

souls reconstructed with faith

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souls reconstructed with faith

by [alternatedoom](#)

Summary

"Hey, fuck you, you ruined my suicide attempt."

Notes

1. Written for, or at this point really just inspired by, [a prompt](#) from the Avengers kink meme. Prompt was *Loki saves Tony in a rather unorthodox way. [Warning: Suicide/Self Harm] When a small and easy to make mistake on Tony's part during a mission leads to an innocent dying, the team rail against him about his reckless behavior and impulsiveness. They mean no intentional harm, but added to the pure and agonizing guilt working it's way through Tony's body it becomes too much. That night, when everyone is sleeping, Tony goes out to the balcony after leaving a message with JARVIS for the team, and jumps off. However, he doesn't hit the ground. Loki had been spying on the tower for a while, scoping out the enemy and had seen Tony jump. Stopping him more out of curiosity than anything else, Loki changes his tune when Tony - on an emotional downslide and an adrenaline high from the jump - lets loose everything. His inadequacy issues, his fathers neglect, his feeling of worthlessness and lack of belonging. He doesn't feel like one of the team or a worthy human being and Loki should just up and kill him already. However Loki sees way too much of himself in Tony at that moment - the feeling of total loss and nothingness causing one to let themselves fall to end it - and instead goes about helping Tony the only way he can think. Which is to say, he kidnaps Tony and traps him in the house Loki has been living in. Charming the property to disallow any harm to come to Tony in his stay there, Loki tries to fix Tony in the hopes that maybe he can fix something in himself. Ending is entirely open to author but I wouldn't exactly hate a nice, H/C-esque FrostIron ending =D*

2. Is anyone still reading FrostIron? Idk!

3. AU changes abound. So, um, where to start. I didn't think I would ever write Tony again, but here we are. This fic is partly brought to you by Hiddleston looking older. I played fast and loose with the specs laid out, but tried to adhere to the spirit of the prompt.

For my purposes imagine *Endgame* with fewer character deaths/departures. Tony has no enduring Pepper relationship and no child. Some time took place between *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Infinity War*, so that Loki and the Avengers had the chance to fight a couple more times (and Loki had the opportunity to fake his death yet again) before *Infinity War* went down. After the destruction of the NY compound in *Endgame*, Tony repurchased the Tower and the Avengers moved back in. Though it was not in the prompt, I incorporated climate depression

because frankly I needed an outlet for mine. As this fill is taking place at a years-later time in canon, J.A.R.V.I.S. has been replaced by F.R.I.D.A.Y., and the team is different.

This Loki's kind of a weird one, too. He's the escaped-in-*Endgame* Loki who witnessed his own emotional growth on a steampunk movie screen (which he watched much more extensively than in canon btw) and had all the humiliating butt-monkey experiences of the Disney+ show. He's pretty chill, domestic, and occasionally comic relief. This goes slightly against the prompt, but the Loki here doesn't really consider himself Tony's enemy, though he's certainly no friend either. The AU takes off from the end of *Loki* S1.

4. **Content warnings:** one use of a homophobic slur, tiny bit of internalized but rejected homophobia, internalized ageism, internalized ableism, a few instances of sexism, a discussion of sexual harassment at work, and two instances of dubiously consensual kissing. Further warnings for a character being forced to eat, suicidal ideation, moderately graphic, possibly offensive thoughts about 9/11 and dead bodies, and a number of suicide attempts, some of which are deadly serious and others done experimentally. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number is 800-273-8255, and a list of international hotline numbers is [here](#). (Please be cautious about what you say on a suicide hotline however, as in some locales they may be legally required to send the police to you depending on what you tell the volunteer, and you might or might not want that.)

5. June 27, 2022 - I forgot until just recently that I used Amber Heard in this fic as a rebound partner for Tony. I threw her name in after trying to think of a celebrity Hollywood-type woman who was both conventionally hot and out of her 20's. I had no idea what was gonna be coming down the current events pipeline.

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

Ninety-three floors. 1695 feet. A shade over ten seconds. Tony's going to be a smear on the pavement. Human bodies are basically liquid-and-gunk filled sacks, and on an impact like the one Tony's going to have, bits that are inside get outside. Sometimes guts burst out of the torso cavity like the boiling hot filling of a pizza roll. Tony absolutely checked out the photos of the World Trade Center jumpers, some of which were not immediately recognizable as human remains. Partial liquefaction is a thing-- depending on how they landed, parts of the bodies were obliterated into liquid and mist as if the deceased swallowed explosives. One of the 9-11 witnesses described seeing a limb clip a ledge and vaporize. And apparently the sound on impact from this height is similar to hearing a small explosion. Someone, a first responder maybe, likened the sound of a body landing to a chunk of concrete debris hitting the pavement.

Pictures of the bloody aftermath will go on Death Addict and Leak Reality now that Liveleak is no more, *r/eyeblech* and *r/MakeMyCoffin* instead of *r/watchpeopledie*. Give all the twisted fucks a sick voyeuristic thrill depending on how bad the aftermath looks. Being a smear is no more than Tony deserves.

Tony's always been a sick piece of shit, he knows and accepts this. Some people have a surreptitious dark side. Some people have that perverse human inclination to *look*, to know someone else's twisted secret, to see someone else's worst day. And people should contribute to what they like, right? Make the world a better place. Don't be take-take-take. Deliver. Contribute. Jumping is the clear choice for someone like him, who could have his AI instantly strike down the online video files of his sex tapes every time a copy pops up but who chooses to leave every single upload alone. Most people without a genius AI at their service hire a firm or whatever to bury the search engine results in bullshit, but the truth is, Tony likes to be looked at. Attention, eyeballs are his drug, and his sex tapes are pretty hot.

Over the past decade he's taken a particular interest in the 9/11 jumpers, maybe because he's always been one for spectacle, and pills and nooses don't make quite the same dramatic statement. Maybe because he always sort of back-burner figured he'd go out a similar way, someday. Very few people take the plunge off skyscrapers; most use bridges or buildings under ten stories. Partly of course that's because owners of skyscrapers usually make it hard to take the leap. Everything's steel-and-tempered-glass enclosures in most tall buildings. Sure, occasionally someone will die from high altitude urban parkour, or an elevated crane will collapse in China, but for the most part people don't die this way. The 9/11 jumpers have the closest physical outcomes Tony has for comparison of death, by falling the way he's likely to fall.

Tony learned in his youth that pills and razors are more likely to score you a traumatizing stay in a padded institution than to end your life. And naturally he had the best and most private care money could buy.

He briefly considered building a nitrogen chamber, that's supposedly a really gentle and peaceful way to say goodnight, but it'd take a day or two to build and Tony's ready to get off the ride now, tonight, not in two days. He used the last of his nitrogen making some new explosives for the Legionnaires, so he'd have to get more delivered or manufacture some or

go get more himself. Hm, maybe a nitrogen helmet, that would save fabrication time and be a considerably more efficient use of resources.

But Tony has powerful guilt roiling through his gut, saturating his bloodstream, seeping through his muscles, and he doesn't deserve a peaceful ending anyway. What in his life has ever been peaceful? Charles Spencer didn't get a peaceful end, thanks to Tony and team. Neither did Andrea Zaleski, thanks to Tony alone. Tony's always known on some level that he'll die violently. Violent delights and violent ends. A line so good they stuck it in *Westworld*.

Nope, no, he's got private access to a skyscraper, one of the tallest in the city with an open balcony and helicopter landing pad, and he's looking out of the penthouse, and he can dismount the balance beam when he's ready. Which is now. Even the East German judge will have to put up a ten, because he's doing the right thing.

How long will he need to get this done?

"F.R.I.D.A.Y., disable all cameras for the next fifteen minutes, and disable all mics on this floor."

"Of course, boss."

F.R.I.D.A.Y. doesn't need to see his last moments, and Tony doesn't want them played and replayed for the rest of the team and Fury, nevermind the media. No, his final seconds will be his own. Even the paparazzi don't hang around his building past midnight. In the wise words of Warren Zevon, he'll sleep when he's dead. They can all stare at him then.

Tony considers for half a second saying a silent goodbye to his workshop, but decides against it. He wouldn't be able to bear looking at U or DUM-E.

Tony digs his phone out of his pocket and leaves it on the bar. Tony leaves the D.R.A.A.G. on his leg, because he's not limping to his death, thanks ever so much. Besides, the D.R.A.A.G. tech is already out there helping disabled people the world over, it's not like it'd be profitable to sneak in and perform a bloody snatch-and-grab. The D.R.A.A.G. will probably end up shattered, if anything. The frame may be titanium, but the joints are reinforced medical-grade plastic.

Tony finally heads out onto the balcony. The icy February air is a cold shock after the perfectly climate-controlled comfort of the penthouse.

Tony walks right up to the edge. Leaning over the railing, he looks down the dizzying height. Tony's not afraid of heights, not unless he's falling.

Tony activates the helmet of the Mark L. The people walking the streets below would be hard-to-see specks without magnification. Tony waits and watches until the avenue below him is empty. Waiting gives him both a distraction and a timetable, because though the excitement's usually dying by three to four a.m., the city never fully sleeps and the last thing Tony wants to do on his way out is hurt anybody else.

At last the street below looks clear, however briefly. Now or never. Tony deems his exit point from life is below, waiting. Tony wonders whether he'll land on his back or his front, his head or his legs. He's seen all kinds of landings. If he doesn't get partly vaporized, chances are good his insides will explode outwards on impact like a water balloon popping. The question is whether they'll come out high, low, or sideways, or if anything will be recognizably left at all. But he'll never know. The suit would contain everything pretty well, but the suit would defeat the purpose of this little tumble.

Tony will not scream. Tony went skydiving a few times in his twenties, and the instructors encouraged screaming while jumping from the plane because screaming kick-starts the respiration instinct. Apparently some people get such a shock to the system from jumping they forget to breathe on the way down, which is not great, but even on the rare occasion a jumper passes out, backup chutes are air-pressure sensitive and set to automatically deploy at eight hundred feet. But breathing is breathing, at five feet or ten thousand. Tony will breathe on the way down.

The helmet covering his face retreats to the nanotech arc reactor with a deliberate thought as the technology reads his brainwaves, and Tony pulls the fruit of his greatest invention off his chest and tosses it off to the side. The reactor casing clatters on the balcony.

Taking a deep breath, Tony half-climbs, half-vaults over the glass railing of the building, marked now solely with an 'A,' that used to bear his name.

No footholds exist on the other side of the glass, so once Tony scrambles over the railing and lets go there's only empty space. Nowhere to go but down.

Tony feels the whole-body surge of regret as he starts to fall, which is normal, you're supposed to instantly regret your choice when you finally take the leap. Or at least most bridge-jump survivors do, but that's just the survival instinct firing off for the last time, and Tony isn't most people. He's been exposed to too many near-death situations not to get over the body's primal panic-regret in less than a second. How many times has he cheated death?

He knows this is the best thing for everyone.

Tony cries on the way down all the same.

Tony falls, and now it's just a countdown.

Tony knows he should breathe, breathing is good even if you're about to die, and he breathes through the natural, terrifying, whole-body devastation of falling. Gulping air actually pairs really well with crying, like burgers and fries, movies and popcorn, whiskey and more whiskey.

Tony falls head over heels, twisting and flailing in the wind, somersaulting like any other long-distance jumper who gets an uneven moving start and falls in a blowing night wind. Some get their center of gravity sorted and fall on their bellies or with their backs to the pavement, but Tony tumbles all over the place. So far nothing's happened that he hadn't expected. His stomach gets left behind somewhere around the ninety-first floor, adrenaline floods his thunderstruck veins, and his heart pounds like it's going out of style, which it is.

Skydiving rarely induces the stomach-drop feeling, because falling belly-down from 15,000 feet feels more like flying due to the brain being unable to fathom the distant ground. Falling from 1695 feet just feels like falling to his death.

The city rushes dizzily around him, past him. He thought he might find himself counting the seconds, or that his perception of time might slow down, but perhaps because he's half-expecting that, it doesn't happen. He's wasting his final seconds on this earth with inane thoughts, how very Tony Stark. Wasting things, wasting time, money, life. Absolutely his brand.

Yinsen's voice echoes through his mind, as Yinsen always does in the background on repeat: *Don't waste it--*

Tony falls, and now the seconds do feel like they stretch.

Tony involuntarily tenses up as he approaches the ground, and this is it. Tony sucks in a last breath against the force of the rushing wind around him. Tony has one more soul-deep, throbbing moment of regret resound through every fiber of his body, but the fraction of a second is fleeting and it's almost over now but --

but--

instead of slamming into the ground for the instant oblivion he expects, a body suddenly thunks into his side, knocking the wind out of him and catching him, an arm slipping under Tony's knees and another supporting Tony's back.

At first Tony thinks it's Steve, but peripheral vision and lizard brain say otherwise, and the shock of being caught midair halts all his mental processes. Then Tony and the person holding him *blink* from midair, so that Tony goes from fifty feet of open space beneath him to being on the street, or held solidly near to it. Tony's always been good on his feet though, and his brain reboots in the space of microseconds. Steve can't teleport, and Steve doesn't wear polished, filigreed gold bracers over green leather.

Disoriented and dizzied, Tony twists his head and, in the artificial lighting from the street lamps, confirms whose arms are holding him like he's a delighted twenty-something bride instead of a hardened fifty-something billionaire trying to fucking die.

Loki.

The other thing Tony realizes all but immediately is that the people traversing the street don't see him and Loki. Tony's always been aware of his audience, and while none of the passersby walk into them, judging by the complete lack of reactions, none of the late-night partiers, drunks, night owls and third-shifters walking down Park are able to perceive them either.

"What the *fuck*," Tony says breathlessly. "Loki?!"

"Yes," Loki says, wide-eyed as though Tony's startled him as much as Loki's stunned Tony, like Loki was expecting to find he held something or someone entirely different. Their faces are inches apart, close enough for Tony to feel Loki's breath on his face, close enough to kiss.

The vapor of anyone's breath should feel warm in the February air, but Loki's breath hits cool against the trails of wetness on Tony's cheek.

Tony's already at the point of hyperventilating because *he didn't die*. The Brooklyn Bridge is one thing, but who vaults off the top floor of a ninety-three story building and lives? And gets caught in and saved by the arms of an enemy? The next thing he feels is anger, sheer fucking rage that he worked up the courage to end it and Loki of all people stopped him.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Tony plants a hand in Loki's chest and shoves, panting for air in the wake of his near-death experience. His eyes must be all pupil right now from the adrenaline. "You asshole! Have you been spying on me?!"

Loki looks too stunned to answer or even put Tony down, and now Tony fights the arms around him. "Put me the fuck down!"

Loki stirs to life, obliging him. Loki sets Tony on his feet, his movements graceful as he bends only slightly, then straightens as Tony stumbles a few steps away from him.

Tony glares at Loki, who evidently didn't die either. Thor told them Thanos killed Loki, strangled him and snapped his neck and promised this time he wouldn't be back-- but who is anyone kidding, of course Loki faked his own death again. Feigning death and making Thor mourn him is basically Loki's hobby.

Loki belatedly finds his tongue. "It is called reconnaissance, and I just saved your life." Loki turns his face up to the skyline, squinting straight up at the top of the tower far above them like he's a tourist. "Who tried to kill you?"

Technically speaking, of course, Loki *is* a tourist, an aggressive invading crazy space tourist. Loki has no idea what he's done, and his obvious confusion at Tony's rage drains some of Tony's anger into annoyance, or maybe he's just too tired to stay enraged. The mission was long and tiring, the raking over the coals was worse, and Tony hasn't slept in over forty-five hours.

"I did," Tony says flatly.

Loki's chin drops in shock and his sharp green-eyed gaze fastens on Tony like he's never looked anywhere else in his life. Loki looks even more taken aback. "Why would you-- *why?*"

"Because life's so great," Tony says, the sarcasm on autopilot. "I'm a shitty person. My dad knew I was worthless, even when I was a kid. It only went downhill from there." Tony runs out of words for a moment because he's hyperventilating and he simply runs out of breath, and then he bends and leans his hands on his knees and pants for oxygen, taking big desperate gulps of air.

Loki starts to reach out to him and then apparently thinks better of it. Loki turns his hand palm up like Tony's a wild animal and Loki's trying to offer visual reassurance he has no ill intentions, leaving his pale long-fingered hand motionless in the space between them in case

Tony might startle and flee. "Breathe," Loki says, though when Tony glares up at him, he looks like he should take his own advice.

"I am breathing!" Tony snaps.

Loki stands pale and still as a statue in front of him, his arm half-extended. Only his eyes move, raking over Tony, and his lips when he speaks. "You're drunk," Loki observes.

"I've had a few, I'm hardly drunk. Drunk on me looks like... more falling down," Tony says breathlessly, but he's feeling less winded already. Shaken, though. He's shaken. And aggravated. "Hey, fuck you, you ruined my suicide attempt."

Loki stays stock-still. Reindeer Games in full-on headlights. Tony's never seen his eyes so wide.

Tony fights to straighten up, his back tight and aching. "Okay, you can make it up to me by finishing what you fucked up. Let's do this. Hey, maybe this is for the best, actually. Why not go out putting a little happiness into the world?"

Loki doesn't say anything at first. Then, very slowly, Loki asks, "You think killing you will bring me happiness?"

"Uh... yeah?"

Loki seems dismayed. "You think I want you dead?"

Tony blinks at him, and now he's the one who's confused. "Yes. Why wouldn't you? I've helped wreck your plans for world domination like, three times. You want, you know--revenge?"

Loki stares at him blankly.

Tony laughs, and the sound is tinged with hysteria. Nope, he's definitely not over accidentally surviving a ninety-three-story fall. "I'm not basing this on nothing. You've tried to kill me multiple times."

Going by Loki's distressed expression, someone who hadn't been there might think him innocent of this completely true allegation.

"Think about all the great chuckles I've had at your expense. You've tried to kill me before like it was all you wanted for your birthday." Tony breathes for another few seconds, still in the process of normalizing his respiration. "You've killed a hundred and forty-six people that I know about and call us insects. Swatting one more should be no big deal."

But bizarrely, the look on Loki's face suggests it would be a big deal to him. The condescending mask of calm he wears when he's not hissing villainous epithets looks stripped away, leaving his face open and slightly stricken, with an intensity of focus on Tony that's bordering uncomfortable. Confusingly, the furrows in Loki's brow look like empathy, which is a fucking ridiculous thought. Tony's misinterpreting due to the obscuring darkness, due to all the adrenaline surging through his system. The illumination from the street lamps is

limited, and without the suit Tony's night vision is normal which is to say, garbage. So when Loki's brow smooths, his face turning expressionless, Tony dismisses what he liminally thought he saw.

Until Loki says, "You're crying."

"So what? Do it Moose Jaws," Tony says harshly. "I'm sure you're a very busy evildoer with many plans for the evening, so let's get this show on the road, yeah?" Tony points upwards. "And don't even think about going up there afterwards, F.R.I.D.A.Y. will laser you into little pieces."

Loki seems unable to close his mouth. Silvertongue is clearly the wrong moniker for Loki, though Leadentongue's too obvious and Uraniumtongue doesn't really flow. "But why do you want to die?"

Tony runs a frustrated hand through his hair. *I don't have to explain myself to you* is what he means to say, but what comes out is suddenly entirely different. "I've been thinking about it for a while, and tonight was sort of the last straw. Look, I'm a fuck-up, okay? Even when I try to save people I cause misery and destruction. They used to call me the Merchant of Death, and I used to be proud of that. Does that tell you who I was?" Tony doesn't expect a response, and Loki just stares. "Well, I changed but not enough, I still fuck everything up, I can't fix all the wrongs I've done, and when I die my thousands of obits are all going to say 'Merchant of Death' no matter what I do now. Lately I've been trying to save the world, but it's not gonna happen. So what's the point?!"

Loki just stares at him wordlessly. Loki's lips stay parted and he remains silent.

"I don't have any friends, either they've turned on me or they've been genuinely good people and I've driven them away. I lost the only woman I've ever loved besides my fucking mom." Tony lets out a harsh, unhappy laugh. "Whom I also lost. I'm reckless and shitty and probably the stupidest genius you'll ever meet. *Do it.*"

Loki's face falls again. Loki looks sad and somehow painfully young, like Tony's hurt him by saying these things.

Even more strangely, Tony keeps talking, like having opened the floodgates of his fatal flaws and failures, he can't shut them. "They didn't even want me on the Avengers. Fury told me Iron Man was in, I wasn't. But I never listen to anyone." Tony laughs hollowly again. "No, I'm Tony Stark, I do whatever I want, and people always get hurt. I had no business being up there and now an innocent girl is dead. My fault."

Loki visibly swallows before he speaks, and when he does respond, it's *weird*. "Your friends think the world of you, Tony."

Hearing Loki use his name in that low voice is jarring, like getting an electrical shock. They've had a couple of brief chats before fighting, but Loki's never recognized him like a person before. Maybe just the one time, when they were about to fight, that Loki recognized him with *You*, in a hateful drawn-out hiss.

"Yeah, they think I'm great and they're disgusted with me and they're furious with me, rightfully, cause they know I'm a reckless asshole." Tony shakes his head painfully. "Tonight wasn't a one-off. There's a distance-- even when I'm with them, I'm alone. And-- I'm not like them. They're good, they're not adrenaline junkies. This life chose them, they didn't choose it. They don't have darkness in them. And I've killed so many people. Some of them indirectly, some not, just like you. Except unlike you, I care."

Loki looks like someone just shot his dog, or like a kid who's just dropped his lunch money for the next week down a storm drain. Young and crushed, almost despairing, and Tony could swear his eyes are glittering. Loki looks as though he wants to say something but doesn't know what to say.

"I guess I could ask Doom, but he'd probably say the mercy of a quick death is too good for me, then drag it out with a big speech," Tony says, and he takes a step closer, then another. "I've thought about building something to do it, but I couldn't do that to a bot. What the fuck, why am I having to convince you? *Come on, Loki.*"

Loki blinks, as though hearing his name from Tony's mouth has woken him up from a trance of his own, and his expression smooths over. "No," Loki says finally, and his voice is firm.

Tony shoves at him, though Loki is far more boulder-like than his slim frame would suggest. Thor explained at some point that Asgardian bodies are far heavier than human bodies. Too heavy for Tony to actually move via a push when he's out of his suit, and Loki doesn't budge an inch. "Are you really going to make me go back in there and hook up a nitrogen helmet? Shut up and do it." Tony hears a really kind of pathetic, desperate note entering his own voice. Again he shoves at Loki's chest, harder this time, and he raises his voice almost to a shout. "Look, I'm not going to be able to hold it together here if you don't just fucking *do it!*"

"Rethink this," Loki murmurs, almost too softly to hear, and he wraps his arms around Tony and pulls him into an unexpected, full-body embrace.

Tony's too startled at first to resist or fight back. Their hips knock together as Loki's lips touch against his, brushing back and forth lightly and nearly chastely. Loki's *nuzzling* his mouth.

The one way I didn't think tonight would end was in a make-out session with you, Tony thinks, but his tongue feels too thick and clumsy in his mouth to spit out the dull witticism. He swallows instead, even though his mouth feels dry as the entirety of the Kunar Desert.

As a team they saw Thor kiss Loki like this a year or so ago, an odd brushing back-and-forth of lips at the start of a long embrace, like butterfly kisses done with the lips before the kiss melted into something briefer but more solid. They've all seen Thor manhandle Loki on numerous occasions, and that was how it began-- Thor saw his brother and shouted at a hundred and thirty decibels (totally normal), raced in (also normal) and grabbed Loki by the side of his neck the way Thor so likes to do (maybe the most normal part of all). But then instead of berating Loki, Thor began weeping openly, hauled Loki in and *kissed* him, and the kiss started just like this one. The real meeting of their mouths was chaste and short enough not to be straightforwardly incestuous but long enough and intense enough to be awkward.

Throats had been cleared, coughs had been feigned, and Clint asked rhetorically whether the rest of them kiss their family on the mouth.

No, Loki's kiss, if that's what it is, is just the merest tickling brushes of lips nestling back and forth against his, light sensitive touches against Tony's, imparted as a source of comfort it seems. Then Loki tilts his chin down, separating their mouths to gently press his furrowed brow against Tony's.

On the occasion of the previous, third fake death, Thor said glumly that Loki died-- sacrificed himself-- in the destruction of Asgard, in the fight against their sister. None of them know exactly what transpired with the evil sister to make Thor cry unashamedly and kiss his brother on the mouth when they were reunited, but it must have been pretty bad, especially because Loki didn't shove Thor away, but laced his arms around Thor's neck and kissed him back, and then they shared an honest-to-god hug.

While incest isn't Tony's thing, he's not opposed to it in consensual practice, and he's not in the least ashamed to remember his dick responding to watching Point Break kiss his adopted brother. The picture the two of them made was enough to leave seriously inappropriate thoughts in Tony's head. Tony wouldn't mind being the filling in that sandwich, if Thor wasn't quite so *loud* and Loki had a completely different personality.

Of course it'd help too if both of them weren't strong enough to kill him effortlessly or accidentally. Tony's much more uncomfortably aware now of the preternatural strength of half the people around him. Kratosanthropophobia isn't uncommon these days.

By the grade-school transitive property of kissing, Tony's kissed Thor now. But that's okay, he and Justin Hammer have banged some of the same supermodels, celebrity reporters, and at least two flight attendants. And this kiss with Loki wasn't sexual, or at least... not exactly, and there was no tongue, just like the kiss with Thor.

You'd think Thor would just accept that his brother is basically unkillable and stop going through a period of mourning every couple years when Loki looks to be dead. Tony was convinced this last time, though, because of the way Thor described Loki's death, and maybe because Thor so thoroughly fell into despair in the years following the Snap while the Avengers were disbanded.

Usually Tony would be freaking out at this point from being touched by a superhuman with superhuman strength, but Loki's hands are gentle and supportive and maybe Tony's still fucked up from the fall, because panic doesn't reach its fluttering fingers into his chest. Loki's skin is cool against his forehead, holding Tony still against him like they're doing a wireless data transfer between their brains. Tony automatically closed his eyes when Loki got near enough to crawl under his skin, but he opens his eyes to get his bearings and finds bright, haunting green eyes an inch from his. It's too much, and Tony quickly shuts his eyes again, shutting out the world, all of this, everything. Tony's still reeling from his survival.

Did he survive? Did he in fact go splat? He'd remember if he did, right? Sure, if this was *American Gods* he'd be oblivious to the fact that he's dead right now. If Tony's dead, Loki will gently point it out to him in a minute. Then again, Loki definitely wouldn't be the obvious choice to escort Tony into the afterlife.

Or would he? Loki's tried to kill him a number of times and nearly succeeded almost as many. Tony's shot Loki with his suits and grappled with him from within the relative safety of the armors, and with all that up-close and personal experience, Tony definitely *believes* in Loki far more than he buys into anything metaphysical.

Like the strange kiss, the forehead-tilting lasts only seconds-- no longer than Tony fell. Then Loki straightens and pulls Tony even tighter into the embrace, close enough that it feels natural to rest his chin along the lean tendon of Loki's shoulder. And the no-holds-barred, whole-body-style hug is totally violating the standard 'bend slightly forward to keep groins four inches apart at all times' rule for the clapping-each-other-on-the-back hugs shared between straight men. Not that Tony cares about that, but he wasn't really a hugger even before a batshit titan crushed a sixth of his body into mush, and even if he was, for other people's comfort he wouldn't gather them up and snuggle them in like this.

Thor's hugs have always been serious business too. You get enfolded, compressed by huge hyper-muscular gym-god arms, and come out on the other side with your eyes half bulged out, feeling both loved and lucky your ribs weren't snapped. Tony used to find Thor's hugs kind of wild, but since Thanos, Tony's been an extra level of leery of the touch of anything or anyone with superstrength, and that's putting it mildly. Clearly Asgardians not only kiss on the mouth, they also give more unreserved hugs than homo sapiens.

Yet Loki doesn't squeeze him, only holds and supports him. Large long-fingered hands press against Tony's upper back and the back of his waist, outspread. For whatever reason, the awkwardness only lasts a few seconds, and then Tony says an internal 'fuck it' and lets himself sag into the embrace. Tony's legs feel weak and shaky, a known symptom of crashing down from an adrenaline rush. Loki holds him up, and Tony's almost surprised by the support despite everything else that's happened here in the last two minutes. To receive this level of empathy from someone like Thor's vicious brother is so unexpected, Tony feels his chest heave with a forced-back sob as they stand there and he hangs off Loki.

With their bodies pressed so closely together, Loki can't see him cry, even if the shakes of Tony's chest and shoulders are unambiguous. Tony keeps his jaw clenched shut and makes no sounds, but he can't stop the tears now or the involuntary heaving movements of his chest.

They stand that way for what might be a long time under the slowly moving cloud cover, amidst the night lights of the city, people walking past them without seeing them. Loki's more than half holding him up. Loki can damn well prop him up. Tony never asked for this embrace. His back aches.

At first Tony lets himself go utterly, but then he tries to pull himself together. Loki's leather-covered shoulder isn't great for tear absorption. The leather's nice quality though, hopefully Loki treats it with some kind of protectant against rain. Tony wipes his eyes on the buttery-soft shoulder of Loki's long jacket again and bites the pressure of tears back into his now-sore throat. Eventually the urge to release the sobs in his chest gives way to a runny nose.

"Okay, Mama Bear, starting to get weird," Tony manages finally, and his voice only shakes on the first word. The weirdness here is way beyond starting, though; they're neck-deep in weird. Tony snuffles, because loudly inhaling the contents of his sinuses is less embarrassing

and less ticklish than dripping snot from his nose. Loki's acting so bizarrely out of character, he probably wouldn't try to kill Tony right now even if Tony snotted on his leather jacket.

Tony's eyes have dried up a little, and he puts his weight back on his feet and pulls away. Loki lets him go and they disentangle, though Tony's limbs feel weak and ungainly, and not just because Loki had him entwined and held immobile for a minutes-long embrace. Loki only looks sad. "I didn't know we were hugging friends," Tony says, but none of it seems very funny.

"You need not be alone," Loki says quietly. "Come with me."

"What?"

"Come on," Loki says, and long cool fingers wrap around Tony's hand.

Reality crashes back in-- the reality of who just *held Tony while he sobbed on the street* after he *tried to kill himself and failed*.

Loki.

"Let go of me, I'm not going anywhere with you," Tony says, yanking his hand away, and Loki's grip is loose enough that Tony breaks away without difficulty. Tony reels several instinctive steps back. The last thing he sees before he runs is Loki's troubled face clearing into a resolved, unmistakably predatory expression.

Tony turns to sprint back to the doors of the Avengers' tower, but even with the D.R.A.A.G. brace intuitively compensating for his inability to run properly, he's inebriated, shaken, exhausted and in the wake of a hard adrenaline crash, and he knows even as he turns that he's doomed to fail in this, too.

"Stop." Loki might teleport, because there's a flash of green in Tony's peripheral vision, and then Loki grabs him again from behind, easily. Loki slings an arm around Tony's neck in a chokehold, although Loki keeps his arm loose, not cutting off Tony's air. Tony tries to duck out of his grip, but Loki casually halts Tony's efforts by slipping his other hand around Tony's waist.

Loki transfers his hold, taking Tony by both wrists, one in each hand. "You're coming with me," Loki says into Tony's ear, and Tony has the strange feeling, even through his mild-to-moderate panic, that Loki intends these menacing words to sound soothing.

Tony struggles harder in Loki's grip as his panic increases and takes him over, kratosanthropophobic panic from having Loki's super-strong hands on him. "Are you crazy?! Let go of me!"

But trying to resist Loki feels like trying to fight a brick wall that's just grabbed you. Tony's body will break first, and so he forces himself to stop fighting. He knows when he's physically outmatched. Better to conserve what little energy and strength he has left.

"No," Loki says calmly. Tony goes slack, making himself dead weight, but what would temporarily foil any human attacker barely registers as an issue for Loki. Loki hangs on to Tony with one hand while allowing him to sink to his knees, because of course, Loki doesn't have to physically transport Tony to get him to a secondary location. Loki holds him gently once he stops trying to pull away, like a loosely fitted handcuff rather than a constricting machine-operated blood pressure cuff, but inescapable all the same.

Tony sees the characteristic green glow, the otherwise pleasant color of emeralds, and when the world whirls around him like his feet are glued to the inside of a shaking snow globe, he realizes Loki's teleporting them somewhere.

And indeed, in the space of another blink, they're somewhere else. Tony looks around, Loki's grasp on his wrist temporarily forgotten, and then Loki lets go of him. They're standing in a creepy darkened house. Tony can see the vague shapes of furniture around them. Beyond nearly floor-to-ceiling windows on one wall is a blue-lit lagoon pool outside, the sole bright spot and source of light in a sea of near-darkness. The tiny unfazed sliver of Tony's brain notes that it's a nice-looking pool. The rest of his brain is in four-alarm-fire, DEFCON 1, fight or flight mode. (Freezing isn't an option.)

Then Loki spreads his arms and adds a second source of light, a sickly green energy emanating from his loosely balled hands. The magic doesn't go anywhere at first, like Loki's mustering the flow of it together, and then Loki's hands open and his long fingers separate and hyper-extend. The charge of magic suddenly coalesces, turning into a vibrant, rapid current of green electricity that passes crackling out along the floor, up the walls and over the ceiling.

"Enough," Tony says, and his voice comes out like a croak. "Take me back."

"No," Loki says with enough finality to make a string of needles prick up Tony's spine.

Through a doorway opening into another room, Tony can just make out the metal gleam of a door handle leading out to the deck with the pool, and he strides as fast as he dares through what feels like it might be a living room. Tony's expecting to bash his knee on some lurking indiscipherable piece of furniture in this shadowy room, and there's something looming large and dark in the center of the next room, but whatever the thing is, it's not in Tony's way. Tony finds and tries the handles of the French doors, and sweet universe, both doors are unlocked and swing outward easily on smooth hinges. Cool ocean air hits Tony's nose, and he can hear the white-noise water rush of the sea close by.

With a single glance backwards, and without bothering to close the doors, Tony flees.

Tony can barely see Loki through the floor-to-ceiling window as he runs along on the wooden deck that runs around the back of the house. (At least, Tony assumes it's the back, because people don't usually put the inground pool in the front yard.) Loki's watching him too. Loki's lit up only by his green sorcery, and Tony thinks he sees Loki's lips move silently, like he's casting another incantation, but Tony doesn't get a good look and can't be sure.

Tony's leg aches in the D.R.A.A.G. brace.

In the very faint sliver of moonlight, the house Tony just exited looms above him. The house can't be more than two stories, but the structure is horizontally sprawling, and in the darkness, with no idea where he is, it's a towering menacing shadow. Tony's spent his life in and around skyscrapers, but this feels far more dangerous. *Loki's house*. Shrubs and trees are deeper, solid shadows in the darkness. Tony's expecting Loki, knowing in his gut he's about to be hunted through the darkness, if he isn't already. Tony reaches the corner of the back of the house and turns, running along its side.

Maybe he did die, because Tony's running almost blindly through the darkness and this sure feels like it could be a nightmare or hell. Tony has zero belief in a deity, at least not the good old American guy-in-the-sky God Steve believes in, or in an afterlife for that matter, but maybe this is a dream state his brain's cooked up to stave off oblivion in its final seconds of unconsciousness. Tony absolutely believes in that. Maybe the psychedelic kooks are right and his pineal gland is flooding some tiny amount of DMT into his dying system. This absolutely could be a wild, epic hallucination.

But everything about it feels real, and every inch of Tony is under the pressure to escape, so the possibilities don't bear thinking about.

Tony runs past the side of the house. Sudden floodlights come on when Tony passes into the front yard, making him feel terrifyingly exposed and a bit like a criminal.

The good thing about the floodlights is they illuminate the front yard and a paved driveway leading to a street beyond. The palm trees around him say he's someplace tropical. Tony risks the swiftest glance over his shoulder and sees Loki nowhere in sight. The sight of the driveway reinvigorates his pace for a few moments, but the yard of wherever they are is large, and all the muscles in Tony's legs are full of lactic acid. Even Tony's good leg is begging for relief as he reaches the long driveway. Nevertheless, feeling so close to escape, adrenaline takes his body over for the second time that night, and he breaks into his best imitation of a sprint.

He has no idea where the hell he is, but what he needs is to find people. He's internationally recognizable, he can make friends instantly or pay his own ransom depending on how things go. Barring, of course, another run-in with a band of terrorists, but even Tony isn't that unlucky.

As Tony reaches the street, he abruptly smacks face-first into a bouncy, invisible *something*. Tony somehow hits softly instead of breaking his nose and his knee, despite dashing into the invisible barrier at full tilt, and even though the force of his stride and the unexpected nature of the collision launches him backwards, Tony lands on the pavement and the feeling of absorption is like landing in memory foam. Tony hates memory foam, he feels like he's being swallowed.

A sharp pain lances through the muscles of Tony's back. His leg hurts too; his leg always kind of hurts, because that's what happens when a thigh gets squeezed until it pops, when a femur gets shattered and put back together with pins, plates and screws, but his back hurts more right now.

For a second Tony just lies there. When the driveway finishes bouncing, the asphalt firms up beneath him. By the time Tony pulls himself together and gets back to a standing position, his limbs wobbly, the asphalt has returned to normal. The driveway under his feet is as solid as it was when he was sprinting out here, with no give at all to it. Normal pavement, how the hell did he *sink into it*?

Magic sucks.

Tony reaches out both arms to feel in front of him as he approaches the area he hit. "What the fuck is this," Tony says, reaching out both hands and pressing against what feels like the wall of a bounce house or the surface of an air mattress, an inflated cushion with some give.

"What the fuck, Loki?!"

"As I was about to say," Loki says primly from behind him. "You'll have full run of the grounds."

Tony turns on him. Loki's ten feet behind him, a sinister black-clad figure backlit by the harsh white floodlights, and Tony stalks over and gets in Loki's face. Cause what's Loki going to do, kill him?

"Listen, you know what I hate? Being told I can't do things," Tony snaps, stabbing Loki with a finger in the chest of his stupidly ornate golden breastplate. "Nothing makes me want to *do things* more than being told I can't. Whether it's throwing the MDMA-fueled rave for senators and captains of industry they said I couldn't throw, or drinking as much as I want, or completely changing the directive and function of my multi-billion dollar corporation, or *killing myself*."

"You tried to take your life. I stopped you," Loki says with quiet deadly seriousness. "Your life belongs to me now."

Tony finds himself yelling right in Loki's face. "Lives aren't fungible assets, Professor Snape, that's not how it works!"

Then the rage gives way to simple horror, because Tony tried to end things and somehow instead he's gotten himself kidnapped by Loki.

Tony feels himself close to tears again, and he drops his face into his hands so Loki won't see him cry. He's physically and emotionally exhausted, wasted, broken.

Loki's clearly aware of his distress despite Tony hiding his face, because strong arms close around him.

"Come back inside," Loki says, a gentle whispery quality to his voice Tony's never heard before tonight.

"I didn't ask for your pity, and I don't want it," Tony says, muffled through his hands. "Let me go."

"Oh, I hold no pity for you," Loki says, still soft but sounding more like normal Loki now, the Loki who hisses out cool statements and circles you like he's planning to stab you in the kidneys, the Loki who unceremoniously throws you to your death. Tony could use that Loki back. Instead a hand smooths over Tony's aching back, up to rest on his shoulder. "You need to rest."

Tony thinks he can see the green glow even through his eyelids, and as his world rocks on its axis again, he feels the hard pavement beneath his sneakered feet shift subtly into something more padded. When he uncovers his damp face and opens his eyes he's standing on what might be an area rug. There's a bed, it's a bedroom. Loki has a slim build, but he picks Tony up like Tony's a child, like he weighs no more than a doll, like catching him at near terminal velocity was nothing.

"Go to sleep," Loki says, lying Tony out on top of the duvet, and maybe Loki performs another spell, because Tony falls asleep.

*

Tony wakes up the next morning thirsty and disoriented. Tony's staring at a large cylinder of antiqued white-finished wood-- a bedpost, he realizes. Then he remembers everything all at once. *Andrea Zaleski. The chewing out by the team. Scrambling off the side of his building, falling. Loki.*

Tony bolts upright, and his back gives him a warning twinge. He's in a four-poster bed, no canopy, in a medium-sized white bedroom, with a silver-framed mirror on the wall, a window on the other, and gray curtains hiding an entire wall. The bedroom has three closed doors.

Tony feels himself up at the same time he looks down at himself, and he's wearing the clothes he went to sleep in, which is good. The D.R.A.A.G. is still encasing his bad leg. His sneakers were pulled off and set on the floor by the edge of the bed, but that's all. Tony gets up, pulls them back on, and unceremoniously yanks the gray curtains apart. An entire wall of the room opens onto a balcony looking over a beach a distance below, with white sands and perfect aqua-blue tropical waters. Tony looks directly down and sees he's a single floor above the wooden deck he ran across last night. Beyond the deck is a cliff, and at the bottom of the cliff is the beach.

The house is set onto a cliff with a tumbling drop, and it appears to be laid out in tiers set right into the hillside. Or maybe the floors of the house are separate structures. The floors actually look separated from where he stands, but Tony can't quite tell, even when he leans far out over the railing.

The bottom floor of the house, though, must be almost right on the rocky beach before it dissolves into sand, and in thirty years or so that level's going to be underwater due to sea level rise, assuming it's not completely swept away by a storm before that.

The view is pretty nice by any standards, but this place is still to be a prison, apparently. Tony runs through his options. He doesn't know whether the door's locked, but he doesn't care-- he doesn't want to leave the room and run into Loki. Better to try and make a quiet exit before Loki even realizes he's awake. He could just take off, but Tony's gotten more judicious with

the passage of time, and he wants to survey the lay of the land and make a conscious choice about which direction seems most promising. With his body as it is, he won't be able to run forever the way he would have done twenty years ago. Time was he would have dropped straight to the ground, taken the bruises and bang-ups of the one-story fall and just started running. But now... he needs to cool it with the instinct and use his brain to compensate for the limitations of his body. Will the barrier of last night still be fixed in place? Did it encircle the whole of the property? Might he be able to see it from up high?

The balcony is a bust for Tony's purposes, but there's a trellis outside the smaller bedroom window perfect for climbing. The room he's in is at the corner of the house, and the trellis ends in a manicured lawn. From the side window, you'd have no idea the ocean was just out back save for the peaceful, rhythmic rushing sound of the waves. Fucking *Manderley* here.

Tony instinctively tests his weight on the wood of the trellis before he climbs out the window. Tony's back complains and his leg briefly screams at him, but he grits his teeth and hauls himself up the trellis all the same. Tony reaches the roof and rolls sideways onto it, resting for a moment before he slowly gets to his feet.

Tony walks across the roof carefully, going to the front of the house and checking things out. From here, Tony gets a better sense of the layout. Though the house looks to be about four stories off the beach in back, the house is only two stories at street level in the front, a first floor and a second. Tony's familiar with the possibilities for creative architecture given the magic offered by a nicely situated cliff.

The green lawns to the front and sides of the street level part of the house are a ridiculously manufactured, typical rich-person waste of water. Exactly the kind of dumbassery that gets on Tony's last nerves.

The beach is gorgeous and the sunsets are probably incredible, but what Tony hoped to gain from his trip up here was not to see how the panorama rivals or surpasses Malibu's, but for what he might see in the distance-- the shimmer of that invisible barrier, any neighboring houses, the street, far structures, recognizable buildings. What Tony sees is nothing familiar, but there are far-distant houses to either side of the property. He sees the short visible strip of street, which is devoid of cars and people, and he sees trees. Mostly palm trees nearer the beach and inland, other species of trees. The high foliage prevents Tony seeing as far as he'd like to towards the front. In the back of the house, there's another house visible, far below Tony and much closer to the water, almost on the beach, though Tony can only see a bit of its pale gray roof from this distance and vantage point. Loki does have a neighbor or two, though.

Tony studies the color of the crystal clear ocean. The month is February, and the morning is warm here. When the sun gets overhead, the mid-afternoon will probably hit over eighty degrees. Thirty-some years have passed, but back in the day his parents dragged him on semi-annual vacations all over the world to please his mother, and he can make some educated guesses as to his location. Tony tries to calculate the handful of places on Earth they could be that have water this shade of tropical aqua-on-blue that are hot in February, and are in a time zone that'd be dark at three-thirty a.m. Atlantic time. Tony tries to narrow down the possibilities. He'd like to know where in the world he is.

Tony refuses to entertain the possibility that they're no longer on Earth, because no. No fucking way. He's had enough of space to last a lifetime.

The intensity of the D.R.A.A.G. support ups as he climbs all the way down the trellis to the ground, then dips as he walks off across the side lawn until he collides with the force field at what must be the edge of the property, though he's walking cautiously enough not to be bowled over this time. Tony walks along what must be the front and side property line, feeling along the force field at chest height, occasionally stooping to feel all the way to the ground, until he's pretty sure there are no useable gaps he could slip through. Tony's not surprised, and he heads back to the house.

Tony walks back into the front yard and checks the joint out in morning daylight. The house is white with classic-modern architecture, complete with rounded columns. He could be anywhere, judging by the building alone. The trellis is a peach color, and both the exterior of the house and the roof are white, probably to reflect the sun, save on cooling costs... and cooling costs give him a thought.

Tony goes into the side yard and finds the HVAC systems he's looking for-- a quartet of condensers mostly concealed by bushes. What other planet is going to have condensers with compressors inside, right? In this climate, the condensers are almost certainly for heat pumps. They have to still be on Earth.

