I know the guy. Tried to sell me some vibranium a few years back— I told him SI didn’t deal in illegalities.” He snorted. “Yeah, Klaue must have thought I was real stupid.”

“Well, all I got back was a message that they’d look into it, and I saw nothing since. Thought it was a dead end, until T’Challa gave me this.” Steve gestured to the paper. “They tracked a small piece of the vibranium that Klaue sold to HYDRA. It wasn’t much, that’s why it took them so long to go through their old intel, I suppose. Not enough for a whole arm, but it would be enough for a hand, at least.”

“This still doesn’t explain anything,” said Tony. He needed Steve to *say it*.

“They can *track* it, Tony,” Steve said. “Even SHIELD knew how to track vibranium, and I know you can, too.”

And there it was.

“So that’s why,” Tony said, the words tasting sour despite having reached the correct conclusion minutes earlier. “Because why else?”

“Tony—“

“I need time,” Tony said, finally looking up to meet Steve’s bloodshot blue eyes. “I believe that you did it because you wanted to spare me pain, and I— *god*. I’m— I *will* be glad you told me, that you’re not hiding this any more. But I need *time*.”

“Of course,” Steve nodded. “Of course, Tony, as much as you need. I’ll stay out of your way, I’ll—“

“No.” Tony didn’t want to keep talking— hell, it was the *last* thing he wanted. What he wanted was to go home and curl up in a ball and shout and scream and get to be angry at the world, but he was stuck in the middle of Europe with Steve, and— well, Steve was his friend. Steve cared, Steve had *tried*, and Tony wasn’t just going to let that go. So he kept going, forcing the words out no matter how much he wished he could run and hide, not quite managing to keep eye contact but soldiering on nonetheless. Because that’s what Tony had done his whole life. “I don’t want you to do that. You’re right, it was selfish of you to hide it, but you *meant* well, and— okay look, just refrain from mentioning Barnes, yeah? I’ll... if you still want the help, JARVIS can run a search just as well as I can.”

“What?” Steve asked, surprised.

“That’s why you didn’t want me to help you before with facial recognition, right?” Tony asked bitterly. “Because you might not have *known*, but you suspected, and you thought it wouldn’t be fair. And that’s why you’re telling me now, because you no longer have a choice. You need me to run the trace.”

Steve nodded jerkily. “Tony, I’m—“

“If you apologise again I think I’m actually going to vomit,” Tony snapped, holding up a hand.

“Of course,” Steve said, nodding again. “I forgot that you’re allergic to feelings. Perhaps I should have brought a sick bag?”

Tony stared blankly for a moment. “Did you just make a joke?”

Steve winced. “Too soon? I mean— no, that wasn’t right, was it?”

The little crease of Steve’s brow as he struggled with the lingo was familiar, and Tony grasped onto it.

“Close enough,” he said, a smile starting to pick at the edges of his mouth. Steve was trying to cheer him up, that much was clear— and while the attempt was in vain, the effort was greatly appreciated. “Seriously, though,” Tony sighed. “Ask JARVIS.”

“You’d do that?” Steve asked.

“No, I just said— *JARVIS*—“

“Tony.” Steve reached across the table again, this time ignoring Tony’s backward shift and grasping his shoulder. “*Thank* you. But you don’t have to, because it’s not— that’s not just why I told you. You’re my friend, Tony, and I wasn’t lying when I said that I really, really hope this doesn’t come between us.”

Tony didn’t respond to that, knowing there was no point. Now that Steve’s conscience was clear he would be asking JARVIS to run the trace, Tony knew that. And he knew that Steve would go after Bucky and welcome him with open arms even as he promised to do anything Tony asked in response to the way Maria and Howard Stark had *really* met their ends, because that was just who Steve was. But he also knew that he was never going to be comfortable with it.

Then Steve caught Tony’s reluctant gaze, boring into him intensely. “Bucky is my friend, and he always will be,” he said. “But you are as well, and that isn’t going to change, either. I’m not going to choose one of you over the other, and I *know* that this is going to be difficult for you. I want to do whatever it’s going to take to make this right. I meant what I said— if you need me to, I’ll go, but until you ask me to leave I’m going to be right here.”

“You’re right,” Tony said, expertly hiding the tremor in his voice with a smirk. “I am allergic to feelings.”

Steve grinned brightly, seeing straight through it.

They sat in silence after that, and Tony was grateful. He knew it was going to take a long time to process, but he thought he could maybe move past it.

Maria and Howard were dead, had been for a quarter of a century, more than half Tony’s life. That fact hadn’t, couldn’t change. But he’d still been hit hard, because *my parents died in car crash* had been a part of who he was for those twenty five years, then all of a sudden that had changed to *my parents were murdered by a HYDRA assassin* and somehow, that felt so very different.

Tony was hit with the sudden, aching need to see Loki, to curl up in the arms of someone who understood what that felt like and who could put him back together.

Then Tony raised his gaze once more to see Steve watching him, a worried crease lining his brow. And then Tony realised—

He was happy to rely on his partner for as long as the sun remained in the sky, but he didn’t need to. He had more than only Loki. He had Steve, he had his team, and he would be able to make it through this.

“Well,” Tony said. “This was thoroughly depressing. What do you reckon the others were talking about? World peace or Star Trek theories? Because to be honest, with that lot, it could go either way.”

Steve gave Tony a smile, recognising the subject change for what it was. “Do you want to go and find out?”

“Yeah,” Tony said in relief, pushing his now cold coffee away from him. “Let’s go find them.”



While it may seem odd that so many Avengers had managed to somehow disappear without being spotted by anyone that Tony or Steve asked, most of them had training in the art of going unnoticed, and had managed to somehow slip away. Add on to the fact that he and Steve were the *most* recognisable members of the team (apart from, possibly, Thor or Hulk) and therefore were continuously stopped for selfies and they had been walking for quite a while without any luck.

“Maybe they went back to the hotel,” Tony muttered.

“They had your credit card,” Steve pointed out. “They didn’t go back to the hotel.”

They did get a lead when a few British tourists claimed to have seen Hawkeye and Rhodey in an argument, but when they reached the location, there was no one there, and Tony was *this close* to phoning the bank and asking where his card had last been used when Steve spoke up again.

“I did have one other thought,” Steve said as they trudged down another Viennese street. “That facial recognition thing you’ve been talking about— could you use it to find the Maximoff twins? We haven’t heard anything in months and I’ve been worried about them.”

“I wouldn’t,” said Tony. “Worry, that is. Loki’s adamant that he’s going to find them, and I don’t think the girl can hide from him forever.”

“I don’t think we should leave it to Loki.” Steve sighed. “I know you care about him, but you have to admit that he can be a bit... vicious.”

Tony nodded because, well, *yeah*. Obviously.

“We all saw what he did to Ultron,” Steve continued. “The twins are innocent—“

“They’re HYDRA,” Tony spat, his anger rekindled immediately.

“They haven’t done anything since we captured Strucker,” Steve said. “They’ve been hiding —“

“Waiting,” Tony muttered.

“—*hiding*, not drawing attention to themselves. Maybe they didn’t realise what they had signed up for, maybe they’ve decided to live quiet.”

“They aren’t you, Cap,” said Tony. “They didn’t sign up thinking they were going to be saving the world.”

“How do you know that?” Steve asked. “They could have been tricked. Apart from fighting us, they’ve not done anything wrong.”

Tony remained silent, having had *enough* emotional conversations for one day.

“Regardless,” Steve sighed. “They’re enhanced, and they need help.”

“They need more than that,” Tony snapped. “They’re not stable!”

“Maybe we could get them on our side, if we gave them the option,” Steve replied. “They would definitely be a valuable asset to the team.”

“They’re not just going to roll over, and they certainly aren’t going to say ‘how high’ when we ask them to jump!”

“You don’t know that,” Steve said. “I think they’re just confused.”

“I am sorry to tell you,” said a menacing voice from the side street to their right, “you probably should have listened to Stark.”

“Crap,” said Tony, his eyes widening.

And that was when everything went to hell.

The girl, Wanda, caught Steve first, hitting him in his side and slamming him into a parked taxi with a blast of red magic, the car crumpling beneath his weight. Pietro went for Tony, appearing out of nowhere and pressing him against the wall by his throat, and Tony’s hands instinctually rose to try and pry the fingers from his neck. The pedestrians on the street began to scream and run, the fact that recent events involving the Avengers ensured that none were stupid enough to stay and take photographs with their smartphones probably the only piece of luck in the situation.

“Stark,” said Pietro, ginning widely as he leaned down close. “Fancy catching you, here.”

“Funny the people you run into when you’re out and about,” Tony gasped, and Pietro’s grin widened.

“*Funny*,” he said. “You always are *so* funny, making all people laugh.”

“I could do a better job if you let me go,” Tony replied.

“Tony!” Steve called, climbing out of the destroyed taxi only to be shoved further into it once again, two patches of red holding him firmly against the metal no matter how much he struggled.

Tony, realising that he had little hope in a strength match against the enhanced being holding him against the wall, released his hands from Pietro's, putting more pressure on his throat.

"Why— don't you... me go?" he croaked with the goal to distract, his words little more than gasps as his vision started to spot with black.

Pietro's eyes hardened. "I should have just killed you in Sokovia," he hissed.

"Maybe," Tony choked out. "Prob—" Tony blasted Pietro in the chest with the glove repulsor disguised as a watch, which he had activated while Pietro was gleefully watching his choked attempts at talking. "Probably," Tony finished, before turning to give Wanda the same treatment, feeling a deep satisfaction as she went careening into a bright yellow mailbox. "You all right, Cap?"