Tony refuses to think about the fact that some life forms and technology have uncanny parallels from planet to planet. Asgardians look exactly like humans and are demigods. Tony has no idea whether evolution is a thing on Asgard, because who the fuck can say, but the odds of Asgardians evolving from single-celled organisms as humans did and ending up visually indistinguishable from homo sapiens are miniscule. The odds of homo sapiens evolving to so closely resemble Asgardians is equally low. The Chitauri spaceships weren't vastly different from stuff human writers and tv show producers have come up with in sci-fi. Maybe other worlds could conceivably have heat pumps. Great, now he's thinking about it.

Tony thinks again-- he's panicking, just a little, or this particular flash of insight would already have occurred to him-- and he climbs over the bushes to take a closer look at the HVAC equipment. Pushing aside sculpted branches, Tony finds what he's looking for-- logos. Each condenser has a sticker emblazoned with the Trane logo, trademarked white spikes through a red circle. Trane doesn't narrow Tony's location down, Trane's an international company and all over the goddamn world. Nevertheless, the stickers signal Tony's still on Earth, and that's good.

Tony inspects the shrubs and glances at some of the non-palm trees before he painstakingly climbs back up the trellis, but botany's not his specialty, and trunk sizes and leaf shapes won't help him figure out where he is unless he can get internet access or a phone with one of those plant identification apps.

Tony slides back through the window and lands in a heap with his back snarling, and getting up takes longer than he wishes it did, but up he goes. Dusting off his hands, Tony tries the first closed bedroom door. The door opens into a bathroom, which Tony takes the opportunity to use. The color of his urine says dehydration, and Tony bends to the faucet and slurps from both cupped hands, then sticks his mouth directly beneath the tap. The water's clean with no

chlorine aftertaste, and feels good on his lips and so he splashes some on the rest of his face too.

Tony looks into the mirror over the sink. He looks like shit, tired and stressed, his forehead lined and his shoulders in a slump. Tony instinctively relaxes his face the way everyone does in the mirror and that makes him look more okay, even if okayness is a million miles away.

He checks the medicine cabinet for painkillers but finds nothing, not even a toothbrush. The bathroom contains nothing removable except for the toilet paper on the roll, the bath mat and the pair of towels, bath and hand, hanging on the rack.

The second door turns out to be an empty closet. The third opens into a hallway. As Tony's looking down the hallway beyond, he suddenly remembers-- he was *trying* to kill himself. Tony's instinct led him to immediately start looking for ways to escape; the shift in his circumstances has needlessly put him back in hero mode. All he wanted to do was end it all, and numerous means of death are all over any house, rich or poor, big or small, tacky or tasteful. He's overthinking all of his surroundings in a big way.

The house looked to be about four stories above the beach. Tony read somewhere, a scientific paper on trauma maybe, that the median lethal distance for falling is four stories. Can't reliably count on death from less than eight stories. Tony would want nine or ten to be safe.

Of course, Tony's discovered firsthand that sometimes ninety-three won't do the trick.

Besides, the tiers of the house are too widely spaced to jump cleanly down from roof to beach. He'd hit the deck first, then have to walk or roll to the edge of the deck to jump farther. Forget it. He'd live, so big nope, bad idea. Sand probably isn't the most fatal surface to land on either. Tony's lucky he turned towards the driveway and street last night. He could have run right off the side of the cliff instead. Tony doesn't particularly want to break his legs, or worse, his arms. Then he'll really be stuck here.

Tony has a new, disturbing thought: or he might just bounce wherever he lands and find himself back at square one, lying sunken in magical memory foam.

Tony walks down the wide hallway, glancing into the different bedrooms. In the middle of the hallway there's an oil painting. Tony stops and checks it out. At first he thinks he's looking at the tails of a school of fish or a pod of dolphins, but the painting is a distant take on of a pack of mermaids swimming on the surface of the sea, their backs to the viewer. The sky looks like it was copied directly from *The Elder Sister*. Tony remembers that one because it's one of Pepper's favorites. She explained to him once why it's one of her favorites, but Tony can't remember a word of her praise for the piece. Pepper minored in Art History, and she had a lot of opinions about art she'd share if he asked. Her background made her excellent at choosing art for his collection.

Tony carefully takes the curving staircase to the ground floor, the street level floor where he was just standing outside a few minutes ago, and looks at the place in daylight.

A professional put together this house, maybe a team of professionals. Like the bedrooms, the downstairs is tricked out in the 'beach house modern' style-- the rooms are big and airy,

white walls, white tiled floor, huge windows, splashes of color here and there, fans on every ceiling. Tony's set up a few rooms like this himself, though he generally likes his giant high-ceilinged rooms with less *stuff* in them. Tony's gaze roves over the folded afghan carefully draped at a diagonal angle, the large terra cotta potted plants of living grass, the chairs with natural-white fitted slipcovers and deliberately positioned pillows that look like no one's ever leaned against them. The curtains blowing in the open breeze are white and gauzy, and set into the wall is a built-in tropical aquarium.

The furnishings aren't to Tony's undeniably idiosyncratic preferences, and Tony's more of an open floor plan guy, but everything meets universal standards for good taste. Tony can't really argue with any of it, but the idea that Loki lives here is bizarre. Then again, what sort of place would make sense for Loki? Thor once described Asgard as 'huge, golden, high ceilings.' Tony can imagine Loki hanging out in Doom's haunt without any trouble, but aside from Castle Von Doomscrolling, anything other than the Taj Mahal or a Scottish medieval castle seems wrong.

But the Taj Mahal's not up for sale, and everybody has to lay their head somewhere.

Beach-facing real estate of this quality is pricey, though. Even if the house was tiny, the value of the property would be in the tens of millions, and the house is neither simple nor small. Maybe the house belongs to someone else, and Loki's borrowing it. 'Borrowing' in the owner's-rotting-corpse-is-in-the-basement way.

At the base of the stairs is a large full-length mirror and a bar, and Tony checks himself out again in the mirror before evaluating the bottles within and pouring some medium-grade vodka into a tumbler. A drink is sorely needed after his adventures in trellis-scaling. Tony looks better than he did in the bathroom, probably just because he's composed himself and is standing up straight.

Tony heads into the kitchen, which has white marble countertops, acres of backsplash, a coffered ceiling, and a life-size acrylic mural of a mermaid scene painted on the long wall beside the table and chairs after the endless cabinets of the kitchen give way to a dining area. The mermaid mural covers the entire wall with fish and coral and ocean, seagulls and foam and sand. Tony gazes at the subject of the mural for a moment, as though he can absorb the serenity from her face.

There's a breakfast bar with stools along the island. Sitting on the island are a fruit bowl and a knife block, and on one of the counters is an old-fashioned fucking breadbox. Tony flips the lid up to confirm what he's seeing. Tony sees bread. Seeing is believing.

The kitchen is stupidly, pointlessly big and well-appointed even though by Tony's assessment the room is not really meant for cooking. This is a house built for days-long catered beach parties, not a bachelor pad for a single failed alien king wannabe. Tony's eyes travel back to the knife block, and he pulls knives half-out until he finds the biggest one.

Mentally psyching himself up for a moment, Tony braces himself with his left hand against the counter and with his right hand attempts to stab himself in the throat.

He manages to get the knife's edge within about an inch of his skin before the tip hits a force field and bounces off, jerking his arm with it. Tony's stunned for only a moment, then collects himself.

Okay then.

Tony walks out of the kitchen back to the base of the stairs where there's the full-length mirror and stands close. Gently and experimentally he digs the tip of the blade into the place around his neck where the invisible padding seems to start. Tony watches the edge of the knife stop. When the approach is gentle, the rebound effect doesn't happen, but Tony also can't penetrate the force field.

With a quick breath of concentration, Tony attempts to put the tip of the knife to his eyelid. He finds his eyelid, too, is protected by the invisible field, and then with great care he tries to touch the knife to the very edge of his eyeball, not particularly wanting to stab himself in the eye, but wanting to know the limits of the magic that's clearly surrounding him. Nothing comes of the effort. Tony tries to nick his legs, feet, hips. Nothing. The knife stops midair. Tony successfully cuts a bit of his hair off, holding the shorn lock in his hand, and then he takes a shot at slicing up his scalp and fails. So he's protected from cutting all over his body save for the dead keratinized cells of his hair and probably fingernails. A glance at his fingernails says they're too short to test this theory, and then Tony remembers he literally can't cut himself.

"Sorry charcuterie students, carving class is canceled for today," Tony says aloud, because if there are no humans and no bots around, sure, he'll talk to himself.

Tony goes back into the kitchen and opens a few lower cabinets to find the kitchen trash can, which slides out as a tall drawer. Good design, Tony approves. Tony throws the lock of his hair in the garbage, though why he's being considerate of his jailer's space is beyond him. As he's gotten older he's become less of a slob, less inclined to throw whatever wherever, but he's in the abode of the enemy here.

Tony looks at the sink for a second. Tony deliberately wanders his gaze around, but then he looks back at the sink.

The kitchen sink sits before him like a waiting guillotine. Tony has similar double-basin stainless steel style things in both Malibu and New York, but he's never contemplated them in this state of mind before. There's a stopper for the sink sitting behind the tap, and after a long moment of consideration, Tony takes a few steps forward and grabs it. Tony jams the plug in the drain and jerks the taps on to start filling one side of the sink, and just as quickly he steps back.

While he waits, Tony turns on a gas burner of the stove and sticks his hand in the fire fearlessly. He feels warmth, but no burning.

Fuck.

Tony takes a step away from the sink and leans against the marble by the stovetop. As his eyes travel around the room, he spots a reusable polypropylene grocery bag by one of the

kitchen table legs. While the sink continues to fill with water, he goes over and looks inside the bag. What he finds, chillingly, are clothes in his size. The bag contains the sleeveless undershirts Tony refuses to call *wifebeaters*, silk boxers, and plain solid colored T-shirts in different colors. None of the clothes are his, none of them have sales tags, and all of them are folded crisply and professionally, as by a wash-n-fold type laundry service. God knows Tony's familiar enough with those, although usually their bags come emblazoned with a logo for advertising purposes.

Tony sits in a crouch for a few moments with the implications. Loki intends on keeping him here for some time, if he went to the trouble of getting Tony an assortment of clothes, having them washed and dried and folded, and also found out somehow Tony prefers not only boxers, but silk boxers, and not only silk boxers, but Mulberry silk. That is some creepy stalker stuff. Has Loki even ever seen him in an undershirt? Loki's seen him in a jeans and a T-shirt over long sleeves, in a three-piece suit or two, in a bunch of armors. Loki doesn't seem to have found any band shirts, though. Tony's almost grateful for that. It would be too much.

Quickly and sloppily Tony refolds the clothes he messed up, stuffing them back in the bag. Then he rises and checks the level of water in the sink. Not ready yet.

Tony opens the fridge out of curiosity and finds it fully stocked. Frustratingly, nothing seems labeled or to have an obvious origin. The milk and orange juice are in matching glass bottles. The eggs are in a plastic egg-holder tray. The butter's in a dish. There's an uncovered bowl of lettuce leaves on one of the middle shelves. Tony shuts the refrigerator and opens the freezer, where he finds a bunch of what look like frozen homemade meals, most of them in disposable aluminum pans. Tony shuts the freezer.

Tony lets the water run for another long couple of minutes, because the sink is really annoyingly large. At last he shuts off the faucet.

Every instinct screams *no*, because he's been drowned before and that's the kind of thing that sticks with you in your day-to-day life and your nightmares alike. With one hand Tony tests the temperature of the water, which is warm. The caves of Afghanistan were cold, and the water Tony was drowned in again and again was invariably icy.

The house is perfectly temperate, but Tony's sweating.

Taking a deep breath of air, Tony forces himself to lower his face into the warm water. Even if he successfully gets water into his lungs, Tony knows he won't be able to die this way-- he could never ever force himself to keep his head down. Who could have that kind of discipline? He'll instinctively pull up, cough, choke, panic, suffer.

Every fiber of his body still resists, but Tony's mind is in control here, and theories need to be tested. He can do this. He could find out here what he needs to do. Suppressing the shudder that goes through his back and shoulders, Tony exhales underwater, the bubbles tickling as they run up over his face to the surface, and then he forces himself to inhale. He's half-expecting to splutter water despite what happened with the knife and the flame.

But... nothing happens. No rush of the discomfort that goes with liquid in the sinuses. Tony draws a second, more confident breath, and breathing the water in the sink feels exactly like

breathing air.

Tony straightens up, his face dripping onto his T-shirt, and Tony uses the sweat-soiled hem to blot some of the water from his face.

Tony takes up the knife again, digs around until he finds a cutting board, and rummages in the refrigerator vegetable drawer. His choices are green peppers, yellow peppers, onions, and garlic. The fruit drawer has apples. Tony tries to imagine Loki walking with a basket through a grocery store. Taking a green pepper, because peppers remind him of Pepper, and not bothering to wash it, Tony places the pepper on the cutting board and attempts to chop it up. The knife itself works-- Tony's able to dice the veg and get the knife right up against the side of his thumb, so that he can feel the coolness of the stainless steel against his skin. When he tries to go a millimeter farther and shave a few layers of skin off the side of his thumb, Tony hits the invisible padding around his body.

Abandoning the vegetable experiment, knife still in hand, Tony wanders out of the kitchen into the large open area of the back foyer, which despite the foyer's size is stylistically dominated by the fountain Tony vaguely sensed as a huge looming object last night. The fountain is made of white marble with an intricately carved mermaid in the center. Tony almost laughs when he sees it, because the ostentatious factor here is cranked up to embarrassing levels of self-indulgence, and Tony's not known for his austerity, decorative or otherwise.

The foyer is otherwise empty save for a pair of benches near the French doors to the back deck. The wide French doors Tony ran through last night are open, pushed flush against the outside wall so the space just looks like a huge open window, no doors at all. The breeze feels nice on Tony's neck and face and arms.

Tony studies the statue as he walks through the foyer. The thin stream of water flows from the shell in the mermaid's hand, and in her other hand is carved a trident. The marble face isn't peaceful like the mermaid in the mural in the kitchen, no, more like a war mermaid, ready to kill, her stone expression hard and focused. The fountain has to be eight feet across at the base, and the mermaid at least seven feet tall. Long. Whatever. Upright, she'd be taller than Tony.

The other side of the foyer opens into a glass-paneled room, and Tony recognizes it as the first room he found himself in last night in darkness. Much like the other rooms, the decoration is expensive beach casual, in here all white and sand and blue, and beach and ocean and nature in every direction through the wide windows. The wall without windows is covered with mirrors, so that when Tony turns around he can see the reflection of the sky and sea through the windows behind him. The room has a big three-sided sectional, a trio of matching end tables and two chairs to fill in the gap. Tony does appreciate a good sectional.

Tony pauses, considering what to try next. Hanging, maybe. Tony hasn't seen any rope or cord, but he can rip bedsheets with the best of them, and the balcony outside his window will do fine as a place to jump from.

Maybe first he should find something poisonous to drink. There's got to be some bleach around here, or Drano or something good under the kitchen sink. As he walks back towards

the kitchen Tony glances out sideways through the wide-open French doors to look at the pool. Instead, what draws his attention is the six-plus feet of lean naked Asgardian lying facedown on a chaise lounge.

Tony freezes.

Tony wasn't able to see Loki from his angle when he first entered the foyer, and as he walked through the room he'd been distracted by the absurd mermaid fountain. He stands fixed for a long time before he moves again, but he eventually forces his legs into action. So his bag-of-cats crazy demigod captor's hanging out naked. No big deal. Who cares. Doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean Tony's going to be forced to be his back massage slave. It doesn't mean anything. Would that be such a terrible fate? ... maybe. Loki would be gorgeous if his personality wasn't garbage, a thousand-year-old god who acts like a violent, jealous, out-of-control five-year-old. Loki's Norse mythology's answer to the stereotype about the hot ones always being crazy.

Then again, the Judeo-Christian god's a mean jealous son of a bitch too. Maybe it's a thing. Point Break's a mostly nice guy, although Tony's experienced the heat of his temper and that's not fun.

Unfortunately, Loki *is* the cruelty, the murder, the mindfuckery, the monster. Thor insists his brother has good in him, but Tony's never seen any sign of that, and Tony's wired to believe hard evidence, not wild unsubstantiated claims made by aliens who wear capes and talk like Shakespearean amateur hour.

Tony walks warily out of the house into the warm morning sun again, keeping his footfalls silent. Loki doesn't stir, like he might be sleeping.

Loki's so freaking tall. Tony knew Loki's tall, the asshole's got to be six-foot-three, but seeing him stretched out full-length and naked really drives the point home.

Despite the cautiously maintained silence of Tony's approach, Loki lifts his head slightly. His hair is wet like he went for a swim, and his voice is casual in a way Tony's never heard it. "Good morning."

"Hey," Tony says, stopping a couple of feet from Loki's plush deck chair.

On the deck on the far side of the pool is another mermaid statue, or a pair of what look like teen mermen in this case. Are mermaids matriarchal, that the race is called mermaids instead of mermen? What is Tony's life that he's alive and being forced to contemplate this question? A few feet away from the mermen, a tiki bar is set up, but Tony can't see what's behind the bar. Tiki bars have always looked to Tony like puppet theaters, and this one's no exception.

Loki motions to the chaise a couple of feet from his. "Please, sit."

Fuck the mermaids and the tiki bar though, because what Tony needs to focus on is how best to handle the nude demigod in the luxury deck chair. Tony goes with the straightforward approach. "Why am I here?"

Loki looks at him, unreadable. "Sit down," Loki says again.

Tony's uncomfortable standing in one place for too long, let alone being told where to put himself. "Why?"

Loki's face looks -- different than Tony remembers, with lines scored in his forehead that definitely weren't present last time Tony saw him. The only word Tony can think for the change is *careworn*, although the idea of Loki being burdened with anything besides his ego beggars belief. Still, the evidence is right there on Loki's face. Tony didn't notice Loki looking a decade older last night, though to be fair the streetlights provided pretty soft, flattering lighting. Loki's hairline is different too, farther back and threatening to recede even further. *Whoa there, Hair Club for Men*, Tony does not say, although shock brings the words to his lips so quickly he has to bite them back.

"Because I asked nicely?" Loki offers.

Tony's mind immediately starts compiling other possibilities for the change, however unlikely. Maybe gamma radiation has a mildly degenerative effect on Asgardians. Or maybe Doom built an aging chamber to use on Reed and Loki accidentally got his head stuck in it. Or Loki went somewhere else in the universe where time moves faster and hundreds of years have passed for him. That'd explain his weird demeanor. Despite his slightly aged countenance, even naked (maybe especially naked), Loki still possesses all the dangerous, evil, pretty-man sort of glamour Tony associates with him. Loki's body is as fit and slim as any twenty-year-old's, and more on display than ever before.

"You said last night my life belongs to you," Tony says. "What the hell was that supposed to mean?"

Tony could scarcely be more tense, but Loki is the picture of relaxed calm. "It means you have to stay here."

"Why? What possible reason could you have to want me to stay here?"

"So I can help you," Loki says, sounding sincere.

Loki's holding fast to that claim, then. Seems like bullshit to Tony, but he has no real choice but to wait for and possibly tease out the truth. Tony circles the deck chair and sits on the identical chaise a couple of feet from Loki's as was requested. Time to see if he can bullshit his way out of this. "Yeah, I wanted to say thanks for saving me last night. It was a really, really bad night. Rock bottom."

"I could tell," Loki says, and either there's real empathy in his eyes or he's doing a nice job of faking some. Tony would bet a few billion on the latter.

"I feel much better this morning," Tony continues.

One corner of Loki's lips pulls sideways. "Is that so."

Tony lies, because what does he have to lose? "It's absolutely true."

Loki's eyes drop meaningfully to Tony's lap and back to his face, a deliberate movement of his heavily lashed eyes for Tony to watch. "Then why are you clutching that knife?"

"Well, you know." Tony elaborates, improvising. "Last night I wanted to kill myself and you stopped me, but usually I want to live and you try to kill me."

"Be at ease, I have no intention of hurting you," Loki says.

"Well, cool," Tony says, feigning relaxation, and he tilts the knife to a nonthreatening downward angle. "Will you take me home, then?"

"No," Loki says immediately. "You aren't well. If I returned you to your tower, you would only repeat your folly. So you will stay."

"I'm fine, though, now," Tony lies.

Loki gives him a shrewd look. "You tried to kill yourself this morning, didn't you?"

Tony sighs, because he's obviously not going to be able to talk his way out of this particular mess at the moment. "Yeah, because surprise! I don't wanna be your prisoner. How did you even know?"

Loki lifts and holds out his hand palm-up like he's checking for rain, then rotates his hand vertically like he's testing the direction of the breeze. "I can feel the reverberations in the spell."

"Well, if you were gonna make me a real-life Froopyland you should have made it more colorful. I mean, this place is kind of a ripoff."

Loki's mystified. "*What-land?*"

Tony turns the knife over in his hands, considering. "I'm functionally immortal here, is that it?"

"That is the idea," Loki agrees, lowering his face into the chaise again, and hearing and understanding him immediately becomes more challenging. "You cannot leave, and you cannot come to harm."

"How come I can chop a green pepper and get the knife right up against my thumb, but I can't get the knife within an inch of my skin when I'm not in the presence of vegetables?"

"The spell senses your intent," Loki says, his voice still muffled by cushioning.

Interesting. Appalling, really. "Can I kill you?" Tony asks.

"No."

Tony gives attacking him a shot anyway. Lunging to his feet, he stabs Loki in the back. Tony aims for the shoulder blade, to injure but not to kill. Tony's done enough of the latter. Still, Tony executes the blow with a decent amount of force.

The knife bounces off and flies out of his hand as Tony's arm reverberates away, a jarring vibration echoing up the limb.

"Hm, points for trying," Loki says thickly into his chaise without getting up or reacting in any other way.

"You kidnapped me," Tony accuses.

"Yes," Loki agrees readily.

Maybe if Tony accidentally-on-purpose does something fatal... maybe if he sets a trap for Loki or himself and can manage to forget about it or something...

Tony lets the knife stay where it lands in the bushes and with dignity returns to his deck chair, where he refocuses on Loki. He'll ponder the 'accidental death' idea later.

"How about if I promise to seek out mental health supports right away?"

"No."

"I'll let you check me in for an involuntary seventy-two hour hold at the US hospital of your choice," Tony offers, knowing full well that's not how it works, but Loki probably doesn't know.

The back of Loki's wet, wavy hair catches the light as he shakes his head.

"Loki, let's discuss this like reasonable people," Tony says, and he has the satisfaction of Loki lifting his face again. Loki looks downright attentive. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Because I want to help you," Loki says simply. "I want to give you the time, and the reason, and the opportunity to make a different choice."

"You know how absurd that sounds, right? You don't help anyone, except for the occasional monster-- Thanos, Doom." A dark shadow crosses Loki's face, there and gone, and either Thanos or Dr. Doom ended up in the doghouse. Probably Thanos for trying to kill him. Unless Thanos helped Loki fake his death, also a possibility, in which case Doom probably ran his haughty metal mouth and said something offensive to Reindeer Games. "You don't even like me. Several times now you've tried to kill me."

"I have always liked you, Tony, because you have a lot of nerve," Loki contradicts him. "Consider this-- I love Thor, and I have tried to kill him at least thirty times."

"Huh. Yeah, I should really have known you're not reasonable people."

When Loki rolls on his side facing Tony, props his arm up and rests his chin on his hand, there is no version of Tony Stark that could resist checking out what Loki's packing under the goofy rounded codpiece Tony's spotted on occasion under the slanted Asgardian tunics. Whether from lurking same-sex desire, a sense of heterosexual competition, indefatigable scientific curiosity, or just that perverse desire to *look*, who can say. Loki's uncut, his cock dangling hooded and white and a solid seven inches soft.

Oh my, Tony thinks in George Takei's voice, which is the only correct way to think those words. Loki's body is hairless below the neck with no sign of stubble, long and lean-muscled and pale, looking far more vulnerable than he apparently is on this property, and he looks good enough to--

"How did you sleep?" Loki asks solicitously, like that's a normal question to ask your prisoner.

And just like that, even as he's thinking he's halfway turned on, Tony's outraged again. "I can't believe this. I can't believe you! I jump off the top of my building and you fucking kidnap me to force me to live? What is *wrong* with you? I wanted to *die*!"

Loki tilts his head up like he knows better than to hope but hopes anyway, his eyebrows raised. "And now you don't?"

"No, I still do!"

"Oh," Loki says, like the air has been let out of his tires and his improbably raised hopes dashed.

"You have no right to do this," Tony says.

"Maybe not," Loki says almost heavily, "but I am doing it."

"You should know that I am one hundred percent determined to kill myself, maybe more than ever, just because you want to stop me."

Loki perks up again. "You're very contrary, see, this is what I like about you." Loki smiles widely, as though he means this. "Of course I do sincerely hope you'll eventually let go of such immature impulses."

"Don't hold your breath," Tony quips. "Or actually, go ahead and hold your breath, because I've noticed here it makes no difference. How far does your little bouncy wall extend into the ocean?"

"Why don't you get in and find out? The water's most pleasant."

Tony doesn't swim. Tony has a pool or two in every residence, but they're for other people to enjoy. Since Afghanistan he won't use them.

"I'm not going to get swept out to sea though, am I." Not how Tony would choose to die, but beggars and choosers, and it's not like Tony deserves a choice anyway. "Can I breathe the ocean?"

Loki smirks at him. "I do tend to be thorough."

"You can't keep me prisoner here." Even as he says the words, with a sinking heart, Tony knows Loki probably *can* keep him prisoner here, because he doesn't see a way out. If the others think he's dead, they'll never miss him. Loki really could keep him. But why would Loki want to? Tony will start going to church before he believes Loki has anything but a dark

and fucked-up reason to be keeping him here. "This is bullshit," Tony says. "You want something from me, and it's not my well-being. What is it? You have a plan that calls for Thor-bait?"

"No," Loki says patiently. "I want you to live. I want you to *want* to live."

Tony wracks his brain. "So that... you can kill me the minute you manage to convince me life is worth living?"

"No, I will not kill you." Loki states it firmly, like a promise. "You have my word."

"Right," Tony scoffs. "Torture then."

"I have never tortured anyone," Loki objects.

"You're not a benevolent person," Tony tells him, "and that's why this is bullshit." The only other straightforward explanation for Loki bringing him here is to torment him with life. Tony looks out at the lapping of the clear sea with its distinctive color, almost turquoise. "Where are we? British Virgin Islands? Grenada?"

"A villa," Loki answers.

Tony makes an annoyed sound. "I mean it, where are we? Bahamas? Mexico?"

Loki makes a twisting, sweeping hand motion and pulls a slim silver phone out of nowhere, glances at it, and hand-erases it from existence again. Tony knows it's magic, not mere sleight of hand, and given that the object in question is a fucking cell phone, it makes the top twenty on the ongoing list of strange things Tony's seen.

"Come on, David Copperfield, let me go," Tony says, and this time the words come out like a plea.

Loki purses his lips. "Why would I let you go?"

"Why wouldn't you? Stop pretending you care about what happens to me."

"Hate me for it if you want," Loki says simply. "But I'm not letting you destroy yourself right now, and I will not allow you to leave."

"I don't hate you, I just think you're batshit insane," Tony says, because that kind of statement would definitely have gotten him an attempted murder last time he encountered Loki. This time Loki has no reaction whatsoever. "When, then? When *are* you going to let me leave?"

Loki only looks at him, his expression maddeningly smooth and blank.

"Are we somewhere in the world that has saltwater crocodiles?"

Loki's face turns skeptical and then suspicious. "Why do you want to know?"

Tony goes back to guessing. Hawaii shares a generous chunk of nighttime with New York, since it's behind New York by five hours. "Hawaii? Venezeula? The -- no, light would be wrong," Tony thinks aloud, staring into space. *Way to pick an antipodal continent, Tony.* Shit, long-ago vacations or not, he should have brushed up on his geography.

"Would it?" Loki asks, all innocence. "I am said to be quite good with illusions, you know."

Tony ponders the meaning of this statement for a few seconds. "So you what-- made it look dark last night to fuck with me?" Tony asks skeptically, and he squints at Loki. "That's-- no. Right? No way." Tony gives him a suspicious look. "Way?"

"Tony. It matters not where we are. Look around. We're here."

"I don't want to hear my name out of your mouth," Tony says. If Loki's telling the truth, they could be literally anywhere near the equator. Greece, Fiji, Vietnam, the Maldives... but if Loki can convincingly create the illusions of thermal energy and olfactory cues, they could be in Antarctica for all Tony knows. The illusion of temperature, though-- Tony would suffer the symptoms of freezing even if he felt fine. Wouldn't he?

"Anthony, then? Stark? What would you prefer I call you?"

Tony waves both suggestions away. "I'd prefer you didn't. Or you can just hiss *you* at me like you did that one time."

Loki's silent for a moment, and then-- "Care to go for a swim?"

"No."

"Do you know how?" Loki inquires.

"Yes," Tony says.

"Do you like to swim?" Loki persists.

"I used to," Tony says absently. Tony rubs his hands over his bare forearms, stirring the hair along his arms, feeling the warmth of the sun on his skin. The pain in his leg feels faint and faraway, and in the balmy sea air, he's as comfortable as he gets these days. Though if experience is any lesson, he's probably going to start burning if he stays out in the sun much longer.

"Do you like games?"

"Not your games. Listen, I want to know where I am," Tony insists. "I need to know where I am in time and space. Cayman Islands? Antigua?"

Loki shakes his head. "I am not going to tell you."

Tony gives Loki a hard look. "What am I looking at here? Days, weeks, months? Is this a literal life sentence?"

Loki seems to consider both the question and whether he wants to answer, his face reluctant now. "I haven't decided."

Tony rises and heads back into the house, turning into the living room with the big sectional and all the mirrors and windows, not even sure what he intends. Maybe to look for matches to burn the whole place to the ground around him. Of course, he can just use the gas stovetop in the kitchen with paper towels for kindling. If this place is Manderley, Tony will be Mrs. Danvers. Burn it the fuck down.

Tony's about to do an about-face and head to the kitchen when soft footsteps behind him let on that Loki's followed him in. Tony leans on the back of a chair for support, and the chair takes his sagging weight without scooting across the floor. Heavy, high-quality furniture, definitely handmade. Tony notes these observations on autopilot, because the computer of his brain never stops running its layers of background processes.

He's aware of Loki standing behind him, probably still nude, and so Tony doesn't glance over his shoulder to confirm. "You're trying way too hard with this place. And mermaids? Really?"

"I'll make you breakfast," Loki tells him.

Tony's surprised enough now to look at him, and yep, Loki's still naked. "You'll make me-- how is this you?"

Loki shrugs.

"Are you a pod person? A Stepford wife? Why are you being like this?" Tony asks almost desperately.

Loki doesn't immediately answer, and Tony turns away just to get his eyes off the sight of Loki standing there all naked and thoughtful.

Tony returns to insulting Loki's living space. Making fun of his surroundings is the manifestation of a lifelong coping mechanism. Maybe it's not the best coping mechanism, but it'll do in a pinch. "Not that I would have expected better from you than a mermaid theme. Honestly, I'd have figured you'd have a living space more like forty-five's. Golden chairs, golden baby carriage, golden toilet--"

"I have always enjoyed mermaids," Loki says in a lofty tone suggesting not that he collects mermaid tchotchkes but that he personally knows some mermaids and thinks highly of them, maybe's even biblically known some fish-person callgirls.

It's too weird to think about, and also Tony doesn't care, so he continues steadily with the insults. "I can tell you didn't decorate this place yourself, because it looks like *Ocean Home* magazine fucked Instagram in here. Except for the mermaids. Beach houses will have *a* dolphin or *a* mermaid, sure, maybe even two, but no high-end interior decorator would lean this hard into a mermaid theme without specific instructions. What did you tell the decorator, *exactly?*"

"That I make a beautiful mermaid." Loki steps into his view, reaching a hand out to Tony without actually making contact, only urging him. "Come in the kitchen. Do you like eggs? Toast?"

Tony doesn't care to be herded anywhere Loki wants to bring him. Tony shakes his head, but Loki seems to understand that it's a general expression of denial rather than an answer to the question, because Loki stands there looking at him expectantly. At least Loki's only beckoning him and not touching him or forcibly transporting him with magic, which is like the bleached bones of freedom, but Tony will take comfort in what he can. Except for his state of undress, Loki's being very... polite.

"Sure," Tony says finally, just to make naked Loki stop staring at him waiting for an answer.

Tony follows as Loki pads, barefoot and bare-assed, into the kitchen. Loki's ass could be sculpted from the same white marble as the kitchen and the kitschy mermaid statues. Not that Tony's looking. Not that Tony's memorizing every curve and muscle movement as Loki walks. Certainly not that Tony's thinking about how it must feel to squeeze those asscheeks, one in each hand, to feel their pert firmness and fleshy give.

Ooof, seeing Loki like this is fucked up.

Loki asks over his shoulder, "How do you like your eggs?"

Tony sighs, and answering takes him long enough to make Loki's eyes fasten on him again. "Scrambled," Tony says finally. "Because that's what this situation is."

Loki rinses and dries his hands, then opens the breadbox and pulls out the loaf within. Loki carves off four thick slices of bread and sticks them in the toaster, and it's utterly surreal to watch. Loki glances at the half-chopped green pepper on the counter but says nothing as he pulls out a skillet from a cabinet.

Tony wanders over to the windows. "So what's up with this place? Do you mind whammy the owner into thinking they don't need to be paid?"

"What a rude assumption," Loki says as he takes eggs, milk, and butter out of the refrigerator, though his tone lets on that he's not actually offended.

"Are you somebody's rent boy?"

"What?!"

"I mean it would explain this place as well as the nudity." Loki gives Tony such an affronted look Tony continues goading him on this front. "Hey, nothing against the lifestyle, no shame. It works out well for some people." Loki's so clearly aggrieved by the suggestion Tony leans further into some facetious speculation. "So who's your daddy? Ed Buck wouldn't care that you're a murderer because he's one, and they finally threw him in prison which would explain why you're alone here, but you're not his type and he probably couldn't afford this place." Tony smears his fingers firmly down the glass pane, deliberately leaving fingerprint marks. "Erik Hagen and Gill are both married now... is it just some old guy off GayArrangement? If

it's Peter Thiel I'm losing all respect for you." Real inspiration suddenly strikes. "Oho, is it Lord Browne? I bet it's John Browne."

Loki's brow creases. "Sit down."

Tony considers arguing or ignoring that, but after a moment he slides into a seat at the kitchen table and continues. "Yeah, my money's on Browne, because we already know he pays for company up front, and in the early aughts he learned a valuable PR lesson about giving your boy toy some freedom. It's okay, no judgement. You know, as long as they leave you better than they found you." Tony fiddles with the salt mill and pepper grinder, dancing each around a little and leaving some pepper dusted on the table. "But if you wanted a sugar daddy you should have come to me. I haven't been holding a grudge, and I would have put you up in a much nicer place than this."

Of course, none of that's actually true. Tony's going to hold a grudge until he dies and the only place he'd ever put Loki is in prison, but Tony's mouth is the only option left for flipping the power dynamic here, and dozens of obnoxious pissants he's put in their place can attest to his love of twisting the knife.

Loki gazes piercingly at Tony but ultimately fails to anger, only turning back to the butter melting in the pan. "Are you done?"

"Apparently not," Tony says. "Although I *did* try."

"This is my house," Loki says coolly. "I stole a great deal of money here in the 1960's, and again in the 1970's, and in the 1980's I made good investments."

Tony stands up again and wanders back over to the windows. "How did *you* make good investments?"

"Quite by accident, if you want the truth," Loki says.

Tony laughs, he can't help it. "So you really do like Earth," Tony says mockingly.

"I do," Loki says, half an admission, almost defensive. Although Tony makes a show of looking out the windows, he's watching his captor closely, and as Loki cracks the eggs open on the side of the pan, he gets a tenacious look in his green eyes like he's prepared to argue the point. "When we were young, I spent more time on Midgard than Thor ever did."

"Huh."

"It was not coincidence that I chose this realm to rule when given my pick," Loki says, turning thoughtful again, gazing past Tony out the big window, and he adds more grimly, "The Other saw my fondness for Midgard as a means of manipulation, a weakness to exploit. I suppose it was."

"Excuses, excuses," Tony says.

Loki refocuses on the pan on the stovetop.

Tony meanders around the room, consciously keeping his distance from Loki, who moves back and forth within the triangle of sink, stove and refrigerator. "Where did you find this place?"

"On Sotheby's Realty dot com," Loki answers.

"Do you do the vaccuuming yourself? Or do you magic the salt and sand away? Or do you have a cleaning service?"

"There's a staff," Loki says.

"Of faithful henchmen, or flying monkeys, or tippy-tappy mind control?" Tony puts a finger to his heart to get the point across, even though Loki'd have had to come up with another way to mind control people since the Mind Stone is long gone from the Chitauri scepter, gone even from Vision. "Or what?"

"Of four humans who think I'm an heiress," Loki says.

"Next question-- are you ever gonna put some clothes on?"

"I'm sorry, does this bother you?" As Loki walks out from behind the kitchen island and returns to the refrigerator, all his assets fully on display in a side view, clothing suddenly rushes diagonally down like near-instant liquidity over his body, led by a twisting line of green energy in a snap that flashes to life at Loki's shoulder and dies at Loki's feet, leaving him barefoot but otherwise dressed. The transformation is over and done in less than a second.

Tony eyes the summery silk robe produced as Loki turns, because he's never seen Loki wear anything so light or relaxed. No fancy sash across his body, none of the little mirrored squares Thor explained have to do with Asgardian royalty, none of the endless trim and detail. The robe is embellished only with wide sleeves, two golden chains fastening the lapels, two paired lines of embroidered pearls and a second, even paler green sleeveless layer on top.

Not only that, but the question sounds faintly condescending, like Tony's being mocked for prudishness. Loki strolls back behind the kitchen island.

"It doesn't *bother me*, it's just... oh, Jesus Christ. Listen, if we're doing this captor-prisoner thing, and we're pretending to do it for my benefit, I need you to do a couple of things for me."

Loki leans forward against the counter of the kitchen island as though giving Tony his full attention, his eyebrows lifting inquisitively. The position looks weirdly human on him, maybe because Tony's never seen him lean on anything. "Name them."

Tony's still stuck on Loki's getup and has to quickly collect his thoughts. "Maybe it hasn't hit the news yet, but everyone's going to think I'm dead and if I'm not dead, I don't really want that."

Loki nods, looking at Tony attentively. "I will bring them a message that you're alive, if you wish," Loki says. "And the second thing?"

"I need my phone or I'm going to go bored out of my mind."

Probably because Loki doesn't want him to have net access, Loki balks at this request, straightening and going back to the stove. "You should have thought of that before you jumped."

"I didn't want some intrepid reporter dashing in and grabbing it off my splattered corpse to steal Stark Industries trade secrets," Tony says truthfully, because this was the scenario he envisioned. Tony walks back towards the windows. "I didn't think I was going to need it *when I was dead*. Which again, you ruined, your fault it didn't happen."

"You Midgardians and your phones," Loki says, stirring the eggs in the pan, then checks on the toast. "Learn to be alone with your thoughts for five minutes."

Tony's head snaps sideways so fast he almost gets whiplash. "I'm alone with my thoughts all the goddamn time," Tony says, loud and outraged and not checking himself in the least. "You have a 'Midgardian' phone, for fuck's sake, *Asgardian*. I wasn't in your presence for a full minute before you whipped it out."

Loki waves his own hypocrisy away with an elegant hand. "I utilize it only for necessary Midgardian customs like banking and checking the time. I will not ignore you to poke at my phone, you have my word."

For no reason Tony can figure, Loki apparently dislikes phones. Tony senses a story there, and it's probably strange. "What did you-- go on a bad dinner date with a phone addict?"

Loki offers no answer as he divides the contents of the pan in half and navigates each neat pile of scrambled eggs onto a plate, then turns away to add the toast and starts shaving butter off the top of the stick rather than the end. The metal of the knife clinks against the glass butter dish. The sound is insanely domestic to be hearing in the context of a conversation with Loki. "Choose something else to occupy your time here."

At this suggestion a second, way better idea pops into Tony's head. "Alright, I want the stuff from my workshop then."

Loki pauses in his butter application, raising his head and staring through the backsplash. "You want me to break into your tower and steal your metal monstrosities."

"Yeah."

Loki turns his head to look at Tony. Loki's eyes have narrowed minutely, an expression that distinctly says wheeling and/or dealing. Tony can almost see the evil little mice in there turning gears. "If I bring materials from your workshop, you will agree not to build any suits of armor, and not to contact anyone with what you might build. In addition, you will stay here with me for three months as my honored guest, and you will cooperate with me."

Tony's caught by the wording of this proposal, because cooperation could mean the back massage pool boy thing, or minionship (henchmandom?), or making something destructive for Loki, some kind of weapon, or any number of disturbing possibilities.

Tony hedges. "What does my cooperation look like?"

"You will not annoy me or grouse overmuch, and you will not try to destroy yourself or escape. You will talk to me honestly each day and listen to what I have to say."

Tony analyzes that. As deals with a bad guy go, this proposal is weird and has a lot of elements involved, but it's not bad. Tony's tried to off himself enough at this point to know he can't, and the exterior's invisible bouncy house wall gives the lie to an easy escape. And Tony could choose to converse honestly with Loki about solar power futures, since no topic of conversation was specified. Tony decides to level with him and lay at least one aspect out straight. "Asking me to stop trying to escape is like asking me to stop breathing-- you can ask and I can even agree, but I probably can't follow through."

Loki stares him down. "Can't or won't?"

"Pick your favorite," Tony says casually.

Tony's surprised when Loki acquiesces. "Very well. You can try to escape, but you will not try to kill yourself. Agreed?"

"And at the end of three months, you'll let me go?"

"No. Sit down."

Tony hesitates for a second, but he sits back down at the table as he mulls Loki's answer over. "How about a month?"

Loki comes over and sets a respectable-looking plate of scrambled eggs and buttered toast in front of Tony. The back of the robe blows and flutters around when Loki walks. "Two months. Take it or leave it." Loki's wrist pivots as he puts the other plate next to Tony's place at the table.

Loki, only recently dressed, the adversary who's tried to kill Tony more than anyone else in the world and come as close as Thanos to succeeding, is about to eat breakfast next to him. With him.

"Fine. Deliver a note to the team, bring my stuff, everything in the workshop, and I'll forgo suicide attempts for two months. I reserve the right to argue about it, though. Politely." Tony sighs. "I'll write the note now. Pen and paper? Or got a laptop?"

Handwriting an 'I'm not dead' note is probably a better idea than printing one out. Tony asks after the laptop option only because that would mean the possibility of contact with the outside world. Tony could do a hell of a lot with a computer if he could get a single minute with Loki's eyes away from the screen.

When Loki leaves the room, Tony takes a bite of the scrambled eggs, because they smell good, and what's the worst that could happen? Tony's hooked in approximately half a second, because the eggs are light and fluffy and perfectly salted, like good room service eggs. The taste on Tony's tongue prompts him to suddenly realize how hungry he is, and he eats rapidly. When Tony runs out of eggs he considers for a second, then tilts Loki's dish and scrapes half Loki's portion of scrambled eggs onto his own plate. Either he'll get to eat more scrambled egg ambrosia or Loki will fly into a rage and kill Tony for theft of his breakfast, so it's win-win. Loki returns with a blue felt-tipped pen and a few pieces of paper, setting both on the kitchen table next to Tony's plate.

Loki sits down next to him and begins eating what's left of his own breakfast without comment. Fork clinks against plate. "What is on your leg?"

Tony gives him a wary look. Loki noticed the D.R.A.A.G. when he was manhandling Tony then, even if he didn't break it or destroy it outright. "My D.R.A.A.G. brace. Dynamic Robotic Augmented Ambulatory Gear. It lets me walk normally."

"What happened to you that you no longer walk normally?"

"Thanos happened," Tony says succinctly, taking a last big bite of stolen scrambled eggs before picking up the pen and pushing his plate aside to slide the paper in front of him. Tony fiddles with the pen, rocking it rapidly back and forth between index finger and thumb as he decides what to write.

Instead of thinking about what to write, Tony finds himself looking at Loki's hand, which is elegantly pinching a slice of toast, and visualizing Loki crumpling the medical grade materials of the D.R.A.A.G. under his superhumanly strong fingers while it's still on Tony's leg. Or Loki could take just it away from him and make him limp and crawl.

"I see," Loki says, nibbling meditatively on the toast. "By the way, if 'F.R.I.D.A.Y.' lasers me into little pieces when I enter your tower, you will starve here. Is there anything special I need to do to prevent this?"

Tony almost smiles at the thought Loki bought what Tony was selling last night, because hey, proof Tony's fantastic at bluffing. Tony's deceived the guy the Norse mythology books call the patron god of lies, and since he's the god of lies, Loki can't get that mad at him. "Nah, I just said that to scare you off from the others. I didn't know what you were doing there or what shit you were going to try and pull."

"You still care for them," Loki observes. "Even though they hurt you."

"Of course I care about them, they were my team." Tony finally uncaps the pen with his mouth and holds the cap between his teeth while he starts to write in his usual scrawl. Tony flips the page away and starts over fresh, trying harder than usual to keep his handwriting legible.

"They *were* your team?"

"You heard me," Tony says.

Disregard the message I left with F.R.I.D.A.Y. I'm alive. Don't sell my stuff. Don't talk to the media. Tony shifts the pen cap to the side of his mouth, teeth clamped on it like a cigar.

"Did they formally eject you?" Loki asks casually, his eyes on his toast.

"What, from the team? No," Tony says, talking out of one side of his mouth. "So you could, again, take me back and let them deal with me."

Loki just looks at him.