"Yeah, Tony," said Steve, jumping up to stand beside him. Then he asked in exasperation—"You took a weapon into the UN?"

"Well, to be fair—" Tony started, but was interrupted by a shout.

"You cannot beat us," Wanda growled, scrambling to her feet. Pietro was slower to get up, having been hit at close range, but still recovered faster than a normal human would have.

"I think you'll find that we can," said Tony, his bare left hand going into his pocket. "JARVIS?"

"I've sent a message to Colonel Rhodes, Sir," JARVIS said, speaking from Tony's phone. "The Avengers are en route as we speak."

"This doesn't have to end in a fight," said Steve, raising his hands toward the pair. Even in his placating pose and wearing a button down and a tie, he looked so like the period drama war hero. "We can all still walk away from this."

And there was Tony, equipped with a three piece Tom Ford and a juiced up wrist watch. He'd fought with worse. But he knew that this time, he wouldn't have to.

"ETA three minutes," JARVIS said quietly, and Tony knew that he wasn't talking about the team.

"Oh, we will," Wanda answered Steve, her tone sweet and condescending.

"You can, also," said Pietro. "We only want Stark."

"I'm pretty popular these days, you might need to wait in line," Tony said.

The corners of Steve's lips lifted in a smile, but the twins remained stony.

"Wow, difficult audience. Tell you what, I'll make you a deal. You two stand down now, and I won't hand you over to my boyfriend." Tony wrinkled his nose. "No, that's still weird. Regardless, he's pretty pissed at you right now."

“Your words mean nothing,” Wanda said. “You will—“

“Sir, call from Agent Romanov,” JARVIS said, louder than when he had spoken before.

“Put her on hold.”

“*Tony*—“ Steve started.

“I’m talking,” Tony said.

“Stark!” Natasha spoke from Tony’s pocket, and Tony turned to Wanda.

“Do you mind if I call a time out?”

“I will not kill you while you are distracted, Stark. I will look into your eyes as you go, as I kill you *slowly*. You will wait for me to kill you, just as we did.”

“Thanks,” Tony said, not entirely sure what she was referring to at the end there but pulling out his phone. “We have a situation.”

“JARVIS updated us,” said Rhodey.

“Why are you on Natasha’s phone?”

“We’re on speaker. And we’re on our way,” Natasha responded.

“Yeah, and we’re not armed, so you’d better have a plan,” Rhodey added.

“Careful,” Steve warned. And oh yeah, probably not the best idea to be talking about the plan with the wonder twins glaring from the sidelines.

“You’re empty handed?” Tony asked.

“We were in the UN,” Rhodey said. “Of course we were—“

“I’ve got my bracelet bites, Tony,” said Natasha. “I’m close.”

“How did you get those through the metal detectors?” Rhodey asked.

“Somehow,” Steve sighed, “I’m not surprised in the— Tony!”

“Don’t worry about the rest, I’ll get it,” said Tony, dodging the sudden blast of red magic only to be knocked down by Pietro once again, the kid pulling Tony’s gauntleted hand above his head this time, twisting Tony’s wrist so the repulsor was pressed against the pavement and Tony was bent awkwardly on the ground. “Just get yourselves here,” Tony gasped in pain.

“Even with back up on the way, you can’t harm us,” Wanda said, her voice filled with glee, taunting Steve as he stepped toward her. She moved to stand beside Tony and Pietro, the threat of what she would do if Steve moved fairly clear. “You have no idea what I am capable of.” She laughed a small laugh. “I cannot even control myself, sometimes, more than sometimes, I *hate* it. But it will all be worth the trouble when—“

Natasha cut the monologue short with a kick to the head, flying in from nowhere - and in that moment Tony truly believed that she was magic, because surely there was no other way she could have managed that move in heels and a pencil skirt. Clint was a second behind, decking Pietro in the head. Or, well, trying to at least, but the guy was too quick, racing to grab his sister.

“Seriously?” Tony said. “I had that.”

“A thanks would be appreciated,” said Clint, brushing down his jacket, his eyes flicking around. The twins had vanished, but there was no way they’d just leave when they were so sure they’d have the upper hand. “You’re the one who said to get here!”

“I thought you were further out. Thirty more seconds and— aha!” Tony pointed to the sky to where a red and gold suit was just beginning a decent, laden with a shield, bow, quiver, and a set of wings. Removing his watch-gauntlet in preparation, Tony asked the question that had been burning at him all afternoon. “What were you guys even doing, earlier?”

“Rhodes bet he could eat a giant schnitzel faster than I could,” Clint replied.

“Yeah, probably not my best move,” said Rhodey, looking a little pale. The jog had probably been incredibly uncomfortable. “I won, though.”

“No, you did *not*. We left before we could finish!”

“But I’d eaten more of it.”

The suit touched down with a *clang* and Tony stepped into it, sighing with relief as the familiar metal clicked shut around him. Tony took a moment to breathe as he passed out the weapons and communicators JARVIS had brought. He’d hardly realised until that moment just how raw and exposed he had felt around Wanda Maximoff without that extra layer of protection. He was sure that she would still be able to get to him from there—

And why? *Why* did she want to kill him so badly? Pietro did too, that much was clear, but *why*? What was it she had said— ‘you shall wait for me to kill you, just as we did’? What?

There was no time to ponder, as a blur streaked past them all in that moment, and—

“Bastard got my arrows,” Clint snarled, looking at the quiver he had only just been reunited with, now sadly empty.

“Keep an eye,” said Steve, only to be knocked back into the same taxi as before. His shield, thankfully, remained in place.

Tony charged his repulsors and had JARVIS do a scan—

“On the right!” he called, just as Wanda charged from around a corner. Her whole body was glowing, and she was headed straight for Tony. She flicked the blast to the side with a wave of her hand and the mailbox she’d crashed into earlier exploded in a shower of paper. And seriously, who was even sending letters these days? Tony blasted her again with the same result but she kept coming.

Then, with JARVIS' usual just in the nick of time flare, War Machine arrived and encased Rhodey, and in one fluid movement, he swiped Wanda across the face and jumped into the sky.

"Ooh, I don't feel so hot," Rhodey said, his voice coming through the coms. "I don't feel right at all. This was not good timing, Tones."

"Sorry, next time I'll make sure not to schedule getting attacked in broad daylight right after your eating competition," Tony replied, his words bleeding sarcasm. Then Pietro was there, falling on the ground out of apparently nowhere as he dodged Cap's shield.

"Where'd you put my arrows, you shit?" Clint asked, cracking down with his bow, but Pietro was gone again.

"We could use some more muscle," said Tony. "Where's Bruce?"

"He's gone to warn the UN and the local authorities," said Natasha. "We *just* signed the Accords, this doesn't look good."

"I bet they did that on purpose," Tony growled. "It's been all over the news, even on the run they must have known."

"We need to do this cleanly, guys," said Steve, eyeing Wanda as she raised her still glowing hands in the air. "Tony, get high, you've got the cameras— think they can pick up Pietro?"

"He's got nothing on JARVIS," Tony confirmed.

"Clint, you'll have to stay on the ground with me. Nat, you too— we'll focus on Pietro. Rhodes, Sam, try to draw Wanda's attention, hit her from afar."

"Got it, Cap," said Sam, jumping into the air. He looked odd with the combination of his wings and his formal suit— it seemed that none of the Avengers had the time to change. They'd all be fighting in their finery today.

The fight was exactly what Tony needed, and he threw himself into it with vigour, repulsors firing and jets burning as he flipped through the sky and demonstrated to the Maximoffs exactly what he was capable of. Meanwhile, JARVIS ran a pattern on Pietro, finding him easily with a combination of heat signatures and the displacement of air. It was easy to see that while he was incredibly fast and nimble he slowed for his turns, and he favoured running in a straight line when he was gearing up for a hit. He was using physics, building up momentum to strengthen his punches— and Tony was awfully good at physics.

Even without JARVIS, he could have worked out a trajectory. He could give the Avengers a second's warning— not much, but enough.

The clang that Pietro made when his chest collided with Steve's shield was music to Tony's ears, even if the guy was somehow up and about a few seconds later. He *must* heal fast, there was no other explanation.

“Good work, Iron Man,” Steve said anyway. “Keep it up, and if you can, help War Machine and Falcon.”

Yeah. They were struggling.

Thankfully, Wanda didn’t seem willing to use her little fear trick— but it was looking more and more like that was only because she didn’t think she had to. The Avengers could hold their own but they couldn’t hold any ground— Wanda had learned her lesson and was staying at a distance, not allowing them to touch her. Sam and Rhodey’s attacks were bouncing off her red shield without leaving a scratch, and she was able to throw the Avengers around like— well, like something significantly easier to throw than sacks of potatoes. Rhodey decided to try something different and landed beside her to throw a punch, but she twisted her hands around and caught his gauntleted fist in a web of scarlet. One push of her hand, palm forward as if she were firing a repulsor, and Rhodey was crashing through the windows of the nearby Starbucks.

Natasha tried next, sneaking up and then trying to distract with her bites while she went in again. But Wanda had been caught by the Widow’s heeled feet before, and this time she bared her teeth as she sent the assassin through the same window to fall atop of Rhodey.

“We need a new strategy, guys,” said Sam, looping through the air and no longer firing his weapon, conserving the ammo for when he might actually be able to hit something. “Because this is definitely not working.”

“Steve, your six,” Tony snapped, and this time, Pietro’s head hit the shield with an almighty crack, and he didn’t get back up.

Wanda screeched, her magic exploding from her in a manner reminiscent of when Loki had gone up against Ultron. The Avengers on the ground were knocked down, and those in the air were swatted aside like flies. Tony’s HUD flickered worryingly as he slammed into the fourth floor of an office building, and he groaned, but quickly pulled himself together.

“Everyone all right?” he asked.

“Sam’s down,” said Steve. “He landed in the road, his wings caught most of his fall but he’s unconscious.”

“I’ll move him,” said Rhodey. “Natasha’s out as well.”

“I’m not,” she groaned.

“You’ve hit your head, you need to sit still,” Rhodey snapped.

“I’m *fine*,” she insisted, much stronger this time. “Get Wilson, I’m going back out there. We’ve still got one enhanced in the field.”

“Two,” said Clint. “Pietro’s back up.”

“Oh for the love of god, it’s like whack a mole,” Tony growled. “Why won’t he just stay down?”

“Because they’re *winning*,” said Rhodey, and it sounded like a curse.

“They won’t be for long,” Steve replied. “Tony, get out here, we need you.”

Pietro may have been up, but Tony could immediately see that he had slowed. His concussion seemed worse than Natasha’s— his heat signature was no longer moving in straight lines, and his turns were becoming sloppy.

Wanda seemed to notice as well and suddenly lashed out, her hands undulating hypnotically as her magic flew to catch Rhodey unawares, just returning to the fight from wherever he had evacuated Sam to. But the magic didn’t blast him off his course, instead seemingly absorbing into his helmet.

Rhodey turned, and fired his repulsor directly at Tony’s head.

Tony yelped and shot off to the side before heading straight for his friend.

“What the hell, Rhodes!” He yelled, only to be met with another blast.

“He’s being controlled,” said Natasha, “He can’t help it!”

In response, Tony altered his course.

“Give me back my Rhodey,” he snarled, turning to fire a small missile in the direction of the scarlet wielding witch. Maybe it was a slight overreaction, but no one messed with Rhodey and got away it, not on Tony’s watch. Wanda caught the missile just before it detonated in a web of magic, and she flung it around and threw it back up at Tony. He managed to dive out of the way but the detonation did send Rhodey flipping through the air, this time. He hit a lamppost hard, bending it in two.

“I’m okay,” Rhodey groaned. “Really, I’m all right.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, she was in my head, but— I think the fall knocked her out. I’m fine, now, I swear. But watch it, she could get any of us.”

“How can we beat this?” Steve asked.

“We can’t fight this magic, Cap,” said Clint, a hint of finality to his tone.

The silence that followed felt *loud*.

“You’re all a bunch of quitters. I am never going to hear the end of this,” Tony groaned, but he alighted on a nearby rooftop anyway and folded away his helmet. He knew, after all, that he’d never hear the end of it if he *didn’t* call, whether they could handle it or not. “JARVIS?”

“He already called me.”

Tony spun around to see Loki standing behind him.

“JARVIS, you need to stop doing that.”

“You are not all right,” Loki said, a frown marring his expression. “What has happened?”

“There’re more pressing matters,” Tony said, gesturing to where the Avengers were struggling below, Rhodey and Natasha back in the fight. “I believe we found someone that you’ve been looking for.”

Loki’s responding smile was both eager and sadistic.

“Put this in your ear,” Tony told him, passing him a spare communicator. “You’ll hear us, and we’ll hear you.”

“I’m beginning to think I should be added to the Avengers’ payroll,” Loki said the moment the device was in place.

“I hate to break it to you, dude, but we don’t *get* paid,” said Clint, his breathing laboured.

“We don’t?” asked Tony.

“No,” said Natasha. “We don’t.”

“Only Stark wouldn’t notice something like that,” Clint muttered.

“Why am I here?” Loki asked again.

“Wanda Maximoff,” Steve answered. “She has telekinetic powers as well as a mental manipulation ability. We thought, well—“

“We thought you would be able to help, considering your *experience* with mind control,” Clint snapped.

“Of course.” Loki’s vicious smile widened as he glanced down to the fight happening below. “There is another enhanced down there as well.”

“We can handle him,” said Tony. “I think.”

“That certainly fills me with confidence regarding your ability. But fine— just leave the girl to me.”

Loki didn’t even pause to don his battle armour, remaining in his usual green and leather get-up before materialising in front of Wanda Maximoff empty handed and wearing a cocky smirk.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he said. “You know how to hide.”

“I know more than that,” Wanda said. “Who are you?”

“I am someone who knows more than *you*,” Loki replied. “And I am also rather fond of Anthony Stark. I believe you want him dead?”

“No more than a thousand other people,” Wanda spat, and Tony was still no closer as to working out the why.

“Shame,” Loki said, tilting his head. “You almost had potential.”

Potential for *what*, unfortunately, was never revealed, as Wanda chose that moment to fling a cascade of magic at Loki’s head.

“You are more powerful than your average Midgardian sorcerer,” Loki said, leaning against one of the few standing lampposts while the girl’s attacks extinguished against the shield in front of him. “I suppose you are impressive... for a mortal.”

Wanda screeched, and threw a blast of magic so powerful that it tore up the street as it surged toward the nonchalant god. Loki didn’t so much as flinch, even as the magic broke through his shield and slammed into him.

“Now, that was just crude,” Loki said from ten yards behind Wanda. Wanda lashed out again to the same result, never able to find the real Loki, only ever attacking illusions.

“Guys,” Bruce’s voice came in over the coms, distracting Tony from the strange fight going on below him. “The police have back up en route, ETA ten minutes. Let me know if it’s a Code Green, I’m in the copter and I can jump if you need.”

“Stay in the sky, Banner,” Steve ordered. “We’re still in close quarters, and we’ve got Loki as extra muscle for now.”

“Will do, Steve.”

Down below, Loki had grown bored of playing tag and was fighting Wanda hand to hand– in a way, at least. He was dancing around her with his daggers twirling dangerously and apparently taking great enjoyment in the way she tried to stop the blades from going near her, her magic not able to penetrate Loki’s own green power which twisted from his hands and snapped out at the red like an irate beast.

He was taunting her, that much was clear– goading and pushing her into losing it even further than she already had, his actions complemented by well placed insults and cutting remarks.

“Your brother is taking on five Avengers, and you cannot even muster the power to defeat only me,” Loki baited. “Come on, little witch– show me what power you claim to wield.”

Loki’s words reminded Tony that he was supposed to be helping, and he glanced to the side to give his teammates some instruction as to where to aim their hits, and joined Rhodey in firing off a few repulsors. Tony was distracted, but Pietro was doubly so– he’d slowed even further in his attacks, and paused too long after knocking Clint to the ground to watch what was happening with the magical battle, giving Natasha the opportunity to jab him in the ribs.

When Tony turned back to Loki, it was to see literal, scarlet fire in Wanda’s gaze as she held her arm up by Loki’s face, her hand undulating in a move that Tony had only seen her use the

once, but the result of which he was intimately familiar with. He couldn't help the stab of worry at seeing *that* so close to Loki, but, while an entirely rational fear, it was unnecessary.

Loki caught the girl's hand before she could complete her movement, staring at the red power she held in it, a swirl of green preventing it from either parting with her or slipping back under her skin.

"This is it," Loki said, his face twisting into a snarl that was far more deadly than the amused detachedness he had worn before. "*This* is what you did to my Anthony."

"He deserved it," Wanda snapped, her teeth gnashing as she tried in vain to pull her hand free. "He deserves *worse* for what he has done to us!"

"What's Loki talking about, Tony?" Steve asked.

"Nothing," said Tony. "Cap, four o'clock!"

Cap reached out with a hand and grasped at the air, and from the incredulous look on his face he missed what he was aiming for, but he did end up with a handful of blonde hair.

Pietro yelped as he was pulled to a stop, his eyes watering.

"Nice one," said Clint, and Rhodey whooped as he landed next to them.

"She got you, too, didn't she?" Steve asked, dragging Pietro along so that he could talk to Tony quietly. "With whatever it was she did to Rhodes. That's why Loki's been looking for her."

"I don't want to talk about it," Tony snapped.

"What are we going to do with Speedy, here?" Natasha asked, gesturing to Steve's prize.

"I like 'Quicksilver'," Pietro muttered under his breath.

A blood-curdling scream echoed through the street, and all six of them stopped what they were doing and stared across to the lightshow happening on the other side.

There was something different about Loki's magic. It wasn't its usual bright green— it was almost amber, a golden yellow hue that reminded Tony of the sunrises he often watched from his window back in Malibu.

One hand still gripped Wanda's wrist, and the other was open above her head, power streaming straight from it and bathing Wanda in unnatural light. Her eyes were round in absolute horror, her mouth wide as the scream continued to tear through her throat— clearly, whatever Loki was doing to her was excruciating.

And Loki seemed to be enjoying it, his lips stretched tightly across his gleaming teeth, his eyes glowing the same amber as everything else. Wanda's scream stretched into the minutes, and Pietro struggled in Steve's iron grip but couldn't move an inch.

“Stop, you monster!” Pietro snarled and spat and shrieked, but Loki didn’t even acknowledge that anyone else was there.

When Loki did finally let up, Wanda slumped to the ground, her eyes rolling as her screams stuttered and became sobs. He stood over her, his expression still manic as his fingers curled around the power in his hand.

“Loki?” Tony asked, lowering his faceplate stepping forward cautiously. “Are you all right?”

Loki visibly shook himself, determination entering his gaze. His fingers snapped shut, and the glow immediately began to fade, Loki’s eyes returning to their usual bright green, and then his hand darted into his pocket. Tony strained to see, but could only catch a glimpse of a flash of gold as Loki hid whatever it was away.

“Loki?” Tony asked, and when the god turned to face him, he looked worn, *exhausted*, but his smile was bright.