"Okay, then listen, while you're invading home base, if you actually want to make me comfortable, get all the products from my bathroom," Tony says around the pen cap in his mouth. A bottle of oxycodone is sitting on his bathroom counter, and a bottle of cyclobenzaprine, and a bottle of alprazolam, and while he's been gamely making do with alcohol for the time being, he needs to have his pills on hand. Or not, but then he's going to end up immobilized in complete agony sooner or later, probably sooner.

"So you can suffocate me with your cologne? Because I do not think my magic can save me from that." Loki takes a bite of eggs.

Tony spits the pen cap on the table and scowls at him. "Hey, my colognes are quality stuff. Classic scent notes, and all three have been bestsellers. When Rihanna proposes a collaboration, you do not say no."

Loki picks up another half-slice of toast and examines it as though admiring his own handiwork. "I assume this person is an arbiter of Midgardian taste."

Tony shoots daggers with his eyes more incisive than anything he could do with words. Tony remembers Loki being far less sardonic and way more murderous. Tony must be getting exposed to his other side here.

Loki reads over his shoulder while Tony contemplates writing more. "Do not indicate you're a prisoner. Tell them not to look for you."

"I didn't." *Don't try to find me.* he adds to the message, and decides it's sufficient. The paper has no watermarks or letterhead, but Bruce will have F.R.I.D.A.Y. analyze its origin and-- and what? The paper's unlikely to be notable in any way, and it's not like he wants to go back. Not like he deserves rescue. Tony needs to figure his own way out, by flight or boat or box, incineration or watery grave.

"And just wondering-- would I die of that starvation you mentioned?" Tony asks.

"No. You would starve forever without dying." Loki's sharp green eyes travel over Tony as he adds, "Waste away to no more than skin over bones. Sunken eyes, withered organs. I think you would go mad."

The way Loki says *go mad* is deeply creepy. Tony wants to die, to end, to be *over*, not to suffer eternal punishment. He's not *that* bad a person. "Okay, you can stop imagining it now, thanks."

Tony scribbles out a second copy of the note for Pepper, who can read his illegible handwriting. Despite the crushing breakup Pepper remains the executrix of his estate, and to the end of her note he adds *xo*, because he still cares about her and always will, even if they're no longer in love, even though she left him when he needed her more than ever, even though she figured out she'd be happier with Happy with unseemly haste after she broke off their engagement.

'Unseemly haste,' so Bronte sisters, Tony even amuses himself.

Tony didn't bother pretending to anyone that the decision was mutual this time. He held an unrelated press conference after the news of their breakup leaked; he joked about being single again and kept his body language loose. He's not bitter anymore, though few things feel as incredibly brutal as being rejected by the person who knows you more intimately than anyone else in the world, like being cut off at the knees and left for dead. But after a seven-month cooling-off period, Pepper got back in contact with him and slipped rather easily into the role of a close friend. Tony doesn't have many of those, and Pep is a shining light in a dark world. Keeping her in his life in any capacity wasn't something Tony had the stoicism and wherewithal to turn down.

Tony's about to write Pepper's address on the back of her note when he realizes just how much he doesn't want to do that. Tony isn't going to put Loki in Pepper's path or give him a shred of information about her. No, a world of no. Tony needs to *think*, to fucking stop the occupying flood of sentiment and use his goddamned brain. Nothing like depression and distraction and years of anxiety to fuck up the upstairs functioning. Tony's sure that between the anxiety and the chronic pain, he's remapped huge sectors of his brain to be shit. He'd have F.R.I.D.A.Y. test this theory with her state-of-the-art imaging if he wasn't certain the results would only make him more depressed.

Tony rips Pepper's note up into little pieces. Thankfully he didn't write her name down anywhere.

Loki looks at him questioningly.

"Okay." Tony folds the first paper in half and hands it to Loki, subdued now, and lists acceptable recipients in approximate order of how much he trusts them. "Give it to Rhodey, Steve, Bruce, Thor, Sam, Clint, or Nat." His heirs, along with a shitload of charities, nonprofits, libraries, hospitals, think tanks, scholarships, Peter and Harley and Happy. Tony put Wanda in there too, although from the sound of things, Wanda really has no use for money at this point.

"One thing though. You can give it to Nat-- Natasha-- if she's with someone, but don't give it to her if she's alone. Find another way to give it to one of the others," Tony adds, because after the brutal, disastrous Avengers v. Avengers fight at the Leipzig-Halle airport, he will never fully trust her again, and he can imagine her not following through with his wishes or even telling the others if the decision is up to her alone. Nat has too many layers of loyalties and too many layers of *reasons*. Chances are good she'd do the right thing, but Tony isn't interested in taking risks with his estate, because it's all he has left.

Tony leaves Bucky off the list entirely.

Tony hopes he's not too late to stop the suicide note news from going out. If he's still alive, and for now he is, Tony doesn't want his estate dissolved, because that's the kind of selfish prick he is and always will be, until he's finally actually dead. Given there won't be a body for his teammates to find, Tony reckons he has a pretty good shot. He could have just flown off in a suit. With no body and no camera footage they'll probably cover for him at first while they try to figure out exactly what happened, and they likely won't disseminate the news immediately.

Tony writes a string of numbers and letters on a second piece of paper. "This is the code to get you past the downstairs security to upstairs security. So you can go up to the 82nd floor and ring the bell, basically." Tony has another thought. "Unless you were just planning to, y'know, poof directly inside."

"I'll deliver it now," Loki says agreeably, accepting the second page, and with a passing sheen of green light he turns into a tanned blond man with thick hair in a floppy fade cut, dressed in an orange shirt and brown shorts with a matching orange cap in his hand. The smile he flashes, however, is pure Loki.

"Nice Bieber haircut," Tony tells him on principle, even though Loki looks like a sun-streaked surfer god. Blond Loki's light brown eyebrows quirk like Loki knows he's sexy as fuck and Tony's full of shit. "You look like bad stock photography. Is that what you think hand couriers look like?"

"I will bring food for tonight, also," Loki says, pulling the cap over his head and adjusting it on his brow. "What do you want to eat?"

"Scotch," Tony says.

Antagonism aside, Tony could use another drink. Tony turns his back on Loki and walks in the direction of the stairs.

"Tony," blond fade cut Loki says.

Tony stops. "Yeah?"

"Our agreement aside-- don't try to burn the villa down," Loki requests. "I'm not completely sure what will happen, but there's a distinct possibility you'll survive as a charred corpse in agonizing pain, or become brain-dead from smoke inhalation but live on."

"Oh, I stuck my hand in the flame of your stovetop," Tony says. "It was fine."

Smirking, Loki adjusts his ugly orange cap. "Ah. Do as you will, then. Do you want me to bring some of your own clothes here?"

"Sure, why not," Tony says, because the longer Loki's away from the villa, the more time Tony will have to figure out how to leave. "Hey, I would kind of like to know how you knew what underwear I like."

"I impersonated you once," Loki says, "and went through your clothes. And that is why I do not require directions to your bedroom, your bathroom, or your workshop."

Shit. Tony was deliberately withholding directions for how to get around inside the Tower. "Checks out," Tony says.

With a last look at him, Loki vanishes in a flash of green that starts at his midsection and writhes up and down his body, disappearing him.

Tony could see what's set out in the tiki bar, if anything, but he chooses the devil he knows and heads back to the bar at the base of the stairs. Tony thinks about Loki's request he not burn down the villa. Tony's tempted, he really is. But the fire on the stovetop was a tiny lick of flame compared to the roaring pyre of a burning house. Tony doesn't want to risk the possibility of surviving with fifth- or sixth-degree burns bubbling over every cell of his body until Loki comes back to put him out of his misery, or even worse, keep him alive despite that. Tony's not a coward, but he's dodged enough explosions to know he doesn't want to die in a raging inferno, and he definitely doesn't want to live on as a vegetable or a fucking *skeleton*.

Tony considers setting a fire in the villa and retreating to the ocean to watch the place burn, but in the end he decides against trying anything with flame. Loki's behaving extremely strangely, but Tony doesn't discount the chance of him returning to form and going ballistic if Tony really antagonizes him, especially since Tony revealed F.R.I.D.A.Y. in actuality has no standing instructions to annihilate Loki if he shows up at the Tower. The one thing Tony can't risk is Loki hurting the others.

Plus, he promised to stop trying to kill himself for two months. *Two months, Jesus Christ*. Having made that agreement, if Tony's going to break his word, he has to be sure he'll succeed or at least be sure he won't get caught.

So much for ripping those bedsheets.

*

Tony drinks another two fingers of vodka and evaluates his remaining options. With Loki away, Tony could go walk the perimeter of the property again and feel out the force field more thoroughly, or he could go in back and check out the barrier on the beach, or he could thoroughly explore the house. He's not sure how much time he'll have until Loki returns.

Tony decides to start with the yard, and he grabs a chair from the dining room before heading outside. Tony walks to the base of the driveway where he barrelled so hard and yet so gently into the force field. His leg aches as he makes his way across the front lawn, but he's constantly forcing himself not to let this baseline level of pain stop him. This time Tony runs the legs of the chair up and down against the barrier, checking every inch of the cushiony force field. When he's established that the barrier goes down to the dirt and stretches higher than Tony can reach with the height of the chair added to his own height, he heads back to the house. He'll investigate more scientifically once he has access to his workshop stuff and can rig some sort of detector together, assuming of course that Loki actually brings his things.

Tony goes back inside the house and decides to start at the bottom and work his way up. He easily finds the exterior stairs leading down to the lower floors. The stairs are outside but are covered in the event of rain and half-hidden in gardens.

None of the entrances are locked, and in the lower levels he finds more bedrooms, a game room, a room with a pair of massage tables, and a gym. Tony pauses in the doorway of the gym, because he hasn't exercised today. Tony works out every day, lifting weights and walking or jogging on a treadmill, the latter of which is necessary in order to keep his cardiovascular system in tip-top shape. Though they managed to save Tony's leg, his overall vascular health is in as much extra long-term peril as an amputee's.

Tony also finds two locked rooms. Tony wants inside these rooms. He's not at a point in his life where he's fit to try and kick a door down, unfortunately.

The lowest level of the house, the beach level, is just a big cabana, with an outdoor shower, a storage room containing two surfboards, three pool floats, an outdoor furniture set that's never been fully unpacked, still in its plastic sheet wrappings, and four small empty changing rooms. The main room has a heavy winch bolted into the wall, probably to retract a small sailboat or something of that nature into the interior.

Tony goes outside again and walks around the house, but the electrical lines running to the villa must be buried.

Feeling somewhat silly for what he intends to do, Tony searches for the big kitchen knife in the bushes outside by the deck. After he finds the knife, he sits on the deck chair next to Loki's and lies aloud to Loki's spell about his intentions.

"I want to live," Tony announces loudly as he plunges the blade towards his exposed throat with both hands. His arm bounces away; the spell is not fooled.

Well, worth a shot.

Tony heads back into the street level part of the house and checks out what he hasn't seen yet. Tony discovers a second stairwell and a screening room with gimmicky movie theater stadium seating. Tony heads upstairs and browses around. All the bedrooms have attached baths, and all the bedrooms have a gift basket or two or three, all different kinds, all unopened. Tony inspects each one to get a full accounting of exactly what resources he's working with. He notes collections of jams and jellies, sunscreens and bronzing oils, soaps, shampoos and conditioners, wines, nuts, chocolates, coffee, tea, and dried fruit. Tony rips one of the snacky ones open for the packet of cashews inside, which he eats while he keeps searching the place.

Tony cackles triumphantly when he opens the door to a previously unseen bedroom and finds an enormous golden bed, a brilliant shining brass monstrosity with a ridiculous gold brocade canopy and posts Tony couldn't wrap both hands around. Tony knew he'd find some all-out Hearst Castle-style gilt in here somewhere. Except when Hearst styled his house like this in the first half of the 1900's, the glitz and gaudiness was trendsetting and fashionable.

Tony walks into Loki's mostly empty bedroom, but the only distinguishing characteristic that marks it as Loki's are the muddled sheets on the slept-in bed. The dresser and the desk are all devoid of actual possessions. Nary a book nor a tchotchke. Of course, according to S.H.I.E.L.D. files, Loki came to Earth with nothing but the apparently magical clothes on his back, the Chitauri scepter, and a bad blue-eyed hangover, and this villa is vastly impersonal except for the whimsical statuary and Loki's hilarious bed. Maybe Loki just isn't a guy for having stuff, maybe that's how it is when you're a demigod. Maybe it's the whole planet for your kingdom or nothing.

Tony opens the closet perfunctorily, expecting more emptiness, but instead he finds a single outfit hanging on two of the black velvet hangers in the closet. Tony pulls the hangers closer to examine the outfit, and the clothes are weird as fuck. The outfit looks like it's been through a war. The shirt is a dull light gray, filthy with many smudges and stains, and torn in one arm with dried bloodstains matted around the tear. The pants are dark brown and in somewhat better shape, though probably no cleaner, and Tony would put good money on the color disguising the dirt.

Draped over the pants, matching in such a way that Tony almost doesn't notice it, there's an extra-skinny dark brown necktie with a flat bottom like something out of the 1960's. The shirt sleeves and the pants inseam are long, and both look like they would fit someone as slim and tall as Loki. Tony tries to picture Loki wearing them, but the mental picture doesn't quite gel.

On the other hand, Loki did say he stole a lot of money in the sixties. Still, why keep the outfit? In memoriam of his successful crime? If Loki keeps nothing else, that makes no sense. Something seriously doesn't add up about the outfit in the closet.

Tony leans in and without touching, sniffs gingerly at the chest of the shirt to see if he can tell anything else about the mystery of these clothes. The shirt smells good, but strange. Tony takes a second breath of it, because if sex appeal had a scent, it would be this. Underneath the scent of a male body, though, is the layer of whatever smells strange. Tony's reminded of being in New York in 1970. The air was different there, and the smell of this shirt is the same, like it's from another time, like older but somehow fresher air, kissed by a hint of ozone.

Tony catches himself, because he's sniffing another dude's used and ruined shirt. Loki's, of all people. Hopefully Loki won't be able to tell, and Tony starts to close the closet when he takes a second look at the bloodstain. Tony runs a finger past the dark splotch, because he could probably learn a lot about Loki's physiology from swabbing and distilling a couple drops of his blood. Assuming, of course, that this blood is Loki's.

Tony walks over to the bathroom, running a hand down the rococo gold tassels holding back the satin bed canopy on the way. The bed is tacky in Tony's opinion, but Tony would say confidently that it *is* very Loki. Tony's mom used to say, albeit pityingly and with more than a shade of condescension, *there's no accounting for taste*.

Loki's bathroom is white and gold and has a whirlpool spa tub big enough for six centered in the middle of the bathroom. Tony used to have one similar, and that's how he knows tubs that size are basically useless unless you have a shit-ton of extra piping, multiple faucets and an additional water heater. Either you're on a schedule and don't have two hours to wait around

getting it full, or you wait around and by the time the thing is three-quarters full, you've forgotten you meant to take a bath in the first place.

Loki's shower has an open glass wall facing the ocean, which is just hippy-dippy enough to seem appropriate for this strange, solicitous version of Loki who walks around undressed and imprisons people he despises to keep them from self-destruction.

In the bathroom is a single, small, rounded silver bottle with black lines that looks somehow... not-of-Earth. Tony sloshes the contents around and considers pouring whatever it is down the drain, but getting rid of it might go overboard on the now-forbidden 'annoying Loki too much' front. Same with uncapping it to sniff, because who knows what the hell is actually in there. Tony does want his workshop stuff. Whatever's in the bottle has the consistency of water rather than body wash or shampoo. Maybe it's cologne.

How dare Loki insult his colognes, seriously. An outrage.

Tony finds three locked rooms upstairs to match the two downstairs, and he spends fifteen minutes trying to pick the locks with paper clips from the secretary desk in the office, but he can't get any of them unlocked. What he wants is to find internet.

Loki returns within the hour, interrupting Tony as he's poking through the other bedroom drawers looking for the keys or items that might be successfully used in lockpicking. He's coming up with random travel care packages-- combs, brushes, cotton balls, toothbrushes, Q-tips, etc in clear, plain sealed vinyl zippered bags, and briefly trying to pick the locks with a mutilated Q-tip was an idea conceived in pure desperation. Tony's about to head back outside and count windows to tease out which belong to the locked rooms (all the exterior doors are unlocked, so it stands to reason the windows might be similarly accessible, and if not, time to consider breaking some windows) when he hears footsteps behind him. When Tony turns around, Loki's looking like his normal self again, wearing a full green and gold leather getup in draping layers from neck to toes.

"I hate vacations," Tony says, which is not true, but he does hate *this* vacation. "There's nothing to do on them."

"You look like you're staying busy," Loki says dryly. "I gave your message to your friends."

The Avengers are his teammates, not really his friends, but Tony lets it go. Tony closes the drawer but doesn't otherwise bother to hide what he's doing.

"I brought Thai food for dinner," Loki says. "And different scotch."

"Different scotch," Tony echoes, rising from his knees with more than his fair share of pain and stiffness; he's pushed his body hard today. Tony hadn't expected to be taken seriously on the 'scotch for dinner' front. Loki can be a bit face-value, apparently. "Did you get my stuff?"

"Yes, it's downstairs." Loki grabs Tony's arm as Tony tries to pass him to the doorway, halting his body with a jerk. "Remember our bargain," Loki says, and there's a definite warning in his voice.

"I don't forget anything," Tony says, yanking his arm back. "Be gentle, asshole. You said you weren't going to hurt me."

"Apologies," Loki says with just a touch of condescension. "I forget how frail humans are."

If Tony was talking to anyone else, he would bristle at being called *frail*, but he knows the insult has nothing to do with his disability and everything to do with him being human and Loki being Loki, oblivious Demigod of Assholery.

Tony'd kind of vaguely figured Loki wouldn't really retrieve his workshop stuff. No worries about the locks then, no broken glass necessary, he won't even need to pick the locks. Once F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s online Tony can contact the Tower or easily orchestrate his escape seven ways from Saturday.

The settings of the D.R.A.A.G. intuitively ramp up as Tony descends the curving stairs faster than he probably should. When he gets far enough to see the first floor, he sees *stuff*, and when he makes it all the way down he discovers that Loki's teleported the whole happy mess of his workshop into the dining room, one of the living rooms, and the room that used to have a pool table. The contents of Tony's workshop spill out slightly from the dining room into into the foyer, and when Tony walks through the doorway it's bliss-- his familiar tables and desks and drawers, the partly organized chaos of his supercomputers and trash, tubes and connectors, his first arc reactor back in its glass box, all his favorite projects and pieces of crap and whirring gizmos he's built just for fun. If Tony's being forced to live, he doesn't want to be without some kind of R&D playground. The only notable addition to the room is an elongated couch that's not Tony's and definitely wasn't in here when it was a dining room. Loki either dragged the couch in or teleported it. But DUM-E is in the dining room, and U, and Tony might hug U and kiss DUM-E if Loki weren't right there. Tony settles for giving DUM-E a pat as he passes by. He never thought he'd see them again. Best of all, maybe, a recent backup of F.R.I.D.A.Y. is on these computers.

"Where's the furniture?" Tony asks out of curiosity while he fires up a couple of the computers, although he doesn't really care what the answer is. The house is big for a beach house, but Tony never saw any fully empty rooms.

"On the front lawn," Loki says, like the front lawn is the natural place to put a long table, sixteen padded chairs and a seven-piece living room set. "The billiards table is on the deck."

The pool table is absolutely going to get ruined if left out in the elements, not that Tony gives a shit. Everything else too if Loki doesn't put them elsewhere. "Why didn't you put my stuff in some of the bedrooms upstairs? More out of the way, no?"

"Why would I do that?"

For some damn privacy, for one thing. "Are you going to complain in a week about my crap being everywhere? That you're sick of tripping on my nest trash and the dining room is for eating, et cetera?"

"No," Loki says indifferently. "I prefer the table in the kitchen, and I like to sit in the sunroom." Loki looks at him for a long moment.

"Good to know," Tony says, walking away, ostensibly to go towards a cooling bank of servers, but mostly to put some distance between himself and Loki. "I'll stay out of your space, and you can stay out of mine."

Loki's mouth twists wryly. "I do not think so," Loki says, but he leaves the workshop shortly thereafter.

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Tony gets to work. The dining room doorway lacks an actual door, so privacy is nil.

Tony promised he wouldn't build any *suits of armor*. The Mark L isn't really a suit, more of an ultra-flexible, anything-goes defense mechanism, a Green Lantern ring of martial imagination. A fantasy prosthesis built to turn into a shit-ton of weaponry. Arguably it's a suit of armor, but Loki only made Tony promise not to build one. Nothing was said on the subject of summoning one. Having F.R.I.D.A.Y. send in the Mark L will probably be the fastest and easiest way out of here. Tony's not worried about the Mark L getting to him, because the nano-particles can probably slip through microscopic holes in the fabric of Loki's magic barrier, or failing that can burrow beneath the earth to reach Tony.

Tony boots up the computer systems and loads a backup of F.R.I.D.A.Y. from four days ago.

"Hi boss," F.R.I.D.A.Y. says. "I'm flying blind."

F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s programmed to let him know when there are problems with any of her major systems, and Loki didn't manage to bring along the cameras set hidden in recessed spots inside the walls of his workshop in the Tower. "I know," Tony says softly. "Open a line to the Tower for me."

"Unable to connect," F.R.I.D.A.Y. says. Tony has zero trust in anyone else's standards for encryption and privacy, so his workshop is equipped to serve as his own private Base Transceiver Station. F.R.I.D.A.Y. has full cell tower capabilities at her disposal. Tony stays in front of the technology curve, and he's set for both millimeter wave 5G technology and 5G ultra wideband. Everything's been directly transplanted here. Everything runs on cutting-edge Badassium (patent still fucking pending) arc reactor tech. Everything should still work. Half his shit arrived still turned on, for fuck's sake.

"Uh. That's bad," Tony says. "Okay, then connect to whatever's around. Get me some wi-fi up in here."

"Scanning, boss," F.R.I.D.A.Y. says, and then, "Unable to connect. No wi-fi connections are available. Unable to wire a hotspot."

Tony's heart sinks. "We're in a luxury tropical paradise, they're not going to put up with 'local access only.'" There has to be a cell tower around, no one tolerates lack of internet well these days, pampered rich vacationers least of all. "Well, Loki has a phone, I've seen it. Find it and use it to tether."

"Scanning." F.R.I.D.A.Y. pauses. "No devices found for tethering."

Well, crap. Not surprising, Loki's phone is probably stored in an alternate dimension or up his butt or something. "Connect to satellite. I want coordinates for where we are."

"Unable to connect. Something is interfering with my array."

Need a net connection to start hacking, need to hack to get a net connection. "Classic catch-22. Can you tell what's interfering?"

"No. No problems are detected."

He's isolated, then. For now. And unfortunately, Tony knows without having to take stock of his supplies that he doesn't have the materials onhand to build another Mark L here.

Tony broods for a minute, but he recovers from this setback quickly, because he has other ideas.

Using his standard hologram program, Tony starts sketching out a combination photometer/pitot probe/hygrometer/radio micrometer/ammeter/surface forces apparatus/barometer/tensiometer to take measurements from the area near Loki's force field. Tony would gamble hard on the force field being the interfering issue preventing F.R.I.D.A.Y. from successfully transmitting radiofrequency waves.

So Tony's going to measure light wavelengths, fluid flow velocity, giga-joules, gravity, the pressure of gases, and the forces between atoms within molecules as well as in between molecules, molecular makeup, the speed of quantum particles, plus some other random measurements he throws in because he has no idea how magic works. But he solved the problem of time travel in a few days once he set his mind to the task, so chances are good he can figure out a little magical force field.

Loki claimed the spell *senses his intent*. Loki's spell can literally read his thoughts, which is beyond intrusive and well into straight-up horrifying. Magic is like an extra, esoteric branch of science that Tony can't learn, one of the only things he can't learn, along with how to share and how to keep people in his life instead of driving them away.

Tony's universally recognized as the greatest nanoengineer who's ever lived. He hacked into the Pentagon when he was in high school, and no encryption exists that he can't break. Any data in the world that's stored online, he can find a way to access. However, because he's got an ounce of wisdom and a pound of PR instinct in his toolbox to go with his ton of genius, and because he's on good terms with T'Challa, he's steered clear of trying to probe the Wakandans' tech. He mastered thermonuclear astrophysics in one sleepless night and was still sharp enough the next morning to slip past S.H.I.E.L.D.'s firewalls and probe into the darkest of the agency's secrets. He keeps up with advancements in bioengineering. He worked side by side with the scientist who created the first and only synthezoid-- he and Bruce and Helen used their collective genius and the Mind Stone to make *life* together, superpowered life. He knows operator algebra and quantum field theory. Sure, bosonic string theory took him a couple days, but once everything started to click he made some valuable contributions to the field. Tony's invented hundreds of things, a few dozen patents of which are actually useful to the public in everyday life, which statistically speaking is a hell of a thing.

Tony knows people, too, and he can sell anything, can command a boardroom or a convention center hall with his charisma and the force of his personality. He can control a narrative like nobody's business. The confidence he puts out spills off him like champagne down a flight attendant's navel. Even now, disabled and tired and older than he ever imagined himself getting, he can entice a woman or man to his bed with a few words or sometimes even just a flirtatious smile, a quirk of his eyebrows and a jerk of his chin.

But against magic, all of his natural gifts, his scientific genius, his golden touch with people and his polymath know-how stack up into less firepower than Tony'd like. Fighting against Doom was eye-opening that way. Tony always wants to be the guy with the most firepower and the most surprises up his sleeve.

After Thanos' defeat, Tony parted on reasonably decent terms with Stephen Strange, who flies under the radar as Earth's high wizard. Wizards, who knew? Tony was never going to have mutual warm fuzzies with the guy, because Strange is one of those people who disliked Tony before ever meeting him. Yet over time a low-key professional respect developed there, or at least Strange's snarky comments dwindled, stopping entirely by the time Strange visited him all laid up in the hospital.

Seven months later, after finishing the worst of his post-Thanos rehab, Tony called on Strange to ask politely for lessons in the mystic arts, because he'd like to learn a supernumerary field, especially one so powerful and one that fucks so hard with a scientific mind, but Strange refused him even before Tony could pose the question. Tony remembers his exact words, too, because they were fraught and scarring. *I know what you're going to ask, Tony, and the answer is no, because you'll destroy the world.*

Strange's manner was respectful, not snarky at all, but Tony hates being told no. He has no idea if Strange was bullshitting him or if *you'll destroy the world* could actually be true; Tony inarguably possesses a talent for severely fucking things up along with his gifts for insight, creation, and figuring shit out. Or Strange might have sifted through a million futures to find the ideal statement to make Tony go away the fastest. Tony's not sure how much magical effort's required to sort through potential futures-- how much magical energy expenditure would have been justified to get Tony to beat a hasty retreat?

How big of a pain in Strange's ass would he have been if Strange hadn't given that particular explanation for refusing to teach him? Tony's asked himself this question before, and done some sincere introspection, and he honestly doesn't know.

If that was Merlin's plan it worked a trick, because Tony's not taking that kind of risk, not for anything. Not after Ultron, not after Thanos. Earth's entire roster of superheroes and a handful of flaky aliens barely managed to stop Thanos and save the world. Tony shifted gears in a heartbeat, immediately telling Strange nope, he only came by to say hi and that drinks are on him next time Strange and Wong are on or around Park Avenue, and then he turned on his heel and descended the Bleeker Street steps. Tony went away reeling, and Strange can't have been fooled because you definitely can't bullshit a guy who can explore fourteen million, six hundred and five alternate timelines in under a minute, but Tony doesn't care. What matters is how fast he turned the visit around.

Tony's not sure why he cares about preserving whatever's left of his dignity, cause anyone with ten seconds and an internet connection can see multiple iterations of his o-face, but Tony will be the first to concur that the human mind isn't reasonable. Pride, vanity are odd things.

Tony pauses and re-evaluates, spinning his blueprints around midair. Maybe a spherometer will tell him something too... where in the design to stick it...

Tony gives his epic combination measuring tool the working title of panometer, because he seems to recall some rando invented the omniometer already. The omniometer cannot be nearly as omni- as the panometer, naturally, but Tony's not about to use an unoriginal moniker. And since the panometer is just a collection of measuring tools, both standard and offbeat, put together into a single device, rather than a wholly new creation of Tony's, it's groundbreaking but still stale and shall not be graced with a fancy acronym name.

Tony realizes he's hungry at some point. He usually has a hunger pang or two mid-afternoon, especially if he hasn't eaten lunch, but Loki hasn't bothered him and he's not going to invite interaction with Loki if he has the option to avoid it. Tony slips out a few times to the closest bathroom to pee and drink water by putting his mouth under the running water from the tap, and then he returns to the relative sanctity of his workshop.

*

Tony refuses to leave his workshop the first time Loki appears in the doorway to summon him for the evening meal. "I'll be there in a sec," Tony says, and Loki pinches the bridge of his nose as if exasperated with him. Tony wonders which of them is more stubborn. He guesses they'll find out.

Loki leaves. Tony keeps working.

The second time Loki shows up, a few minutes later, the invitation to dinner is issued crossly and presented as a demand. "Come eat, or I will tie you down and force-feed you."

That threat sounds uncomfortably real, and so Tony follows Loki to the kitchen. The 'different' scotch turns out to be two bottles, one Oban 21 and one Highland Park 25. No Macallan, but nonetheless Tony can't deny he's slightly impressed. Loki put in some degree of effort to find quality.

Loki has reheated the Thai in the plastic containers it came in, probably leeching bisphenol-A or Diphenyl sulfone or other nasty trace chemicals into the food. Whatever, Tony wanted to die anyway. Not like his body's ever been a temple, either.

"Sit down," Loki says. Loki's still dressed in his green and gold leather, and he seats himself at the head of the table.

Tony feels like James Bond being forced to dine with Dr. No, but he walks over to the table and takes the chair at Loki's right hand. Breakfast was a negotiation. Without the distraction of a cryptic note to pen, the exact situation being up in the air, and plans to be hammered out, they're just enemies eating a meal together.

Loki drinks wine, pushes around a plate of noodles and beef, and stares out the window at the darkening sea, lost in his own thoughts. Tony eats some of everything-- the beef, coconut soup, curry, a chicken in sauce, relishing all of it, not having realized just how hungry he was. He's probably still recovering from the day-and-a-half-long mission that ended yesterday on top of not eating lunch today. The Thai is heavily Americanized and barely spicy at all, which suits Tony.

Once Tony's satisfied his immediate urge to stuff his face, he slows down. Loki specified wanting Tony to stay as his *guest*. Time to engage, build trust, create a fake rapport, the better to manipulate his captor with so he can get the fuck out of here. If Nat can play Loki like a piano, Tony can too.

"How is everybody?" Tony asks. "How'd the delivery actually go?"

The question gets Loki's attention back on him. "I do not know," Loki says. "Natasha answered the door. Thor was sitting behind her, so I handed Natasha your note. I didn't stay to speak with them. They seemed surprised."

"Very few delivery people arrive at the Avengers headquarters unannounced and unsummoned," Tony explains.

"Ah," Loki says. Loki watches him eat for a few moments.

"Why aren't you eating?" Tony asks through a mouthful of flavorful noodles.

"I only drink blood," Loki says with a slight sigh.

Tony saw Loki eat eggs and toast only hours ago, and he can tell Loki was being facetious, but he's still nonplussed. "What?"

"That was a jest," Loki says with no trace of humor. "About being a monster. You know what I am, do you not?"

"Can't say I do. Though Thor did tell us you were adopted," Tony says.

"I'm a frost giant," Loki says emotionlessly, like this news is something he had to come to terms with, maybe even like he's sharing this tidbit of identity to prove to himself that he's accepted it, that it's not something that matters.

"Okay, that means nothing to me, but you're a monster for reasons that have nothing at all to do with being a frost giant," Tony says seriously, and Loki gives him a reproachful look.

Slight misstep of honesty, oops. Sometimes he can't hold this shit in. Tony heaves a sigh and attempts amends. "You look pretty Asgardian from where I sit. My point is, what's good for the goose," Tony says, jerking his chin at Loki's plate, and then he realizes he might need to explain the idiom if he wants Loki to understand it. "Did you put anything in the food I should know about?"

"No." Loki obligingly picks up his fork and twirls some noodles around, but he looks as though his heart isn't in the process.

"Then do I get to tie you down and force-feed you or only you get to do that to me?"

Loki makes a face. "It is my hope there will be none of that. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

Tony holds eye contact while he takes another bite, though Loki looks away while Tony chews and swallows. "Something on your mind?" Tony asks.

Loki remains somber, but he looks back up as though he's pleased to have Tony taking an interest. "I was just wondering if Thor recognized me."

If Thor realizes the message was delivered by Loki... the Avengers might come for him. Tony wants to get out of here, but he doesn't really want the fuss of an official rescue. He'd probably have to talk his way out of that seventy-two hour involuntary hold he mentioned before. These days, if you want to commit suicide without a lot of bullshit follow-up and sometimes the kind of white-coat inpatient interventions that impart their own lasting trauma, you have to get it right the first time, no fuck-ups. Which is one of the reasons Tony chose jumping off his skyscraper in the first place. "What makes you think Thor might have recognized you? Can he see through your illusions?"

Loki flashes a small smile, the Mona Lisa turned mischievous. "No. He falls for them every time."

Crap. "Well, okay then."

"But I wonder." Loki's fingers stroke the base of his wineglass. "He knows *me*. And I wanted..."

"What did you want?" Tony prompts when Loki falls silent.

"To say hello," Loki says almost wistfully.

Loki is such an unbelievable dick to his brother. Okay, stick to boring, uncontroversial topics. Tony's been wondering about the request not to burn the villa down. Was Loki just trying to safeguard his property, or is there truly some danger to fire that's not present with things like cutting and drowning? "Just wondering-- is there something special about fire and smoke? Or did you just not want to lose your mermaid mural?"

"Fire is cleansing," Loki says, like that's a known truth of the universe, like this explains everything. "You never really know how a large-scale fire will interact with a spell. Even a thorough spell."

Tony considers this answer, because it sounds plausible enough. Still, Loki's probably full of shit and just didn't want his fancy mance burned down. "How long have you lived here?"

"A week and a half," Loki answers.

Even with how clearly not-lived-in the villa is, Tony's surprised. "Wow, that is recent. So did you have this anti-death spell in place before you brought me here? Is this where you go when you're feeling the urge to fall on your Chitauri scepter?"

Tony feels the most upside-down stab of guilt when as he registers the expression that twists Loki's so-handsome-they're-pretty features. Loki's face quickly smooths over, so fast Tony's not even sure he really saw what he thought.

"No," Loki says evenly. "I cast it the night I brought you here."

"Are you coming off some kind of bender?"

Loki's wineglass is halfway to his mouth when the question makes him freeze, as though Tony's triggered some alarm in him. "What?"

"You just seem really different than the last time I saw you," Tony says. Understatement of the decade. "Like you've been through some shit."

"Ah," Loki says, and he re-animates and sips his wine. "Yes. I have."

Tony wipes dipping sauce off his mouth with the back of his hand, then licks it off. "Wanna talk about it?"

"No," Loki says, and his tone leaves no room for discussion or prying.

Well, okay then. "Suit yourself. Tomorrow your pris-- your grateful houseguest --" Tony loads those words with sarcasm-- "-- would like cheeseburgers. From Five Guys. And a chocolate shake."

Loki inclines his head. "As you wish."

Loki finally puts the bite of noodles he's been playing with into his mouth, and Tony can't help but watch Loki as he chews. Though no golden god, and appearing older than he once did, Loki's every bit as good-looking as Thor. Loki stares into space, brooding like he's *Wuthering Heights* on extra doses of barbiturates and alcoholism, like Loki's the depressed one here.

It's kind of funny.

After they eat, Loki snaps the plastic lids closed on their leftovers and puts the half-emptied containers of Thai into the refrigerator, and Tony returns to his makeshift workshop without waiting to see what Loki does or where he goes after.

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The workshop is darker than it was when Tony left it for dinner. The sun is sinking towards the horizon, spilling the pink and orange lights of a tropical sunset through the window. Tony flips the lights on.

Tony keeps his massage device in his workshop, a piece of homebuilt equipment with a leg-sized cavity. Tony spends twenty minutes having his bad leg pounded and rubbed while he works on the panometer. Except for the unfamiliar walls, tile, ceiling and couch, it's almost like being in the Tower.

What if he invented a device, say, a booby trap hidden in the ceiling, that had a fifty-fifty chance of executing anyone who sat down under it, and a fifty-fifty shot at dispensing a cookie? If the spell senses intent and Loki doesn't know the device is about to operate, would it be more likely to kill him than it would be Tony, who would sit down expecting the device to work? Would a forty/sixty split of cookie versus death be less likely to work due to his measurably greater intention of causing death, and if so, how much less likely? Tony has no idea how to calculate factors of scientific probability against the power of magic.

Could he do something less obvious than a falling cookie? The alternate effect should be something pleasant to balance against the outcome of death. Everything pleasant Tony can think of-- that he actually has the materials to make happen-- are going to be obvious. Soft, sweet music would be possible... he doesn't have the chemicals onhand to make some kind of orthonasal treat for the senses.

The whole idea is a little goofy, but Tony finds experimentation nigh irresistible.

Loki's not a good guy, but would it be wrong to kill him? Loki's tried to murder Tony a bunch of times, but Tony's had enough of killing. On the other hand, Loki's holding him prisoner, and killing him would be a kind of self-defense. Plus Thor, and the world, already believe Loki dead at Thanos' hands. Not that that makes any difference morally... and Tony does care about the moral angle.

But if Tony did fabricate such a contraption and managed to kill Loki, chances are Tony could replicate the effect on himself. And if it works on Tony first, Loki won't be his problem anymore. There are some risk versus reward calculations to be done here, but Tony's got a history of gambling big and winning in kind. Usually his life is what's at stake, but now he'll be gambling for the reward of a swift death versus a prolonged incarceration with Loki as his jailer.

After he opens up and removes his leg from the Leg Pummeler 9000, Tony rummages around for a while to see what he can turn up for cameras. He only has five spare cameras onhand, but he mounts four of them in strategic locations around the workshop so F.R.I.D.A.Y. can see, and keeps the fifth one portable so F.R.I.D.A.Y. can assess the villa's ceilings to determine suitability for the death-or-cookie trap.

Tony also digs out a tiny earpiece speaker and syncs it with his laptops so F.R.I.D.A.Y. can speak into his ear. He'll still need to type to F.R.I.D.A.Y. for maximum privacy, but she'll be able to communicate with him more quickly and directly.

Plus, he'll be able to hear her voice. No small thing.

Loki appears in the workshop doorway-- funny how this room already feels like Tony's workshop, even though it was a dining room only hours ago.

"Hey, I was just thinking about you," Tony says. "I need some cookies."

"Later," Loki says. "Come in the sunroom. We are going to talk."

"I don't want to talk right now," Tony says, settling deeper into his seat. He's been sitting too long, his butt's going numb, but he wants to keep working.

"Then you'll listen to me talk," Loki answers like a smart-ass. "Come now, we had an arrangement."

"I don't think I like this arrangement that much," Tony says. "Can't we have an arrangement where I perform the occasional sexual favor and you leave me alone the rest of the time?"

Tony says it partly to provoke a reaction but mostly to sass Loki, and for a microsecond, Loki's brows lift and Tony could swear Loki looks thoughtful, maybe even tempted. Loki's expression sharpens into a strange penetrating look, strange even for this new Loki, his forehead showing its deep new lines to full effect, but then his expression focuses further, hardening.

"No," Loki says. "Come into the sunroom or I will tie you up and carry you in."

"Fine," Tony groans. "Your loss, bucko."

Tony hauls himself to his feet, his muscles stiffened from holding the same position for too long. Tony follows Loki into what Loki calls the sunroom and what Tony thinks of as the dark room, the first room, because it was the first room of this house he was ever in and at the time, he was disoriented and it was terrifyingly dark. Most places, the first room you're in is the one that contains the exterior door. Being Iron Man, Tony sometimes disobeys that natural rule by crunching through the ceiling, but breaking it due to teleportation is new.

Loki sits on one of the two chairs and Tony stretches out on the sectional. Mostly he lies down to mock Loki, because apparently he's going to be in some hilarious parody of therapy here, and also because stretching out flat feels better on his messed-up back. Physically he'd be better off lying on the floor, but the cushions on the sectional are brand new and firm, and more importantly, Tony feels the need to stay on his toes around Loki. Lying down is pushing it. Lying down on the floor would make him feel too vulnerable.

Tony already feels too vulnerable. Human and weak, armorless and trapped.

"Tell me about your relationship with your father," Loki instructs as an opening, and this suggestion's going way too far for plastic toddler kitchen therapy pretend. The entitlement implicit in the question steels Tony's spine.

"Oh, nope," Tony says in his firmest boardroom don't-fuck-with-me voice, sitting back up and swinging his feet to the floor, ignoring the sharp ache that rises in his back. "No, that crosses a line. You're not a fucking shrink, and I'm not sharing that stuff with you. If you want me to talk about my dad, I want a licensed practitioner. A psychiatrist." Tony stands up and heads to the door, but he doesn't get three steps before Loki's hand is on his wrist, restraining him. Tony flinches from his touch.

"But what you have is me," Loki says.

Tony scowls at him and tries to pull away, but Loki's fingers might as well be steel. All Loki would have to do is squeeze and the bones of Tony's arm would snap and crumble like dry twigs into dust. Tony feels his anxiety ratchet up, and he jerks harder, a second time, then a third, tugging like that'll make Loki let him go.

"Let go of me," Tony says, but what he intends to come out as a firm demand sounds whispery and feeble to his own ears. Tony's heart is pounding just from fear of Loki's unwelcome touch.

Loki looks like his curiosity's been vaguely aroused by Tony's fruitless efforts. "Why are you fighting me? You didn't even try the last time you were out of your armor." Loki looks up and seems to notice Tony's panic, though, and he releases Tony's wrist from the manacle that is his casual grip.

Tony's putting so much pressure on trying to reclaim his arm that when Loki lets him go, he stumbles back a step. Tony yanks his wrist back, then presses his forearm protectively against his chest.

Tony remembers what happened in the penthouse, probably a lot better than Loki does. He knew he was no match at all for Loki, and he still isn't, but post-Thanos his body has instinctive reactions it didn't used to have. "Bad stuff happened between then and now, all right?" Tony hates that his voice shakes, hates the tiny quaver running through a word or two. *Bad stuff*. So eloquent.

"All right," Loki says. "Sit down."

With a long look at him, Tony sits.

"You agreed you would speak to me honestly," Loki reminds him, returning to his chair.

"Oh, is that what time it is? Okay," Tony says. "I've decided to speak to you very honestly about expansionary fiscal policy."

Loki looks at Tony so blankly Tony almost loses the patience to even bait him. Tony's heart rate is slowing down, though.

"Cost-Push inflation, Demand-Pull, the Consumer Price Index, you'll love it. No? I could go easy on you... Javascript? The political symbolism of *Starship Troopers*?"

Loki's face announces the miles of annoyance he's just traveled, no words required.

"You want honesty? *I need this to all be over*," Tony tells him forcefully.

"No, you don't need that," Loki contradicts him at once. "Humans need food, water, and shelter. You won't die if you don't get to die."

"No, I'll just make myself and everyone around me miserable. I'll just *accidentally kill people* because I'm reckless and impatient and have bad judgement. I'll just lose a little more of what makes me me every day." Tony stands up, intending to pace around, but immediately realizes Loki will probably think he's trying to leave again. When Loki makes no movements,

observing Tony and presumably seeing his hesitation, Tony goes ahead and walks around the outskirts of the room. When Tony glances over, he sees Loki's eyes are staying on him.

"At least when we killed Charles Spencer it was a group effort," Tony says as the darkest breed of gallows humor, but maybe he shouldn't assume Loki will get that. Soul-crushing regret about accidental manslaughter might not be something Loki's capable of comprehending. "Andrea Zaleski's death is my fault, and mine alone."

"Was this person, Andrea, the first person you killed?"

"Pfft, hardly," Tony says. "But she was an innocent bystander, and her death was my fault."

"How many lives have you taken?" Loki asks.

"Over a hundred," Tony says, a conservative estimate. "Mostly assassins, terrorists, HYDRA soldiers. Not counting Chitauri."

"Because...?"

"The same reason I don't count the spiders I killed when I had a live-in girlfriend who hated them," Tony says, because duh. "They're not people."

Loki folds his hands in front of his chest, steepling his index fingers and briefly pressing them to his lips. "With such an impressive record, why didn't they want you on the Avengers?"

Tony claimed he doesn't forget anything, but now he experiences a flash of self-doubt. Did Loki know that from his journey through the center of Clint's mind, or did Tony spill those beans the night he jumped? Trauma can mess with memories and Tony isn't sure. "I'm volatile, self-obsessed, don't play well with others, and the goal of the Avengers Initiative was not to kill people, we weren't a fucking SEAL team."

"You must be doing something right, you and your five warriors defeated me and a vast army," Loki points out. "You have served your world well. The accidental death of one bystander --"

Tony interrupts. "See you can't understand this, Loki, because you have no moral compass at all," Tony says loudly, talking over him.

"I have a moral compass," Loki protests.

"Uh huh." Tony's leg hurts, so he walks back around the side of the sectional and collapses back onto the cushions. "Where was your moral compass when you, say, mind-controlled Clint and forced him to kill seventeen people he knew? Please, explain that moral calculus to me, I'm interested."

"I just... ignored it for a long time," Loki says. "Lately it's gotten exercise, thank you."

"Really, though? Cause I have yet to see any evidence of that. Why should I believe you?"