“I am fine,” he said, striding forward quickly. “*More* than fine.” He wrapped his arms around Tony and kissed him hungrily. Kissing Loki while wearing the suit was always a treat, because it meant that Tony didn’t have to stand on his toes to reach. But it also meant that he couldn’t feel Loki’s grip on his waist or the way their bodies were pressed together, and after the day he’d had, Tony wanted, *needed* closeness.

He reluctantly pulled back, planning on removing the suit before continuing where they left off, but the moment the suit was gone he felt a hand on his shoulder that was far too small to be the touch that he ached for.

“Tony,” said Natasha. “Look.”

He tore his gaze from Loki, and found he was glad that he had.

“Vultures,” he spat, glaring at the gaggle of reporters that had flocked to the scene the very *second* that the fight had ended. The police helicopter was only just coming to land, for god’s sake, and the back up Bruce had promised was still two minutes out.

And *this* was why Steve had made the UN put a ‘permission to act when necessary’ clause into the Accords. If they waited for bureaucracy, they’d only ever arrive after the world had ended. *Not* that this was a world ending event, but. The point stood.

“I suppose the world knows of my allegiances now,” Loki sighed, as if the world knowing he had helped the Avengers was a bad thing.

“It’s probably for the best,” said Natasha. “You were bound to get caught out eventually, and at least this way, it was while you were doing something... relatively good.”

Tony thought she was probably right but Loki glared at her, certainly disagreeing, though he didn’t protest when Tony reached for his hand and laced their fingers together. In fact, he tugged a little and pulled Tony closer, making his ‘allegiances’ *very* clear.

“What are we going to do with her?” Rhodey asked, pointing to Wanda. He was standing beside her, repulsor at the ready— but she was still on her knees, her arms wrapped around her chest and sobbing, tears streaming down her cheeks. She hadn’t made a move since Loki had done... well, whatever it was that he did.

“The Bundespolizei can take her from here,” Loki said, looking down at her with revulsion etched across his face. “She is powerless, now.”

“What did you do to me?” Wanda whimpered, her brown eyes glaring at intensely at Loki as if she were trying to set him alight— but couldn’t.

“I saw your greatest fear,” Loki replied, “and I made sure that it became a reality. You will be separated from your brother during your sentence, I am sure— and I know what it is to be imprisoned without magic, to have your power stripped from you. It is an empty existence, and yet no more than you deserve.”

Tony heard the echo in the words even if Wanda didn’t.

She was too busy glaring, muttering. Pietro was struggling again but Steve remained firm, which was... interesting. He had been so sure they could be rehabilitated, and Tony couldn’t think of what had changed his mind enough that he didn’t object to what Loki had done.

“Your weapons killed my parents,” Wanda sobbed brokenly to Tony, rocking forward on her knees. “You killed them!”

“Wanda,” Pietro said, “Maybe it’s time to—“

“You *killed* them!” Wanda cried again, her voice rising to a screech. “It was you, you ruined our lives!”

Tony realised that he didn’t feel angry. Maybe his anger reserves had dried up for the day, or maybe he just didn’t have it in him to muster up the energy for someone he found that he honestly could understand. Maybe, in a different world where Tony had less support, that could have been him. He hated how close he had come to that, but he didn’t feel angry at all.

Tony just felt sad.

“No,” he said. “I may have made those bombs, but I didn’t have control over where they went. I may have built the weapon but I didn’t pull the trigger, and while I get where you’re coming from— you’re looking in the wrong place. I didn’t kill your parents, and I have done all that I can to right the wrongs committed by those who did.” Tony paused, catching Steve’s eye as he continued. “You can’t ask any more of me than that.”

They did end up passing the enhanced - well, and one ex-enhanced - over to the police, as Loki had suggested. Wanda was a mess, her mind reeling from the sudden loss of her magic. Pietro went quietly, his worry for his sister overruling any desire to resist.

“Thanks again for the save, Loki,” Steve said, holding out a hand in invitation.

“I was not lying when I said I expected to be on the payroll,” Loki told him with narrowed eyes, leaving Steve to lower his arm in disappointment. “At the very least, room and board like the rest of you.”

“You already have clearance in the Tower,” Tony said with a frown. “Same as Malibu.”

“But the Avengers live there,” Loki said stiffly, “and if I am to spend time with you there, then I would have it that I am not looking over my shoulder every moment.”

“All right, Loki,” Steve sighed. “It’s not like we could keep you out, anyway.”

“That is correct,” Loki nodded. “JARVIS would never allow such a thing.”

“I suppose not,” said Steve, and were Tony’s eyes deceiving him, or was Cap actually smiling? “You did save his life, after all.”

“Nah, I was the one that saved him,” Tony pointed out. “Loki just... well.” Tony grinned wide.

“Don’t—“ Loki started, but Tony powered on.

“I guess you could say that Loki *avenged* him.”

“Stark—“

“What? You said you wanted to be on the payroll.”

“You said you don’t *have* a payroll.”

“And yet, here we are.”

Loki sighed. “Can we head home, yet?” he asked. “I tire of this.”

“Soon,” Tony said, exchanging a look with Natasha. “I need to talk to the press, and we’re going to have to go over what happened with the UN.”

“Actually, I’m delegating,” Steve said. “You deal with the vultures, and I’ll talk to the UN. Nat, I need you to go to the hospital with Rhodes. Bruce said that Sam’s all right, but he’ll want a few more familiar faces when he wakes up.”

“You just hate being on camera,” Tony said, rolling his eyes, and Steve shrugged.

“I’d take politicians over the press any day.”

“And that’s where we differ,” Tony said. “But all right, then, we split.” He looked to Loki. “Give me ten minutes.”

Loki shook his head. “Five.”

“Even better. Okay then, five minutes,” Tony said, kissing Loki’s cheek before releasing his hand and stepping back, a smile on his face. “Only five minutes, and then it’ll be just you and

me, I promise.”

And okay, Tony might have *wished* that he didn't have to talk to the press. He might have fervently *hoped* that they could all just disappear, but he had only fostered the thought with the added fantasy of going home with Loki. He certainly hadn't wanted nor even *expected* the whole world to explode into a colourful cascade of wind and light, the sound of it almost deafening as he was pulled off his feet in a horribly familiar manner. He was tossed and turned and flung every this way and that, his eyes streaming and his head pounding from the sensory overload. Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, he was spat out onto dark lacquered floor inlaid with gold.

Tony groaned but despite his disorientation he jumped to his feet as quickly as he could, unwilling to appear weak even as he knew how vulnerable he remained without his suit.

The room he had landed in was about thrice as long as it was wide, with no apparent support for the high, domed ceiling. He was surrounded by soldiers Tony immediately recognised by their helmets as Einherjar, and behind them milled a couple dozen people, all dressed like they had come straight from a Jane Austen novel. At the head of the room, about twenty or so yards in front of where Tony stood, was a huge golden throne, and seated upon it was an old man whose face he had seen only once before. It had been a while, but there was no mistaking that golden eye patch.

“Oh,” said Tony. “Well, *fuck*.”

To Infinity and—

Chapter Summary

“Father, the answer is as clear as day,” Thor said, gesturing between his brother and his teammate. “The bond between them runs deeper than friendship or even fondness. Loki has found his other half.”

Chapter Notes

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

If Tony had ever imagined visiting Loki and Thor’s home planet, he had always pictured the trip involving lots of science and sightseeing and questions about the Bifröst. Never, not once, had he pictured an honest to god royal court, complete with the painted ceilings, flowing outfits, and golden furniture. And was that a painting of Loki wearing a freaking *halo* on the ceiling? Sure, he’d known intellectually that Loki was a prince, but this was all a bit...

Much.

If it was intended to intimidate, it was definitely doing the job.

And to make matters worse, Tony was definitely the only human in the room— not a single friendly face in sight.

“Anthony Stark, hero of Earth,” said Odin after allowing Tony to gain his bearings, his voice echoing through the hall with a dull boom. “Welcome to Asgard.”

Tony cursed under his breath as it all hit him once again because crap, this was Loki’s *father* and Tony’s first words to him had been a cuss. Yeah, such a brilliant first impression—

But then Tony remembered that this wasn’t just Loki’s dad. It was also the King of Asgard, the guy who had sent soldiers to take Loki away from him not just once, but *twice*. The guy that, according to Thor, had only wanted an apology but had been angry enough beforehand to give Loki cause to believe that his own father wanted him dead. And on top of all that, Odin had clearly come to the conclusion that if he couldn’t separate them by taking *Loki*, he would just go ahead and kidnap Tony instead.

So, for lack of a better plan, Tony just decided to do what he did best.

In for a penny, in for a million bucks.

“Your Majesty—“

“Allfather will do,” interrupted Odin, a spark of amusement in his single eye.

“*Your Majesty*,” Tony repeated, just to be contrary. “I don’t mean to be rude, but what the ever loving *fuck* am I doing here?”

Odin’s face instantly transformed, no longer the old man amused at the antics of a lesser being but a king faced with an unruly prisoner.

“You are here, Midgardian,” Odin said, “Because I require you to be.”

“Well, obviously,” Tony replied. “But specifically, I am here because...?”

“From my seat upon Hlidskjalf, I am able to see across Realms,” Odin boomed, and okay, creepy. “I know not *why*, but I know that you have caught the attention of my son.”

“Yeah, Thor’s a good friend,” Tony agreed, holding in a smile when Odin’s lips twisted in annoyance.

“Loki may hide himself from me, but he has not hidden you. Often, however, I see you conversing with nothing, so I know that he is keeping your company.”

“But you don’t know *why*,” Tony summarised.

“No,” Odin agreed. “But I do not need to. Loki is possessive over that which he believes to be his own, and will never allow something he believes to belong to him to fall from his grasp. My Einherjar tell me that he is of some importance to you, and that you protected him. Perhaps Loki will grant you the same.”

“Oh, cool,” said Tony. “I haven’t had a ‘leverage’ kidnapping since I was seven. Got out myself that time, since dear old dad had stopped paying ransoms about three years earlier. It was a while ago, memories are blurry, but I’m pretty sure I set someone on fire?”

“Cease this prattling.” Odin waved a dismissive hand. “Only your presence is required, here. There is no need for you to continue to—“

“Yeah,” interrupted Tony, nodding thoughtfully. “I *definitely* set someone on fire. That is how these things tend to end. Now the *last* time I got kidnapped— *that* was an impressive explosion. Have you ever had any of your kidnapping victims explode something?” Tony asked, watching Odin gnash his teeth with wide, expectant eyes.

“You will not find Asgard so easy to escape,” growled Odin.

“Aw,” said Tony. “Is this your first time kidnapping a human? Don’t worry, I can give you a perfect demonstration of what to expect.”

Tony, of course, was bluffing out his ass. He had nothing— no suit, no weapons, and he didn’t even have his small glove gauntlet that he’d taken to wearing everywhere, because he’d taken it off during the fight against the Maximoffs.

But there was *always* something Tony could use to his advantage. He only ever had to look hard enough.

At the moment, it was looking like Odin's arrogance was as good a weapon as any.

"The first thing you need to know," Tony continued, "is that we humans never give up. Not ever."

"You will listen to me," Odin snapped.

"Because us humans get it. While running might mean that we could live, if only for a while," Tony continued, ignoring the king save for a glare. "We all know the truth."

"Quiet!" Odin snapped. Yeah, Tony reckoned that this was probably a little cliché, too, now that he thought about it, but he was never one to let that stop him.

"The truth is that one day, we'll find ourselves dying in our beds and wishing that we could trade all the days from this day for that one chance, just that one chance to come back here and—"

Odin waved a hand in a manner that Tony recognised, and he instantly flinched back, expecting a spell. But when the magic washed over him it only felt warm and slimy, and not anything like what he'd seen from Loki or Wanda. He quickly took stock of himself, but nothing appeared to be out of place.

"Now that you have been rendered silent," Odin stated, "We shall be able to—"

"Whoa, whoa," said Tony, holding up his hands. "That was a *silencio*? I mean, obviously not a very good one, but I am so going to have to get Loki to try and mute Barton at some point—wait. You just tried to use magic to shut me up," Tony said, raising his eyebrows. "That's definitely a new one for me."

Odin at first looked shocked, his blue eye widening in confusion as he stood from his throne.

"It's not possible," Odin said.

"Not *probable*," Tony corrected, and really, it was a *travesty* that no one was here to be impressed by how many references he was able to stick in a single conversation. "Obviously, it's possible. And yeah, I've had to rearrange my parameters for what's possible several times over the past eight years. You get used to it."

"You should not have been able to withstand that spell," Odin stated. "What powers do you hold?"

"None," said Tony. "I'm just a human, like I said. But hey— that means you just used your magic to try and silence a *human*." Tony smirked. "Seems a bit like overkill. Are you worried?"

The Asgardians in the room were fidgeting, and muttering. Tony's smirk grew, knowing that he had hit a sore spot.

Odin narrowed his eyes, and then he thrust a hand forward, his fingers extending straight at Tony and expelling a blast of blinding hot golden light.

Tony flinched but couldn't get out of the way. The magic was fast, too fast, and it slammed into him—

But it didn't touch, because just as the light came into contact Tony's skin glowed green, and cold power exploded from him in a bright flash.

“What the hell was that?” Tony exclaimed, looking around. The magic had dissipated quickly, leaving no trace. The Einherjar and the Asgardian civilians in the room were staring in shock, and Odin's expression was deeply thoughtful.

“It appears that Loki did not leave his plaything defenceless after all,” Odin said.

“He shielded me?” Tony asked, delighted. “That little shit— he got mad at me for saying I'd protect him when all along—“

“Why has he done this?” Odin asked, standing from his throne and descending a down the steps, his spear still held tightly in hand. “Why would he use his magic in such a way?”

Tony bared his teeth. “Wouldn't you like to know?”

“Yes,” said Odin, stopping only a yard in front of Tony. They were the same height, and Odin's eye bore into him sharply. “You will tell me. *Now.*”

“No, I won't,” said Tony, taking a step forward so that he was in Odin's space. It was clear that Odin was used to being the biggest man in the room, but Tony had been standing up to Asgardians for years now. And while Odin may be king, Tony's many arguments with Thor and Loki and his fights with several Einherjar at once had numbed him to the affects of the big, bad, Asgardian demeanour. “I'm not going to tell you anything about Loki. And you know why?” Tony lifted his chin. “Your soldiers said to me once that they thought I would not harm them. Well, you now know that I *will*— but *you* won't harm *me*. Loki told me that you need me to defend Midgard, because otherwise, Asgard is left vulnerable. So you're not going to hurt me, and nothing that you could say or promise is ever going to turn me against Loki.”

“Loki lied to you, it's what he does. There are plenty of humans who could take your place,” Odin said. “Do not make the mistake of thinking that a mortal could ever mean enough on Asgard to save your life should I wish it taken.”

“Even so,” Tony said, standing firm. “You could do whatever you wanted to me, but I won't ever betray him, so you might as well save your energy.”

“What has he done to earn such loyalty?” Odin asked.

“That you have to ask that,” Tony snapped, “Is exactly *why* I'm not cooperating the way you would like.”

“You *will* answer me—“

“I will not. I don’t have to listen to you.”

“Take him away,” Odin snarled, swirling dramatically to return to his throne, demonstrating very clearly where Loki got his taste for flare. “Get this mortal out of my sight!”

“It’s human priorities,” Tony called as he was lead out of the hall by the Einherjar, the desire to finish what he had started earlier and fulfil a wish he’d had since he started in the hero business too strong to resist. “You probably could take my life, but I’m sure as hell not going to let you take my *freedom!*”



Asgard, Tony decided, was *not* all it was cracked up to be. Although, to be fair, of all the kidnappings Tony had experienced in the past, this one was definitely the least horrifying. Sure, the soldiers were an intimidating touch, but other than that— there had been no torture, no guns, and no death. At least, not yet. In relative terms, it was actually quite pleasant.

Still, though, the people were stern, the outfits were so last millennium and the golden décor was little harsh on the eyes. Definitely *not* a place Tony would want to spend millennia parading about in. There was no wonder Loki hadn’t wanted to come back.

The room he’d been put in was all right, though. It was comfortable, though sparse, with a bed and an en suite bathroom, looking remarkably similar to motel room with a medieval theme. Servants quarters, perhaps? But there were no windows, and therefore Tony lacked both an escape route and a method of knowing how much time had passed.

Still, it was leagues and *leagues* ahead of a cave.

Even better, his plan had worked, and he had been left alone. Tony turned the whole place upside down, but the cupboards were empty, there was nothing under the bed, the sheets were all fabric with no zips and all the furnishings were bare. There wasn’t even so much as a bible in the top drawer of the side table.

So, Tony improvised. He tried to pull off a few doorknobs and cupboard handles, only to find they were made of something too strong for his *mortal* hands to snap. So he climbed on a chair to have a look at the light fixture in the ceiling, only to find that it wasn’t connected to any kind of electronics— the simple strip of yellow light seemed to be magical.

He still didn’t give up there, because he was *Tony Stark*. He still had his StarkPhone, which was something. It had lost all connection to the phone network, of course, but he could still use it as a weapon.

Tony pulled it out of his pocket, his fingers brushing the silver ceremonial pen that the UN had let him keep. It wasn’t perfect, but it was better than nothing, so Tony pulled that out, too. He was about to flip the phone over and pull out the back when the screen lit up.

‘*Sit tight,*’ the message read. ‘*I know you find it hard, but don’t do anything stupid. I’m coming for you.*’

Tony smiled fondly, brushing his thumb across the line of text.

Your dad is a dick, he typed, but the message wouldn't send. Loki never had got around to upgrading Tony's phone to be able to send magical messages— neither of them had ever expected that it would be necessary.

Well, Tony wasn't just going to sit and do nothing.

Don't do anything stupid?

Ha.

It was almost like Loki didn't know him at all.

—•—

Tony found it difficult to guess how long he had been in the room when an Einherji came to collect him, but he did know that he was hungry and thirsty. He hadn't quite been desperate enough to try drinking from the tap in the bathroom - who even knew if Asgardian tap water was safe for humans, anyway? I had *looked* like water when Tony had turned it on, but he hadn't been game to actually put the stuff in his body.

Another question for Loki, he supposed. When, you know, he finally saw him again.

"I feel like I have been in here a *week*," Tony complained when a single Einherji came through the door. "I haven't been given any food or water—"

"It has been less than a day," the Einherji said, his eyes bright with amusement. He looked young, Tony would guess early twenties if he were human. "Now come, Man of Iron. A situation has arisen, and the Allfather requires your presence in the Hall."

"It's Loki, isn't it," said Tony, brightening. "Of course it is, I bet he can get on old Odin's nerves with even more efficiency than I can."

The Einherji looked unsure as to whether he should be divulging the information, but he nodded. "It is Prince Loki, yes. However, he... he has brought a hostage."

Well, really, there was only one person who that could be, and *that* was never going to end well.

"The Hall, you said?" Tony asked, moving swiftly out into the corridor, leaving the Einherji to hurry after him and direct him around the right corner. "I suppose we don't want to keep the Allfather waiting."

When they arrived, the Hall was far emptier than it had been before. There were only a few Einherjar at the bottom of the steps below the throne, and no Asgardian civilians in sight.