Loki suddenly stands up and moves toward him, making Tony's hair stand on end. Since Afghanistan Tony's hated people making sudden or unexpected movements around him, but this situation feels like more even than what's normal. Raw instinct in the presence of someone who tries to kill him basically every time they see each other, probably, on top of the fact that they're already within comfortable speaking distance and Loki has no real reason to come closer. Loki crosses over from his chair and drops down to the floor next to the sectional, sitting next to Tony's feet. Loki leans his back against the lower part of the sectional, drawing his knees up. The position shift is weirdly submissive and gets Loki's gaze off Tony's face, though, none of which is bad.

"What reason have I to lie?" Loki asks. "What reason have I to do any of this? Is bringing you here not evidence I have changed? I believe you're not so broken you cannot be fixed."

"I'm not broken at all," Tony objects. "I'm just done."

"Why did they call you the Merchant of Death?"

"See, you don't know the first thing about me," Tony says with exasperation. "You could have picked up like, a single magazine feature on me." Loki says nothing, and the reason for the nickname that once flattered Tony is no guarded secret, so Tony answers the question. "I was a global arms dealer. I invented all kinds of weapons, all kinds of fancy new ways to hurt other people. To kill other people, mostly." Tony leans back into the cushions. "Long story short, my company's weapons were used against me, I was tortured, and after I escaped I turned the company around completely. No more weapons. Now we exclusively do good stuff."

"Yet you remain unhappy."

"Well, torture kind of sticks with you, and doing mostly good things doesn't excuse decades of doing shitty things." Tony takes a deep breath. "And I'm a narcissist, so I can't stand to be a failure."

Tony doesn't really think he's a narcissist, but sometimes the label comes in handy as a defense mechanism. Though he's undeniably an exhibitionist inside and out, Tony's read up on narcissism and speaking as objectively as he can, he thinks he harbors way too much guilt and shame to be a narcissist in the clinical sense. No need for other people to know about that, though. Some things even Tony keeps to himself.

"How are you a failure because of one unfortunate accident?"

"Because the fucking world needs saving, and I can't save it," Tony says.

"You are saving it constantly from what I can tell, and I don't think your decision to jump sprang from narcissism," Loki says piercingly. "I think you were suffering a moment of utter despair."

Tony's slightly surprised, because Loki's more insightful than Tony would have guessed. "Whatever, how would you know?" Tony asks rudely. "You know, there was one time I really

bared my soul to Bruce, and it actually felt so good to open up. My science bro gets me, and he has seven doctorates."

"If he 'gets you,' then why did you not seek out his counsel when you were at your most desperate?" Loki asks.

Because-- because *Tony, you can't keep doing this. You're in pain, and you're not stable.* Oh, the irony of the Hulk telling you you're insufficiently stable. On the other hand, Bruce wasn't wrong, Tony did tap dance off the top of the tower about twenty minutes after that little conversation was over.

Tony ignores the question. "For some reason it's not as nice to talk to you," Tony says thoughtfully. "Maybe because you've tried to kill me? In the most horrible ways?"

"We will talk again tomorrow," Loki says, rising fluidly from the floor.

"No shit, Sherlock, you're the only one here *to* talk to. Fuck that daddy issues crap," Tony says, and Loki stops and looks at him. "You want to know why I was depressed *before* my carelessness recently killed an innocent girl? Tomorrow I'll tell you about my climate depression."

*

When Tony goes up to bed that night, he walks into the bathroom and discovers Loki did retrieve all of the toiletries and personal items from Tony's bathroom in the Tower. Only one category of possessions is missing-- Tony's extensive collection of colognes is absent.

A miscellaneous assortment of Tony's shirts and boxers are stacked on top of the dresser, and the bag of clothes that aren't his is sitting next to them. Loki didn't seem to think Tony would need any actual pants or the kind of shorts meant to be worn on the outside-- he brought none of Tony's jeans, khakis, suit trousers, or long pants of any kind. No shorts or swim trunks either, but what Tony wants are pairs of pants. The most charitable explanation for why Loki neglected to bring pants for Tony is because they're in the tropics, but Loki himself vacillates between long pants and nothing at all. Is Loki operating under the misconception that Tony won't try to escape if he lacks pants? Loki's vastly overestimating Tony's sense of decorum and level of desperation, if so. Maybe Loki just wants to make him feel vulnerable. As if he didn't already.

Tony sets the folded stacks into the drawers, feeling a little like an inmate placing meager possessions on those miserable narrow shelves. Tony recognizes the vast difference in these two situations, but he's had the world at his feet too long not to keenly feel the chafing of being trapped and at someone else's mercy. Opulent surroundings are just a regular environment to him, but jailed is jailed.

Tony sleeps in his same jeans and long-sleeved T-shirt for a second night. Tony leaves the curtains of his room open as he crawls into bed, and when he wakes up with the sun the next morning, he heads downstairs to find a plain white bag full of chocolate chip cookies on the counter, the top of the bag crisply folded like it's never been opened, fairly clearly meant for

him. Operation: Surprise Ceiling Guillotine is on. Loki's lying naked again on his same deck chair, with a wineglass on the table beside him full of a red.

"Good morning," Loki says into his chaise as Tony stands in the doorway, even though there's no way Loki can see Tony with his face planted deeply in his deck chair. Like Loki's a fucking spider and Tony's moving around his web. It's creepy.

"Morning, Lady Godiva," Tony says. Tony walks out the propped-open doors and hovers next to the other chaise. "Feels like *Groundhog Day*. Why do you do this?"

"I like the sun in the morning," Loki says, turning his head to look at Tony. "I don't get cold, but I like the warmth." Loki sounds sleepy. "Take off your clothes and lie down. The sun is good for you."

"Uh, the sun gives me cancer and wrinkles."

Loki idly waves his dangling hand. "There is a basket with sun lotions in one of the bedrooms. Spending time out of doors is good for you."

Tony points at the wineglass. "You're a lush, what do you just, drink wine all day long? How are you an authority on what's good for me?"

Loki shrugs. "Asgardians drink oft, that is true."

"I thought you weren't really Asgardian," Tony challenges him.

"I am Jotun by lineage," Loki says. "But my instinctive form is Asgardian, and my customs are Asgardian. I am of a prince of Asgard and the rightful king of Jotunheim." Loki pushes himself up off the chaise. Tony looks openly, long and hard and not sparing Loki's slim, perfectly formed cock. Loki obviously wants to be looked at, and Tony's not particularly motivated to deny him.

Loki dresses himself suddenly without a single movement, with clothing simply rushing over him again in a descending curl of green energy. (Tony has got to figure out how to quantify and measure that energy.) Today Loki clothes himself in a soft-looking green tunic and light brown pants that cling snugly to his legs. His feet stay bare.

"Whatever happened to your foreboding wall of leather?" Tony asks.

Loki tilts his head. "Do you have nothing better to contemplate than my attire?"

"Actually, a few things," Tony says, scanning the horizon. "If you're the rightful king of Jotunheim, why didn't you go rule there?"

"Jotunheim is icy and dark and grim," Loki answers. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"Cereal," Tony says.

The only cereal Loki has is a clear Tupperware box containing cornflakes. Tony walks around the room opening cabinets at random until he locates the sugar, but noting what's

where as he goes.

"What are you searching for?" Loki asks, but by then Tony's pulling the sugar jar out. Tony snaps up an extra spoon from the drawer and sits to eat, sprinkling cane sugar over each bite. Loki joins him in eating cereal, minus the added sweetener.

"Can you get me some better cereals?" Tony isn't going to say please while he's Loki's prisoner.

"Which would you like?"

"Sugary crap," Tony says, because stressful situations always send him off on either a sugar kick or a bout of functional alcoholism, and this situation is severe enough to warrant both. "I'll make you a list." Tony gets up and goes over to the kitchen drawer where he knows there are pens and paper, pulling out both. "Hey, why is everything completely stripped of labeling? Why not keep the cornflakes in the box they came in?"

"Because the packaging is inevitably garish and vulgar," Loki says.

Tony snorts as he resettles, adjusting the position of his leg under the table. "Yeah, don't want to offend the insides of the kitchen cabinets. Can't have that."

Lucky Charms / Captain Crunch / Honey Bunches of Oats

Loki stirs his cornflakes around in their excess milk, frowning. "If you must know, it's more like home. What was my home. We didn't have brightly colored labels on everything. We had... glass jars. And sacks."

"Asgard, huh?" Thor was woebegone for months over the loss of his 'homerealm' after their sister and some fire demon-god-thing wrecked it.

"Yes," Loki says.

"Do you miss it?" Tony asks, scribbling more cereals down.

Frosted Flakes / Fruity Pebbles

Tony adds *deli sliced turkey / Swiss cheese / Skippy peanut butter* for when he eventually evens out and kicks the sugar bender. Might be two days, might be three. He'll start feeling like shit and go the other way, go on a protein kick.

wireless TENS unit, because he needs his zappy pain-dampening, endorphin-encouraging electrical current therapy, but he has more important things to build. Let Loki fetch him one.

"Sometimes," Loki says. "Our ways were simpler, but more elegant."

"Well, I'm an American boy, I like my cereal boxes garish," Tony says, and saying his nationality aloud makes him think of Steve. "I especially like the ones with puzzles and word games on the back."

Loki bows his head like he's taking this conversation seriously, a solemn king granting a boon. "I will leave your new cereals in their garish boxes."

*

Tony finishes the panometer design within an hour after breakfast and starts F.R.I.D.A.Y. fabricating the device. Tony considers what to work on next. He could make a jet pack to see whether Loki's bouncy-castle force field has a ceiling, or whether Tony can simply fly out of it. A jet pack isn't a suit, so he's not yet breaking his word.

Given that Loki knows Tony can fly in his armor, Tony would put solid money on the force field being dome-shaped, but he won't know for sure until he checks.

He could also start designing the ceiling cookie-or-death trap, which he's decided to call the Instant Mechanized Probability Device Eventually Automating Death, or I.M.P.D.E.A.D. for short.

He won't be able to field test any of his new equipment until Loki leaves for a decent length of time, because if Loki discovers any of what Tony's building, he'll definitely slap an invisible ceiling on the force field, cast a spell to confound whatever data Tony might gather with the panometer, or disarm the I.M.P.D.E.A.D. Tony may have to invent some bullshit reason for Loki to take a trip. Maybe ask him to retrieve something unusual or specific. Save for the longer trip to deliver the message and bring back Tony's workshop, Loki's fetching things either very quickly or in the middle of the night, so that Tony's not aware of his comings and goings. Unless Loki's having things delivered, also a possibility.

Loki probably can't follow along with the specs of the panometer, the labels of which Tony deliberately abbreviated to be confusing, but Loki might well recognize the general appearance of a jet pack. Tony refrains from using the holograms he prefers, instead beginning a design on the laptop incorporating aspects of the last two jet packs he invented, but altering a few things here and there.

Tony has to start at the beginning, because his jet pack designs haven't been stored locally. The blueprints for his jet packs are stored on one of many encrypted servers in a cooling clean room in the Tower, which works fine when the whole building's lit up and online and F.R.I.D.A.Y. can access anything he's ever made at the rate of eight petabytes per second. Here, not so much. That's all right, though, a jet pack isn't so complex to design or execute.

This jet pack will run on Badassium arc reactor tech but will have two backup arc reactors and four oxygen tanks for breathing too, because Tony has no way of knowing how far he might have to fly, how high he might have to fly or what he might have to fly through. With three Badassium arc reactors for power, Tony will be able to fly anywhere in the world. Without a proper Iron Man suit he won't be able to fly very fast or very high, but once he escapes he can get whatever gear he needs.

He slims and elongates the oxygen tanks to make them less visible worn under clothing, then rethinks and flattens them to add two inches to his back, no more. Tony adds cushioning to protect the curve of his spine from the metal of the tanks. Tony wants to add one other element that makes designing the tech slightly tricky-- he wants the jet pack built invisibly

inside a breakaway computer housing so that F.R.I.D.A.Y. will be able to fabricate the jet pack in relative secrecy. Tony fancies the housing up a bit to make it look like a convincing mock-up of the desktop computer tower he might build if he was into antiquated tech. Loki won't know the difference. Tony sits facing the door while he works on the design so Loki can't sneak up on him, but then he remembers Loki can turn invisible at will. Loki can stalk Tony all day in here if he wants to.

Tony pauses, minimizing the blueprints and getting up, because he has an idea.

Tony takes the time to disable the CO2 extinguisher he prefers for his workshop, and he spends the next twenty minutes jury-rigging an old-school fire extinguisher to DUM-E. Tony gives DUM-E a single instruction, then works for a few hours on the nascent hidden jet pack blueprints until Loki appears in the doorway to tell him lunch is ready. Loki's dressed in a variation on his familiar wall of leather, which is probably a tell that he left the villa and returned. Loki refrains from entering the workshop, simply announces lunch and leaves.

Tony grabs a bottle of Kahlua and a bottle of vodka as he passes by the bar by the stairs. One bottle in each hand, Tony inhales deeply as he walks into the kitchen and into the aroma of cheeseburgers.

"I hope that these cheeseburgers are satisfying to you," Loki says, and Tony doesn't know how on earth Loki makes that stilted Asgardian formality sound normal and casual.

"Uh huh." Tony sets the bottles down at the kitchen table where a grease-spotted brown bag is sitting beside a chocolate milkshake in a clear plastic cup with the Five Guys logo. Before he sits, Tony unobtrusively checks the back of the bag for one of those white receipts they often tape to one side, because usually those will say location or store number or something, but nada. "Pretend all you want, but I know what you're doing."

Loki draws away from the wine refrigerator. "What am I doing?"

"Torturing me." Tony reaches into the bag without looking until his fingers close around a warm foil-wrapped something. Tony pulls the cheeseburger out and turns it over in his hands until the opening of the wrapper is face up. "You threw me out a ninety-three story window, you sicced a giant gazorpazorp on me--"

"I don't know what that is," Loki says, but the guilty glitter in his eye as he brings two wineglasses and a bottle to the table says he knows exactly which interdimensional hellspawn Tony's talking about.

Tony squints, because surely he has to be wrong, Loki can't possibly feel *guilty* for the evil things he's done. "--and you've thrown a magical hula-hoop of acid over me, I barely got the suit off in time before getting melted alive, and those are just the times you've tried to kill me personally. Not even addressing the murder-flower enchantment and all the other shit you pulled when you and Doom discovered each other and the Gregorian choir started up. Don't pour two of those, I'm not drinking wine alongside a milkshake, you heretic." Tony half-unwraps his cheeseburger, holding it in the wrapper as he habitually does to preserve whatever cleanliness the burger possesses while also keeping his hands clean-ish of burger grease and ketchup, and takes a bite.

Loki listens impassively now, and he fills one wineglass but leaves the second empty as requested. "Different allies, different enemies, different me. Something else to drink?"

Tony swallows the bite in his mouth. "Water's good. No, I don't think so. You try to kill me every time I see you, and now that I want to die, you won't follow through. I think you're punishing me the best way you can think of-- keeping me alive when I've made it clear I want to be otherwise." Tony peeks back into the bag and finds it contains fries too. Tony pulls a full paper bag of them out. Groping around inside, he can tell there's no cheeseburger shortage either. "Jeez, how many did you get? I'm not your brother, you know. Are you going to put all these away? Because I'm not."

Loki looks openly dismayed as he rises and goes back to the sink. "You mistake me," Loki says, holding the glass under the tap but gazing over at Tony like he's hurt or unhappy. "I have changed since-- since those times I tried to kill you. And I recall I told you the last time that it wasn't personal--"

Tony scoffs, takes another bite, and talks with his mouth full because he's a prisoner, fuck polite table manners here. "Actions speak louder than words --" Tony means to call Loki Motley Crue, but what comes out is different. "-- Lokes."

Loki places the full water glass in front of Tony and sits back down, back straight, resting his wrists on the edge of the table. Tony watches him sit there, looking both thoughtful and kind of sad. "I was not in my right mind during the invasion of your city, and I hope you will weigh my more recent actions as heavily as my past misdeeds."

The brown paper fry bag is grease-soaked, and Tony rips the bag so he won't have to stick his hand so far in. "Do you ever eat? Thor never stops eating. Godlike metabolism. But you just pick at everything or don't eat at all."

"I eat," Loki says. "But I'm not eating this. It's not food. It's made of grease."

"Are you kidding? It's great." Tony sticks a fry in his mouth. "Did your mom back in Asgard bug you to eat? I bet she did."

A subtle shadow of pain crosses Loki's face at this question before his expression clears. "Listen to me," Loki implores with his strange new earnestness. "Listen. You say you are tired of being alone with your friends. Why not try the company of your enemy who without knowing you, knows you well?"

"That's the most ridiculous fucking thing I've ever heard sober or drunk," Tony says, again with his mouth full. Unlidding the milkshake of its plastic cover, Tony liberally doctors the shake with the Kahlua and the vodka. "You don't know me."

"Ah, but I do," Loki says, his face intent. "Or-- I understand you. Which is more important, anyway."

Through the bite of cheeseburger in his mouth, Tony sighs his capitulation. "Judging by your laughably point-A-to-point-B attempt at therapy, I don't think you know *or* understand me. Besides, by your logic I understand you, too. Are you willing to concede that?"

"I wouldn't rule it out," Loki says lightly.

Tony rolls his eyes. "Okay, sure, then I'm your totally real houseguest who gets you, and we're hanging out and talking civilly, so... maybe you should just shut up and enjoy my company, *buddy*."

Loki's eyes flutter closed for a second like Tony's a particularly difficult and exasperating child, and then he takes a long draught of his wine.

Tony was busy in his workshop all afternoon yesterday, and it's not like he wanted to come out then or now, but the fact that lunch was skipped over entirely yesterday is not lost on him. Today's different for some reason Tony's not sure about, and the only way to find out might be to ask. "What's up with lunch? We didn't do lunch yesterday."

"I forgot how your kind structures your eating," Loki says. "That you eat thrice daily."

"How many times a day do you eat?"

"Twice, usually," Loki says. "And that much... quite honestly, only out of habit." With a dubious look on his face, Loki pulls a cheeseburger from the bag. Tony watches as Loki unwraps it and lifts the bun to inspect the patty, layer of cheese, smattering of grilled onions, and perfecting smear of ketchup beneath. "You know... I don't think that vertical portal of acid was my doing. I saw Doom give the talisman to me, but I don't think I knew what it would do."

Tony takes a second cheeseburger out of the bag. "You *saw* Doom give it to you? What, were you having an out of body experience at the time?"

Loki looks up sharply, like he's realized he said too much. "Something like that."

Weirdly, sometimes the god of lies is apparently pretty garbage at fibbing, but Loki covers the maybe-revealing moment smoothly. "Fine, I will eat this," Loki says, and he slaps the cheeseburger back together and takes a bite.

Loki seems really out of sorts. Traumatized, even, maybe. Tony gives Loki a suspicious look but ultimately decides he doesn't care.

"It's good," Loki says a minute later.

"Told you," Tony says, sipping his now pleurably alcoholic shake.

Loki takes another bite, and so does Tony, and for a minute they eat together in silence.

"The reason I procured so many cheeseburgers is that I did not know what toppings you prefer," Loki says after he chews and swallows. Loki chews with his mouth closed, with all the politeness Tony's thrown to the kidnapped wayside.

Tony feels guarded about this disclosure, like he's not even sure what to think about Loki's tacit claim that he cares this much, and though Tony takes pains not to sound sarcastic, neither is his answer particularly sincere. "Uh, that was nice."

"Still not sure this is food, per se," Loki says thoughtfully.

"You're a terrible food snob, buddy," Tony says, but in the brain-to-tongue translation he fails to insert the appropriate sarcasm on the honorific. Whatever. Tony goes back to his cheeseburger, which is delicious and everything a cheeseburger should be.

*

After lunch Tony returns to his blueprints. Time moves differently in his workshop, when he's focused on a project.

"Here," Loki says, appearing in the doorway with a machine in his hands. "One Complex Wireless Muscle Stimulator Kit," Loki says, and he sets the machine down on a table. "I hope this will suit your needs. Your cereals and the other foods are in the kitchen. What are you doing right now?"

"Nothing special," Tony lies. "I spend most of my time in here fiddling around until genius strikes."

Loki starts over to the table where Tony's working. "Do you want--" Loki begins, but as soon as Loki comes within range, DUM-E starts spraying Loki up and down with the fire extinguisher, leaving a thick coating of the sticky, powdery white residue that's the hallmark of most ABC extinguishers all over him. Tony couldn't have asked for better aim or timing.

"DUM-E, he's not on fire, stop!" Tony exclaims, packing as much exasperation into his tone as he can. "Oh my god," Tony says to Loki as DUM-E lowers, ceasing the spray. "Sorry about that."

All Loki does is hold his eyes closed and blow out a breath when the monoammonium phosphate spray is over. "Right," Loki says without opening his eyes. "I will go get changed then."

"Ooof," Tony says, adding additional space for fuel cells to his design. "Really sorry. DUM-E does that to me at least once whenever I'm field testing a new suit. I don't know why I haven't scrapped him. Sentimental value, I guess."

After Loki's left, Tony glances up at his robot. "DUM-E, that was amazing. Right in the face. Good job."

DUM-E's robotic arm lowers with a soft whirring trill.

Tony works for a good forty-five minutes uninterrupted on the jet pack design.

Eventually Loki comes back into the workshop, his hair wet from a shower, and Tony looks up at him. Loki's clothes are simple and dark-- leggings that look basically like regular pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and a buttoned vest that ends at Loki's hips.

Loki lies down on the couch.

"Hey, I thought that was for my naps," Tony objects. Tony's old enough to know the value of a power nap, but he gives zero shits about the couch, because who cares where he lays his head if he does need to drift off for a spell. What he cares about is keeping Loki out of his space while he works on something he doesn't want Loki to know about.

"If you get here first," Loki says, sounding sleepy. "Or if you can manage to push me off." Loki falls asleep a few minutes after that, his breathing turning soft and even.

Tony considers. He wants Loki gone, but on the other hand, if Loki is sleeping right in front of him, Loki can't spy on him... probably. Tony hopes. Unless Loki is just making an illusion of himself sleeping.

One way to find out. Tony walks over to Loki and impulsively runs a hand through Loki's hair, which feels tangible, no facade. Loki's hair feels like normal, clean hair, soft and damp and neither greasy nor roughened from the beach-abuse of salt and sun.

Loki's eyes snap open at his touch, wide and instantly fixed unblinking on Tony's face.

Tony's hand doesn't even get stuck on tangles halfway through, which in his experience is the norm with long fine hair. Kissing is the natural and obvious choice to wake up and freak out a sleeping dude, but though he enjoys cracking a gay joke here or there at his own expense, to Rhodey's chagrin or in Steve's general direction, Tony's not that kind of guy.

"Kissing you seemed too obvious," Tony says as his fingers slide free of Loki's wavy hair, and Tony pulls away and goes back to his laptop without further explanation.

Loki lies awake for a short time after that, or at least his eyes stay open and upturned to the ceiling. Eventually Loki's eyes drift closed again, and his respiration returns to the soothing, slow-minute-hand clockwork of breath it was previously.

Tony could wait to resume the diagram of the jet pack out of an abundance of caution, or he could plow on with his work. Tony isn't sure how closely Loki intends to supervise him in here, and after a minute of waffling, Tony decides he has no choice but to risk it.

Tony works all afternoon while Loki sleeps on the couch, his chest steadily rising and falling, for what must be at least three hours.

"Late night?" Tony asks when Loki stirs and his head twists around in Tony's direction. Tony minimizes the plans he's working on and pulls up a game of deliberately half-played solitaire.

"A bit," Loki says, his voice slightly raspy, but as he rises Loki doesn't even look bleary.

Loki looks Tony over. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Surprise me," Tony says.

Without coming over to inspect his screen, Loki walks out of the workshop.

Tony checks out the TENS unit, and it's fine. He hooks it up and goes back to his blueprints.

*

The plate Loki puts in front of Tony that night has a seasoned chicken thigh, roasted vegetables, and a dinner roll.

"You should bathe," Loki says while they eat. Loki seems to have a good appetite tonight, eating with more enthusiasm than he has at prior meals. Loki eats with his fingers, licking them periodically, and Tony does the same because when in Rome, fuck it, who gives a shit.

"Why? I'm a prisoner here."

"You are a prisoner with a luxury bathroom, so use it. Take a shower before we speak tonight," Loki says.

Tony openly sniffs his pits on both sides, because he's not here to impress anyone. Loki's not wrong-- Tony hasn't showered since before the start of that last mission, and he stinks.

"Sometimes when I go on a creative invention bender I don't shower for days. You kidnap me, you're gonna have to get used to it. Besides, you neglected to bring my collection of scents."

Loki looks at Tony with a calm, knowing, really annoying equilibrium. "If you won't wash yourself, I will chain you to the showerhead and--"

"Wash me yourself, got it, consider my bluff called," Tony interrupts. "Okay, I'll shower, but get me some cologne, I don't feel fully human without it."

"Take a shower and I will put some of your scent on you," Loki says.

"Wow, that is super controlling."

Loki gives the tiniest of shrugs with one shoulder. "I am holding you prisoner. Does personally applying your cologne really cross additional lines?"

Tony narrows his eyes and thinks about that, but his answer is decisive as ever. "Yes."

After dinner, Tony drinks some water and pays a short visit to the exercise equipment. Exercising on a full stomach is not the greatest, but he's skipped multiple workouts now, and he gets in a pretty good, much needed session of weights and resistance training. He sits on the bench press seat and drinks more water when he's done. Then he climbs the steps to his room and goes into his bathroom.

Slowly Tony removes his clothes, and after he turns on the shower he takes a good look at himself in the expansive mirror over the sink. The light brown highlights that conceal the salt and pepper in his hair are growing out; Tony was due for a touch-up in a day or two. Tony's never colored his beard, and the salt and pepper in his facial hair is saltier and more peppery than ever. Tony shaves his body hair, but when it grew in during his hospital stay it was the same, brown mixed with a disheartening amount of gray and white. His face looks lined. He looks *old*. Tony feels old, old and tired and creaky and cranky.

Tony turns his back on himself and steps into the hot shower.

*

Tony dresses afterwards in clean clothing, a T-shirt and a pair of boxers. No other clothes are available to him, just boxers, sleeveless tees, a couple of pairs of swimming trunks now, and T-shirts.

Tony feels a little less comfortable than he did wearing his jeans. He's done his damnedest to keep atrophy at bay, but despite all Tony's determination, despite the best medical care, the best physical therapy money could buy, frequent TENS therapy, intensive deep tissue work by a masseuse experienced in patients with paralysis, nanotech stimulation on the go, regularly sticking his leg into the pummeling machine, and daily exercise, his totally-fucked leg is covered in scar tissue and has withered enough to be a visible mismatch with his normal leg. Tony hasn't worn shorts outside in years, not since he last ran around on a beach in swim trunks with Pep and the paparazzi at minimum safe distance, and he's never made a habit of walking around the house in just boxers. He's not ashamed of his leg, not at all. He got this damage saving the world. He's just not thrilled.

"Ugh, I'm not in the mood for your therapy," Tony says when Loki comes to his workshop later that night to collect him. Loki's dressed like if Princess Jasmine were into gauzy green smoking jackets.

"Yes," Loki insists, and no threats are needed to make Tony reluctantly set his laptop aside and follow Loki to the sunroom. Loki sits on the sectional and points at the cushion next to him. Tony sits on the far end of the sectional, a good four feet from the general vicinity Loki indicated.

"Come closer," Loki says with a hint of impatience. Tony looks at him, equal parts suspicious and uncomfortable, but he scoots down, approaching the place Loki gestured for him to sit.

Loki draws closer, within arm's reach, and pulls out a small, subtly blunted triangular-shaped bottle-- the round brilliant cut jewel-shaped lines of the Mark L nano-arc reactor. The bottles of his first two scents were shaped like the helmet of the Mark XIV and the gauntlet of the Mark XXI, respectively. Tony originally thought yet another armor design might be a little too one-note for the packaging of his third eponymous fragrance and wanted to go in a different direction, but Rihanna told him he had to go with some aspect of his best work, that the armor design is signature, quintessential, expected. They compromised on the nano-arc reactor in crystal, guarded by straight thin lines of pewter. Rihanna *is* an arbiter of taste, no matter what some greasy frost alien thinks. The only thing about her he didn't love was that she wasn't interested in sleeping with him, only in turning a profit together. Some of his fellow billionaires are rivals about who has the most money and some are disinterested in that particular dick-measuring competition, but two things all Tony's brethren have in common is that they love their money, and money fails to impress them.

Plus, with the flat bottom of the nano reactor like a diamond with a large culet, the first rendition of the bottle stood upright perfectly without precariousness. Tipping was an early issue with the first two stylized, top-heavy bottle designs, and both prototypes had to be reworked with balance in mind.

Tony hadn't been aware that Loki went out of the house. Must have been while he was in the shower. Not that he's keeping track of Loki's comings and goings. Eventually, though, he'll need to start, in order to test out his inventions. Unless-- Loki's not dressed in the Wall of Leather. Maybe Loki retrieved and hid Tony's collection of scents somewhere that first day.

Loki manages to get the crown of the diamond-shaped bottle off by himself and gestures with it, his finger over the spray press like it's a weapon. "Where do you normally spray this?"

"Seriously-- you're seriously going to put it on me?" Tony asks exasperatedly. "If you want to see me with my shirt off, you can just say so."

"I have had you at close range enough to know you overapply your scent," Loki says.

"Oh, for god's sake. Rude *and* so controlling it's creepy." Rolling his eyes, Tony pulls up his shirt to his chin, hiding his face and angling his elbows up. "Fine," Tony says, muffled by his shirt. "Across my chest, both armpits and neck."

Loki spritzes a single application over Tony's chest.

"That's not adequate," Tony complains, letting his shirt slacken. "I can barely smell it."

Loki shakes his head. "That is because you're scent-blind from overuse of this. Trust me, this is the perfect amount to announce you without screaming your name."

"But I like to hear my name screamed," Tony says. "You're not selling this very well. If Rihanna were here, she could give you some pointers."

Loki stares Tony down, then sighs. "As you wish," Loki relents finally, and he offers the bottle to Tony with elegant fingers. "But perhaps you might use it considerately? At the risk of me forcibly washing it off you?"

Tony takes the cologne, and holding aggressive eye contact, he defiantly applies an additional spray to his neck before setting the bottle down on the end table behind him, as far as possible from Loki. He's tempted to break the bottle over Loki's head-- not to hurt Loki, just to thoroughly soak him in Stark no. 3. On the other hand, the bottle probably wouldn't shatter because of the no-injuries spell. Tony'd have to simply unscrew it and pour. Unfortunately, either way would mean Tony wouldn't have his cologne anymore. Decisions, decisions.

"It's my God-given right as an American to wear as much cologne as I want." Tony waves his hand twice over the side of his neck to speed the droplets in evaporating on his skin.

Loki retreats to the outer corner of the sectional, pulls his knees loosely to his chest and rests his forearms on them. The position makes him look relaxed, receptive, and maybe strangely young. "Tell me, did you have a moment of regret after your feet left the roof?"

"The balcony, I jumped off the balcony, not the roof." Tony looks away almost guiltily. "Yeah, I regretted it. For just a second at the beginning, and another second towards the end."

"Why did you not call for your missile-armor?"

"My missile-- oh. The Mark VII. Ha! Hey, did that hit you on the way out?"

Loki says carefully, "Let us call it a close miss."

"I calculated afterwards based on where I went out the window, and you were standing right in its path. Usually I have cameras at all angles going at all times, but J.A.R.V.I.S. was redirecting all power to the armor upload." Tony smirks at him. "Or I would have watched and re-watched... and re-watched again."

Loki raises his eyebrows. "You are surveilled every minute of every day in your own home?"

"Nah. They're my cameras. No one else has access. And if they did... what's the worst they could see?" Tony pokes the nearby lampshade, knocking it off-center. "I'm not exactly known as a private person."

"Back to my question," Loki says. "Why did you not call for your armor?"

Tony taps the place where the nano arc reactor used to sit on his scarred chest. Tony feels naked without something there. "I wasn't wearing-- I didn't have the bracelets that would align it to my body, to tell it where to go, and I took off the nanotech, because I knew if I'd chicken out if I wore something that let me," Tony says, because the truth is painfully simple. He has no reason not to tell Loki about the nanotech, because although the less information Loki has, the better, Tony can't produce another Mark L out here in the tropical sticks. "The nano can morph into whatever I want. And I knew me being gone would be the best thing for everyone."

"Your leg brace can't 'morph?'"

Tony absently smooths a hand over the clean lines of the D.R.A.A.G. over his thigh. "No. It's not nanotech. That's I.P. that hasn't been released to the general public."

"I.P.?"

Tony pulls his lips back in a closed-mouth smile that's really a grimace. "You're killing me here. Intellectual property. I thought of the idea, and I made it exist, so it's mine," Tony explains. "These braces are mine too, but I sent them out into the world to help people. Thousands of people wear the D.R.A.A.G. tech. Rhodey wears it. The D.R.A.A.G. works equally well as a layer of nano-tech over the leg-- maybe better, actually, therapeutically speaking-- and me choosing to use it is... well." Tony slides his hand down to his mangled knee, clasping the uneven bump of his kneecap thoughtfully. "A capitalist combination of advertising and solidarity." Tony changes the subject. "Hey, here's a question. You told me my friends care for me deeply-- how the hell would you know?"

"Thor spoke highly of you once, and I've been inside Clint's mind and others," Loki says simply.

Tony scoffs. "So you were extrapolating from those two?"

"Well, partly," Loki admits, unfolding his legs and putting his feet on the floor. "I've also explored the inside of Eric Selvig's mind, and a number of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents'. Few know you personally, but everyone knows who you are, and you command respect from most. Clint respected you and envied you in equal amounts," Loki clarifies, gazing off into space like he's trying to recall. "Not greatly on either count, but he didn't actually know you at the time."

"Ah. World of difference, there. So you were totally lying," Tony says. "You have no idea what they think of me."

Having hung out in Loki's house for the better part of three days, Tony's noticed Loki makes a particular dismissive expression when he's disregarding your opinion. "Hardly. When I was wearing your face, I had a chat with Bruce and interacted with Clint. They enjoy you."

"Ugh. Neither of them saw through you like Saran Wrap? Did Nat?"

"They never suspected," Loki says, and he adds a bit reluctantly, "I did not encounter Natasha that day."

"Bullshit," Tony says. "Don't lie, you avoided her like the plague. What were you doing in my building?"

"Reconnaissance," Loki says smoothly.

Tony doesn't know why he should feel skeptical. What else would Loki be doing in his building? "Uh huh. Tell the truth, you just wanted to feel me up and play with my stuff."

Loki waves this suggestion away. "The other night you said you would explain climate depression," Loki prompts.

"Uh, it's when people get clinically depressed about the climate crisis. I wasn't being literal when I said I'd explain that," Tony says, but Loki continues to look at him expectantly. Tony rapidly re-evaluates his understanding of that conversation. "Do I really need to explain climate depression?"

"Atmospheric conditions and temperature patterns shift over time in this realm, as in many others," Loki says. "I fail to see why a natural process should move you to sorrow."

Tony smiles, again as more of a grimace than anything else, a means of repressing a pained kind of laugh. Tony squashes the impulse to insult Loki's intelligence, because he knows Loki's pretty smart. Loki's just kind of clueless about Earth, much like Thor was when he made first contact. Much like Thor still kind of is. "You bought beachfront property without understanding climate change?"

"Yes, I suppose I did," Loki says, folding his hands in his lap. "Will it please you to explain why this decision was foolish?"

Tony raises his eyebrows, because Loki sounds sincere. "You seriously want to know? It's a lot."

"If you are willing to tell me, yes," Loki says as though they're having a normal conversation, but then he continues more decisively, as though he's just remembered he's in charge here. "Yes, if this troubles you, I would like to address it in our talks."

"Christ." Tony rubs his face with both hands. "Do you have a whiteboard or a chalkboard? I need to draw some diagrams to properly explain."

Loki nods, rising. Tony follows Loki out of the sunroom. Tony pauses in the kitchen to fill a glass with water, because if Loki's actually willing to listen, Tony's throat is going to need rewetting. Loki waits for him in the doorway, then leads him into the screening room, pressing a button in a wall panel to lower a whiteboard from in front of the place the screen descends. Knowing this house, the whiteboard was probably intended for big games of charades.

"Okay," Tony says once he's picked up a dry erase marker from the shallow channel at the base of the whiteboard. The well contains several colors, so that'll help. Loki sits down in the front row without being asked.

Loki lets Tony talk. Loki sits silently and lets Tony talk about all of it, beginning with the cycle of oxygen exchange and the greenhouse effect. Tony's never explained the whole of the climate crisis to someone who didn't know of the problem before, although he knows his subject matter inside and out. Tony explains about fossil fuels and pollution, carbon footprints and the logging in the Amazon, commercial meat production, melting ice sheets and the unknown quantities of methane trapped in what used to be permafrost. The vast majority of people think linearly and struggle with the concept of exponential growth, and Tony's prepared to explain with the ever popular lily pad metaphor and draw an illustration, but Loki nods immediately to indicate understanding when Tony begins to talk about exponential curves, so Tony moves on to ocean rise, the impending collapse of the AMOC, the acidification of the oceans, the blighted coral reefs. Tony talks about factories and air conditioning, the energy consumption of cryptocurrency mining and the murders of environmental activists in South America.

Tony covers global capitalism, economic inequality, lack of corporate oversight and the notion of growth at any cost. Fast fashion. The climate-change-exacerbated disease issue. The two party political system and Trump in the US. The CCP, Putin, Bolsonaro, and the worldwide lean away from liberal democracy. Money in politics. Chemicals and plummeting sperm counts. Overfishing, diminishing biodiversity, the daily extinctions of species on Earth. Wildfires, hurricanes, flooding, heat deaths. Future crop failure and mass famines.

While he talks, Tony drinks his glass of water. He probably should have brought two glasses, because even though he rations the glass he runs out and by the next time he reaches for it, his throat already feels sore from talking without sufficient hydration. Loki's eyes flick from Tony to the empty glass, and with a twist of his wrist and a sheen of green energy, Tony's watching his glass refill itself. "Thanks," Tony says, and he continues on.

Despite the time investment, explaining all of it from start to finish makes him feel better, however temporarily, maybe because teaching feels like an accomplishment in itself, maybe because misery loves company, maybe because Tony irrationally believes that any problem that can be completely explained can be solved. Maybe just because he and everyone

screaming about what's coming feel like Cassandra all the damn time with foreknowledge of a doom that's being roundly ignored by everyone in charge, and Tony briefly purges the thoughts from his system by speaking them aloud, mentally checking off the list each of the facts that need to be touched on or described or thoroughly explained. Like brain-vomiting all this ugly knowledge into Loki briefly empties Tony, leaving him with an ephemeral void inside that's almost like peace.

Finally Tony begins to wind the lecture down.

"So what we're looking at here is the buildup of the sixth major extinction event on Earth. In one survey, four out of five members of Generation Z-- that's the newly minted adults and the kids about to become adults-- four out of five members of Generation Z reported they don't want to have kids because of the climate crisis. A huge percentage of them suffer from climate-related depression, which, if you didn't get it by now, is the psychological weight of knowing what's coming and feeling helpless and hopeless in the face of that knowledge. Even if that study was off by fifty percent, that's more than enough to destabilize a society, and that's before the actual collapse of all these intricate systems. There's a forensic psychiatrist, Van Susteren, who coined the term 'pre-traumatic stress disorder.' It's a term I like."

"This is what you suffer from," Loki states, not a question.

"Yeah," Tony says. "Yeah. Soros, Wobben, Gates, and Grantham and I have thrown billions at the problem-- and not even thrown, carefully allocated to competent groups and committed people, but it's not enough. The problem's too large, too complex, and too many people simply refuse to believe it's a problem because they don't believe in science or because they make a living off not believing. You know what inertia is, yeah?"

Loki nods.

"Total inertia. Paralysis. The political system is too gridlocked, and it's actually really hard for me to buy politicians in the places politicians most need to be bought. A slight majority of the voters in some of these places, plus the effects of gerrymandering, is enough to keep them solidly in power." Tony takes a deep breath. "And most of them subscribe more to ideology than to reality. They don't believe in science, or don't want to cost shareholders gains in the short-term, or they don't want government telling anyone what to do, or they just like saying no to change, or they *want* the world to end because experiencing 'the Rapture' will make them feel special. Or all of those. They're already showered with campaign cash from corporations and wealthy people who wet their pants over taxes. Some of them care most about their money and some care most about their ideology, but none of them are too concerned about what we leave behind for future generations."

Loki's gaze flicks from Tony to the whiteboard and back, listening.

"And a lot of them don't care for me personally because I have no patience for bullshit or short-sightedness. They've kind of made a villain out of me, actually, in right-wing circles, me and Soros. So while you'd think I'd be able to buy enough politicians to fill a few Olympic swimming pools, that's not the case. Even when the money's offered from a Super PAC that can't easily be traced to me, they won't support the positions that would arrest and reverse climate change. The countries with more functional democracies are on the case, but

they aren't the countries causing most of the emissions, so there's not much they can do. The countries causing the bulk of the problem are also the countries unwilling to make the kinds of sweeping changes needed. And so--"

Tony pauses. How to conclude his singular environmental dissertation?

"-- the Earth will spin on, but in the words of Gary Cohen, we're surfing the apocalypse. It's a shitshow, it's only going to get worse, and humanity as we know it is fucked," Tony finishes.

Loki remains silent, staring at him.

"I'm taking questions," Tony says after twenty seconds lapse. "Do you have any questions?"

"Yes," Loki says finally, his hands resting on his thighs. "Have you considered stopping any of this by force?"

"Fuck, of course," Tony says tiredly. "I mean, I won't lie, I've considered environmental terrorism on a grand scale, because I'd be amazing at that, but having signed the Sokovia Accords, legally I can't intervene. And I don't expect you to understand, but I believe in the rule of law. Even if my hands weren't an extra level of tied, I believe in doing things the right way, because I don't want to be one of the bad guys. I couldn't get the world carbon-neutral without a shit-ton of property destruction and probably some murder." For a second Tony's crushed with the weight of recent memory, of agony, of shame. *Andrea Zaleski. Charles Spencer.*

Tony swallows and shoves the wave of emotion down. "Ever heard of the 'do unto others' rule? I wouldn't want my property destroyed, so I don't destroy other people's. And aside from the moral question, if I did go there I'd be a wanted criminal for the rest of my life, and on the run, assuming I wasn't killed in a massive drone strike. No bunker is fully secure, and everybody has to sleep sometime. And the problem is too multi-faceted to attempt to fix with time travel without risking, well-- the kind of chain repercussions I can't even imagine setting off. You're a prime example of that. Although." Tony weighs his words. "You're not the worst example of unforeseen consequences I've ever met."

Loki shakes his head. "I understand your sorrow, but Tony, you cannot take responsibility for your whole realm."

Tony hears his voice crack when he answers. "If not me, then who?"

"Your world has multiple governments that have chosen not to act, or to inadequately under-react," Loki says, which is no answer at all. "The choice is being made by committee, and not because they haven't been alerted to the problem. It sounds like you have done your best, so none of that is your responsibility."

"I have a lot of capital, that makes it my responsibility," Tony says. "More than your average citizen's. Money's what makes the world turn."

"But from what you have said, the most important people cannot be swayed by your monetary entreaties. And if you cannot control everyone, then you are not responsible for

everything they do," Loki advises. "Feel sorrow, but not accountability. You say money rules on modern Midgard, and I know well the power of currency. Yet you, with all your power, are not the leader this world needs." Loki seems to hesitate over his next words, but when he speaks, he's firm. "You will not like hearing this, but the truth is-- you should have let me rule you."

Disgust and smoldering anger wash through Tony's body, because *of course* that would be Loki's ultimate reaction to any and all of humanity's worst predicaments. "Great insight," Tony says, thick with sarcasm. "Glad you got so much out of my TED talk."

"Truly," Loki insists. "I would have put a stop to this world's most pressing problems. The vast majority of you would be happier, and your people would survive. Instead, you continue to rule yourselves-- so appallingly it's almost impressive. From what you have said, the flame of your species will burn low within a handful of generations, and destroy itself soon after that, and something else will rise to take your place. Hopefully a race less destructive. From the sound of things, this realm will be fit to house the sons and daughters of Muspell."

The mythological etymology of Muspell temporarily escapes Tony, and he raises his eyebrows blankly for more information.

"The offspring of Muspell are the the fire demons," Loki clarifies. "Of Muspelheim."

"Cheery," Tony says, scowling. "Thanks."

Loki says carefully, "I am quite insulted, if you want the truth, that you would follow your last leader and not attempt to depose him, but you would not allow me to--"

"Trump was elected," Tony interrupts loudly. "Listen, this is our system in this part of the world. Is it great? No. But we'll rise or fall as a species on our own merits. It's just really sad. Your arrogance, by the way, is stunning."

"And your sense of right and wrong is like a wire around your neck," Loki says, and he's actually looking at Tony's neck as he says it as though he can see the shine of silver against Tony's skin. Tony resists the urge to put his hand over his throat. The feeling of Loki's eyes on his neck is like realizing someone else is watching an insect crawl on you without saying anything. "As your king," Loki says, "I would have protected you."

Since Loki's forcing Tony to stay alive extremely effectively it's hard to argue with this assertion, but like life in the *Jurassic Park* franchise, Tony finds a way. "You have a funny way of showing it, killing all those S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel, fucking up Clint's mind, eye-gouging and--"

"I am sorry, I have no comfort for you here," Loki says, interrupting Tony back, and living with Tony is probably teaching the god of mischief bad habits, what a thought. Standing up, Loki keeps backtracking. "I was wrong, this *is* your fault. Yours and the other 'Avengers.'"

"Really not helping my climate depression, warden," Tony says.

"No, I suppose not. But I will tell you this," Loki says. "Thanos told me some dooms are inescapable, Tony, and you remind me of him now."