"Loki has arrived in Asgard via the Bifröst," Odin told Tony, standing in almost the same spot that Tony had last seen him, on the level ground before the throne. "He is on his way here."

“And you want me to do what, exactly?” Tony asked, raising his brow. “We’ve already had this conversation. I won’t work against him.”

“Your part is quite simple.” Odin smiled harshly. “You are to do *nothing*.”

Tony was caught by surprise as the Einherjar behind him gripped his shoulders tightly, and then Odin began to move his hands in intricate patterns. A coating of golden, shimmering light began to fall on Tony’s skin, and he waited for Loki’s green to come to his rescue again—but it never did.

“Good,” said Odin. “It seems you were only shielded against harmful spells, and not those that are defensive. You shall remain quiet.” Odin nodded to the Einherji, who placed a gloved hand over Tony’s mouth.

Tony yelled but it came out muffled, and the Einherji squeezed tighter for a moment in reflex.

“I have rendered you invisible to all those who do not already know you are there,” Odin told him. “It is a shielding spell, and therefore Loki’s protections do not disrupt it.”

The Einherjar led Tony around the side of the throne, turning him so that they faced the Hall proper.

“Sorry,” the soldier whispered to Tony. “You are only a mortal, so you so you do not understand the ways of Asgard, but know that the Allfather always has his reasons.”

Fuck you, Tony tried to say, but he couldn’t even move his lips, the Asgardian’s strength too much for him to counter. Man, and Tony had thought the guy was all right, earlier.

The huge golden doors of the Hall slammed open moments after Odin had retaken his seat, and Loki strode in. He was wearing the same clothes he’d fought in on the streets of Vienna, all black leather and green highlights, and his hair flowed freely to his shoulders. Tony only half wondered for a second how Loki had managed to make it this far into Asgard without being opposed—but the answer was painfully obvious. Loki’s eyes were once again burning a bright, bright amber, and power of the same hue swirled all around him, clinging to his skin and crackling in the air. The sight of him caused several of the well-trained soldiers before the throne tremble, and one even stepped back as Loki’s thunderous expression grew even darker as he entered the Hall.

And as he moved forward through the doorway, the Einherji’s earlier words were proven true—Loki wasn’t alone.

Thor stood beside Loki, thrown into partial shadow by the brilliance of Loki’s magic which highlighted the way his eyes were glowing a similar shade of yellow, though not quite as bright as his brother’s. His face was blank and empty, and it was unsettling to see the usually energetic Thor reduced to apathy.

“Loki,” said Odin warily. “Don’t be foolish. Put that Stone away before you do something regretful.”

“*Foolish?*” Loki chuckled bitterly. “You think me foolish, Allfather? I, who have aided my brother in difficult matters for *centuries?*”

“I think you misguided,” Odin corrected. “You once had a mind for diplomacy, but now I fear that your hate has led you down a different path.”

“My hate?” Loki’s eyes flashed even brighter, and his magic surged and twisted all around him. “Perhaps you are right. But it is not with hatred that I speak to you now— it is with *rage*. You have taken something of mine, and I would have him returned.”

“Yours?” Odin asked. “You claim slaves now?”

“A slave?” Loki spat. “You want to see a slave? Thor!”

“Yes, Sir?” Thor asked— and for some reason he sounded so familiar to JARVIS that Tony flinched.

“You will remove the soldiers from the room,” Loki ordered. “I wish to speak with the Allfather *alone*.”

Thor nodded and moved forward, hefting his hammer. The Einherjar glanced between themselves, wary, clearly unsure of how to react. Thor, after all, was their crown prince.

“That will not be necessary,” Odin said, nodding to the soldiers. “Leave us.”

The soldiers scurried to a side door without a backward glance, and Thor returned to Loki’s side.

“You will release Anthony Stark to me,” Loki stated as soon as the room was clear of the soldiers. “You will let me return to Midgard, free of your constant badgering. In return, I shall give you back your son.”

“I have two sons, Loki,” Odin said.

“*No*,” Loki replied. “You do not. Not so long as you take and hide and *demand* things from me as you see fit.”

Odin’s eyes turned sad. “Loki, we have been here before.”

“Yes, and I have no desire to pick at old scars.” There was pain underlying Loki’s dark tone, and Tony tried in vain once again to make some kind of noise.

Loki had admitted, once, that he wished he could still see Odin as a father. But perhaps they were now just too different, perhaps the breach had cut too wide. Tony fought with more vigour, realising that this trip— that *he* could very well have made it all worse.

“You may have your freedom,” Odin said after a pause, “If you hand over the Stone and Thor this instant, and then *leave*.”

“I will not,” Loki said, not even pausing for a moment. “You will also release Anthony Stark. I will *not* leave without him.”

Odin leaned forward on his throne. “And why not?”

That bastard. He was manipulating Loki again, just as he had for Loki’s whole life. What was he hoping to gain? Why would Odin try to make Loki leave Tony behind when he was the one who had made Loki come up here? Did he think that Loki would turn on Tony, and that Tony would leave him as a result? Was it just about making Loki miserable?

What sort of a father made his child choose between the person he loved and his own freedom?

Whatever the answer, Tony knew he didn’t like it.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to make the Einherji let go with only strength, not when he couldn’t even bite at the gloved hand covering his lips. But Tony still had another trick up his sleeve— or, rather, in his jacket pocket.

They really should have tied his hands.

The phone battery that Tony had managed to rewire into an electroshock weapon with only a pen and his wits was small, but powerful— it carried enough of a charge that the Einherji let go with a yelp, and Tony could finally move his jaw and make use of his voice.

“Loki!” Tony shouted.

Loki’s burning gaze snapped up, staring straight into the dark corner beside Hlidskjalf where Tony and the Einherji were concealed.

Tony’s mouth was muffled again, the Einherji holding tighter than he had before, but the damage was done. Loki knew that Tony was there, and the spell was broken.

“Release him,” Loki snarled, “Or Thor will no longer remain so silent.”

Thor glanced at Loki as if he were waiting for orders, and Odin sighed.

“All right, Loki,” he said, turning to where Tony was struggling. “Release the mortal.”

The moment Tony was let go he spun around and glared at the soldier. “*Fuck you,*” he snapped. “I have wanted to say that all afternoon.” Well, for about the past ten minutes, but the intent remained.

“I *am* sorry,” said the Einherji, his young face conflicted.

“No, you’re not,” Tony replied. Then he spun on his heel and hurried across the Hall. As he drew closer Loki began to move as well, meeting Tony in the middle.

“Are you all right?” Loki asked, his left hand reaching up to cradle Tony’s cheek while the other, still clenched in a glowing fist, came to rest at the base of Tony’s spine.

“It takes more than a kidnapping to ruffle my feathers,” Tony responded, tracing Loki’s cheekbone with his fingers before rubbing his thumb under Loki’s amber eyes. “What have you done to yourself?”

“Nothing permanent,” Loki assured him. “I needed an edge to get here.”

“An edge?” Odin boomed, and Tony turned to stand by Loki’s left side so that they could keep the king in sight but still near enough to keep contact, the power now twisting about the both of them. “Is that what you would call it? An Infinity Stone, used only as a means of manipulation and destruction.”

“What were they designed for, if not to destroy?” Loki snarled. “They have only brought me pain. I would happily hand this one over if it is enough to buy our freedom.”

“It is that frame of mind that has always caused me worry, Loki,” Odin sighed. Then he said firmly— “Thor, and the Mind Stone. And you must promise me that you will abide by the laws of Midgard while you remain there. If you do not, then you will have to suffer the consequences of your actions.”

“That is all?” Loki asked, his voice hard and untrusting. “Thor, the Mind Stone, and my will to conform to Midgard’s rules?”

“That is my offer,” Odin agreed. His expression had softened as his gaze caught on the way Loki’s left hand was twisted in Tony’s expensive shirt, his arm resting under Tony’s jacket and holding him close. “Though I am surprised that you would accept it.”

“I would have your *word*,” Loki snapped.

“You have it,” Odin nodded. “Now, release Thor.”

“No need, father,” said Thor, and Tony glanced to him in surprise. His eyes were still that bright yellow, but he was smiling. Which... made a lot of sense, actually. After what had happened in New York and with how strongly Loki had reacted to Wanda, Tony didn’t think Loki would be able to stomach mind controlling another person, and especially not Thor. “Loki assured me that the only way you would release our friend would be in exchange for me— I tried to tell Loki that a ruse wasn’t necessary, but this was the only way he would agree to come to Asgard without violence.”

“A trick?” Odin asked, but he sounded amused. “I see that I was wrong, Loki. You are far from foolish.”

Loki frowned. “Yes,” he said. “Had you only seen that earlier...”

“I was wrong about more than one thing.” Odin turned to Tony. “You were correct, Midgardian. I see now, what Loki has done.”

“What is he talking about?” Loki asked.

“He wanted to know why I wouldn’t betray you,” Tony said. “He didn’t ask nicely, so I didn’t tell him.”

“Father, the answer is as clear as day,” Thor said, gesturing between his brother and his teammate. “The bond between them runs deeper than friendship or even fondness. Loki has found his other half.”

“Is that so?” Odin asked, his eye twinkling. “I must say that I had my suspicions when I discovered the protections you placed upon him, Loki, but I do know how possessive you can be. Though it was interesting that the only shield upon him was to defend against *Asgardian* magic.”

“Anthony can take care of himself,” Loki snapped. “But I was not about to risk that I was wrong in thinking that you would not stoop to harming a Midgardian hero.”

“Had I known his true importance I certainly would not have even tried,” Odin replied. He looked to Thor. “You say this Midgardian is Loki’s match?”

“In all ways,” Thor confirmed.

“It must be my curse,” Odin sighed, “To have both my sons choose the company of mortals.”

“Hey,” said Tony, stepping forward. Loki moved with him, reluctant to let him go. “I may be mortal, but—“

“You misunderstand— I agree with Thor,” Odin interrupted. “You are quite the perfect match.”

There was something in his tone that Tony just didn’t quite like.

“They are very similar,” Thor said.

“Yes,” Odin agreed, his gaze lingering on Tony. “Very much so. When you came here, I thought you rude and primitive, and I did not understand how you had caught my son’s attention. But now I see— your tenacity, while uncouth, is rather entertaining, and very similar to Loki’s love of flyting. But know this, mortal. Loki is capricious, and he will not find you as amusing as he does now for very much longer.”

“That’s not true,” Tony snapped. “I know that Loki loves me, and I’m not about to let you—“

“It’s all right, Anthony,” said Loki, his grip on Tony’s waist tightening.

“It’s not,” said Tony.

“It is,” Loki said. “I agree with him.”

“I speak out of care for you, Loki,” Odin started, but Loki cut him off.

“No,” Loki snarled. “You do not. You lost that right long ago, and I will not let you diminish what Anthony and I have. I agree with you, yes, because I know that I won’t feel the *same* about him in the future. Since the day that we met the way that I feel about Anthony Stark has only grown *more* fierce.” Loki turned to Tony. “Perhaps, to others, we may seem too similar and too volatile to work, but we’re not going to fall apart because we find each other

entertaining. We work because we challenge each other, because neither of us can cope with anything *simple*. And you're not just something temporary for me," Loki said, his eyes boring deep into Tony's, so familiar despite the different colour. "I know that you're mortal, but— you're not something that I could walk away from. Not ever."

"I know," said Tony, smiling softly.

"And that he is a mortal does not make him less than us," Loki snapped, looking back to Odin. "I have spent years on Midgard now, *father*. I have seen the way that the humans fight, the way that they care, the way that they are able to adapt. It is something that Asgard lacks, and I envy them. Maybe that makes me weak in your eyes, but I believe that their unruliness is an asset. And I know that having Anthony by my side only makes me stronger."

"No, Loki," said Odin, and Tony felt Loki flinch. "If you care for the mortal this much—"

"I love him," Loki asserted.

"That is worse," Odin snapped. "You and Thor both— mortals do not live long."

"And I do not care," Loki replied. "Any time is more than I could ask for."

"And when he dies— what then?" Odin asked, his voice more curious than harsh. "What will you do *then*?"

Thor stepped forward, moving to stand in front of Tony and Loki almost protectively. "Father, you speak out of turn," he said, his tone calm and reassuring. "Stark has many years left yet, as does my Jane. They will live full human lives, and we will be with them for as long as that may last."

"Thank you, Thor," said Loki. Then he turned to Odin. "You have taken many things from me in past years, but you shall *not* take *this*."

"Very well," said Odin, inclining his head. "If you believe that you truly love this mortal, Loki—"

"I *do*," Loki insisted.

"Then Anthony Stark, I would make a deal with you as well."

"A deal?" Tony asked. "What are you, a devil?"

"Perhaps," Odin said. "But I would have you promise to ensure that your world will accept my son, and in response— I will grant you the assistance that Thor asked for in your name."

It took Tony's brain a few seconds to catch up.

"Oh," he said. "*Oh*. Yeah, I mean— I was hoping to get onto the media about this, anyway, and Steve seemed to think that maybe the UN—"

"Your answer?" Odin cut in, his patience obviously still thin where Tony was concerned.

“You haven’t laid out proper terms,” Loki interjected.

“No, he has,” Tony cut back in. “I do want some clarification though, because this *is* Loki we’re talking about—“

“*Excuse me?*” Loki asked.

“Say I do everything I can, but he still decides that he’s going to attack Central Park with giant squirrels, or—“

“I would never do something so absurd.”

Tony raised an eyebrow, and Loki huffed, conceding the point without any further need for argument.

“I believe this may serve as further incentive for Loki to keep his own bargain, will it not?” Odin asked.

“No,” said Tony. “I love Loki, but I’m not betting the future of my planet on his ability to entertain himself like a normal person.”

Thor snorted.

“Then what do you suggest?” Odin asked curiously, the spark in his eye letting Tony know that this, too, was a test.

“I’ll keep Loki *safe* from my world,” Tony said. “I can’t promise that they’ll accept him—we’re human, after all. But I will not let them harm him.”

And regardless, he refrained from saying, he’ll be accepted a hell of a lot more on Earth than he has been here.

“Then it is settled,” said Odin, his voice echoing through the room despite his soft tone. “In her time of need, Midgard shall have Asgard’s help.”

“Thank you, father,” Thor said, and Tony nodded, relief flowing through him. He knew that Odin had probably already made up his mind, for the reasons of defence that Tony had laid out earlier, and that it probably had nothing to do with his promise— but it was nice to think that something good had come out of this clusterfuck, and that was a fact that Tony would definitely be lordling over the others.

Yeah guys, I got abducted, and I came back with the key to saving the Earth. How was your day?

“Now, I believe that you have been stalling, Loki,” said Odin. “Are you able to let go of the Stone, or has the power begun to consume you?”

Loki glared in clear insult and opened his right hand, holding it before him. Sitting open in his palm was the small gold-titanium box he had taken from Tony in the wake of Ultron. Nestled in the box was a bright yellow gem, the exact colour of the magic Loki had used to

scare the Asgardians and remove Wanda Maximoff's powers— the very same yellow that stained his eyes. Then, in one swift movement, Loki closed the box— and as the lid snapped shut, the yellow power in the air disappeared. When Loki used his powers to levitate the box up to Odin for the Allfather to tuck away, his magic glowed a bright, comforting green.

“The Mind Stone, Allfather,” Loki said, the green bleeding back into his eyes to replace the unnatural amber. “And now, I believe that we are free to take our leave.”

Tony felt uncomfortable turning his back on Odin, but he knew that it had to be done. It was a small comfort to have Thor at his back, however, the thunderer a solid presence that Tony knew would take a mountain to move.

“You *are* still welcome here, Loki,” Odin called to them as they walked for the doors. “If you wish for forgiveness, then all you must do is ask.”

Loki paused, but did not turn. “How can I expect you to forgive me,” he asked, “when you do not understand even the smallest thing about me?” Then, he continued walking out of the Hall.

“That whole thing was a test,” Tony said the moment that they were out of the palace doors, before they had even descended the steps “Every question he asked— he was testing you.”

“I know,” said Loki. “I do not believe that I passed.”

“You said what he wanted you to say,” Thor pointed out, moving forward to stand on Loki's other side.

“Yes,” said Loki. “And he knows it. He will wish to speak to us again, at a later date— when he knows for certain whether or not our relationship is temporary.”

“I'm sorry,” Tony said. “I know that you'd hoped—“

“Hoped is too strong a word,” Loki cut in. “Wished, perhaps? But I knew it was a useless dream.” Loki sighed. “He lied to me my entire life, and now— I could not ever forgive him for what he has done in the past, and I will not ever be able to see eye to eye with him in the present when he believes that I would be better off without you. Maybe Thor can live with that, but I certainly cannot.”

“What he was saying is true, you know,” Tony said. “I'm not going to live nearly as long as you.”

“Oh, my love,” said Loki, leaning in to press their foreheads together, his breath whispering across Tony's lips. “That is not something that I want you to have to worry about.”

But it was something they needed to talk about. Just... perhaps at a different time.

Tony tilted up his chin to kiss Loki, aware of the other people milling on the palace steps and so keeping it chaste, but still making sure to pour as much emotion and affection into it as he could. They had shared a thousand kisses in the past but Tony thought that this might be one of his favourites— slow and sweet, both relishing in the feel of the other pressing close as lips

slid together. They stayed entwined even when their lips parted, the tender yearning in Loki's gaze proving that he was just as reluctant to move as Tony was.

"I love you," Tony told him.

"Yes," said Loki, closing his beautifully green eyes in contentment. "And I, you."

"Can we go home now?" Tony asked, reaching up to brush Loki's hair behind his ear. "I promised you five minutes about a day ago, I think."

"You did," Loki agreed. "And I expect you to make that up to me."

They collected Thor from where he was waiting to the side, his ears a bright pink beneath his blonde hair, his now blue eyes filled with affection as he smiled at his brother. He led the way to the Bifröst, and Tony thought that he kept his gaze turned away out of respect more than embarrassment, giving them a few more moments of relative privacy.

Loki was increasingly jumpy as they moved away from the palace, continually looking around them even as they began to cross the Bifröst, despite the fact that the nature of the bridge meant there really wasn't anywhere for an assailant to be hiding. It didn't seem possible, but the further down the bridge they got, the more twitchy Loki became.

"You know, I didn't realise that there was an actual *bridge*," Tony said in an attempt to distract. "That's kinda cool."

It was more than cool— it was *awesome*. Asgard wasn't a planet like Tony had thought - it was more of a floating disc, with the ocean running over the side in a powerful cascade. Tony stepped closer to the side to get a better look, wanting to know how it worked— where did the water go? How did the water replenish itself if it fell into nothing? Was it magic?

"Anthony," Loki said, gripping Tony's arm tightly. "Please come away from the edge." There was a shadow in his eyes, and his expression was pleading, *desperate*.

Thor was worried, too, an echo of pain etched across his face as he leaned forward on his feet, as if he were ready to dart forward pull them both back forcibly.

Tony glanced one last time toward the darkness of the void, and he realised that he knew only too well where the water ended up. He'd been there himself once before, after all.