"Well that's a shitty thing to say."

"'Dread it, flee before it, destiny arrives all the same,' he said. What you have taught me here tonight is that this shift in the composition of your realm cannot be stopped. Accept your own lesson, if you believe I've learned from you correctly, and if you truly share the philosophy of Thanos." Loki draws a breath and says significantly, "For myself, I believe no situation is without possibility. Let possibility sustain you."

Tony scoffs, packing his words full of scorn. "Is 'possibility' your wishy-washy trickster god word for 'hope?'"

Loki doesn't so much as blink at his tone or the insult. "Take it from me, I who lost everything I believed to be true about myself, my family, and my home in one brutal blow," Loki says earnestly. "I lost my freedom to Thanos, lost my battle with you, lost my powers to the TVA, and lost a gift-wrapped offer to puppet-master the entirety of the universe. Loss after loss after loss."

The TVA? Puppet-master the-- ? "Wait, *what?*"

Loki ignores him. "Everything but the core of myself was stripped down and taken from me." Loki leans forward, speaking intensely. "And yet I still came back from the edge, and here I am with you now, stronger and more powerful than I have ever been. If you know in your heart that you cannot stop what's to come, set your mind to accepting it. But if instead you can hold to possibility, all things change with time. I do not believe in destiny, or in certainty, until the moment is at its last, until the ending is upon you."

"Good talk, Comeback Kid," Tony says, because his mouth never fails him, even though he feels sick inside. Tony waits for Loki to walk out, but Loki stays put. The two of them stand across from each other, eyes locked, until Tony looks away first.

"If you care enough to put this much thought and effort into stopping what's coming, surely you care enough to try to mitigate the worst of it," Loki insists.

"Mitigation?" Tony blows out an angry breath, almost a laugh. "The world needs saving and I'm Tony Stark. If I can't do it, maybe with the help of the Planetegers, it can't be done. So what's the point?"

"It is a wonder your ego is not visible from space," Loki says.

Tony rolls his eyes. "I mean, I've invented a few different kinds of geoengineering tech that could help, but the world's governments need to univervally get on board if we're going to fuck around with geoengineering, and they're not."

"Answer the question," Loki demands. "Do you not care enough to try to mitigate the worst harms of this?"

Sighing, Tony puts his black marker back down in the little well. "Yeah, sure. Of course."

"Then your world still has need of you," Loki says. "And perhaps, in the course of trying to mitigate the worst, you might still sway events to avert the disaster entirely."

Tony runs his hands through his hair, feeling drained and not in the mood to argue about hope or possibility or what the fuck ever, and he grabs his water glass and walks past Loki for a refill the old-fashioned way. He's all tapped out, and his throat is too dry for this bullshit.

Loki follows him out. Tony walks into the kitchen and turns on the faucet.

"Why have *you* not become president?"

Tony's irked by the conclusions Loki's drawn, but this question showcases all Loki's obliviousness to the intricacies of Earth, and Tony laughs again as he fills his glass. "So many reasons."

"Such as?"

Tony thinks about how to answer, because summarizing Earth things for Loki requires a good deal of noting the obvious, but the question is asked sincerely and is pretty funny, so Tony answers candidly and as completely as he can while remaining concise. "Well, first of all, I don't have the personality for it. You have to have the patience to make nice with idiots. Presidents aren't kings, you can't blow people off and do whatever you want. You can't say what you really think, and you have to talk out of both sides of your mouth, which-- I'm not into that. I'm a straightforward guy."

Tony stops filling his water glass partway in order to drink some of what he's just guzzled in, swallowing several gulps before he resumes both talking and refilling the glass. "Second, my life would be all politics all the time, and no science or tech, and science and tech are what I actually enjoy. To be president, you give up your freedom in exchange for limited power. Third, at this point, enough people recognize that billionaires are a civic problem that we aren't really welcome in the process. At least, not by the people I'd need to convince to vote for me. I'm more of an everyman than Tom Steyer or Ross Perot and have a way better Q Score, but it'd still be an uphill road," Tony says, even though he knows Loki won't have a clue who Steyer or Perot are and won't know about celebrity Q ratings either. "Bottom line, I couldn't do anything for the climate crisis as president that I can't do with the levels of money and fame and the empire I already have."

Tony considers another moment as he tops off his water glass, then shuts off the tap, turns to face Loki and continues. "Granted, Trump's election turned a lot of the conventional wisdom about conduct and demeanor on its head, but I've made a lot of extremely public mistakes. There are three different sex tapes of me floating around the internet, and I've settled multiple sexual harassment lawsuits that haven't exactly been a secret. A lot of people see Iron Man as a vigilante, even now, and I'd be appealing mostly to the side of the aisle that's not impressed by that, so I still don't think I could, and even if I could, I wouldn't want to."

"Sexual harassment--"

"Unwanted advances," Tony clarifies, not mincing words, there's no point. "I throw myself at people, sometimes. Inappropriate in a professional environment. In my defense, I did nothing illegal-- offhand comments, invitations, and isolated incidents are not illegal. Acceptance or rejection, none of it ever influenced hiring, promotion, or retention decisions," Tony recites. "Well, except for Pepper, I kind of fell in love with her before I made her CEO. But no hostile work environment was ever created. Never any retaliation-- but with a reputation like mine, the lawyers tell me it's better to settle out of court."

Loki seems genuinely mystified. "Why would you make sexual overtures towards a disinterested party? I would not have thought that of you."

"Well, you don't know whether they're interested until you hire them over HR's objections and flirt relentlessly," Tony says. "You might not have noticed, but I can be the teeniest bit self-destructive."

"I did notice," Loki says dryly. "Back to the presidency-- if being world leader further ties your hands, why not become the power behind the throne?"

Loki's cluelessness has ceased to be amusing, and Tony's tired. "That's just not how it works here, except maybe with Cheney... look, I don't want to talk about this anymore. I've had enough for tonight."

"As you wish," Loki says, and Tony turns and heads to bed.

*

Despite how tired he is, Tony waits awake in his bed that night to quietly exit the house and walk around the perimeter, gently pressing the panometer into the force field. After a full circuit around the property, Tony sticks the panometer on the ground next to the force field, sits in the cultivated grass and lets the instrument gather its data. After a few minutes more, Tony brings it back inside. Tony leaves the panometer in his workshop for Friday to analyze.

*

Before he goes to sleep, Tony actually sets the alarm that sits on the nightstand beside his bed.

When he wakes up early the next morning, Tony goes into the pink-toned bedroom and rips open the plastic wrapped around one particular gift basket, then chooses a sunscreen and brings it downstairs.

Tony pours two fingers of the Oban scotch into one of the polycarbonate glasses meant to be used poolside, because he's a prisoner on vacation now and day drinking is a thing. Tony takes his drink out to the deck. Tony strips off his boxers and T-shirt, then sits and removes the D.R.A.A.G. before rubbing sunscreen all over his body, including his taint, dick, balls, and between every toe and the soles of his feet, because he knows from experience that the tropical sun will seek out any skin not drenched in sunscreen like an air-to-air missile and cook him accordingly, and he'd rather not deal with a sunburn. Though Tony's pretty sure this new calm Vacation Ken version of Loki would rub aloe on him.

Finally Tony lies down naked on the deck chair Loki apparently always uses, because if Tony has to be here, he's definitely going to test the limits of how annoying is too annoying.

Loki comes out about half an hour later, and hearing his movements, Tony slits his eyes open against the sun to see Loki's reaction. Loki comes into view, and his only responses to Tony taking his spot are a huff of a laugh and a slight amusement to the line of his lips. Loki seems unbothered, undressing himself with his one-handed clothes/no clothes abracadabra and setting his full wineglass down on the table on the other side. Naked, Loki sits down on the chaise next to Tony. "Good morning."

"I always knew you were a big diva--"

"Takes one to know one," Loki puts in quickly, the smart-ass.

-- but I'm still not over this being your routine."

"Why?"

"Because it's just so weird," Tony says. "And it's kind of a lot, the-- you-without-clothes."

"Of all the humans I have met, you're the last one I'd have expected to have modest eyes," Loki says.

"It's not about my modest eyes, it's about waking up to all your pale... everything," Tony says with a pointed glance down.

Loki smiles at him, a real, open, warm smile. "And now you-without-clothes."

"If you had succeeded in taking over Earth, would you have built your palace here and walked around naked in the morning? Scandalized the servants?"

Loki turns his head and gazes down at the ocean while he contemplates the question. "I would have chosen a more centralized location for my palace, and kept a place like this for retreats from the pressures of ruling-- which I know from ruling Asgard are great. But this is better. I can be here all the time if I want, with no responsibilities."

"You took one on, *Under the Tuscan Sun*," Tony says, meaning himself. "For some reason I still don't understand."

Loki keeps his green eyes locked on the waves.

"Do you have other homes, or is this it?" Tony asks.

Loki takes a long pause before answering. "I have hidden places on Alfheim and Vanaheim, boltholes stashed with gold and treasures from childhood. This is my only home on Midgard. But I don't intend to reside here forever," Loki says. "The sea levels are rising, you know."

"Oh? I hadn't heard." Tony never misses a beat. "As a would-be king, I'd think it would be beneath you to spend your time like this. Kind of a waste, no? Don't you have anything better to do?"

Time was, Loki would have flung Tony off the deck for calling him a would-be king. "I'm enjoying the calm between storms," Loki says finally. "I find my projects as I go."

Loki turns to lie facedown on the chaise, but he shifts his head to one side to keep looking at Tony, which is usually an indication someone wants to continue a conversation.

"So I'm a *project* to you?"

"I haven't decided what you are," Loki answers.

"You say *between storms* like you know what kind of storm you're expecting," Tony says.

"I have an inkling," Loki says.

Tony lifts his head and takes a too-large gulp of his drink, swallowing at an angle. The scotch burns on the way down, a familiar welcome warmth. Tony's curious about what Loki's alluding to, but he's not that worried, because the Avengers have proven beyond a doubt they can handle what's thrown at them. "Care to enlighten me?"

"No," Loki says, turning his head so his face is pressed into the cushioning of the lounge chair. Tony's expecting it when Loki's voice comes out muffled. "But when it happens, know that it was not my fault. It was not my choice."

"That's pretty fucking ominous," Tony says, but he lets it go. At this point, Tony could teach a master class in letting things go.

But then, so could this strange new Loki.

For a while the two of them lie poolside and bask in silence broken only by the occasional crystal *ting* of Loki's wineglass when he raises both his head and his glass six inches to drink, then sets both back down. Judging by the sound, Loki's not using the pool-safe polycarb glasses, very irresponsible. Eventually Loki rotates to lie on his back, closing his eyes to the sun.

Tony feels a hunger pang in his stomach. If he were in his workshop he'd barely notice or outright ignore the twinge, but out here, lying in the sun with his hands idle and nothing to do but think, Tony's more predisposed to take his body's cues. "Are you going to make me eggs and toast again, gracious host?"

Loki perks up, raising his head and looking at Tony as if Tony's surprised him. "Do you want some?"

"Yeah, why not."

Tony's surprised in turn when Loki immediately rises off the chaise and goes into the villa. Tony picks up his boxers and puts them back on, because unlike Loki Tony has a mild sense of decorum, and he follows Loki into the kitchen because he's an extrovert at heart and Loki might as well be the only living person in the world.

"You know, Thor roams around his floor naked sometimes, but I would not have pegged you as--" Tony waves a hand at him. "--like this. A nudist."

"I'm not a nudist. This is my private space," Loki objects as he pulls things from the refrigerator. As though he required a reminder, Loki garbs himself in a gold brocade dressing gown, the pattern of which looks a lot like his overwrought bedcurtains.

If Tony were an actual guest, he'd do something to help-- busy himself setting the table, or offer to make the coffee, or something. Since he's Loki's prisoner, Loki can do it himself. "But now you have someone else living in it. Whatever, it's fine. If anything I'd have put you down as a never-nude."

Loki cocks his head, like he's mentally processing the self-explanatory term. "Do those exist?"

"To be honest," Tony says, "I don't really know."

*

Tony goes into his workshop after breakfast. Unfortunately, the data from the panometer brings no great insights. Tony looks over Friday's inconclusive assessment of the data before examining the raw numbers himself, but none of the measurements he sees points to any clear course of attack or action.

Tony starts F.R.I.D.A.Y. fabricating the jet-pack-inside-the-fake-desktop-tower-computer-housing in plain sight using the medium-sized 3D creation chamber. Tony watches F.R.I.D.A.Y. smoothly operate the robotic arms for a moment before he goes back over to his laptop.

He's decided on a plan of action-- he's going to make an old-fashioned combustion engine platform that will serve as a disguise and hiding place for him to work on what he really wants to build and doesn't want Loki to see. The engine will be noisy, too, to mask the sounds of future 3D printing. Tony only has so many distractions he can engineer to score privacy for F.R.I.D.A.Y. to fabricate and assemble his designs, and if he pushes his luck with tricks like the fire extinguisher Loki will get suspicious... more suspicious.

Tony can't talk to F.R.I.D.A.Y. openly about the designs, because he doesn't know whether Loki might be listening, so when he wants to communicate with F.R.I.D.A.Y. he has to type and read her answers. F.R.I.D.A.Y. takes his cues as to whether speaking aloud is acceptable or not. Tony uses the laptop screen, too, not his holograms. It's fine though, it's still F.R.I.D.A.Y. even if Tony can't hear her voice. Tony doesn't have the attachment to F.R.I.D.A.Y. that he did J.A.R.V.I.S., because how could he, even if the operating knowledge base is the same? Still, a familiar AI friend is good to have around.

Tony rigs temperature sensors by the doorway, set to flash a small red or blue light across the room if the doorway area turns hotter or cooler in excess of zero point seventy-five hundredths of a degree Fahrenheit. Judging by the occasions on which he's touched Tony, Loki's body temperature seems cool, and knowing he's a frost giant further inclines Tony to think his overall body temperature will ever so slightly cool the air around him. The sensors

should tell him whether Loki's invisibly spying on him, at least, so long as Loki invisibly enters via the doorway and not by teleportation.

Since the engine project is just a mock-up, Tony sets it up mostly by hand and cuts a lot of corners, focusing on making something that looks complicated, can have parts swapped out easily for the appearance of progress, and is large enough to easily hide a secret project rather than something that will actually run well in the end. The real undertaking will be a guided missile. He's going to build an ion propulsion missile to try to bust a hole in the ceiling of the force field. Assuming of course that it does have a ceiling. If the sky's not capped off, Tony's right out of here with his jet pack.

Tony slides underneath the suspended engine to connect improvised pieces to the engine block, and he's screwing on a set of carburetors when Loki enters the workshop an hour later.

Loki looks for him. Tony can see Loki peering around the room from his vantage point mostly hidden under the suspended platform. Loki's making the rookie mistake of looking for an engineer at eye level.

"Tony?"

Tony slides on his ergonomic automotive creeper out from under the engine. Tony sits up, socket wrench still in hand, so he doesn't have to look quite so far up at Loki. He's sweaty from the heat of testing the engine and he knows he's got some quantity of synthetic oil dribbled on his T-shirt.

Tony angles his head to see the sensor lights are flashing blue behind the server bank. Fantastic. Tony tosses the wrench a foot in the air and catches it in a little victory throw Loki won't comprehend. Good thing he catches it too, because it hurts when a wrench slams into your fingers. "Yeah?"

"There you are." Loki looks Tony over before he returns to surveying the scope of the project. "Do you want to go jet skiing today?"

Tony makes a face. "*What?*"

"Jet skiing," Loki repeats. "On jet skis. I have four of them. Do you want to ride on one?"

While he's out from under the engine, Tony takes the opportunity to swap wrenches, weighing the replacement in his hand. "What that you know about me makes you think I would want to go jet skiing?"

Loki looks away briefly before answering. "I had a friend who wanted to jet ski and never had. At least, not that he could remember. And I understand it is impossible for humans to be sad while on a jet ski."

Loki says it so earnestly, Tony starts laughing. "Loki, that's--" Tony briefly buries his face in his elbow, which by some miracle is still clean. "That's a *meme*. An *ancient* meme."

"Good, then my research was diligent," Loki says, undeterred and stoic in the face of Tony's laughter. "Ancient wisdom is often the sagest."

Tony lies back down and slides beneath the engine-in-progress again. "Maybe another time."

Instead of leaving, Loki walks over to the couch he's placed at the edge of the room and lies down. From his angle under the engine Tony can't quite see what Loki's doing. Maybe reading, maybe playing on his phone, the big liar.

Tony mistrusts the level of privacy he thinks he has, so instead of making progress on his potentially more useful inventions he futzes with the combustion engine, adding unnecessary but loud fans and extra spark plugs. Loki doesn't ask what he's doing. Eventually Loki falls asleep, and then Tony works on the I.M.P.D.E.A.D.

*

Tony plugs the fifth remaining camera into one of the laptop's many USB ports, sticks the tiny speaker in his right ear, then sits and types. *Time for finishing touches on the I.M.P.D.E.A.D. Need to establish how we're going to secure it to the ceiling. Install wireless communication on this camera.*

"You got it, boss," F.R.I.D.A.Y. says in his ear.

"Belay that order," Tony says out loud when Loki appears in the doorway of the workshop earlier than the usual dinner announcement time.

Loki looks around as though to see the entity Tony's addressing. "Imaginary friend?"

"Talking to myself, only way to have an intelligent conversation," Tony says.

"Let's order in tonight," Loki suggests.

Tony leans away from the laptop, back against the counter behind him. "Oh yeah? How do you order delivery here?"

"If I am not going out to get it myself, I order it online, like everyone else."

So they're within driving distance of restaurants or caterers, not stranded on a semi-private island. Civilization is near, good to know, and there's definitely internet. "You know how to buy things online?"

Loki scoffs. "Your Midgardian technology is pathetic compared to the ways of Asgard. I told you, I found this place on Sotheby's."

"So how do you do that? I haven't seen internet here," Tony says idly, keeping his eyes on the laptop screen.

"You'd like to know that, wouldn't you," Loki replies. Tony swiftly raises his eyes to meet Loki's, but Tony says nothing. There's nothing to say.

For a while they have silence. Loki pulls out his phone with that magical sleight-of-hand and sweeps his fingers over the touchscreen, back and forth. "What would you have to eat? And don't say scotch."

"Gin," Tony says. "And a Cinnabon. Loki, seriously, I don't care."

"I will get sandwiches," Loki says with a sigh, but an hour later when Loki summons Tony for dinner and sets out wrapped club sandwiches on the table, he also puts down a Cinnabon box. The gin he places down is a sealed bottle of Askur Yggdrasil 45, which is a booze Tony's never even heard of, and Tony would like to think he knows his alcohols.

"You bought that for the name, didn't you," Tony says. It's not even a guess.

"I bought it because you asked for gin," Loki says, retrieving a pair of low tumblers from the cabinet by the sink. "I will drink it with you because of the name."

*

The following days pass without incident. Loki must note Tony prefers the Oban, because Tony discovers a fresh bottle in the liquor cabinet.

Tony has the I.M.P.D.E.A.D. to try, and if that doesn't work he's absolutely going to try to escape via his missile and jet pack, but he decides to give talking his way out of this one more shot.

"You can let me go now, really," Tony says after dinner one night, when he's risen from his chair but before he departs for his workshop. "I'm okay."

Loki, midway to the sink laden with dirty plates and half-empty cups, glances back at Tony with his eyebrows slightly raised, showing all the wrinkles in his forehead. "All right. I need your blood."

Tony's wary instantly, because it sounds like he's about to be put to a physical test. Without thinking Tony pulls his left arm in, covering the inner elbow and conveniently hiding the back of his left hand too, the two places hospitals always want to stick an IV or puncture for a blood draw. "I thought you said that's just an Asgardian childrens' story," Tony puts forth as a distraction.

Loki drops plates and cups into the sink so abruptly Tony hears something break, but Loki doesn't even look. "Sit down," Loki says, returning to the table and sitting down in his usual place. Tony takes a few seconds longer to sit, which he does only reluctantly, full of a bad feeling about what he's in for here.

Loki glances up at him, sharp and expectant, when Tony drags his feet in sitting down next to him. As Loki's peering at him Loki bares his own wrist, methodically rolling back the green leather of his jacket, then pulling back the black sleeve concealed beneath, baring half his arm. It'd be hot to watch if Tony wasn't suddenly so nervous. He'd have thought Loki's jacket would be way too tight to roll up like that. Asgardian leather.

Loki takes Tony's hand and flips it over, studying the tracery of veins or maybe the scars on Tony's wrist. Not all the marks on Tony's wrists are from suicide attempts. "A bunch of those aren't what you think," Tony justifies, then wonders why he felt the need to announce that. "Some of them are from fabrication and fights and crash landings. Iron Man mishaps, you know."

Loki strokes with his thumb along the half-inch vertical white scar by the vein. For all that Loki's hand is cool, his touch on Tony's skin feels like fire. "Only some?"

"Yeah, that one's what it looks like," Tony says shortly.

Loki delivers a slight squeeze to Tony's wrist-- a caress-- in an apparent show of sympathy. Then Loki tucks Tony's hand between his half-exposed forearm and the side of his chest like a nurse about to take Tony's blood pressure. Tony has just long enough to register the softness of the green leather of Loki's jacket before Loki materializes a silver awl in his hand and mercilessly jabs the underside of Tony's arm midway between wrist and elbow.

Tony jerks at the initial jolt of pain, but he knows better than to pull away. *Bullshit this, you can bullshit anything, you're the bullshit master.*

"Ow," Tony complains, more on principle than because it hurts all that much past the startle. Tony gets a better look at the instrument, which is a sharp pick at one end and a flowing circular design on a small ring at the other. Tony knows Loki fights with daggers when he chooses hand-to-hand combat, but this tool is too small to be a dagger, the sharp shaft too thin and narrow and delicate. "The hell is that?"

"A hairpin," Loki answers.

"You didn't even sterilize it first. Where's the concern for my well-being?"

"Hold still." Loki hovers the needle over his own upturned arm, his face reflecting concentration, and with another swift movement he pierces the flesh in the middle of his own arm. Loki's blood comes out red on the pin just like Tony's, coating the metal more thoroughly.

"No worries about HIV?" Tony asks. "Hep C? You have no idea where I've been."

"Be quiet." Loki holds his forearm extended side-by-side along Tony's, lining their jabs up. Puncture wounds tend not to bleed much if at all, but Loki stabbed deep enough that both their wounds bleed sluggishly, a few drops welling up and out over the skin, staining. Loki watches the movement of blood on the broken skin on their forearms like he's getting some kind of baseline measurement. And shit shit shit, this might not go well.

"Do you still want me to kill you?" Loki asks finally. The tip of Loki's tongue snakes distractingly out between his lips like he's focusing hard.

Tony finally ventures what's obvious here. "Is this a magical lie detector test?"

Loki frowns down at their arms. "Answer the question. Do you still want me to kill you?"

"No. I don't." It's more or less true. Under normal circumstances Tony would be perfectly capable of handling the job himself.

Loki keeps his eyes lowered to the red marks on their paired forearms. "Do you still want to kill yourself?"

"No," Tony says, making sure to breathe deeply and calmly, though he doesn't believe for a second that that'll work. Nerves churn his stomach and yeah, it's kind of a fib. Tony wasn't expecting to have the truth of his words tested by magic.

"You're lying," Loki says, letting Tony's arm slide down and fall away, but his fingers catch Tony's wrist and tighten before he tosses Tony's hand back into his lap. "Do not lie to me."

"Well, you're the god of lies, so maybe-- write it off as a prayer?" Tony suggests facetiously, putting his arm to his mouth to suck the puncture wound for a second.

Loki clenches the bloodied hairpin in one fist, and when he opens his hand again the sliver of metal has vanished. Loki's tight-lipped, but Tony doesn't much care.

*

Tony redoubles his efforts over the following, rather uncomfortable days. He and Loki talk little beyond Loki asking him what he wants to eat. He works out on the gym equipment and walks on the treadmill. He finishes designing the I.M.P.D.E.A.D. and starts F.R.I.D.A.Y. fabricating it hidden inside a mirror box.

Tony misses his phone, handheld staple of twenty-first century life, and even if he can't make use of it immediately, once he gets free of Loki's force field he'll want some way to communicate with the outside world.

We're going to build a phone, Tony types to F.R.I.D.A.Y..

"Great," F.R.I.D.A.Y. responds in his tiny ear speaker.

As with his computers, Tony builds his own phones from scratch. For him it's a casual enterprise. He already has all the materials he needs-- SIM cards, chips, circuit boards, pan-head machine screws, matching hex nuts, solder, capacitors, and the microspeakers he uses for AI communication in the tower. F.R.I.D.A.Y. can fabricate a stylish housing. As with the jet pack, though, all the phone designs Tony's ever made-- and he's stored thirty years of plans for posterity-- and all the relevant code are entirely stored on the Tower's encrypted servers, with backups in Malibu, Vermont, and a vault in central Jersey. So he'd be starting from square one with a phone, which is a far more complicated device to whip up than a jet pack.

Design me a housing, something sleek. Tony types in the specs of the materials he intends to use. *We're going to need to fab a battery.*

"You got it, boss."

F.R.I.D.A.Y. comes back with a pair of designs in pretty good time.

"Looks fine," Tony says aloud.

He'll still need software for the phone, an operating system, which is going to take a hell of a lot longer than printing the shell of a phone casing.

Pepper abandoned a phone in his workshop once, long ago, after he supplied her with one of his way better homemade ones. Even as she was trying to decline his offer of a phone on the grounds that it was too much trouble to transfer everything on her old device onto a new one, J.A.R.V.I.S. was wirelessly transferring all the contacts, notes, videos and photos from her Blackberry onto his superior unbranded model. Tony thinks of the memory half fondly, half remorsefully.

Tony only makes phones for the people he really cares about. Rhodey has one, and Peter and Pepper and Happy, and each of the Avengers. Tony made one for Fury, but Fury refused to accept it on the grounds that Tony's security clearance isn't high enough to let Tony casually spy on him. When Tony pointed out he can break into S.H.I.E.L.D.'s files whenever he wants and cover his tracks well enough that no one can prove he committed a crime, Fury said *I have a moral obligation to make you work for it.*

Tony taps his fingers on the table. He's tempted to pull out the Blackberry-- he vaguely knows which storage area of his workshop it's in-- and just copy the ancient code over and clean it up instead of writing code from scratch. A pile of tweaks will be required for hardware and 5G compatibility, and a major data capability upgrade will be needed, plus adding whatever software Tony will need to take over the nearest cell tower with the press of a button, but building on what's already there will still be faster than writing out a whole new operating system. Tony could have F.R.I.D.A.Y. write new code from scratch, but F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s busy fabricating a custom muffler to attach to his power tools, plus the I.M.P.D.E.A.D, while also running three million simulations of the missile impact based on the limited data gathered by the panometer. At home, F.R.I.D.A.Y. could easily do ten times as much at once, but here she's lacking a lot of processing power.

Tony rummages through a few drawers before he turns up Pepper's old personal assistant/phone/mess-that-was-the-height-of-electronic-sophistication-at-the-time. The scratches on the casing are probably from the other random pieces of crap inside Tony's junk drawer. Tony doesn't have a compatible charger, but he's able to jury-rig a random battery that doesn't quite fit inside the casing to turn the thing on.

Tony starts in on the Blackberry himself, copying the code onto the laptop. Tony doesn't care about encryption or frills for this phone. He just wants a guaranteed means of contacting the outside world once he's free. Building on top of the old software, upgrading it then debugging will be fine. Tony wants to get the phone done quickly and get back to the missile.

Tony builds the guts of his new phone in record time, fitting together new memory and video cards, attaching circuit boards and inserting the SIM card. F.R.I.D.A.Y. starts up the transfer of old software to support the new hardware.

Tony restarts the phone and inspects the display when F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s finished. Something's loading wrong-- looks like a typical programming interface compatibility problem. Tony's encountered lots of bugs large and small on the rare past occasions he built electronics from

scratch without slamming out the source code himself or having J.A.R.V.I.S. write it for him. Other people write shockingly, baffling bad software. Tony spends the better part of the afternoon debugging and tweaking, streamlining the code, then finally rewriting big sections of it, which is how these things usually go. Should have had the patience to sit back and wait for F.R.I.D.A.Y. to write all fresh code in the first place. Tony's impatience strikes again, leading him to take shortcuts he shouldn't. This sort of thing is exactly the reason--

Tony tries to short-circuit that thought before it completes, but instead he just shortcuts straight to *Andrea*. *Andrea Zaleski*.

Tony turns sideways to the laptop resting on the other table and types a direction to F.R.I.D.A.Y. *Write me code to put on here to easily take over the nearest available cell tower. I want to be able to push one button and have it. Plan for as many contingencies as possible.*

"That'll be a challenge, boss," F.R.I.D.A.Y. replies in his ear. "Different cellular corporations have different interfaces and different security protocols, and without internet access, we can't find out the exact countermeasures each one takes."

Tony uses voice activation ninety-eight percent of the time and so he doesn't type much anymore, but he's still fast. *Shit, right. Do your best, write the code as broadly as possible. If we can't take it over, fine, I just want to be able to use it.*

"You got it, boss."

*

Tony stays up that night late, lying in his bed pretending to sleep. Around two a.m. Tony finally rises. Tony passes Loki's closed door and slips downstairs.

Tony climbs up on a chair and carefully installs the I.M.P.D.E.A.D. in the ceiling of the sunroom, over the spot on the sectional where Loki tends to sit. Loki's unpredictable, and probably changes his choice of seats more often than a typical person, but he has his preferences like anyone else. Installation takes about fifteen minutes, from laying down a few torn-apart taped-together garbage bags to catch ceiling debris to concealing the slotted opening afterward as best he can. The power tool muffler works a trick, keeping the sound down when Tony cuts into the ceiling with his handsaw. He's lucky the sunroom is at the other end of the house from Loki's bedroom. He hopes Loki is in fact asleep in his bedroom.

Tony finishes his installation uninterrupted.

*

The device works perfectly on first deployment the next night, except for the fact that Tony's thwarted by the bane of random chance. In the end, Tony programmed a seventy percent chance of death by missile and a thirty percent chance of cookie, and Loki gets what in a real-life Russian roulette scenario would be a lucky spin of the barrel, a fortuitous roll of the dice. That night, Loki chooses the precise spot on the sectional and sits, and Tony holds his breath. Two measured seconds after Loki's seated, a slightly stale, days-old mall cookie drops into

Loki's lap. Loki looks with confusion at the cookie crumbling on his long leather tunic before picking it up. "What is--"

Loki cuts off, but he doesn't seem upset at first. His brow stays smooth, his eyes don't narrow. Loki looks up at the ceiling curiously. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," Tony sighs even as Loki's climbing up on the sectional to explore the I.M.P.D.E.A.D. in the recessed circular hole cut in the ceiling. "A cookie dispenser."

Tony watches morosely as Loki stands up on the sectional, breaks open the covering panel with one hand and explores the inside. Tony considered programming the device to go off if probed after deployment commenced. But would that have affected the chances of success if the missile engaged rather than the cookie dispensal mechanism? Tony still doesn't know. "It's art. It's my art."

Loki dismantles the I.M.P.D.E.A.D., casting pieces to the floor as he investigates. After Loki's examined the interior missile, seated in launch position, he seems to decide he's seen enough. Then Loki sits down on the other side of the sectional and puts his hands together in front of his chest, steeping his long fingers and pressing his fingertips together. Loki stays like that for half a minute, deep in thought.

Tony breaks the silence. "Do we still have to talk or are we done here?"

Loki drops his hands and gives Tony a sharp, annoyed look. "No more art installations."

"Yes, warden."

"If you think I won't lock you in the basement and feed you scraps of garbage, think again," Loki warns him. "I could make you miss this life."

"I'm sure you could," Tony says as he waltzes out of the sunroom, but he's not really worried.

*

Loki's turned even moodier the next day, and he doesn't talk to Tony beyond asking what he wants to eat.

"Don't care," Tony says.

That morning Loki makes coffee and toasts each of them a bagel, and they sit in silence at the breakfast table, which is different from the sometimes tense, sometimes surprisingly simpatico conversations they tend to have. Tony leans both elbows on the table. "I get the intuitive sense you might have realized the futility of the Make Tony Want Life Project. I would even venture that it's getting on your nerves a little?"

Loki looks at him. "Don't raise your hopes," Loki says with a thin, unpleasant smile. "I don't give up easily."

"Me neither," Tony says bluntly, and he eats and skedaddles out of the kitchen as quickly as possible. That morning, Tony puts the finishing touches on the ion propulsion missile he'll

use to attack the force field around the house. At around four o'clock in the afternoon, Tony wanders around the house looking for Loki. Tony turns him up with a knock on one of the locked downstairs doors. Loki opens the door six inches, blocking the space with his body. "Yes?"

"Dinner request," Tony says, trying to see past Loki into the room behind him. Loki steps out of the room, maneuvering his body uncomfortably close to Tony's and forcing Tony to either back up a step or have his body pressed against Loki's. Loki firmly shuts the door behind him, cutting off Tony's line of sight. Not that he could see anything useful anyway.

Loki stares him down. "What is your request?"

"Beef Wellington," Tony says. "But not any beef Wellington. There's a steakhouse in the West Village named Boucherie. I want their beef Wellington. Also, a bottle of Macallan No. 6."

Loki's gaze has a penetrating weight, but Tony returns it casually, without showing concern. "As you wish," Loki says.

Tony returns to his workshop. Loki can't possibly have something that specific delivered within a reasonable time frame. He'll have to go out himself.

*

For his escape effort Tony dresses as warmly as he can, which means nothing more than changing into the clothes he came in plus a couple of extra T-shirts on top, because flying is cold. Tony ties together two T-shirts into a scarf and wraps the length of them around his neck. Then he waits, watching the clock.

Loki never announces his departures or arrivals, but the two of them consistently dine around six o'clock, so forty-five minutes before that Tony puts his cell phone in his pocket, tucks his F.R.I.D.A.Y.-connected earpiece into his ear, wraps a fireproof blanket around his shoulders, and brings the jet pack outside for its maiden and hopefully only voyage. He has no real way to know when Loki might leave. Loki might already be gone, but if he isn't, it's unlikely he'll come walking outside the villa before he teleports away. Tony walks to an area of the yard where no windows intersect and slips the harness straps over his shoulder, buckling the waist belt.

Tony turns the jet pack on and gingerly tests it out, hovering a foot off the ground. The jet pack works flawlessly. Tony zips upwards in the air steadily, hands above his head to feel for the barrier. He hits the barrier at about sixty feet.

He flies back down, goes back into the house, and brings out the rocket explosive. He sets up the rocket on the lawn, aiming it at the place he touched the ceiling of the force field.

Then Tony gets ready. He pulls the modified fiberglass blanket protectively over his head and hovers halfway down from the ceiling of the dome around the property, a good thirty feet in the air.

"F.R.I.D.A.Y., check the alignment of the detonation."

"All systems are go, boss."

"One more time, run the equations for my takeoff time based on the height of the barrier."

"Done. You'll take off 5.569 seconds after launch," F.R.I.D.A.Y. says.

"Sounds about right," Tony agrees.

Tony readies himself to zip through any hole that's ripped in the barrier. The thing might go down for only microseconds, assuming it goes down at all, so Tony calculated the quickest route upward that won't see him blown back from the concussive force of the explosion or even worse, caught in the explosion. He's going to have to fly upwards fast into a fiery ball, and the safer he stays from the explosion, the more danger he'll be in of being bisected if the barrier snaps back. He might be okay with being bisected, except for the fact that if any part of him falls back inside the force field, he might end up cut in half without dying. Of all the things he has left to lose, Tony does not want to go through the rest of his life without his dick.

"On your mark," Tony says. "Do it."

F.R.I.D.A.Y. launches the missile with a small explosion, and Tony watches the rocket shoot up into the sky.

"Now," F.R.I.D.A.Y. says, and the jet pack soars Tony up into the sky.

Tony zips up straight into the collapsing ball of fire from the blast. He can feel the heat through the protective blanket, and he doesn't get cut in half at the waist, so that's good, but as he sails out of the blast radius and past where the barrier should be, the cloudless blue sky turns to blackness as abruptly as though a light switch has been flipped.

Startled by the change in visuals, Tony instinctively takes the controls back from F.R.I.D.A.Y. and slows the jet pack, hovering in the almost complete darkness. The only source of light emanates from the fifteen foot circle below him of green lawn. Like Tony broke a hole in a snow globe, and outside the globe is only darkness.

Thinking of a snow globe makes him think about the rushing, disorienting sensations every time Loki's teleported him somewhere.

"What the hell," Tony says, but F.R.I.D.A.Y. doesn't answer. Tony's definitely... outside the normal parameters of the world. Tony pulls out his phone and turns it on, but he has no bars. No service.

Gazing back at the brightly lit green circle below him, Tony waffles on what to do, but in the end he flies upwards with resolve. This black nothingness can't go on forever...

... unless of course it can.

Tony continues flying upwards. He feels like he's in space again, though there are no stars in the expanse of blackness, and he can breathe, and he isn't cold.

Tony nudges the intuitive lever on the jetpack again, pushing it harder. He rises until the green-lit circle below him dwindles to a pinprick point and finally vanishes, and then he's alone in the darkness. Tony's not sure how long he flies away from the green-lit circle below him-- F.R.I.D.A.Y. would be able to tell him down to the microsecond, but he's lost contact with F.R.I.D.A.Y., and he begins to have doubts. What if Loki never intended the magical bubble of the force field to be punctured, and Tony's lost out here forever in some alternate dimension? Maybe Loki won't be able to follow him in to pull him out, and if Loki *can* follow, maybe he won't be able to find Tony. Tony can't be sure of his trajectory without F.R.I.D.A.Y., and he's not sure he's been flying straight upwards. He's probably gotten off course and is going at a diagonal, however slight. He's not sure he'd be able to find the circle of light and green lawn he left behind. Loki might give up on him, finally.

If Tony gets lost out here, will he still be unable to die, or will he die of thirst? Would he die on impact if he shut off the jet pack and let himself tumble downwards, or would he simply drift? Could he be lost out here in the darkness of infinity, forever?

Tony slows the jet pack and pauses in his rise, looking down. Flipping a switch, he decides to test the gravity of wherever he is by turning the jet pack off entirely. Maybe he'll float, maybe he'll fall, either way he'll learn something.

"A clever flying device," Loki says from behind him, nearly giving him a heart attack. "Are you ready to come back?"

Tony turns and Loki's standing there, in the void, as though there's an invisible floor on which to stand.

Tony needs a second to collect himself. "So... am I lost in an extra-dimensional balloon, or trapped in an illusion?"

"One of those, probably," Loki says, and he's smiling which is deeply annoying.

"I mean, does the darkness go on forever here?"

"Forever," Loki assures him. "Neat trick, isn't it? A sorcerer did this to me once for half an hour. I was falling, though. I thought I'd let you fly in here, it seemed more your style."

"Fine," Tony says grimly, and Loki reaches out and catches Tony's hand.

"Fine what?" Loki says, expectant.

"Your god of mischief schtick is showing," Tony says, and grudgingly, "Fine, take me back."

The twisting sensation of teleportation comes over Tony again, and then they're standing back on the front lawn. Solid ground is under his feet, and Tony doesn't show his relief at all but he could cry from the solace of being back in a *place*, to be somewhere that's not a black in-between nowhere of nothingness.

"So where the hell are we? What was that?" Tony demands.

Loki starts to answer but then they both stop short and look, because the tiny figure of a person is picking their way through the distant trees across the street.

"Hey!" Tony yells, but the person keeps slowly making their way among the trees. Tony takes a deep breath to really scream this time, to scream like a sorority girl in a slasher flick, to scream like an angry fanboy or the kids who've just taken their finals and are on roller coasters, but before he can, a hand clamps over his mouth and yanks him backwards. Tony's body slams back against the front of Loki's.

"Now now, must'nt frighten the neighbors," Loki says softly.

Tony's scream under Loki's hand is muffled.

"I think," Loki's voice says in his ear, "perhaps we need to rethink the order of things."

Tony's feet come out from under him and the world turns upside down as Loki teleports him somewhere. When Tony gets his bearings, he looks around to see he's in the lowest floor of the villa compound, where plastic-wrapped furniture sits waiting and furnishings that have already been unwrapped are covered with white sheets. There's still the same big winch set into one of the stone walls, only now there's a length of thick chain coming out of it and a manacle on the end.

"No," Tony says, uselessly. Loki's face is stony, even though Loki was in a good mood only a minute earlier. The close call with the neighbor must have been close indeed for Loki to go from amused to cold so quickly.

Loki manhandles Tony over to the wall with the chain easily. Tony could fight, but he wouldn't accomplish anything. Loki snaps the manacle shut around Tony's wrist with a final-sounding click. Tony notices the plastic paint bucket set a few feet away.

Loki crouches in front of him. "Perhaps being my prisoner for a time will change your feelings about being my guest."

Tony looks up at him. "Loki, please, don't leave me down here."

Loki purses his lips. "Why not?"

Tony probably gets just one shot at making his case, so he brings his hands, chained and free, together in front of his knees and loads every ounce of pleading he can muster into his face. "... I don't want to be alone."

Loki stares at him for a long moment, one of the longest of Tony's life, it feels like, and then Loki twists his fingers, and the chain falls off Tony's wrist. Tony lowers his face in both thanks and relief.

"No more escape attempts," Loki warns, and Tony nods fervently.

Loki teleports them into the kitchen, where the table is set with dinner. Tony's tense all over and coursing with adrenaline as Loki finally lets him go.

Tony stumbles over to his chair. Too many teleportations too close together messes up his balance, and the last thing he feels like doing right now is eating. Tony considers telling Loki he's not hungry, but if history is any guide Loki will just threaten to make him eat. If he sits and picks at his food, Loki will leave him alone.

Tony barely tastes the Mccallan he knocks back, and they eat perfect beef wellington in silence.

*

A few minutes after dinner, perhaps taking Tony at his word that he doesn't want to be alone, Loki wanders into the workshop. Tony's not building anything now, he's just lying on the couch, staring into space, feeling listless. Loki sits on the floor and leans against the lower part of the couch. Loki doesn't say anything, maybe out of respect for Tony's naked unhappiness. And maybe it's because of the companionably depressed silence in a comfortable place that Tony eventually realizes he does feel like talking.

"Do you think I could destroy the world?" Tony asks.

Tony sees Loki moved out of his own thoughts as Loki's eyeline changes, his chin dipping into a different course of thought. Loki pulls his knees up to his chest and loosely wraps his arms around his long legs. "Why, do you want to?"

"I really don't."

"Then don't," Loki says.

"I won't," Tony says. "But do you think I *could*?"

"For a certainty," Loki says.

Tony nods.

"Why do you ask?"

"I was sort of-- warned that I would. Could. Accidentally, if I'm not careful and don't-- stay in my lane."

"A million fools have something to say," Loki says. "I fail to see why this warning should trouble you."

"This prediction was made by Stephen Strange, Sorcerer Supreme, all-knowing future-scanning guy."

"Hmm," Loki says. "I do not know him, but that seems curious." Loki stretches out his legs in front of him. Maybe Loki's feeling restless too. Because they're right there in his line of sight, Tony looks at Loki's feet, at the sleek black leather boots into which Loki's dark green pants are smoothly tucked.

"Curious? Why?"

Loki considers. "Because you're already haunted by one instance in which you believe you were reckless. I do not doubt you will be very cautious in the future."

"I guess." Tony stares at Loki's boots.

"Let me be direct-- you have been here for weeks," Loki says. "Are you satisfied yet that you cannot escape me?"

"Meh," Tony says. Eloquent to the last.

"You are here with me for the duration," Loki says. "Until I see fit to set you free, which I will do when your state of mind has improved. Yet you refuse to discuss the sources of your biggest trauma."

"Yeah, I don't want to talk about that," Tony agrees.

"Will you allow me to see for myself?"

Tony looks up at him warily. "See for yourself? What are you talking about?"

Loki shifts away from the couch and turns around, leaning slightly into the space between them, and shows Tony both sides of his hand like he's preparing to perform a card trick. "I could place my hand against your forehead and summon the memories to the forefront of your mind, and I could see for myself the things that have happened to hurt you. Your worst trauma would be revealed to me without you needing to say a word."

"What? No," Tony says, repulsed and shocked and not hiding it.

"Then we can decide how to proceed from there," Loki says, and he seems to misunderstand the source of Tony's refusal. "You would not be harmed," Loki reassures him. "You would relive your experience, but you would be safe, and it would last only moments. You might experience it as a... psychological release."

"A *release*?"

"Yes," Loki says.

"Or, maybe, you know, sear those memories deeper into my consciousness. Absolutely not," Tony says.

"I will share something with you in return," Loki offers. "I could walk you through everything the others said about you. Would you like to experience my conversations with them?"

"No," Tony says, angry now. "I have fuck-you money, I don't give a shit what anyone has to say about me. You're not going to share your worst trauma with me, are you?"

"I'm not the one who jumped off a building, Tony."

"No," Tony says flatly. "The answer is no."

Loki's eyebrows lift speculatively, and his voice is silky, totally The Old Loki breaking through the new facade. "I could do it by force."

That's definitely a threat, however lightly and liltily Loki issues it, and a tingling warning chill zips down Tony's spine. Tony stands up and skittishly moves off, deliberately putting space between them, but he knows if he tries to leave Loki will grab him again, and he definitely doesn't want Loki's hands on him moments after this appalling suggestion. Tony retreats to a spinning work chair six feet away. "Don't you fucking dare. That sounds like mind-rape. You violate me like that and you break our deal."

Loki puts up his hands in a gesture of apologetic surrender. "Force of habit. I have no wish to violate you," Loki relents. "It was only an idea."