He stepped back toward Loki with a shudder, and they continued on.

"We go back to Midgard, Heimdall," said Thor, taking his place in front of the golden archway, gesturing for Tony and Loki to join him. "The Tower, please."

"Okay," said Tony, pressing closer to his lover as Heimdall lifted his sword. "I mean it, this is *definitely* the last time I'm traveling by Bifröst."

Loki hooked his arms around him and pulled him in tight, tucking him firmly against his side. And Tony found that the Bifröst wasn't nearly so horrible when he had Loki there to hold him steady.

If Tony was being honest, he'd admit that he had been expecting there to be some kind of chaos happening in the Avengers' living room when they walked back into the Tower, having once again been deposited on the roof. He'd been thinking along the lines of Odin changing his mind, of there being sword-wielding Einherjar or a few Asgardian magicians or, at the very least, a bilgesnipe chewing on the corner of the couch.

So when they exited the elevator and the whole room exploded into a cacophony of light and noise— well, Tony should *not* be blamed for his reaction.

Loki, of course, would laugh about it for *months* afterward.

“Did you have to throw it at *me*?” Clint asked as Bruce patched up his injured shoulder, where Tony had nailed him with the cobbled together electroshock device he'd used against the Einherji in Asgard's Hall.

“You should know better than to jump out of the dark like that!” Tony exclaimed. “So before any of you start blaming me for this, I think we all need to look at the real culprit, here.” Tony glared at the ceiling. “JARVIS, you know I hate surprises. Why did you let them dim the lights? Scratch that— why was any of this allowed at all?”

“While I may have condoned the idea of a welcome back surprise, I did tell them that the party horns were too much, Sir,” JARVIS replied defensively.

“Don't throw us under the bus, JARVIS, you're the one who said we should use the disco lights,” Clint said. “*And* you offered to record Tony's reaction of your own free will.”

“And I am so glad that you did, JARVIS,” Rhodey giggled. “Tones, I think you hit a decibel as yet undiscovered by man.”

“I heard the windows shudder in fear,” Bruce agreed.

“Bruce, I thought you were on my side,” Tony whined.

“Tony,” Bruce said, “I'm always on your side. You know that, right?”

The sudden serious tone had Tony reeling for a second.

“Thanks Bruce,” he said.

“Except, of course, when it comes to pizza,” Bruce continued. “Because the whole pineapple thing is just wrong.”

“Okay, friendship revoked,” said Tony, grinning.

“Seriously, though, Tony,” said Bruce. “We were all worried when you disappeared up to Asgard. Loki wouldn't tell us much.”

“I didn’t know much,” Loki argued. “I only knew that Odin had taken him, likely in an attempt to trap me.”

“We know,” said Steve. “But go on, Tony— what really happened?”

The eight of them - Sam was fine, but recovering at home - settled on the couches for the explanation, which did not take as long as Tony would have thought. Loki had flare for storytelling and Tony added in his commentary while Thor added dramatic sound effects, and they had the Avengers gasping in all the right places.

“And then,” Loki was saying, “Like a cry for help out of the darkness—“

“Excuse you, I was giving you a warning—“

“Which, of course, was entirely unneeded.”

“You should have seen it,” Thor said, his words dripping with awe. “Stark was like *zap* and then the guard was all *eeeeep!* and then—“

“I was badass, that’s what happened then,” Tony said with a grin.

“Once I had ascertained that Anthony had not got himself injured while he was left to his own devices,” Loki continued with an eye roll, “Odin made his deal.”

They explained how Thor’s acting had fooled the Allfather and that he had agreed to Loki’s terms, and then how Odin had tried to convince Loki and Thor that mortals did not make good partners.

“And then Loki gave the biggest slam-down I’ve ever seen,” said Tony. “Odin didn’t know what to do in the awesomeness that is us.”

“He also agreed to aid Midgard when a future attack comes,” Loki added.

“Yes, that’s awesome too,” Tony said, catching Steve’s relieved expression. “Maybe I should get kidnapped more often. I always seem to come out with something to save the world.”

“No,” snapped Loki. “Don’t you dare. That was entirely too stressful to go through again.”

“Aw, you were worried about me?”

Loki’s answer was only to tighten his hold, and Tony grinned a little wider.

“No more need for armour, Tony?” Bruce asked then, and Tony knew he wasn’t referring to Iron Man.

“Nah,” Tony replied. “Not like that. We don’t need it— we’ve got the best heroes in the Nine Realms.”

“That is true,” said Loki, his expression fond.

“Did you just *compliment* us?” Clint gasped.

“Nah, he was just talking about me, *obviously*,” said Tony. “Anyway, after that, Loki gave Odin back the Mind Stone. He let us go. He really didn’t want to, though.”

“He truly believes that they are weaknesses to each other,” Thor explained.

“But of course, we shall prove him wrong,” Loki said fiercely.

“Of course we will,” said Tony, leaning in to press a kiss to Loki’s lips.

“Okay,” said Rhodey. “Before, I thought this was one of Tony’s infatuations. But now I see. This is serious.”

Loki leaned his head on Tony’s shoulder. “Yes.”

“In that case, as the best friend,” Rhodey said, “It is well within my rights to let you know that if you hurt him, I’ll make sure you suffer a thousand times over.”

“You would not be able to harm me,” Loki replied.

“Trust me,” said Rhodey, his tone lowering to the point where it was so menacing Tony felt a shudder of pride creep up his spine. “I will find a way.”

Loki, however, seemed relatively unaffected, a slow smile beginning to curl the edges of his lips. “I think I like you,” he said before lifting his head to look at Tony. “Can I—“

“No,” said Tony.

“But—“

“No.”

“You know what?” said Rhodey, glancing between them worriedly. “I don’t think I want to know. Anyway, Cap had something to tell you guys, I think.”

Loki turned to Steve expectantly. “This had better be about adding me to the Avengers payroll,” he said.

“Sort of,” Steve shrugged.

“Good,” said Loki. “I will stay in Anthony’s room, of course, and use space in his workshop, but I will require my own fridge somewhere. I have been informed that the one in the kitchen is not the correct place to store spell components.”

“We’ll get right on that,” Steve said without even blinking. “But actually, I wanted to talk to you about something a little more delicate.”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “Such as?”

“After what you did in Vienna, the UN is willing to consider writing a treaty similar to Thor’s, with only a few extra restrictions,” Steve told him. “You could join us. Officially.”

Loki’s face morphed into such a perfect picture of absolute horror that Tony had to stifle a giggle.

“They expect me to agree to be constrained?” Loki asked in disgust.

“It’s essentially the same agreement you guys just said you made with Odin,” Steve replied.

“And I am beginning to see that my decision in Asgard was a mistake.” Loki began to smirk. “In fact, I think it is a mistake that needs to be rectified.”

“Oh no,” said Tony. “Loki, come on, working with the Avengers could be fun—“

“Excuse me a moment, darling,” said Loki, silencing Tony with a kiss. “There’s something that I must do.”

“Loki,” Tony said suspiciously. “You’re not going to—“

“I’ll see you soon, my love,” Loki said, and then with one final grin, he was gone.

“This is not likely to end well,” said Thor, sharing Tony’s worried glance.

“He’s not going to do anything too drastic,” said Tony, quite obviously trying to convince himself just as much as everyone else. “He’s not going to risk—“

A loud, blaring alarm sounded through the Tower.

Avengers Assemble! The automated warning called. *Avengers Assemble!*

“You were saying?” asked Clint.

Tony winced. “JARVIS?”

“He has animated the Statue of Liberty, Sir,” JARVIS said, and if that wasn’t an inkling of pride in his voice— “I believe my apologies are necessary, I created a playlist of classic movies for him to be able to keep up with your references, and you do so like asking him who he is going to call.”

“This just means my living room is going to be destroyed again, doesn’t it?” Tony groaned.

“Suit up,” Steve said, and then when Thor frowned he added— “It’s not like we have a choice, here.”

“I’m pretty sure he wants us to go after him,” Tony said. “If he were stuck in a routine of waiting around to save the world, he’d get bored. He wants the extra attention.”

“You’re saying he doesn’t *want* to be cleared?” Bruce asked in disbelief.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Steve sighed.

“Sirs,” said JARVIS, “Lady Liberty has begun to make her way up Broadway. I have considered possible destinations and based upon her trajectory, the statue is headed for—“

“JARVIS, if Loki goes King Kong on this thing I am banning you from setting his movie playlists ever again,” Tony snapped.

“Noted, Sir.”

“Really, Tony?” asked Natasha, raising her eyebrows at the footage JARVIS was displaying for them on the television. “Out of everyone you could have had, *this* is the guy you chose to fall in love with?”

“Yeah,” said Tony, his expression softening, his grin wide and fond. “Yeah, it most certainly is.”

Tony, of course, woke later that night to loud shouts, the tell tale clamouring of Asgardian swords, and JARVIS’ assurances that a construction team had already been notified.

This is my life now, he thought as he rolled over and buried his head under his pillow with a groan. But even when Loki’s magic couldn’t manage to return the Avengers’ comfiest armchair to its former glory the next morning, he found that he didn’t really mind. It only took one smile, one touch, one kiss, and he fell in love with Loki all over again.

Because, yeah, this was Tony’s life. It was crazy and insane and expensive and problematic, but there was perfection in the chaos— and Tony wouldn’t have it any other way.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Tony did the Braveheart thing, because he's a nerd ~~and so am I~~

and yes, there's already more in the works, but I'm going away tomorrow for a couple weeks so don't expect it up as fast as I wrote this one (and honestly I think this fic is getting filed into my memory under the category of I Have No Bloody Clue How I Did That)

Thanks so much to all of you guys, you're all awesome

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