"Yeah, not if you ever want me to trust you."

"Understood," Loki says, like he means it.

"I'll talk. Like I have been. Just... you need to respect my boundaries."

Loki briefly bows his head. For a long pause neither of them says anything at all.

"So you dig my sass, I get it, but don't tell me you're doing this because you like me," Tony says. "You don't need to go to these lengths. All this is for weird personal reasons, isn't it? Tell me what those are."

"I-- well, in a manner of speaking." Loki draws a sweeping breath, then exhales, his eyes back on the floor. "I have been where you are."

"Uh huh. You felt terrible guilt after your first instance of reckless manslaughter? Your super team didn't want you around anymore?"

"Something like that," Loki says.

Tony senses a nugget of something interesting smoldering under the surface here, probably burning into carbon. "Listen, if you want me to open up to you, you need to let me in that scrambled little noggin in return. That's only fair."

A long and pregnant pause ensues, and Tony ninety-nine percent expects Loki to refuse to spill... and then Loki surprises him. "Thor's friends," Loki says suddenly, quietly. "I never really had any of my own, you see."

The thought of Loki having friend issues is... not something Tony's ever much thought about. "What about Jet Ski? What about Doom? I guess Doom's not really anyone's friend," Tony concludes, answering his own question. "Did you and Doom have--" Tony makes a loose but juvenile ring with his fingers and thumb and vaguely thrusts his index finger into the circle. "-- a *thing*?"

"I met Mobius quite recently," Loki says, disregarding the Victor von Doom-related line of inquiry entirely.

"*Mobius*? What is he, an arcade wizard? Or a big fan of Giraud?"

Loki gazes up at Tony almost as though he's disappointed.

"Okay, you were saying-- you didn't have any friends," Tony says, and then the real shared circumstance clicks. *I have been where you are*. "Oh shit," Tony says as the truth dawns on him. He's been blinded by his own internal mess and this bizarre situation. Tony sits up straight in his chair in an abrupt movement. "You tried to kill yourself too, didn't you? Who stopped you? Thor?"

"No," Loki says quietly. "No one stopped me. I fell as you did."

"Shit," Tony says, stunned.

"Thor would have saved me, but I chose death rather than show humility or do penance. I let myself fall just as you did." Loki's voice grows distant. "Except I fell longer and farther, through leagues and light years of the void of space."

"And the Chitauri caught you in their bouncy castle?"

"Would that they had," Loki says a bit more harshly. "My association with the Chitauri was more roundabout and far more painful. Believe me, there's nothing soft, or gentle, about the Chitauri homeworld." Loki's green eyes flash with the heat of remembered anger. "Nor The Other's former master, as you know."

Thanos. "Yeah."

"I wish anyone cared for me enough to try to stop me. No one saw me. Not until it was far too late," Loki says, ruminating, and then he sighs. "Tony, I have not taken you prisoner to punish you. How can I persuade you of this?"

"I don't really believe that anymore," Tony admits. "Although... if you've grown and changed so much, why were you lurking outside my tower in the middle of the night?"

Loki averts his eyes for a moment and inhales like he's gathering his dignity. "If you must know, I was trying to work up the courage to speak to Thor."

Tony finds this explanation hard to swallow. "At three in the morning?!"

"I could not sleep," Loki says.

"Why would you need courage to talk to Thor?" Thor's going to rejoice, again, when he finds out Loki's alive, again. Last time, when Thor found out Loki survived their evil sister after all, Thor threw a party open to the public that lasted six days. The whole thing started when F.R.I.D.A.Y. captured satellite imagery of Loki outside the Romanian borders of Latveria up to god knows what, and the photographic evidence was enough to send Thor into a blissful tizzy, all shouting elation and forceful back-slapping. Thor hugged Tony way too tight that day, wept on Tony's Tom Ford and said something about weeks of revelry and jubilation.

Tony shrugged it off, figuring Thor would spend a day or two in a happy drunk. Tony remembers thinking of the weeks of revelry and jubilation *that'd be something to see*, but he never for a second thought Thor meant to follow through.

Thor somehow found an upscale party planner, the now-infamous Irene Merryweather, who bribed a bunch of people to break reservations and booked Pier Sixty at Chelsea Piers with room for two thousand guests. Merryweather decorated and organized the shindig in record-breaking time, and partly while the party was going on which is trashy, but she made it work, and the rest was history.

Thor didn't actually issue any formal invitations, just stood outside and urged random passersby in for a few hours before joining them. Not many people came at first, the party started small, but soon enough there was by all accounts a good mix of New Yorkers. Some tourists came in because they were excited to recognize Thor, and the regulars from a dive bar somewhere got wind of the open bar, and some curious businesspeople went in on their lunch breaks. Merryweather invited some familiar faces from the NYC party crowd, and some artists came, and some homeless people wandered in. All were welcomed. A mosaic of Loki's head and shoulders was fashioned from helium balloons on the ceiling. By the second day, Thor's fans had descended en masse. Thor's fans apparently have a highly active and engaged internet community. Then came the B-list celebrities and influencers. On the fourth day Jordan Klepper showed up with a camera crew, and that night Lady Gaga came dressed in a leather and spandex superhero costume. By the fifth day, there were Kardashians.

As the attendees found out it was Loki's life and good health they were celebrating, a lot of them were apparently confused, but with Thor's infectious enthusiasm, endless hors d'oeuvres and free drinks, the bash didn't suffer any for its theme of celebrating a presumed-dead alien terrorist being alive. The guest of honor did not make an appearance, as he was hanging out in Latveria with Doom at the time.

Tony only caught the tail end of the gala after Thor eventually thought to drunk-dial him with an invitation when the party was being shut down on the sixth day. Tony and Rhodey suited up and got there in less than five minutes. By then even Thor's endless reserves were running down, the Kardashians had left in a huff, Dolly Parton was deeply engaged in conversation with a homeless man, photographers from every tabloid were running wild, far more than two thousand people were illegally packed into the standing-room-only event space, a fact the security guards had been bribed to ignore, and half a dozen cops were there arguing with Merryweather and issuing citations and fines right and left. Merryweather proved unable to bribe the police, maybe because too many witnesses were all around them watching. Frankly, it was a testament to great engineering that Pier Sixty was still standing afterward. Numerous fights had gone on and been separated by security, but Thor didn't mind. Thor has a twisted alien side of his own and enjoys humans fighting as long as the fisticuffs don't end in death or permanent maiming, which apparently is going too far for Thor's idea of some good casual brawling.

After everything was tallied, Thor's little soiree cost Tony a little over two hundred nineteen million dollars. The money wasn't a big deal, but Tony usually curates the hell out of an invitation list, and he didn't care for the surprise of throwing an endless party he didn't know about in advance, didn't get to attend, and for which nobody was required to send an RSVP.

Tony was kind of pissed, but truth be told he was almost equally amused. His bad for giving each of the others a credit card for any unanticipated team needs and not thinking to put a hard limit on them. Everyone else was completely responsible with their plastic, but Thor quite literally handed his purchasing power over to Merryweather, who did a wild slew of cash advances on top of all the charges for venue, booze, balloon team and hors d'oeuvres. Thor was so drunk and so ebullient, Tony lacked the heart to tell him off as he thanked Tony profusely for the party. Tony didn't even remind Thor that Loki defenestrated him through thick fucking glass with intent to kill, or threw that portal of acid on him which would probably have been an even worse way to die. Tony could have, but the reminder would have meant nothing to Thor, because Loki's tried to kill Thor on more occasions than Tony dreamed, apparently. Thor drunkenly rambled about his brother and shamelessly wept with joy.

Tony wonders exactly what it's like to have a sibling.

The tabloids wrote about the event for weeks afterward. Careers were forged and broken. For her tireless efforts to keep Loki's portrait up, the balloon lady won some kind of underground award for performance art. One of the homeless guests became famous. Merryweather cemented herself as the East Coast's most prominent and most expensive event planner. A too-pushy paparazzi got into a scuffle with The Situation and ended up in some kind of legal trouble. Although a vast number of people came and went over the course of the party, after the madness was over, hundreds of thousands of people claimed to have attended at some point, which was definitely an impossibility. Tony was with Pepper at the time, but he slept with Irene Merryweather a couple of years later when the opportunity presented itself at some charity ball. Irene was wearing a slinky green dress and old-fashioned spectacles like a sexy librarian. Tony does love redheads, and when he gave her a hard time about spending his money without even being his mistress, she teased him right back, something about keeping a better eye on his kept boy.

"Because." Loki speaks haltingly, his face forlorn. "I... have wronged him. Many, many times."

Loki has grown, has changed, and Tony's about to say *no shit, you're the worst* when it dawns on him that Loki, who's given Tony nothing but compassion since he stopped trying to commit cold-blooded murder, could probably use some compassion himself right now.

"You know, Thor loves you like no one else. He'll always forgive you, no matter what crazy shit you pull," Tony says, meaning it. "You know, when Thor found out you survived your sister, he threw an epic party that lasted six days." Tony spreads his hands in the air expansively. "Imagine a vast event space, 20,000 square feet, with the entire ceiling covered in helium balloons that formed a giant mosaic of your head and shoulders." Tommy Wiseau pointed it out to Tony and Rhodey right after they walked in, as if they could have missed it. "Balloons in black, white, gold, peach, and two shades of green. Thor hired New York's foremost event planner and she got some up-and-coming artist to do it." *Antifreeze green and puke green*, Rhodey said of the colors of Balloon-Loki's outfit, but the display was undeniably impressive. The team of assistant balloon artisans apparently didn't even finish their masterpiece until the evening of the third day, at which point Irene got on a mic and announced its completion to general applause. Even then the team had to keep going, starting

over where they began and replacing older balloons with new as the older ones began to droop. The ceiling lights backlit the balloons and shone in between them like light was coming out of Balloon-Loki's pores. "It was memorable. You didn't read about it in the news? I think if you hadn't been trying to take over the world when you showed up in 2012, or if you'd actually gone to see Thor instead of hiding out with Doom two years later, you would have attended the party of your life. Literally, the party of your life."

"I--" Loki says, but then he stops. "I am weary. Let us stop for tonight."

"Why?" Tony says, but Loki's already up and leaving, walking towards the kitchen. "Hey, a good therapist never bails!" Tony calls after him, and Loki looks back at him nonplussed as Tony follows him to the kitchen.

Avoiding Tony's eyes, Loki picks up Tony's empty dinner plate as well as his own off the kitchen table and takes both to the sink.

"You what?" Tony follows Loki and uses the lift function of the D.R.A.A.G. to help him hop up backwards onto the kitchen island, settling himself through the peal of pain that lances through his lower back. "Finish your thought."

Tony gets it, though, without Loki needing to explain, even if Loki can't or won't put it into words for Tony. Loki doesn't think he deserves forgiveness. "I get it. I don't deserve forgiveness either," Tony says. "I came to the conclusion I don't deserve life."

"You'll get better," Loki assures him, turning the hot water on, looking sideways but probably not enough to actually get Tony in his line of sight. "I did."

"Yeah, and you're a real weirdo now," Tony says, watching. Tony washed his own dishes in the years after the Snap, and he definitely felt a how-the-mighty-have-fallen vibe around the task. "You're a rich nudist kidnapper. You're a demigod from another planet who tried and failed to be king of Earth, and now you wash your own dishes. What happened to you?"

"I got better," Loki insists, hand-twisting a sponge out of thin air and holding it under the stream of hot water. "I moved on. You should too."

*

"Don't think I didn't notice you ignoring my question about Doom last night," Tony says before breakfast the next morning, when he's looking out the big windows.

Loki's frying four sausages in a spitting hot pan while keeping an eye on half-cooked waffles in the press. Loki gestures at Tony with the spatula. "Why do you always do this?" The question sounds nonjudgemental, more curious than accusing. "Do you *know* you always do this?"

Tony turns. "What, speculate on other people's love lives? Because gossip is at least something to think about, and I bore easily."

"No." Loki's watching him, his eyes following lazily on Tony as he moves around the room, and with his free hand Loki expertly picks out silverware from the drawer without looking. "You flit about like a wood fairy around the periphery of every room you enter."

"Hey," Tony objects. "I know you're not from around here, but that's a pretty insulting thing to call someone these days." Tony stops and reconsiders, because he's definitely not beyond dick jokes. "Although I guess if I were a fairy, I would be a *wood* fairy."

Loki speaks lightly, as though to ensure Tony doesn't take his observations as criticisms. "You avoid sitting down unless bidden. You circle around like you cannot bear to stand still, like you fear an attack from any direction at any moment. You never turn your back on me, and if I come up behind you you startle." Loki stares at him. "Are you conscious of this?"

"I'm just twitchy," Tony says, turning away, because he doesn't much want to discuss Afghanistan. "It's a habit."

Loki sets down his handful of silverware and his spatula on the counter and takes a step back from the cooktop. Loki leans his hips back against the kitchen counter. "Do you fear me so much?"

"No." Tony shoots him a disparaging look. "No, I'm not afraid of you." Not *entirely* true. *Mostly when you put your hands on me.* "It has nothing to do with you."

Loki gazes at him for another long moment before he straightens up, shuts off the coffee maker and neatly pours a cup of coffee for each of them. Breakfast is the only meal of the day Loki ever prepares from scratch, but Tony's impressed Loki consistently manages to get coffee, a main dish, and one or two breakfast side dishes all hot and ready to eat at the same time. Like he spent some time masquerading as a short-order cook, or maybe he's using sorcery. Even Tony who can effortlessly calculate multiple cooking times in his head, is not the best at perfect food preparation timing, and a minor deity of chaos should be too disorganized as a person to make a success out of cooking.

"What *are* you afraid of?" Loki asks.

"This is breakfast, not one of our precious evening chats," Tony says. "I don't have to answer that."

"No, but you know I'll just ask you later if you don't tell me now," Loki says. "Do you need time to think about it?"

"No," Tony says.

"Then tell me, what do you fear?"

"Intrusive personal questions in interviews I didn't really want to do in the first place," Tony deflects.

Loki gives him a look.

"I'm afraid you're focusing so hard on me you're going to burn the sausages," Tony says.

Loki sighs in exasperation, but he also glances into the frying pan. *Made you look.*

"Tell me what you're afraid of first," Tony says challengingly. "Worst fear. Go."

Loki quickly checks on the waffles. "Being alone," Loki says simply and immediately, as if confessing his greatest fear means nothing to him.

Tony was expecting some hedging or a refusal to answer. And maybe Loki's lying, although as an extrovert who basks in attention, Tony's inclined to believe him. Time deliberately spent alone is great for work and for relaxation, but being alone in life is a misery. In Tony's experience, the companionship money can buy isn't as great a substitute as most people seem to think. "Well, you've obviously thought about that answer a lot. You're clearly a cat person, why didn't you just get a cat?" Tony turns again and wanders a few steps in the other direction, from the windows to the door. "I bet you didn't realize how much you wanted a pet until you ran into me. The good news is, it's not too late. We can go to a shelter right now."

"Your turn," Loki says, expertly extracting both golden waffles from the Belgian waffle maker, and after he plates them he adds a pair of sausages to each with tongs.

"Well, there's pain," Tony concedes. "Also certain situations, three species of crocodiles, especially the saltwater ones, and being without an internet connection."

"How tragic for you," Loki says. "Being without an internet connection here. What kind of situations?"

Drowning.

"Situations where-- I'm not in control." Tony flops down into one of the kitchen chairs even though Loki hasn't yet set breakfast down, just to show he's capable of sitting still. "Do you have nightmares, Reindeer Games?"

Loki brings two plates of waffles and sausages to the table and sits down beside Tony. "Yes. Sometimes. Do you?"

"Nightmares are all I have when I'm asleep." Tony isn't sure why he keeps going, why Loki is kind of ... easy to talk to sometimes. Tony picks up the fancy silver pitcher and pours a judicious amount of syrup on his sausages. "My twitchiness is a holdover from Afghanistan. I was tortured there and I haven't been comfortable around people since. Most people."

"I will keep you safe," Loki says, and he stops shaving butter off the top of the stick in that precise way he does in order to lay his cool hand over Tony's for a moment. As usual Tony flinches a little from Loki's touch, just a twitch, but he leaves his hand where it rests on the table under Loki's. "I know you do not want to be here, but you are safe with me."

"I noticed," Tony says as Loki goes back to placing each whisper-thin curved-over pat of butter on a different area of his waffle. "Doesn't really solve my problem though."

"Time will solve your problem," Loki insists.

*

That night Tony abandons his workshop for the sunroom before Loki comes to get him for 'therapy' hour.

When Loki comes looking for him, Tony's already leaning on the back of the sectional facing the wall, looking into the mirror and seeing himself and the pink-streaked sky through the window behind him. Tony looks wan to his own eyes, older and more tired than he has since the hellish repetition of rehab, after Thanos fucked up his body beyond full repair. Inside, though, he feels oddly peaceful.

Then Loki's suddenly standing in the doorway, taking Tony in. Loki may have noticed Tony moves around a lot, but Tony's noticing that Loki often fails to walk into a room, first lurking in the doorway. Tony wonders why.

"Do you want to talk?" Loki asks.

"I mean, no more than usual. No, I don't," Tony says.

"I ask because... you're in here," Loki says, a question in his voice.

"Just getting the jump on you, my options for fun are painfully limited," Tony says easily. "No, I don't want to talk. We talk endlessly. Am I free to go?"

Loki shakes his head. "I have another idea. Come with me."

Tony obligingly follows Loki across the downstairs to the screening room. Loki sits down, and Tony leans against the wall and watches as Loki lowers the screen. Loki hand-twists a tv remote into his hand and uses it to turn on-- a cartoon. Tony only gets a brief look at the main HDMI screen before Loki clicks through, but Loki has Netflix, cable, Amazon Prime and a security app.

What Tony wants to do is look at the wires and cables behind the screen, because he can easily hook up a laptop to an HDMI cable and use it to get online. The setup is professional, with no cables in sight, but they're back there. Tony should have realized the screening room would be hooked up and ready to go.

"Sit," Loki says.

"I'm good," Tony says. Tony's waiting for a punchline as the intro begins to play, but Loki gazes up at the screen like there's no joke to be told. Tony watches the opening silently.

"*Paw Patrol*?" Tony says finally, doubtfully, as the episode begins. Talking cartoon dogs and a cartoon boy. "What? Why? Is this a joke?"

Loki glances at him. "You don't enjoy this?" Loki picks up the remote and exits out of *Paw Patrol*, cycling through a cable menu. "*Peppa Pig*?"

"What?! No. No, I do not want to spend the evening watching kids' cartoons with you."

Loki asks, like he thinks he's being considerate, "Do you want to watch them alone?"

"Do you like this?" Tony demands, gesturing up at the menu of brightly colored animated thumbnails, the cartoon selection of programs for toddlers. Tony paces in front of the bottom part of the screen, probably interfering with Loki's view. "I didn't realize Thanos left you with brain damage."

Loki stiffens for a second, unmistakably, but when he speaks he sounds normal. "I have never watched any," Loki says, and points to the seat next to his. "Sit down, Tony."

Tony's exasperated. Confused, yes, but largely exasperated. He's been pulled away from his workshop for this. To placate Loki, Tony sits down. Under other circumstances he'd leave the space of an empty seat between himself and Loki, but he's more likely to get a straight answer out of Loki if he does exactly what he's been asked. "Please explain. Why, exactly, do you want me to watch cartoons?"

"Midgard has changed so much. Humans-- humans are not different, but your world is ..."
Loki trails off. "I found a chart indicating cartoons bring joy. I investigated what cartoons are, and they're this. I thought we might watch some together."

"A chart," Tony repeats. "Where did-- you found this on the internet?"

Loki nods once. "There were several circular statistical graphics illustrating --"

Circular statistical graphics-- Tony interrupts. "Do you mean pie charts?"

"Yes. Illustrating the various components of happiness. The foremost one listed, in descending order of importance-- achievement, affection, enjoying the moment, bonding, leisure, nature, exercise." Loki reaches out a hand and squeezes Tony's shoulder as if to buttress the implication that he can provide these things. Loki's hand is strong, his grip not painful but firm enough to give the distinct sense this touch easily could be bone-crushing if Loki wanted it to be.

"Uh." Tony looks down at the hand on his shoulder (*sus* as the kids say), but he doesn't pull away. "... is this bonding, or affection?"

Loki ignores the question and continues. "The secondary chart put 'memes' first-- you mentioned a meme, if you recall, so I presume you like them. Both charts seemed to have their merits. You have achievement, leisure, we're surrounded by nature," Loki says, as though checking each item off on a list. "You have access to numerous kinds of exercise. 'Expensive toys' made the second chart, and I know you have those in abundance. Food was listed, and games, and 'funny stuff,' but the second-largest slice was 'cartoons.' I thought they might fall into the category of 'enjoying the moment.'"

Tony's shoulder shifts in a sudden jerk. The movement isn't wholly voluntary, but mostly an uncomfortable firing of nerves under the emotional stress of Loki's sustained touch. "So what's next, are you going to do some stand-up for me to satisfy the category of 'funny stuff?'"

"Do you want that?" Loki asks, taking the hint and finally dropping his hand. "I am not familiar with 'stand-up' but I--"

Tony interrupts, because he can't take it anymore, and he can't help how bewildered he sounds. "Loki, what do you *want* from me?"

"Is it not obvious?" Loki asks, and Tony stubbornly shakes his head even as tears inexplicably fill his eyes, and he faces forward so Loki won't see. Loki researched happiness for him and came away with some legit fundamentals and a bunch of memetic internet nonsense, but Loki *researched happiness for him*. Tony's thought since day one that the most obvious Occam's Razor answer here is that Loki wants to make him suffer, but the strange possibility could exist that Loki wants to see him *happy*.

"I want you to want this," Loki says with uncharacteristic patience, gesturing with his free hand to encompass the room, or the world. "To want life. I want you to see your own worth, despite the arrows slung and nocked at you, whatever your own past errors, and not to give up."

Tony's silent for a few moments as he blinks and brushes away the tears from his eyes with the heels of his hands, disguising the motion by running both hands through his hair afterward. His hair's getting longer and floppier. "Well, if that's the operating hypothesis, we can at least watch cartoons meant for adults." Tony looks at Loki again and holds out his hand for the remote. "Give me that."

*

A few nights later, Tony forgets to go to bed. When he gets tired, he lies down on the couch in his workshop and falls asleep. Tony's always been fond of lying on his side and nestling his face into the inner nook of the arm of a really good couch. Tony presses his forehead and nose to the cushion and can breathe easily, but the sensation of his forehead against soft leather-covered padding feels profoundly comforting, like being snuggled from the front without being smothered. Freud would undoubtedly make it about breastfeeding, but Tony thinks it's simply the sense of coziness and enclosure without being stifled. Facing outward just doesn't replicate the effect, even if a blanket is added. And whoever Loki's decorator is, they can definitely pick a couch.

The next thing Tony knows, light is coming in the window and someone's hand is stroking his hair like he's a cat, petting him slowly from crown to nape. Tony opens his eyes and looks over his shoulder, bleary.

Loki's bending over him, naked as usual, and as Tony glances back he's at a height to get an eyeful.

"Wake up," Loki says.

"I never thought this would be my life," Tony mumbles, facing front and burying his tired eyes in the inside of the couch again. "Um, why were you touching my hair?"

"Because you did in order to wake me?"

"Oh... yeah." Tony did do that, didn't he. "I was just-- checking to see whether you were tangible or an illusion."

"That's much nicer than the way Thor does it," Loki says, straightening, and when Tony rubs his eyes and looks up at him, Loki adds, "By throwing random objects available in the vicinity at me."

"I'll try it that way next time," Tony says. With a great effort, Tony heaves himself over on the sofa to face outward.

Tony would have sworn Loki's hands were empty, but out of nowhere Loki tosses some black cloth at him. Tony sits up just in time to catch it against his chest. He's holding a pair of swimming trunks.

"Does your leg brace need to stay dry?"

"Dry? No. Wait, what?"

"Come swimming with me," Loki says.

Tony holds up the swimsuit to check it out. The trunks are sleek and black and in fairness, do look like something Tony would actually wear if he were planning to swim, which he is not. "Uh, I was repeatedly drowned for sport, so no."

"We have that in common." Loki says.

"What?"

"Put those on," Loki continues. "Or leave them, I don't care."

"Wait-- what?" Tony looks up at him, bewildered. "When? Who did that to you?"

"I had several unfortunate experiences elsewhere in the universe." Loki's mouth purses into a little grimace. "Asgard speaks of the Nine Realms as though naught else matters or even exists, but there are untold worlds beyond Yggdrasil. I have ventured... out of my depth, shall we say, only a few times in a very long life, but on those occasions I have survived by a hairsbreadth. By luck. By chaos and cleverness. I have, as you said your second night here, 'been through some shit.'"

Tony's astonished, but he doesn't show it. "Well listen," Tony says briskly. "I'm happy for you that you were able to surmount your trauma, but some of us aren't ready and haven't. So I don't want to be on your swim team."

Loki pulls Tony up, and the floor rocks beneath Tony's feet and the world around him momentarily blurs as Loki magically shifts them outside by the pool. "Just put your feet in, then," Loki says.

Loki's just going to make himself a pain in the ass until Tony offers him some kind of concession, so when Loki settles at the edge of the pool, dangling his calves into the water, Tony reluctantly strips his boxers off. He's expecting Loki to turn around while he's naked, but Loki faces front, giving Tony his privacy for the seconds it takes to pull on the swimming trunks. Tony has another thought-- sunscreen, or the lack thereof. Even in the early morning-- "If I stay out here more than five minutes, I'm going to get a sunburn."

"Five minutes then," Loki says, and Tony sits down beside Loki, lowering his feet and calves in. The pool's warm and the water comes up almost to his knees.

Loki leans forward, scooping up a palmful of water and letting it drizzle from his hand. "You know you can breathe this, right?"

"I know, and I don't much care."

Loki flicks a second handful of water at Tony's knees. "This is the perfect opportunity to work on your lingering issues. You said you liked to swim. Don't let your dead enemies take this from you."

Loki's looking back at him, and Tony makes and holds eye contact. Loki's green eyes almost glow against his pale skin in the early light. "They already did," Tony says quietly. "Some things you don't get back."

Loki tsks. "You take them back."

Tony makes a wry face at Loki. "Do you? Maybe you do, but as you might have noticed, I'm me."

"Come now," Loki urges. "This is exposure therapy, gentle and safe, just like your friend Bruce would espouse."

"You don't know what stand-up is and you think cartoons can make humans happy, but you've heard of exposure therapy," Tony says dubiously.

"Do you think all outside your world live perfect easy lives, free of pain?" Loki slips off the side and into the pool with almost zero splash, stands in the chest-high water and holds out both steady hands to Tony, palms up.

Tony eyes his hands mistrustfully. "Why are you so insistent on this?"

Loki doesn't drop his hands. "Midgardians have terribly short lives. You're halfway through yours already. You don't have time to stay traumatized."

"That is just so typical of a know-it-all Asgardian frost alien," Tony says half-sourly, but he can't help the corner of his mouth pulling up in a smile. "So... *you*."

Loki's face is open and openly coaxing, his eyes wide and tempting, sparkling and guileless, every inch of his face radiating the request for trust, and Tony sighs and gives in to the persuasion. Loki's undeniably putting a good deal of effort into this entreaty. Feeling a bit like he's vaulting over the penthouse balcony again, and this time feeling reluctant instead of confident in his choice, Tony pushes himself off the side and out into the warm water.

"I don't need to hold your hands," Tony grumbles. He's not having a panic attack. His feet can touch the bottom in this part of the pool, so he's not even swimming, just standing in water. He's fine. Fine.

"Will it not make you feel safer?"

The unvoiced insane always-paranoid part of Tony suspects Loki's built up all of this just to drown him, but Tony allows no hesitation to show as he boldly slips his hands into Loki's. Men don't touch like this, Tony thinks, but that's only Howard's condescending voice in his head passing through, here to tell him what's inappropriate, passing an ounce of homophobic judgement, just whispering a shitty little holdover from the golden age of toxic masculinity. Tony pushes those thoughts out of his mind, looks at their clasped hands, and honestly considers whether he feels safer. Maybe he does.

"Have you considered it the other way?" Tony asks, flipping the script back on Loki, and he stares Loki solidly in the eye. "That maybe *you* feel better holding *my* hands?"

Loki regards their enfolded hands, lifts his eyes to Tony's and smiles enigmatically. "You're all right, then?" Loki asks, and he waits until Tony nods and withdraws from his touch to lower his arms to his sides.

*

"Why saltwater crocodiles?" Loki asks at lunch the next day.

"Because they're terrifying? Give me the salt."

*

The next night halfway through their therapy hour, Tony thinks to ask, "When I jumped and you saw me drop, did you know it was me?"

Loki shakes his head. "No. I saw someone falling, but I didn't know who it was," Loki answers. "I was curious."

"And you still would have caught me if you knew it was me?"

"Yes," Loki answers without a trace of hesitation. "Believe me, I have changed."

"You keep saying you've changed," Tony says. "Let's say I do believe you. When did you grow up?"

"Hundreds of years before you were born," Loki says.

Tony gives him an unimpressed look, the kind that's all he needs to send Peter into fits of babbled explanations and justifications.

But Loki only stares back at him, long and assessing, as though considering whether Tony can handle a truth or keep a secret. "If you truly must know, I watched the last act of my life play out across a screen."

Tony believes him, because Loki vibes like he's telling the truth, but what he's saying makes no sense at all. "You've seen your future?"

"No. Not my future, anymore," Loki says quietly. "But I saw what happened to a different version of myself up until I-- up until he died on Sanctuary II."

Thanos' ship? Tony's confused now. "Wait, what?" Tony shakes his head, because he's not going to be taken in by bullshit. "I'm not your gullible brother, you obviously survived Thanos--you faked your death, *again*, nice job breaking Thor's heart a fourth time, by the way. Once was enough, maybe twice, but *four* times? Is that the only way you can get it up, by making Thor believe you're dead?" Tony's just giving Loki the business as he always does, and he's surprised to see Loki's feverish green eyes flash and to realize he's finally, finally -- unintentionally!-- said something that's violently pissed Loki off. Tony plunges on anyway. "Cause I can't think of any other reason to fake your death *four times*."

"How *dare* you," Loki says, suddenly on his feet, seething rage in his eyes, his mouth a thin but elegant and very angry line. Why, why is it that Tony's go-to insults for Loki come out sexual in nature? Tony will have to contemplate that later. If he survives to see 'later.' Does he *want* to see 'later?' Maybe. Maybe he does.

Shots, though-- shots definitely fired right across the bow. Thor is a touchy subject for Loki, Tony sort of already knew that. Even through the quietly-freaking-out, calm-exterior manic state Tony was in back in 2012 in the penthouse, he could see how Loki's face clouded at the thought of facing his big brother. And it was the mildly insulting sexual insinuation that made him throw Tony out the window that day, too... the implication of impotence definitely has a history of setting him off. Note to self, maybe don't tease Loki with an offensive combination of two particularly touchy subjects.

Well, Tony's smart mouth has managed to deeply piss Loki off for the first time since their big reunion, might as well take advantage of it. Tony hops off the back of the couch and straightens up, getting in Loki's face. "What are you gonna do about it?"

Loki's hands come up like he's going to throw Tony backwards or maybe even strangle him, but Loki only seizes Tony by the neck and the upper arm as he captures Tony's lips in a sharp, brutal kiss.

Tony flinches at Loki's touch, but his neck doesn't seize up when Loki grabs him, maybe because he's prepared to be attacked and making a conscious effort to stay loose-limbed, so that's nice.

The kiss is not nice.

The kiss is prolonged and vicious, with Loki's mouth pressing to his with violent force. Loki's tongue pushes Tony's lips open with zero fucks or by-your-leaves given. Usually Tony likes to be in control of a kiss, of a touch, but now he's a passive non-participant, a face and body having a kiss done to him, no more. Loki catches Tony's upper lip between his teeth and rakes down the inside hard enough to draw blood. Blindly, all other thoughts momentarily turned off, Tony feels the stinging pain and tastes the copper on his tongue.

Loki can hurt him, then, through the spell. Loki can kill him, if he wants to.

The kiss is not nice, but Tony's having all the wrong reactions to it. Tony should be freaking out, for years now he's been unsettled by anyone with superstrength being in his vicinity and had panic attacks when they get too close, but here he just feels turned on.

Loki jerks a few inches back, though he keeps a grip on the side of Tony's neck tight enough to give him a stroke. "I could do *anything* to you," Loki hisses, and this is far more like the old Loki, although with the rapey factor dialed up to eleven. Does Loki think one forced kiss, a neck squeeze and a threat are going to frighten him? *Should* he be frightened?

Tony pants when Loki suddenly pulls away, almost dizzy from the intensity of the kiss, his lip still stinging, and he's gotten hard rapidly, faster than he has in ages without the aid of recreational sedenafil surging through his system. Tony hasn't liked it rough since his twenties, and then only when he was in control, but Loki kissing him in anger was fucking hot.

"Hey, I offered you sexual favors and you turned me down," Tony says breathlessly, because while he lacks the ability to get rough with Loki back, clearly he's still more than capable of verbal provocation, and he makes the words a challenge.

Loki seems out of breath too, his chest rising and falling quicker than usual, and anger makes his face dark and his eyes stormy, but he speaks deliberately now, with forced calm. "What I am choosing to do is *care for you*, because I think you are worth my time and trouble."

Tony can still feel the shadow sense of the violent pressure of Loki's mouth against his, and the ghost of the tightness of Loki's fingers on his neck. Tony fully expects to sport bruises in multiple locations, and he finds he doesn't care. "And I think you're dead wrong, but clearly you don't give a shit about my opinions."

Loki seems surprised by this accusation, so much so that he fumbles his words. "I-- I take into account-- I ask you every morning what you want for breakfast--"

Tony cuts Loki off with a laugh that's bordering on hysteria. "So what?! Loki, I'm not your pet!"

"I don't think of you as my pet--"

"And I'm not your project," Tony insists. "I'm not talking about my opinion of what I want to fucking eat. I'm talking about my opinion on me wanting out of the mortal coil."

Loki's face changes then, his features hardening. "My project is exactly what you are," Loki says coldly. "So sit down."

Tony sits. He's expecting Loki to sit down too, but Loki turns on his heel and walks out of the room.

Tony sits on the sectional for a good ten minutes before he realizes therapy is probably over for the night, and Loki's not coming back. Tony's alone, so he lies down on the sectional and closes his eyes, thinking in fits and starts, emotion occasionally rising and falling inside him, sometimes churning through him. Tony lets his mind drift around.

Loki's attracted to him, Tony knows it. That kiss was revelation; nobody kisses someone like that unless they want to fuck. And it's downright uncomfortable how much Tony wants to steer Loki into bed. Not something anyone healthy should want from their kidnapper.

Luckily Tony's never pretended to be healthy.

Tony thinks about Loki, this Loki, the Loki who lives by the ocean and openly appreciates mermaids, the Loki who looks like he's aged a decade in human years, the Loki who walks around naked half the time and makes Tony breakfast like it's his job.

Loki claimed he died and watched the last act of his life on a screen. Loki said he's a different version of himself. Tony thinks about what that means. Watching your life play across a screen sounds vaguely like an afterlife situation, but as the guy who wrote the equations that made quantum time travel a thing, Tony puts the pieces together fast and realizes what it all means in a start. He's getting slow, though-- he should have realized the truth immediately from the variously strange things Loki's said.

Different allies, different enemies, different me sounded at the time like Loki was saying he'd changed, but in context... and then *I saw Doom give the talisman to me, but I don't think I knew what it would do*. Tony's dealing with the Loki who branched from New York in 2012, the freshly defeated Loki they inadvertently unleashed trying to get the stones in New York. Loki grabbed the Tesseract and took off, and the Loki Tony knows here and now is vastly different from the raging, self-important asshole Tony fought back then, but if Loki actually died at Thanos' hands, this has got to be him.

Tony has no idea how Loki might have watched the other Loki's future on a screen, though. And *a gift-wrapped offer to puppet-master the entirety of the universe?* What the hell was that about?

*

The next morning Loki isn't drinking and naked sunbathing outside on his chaise. The French doors to the deck are closed. Tony should feel great about finally disrupting his captor's weird-ass routine.

Instead, bizarrely, Tony feels guilty.

And to think, he never bought into the Stockholm Syndrome thing. The whole idea sounded stupid. Who would identify with, or root for, or fall for a kidnapper? Tony's hated the guts of every bad guy who's ever held him prisoner. But here-- Tony's feeling it happen in real time, firsthand seeing the phenomenon in action. He's become attached to his captor. Stupid damaged brain. Yet knowing his feelings aren't rational doesn't fix or eliminate them. Solitary confinement's supposed to be the most brutal possible thing for normal people, and Tony's hardly normal. He knows he really will go nuts if he's deprived of human contact, or... human-like. Tony's the kind of person who needs someone to listen to him talk. Not only that, Loki's treated him with kid gloves, relatively speaking.

But... it's more than that. He likes Loki now. Genuinely likes him. Tony started out feigning friendliness to Loki in order to manipulate him; when did the fake rapport become real?

Tony doesn't have an answer for himself, only thoughts that whirl around like so many disorganized nanoparticles.

Tony goes back into the downstairs, which feels empty. "Loki?" Tony calls tentatively, but he gets no answer.

After a brief search of the downstairs levels, Tony trudges back up the stairs and taps on Loki's closed bedroom door. "Loki?"

Tony realizes he's hearing running water, and when Tony gets no answer, he opens the door. Across the bedroom, the double doors to the bathroom are thrown wide, and Loki is in the centered spa tub. For a second Tony's eyes interpret what he's seeing as Loki and a giant blue-green fish in the tub, but clarity dawns as he realizes Loki's sprawled out in the bathtub with a wide and elaborate mermaid tail resting on the far side.

Tony moves to the bathroom doorway, averting his eyes from Loki, because even if Loki's comfortable walking around naked, he might want privacy in the bath, who knows. Tony knocks twice on the doorframe to announce his presence.

"You're a merman," Tony says aloud. "I am Tom Hanks in this scenario."

Loki says nothing for a long moment.

"Listen Madison," Tony says through the cloud of hot and heavy steam in the room, waving a hand in front of his face to brush it away a little and hopefully get some cool air to his nose if there's any left available. "I'm sorry about last night-- I shouldn't have said, you know, what I did. Sensitive topic, and, y'know. My bad."

Loki still says nothing.

"... are you not speaking to me?"

"I am," Loki says immediately, and in peripheral vision Tony can see Loki's head turn up towards him.

"Good, because the silent treatment is abusive," Tony says. Under Howard, Stark Industries invented thousands of weapon designs, prototypes and immensely valuable finished products, but at home Howard's favorite weapon was a refusal to acknowledge Tony existed. "Just saying."

"Come in," Loki says, and Tony walks into the room, keeping his head turned away from Loki. "Sit, if you care to."

These requests are made with uncharacteristic hesitation, and for the first time it occurs to Tony that Loki might have been avoiding him this morning not out of anger, but out of misgivings or even private shame.

Tony could sit on one of the matching cedar benches on the outskirts of the room, but instead Tony sits down on the squared-off ledge of the spa tub. "This is um. Different," Tony says of the tail, unable to keep his eyes wholly off the shimmering length of it. The mermaid tail is blue-green scales but more green than blue, and many flecked with scintillating gold like a piranha, light-reflecting as they catch the rising sun from the windows. At the bottom, the

fish scales give way to striated patterns of thick and thin finning towards the wide bifurcated tip, and the whole length of it faintly shimmers in the sun.

"I am sorry too," Loki says.

"You are?" Tony's almost forgotten what they're talking about. He'd like to take a small scraping of the fishtail to run through a genetic analyzer, get the DNA, process every inch of the genome of the novel species he's looking at right now. Bruce would lose his mind. "For what?"

"For... hurting you," Loki says haltingly.

Oh, right. "It's fine. No one can say I didn't know you have a temper. Remember when you threw me out the window?"

"I regret my impulsive actions," Loki says, his voice low, his eyes on the water in the tub. "Last night was not acceptable and it will not happen again."

"Let's try it again a little less violently," Tony suggests.

Loki's eyes fly to his face. "No."

"No? That's not the vibe you're putting out, warden."

Now it's Loki's turn to look away, his gaze fixing in the direction of one of the pristine sinks. "I want to help you. Truly. That is all."

That is not all. Tony knows people and ancient frost alien terrorist demigods enough to recognize bullshit like that when he hears it. Tony leans down and dips a hand into the warm bathwater. The spa tub isn't quite half full. Loki turns into fish right around his hips, pale skin giving way to the start of patchy bluish-green scales. "These things take an eternity to fill up. How long did it take you to get this much water in it?"

"About an hour and a half," Loki says.

Tony hasn't gotten inside a full bathtub in years. He tried after he came back from Afghanistan, and he tried again in 2015 or so. No dice, and Tony wasn't interested in addressing the issue further when a perfectly viable alternative exists. Showers only, showers always. "If I get in your bath, are you going to get out?"

Loki's eyes flash to his face again. "I -- no, it's *my* bath."

Tony pulls off his shirt. "Okay, then consider this me helping you fill out the volume of the tub faster." Stripping off his boxers, Tony sits back down on the side of the tub, dipping his good leg into the water. Tony unselfconsciously leaves the D.R.A.A.G. on as he climbs over the edge and slips down into the tub across from Loki. "You're welcome. Pass me the soap?"

Loki materializes and hands over a bar of soap like he's nonplussed to have Tony in his spa tub, so Tony acts like the whole thing's totally normal. Besides, Tony can't hold back on asking after last night's revelation any longer.

"Picking up where we left off," Tony says, scrubbing his armpits with the soap. "I realized something. You're the Loki who branched from 2012, aren't you? Steve and Scott and Bruce and I traveled through the quantum realm to collect three of the Infinity Stones, but in all the commotion in the lobby you grabbed the Tesseract and flew the coop." Scott Lang is a credulous, stuttering, star-struck idiot, but he *is* bright and his actions helped save half the universe, so Tony calls him by his first name like any of the other Avengers, even though Scott largely works alone and doesn't live with them. Tony zig-zags the soap over his chest, getting a lather started. "Am I right?"

"Yes. And I did not survive Thanos," Loki says heavily, as if this truth weighs on him.

"So where have you been hiding out all this time?"

"Outside of time," Loki says, watching Tony soap up. "And I was not 'hiding out.' I was ensnared by a timeline-wrangling bureaucracy."

"That's... huh, that's interesting." Tony didn't know there was a timeline-wrangling bureaucracy. The possibility of Time Cops never figured into any of his calculations or his plans. No timeline authorities bothered any of the Avengers on their journeys through the Quantum Realm as far as Tony knows, and he read all the debriefs during his recovery in the hospital. Does that mean the ten of them going back to reverse Thanos' destruction was stamped with this entity's approval?

"I blamed you at first," Loki admits. "It was your fault I was there-- you lot were the ones mucking about with time. I did nothing but what came naturally, picking up the Tesseract and using it to escape, but I was the one considered to have violated the 'sacred timeline.'"

So Tony and team were meant, by some time-meddling cosmic supermen, to reverse the Snap. Knowing some of your life's best work is smiled upon by whomever runs the universe feels kind of nice, warming Tony's chest like a good Macallan flowing down. Tony marvels at the thought. On the other hand, it's really discomfiting knowing that some entity is running the universe behind the scenes and punishing wayward time travelers, cause under other arbitrary circumstances that could have been the Avengers and company. Probably the way it's disconcerting to be an ant in a world of men, with no clue why some of you are getting stomped or baited with poison or immortalized in melted aluminum poured directly into your colony.

"Huh," Tony says. "Um, sorry?"

Loki shakes his head. "It matters not. It was meant to happen."

A timeline-wrangling bureaucracy sounds like either Douglas Adams or *Rick and Morty*, but Tony has no doubt both comparisons would go over Loki's head. "That can't be all you did to get in trouble with the time lords."

"The Time Variance Authority, and my presence there was contrived by the one controlling the TVA for the purposes of offering me control of the organization."

"Control of the time cops," Tony repeats.

"Yes. To continue to prune timelines, to prevent the rise of the multiverse."

Tony looks at Loki dubiously. "No offense, but why would they give you of all people that much power? Being a chaos person and all?"

"Because I'm pragmatic," Loki says.

Tony lets it go, for now. "So are there infinite universes then?"

"There are now," Loki says soberly. "Think of your climate conundrum this way: even if in an alternate timeline, humanity will live on."

"I guess that's something," Tony says, though the thought isn't that comforting. "So to you, the last times you saw me were when you threw me out a window shortly before the Hulk wiped the floor with you, when we were in the elevator and then the lobby of my building, and I had a cardiac event on the floor."

"Yes," Loki says. "I saw you, though, when I saw the rest of the other me's future."

"And how did you end up here?"

"My fellow, ah, my fellow time criminal, who was also an innocent--" Loki stops, reconsiders, and starts again. "My fellow time criminal, who was also unfairly accused of crimes against the timeline, destabilized the bureaucracy. I was thrown here somehow, to this timeline. I feared being followed here at first, but I believe the TVA's effectiveness was compromised beyond recovery by her actions."

Tony stares at Loki, reminding himself the Avengers have proven they can handle whatever's thrown at them. "So you fucked up the universe?"

Loki doesn't meet his eyes. "I am not sure, to be quite honest with you. For what it is worth, in the end, the choice was not mine."

Definitely a connection between Loki's not preventing the rise of the multiverse, and the storm Loki said was coming. "Worse and worse with you," Tony says, but the world seems to be turning on, so he lets it go. He's curious about mermaid anatomy. "Where *is* your junk right now?"

"My *junk*?" Loki sounds insulted, but just as quickly dismisses what must come across as a slur and makes a demonstrative gesture at the place his pelvis would normally sit like a model from *The Price is Right* showing off prizes, but with more swirl to his fingers. The spot is groin-level at the middle of his body a short distance from where the scales begin on his torso, and there might be the line of a seam faintly visible there beneath the water, but Tony's not sure. "Here, sheathed. You are obscene." Loki doesn't sound like he really minds, though.

"You're not the first person to tell me that," Tony says, and he drops his eyes to the tail before looking back up at Loki and holding up his hand over what would be the calf area of the fish tail, delicately keeping his hand six inches away until given permission. "May I?"

"Go ahead," Loki says, and undulates the tail-- his *tail*, flapping the wide-finned end of it against the porcelain of the tub with a noise that's somewhere in between a thump and a slap.

The scales of Loki's tail feel slippery under his fingers. Tony runs his hands along the water-slickened scaled length of it the same way he'd run his hand up a woman's smooth-shaven leg, letting his fingers brush as light as feathers and tickling a little when his hand creeps up as far as he can reach. Tony slides his butt along the bench of the spa tub to run his hand higher up, and Loki looks sideways at him, green eyes narrowed with sharp consideration. Tony holds Loki's gaze as he slowly drags his palm and then his fingers over the spot in front that Loki indicated, watching for some reaction. Tony's not disappointed-- for a fraction of a second a *shiver* goes through Loki, like he's just heard some really good ASMR. The frisson starts in Loki's neck and shoulders and runs down his body, though after the sensation passes through Loki's shoulders he breaks eye contact and mostly hides the remainder of the reflex, though his tail flexes ever so slightly, as though a tiny ripple's passing through it, too.

Tony slides his hand slowly to the side where hip meets waist and blue-green scales give way to pale skin, lets the moment pass and pulls away, leaning down to splash his hair wet without putting his face in the water. "You have shampoo in here?"

*

As they go in for dinner a few nights later, Loki walks over to the kitchen counter. Pulling a knife from the block, Loki flips it in the air, catches it, and hurls it at a fatal speed towards Tony's eye just as Tony's about to sit at the table. Tony ducks on instinct but too late and too slow to avoid the blade. As he jerks down, Tony's upper back and neck seize up. For a microsecond he thinks he's going to die with a knife in his eye, and the single thought comes as pure knowledge, an emotionless understanding, without time for either positive nor negative feelings accompanying the thought. Then the silver point of the knife hits the invisible barrier around his forehead and bounces off, clattering to the kitchen floor.

Tony hits the floor in a kneeling position, his neck muscles going furiously into spasm. "What the hell was that?" Tony bursts out, but then he has to clench his teeth to keep from shouting as a fresh surge of pain wracks him.

"Just testing your will to live," Loki says casually, going to the refrigerator.

Tony's heart is pounding from the shock and pain, his knees buckle and with a single harsh movement he forces himself to drop flat to the floor on his back. The shift in position redoubles the shock and searing pain into an agony that's paralyzing, so intense that for a second Tony can't speak, can't even think.

The seconds pass like months, but they pass. "Do it again without the barrier up and see if I duck again," Tony suggests through gritted teeth a few moments later when he can speak again, his eyes on the ceiling without seeing it. He's sweating.

"I won't do it again," Loki says, and rage stemming purely from the pain flashes through Tony on hearing the smile in Loki's voice, but then Loki must turn around and notice Tony's down for the count on the kitchen floor. "I don't like to be predictable," Loki says, but his sentence slows down with each word, and then Loki asks with concern, "Are you all right?"

Tony's not all right, he's reeling in a tailspin of agony, all the muscles of his neck, shoulders and upper back firing at once with every involuntary twitch of movement, and then sometimes when he's holding studiously still too, forcing motionlessness.

Loki's kneeling at his side in a flash, and his words cut low and urgent. "What's wrong?"

"Pills," Tony grinds out through a fresh wave of pain. "Bathroom."

Loki looks like he wants to give Tony a hard shake. "Tony, what is hurting you?!"

"Trapezius myalgia," Tony says.

Tony's answer must not translate perfectly, because his response doesn't diminish Loki's agitation. Loki sounds almost confused. "... neck pain?"

Instead of teleporting upstairs to fetch the appropriate drugs, Loki slips one of his long-fingered hands underneath the back collar of Tony's shirt. Loki's palm and fingers are cool against Tony's neck, and Tony's muscles react badly to the temperature shift at first. Tony squeezes his eyes shut hard and clenches his jaw again. But then something changes-- the coolness that's further aggravating his tightly snapping muscles is suddenly numbing his trapezius.

Tony moans with the quick and blissful dissipation of the pain, catches himself, because way to make a wholly sexual-sounding noise under Loki's touch, but instead of silencing himself and letting the rest out as a quiet breath, Tony lets the rest of the sound finish and die in his throat, because he's shameless like that, and because the feeling of swift dispersion of acute pain feels like the rush of endorphins or ecstasy.

Loki's not looking at Tony, but his expression is one of perfect hyper-focused concentration, like he's trying to absorb information through his hands, like he's focusing on adding just the right amount of titrant to an analyte, and all depends on the steady deftness of his hands.

"Neck pain," Tony repeats a few moments later. "Chronic neck-shoulder-and-a-little-bit-of-upper-back pain. It's actually kind of amazing it took this long for you to lay me out."

"Forgive me," Loki says, shifting his hand, and the relief flows out from Tony's neck into his shoulders. "I did not realize--"

"That Thanos fucked up my body so much so that you can take me down with a quick startle or practical joke? Yeah, most people don't realize. No sweat." Tony experimentally moves his head left an inch, then right an inch, and the pain is greatly diminished, only an echo of the agony he felt thirty seconds ago. "Where were you after he threw a moon at me?"

"I was dead," Loki reminds him bluntly, bending closer so he can slide his hand farther down into the space between Tony's shoulder blades, and their faces are only inches away now. Loki continues putting out whatever magical energy Tony's neck is soaking up like the sweet relief of morphine. Tony loves those Duramorph shots. "Stop moving."

Tony lies still, just letting himself feel the sensation of exquisite easement Loki's saturating through his muscles. "Can you just... do that forever."

Loki's grim face softens a little.

"I actually survived the moon throwing really well. It was the part where he grabbed me by the leg and crunched that really caused problems." Tony slaps his fucked-up thigh.

"Testament to the power of modern science they saved this thing." Stupid giant titan hand. Tony would have bled out promptly if not for Wanda, who held him together with magic and the sheer force of her will until he got medical care. Not many people survive having their femoral artery squeezed until it pops, and plenty of people don't survive the simple breaking of a femur, let alone the compound shattering of one. Tony was unconscious for the hospital trip and the surgeries that followed, but apparently the hospital was a real clusterfuck with half the population suddenly back. That was the last any of them saw of Wanda, too, until F.R.I.D.A.Y. pinged Tony with a series of ultra-classified S.W.O.R.D. files plastered top to bottom with her name and a disturbing tale to tell about an idyllic suburb in Jersey. Tony knew Wanda was dangerous. Things feel complicated now, not least because he owes his life to her. Tony's not so bull-headed he failed to take a lesson about overpreparedness and jumping the gun from Ultron, and he figures Wanda's S.W.O.R.D.'s problem until things really go pear-shaped.

"Stopping Thanos was kind of a last hurrah, or it should have been. I mean, the suits have never completely protected me from contusions and injuries, but they were mostly small stuff until that, bruises and welts." Tony laughs shortly. "I was considering really becoming the consultant Fury wanted. If only I'd known all I needed was to ask you for a portable magical protection bubble."

Loki says nothing, only easing his fingers farther down, moving his hand in a slow circle around Tony's back.

"I have definitely regained my will to live, because I instinctively dodged a weapon thrown at my head," Tony says. Tony feels like he can sit up, so he does, moving Loki's hand with him. "Definitely. You can let me go now."

Loki hisses displeasure when Tony moves again, using his other hand to stabilize Tony where he sits. "Be careful."

Tony ignores him, shrugging his shoulders comfortably. "Healing powers, huh? That's new?"

"I -- healing, no, I do not think so," Loki says, finally reclaiming his hand, curling his fingers up as he withdraws them. "Pain-banishing, only. I am an enchanter and illusionist. The painlessness is both enchantment and illusion, and it will wear off with time. What do you normally do when this happens?"

"Take a painkiller and a muscle relaxant and wait it out," Tony says, his lips twisting. He's a heavy user, and for years now the only thing between him and a full-blown opiod addiction has been sheer stubbornness. "There's not an easy fix."

*

Tony takes the cyclobenzaprine but skips the oxycodone, because the only pain he's in is the normal on-and-off amount from his leg. The cyclobenzaprine puts him to sleep early and deeply, and Loki doesn't wake him for therapy that evening. When Tony wakes up the next morning, Loki's sitting on the edge of Tony's bed leaning over him, green eyes intent.

"Whoa," Tony says, and he starts to sit up only to feel the searing pain in his neck again, flattening him back out fast.

"Don't--!" Loki says as Tony tries and fails to get upright, but too late.

"Were you watching me sleep?" Tony asks as Loki slips a hand against Tony's neck. "Cause no offense, but that's creepy."

"I did not intend any violation. I did not want you to wake up in pain," Loki says, once again sending those sweet waves of pain-eating illusion through Tony's bow-tight muscles. Tony lies there and lets Loki work, though he stretches the muscles of his neck and shoulders a little as the pain fades to a phantom of itself.

Tony rises and goes into the bathroom for his morning routine. When he's finished taking a piss and brushing his teeth and exits the bathroom, Loki's still sitting on Tony's bed.

"Come on," Loki says, rising. "What do you want for breakfast?"

Tony's not surprised when Loki makes him lie on the sectional in the sunroom, but he is surprised when Loki hand-twists the familiar silver phone out of nowhere and hands it to him.

"Rest," Loki says pointedly, and he fixes Tony with an intense stare. "Do not try to contact anyone. Agreed?"

"Yes, warden," Tony says, but he's delighted. The phone's a Samsung, Tony notes with amusement, and the sleek housing feels good in his hand. Feels right. "No sexting, I promise." Tony squints at the phone. "You got any dick pics on this I should know about? And where would I find said dick pics? Just so I know which folders to avoid."

"You see it every day, do you truly require a photograph?"

"Well, require is a strong word," Tony says.

Loki leaves the room and comes back with a glass of water, setting it on the end table before he leaves the room for a longer time, presumably to go make the cheesy omelet Tony requested.

Tony wastes no time in starting on the phone for information. The first thing Tony notices is that the phone doesn't say the date on the home screen, only the time, which is... unusual. The phone is set to LTE. Tony immediately uses the net connection to detect his approximate location by way of the location of the nearest cell tower, and he comes up with Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

"What," Tony says aloud.

A quick refresh tells him he's in Henderson, Nevada, not that Tony needed confirmation that he's not in Mongolia. He's definitely not in Nevada, either. Loki's magical field must be messing with the internet protocol, or the satellites if this is satellite internet, or maybe the spell is designed more generally to clairvoyantly thwart Tony.

Tony goes into *Settings* and slides the bar on *Developer Options* to maximize his chances of fixing whatever's going on here, then starts the semi-methodical messing around that characterizes superficial technical troubleshooting. Tony looks to see what time zone the operating system has been set to, yet there's no indication of any time zone being set in the system at all. Tony clicks around through every option and sub-menu and comes up empty-handed. Baffling. Probably just more bewitched bullshit. Carefully checking everything and fucking around changes nothing. Tony could sneak into his workshop and ask F.R.I.D.A.Y. to jailbreak the phone, but he has no doubt he'd run into more walls and in the meantime, Loki might want his phone back.

Tony has net access, though, now, even if he is working with the equivalent of a diabolical VPN. Tony logs into his email and stares at the small screen. Emails from Steve, from Rhodey, from Nat, from Fury, from Pepper. Tony skips down to Pepper's.

Tony, call or email or text, or hire a skywriter, or time travel and tattoo a message on me while I sleep. Do whatever you have to do, but you let me know you're alright. Everyone's worried sick.

P.

Pepper always signs her initial to the ends of her personal emails to him, as if he wouldn't know it's her from the automatic signature with all her contact information. Tony, who has checked out the contents of her Sent box, theorizes it's her way of personalizing what would otherwise be generic, because she doesn't sign an initial with professional messages to her secretary or subordinates or anyone on the board. Tony moves on to the next message, because Pepper gave up the absolute right to a prompt answer when she broke up with him (again).

Tony was a complete gentleman about the whole thing, embracing Happy and joking about Happy being the better man. Tony felt less resentment about the marriage to Happy than anyone seemed to expect from him, which was kind of insulting and affirming at the same time. Insulting because he's an adult, and even if he'll always feel stung over it, he'd have to be a monster to outwardly be an asshole because the two of them clearly make each other blissful. Affirming, because everyone's surprise at least confirmed that expectations of him are low. Tony likes to keep expectations tamped down. Tony skips Nat's email entirely to read Rhodey's.

For God's sakes Tony, what the fuck are you doing? We all feel badly about the other night, but this is the worst stunt you've ever pulled. Call me.

Oh, Rhodey bear, BFF forever. Tony's really upset him if he's swearing. His Rhodey usually keeps a squeaky clean mouth. But Rhodey berated him right along with the others when he was hitting his rock bottom.

They all did, all except for Bucky, who never speaks to Tony unless they're on a mission or discussing tactics or if Tony speaks to him first, Bucky who even now bows his head when Tony enters the room like he thinks that's the proper way to be respectful to someone after killing their parents, stealing their best friend, beating the electromagnetic power cell out of them and leaving them alone and stranded in Siberia.

Bucky showed up to fight against Thanos alongside the rest of the enhanced individuals who were Snapped. He fought side by side with Tony and saved his life during the battle, which was a strange turning point. With the passage of time Tony's accepted that the Winter Soldier was mind-controlled by H.Y.D.R.A., but Tony deserves a fucking Nobel Peace Prize for letting Bucky be on the team and live in his building. (Tony's won it before, but for his charitable treatment of James Barnes he deserves another.) Tony's not sure why Bucky accepted the invite, relayed through Steve, and Bucky certainly doesn't seem comfortable in the Tower, but Tony judges Bucky the type who's never comfortable no matter where he finds himself. Since Tony's gotten to know the Manchurian Candidate slightly, he's struck Tony as quiet but internally restless, a walking archetype of the adage about still waters running deep.

He's a nice guy, you should give him a chance, Nat said once. I am, Tony answered shortly, but the comment got under his skin, and he elaborated with barely veiled hostility. He's the car that killed my parents. He lives in my house and I feed him and leave him alone. So what, exactly, does 'giving him a chance' look like to you? What more should I be doing for him here?

Nat's a smart woman, and she backed off.

Steve probably talked Bucky into moving in. Tony's seen him smile at Steve, heard him voice an opinion to Sam when he didn't know Tony was behind him, but Bucky has nothing for Tony but an atmosphere of guilt like a personal cloud of grief that perpetually follows over his head. Sometimes Tony feels like Bucky's continually grieving Tony's parents more than Tony has, which is honestly kind of fucking annoying. Tony's committed to being the biggest man, though, and he's included Bucky on the team and otherwise ignores him. Bucky returns the favor with his constant weird deference. Bucky stood by wordless and unmoving the night of their last mission, with his eyes motionless on the carpet like he was the one being called to it, while the rest of them took turns criticizing Tony's judgement. Not that Tony didn't deserve the condemnation, and Tony knows they didn't realize how bad off mentally he was at the time. Not even Rhodey.

In any case, Tony certainly can't hold it against his Gummy Bear. Tony closes Rhodey's email and looks at Steve's.

Dear Tony,

We woke up this morning to you gone and a message from F.R.I.D.A.Y. that you were ending your life. We don't know whether you really recorded that message or it was something called a deep fake, but it sure looked like you. F.R.I.D.A.Y. says it was you. Then the cameras were temporarily disabled in the tower for fifteen minutes. F.R.I.D.A.Y. said you ordered that, and you had her turn off the penthouse mics, but based on her sensors you jumped off the balcony. We found your nano-reactor lying on the balcony too.

A little while after that, a guy knocked on the door and gave a message to Natasha and Thor.

The note is written in what looks like your handwriting and says that you're alive and not to look for you. The messenger took off before either of them could read the note, and they didn't know yet that you were missing. Nat and Thor strongly disagree on what the delivery guy looked like. The front door camera malfunctioned so we have no video evidence of him, and he doesn't appear on any of the downstairs cameras either.

All the stuff in your workshop is gone. All of it. And everything from your bathroom, too. Nothing in the trash, no sign of any of your effects or your work.

We consulted Dr. Stephen Strange but he refused to help us find you. He said you're right where you need to be, and he wouldn't say any more.

Tony, we all feel absolutely terrible about last night. I'm sorry. We were way too hard on you, and we need to know whether you're all right. We need to know: where are you and what is going on?

Oof. There are a few additional messages, all reiterations and rephrasings of previous emails, all laden with requests for communication. Tony clicks through them fast.

Dr. Strange must be getting lazy. That would explain both why he refused to find out for the Avengers where Tony is, and why he didn't want to teach Tony the mystic secrets of the finger-wiggling wizard arts.

What to tell Steve? Or Rhodey? Tony doesn't much feel like contacting anyone, now that he comes down to it. What would he say anyway? Accept the apology? Ask for rescue? Loki's made certain Tony doesn't know where in the world he is. *Look on tropical islands near the equator* wouldn't narrow it down much, and Tony doubts Loki purchased this property under his own name. Tony's pretty sure he's not in the US, so dialing 911 won't help. In the EU Tony knows the number is 112. Elsewhere... Tony has no idea.

Far better to escape on his own, and able-bodied or not, suitless or armored, Tony's sure he'll find a way. He's been in far worse situations than this. Tony clicks the back button to get away from the urgency and pressure of Steve's email and Rhodey's.

Tony holds the phone in his hand with his email open for a long time, until eventually he realizes he's not going to contact anyone or send anything with it. Feeling a strange mixture of guilt and lightness, Tony slides his thumb right to check out the news and his company's stock price.

*

Tony does flip through the contents of Loki's phone. Tony finds no dick pics, which is a pity because Loki's cock truly deserves to be photographed.

Loki has no search history to be found, and not even a forensic excavation turns anything up. Tony wants to see real estate listings, local delivery places, anything would help Tony figure out where he is. At the very least, he'd like to see what kind of porn Loki looks at. Tony sees

no proof Loki knows how to take a photo, but he must know how to manage a screengrab, because there are two images saved on the phone, both screenshots of Thor. One looks to be captured from a new article, another a fan selfie taken on the street, Thor smiling broadly with his arm around a teenager.

"I would have aggravated the messed-up parts long before now if I knew you were going to let me play with your phone," Tony says when Loki holds out his hand for the phone later in the day.

*

"So, yesterday you discovered the third reason I finally said fuck it and jumped," Tony says in the sunroom after the sun has sunk below the horizon and they're probably almost done with their nightly conversation, although tonight all they talked about was food. "Chronic pain."

"I know little about that," Loki admits. "I do know pain... but not that particular kind."

"Well, it sucks, that's about all the memo you need. Given how much a little knock-around from the Hulk freaked you out, I bet you wouldn't deal too well with it." Tony stands up, looking out at the darkened beach. "I don't feel like being cooped up. Let's go swimming."

Loki looks surprised, following Tony's gaze out the window. "As you wish."

Tony strips off his T-shirt and drops it on the sectional. Loki follows him as Tony walks to the French doors, and when Tony glances back at him, Loki's lost his silk caftan and is naked. Tony leaves the D.R.A.A.G. on. He'll absolutely need it to walk on sand, and he won't be able to swim if his leg runs out of strength, cramps up or simply hurts too much to move independently. Tony doesn't want to have to ask Loki for some pain-killing enchantment mid-swim. Tony walks past the blue-lit waters of the pool and heads to the steps going down to the beach.

"You intend to swim in the ocean?" Loki asks curiously, trailing after him. "At night?"

Tony pauses at the top of the stairs. "Yeah."

"Sharks come out in the dark," Loki says, catching up to him and peering at him in Tony's peripheral vision as they descend the steps. "Midgardians fear sharks, do they not?"

"I mean... not all of us?" Sharks have a bad reputation they don't deserve. "I mean, they wouldn't be able to bite me anyway, would they?"

"They will not be able to bite you, but they might try," Loki says.

"Well, that should be interesting," Tony says as they reach the bottom of the stairs and walk toward the ocean. "Nah, I'm not afraid," Tony adds, and he finds the words are true. While he's with Loki, what could possibly happen to him? "Ask me again once we're a couple miles out."

Tony waits for Loki to tell him they're not going to swim that far out, but Loki says nothing.

"I want to make you work for it tonight," Tony says, answering the unasked question of *why*, why does he want to swim, and he thinks of Fury and he keeps walking.

The sand feels good under the soles of Tony's feet, the effort of walking on the uneven surface working his calves. Tony's leg aches, but he hardly notices. In the near-darkness the water looks black and opaque, reminiscent of the void of space. Tony strides straight into the warm water, the rush of the surf slowing his paces a bit as he walks out farther and gets deeper, feeling the small waves swirl and eddy around his thighs, then his waist, and eventually his chest. Tony's heart pounds a little as his head gets ever closer to the surface, but nevertheless he shuffles in the water out past the point on the continental shelf where his feet can touch. Technically on an island it's called an insular shelf, but say 'insular shelf' and unless you're talking to a geologist no one has any idea what you mean. Tony's great at code-switching, but he still gets that kind of thing a lot.

Tony opts for the breaststroke, an energy-conserving style of swim, because they're in no hurry and because the breaststroke is gentle on his abused body. As he begins swimming out, Loki only a couple of feet behind him, Tony dips his face below the surface of the water and inhales very slightly through his nose, just a puff in to test his water-breathing status, then a second more assertive breath. Tony finds he can indeed breathe the salty water like air, which is reassuring. Tony brings his face back up, tasting the salt when he opens his mouth.

For a while they swim in silence. Tony absolutely feels like he could die out here in this dark nothingness. He's weightless, feeling the warm black water lap at his neck. Gradually the sky darkens further, until the sea is invisible except as the barest flashes of on water. An unknown vastness open beneath him. Tony's in a thalassophobe's worst nightmare. Tony glances up at the moon, which has waned to a mere sliver in the sky. With the warm water and inability to see anything, being in the water is like being in an open sensory deprivation chamber.

Tony swims on.

Loki swims behind him. Tony can barely, intermittently see the ghost of Loki's outline when he looks back.

Finally Tony asks straightforwardly. "How far can we go out?"

"As far as you want," Loki answers with a glance back towards the distant villa, far away now, its lights tiny. "Would you like a light, or would you rather not see what is around us?"

Tony keeps swimming for a few seconds before he processes by the slightly lower carrying of Loki's voice that Loki has stopped somewhere farther away from him than he realized. Tony turns in a circle but he can't see anything. Everything is blackness.

"I'd always rather see than not," Tony says into the blackness. "I didn't realize visibility was an option. Did you bring a flashlight?"

Suddenly Tony's rendered sightless by a blaze of blinding white light, tainted ever so faintly with green, eclipsing the darkness completely. Loki must adjust the level of magical juice he's giving the spell, because the miniature white sun subsides to a bright, strong glow, still cast with that barely discernible green tinge. Tony gasps even as the light wanes and tempers, and

when his vision returns he can see the orb of light flared to life in Loki's hand six inches below the surface of the water. Tony can't look straight at the source and has to cover his eyes for another second after he tries to look, because the light is dazzlingly strong.

Loki appears pleased with himself. He also looks a bit weasel-like when he turns slightly, his dark hair plastered to his head with the salt water. Despite that, or maybe because of it, the magical illumination showcases that Loki has a well-shaped skull. The light highlights his cheekbone too, casting all the planes of Loki's face into sharp relief.

When Tony looks down and around, he sees the light illuminates the clear-again water in a huge spherical diameter, maybe a hundred feet around them, and Tony's unable to keep from an instinctive whole-body startle that would absolutely aggravate his back if not for Loki's magical pain-dampening session shortly after dinner. The water is teeming with life, fauna and flora alike. The two of them are surrounded by creatures, by sharks and fish and sea creatures that are neither. There's a shark four feet from Tony's legs.

"Jesus," Tony says as he jerks. Immersing himself in water is enough of a trigger for him, let alone swimming in the ocean at night, let alone swimming with sharks without a harpoon gun or face mask or flippers or spear or fucking *anything*. What the hell was he thinking?

"They hunt at night," Loki says quietly.

Seeing sharks passing between them and the now-faraway beach is deeply unsettling on some level. The sharks are at least six feet long, though some are more than seven feet. Tony studies them, because he used to know a lot more about sharks than he remembers now. Tony tends not to forget things, but all things related to having his head underwater have become wrapped up in his trauma. Honestly, it's amazing he never quit bathing.

These look like grey reef sharks or blacktips. Tony hasn't been underwater in years, but he has his scuba certification, and he's gone diving with sharks a number of times before, back in the late eighties when he was eighteen or nineteen and cage diving was all the rage. Later he went on cageless shark-encounter dives, starting in Thailand twenty years ago and then in the Bahamas. There the tour guides start newbies out with the shy species of sharks, Caribbean reef sharks, grey reefs and great hammerheads if he remembers right, and escalate to locations where the bolder varieties dwell, like Tiger Beach, where the big ones are fucking everywhere and bull and lemon sharks regularly pass through. Tony's fed sharks dead fish at the length of a spear, and he can't say he always respected the wildlife, but he never got bitten.

Tony used to be an adrenaline junkie, obsessively-compulsively gambling with his safety like it didn't matter. What's amazing is how long he got away with that.

The last time Tony was in Australia was 2008, mere months before the Afghanistan trip that so profoundly changed his life. Tony was still seeking out socially acceptable life-or-death thrills back then, and 2008 was also the year *Crocosaurus Cove* opened. Tony was one of the first people to be submerged alone with a glass dome separating him from a hungry sixteen-foot saltwater crocodile, and the proximity to that particular reptile was almost as heart-pounding as the time he dodged an opportunistic tiger shark while diving off Viti Levu. Outside of the movies, sharks tend to be more curious about humans than specifically hungry

for them, but some species of crocodiles hunt and eat people very deliberately and have 5000 pounds of pressure per square inch of their jaws. Tony's savvy enough with numbers and with brute force on his limbs to imagine exactly what that means. Crocodiles have the strongest bite ever measured and can bite through a limb, human or reptile, like a hot knife through butter. Tony's seen a croc take another croc's leg off on YouTube like it was nothing and holds in his mind a clear memory of all the scratches on the clear *Crocosaurus Cove* dome, which was made of the layered glass-and-polycarbonate they use to make bulletproof glass.

Even so, while the experience got the heart pumping, he was never in fear of his life. Tony wouldn't have said he's afraid of sharks, no, but this, swimming far out in wild, darkened island waters after dusk when it feels like all the sharks in the ocean are beneath him searching for food, feels far beyond his safe *Crocosaurus* plunge and any of his shark encounter experiences. This is worse, way way worse. Surface swimming with sharks beneath him feels quite a bit different from bottom diving with a full oxygen tank, lurking on the bottom of the ocean as part of the scenery. Tony feels like he's starring in *Jaws* here. Bad, bad movie to think about when you're this far from shore.

Tony makes himself take his eyes off the sharks to look at the tropical fish that are all around them too. Some of the creatures shy away from the light, some swim closer. Tony realizes Loki's gazing at him, and Tony resumes swimming out to sea. Nothing can hurt him here. If a shark gets close enough to experimentally bite Tony's personal force field, maybe he'll be able to tell for sure what species he's looking at. "Are those grey sharks, or blacktips?"

"I don't know," Loki answers.

"I can't tell from here, even with the light." Tony can't tell much about them in the white but faintly green-tinged light and the encroaching darkness.

No sooner has Tony said this than he sees another much larger shark sliding through the water far beneath them, almost but not quite out of range of Loki's light. "Oh shit, what's that one?"

"I think different sharks hunt at different times of night, but I do not know all their names." Loki's eyes on him gleam green even in the oppressive darkness, lit only by the single orb of light. "You're perfectly safe, Tony."

Tony nods and determinedly swims on, although he keeps glancing down at the predator lurking far below them, and he swims slowly so Loki can keep up with him while swimming one-handed. "I know that. Intellectually."

"You do fear death, then," Loki says. As Tony's glancing back at him a shark comes out of nowhere from behind Loki, aiming for Loki's hand like it wants to try to eat the light. The shark comes on fast and Tony doesn't have time to call out a warning, but Loki seems to sense the creature before it reaches him, and with a complicated gesture of his long fingers sort of like what Tony's seen Wanda do, Loki sends it reeling away.

Answering Loki takes Tony a minute. "I don't know that I fear death. I fear... situations."

"And pain," Loki says as though to remind Tony that he knows and remembers.

"But I really don't mind sharks," Tony concludes. "I used to dive with sharks on vacation."

"Are you anxious, right now?" Loki asks.

"I mean... kind of," Tony says honestly, unembarrassed.

"Because of the sharks, or because of the open water?"

Because of the vast unknown, maybe. And the water. And the sharks a bit too, because human instinct can't be easily repressed. Tony ignores the nuances of the question. "I've been anxious since I got here."

Loki makes a noncommittal noise.

"I do like sharks, really. When I was trying to decide between Malibu and Miami-- Malibu has sharks, Miami has alligators. I picked Malibu. Most sharks, in most situations, aren't dangerous to humans."

"Neither are most alligators," Loki points out. "And-- I have been to the place you call Miami, and it is a coastal city, and most all coastal regions have sharks."

"Yeah, but in places that have alligators, alligators are all over the goddamn place, and they can climb fences." Tony glances down into the depths again. "My point is, I can't turn off thousands of years of evolution like a light switch," Tony says. "It's instinctive to be afraid of apex predators."

Tony's getting tired-- he hasn't gone swimming in so long, his muscles aren't used to it anymore. But Tony realizes, quite suddenly, he doesn't have to swim on the surface. He can't hold his breath for thirty seconds, but here and now he can fucking free dive past all normal and even extraordinary human limits. "You know, I want to dive."

"Go ahead," Loki says, and so Tony takes a deep breath of air unnecessarily, without thinking, and goes under.

Tony swims down, breathing water, and he can tell Loki follows him because the light follows him. Another shark moves slowly into the circle of light and approaches them, and Tony's pretty sure it's a bull shark. Sure enough, the shark goes for the light in Loki's hand, and Loki deflects the creature with a flick of his hand like he's a king dismissing a serf.

Tony keeps swimming down, not in quite a straight vertical line, but on a steep downward slant, and Loki follows him. The ocean floor is about fifty feet down, the reef is gorgeous and colorful and absolutely the type of coral that's dying the world over. Soon enough Tony's trailing his fingers in the surface of the underwater silt, breaking the first rule of cave diving, but he's not in a cave, so it's fine. Tony keeps moving. He sees eels and an octopus and fish of all kinds. He's lost track of which way shore is but that hardly matters either. The large shark that was below them appears at eye level, and it's a tiger, a big one. Tony smiles at it for the sheer joy of seeing it. The shark shows no particular interest in Tony, however, and swims away from him and Loki.

Tony swims underwater until his whole body is tired-- it took a long time, longer than he expected, but he's weary. The D.R.A.A.G. is practically moving his bad leg for him completely, and his good leg is so tired he wishes he had a D.R.A.A.G. for it too. Tony pushes up off the ocean floor.

At last he surfaces, and Loki breaks the surface a few seconds later.

"I do like Midgard," Loki says into the quiet, and for a few moments around them is only the tinkle and small splashes of bodies moving softly in water.

"That species, that was a tiger shark," Tony says, just for Loki's edification.

"There is a notable shark around the underwater drop-off out by the reef that's very aggressive," Loki offers. "An oceanic whitetip, that species I know. They are not as large as some of the others and slower swimmers, but considered more dangerous than most. And this individual is far quicker than its brethren to attempt to bite."

"One individual shark? In particular?" Tony's so tired, he's not sure he heard right. "How can you tell it apart from any other whitetip?"

"He is recognizable by damage to his back fin," Loki says.

Tony pauses, because put together, that all sounds like Loki hit up a search engine because he wanted to find out the species of one particular shark. "Are you saying you have a shark friend?"

Loki smiles at the water. "Maybe."

"How far out can we safely go?" Tony asks.

Loki looks at him, and Tony reads doubt in his expression, faintly cast with green from the sheen of the ethereal light. "We can go farther if you like."

"How far though?" Tony persists. "I'm not asking for suicidal purposes. Is there any point at which you personally feel unsafe?"

"Tony, you fail to fully appreciate the magnitude of my powers," Loki says.

Tony's gazing out beyond where the light ends, into the nothingness of the pitch black horizon, but the tone of Loki's voice hints at something, the normal timbre of his voice becoming underscored by a strange low-frequency rumble towards the end of the sentence, *of my powers*, and as Tony turns his head the source of the white aurora is momentarily eclipsed by a rippling shining green light, and when the swelling green energy dwindles and passes away, Loki's gone and the light has moved.

Tony turns in the direction of the light and sees a gargantuan shark lurking just beneath the surface a hundred feet away, and the orb of glowing white light now originates from the tip of its side fin just below the water.

Tony almost has a cardiac event.

The shark is larger than the biggest great white, not a megalodon, but easily thirty feet long, thick and sleek and immensely dangerous-looking, enough to set off any and every primordial human instinct in Tony's brain. Fight, flight, or freeze. Tony isn't one to freeze, but he freezes now. A corner of Tony's mind is vaguely aware of a lot of the remaining creatures in their vicinity rapidly dispersing upon perceiving the enormous unknown predator in their midst. If it loitered at all, Tony's sure the tiger that was below them is long gone.

Without thinking Tony ducks his head back under the water to gaze on something he's never seen before and likely never will again, something probably few people have ever seen.

The monster of cartilage and muscle swims straight towards Tony, powerful and direct and moving deathly fast, yet despite its sickening speed Tony gets a good look at its face as it approaches. The shark widely opens its mouth, which is full of rows and rows of teeth, not tapering and set far apart like a great white's, but perfect straight white triangles, side by side and densely packed. The proportional stretch of the gaping mouth looks set in a smooth faint smile, and the shark's eyes are not dead black spheres or slitted, soulless pupils over pale irises and too-large whites. No. The shark's eyes are extraordinary live green irises on black, beautiful and unnatural. They're Loki's eyes, or something like them.

The otherworldly shark avoids barreling into Tony at the last second and instead swims a shockingly tight circle around him, close enough to almost brush against his shoulder, close enough to displace the water around him in a rushing swirl in its wake, leaving him bobbing in suddenly choppy water. Tony knows you shouldn't touch anything from the Cthondrichthyes classification without gloves, because if you stroke some sharks the wrong way you can rip up your skin, but he reaches up to touch knowing somehow-- beyond even the powers of the protective spell-- Loki wouldn't hurt him, not now, not anymore. Tony's fingers brush against skin as soft as the kind of silk he likes and as slippery as lube under his fingers. The creature passes sleekly through the water and moves away from him, sinking below him and gliding away fast, and Tony wants to call Loki back to him. Underwater he wouldn't be able to form proper words, but Tony knows Loki would hear him, would respond.

He watches, instead. There's a lot to look at even from the back and side, starting with the fact that the shark carries none of the little symbiotic fish or remoras most sharks have around them, nor does it have any of the natural blemishes and scars all large sharks bear from skirmishes and life in general. The shark's colors are unlike anything Tony's seen on the Discovery channel or in all his hours of scuba diving. The shades aren't terribly different from a normal shark, but they *are* different. They're subtly Loki's colors, black and gray and the darkest green, with those same gold flecks occasionally flashing at the tips of its fins.

The sheer sense of power perceptibly emanating from the shark is greater and more obvious than any magical phenomenon Tony's felt, and he's spent a good deal of time around Wanda Maximoff, the Vision and Sorcerer Stephen. Tony feels the unnaturalness tingling in his flesh, reflecting off his skin like the ethereal white light of the orb.

Loki swims about twenty feet away, cruises a broad circle around Tony, and Tony re-assesses his initial take on the thing's devastating size. The shark's not thirty feet, it's probably closer to thirty-five.

Then Loki changes back into himself in a huge and shrinking ripple of searing green energy. Loki turns back towards Tony, the movements of his head and neck as elegant as though the underwater grace of the shark is sustained in him for a few moments in his normal Asgardian body.

Loki rises slowly as he comes through the water back to Tony as though he's climbing low-rise stairs up to the surface. Tony swims upwards too, breaking the surface and waiting for Loki to do the same.

Loki emerges as naked as Venus standing in the shell, ascending slowly, holding up the sustained orb of light in his hand like a lantern lighting his way as he climbs. Loki reaches the surface, takes one last step up, and then he's walking on the water like he's fucking Jesus. Loki strolls to him, bouncing gently with the movement of the glassy surface as though he's standing on a waterbed, and then Tony can only gaze directly up at Loki, waiting and unsure of what exactly he's waiting for.

"There's nowhere in Midgard I fear to go," Loki says, although really nothing more needs to be said on the subject, and Loki holds out his free hand down to Tony.

"I get that," Tony says instead. Tony's mouth is dry as he takes Loki's hand, and not just because Tony's thirsty from the long and exhausting swim out. Loki pulls Tony gently up to stand on the undulating surface beside him. "The inside of a volcano?" Tony says.

"The inside of a volcano might be a bit too much," Loki concedes. "Shall we walk back, or return magically, or would you like to swim more?"

"Let's walk, at least a little ways," Tony says, bending at the knees and bouncing a little to try to make the water recoil and jounce him in return. His efforts don't work, but Tony's undeterred. Being around a thirty-five foot magical shapeshifted shark and being able to walk on water has re-energized him with adrenaline, go figure. He'll sleep soundly tonight.

"Always felt like I should be able to do this."

Loki smiles.

"So uh, do you walk on water often?"

"First time," Loki confides.

"Uh huh. So what are you doing with your life?"

Loki smiles enigmatically. "I don't know yet. What are you doing with yours?"

"At this point, eh, just messing around," Tony says, and he bounces again on the surface. "Not too old for new experiences, apparently."

"Nor I." Loki offers Tony his hand, and given the mildly unstable surface they're walking on, Tony accepts it.

*

"How is your back?" Loki asks a few mornings later, as he has several days running.

Tony rolls on his side experimentally. He's not disconcerted by waking up to Loki sitting on his bed anymore. "Better, I don't think I need a laying on of hands this morning," Tony says.

Loki nods, and after breakfast Tony goes back to his workshop. After Loki's warning against future escape attempts, Tony wasn't sure whether he'd try again, but he still persisted in developing further ideas for getting out of here. But instead of investigating the HDMI hookup on the television, or working on any of the next generation of concepts for use in an escape, Tony finds himself messing around with theoretical improvements on the nanotech that he has no way to field test. Loki comes into the doorway without saying anything and drapes himself over the couch.

Tony keeps working, continuing to tweak his designs, although about fifteen minutes later he has a thought-- he's *comfortable*. Tony can rarely let his guard down around other people, except for when he's in the presence of Rhodey or Pepper, the only people he's ever willingly allowed inside the inner sanctum of his workshops. Agent used to come in too, but he was never invited, just popped in whenever Fury felt like it.

"You know, I don't hate living with you," Tony says, even though Loki will have no way to fathom what it means for Tony to say this out loud. "I usually don't like people in my space." Understatement of the year, there. Tony loathes having people in his space.

"I'm not people," Loki says from the couch without opening his eyes. "I am Loki Odinson."

*

Loki appears in the doorway of his workshop. "Do you want to go out tonight?"

Tony looks up and wipes engine grease off his hands, dirtying the rag without really getting his hands clean. "What, like, to dinner?"

"If you like. Or on a walk, or to a movie, or to a party," Loki says.

A *party*? "Where? It's not like there are good parties out here in...?"

Loki doesn't take the bait. "Teleportation, Tony. Remember how I have that power? We will travel to a club in Barcelona or Rio."

Tony points out the obvious flaw in the plan. "You're a war criminal and I'm a celebrity. We'll be recognized."

"I will put illusions in place over us."

"Oh, lemme see," Tony says, intrigued for the first time in a while.

Loki throws an illusion over Tony, Tony looks down at his hands as the green energy flashes over his skin, disappearing the grease stains in its wake. Tony rubs his fingers against his thumbs and feels the grease still there, only invisible. Carefully not touching anything, Tony

walks outside his workshop to check himself out, out to the wide full-length mirror by the stairs.

Tony looks into the mirror, and what he sees gives him pause.

Tony's features are different, but the change is far more than that. Tony looks younger and all-over smoother, clean-shaven and more androgynous. Tony looks good, like life hasn't had a chance to fuck him up yet. Loki's removed all the light brown highlights from Tony's hair as well as all the gray and taken it long, down past his shoulders in a dark tumble.

Tony's first epiphany is that he has Thor's hairstyle, complete with a few little braids off to the sides over his ears. Still, if Tony didn't have such a visual memory, he wouldn't gradually identify each of the individual elements of what he's seeing, and what he realizes is that he looks a bit like each of his teammates. His eyebrows, which along with his long dark hair are probably the reason he looks like such a delicate, elfin kind of guy, are Natasha's neatly groomed eyebrows, maybe made a tiny bit thicker to suit a masculine face. His nose is a replica of Bruce's, and his generous mouth is exactly like Steve's. (America's mouth, Scott would say.) The shape of his angular face with the lean male model cheekbones is all Rhodey. Tony looks for Clint longer before he recognizes Clint's cleft chin. Tony searches for something of Pepper before it occurs to him that while Loki rooted around in S.H.I.E.L.D. agents' minds and combed through their knowledge, none of them knew Tony and they probably didn't know how much Pepper meant to him, so Loki might not be aware of how deeply Pepper is embedded in Tony's heart either. Maybe Loki picked up on the playboy thing and didn't probe further, and it's not like Tony keeps any framed photos of Pepper around the Tower. No sign on his face of Peter or Scott, no trace of T'Challa or Bucky, nothing of Wanda or Vision, which might be just as well or Tony could have ended up with crimson red skin or a jewel in his forehead right now. Or a metal arm.

Tony looks at the brown eyes under Natasha's manicured streaks of eyebrows, and it takes him a second to realize they're still his own. Bold, insouciant, arrogant eyes stare back at him. Hurt, soulful, terrified eyes.

"I see what you did here," Tony says. He doesn't look a day over thirty.

"Do you dislike it?"

"No," Tony says slowly. "It's weird, but it's fine." He looks fantastic, there's no disputing that. His teammates are a bunch of unbelievable hotties, so no real surprise assembling them into one face would turn out gorgeous. "You're back to being your delivery man," Tony observes when he sees Loki in disguise over his shoulder, and then he goes back to admiring himself.

Loki leans in over his shoulder. "I could tell how much you liked the haircut," Loki says into Tony's ear, close suddenly, but when Tony turns his head Loki's already stepped away.

"Unless the club scene has changed drastically in the last decade, I don't want to go clubbing," Tony says.

"Aren't parties what you do for fun?"

"Parties are not clubbing, and clubs are not parties. You can party at a club, but that's not the kind of party I have any interest in attending. Bunch of sweaty drunken twenty-somethings getting their eardrums blown out, no thank you."

"I could find us a more sedate party," Loki proposes.

"Sedate?"

"Yes," Loki says. "If you don't want to ride my jet skis, I will do what I can to entertain you."

"Huh, thanks," Tony says. And-- when did he start thanking Loki for anything?

On the heels of that thought, Tony changes his mind. He hates the press of crowds, hates the crush of bodies near his, has ever since Afghanistan, since torture. Shitty thing to do to an extrovert, making them freak out at being around people. But Tony hasn't been around anyone but Loki in weeks now, and the sound of a lot of people in a small space appeals to him more than a sedate party, whatever that means.

"But you do not like crowds," Loki remembers.

Tony Stark hates crowds, but the man in the mirror isn't Tony Stark anymore. "Fuck it, take me clubbing. Let's go to New York. I'd rather go somewhere I speak the language. And get me some earplugs and a drink." He'll probably throw out his back dancing, but fuck it. Tony hasn't been around other people in weeks. "And keep asking, I'll ride your jet skis," Tony adds suggestively.

"I'm not going to leave your side," Loki warns him. "Do not try anything."

"I've never not tried anything in my life," Tony says, but right then, all he wants to do is check out whatever Loki's idea of a suitable party turns out to be.

*

Tony may not look like himself, but he has as much charm and confidence as he ever has, and the pretty young things in clubs like this, male and female alike, assume you have a lot of money if you're older and sit around with a friend and a drink, looking disinterested. Plus, no one can say Loki lacks style when it comes to Earth clothing, and Tony knows he looks good in his teammates' features and a perfect simulation of Stefano Ricci. Loki clearly picked up a lot of excellent cues when he inspected the contents of Tony's closet. In short order Tony's flirting with a woman less than half his age in the body-language and coy looks-based flirtation of club scenes. Loki sits at his side, silently watching.

The woman-- girl, really-- smiles at Tony while he smirks at her, and with a pang Tony thinks of Pepper, who was age appropriate for him, who knows who she is and what she wants, who's got her shit together.

The view's nice, though, and when the girl can't persuade him to get up and dance with her by briefly tugging both his hands, she dances right in front of him. Her friends are beside her, but her eyes are on Tony more often than not, and he could absolutely pull her if he had

somewhere to take her. Not that he *should*. Even if she's a few years older than Tony thinks she is, she'd still break the half-your-age-plus-seven rule. Tony might look like he's in his late twenties, but he still *feels* fifty-two. He's nearing the age when most fabulously rich bachelor men find a younger but not indecently youthful partner to stick with for the remainder of the long haul, someone to be comfortable around, someone to see them through the remainder of their lives. Granted, some rich guys wait until they're seventy-five or eighty before settling down with a twenty-something, but at that point you can't even pretend your partner's not in it for the payday.

Who is he to judge, anyway.

At some point Tony's pretty sure his feelings towards barely-adult kids like this girl are supposed to turn avuncular, but he's got no shame admitting he's not there yet. Beauty remains too seductive.

Loki nudges Tony with an elbow and puts a finger up, the universal sign for wait a tick, I'll be right back, and Loki gets up and walks away. The seating is limited, and Loki's spot is immediately filled by a drunk guy. Tony looks him over, idly hopes the dude doesn't puke to the left, and returns his attention to the young woman who's absolutely dancing for his benefit.

Loki returns a few minutes later and leans over to the dancing girl. Tony can't hear what Loki whispers in her ear, but she looks blond-Loki up and down and for half a second she looks offended. Then she smirks at Tony as she turns away, and moves off a bit with her friends, and-- what just happened?!

"Hey, you ruined my lap dance!" Tony shouts at Loki, which isn't quite correct because she hadn't been touching him, but that's okay, as a complaint it gets the point across.

Loki leans down to the couch, putting his hands above either side of Tony's body and using the back of the couch for support or balance, which has the effect of landing his wrists a bare inch above Tony's shoulders and his face very much in Tony's personal space, not that Tony minds. "I can hear you, you don't need to yell," Loki says, his breath tickling in Tony's ear. Loki's volume is normal, yet somehow audible. "Come dance with me."

"Uh," Tony says, because for some reason even his good knee turns to mush to hear this request. "Even before Thanos, my preference was to sit with a drink and enjoy watching people dance for me." Tony gestures to the open space above his lap.

He's being crude, but as he looks up at Loki and Loki stares down at him, the moment turns strangely serious, maybe because Loki's face is so intent, and something unfathomable passes between them, a pinprick of understanding that expands into a whole world, given and traded back.

"As you wish," Loki whispers, and maybe it's the All-Speech but even being a demigod, it's incredible Loki can make himself audible over the deafening racket of music, and with that Loki straightens and begins to dance.

"What do you, have a noise-canceling tongue?" Tony asks rhetorically, but he sits like a man spellbound, watching the blond fade cut version of Loki dance. Watching Loki dance *for him*, because he asked. Loki has perfect rhythm, like he's familiar with the song, and he's a slinky, subtle dancer. The next song has a harder, faster beat, and Loki's moves become more pronounced, taking up more space. Loki has women to his left and right, they're surrounded by dancing people, and there are any number of attractive people that draw the eye, but Tony can't take his gaze off Loki.

Dancing with people is a quick couple of steps away from sex with them, and usually a single step from romance if you're into that sort of thing.

Loki leans down again. "Perhaps a less athletic sort of dancing?" Loki says in his ear.

"I think they only have the one kind here," Tony says.

"We'll go somewhere else," Loki says.

Tony shrugs and makes the effort to stand up. "Sure, why not?"

Loki takes him by the hand and leads him through the crowd. Tony's not as bothered by the crush of people as he feared he'd be-- he's with Loki, what could happen?

Loki brings him to the bathroom, Tony notes with some amusement, where Loki pulls Tony into a stall. A bathroom attendant starts objecting.

Tony's aware of eyes on them as Loki closes the door anyway and teleports them out-- disappearing from a toilet stall probably suits Loki's sense of humor.

When Tony get his bearings, they're in an alcove of some kind of fancypants dinner-and-dancing ballroom, the kind of event hall with velvety peach wallpaper and boring but well-executed swan ice statues. The music is soft instead of deafening, and the relative quiet and dim lighting are a balm on Tony's abused senses.

Tony glances down, his attention caught by the fact that they're both dressed differently, their casual dressed-down suits replaced by black tie. Loki's tuxedo is sort of old-school, with the tails, and he looks amazing as Tony's eyes travel back up. When Tony does look up, he's startled to see Loki's face looks like himself again but far older, a distinguished, half-gray version of Loki.

"I hope slow dancing is still an option?" Loki asks, and he offers Tony a hand, palm up.

"Okay, one dance," Tony says, and he grabs Loki's hand and leads him into the slow-dancing couples on the dance floor. Loki wasn't kidding about finding a more sedate party. Loki seems to be waiting for Tony to take the initiative, so Tony slides a hand around Loki's waist, and Loki puts a hand on Tony's back in answer. Tony leads, and Loki lets him. "What'd you tell that girl?"

"That she shouldn't get her hopes up, because you were coming home with me," Loki says.

"Possessive much?" Tony says, but the truth is, he doesn't mind, and it's pretty entertaining.

Loki shrugs.

"So I'm noticing a lot of these people, and you, and probably me, are on the elderly side," Tony murmurs. "Do you attend all the nursing home dinner-and-dance nights?"

"I didn't want you to feel out of place," Loki says with an innocent smile.

Tony gives Loki a hard nudge in the side of his abdomen. "Says the thousand-year-old who needed nine-hundred-ninety-nine of those years to grow the fuck up. God you're a dick."

"Such a strange word choice for an insult, I have always thought," Loki says, and he adds in a low, suggestive voice close to Tony's ear, "Having a dick is so pleasurable, wouldn't you agree?"

The words conjure up a clear recollection of Loki's long, pale, heavy cock, the soft-looking foreskin Tony kind of wants to slide his tongue into, and Tony's mouth goes dry. "Yeah, can't argue."

No one looks at them, and at first Tony thinks they must be invisible to everyone here as they were on the street outside his tower, but then a little old lady with coiffed silver hair catches Tony's eye and smiles at him. Tony's startled enough to smile back, a quick flat smile, but genuine all the same.

The two of them dance in silence for a few minutes, until the song changes.

"Let's go home," Tony says, and then he realizes what he's said.

Loki stares at Tony a few seconds too long, like he's processing or almost as though he hasn't heard, but then he nods. Taking Tony by the hand, Loki leads him across the room and through an exit door, pressing the silver bar in the middle of the door to open it. Loki lets go of him as they exit into the cool night air of a full parking lot. Lots of old people cars, Lincolns and Cadillacs. Tony has time to take a quick look around. They could be anywhere, though everything in sight vibes of suburbia. The darkened sky shows a handful of stars, more than can be seen in the night sky in New York City, but far fewer than are visible at the villa, wherever it is.

"Are you ready?" Loki asks, and refocusing on him, Tony nods and reaches out his hand for Loki's.

*

"You told me you have no wish to talk about your father, so I am going to tell you about mine," Loki tells Tony the next evening in the sunroom as the last of the pink light from the setting sun streams in through the windows. "The night outside your tower, you said yours thought you were worthless."

Tony looks at Loki without saying anything. Tony's curious, certainly.

"I grew up believing myself to be my father's natural son," Loki begins. "In reality, he took me from another Realm as a babe. I was the son of the Jotun king. Asgard and Jotunheim

were at war, and a great battle was fought on Jotunheim. Asgard won the day, and afterward Odin went into their holy temple, where he found me. He claimed I had been abandoned because I was small, and when he left Jotunheim he brought me home with him. I do not know whether he truly believed me abandoned or outright stole me. I have been alive over fifteen hundred years, but I found out the truth a mere decade ago."

Tony groans.

"No one ever knew, me least of all. My mother wanted to tell me the truth, but she never openly went against him."

"That's a shitty story," Tony says with genuine sympathy. "How old is your dad?"

"He was well over ten thousand years when he passed," Loki says.

"You'd think a ten thousand year old god would be able to figure out the basics. No offense."

"None taken," Loki says.

Tony sits with this new knowledge for a minute. Loki was adopted and no one told him. Tale as old as time, and as cruel as the people who are supposed to love you yanking a rug out from under your feet. "Did he love you?"

"In his way, yes," Loki answers. "I wouldn't have said so before, but now... now I daresay yes. But he deceived me my whole life. He was keeping me as a secret prize, with the hope of someday making peace with Jotunheim. Uniting our realms, he said when I found out. Thor and I were told our whole lives that we were both born to be kings but that only one of us could sit the throne of Asgard. I thought I would rule better than Thor could, because I had a mind like a sword with a honed edge, and Thor was an oaf." Loki fiddles restlessly with his hands in his lap. Tony watches, because it's unlike Loki to fidget. "When I found out I was born to be a king of monsters, I-- well. I lashed out, as well one might. But even then I tried to please my father. I killed Laufey, the Jotun king, and I tried to destroy the whole realm of Jotunheim to prove myself, to prove my loyalty to him. Yet still Odin was not pleased."

Tony blinks. "Wait, you killed your bio-dad?"

Loki looks up and nods.

"That's, uh. That's heavy stuff," Tony says.

"Indeed. And it was when Odin expressed his displeasure at my actions that I let myself fall into the abyss."

"Sometimes," Tony says, "I forget you're seriously a murderer. I mean. You just said you tried to commit genocide of an entire planet, right? Do I have that right?"

"We were at war," Loki says simply.

"How many Jotuns are there?"

Loki shrugs. "Tens of thousands, probably."

"Very Stalin of you." But maybe Tony can write off the Jotuns, just as he does the Chitauri. Though Loki, a Jotun himself, is very much a person. Loki himself said he's Asgardian, though, more than Jotun.

Loki's gaze on him sharpens, and as though he knows what Tony's thinking, he brings up the Chitauri. "Are you aware the Chitauri consider you the general of Death itself?"

"Excuse me?"

Loki gestures at the ceiling. "Consider-- you slayed all the Chitauri who went through the portal. Not one returned from Earth. Then you yourself came through the portal orchestrated by their own leaders, destroyed nearly an entire armada, millions of Chitauri, and slipped away before you could be caught by the few survivors. You are known throughout the race. Mothers on the Chitauri homeworld tell haunting stories of you to their offspring."

"Bullshit," Tony says.

Loki tilts his head. "Is it?"

Tony studies Loki, and he can't tell.

"Odin spent his younger years with my sister the goddess of death at his side, making war everywhere he could, taking over and killing and stealing vast spoils, yet I was to be permanently imprisoned for venturing to Earth to rule it," Loki says. "The hypocrisy was flagrant." Loki purses his lips in a distasteful little moue. "So you see why I understand difficulties with fathers."

Loki's expression smooths and he falls silent, and Tony's not sure he should break the quiet until Loki raises his eyes. "Knowing my history-- will you tell me now of your own father?"

Tony only thinks about the request for a moment before he nods. Tit for tat is okay. "There's a lot less crazy shit to tell, but sure," Tony says, though the agreement catches slightly in his throat, and finding the words takes much longer.

"My father was a war hero and a tactician from back in a time when 'men were men,'" Tony says finally. "He helped build the perfect man long before I was born. I couldn't live up to that."

"I fail to see how Steven Rogers is the perfect man," Loki says.

"Well, Captain America, peak physical perfection," Tony says. "And you can't argue he didn't earn it. Steve's... I mean, morally speaking, there's something to him. He can wield your brother's hammer." Tony waves a hand. "There's not much more to say, really. My dad was hard on me. He never told me he loved me, never showed any interest in me whatsoever. He barely spoke to me and when he did, it wasn't anything kind. I went to college early and double majored in physics and engineering, and by the time I was nineteen I had two master's degrees, but I was lazy in his eyes. Also, a hedonist, because I fucked a lot of women but I

also fucked men, and he found out. I mean, I didn't exactly hide it, and the press has hounded me my entire life, so obviously he found out. He didn't call me a fag to my face, but I heard him use it about me to my mom. He was a playboy too in his youth, and he wasn't homophobic generally, he just didn't want his son sucking cock because that reflected badly on him."

Loki's upper lip curls with contempt.

"He gave me the silent treatment like it was his job. I don't think he meant to, exactly, but he did. So, that's it. He never hit me, and I never lacked for anything, but he never missed an opportunity to let me know he was disappointed in me."

"Your father is dead and doesn't get an opinion anymore," Loki says.

"He lives up here now," Tony says, tapping his temple. "Rent free."

"Ah," Loki says knowingly. "I understand." Loki's silent a moment. "Odin called me his son right before he died, and told us he loved us. It meant the world to me. Then, when Thor and I met our sister Hela a minute later, she told me I sounded like Odin. She tried to kill us shortly after that, yet the remark pleased me."

"I actually, uh, ran into my dad when I was back in time," Tony says. "We had a good chat. I uh, I hugged him. Didn't really fix anything though."

"Once a relationship is broken like that, nothing can ever quite put the shattered pieces together," Loki says.

"I don't think so either," Tony says.

"Do you still want to die?" Loki asks him.

"Yes," Tony says. "But only-- here's the thing. I know the error that resulted in her death was a small miscalculation. One anyone-- one anyone could have made." Tony says it aloud for the first time. "I know that. But if I'm going to put on my suit and fly around and be an Avenger, I can't be *anyone*, I can't make mistakes like that. If I go back, I'll be subject to disciplinary action, but it'll probably be a slap on the wrist, and I feel like I deserve something harsher than that. And on another level, I still want to do it because I decided to do it and I want to follow through. Which is dumb, because I never even followed through on piano lessons. I guess I want to because life inside my head is shitty. Even though lately... it hasn't been bad. But I know it will be shitty again at some point in the future." Tony evaluates the mess of what he just said, and decides it's sufficient to explain himself. "What made you change your mind?"

"I don't know that I ever consciously changed my mind," Loki says. "I have certainly seen dark times, but life has generally interested me far more than the alternative." Loki stares out the window at the horizon. "Maybe, Tony, if there's hope for you there's hope for me."

Tony wrinkles his forehead at the wording. "Wait, did you mean-- don't you have that backwards?"

"Do I?" Loki turns and heads for the door, not looking at Tony. "Goodnight, Tony."

Tony sits on the sectional for a long time after Loki's gone.

*

Tony cries that night after he finally goes to bed. He presses his face into his pillow, trying to keep his sobs silent, and he succeeds except for a hiccup, and for the fact that his nose runs when he cries.

Tony doesn't hear the door open, but he's taken aback and glances over his shoulder as he feels the bed dip. Loki slides into bed beside him, and Tony quickly faces forward again so Loki doesn't get too good a look at his face. Loki nestles close to him from behind, an arm slides around Tony's chest, and Loki crooks one leg over both of Tony's. Tony's wearing a T-shirt and boxers, and while he can't be sure Loki's naked, he can feel Loki's arms and thighs are bare against his.

A few tiny, muffled sounds don't explain how Loki knew or why Loki's come into his room. Tony's voice comes out choked, and not just because he's emotional. Probably-naked Loki's molesting him. Not that Tony's completely opposed to the idea, just that now's not really a good time. "Loki-- what are you doing?"

"Comforting you?" Loki offers quietly, making it a question. "Like shield-brothers, Thor would say."

That does sound like something Thor would say. Tony could ask Loki if he is in fact naked, but Tony already knows the answer. Wordlessly Tony checks anyway, reaching behind him and sliding a hand up Loki's thigh to his hip. Naked, for sure.

Then again, Loki is smoking hot, although his hair usually looks like it could stand a washing, even when he isn't swimming in salt water every day in a tropical paradise. And surprisingly, the physical comfort of having Loki cuddling him-- *spooning* him-- is somehow immediately reassuring. Tony lets the tears drain out of him and wipes his nose with the back of his hand, and his turbulent emotions settle rapidly under the draping touch of Loki's body. "Okay, whatever," Tony says. "Only because I'm tired."

*

Tony wakes up with Loki's arm snugly around his waist and Loki's hard-on pressing against his ass through his boxers. Tony's not opposed, not at all, although he intends to be the one getting a piece of ass. Loki's smooth, milky-white, perfectly shaped ass.

When Tony turns over, Loki's eyes flutter open. Blinking, Loki pulls back his arm.

Tony has his occasional morning hard-on too, probably inspired by subconsciously feeling the one pressing against him, and he grips Loki's hip before slowly rolling their cocks together. The friction against Loki feels so good, like the hum of an engine after Tony's souped it up. Loki's lips part, and for a moment he presses back against Tony and it's like flying in his suit.

Then Loki's gone. Loki flashes with his green energy and vanishes, leaving Tony alone in the bed.

The rejection is crystal clear.

Tony lies in bed for another minute, until a familiar, unwelcome feeling overtakes him-- something like self-disgust mixed with shame, an icky internal roiling he can only clear away by getting up and getting on with the day.

Tony goes into the bathroom and takes a piss, then checks himself out in the mirror. He looks like shit-- his face looks tired and hollow, maybe even a little baffled. He's never baffled. Tony automatically tightens his expression into his game face in the mirror, brushes his teeth, splashes water on his face, then goes downstairs.

Loki lies stretched out on the sectional reading a tattered book with a plain, yellowed parchment cover and no title on the spine. Loki's dressed in one of his neck-to-toes leather outfits. Figures Loki would start going around fully dressed just as Tony was starting to really enjoy the view.

Who is he kidding, he's enjoyed the view from day one.

Tony walks over to Loki, sits on the sectional beside him, and puts a hand on Loki's thigh. Loki looks at him, nonplussed, and Tony winds his other hand through Loki's hair as he slides into Loki's lap.

Loki pushes him away, and that superstrength is something, but Tony's intent enough on his purpose that he doesn't feel too disturbed by it. Tony slides sideways and nuzzles against Loki's other side.

"What are you doing?" Loki asks quietly.

"This is what you want, isn't it?" Tony says the words against a pale smooth cheek and aristocratic cheekbone. "You want to fuck me. Why else--"

Loki pushes Tony off him, tumbling him backwards onto the sectional. Loki stands up, walking up and down a few paces like he's disturbed.

Tony lies there sprawled and slack on the couch cushions.

"You want to make me feel better? Let me take this for a spin," Tony says, gesturing with a finger, a crude up-and-down motion encompassing Loki's body. "It'll make me a lot happier than cartoons, I promise you."

"No."

"I can't believe you don't want to have sex with me," Tony says, half-indignant. "I may be fifty-two, but I'm a fifty-two year old snack, come on."

Loki purses his lips. "You have an astonishingly high self-regard for someone so desperate to die."

Tony doesn't particularly feel desperate to die right this minute, that urge feels more... distant. Almost forgotten in the grander scheme of things, whereas the issue of Loki sleeping with him is a matter that's suddenly front and center. "Well, I'm not the worst person ever," Tony says. "It's called a superiority/inferiority complex. I think I'm better than everyone else because I objectively am, but I simultaneously think I suck. Compulsive need to prove myself. It's a thing."

"I brought you here because there is no shame in sorrow--"

Tony interrupts, because the last thing he wants is more of Loki talking himself out of this really good idea. What Tony wants right now is sex. "Actually, depression is still highly stigmatized in some circles," Tony interrupts.

"-- and because you needed someone. I didn't bring you here for sexual congress," Loki says in clipped tones. Loki folds his arms in front of his chest defensively. "I had no one to console me when I was most in need of solace. I wanted to be that for you."

"You also wanted to dance with me. You chased off the girl who was flirting with me that I absolutely could have fucked. You've kissed me twice, once violently. I'm your beach house prisoner and you spend all your time spoiling me," Tony says as savagely as he can, which is pretty fucking savage. "You came in my room last night naked, fell asleep against me, again, naked, and I woke up to little Loki nestled right up between my asscheeks. What am I supposed to think?"

Loki looks abashed. "I--" Loki starts, but then his expression flickers. "Wait, twice?"

"Yeah, you don't remember? Shit, I'm *insulted*."

Sudden recognition flashes in Loki's eyes. "That was not a-- I was only trying to comfort you."

"You do an awful lot of comforting with your body," Tony says pointedly.

Loki flushes, and Tony's made the Norse god of mischief blush. Ta-da, Tony really is amazing and a half. "I was-- it doesn't matter," Loki says. "I don't think intimacy with me will help you, and I brought you here to help you."

Tony rolls his eyes, sagging sideways again on the sectional. "Yes, you've told me a million times now."

"Let me tell you something, then, that you don't know. I recently--" Loki breaks off, then resumes hesitantly, his eyes roving the floor. "I... loved someone not so long ago."

Tony's whole chest contracts as his heart goes cold for a second. "Oh yeah? Who was that?"

"An alternate version of myself from another timeline."

"Wow," Tony says, honestly impressed despite the cold spike of upset that lodges in his chest. Tony straightens up on the sectional. "That is hilarious."

"Don't judge," Loki says, his eyes flashing like falling in love with himself is a sensitive subject for him.

"I'm not, I'm not. Women, men, all good, why would I judge? And self-love is the first and last love. Christian Nestell Bovee. I could probably fall in love with myself. Actually, I've been told I already am," Tony says, and as he finishes he realizes he's rambling because he's... he's having feelings. Feelings. Him. For Loki. What the fuck. Before Pepper Tony didn't do feelings, and he hasn't done feelings since her, and he thought he never would again. Tony hastily collects himself. "So what did you like about him?"

"Her," Loki says, sitting back down, unconsciously elegant with his back straight. *Her*. "She was determined, clever, powerful, beautiful. Maddening. Uncompromising." Loki's eyes settle on the floor again, his face deep in recollection. "Perhaps too uncompromising."

"Maybe you could find another alternate Loki," Tony suggests.

"I doubt that," Loki says. "Sylvie was special. I met many variants of myself, and we're not interchangeable." Loki grimaces. "A lot of us aren't the best company."

"I'm imagining a big circle of smiling Lokis literally backstabbing each other." Hearing Loki talk about himself in the plural is weird. "So-- did she love you back?" Tony asks. "What happened there?"

"I think she did, but it didn't matter in the end," Loki says. "I didn't fall out of love, if that's what you're asking. We were simply separated."

Tony swallows, but he doesn't think Loki notices, and he keeps his voice even and normal. "So go find her again? Unless-- did she die?"

"No. And no, I don't think I can. I believe we were cast into different timestreams, and I don't know how to go back or find her," Loki explains. Tony figured out time travel, but he has no idea, none, about how to slip *timestreams*, or alternate universes, or alternate dimensions, or-- "I lost my friend as well," Loki says distantly.

"Jet ski guy?"

"Yes," Loki says. "It doesn't-- what I am trying to say is, I have known the touch of many, but romantic love is... relatively new."

"Oh," Tony says stupidly, suddenly understanding, and he's under that rare blue moon where words desert him, but he wants to hear Loki say it out loud. "And you're telling me this because...?"

Loki takes Tony's hand in his cool one, interlacing his fingers with Tony's. "Because I have developed similar feelings for you," Loki says like this shouldn't be news at all, and an open, playful warmth dances in his eyes.

"Wow," Tony says, even though yeah, it's not surprising at all. He's still blank and at a loss, because Loki's behavior doesn't add up. Loki loves him, but-- "But you don't wanna get

down."

"No," Loki agrees. "I want you to be well. This is not the right time in your life for you to... decide to get involved. With anyone."

"I'm already involved," Tony points out. "Because I feel the same way about you."

"*Oh*," Loki says like he's stricken, and Tony leans forward (thank you sexual aggression, always knew you'd come back) and then they're kissing.

*

Tony loses all sense of time and space as they make out like teenagers on the sectional. Tony tries to get into Loki's leather clothing but can't get farther than sliding his hands under the exterior jacket, because Loki refuses to take anything off. Tony starts to yank off his own shirt demonstratively, but Loki stops him, gripping both Tony's wrists.

Tony's kratosanthropophobia kicks in suddenly, abruptly, and he jerks back. Loki notices immediately and lets Tony go, and Tony composes his face and dives back down to resume their kiss, but Loki grabs his shoulders and holds him six inches away.

Loki stares at him probingly. "What was that?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Tony says. "Come on, don't stop."

Tony thinks Loki's going to press him to spill the details, but Loki relents. They roll around briefly, finding a position comfortable for both of them. Tony finally ends up in Loki's lap, because Loki's so damn heavy that even when Loki puts his weight on his knees, the prison of his thighs feels like a ton of bricks against the outside of Tony's. Tony sits in Loki's lap with Loki's hard-on pressing into his ass, and he leans forward and rubs, getting friction off Loki's abs until he's fit to come in his pants, which is absolutely not an option. Tony has better control than that.

Tony pushes his fingers under the shoulders of Loki's jacket. "Take this off," Tony says into Loki's mouth.

Loki shakes his head, and Tony grabs and squeezes his leather lapels in frustration.

"No one's blue-balled me like this in... ever." Tony reconsiders. "Maybe one girl in college."

Loki laughs.

"This is cruel and unusual punishment," Tony says. "You do want to torture me, stop lying."

"I don't," Loki says, almost a laugh again, but even as he says it he's pushing his cock up against Tony's ass. Loki bites his lip and eases out from under Tony all at once and gets up, half-dumping Tony on the sectional. "Maybe a breather," Loki says. All Tony can do is pant and stare up at him.

The two of them circle around each other the rest of the day. Tony can't remember when he was hard this long, this often. Agonizing, delicious, frustrating, nearly perfect. Loki loves him. Loki as much as said it. Why Loki is saying no to him is beyond him. When's the last time anyone made Tony wait for it?

*

That night, shortly after Tony's laid down to go to sleep, his door opens. Tony looks over his shoulder only to feel the weight of the bed shift as Loki slides in next to him, nestling against Tony's side.

Loki's naked. Big surprise. What does honestly surprise is when Loki reaches for Tony's cock.

Tony nearly jumps out of his skin, because what did he do to deserve this?

"What the fuck, mixed signals much?" Tony objects, rolling over to prevent proper spooning and further sexual touching. Futilely Tony shoves at Loki's chest. "You change your mind like--"

Loki brushes Tony's arm away, pulls Tony close and nips at his ear, then lavishes the sensitive flesh there with his tongue, bringing about a silence in which Tony feels almost dizzy with pleasure just from having his ear tongued, the lobe nibbled. Tony might die if he doesn't get to fuck Loki immediately.

"Take this for a spin," Loki breathes past Tony's ear, and the words make Tony's heart begin to race. "If you wish it, I will not deny you."

"That's-- that's not how it's supposed to work, Fatal Attraction," Tony says, trying again to push Loki away, but since Loki is twice his weight Tony only ends up pushing himself away from Loki.

Well, whatever works.

Loki allows Tony to put a foot of separation between them, and Tony reaches over and turns the light on to kill any romantic vibes loaned to them by the darkness. "Not going to be much fun for anyone if I'm the only one who wants to," Tony says. "Even before hashtag MeToo, I don't do anything with the halfhearted. It's thrilled enthusiasm or no dick for you."

Loki's answer is to slide a leg around Tony's thighs and pull Tony close again, and the anxiety rushes over Tony but this time he hides the moment of panic better. Tony feels Loki's hard cock against his thigh, more than one drop of wetness smearing around in its wake. Tony glances down to look. What gives Tony pause, though, is not the physical evidence of arousal, but the look in Loki's eyes when Tony refocuses on his face. Loki's face tilted up towards him is open, vulnerable. Wanting, almost plaintive.

"Yeah so you have a hard-on, whatever," Tony says, sliding overtop Loki, and Loki follows his lead, easing from his side onto his back to take Tony's weight, then arching up his hips

under Tony's ass. "People get them for all kinds of reasons," Tony adds. "If you want to have sex, use your words. What the hell made you change your mind? Start at the beginning."

Contrary to the end. The thought gives him a certain chagrin. Arguing against something being decided in Tony's favor is not his normal *modus operandi*, but it's not the first time, either.

Loki lifts his head, rising to the extent he can without tumbling Tony off him. Loki half-sits up, propping himself up on his elbows. "Tony," Loki says, "I apologize for trying to kill you." Loki's hips press up beneath Tony's butt, seeking friction. "I desire to know you more intimately."

Tony pushes Loki's legs apart and discovers Loki is amazingly flexible, with each knee hitting a side of the bed like he's a fucking gymnast. Tony's fucked former gymnasts, and he digs that shocking freedom of movement. God knows Tony can't do a split, couldn't even in his twenties. "Christ," Tony says. "Okay, keep talking."

"I hope you will indulge me, for I care for you in ways I did not expect," Loki says like he's a fucking seventeenth century gentleman courting a lady. Loki's long fingers stroke up Tony's sides, leaving delicious sensation in their wake. "Lie with me. Pleasure me, and allow me to pleasure you."

"This could get so messy so fast," Tony says honestly. "You're holding me prisoner here. What if you turn out to be really clingy?"

Loki just looks at Tony, but his expression softens even further with amusement.

"On the other hand, you're the only person around here, and god of lies thing aside I actually believe you when you say you care about me. Plus I haven't gotten laid in weeks now, all of that's sort of pulling me in the yes-we-should direction." Tony tilts his head from side to side, pretending to consider for half a second. Like he'd really turn down the chance to fuck a hot-as-fuck, probably slutty demigod who's had centuries to hone all his sexual techniques and is *in love with Tony*. (*That Tony loves back*. Fuck, he really does. How on Earth did this happen?) "Okay, c'mere."

*

What Tony knows he'll remember from this first time together is the look in Loki's eyes, languid and energetic, intent but unfocused, lascivious and beguiling.

Just as Tony remembers from the night he jumped, Loki's breath has a fresh and clean scent, only this time Tony's tasting as well, filling his mouth with coolness. Tony can only liken the experience to the cucumber sorbet palate cleansers that were such a thing a while back. Couldn't go out for a fancy dinner without tripping over one or five.

The whole experience of fucking Loki is like that-- surreal. Tony goes more for women, and a long time has passed since he fucked a man. Loki willingly follows Tony's lead, leaving no question of who's going to be on top. Tony stays physically on top, too, because having his pelvis flattened would not be sexy. Tony's had enough body parts crushed for one lifetime. If

the two of them keep having sex, they're going to be hard-pressed for variety. Maybe a sideways position, maybe a sex swing--

Loki gasps a gratifying breath out when Tony starts to push inside him, going slow, filling the gap with kisses. Loki's heavenly inside, breath-stealingly tight and hot and slick. Outside, Loki's hands feel like they're everywhere-- rubbing Tony's chest in little circles, caressing the stubble of Tony's facial hair, pressing deeply into and along Loki's own thighs. Tony settles inside all the way and pauses again before he begins to fuck Loki, and Tony's not as rough as he used to be, but by the end he still goes hard. Loki seeks his own pleasure freely, touching himself everywhere and fucking himself on Tony's cock, and Tony watches him raptly. Loki comes first, his mouth sweetly open and a cry on his lips, and Tony follows helplessly. The orgasm rocks Tony to his core, leaving him breathless and weak and full of endorphins, and as he drifts to sleep afterwards, nothing hurts at all.

*

The next morning starts out differently, because although they began the night in Tony's bed, they wake up in Loki's absurd golden brass behemoth. Otherwise the morning is the same as all the mornings before it, save perhaps for the intimate smile Loki flashes at him. After breakfast Loki walks out onto the deck wearing his light green lounging robes, and Tony puts on his sunglasses and follows him.

Tony's expecting Loki to magically disrobe and lie down in the sun, and Tony plans to sit with him, but with the roar of a plane approaching all plans rapidly change.

Loki's hand flies to Tony's wrist like he's operating on instinct, like he's about to teleport them away, but then Loki just as quickly lets go. Tony gives him a questioning look, but Loki avoids his eyes. The plane comes into view, and it's the quinjet, naturally. Tony holds his breath in a moment of horror, expecting the quinjet to crash into the force field, but no sooner has he had the thought than the jet is definitely past the barrier with no harm done to it, all its sleek metal lines intact.

Tony and Loki stand on the deck and watch the jet land in the yard. "I bet you're glad you put clothes on this morning," Tony says, but Loki doesn't have time to answer.

The bay door of the jet opens and the Avengers, or what's left of them, emerge fast and in no particular superhero formation, just sort of piling and flying out. Clint has an arrow drawn and fitted to his bow in a heartbeat. Thor's next, and Pepper follows him out, wearing the Rescue armor Tony made for her as a wedding present. Tony edges himself in between Loki and Clint, feeling a twinge in his back from moving quickly. Sam, Nat and Steve follow Pepper. They obviously left Bucky at home, which Tony duly appreciates.

Tony sees the moment Thor lays eyes on Loki. Thor's expression transforms from stunned disbelief to fury, wavering into a wrecked, emotionally charged sort of joy all in the space of seconds. Clint aims and fires an arrow at Loki almost too fast for Tony to see, but Loki doesn't so much as glance at the projectile ripping towards him, and the arrow bounces off Loki's neck without him taking the slightest notice. Clint swears, audible even from fifty feet away.

"Loki!" Thor shouts, just as Pepper calls Tony's name, and Thor's so damn loud Tony barely hears her say it. Thor uses his crackling lightning axe to fly in ahead of everyone else, propelling himself in an arc through the air on a crackling surge of lightning strikes. Thor rockets towards them and lands just far away enough to avoid electrocuting Tony, then strides forward and moves Tony aside like he's a chess piece-- not roughly, just displacing him from here to there like he's in the way.

"Hey, the kidnapping victim is over here," Tony says, because Thor's basically ignored him, but Thor pays no attention, instead descending on Loki like a vengeful angel.

In his peripheral vision, Tony can see Pepper coming towards them wearing the Rescue armor he made for her, and she rockets over to him and lands a good deal more safely than Thor did with his electrical surges. Rhodey's right behind her.

"Tony," Pepper says, sounding almost broken, and as she hugs him and pulls back she drops the faceplate and Tony can see the pain in her eyes. She really does still care about him, that much is clear. "Tony, we were so worried--" Pepper breaks off, probably realizing she only has half Tony's attention.

Tony gets the sense that Rhodey is uncharacteristically hanging back, maybe to give Pepper precedence, maybe because of the loud and emotional scene Thor and Loki are having. His War Teddy's not one for drama, either being in it or watching it, and messy emotional scenes are not his thing. Tony can't be sure, though, because unlike Pepper, Rhodey keeps his faceplate up like he expects Loki to start attacking them or for food to start being thrown or something.

"You okay Tony?" Rhodey asks, and Tony nods almost absently, his focus still mostly on Thor and Loki.

Loki's put his hands up in a gesture of peace as though that's going to spare him Thor's wrath. Thor's grabbed Loki by the neck like he's furious, but he sounds heartbroken. "Loki, how could you do this *again*?"

"I wanted to see you," Loki protests, not resisting the stranglehold on the side of his neck. Either Loki's consciously allowing Thor to manhandle him or the magical harm-prevention field isn't registering Thor's roughness as a risk to Loki's life and limb. "I came to see you. You were the one person I-- but the situation --"

Thor shakes Loki once, a rough bone-rattling shake that would give a human being the kind of whiplash that requires six months in a neck brace. Loki's head jerks back and forth and back like the floppy head of a doll, and he leaves his head tilted back for Thor's blistering bout of yelling. Thor's hand is half around Loki's neck and half wrapped in Loki's hair. "How did you survive Thanos? *Why do you keep doing this?*"

"I didn't survive him," Loki says quietly. "I am sorry. I have missed you, brother. So many times I wished I had you by my side--"

"Where have you been then?" Thor demands, and from the angle of where he's standing, Tony can see Thor has tears in his eyes.

Hands still in the air, though his fingers have curled somewhat, Loki starts to answer Thor's question, but Tony cuts him off to instantly clear it up and save on a bunch of drawn-out confusion from whatever answer Loki's about to give. "He's the Loki that got away in twenty-twelve when we went back to get the Tesseract," Tony says, offering the most concise explanation possible. Thor turns and boggles at him like he'd forgotten Tony was there. Thor looks at Loki and seems to consider, gauging this explanation, then his expression breaks like he's been stabbed in the chest and his heart's being torn out, his lips twisting with something like agony or grief.

"Then you're not--" Thor starts, his grip on Loki faltering before his hand retightens, and Thor breaks off. Thor's weeping now, with tears sliding down his cheeks. "*Who are you*, and why do you wear my brother's face?!"

"It's me." Loki's eyes stay glued to his brother like Loki's memorizing Thor's face. Though Loki's face stays dry, his eyes are full and glittering more and more by the second, and now it's Loki who's gripping Thor, though more gently and by the shoulder. "I saw, brother. I saw everything that happened. It's me."

Then everyone else reaches them and starts talking at once, and in some cases, yelling. Tony only hears half of them, and briefly loses the thread of Thor and Loki's conversation to boot.

"Did he hurt you?" Clint demands of Tony, gesturing to Loki.

"Are you all right?" Steve asks.

"Has he hurt you?!" Clint repeats, gesturing to Loki.

Tony doubts *Only when he briefly refused to sleep with me* would go over well, so he just shakes his head. "No, no hurting. Quite the opposite. Lots of safety."

"Tony, what the hell happened," Steve says in the tone of a leader way past the point of needing an explanation.

"I caught him and brought him here for rehabilitation," Loki says smoothly, interrupting Thor and derailing the conversation they're having, and Thor looks pretty pissed about that. Loki, who has only had eyes for Thor since being grabbed and manhandled by his brother, finally turns his head to look at the others. Loki stiffens momentarily, and Tony follows his gaze to Bruce and realizes Loki, this Loki, has never seen Bruce in his melded Banner-Hulk state, permanently Hulked out yet in full control of himself.

"Caught --" Steve breaks off, visibly crushed. "You really jumped, didn't you. Tony--"

Tony cuts him off. "It's fine, it's fine. Water under the bridge," Tony says. "How did you find me?"

"F.R.I.D.A.Y. triangulated where your email was accessed," Nat explains. "It took some time, but--"

"So you jumped but Loki slowed your fall or something?" Bruce rounds on Loki. "Did you bring him here to torture him!?"

"Do I look like I've been tortured?" Tony asks, but no one's listening to him. "Hello, I'm wearing boxers and a T-shirt on a deck in a fucking tropical paradise."

"I am not the Loki you know," Loki says hastily, looking unnerved by the angry glint in Bruce's eyes. "The version of me you knew-- at least, mostly-- was killed by Thanos." Loki glances at Thor. "I have been on my own journey. I was coming to see you, brother, in New York," Loki says to Thor. "And instead I found him --"

"You're not qualified to rehabilitate a suicidal patient," Bruce says hotly, because Bruce has always cared about little things like professional credentials, and of course, Bruce has tried to kill himself too, so it stands to reason his feelings on the matter might be strong.

"He's uniquely qualified, actually," Tony puts in. "He ensorceled the villa so I couldn't hurt myself. I was annoyed at the time, but in hindsight it was pretty slick."

Bruce glares at Loki. "So you kidnapped him," Bruce accuses.

"Yes, I took him prisoner here," Loki admits readily. "He needed time, counsel, and comfort." Loki's eyes flicker to Thor. "From someone who made similar choices."

Thor's face clouds, and then he holds Loki at arm's length and studies Loki's face. "Brother, you look *older*."

Loki ignores Thor now, avoiding his eyes, focusing on the conversation happening around them.

"Well come on, this ends here and now. We're here to rescue you," Steve says, taking a step back and to the left so Tony has a clear path to the jet sitting with the engine still running in the side yard. "Hop in, let's go home."

Tony can feel the tension coiled in Loki next to him, can see the stiff upper lip Loki's maintaining behind his even exterior. Loki doesn't want him to leave, and Loki thinks he's about to take off with his team. Tony would be well within his rights to ditch, since he was brought here against his will and technically speaking is Loki's prisoner, but Tony has no intention of leaving now. The words in Steve's email about Dr. Strange float back to him-- *He said you're right where you need to be*. Really, Stephen Strange knows way more than he should about Tony's life. Nosy sorcerers.

Tony shakes his head. "I'm not coming," Tony states flatly.

A universal startle reaction goes through almost all his teammates-- eyes widening, or heads tilted back, or mouths dropping open. Tony has the sense of being surrounded by an ocean of shocked eyes and parting lips. Natasha only blinks once, because she never reacts to anything unless she consciously decides to react.

Bruce is the first one of them to collect himself. "What? Then when are you coming back?"

"I'm not," Tony says. "I'm done with the Avengers. It's time. I'm out. You guys can keep the building." Tony looks sideways and meets Loki's eyes. Tony can feel rather than see Loki's surprise, but after a moment a slow, tender smile spreads over Loki's face. "I got a second chance here," Tony says. "I'm not wasting it. No offense."

Natasha puts the pieces together, and her eyebrow arches. Her voice remains studiously neutral. "You're sleeping together?"

"Oh," Thor says, a light dawning. "*Oh.*"

Clint's face twists in disgust or horror. Steve blanches, that sweet summer child. Pepper looks pale, though probably more because Loki was a bad guy than from any kind of lingering romantic feelings for Tony. Loki's dazzling white smile grows both in confidence and mischief.

"That is none of your business but yes, yes we are." Tony's never been one to deny his grand exploits, and making a gorgeous 1500 year old demigod fall for him at fifty-fucking-two and disabled definitely makes the list. "It's kinda more than that, actually." Tony looks sideways, searching Loki's eyes. "I mean, we're in love, yeah? What is this?"

Loki's smile softens and bleeds away its wicked edge, melting into an expression that's gentler. "Yes."

"Tony, he's mind-controlling you," Clint says furiously, getting Loki's and Tony's mutual attention off each other, but Tony's already shaking his head as he turns back to Clint.

"He couldn't do it in 2012 and he doesn't have the-- he's not, okay? Look, I wasn't happy about being here at first, I was trying to kill him and myself, but-- "

Natasha keeps her voice even. "Stockholm Syndrome much, Tony?"

"I don't much care what you think," Tony says. "I know what I want. Okay?"

Bruce's eyes flicker from Tony to Loki and back. "This all sounds really fucked-up."

"Well, no one's denying that," Tony agrees. "But good stuff can come out of fucked-up stuff."

Steve scowls at Loki as though he violently disapproves of this revelation. "So you saved Tony's life, and brought him back here, and your 'comfort' took the form of--" Steve breaks off and shakes his head faintly but emphatically, like he can't bring himself to finish the sentence.

"Yes," Loki says, at the same time Tony says, "No." When they look at each other, Loki lifts an eyebrow, outlining the wrinkles in his forehead.

"Well, not immediately," Loki says.

"Yeah, it kind of developed," Tony explains.

Thor starts to say something. "My friends--"

"You really will fuck anything," Clint says to Tony almost in wonder.

"That is not true, I almost exclusively fuck former supermodels--" Tony starts, but three or four of them are talking at once again. Loki looks affronted and opens his mouth in a snarl, but Tony puts a hand on Loki's chest to indicate he's going to handle this one.

"How dare you insult my brother--!" Thor starts, outraged, and Tony sets his other hand on Thor's chest.

"Not cool," Tony says to Clint.

Loki's lips have pulled into a sneer, and he speaks up too. "I will let that one go," Loki says to Clint. "Watch your mouth."

Clint's clearly outraged, and Clint stares Thor down and then Loki fearlessly, unafraid to go toe to toe with a couple of irritated demigods. "He's coming straight off trying to take over Earth--"

"He's not," Tony says.

Loki addresses Clint, his voice low and persuasive, his eyes intent enough to get Clint's silent attention back on him. "When you traveled through time you changed the course of my fate. I have been on my own journey-- through the multiverse."

"The multiverse," Bruce says, suddenly sounding happy, probably because the existence of the multiverse proves at least two of his published theories correct.

"The multiverse?" Steve repeats, sounding dubious.

"He met an alligator Loki," Tony says, just to add to the conversation before it erupts again, which it does in short order.

"Tony, you can't really mean to stay here," Steve says.

"I don't care what he's been doing," Clint says hotly.

Natasha takes Clint's side, because of course she does, although she sounds apologetic and reluctant. "Loki never faced S.H.I.E.L.D.'s justice for New York."

"You're one to talk about not facing S.H.I.E.L.D.'s justice," Tony snaps, and their exchange quiets everyone down again.

"Is this like-- a rebound thing?" Steve asks awkwardly, glancing apologetically at Pepper.

Tony remains as patient as he can, but he can't help slapping the base of his palm to his own forehead. "No. The month with Amber Heard was the rebound thing. Christ, Pepper left me four years ago. Rebounds are immediate, Steve."

"Still can't believe Amber put up with you that long," Nat says with a small smile, and Tony can tell she's teasing to take down the tension of the situation a few notches, Nat-style.

"My friends," Thor announces loudly. "My brother looks older."

Most of them receive this declaration with blank faces.

"So what?" Clint says.

"He's right, you do look older," Natasha says to Loki.

Loki glances at her, his eyes sharp, his forehead furrowed.

"You do, Loki," Thor says quietly, stepping closer and reaching up a hand to touch Loki's forehead. Loki ducks his head away but not particularly hard or far, just the way one mildly jerks to evade a big brother's hand, not that Tony would know. Thor evidently believes his touch is not truly unwelcome, because as Loki straightens Thor resumes tracing one of Loki's dozen deep-etched forehead lines with a single finger. Or maybe Thor knows Loki doesn't want to be touched but is ignoring that preference on account of all the times Loki's nonconsensually stabbed him.

"He's matured," Tony says. "It suits him, don't you think?"

"What are you getting at, Thor?" Steve asks.

Thor sounds borderline jubilant as he strokes two large fingers along the side of Loki's face, not to be denied. Loki averts his eyes. "Asgardians do not age linearly or predictably as you do, changing slowly over time," Thor says to them. "Externally, we age in fits and starts, in bursts to match what lies within." Thor cocks his head, probing as though he wants to hear a full explanation for the reasons behind the evolution in Loki's appearance. "You have *grown*, brother."

Loki rolls his eyes and puts up an arm to physically brush Thor's hand away, signalling he's had enough. "Rude," Loki says, but his expression says he's too pleased with how this meeting has unfolded to truly be offended. "You all look older too. Far older," Loki emphasizes. "Years."

Thor's hand claps down on Loki's shoulder. "I knew you could be more. I am happy for you, brother," Thor says, and then Loki's being engulfed in a patented Thor embrace.

Tony wants to say something mocking, but then apparently it's his turn and Thor has wrapped him up and is squeezing the life out of him. Thankfully this hug lasts no longer than Loki's before Thor snags Loki with one arm and turns it into a looser and less brutal triad hug, and Tony's phobia doesn't kick in.

"Hey," Tony manages. "Trauma. Trauma from squeezing, don't like it."

Miracle of miracles, Thor pulls back. "Be good to each other," Thor says, looking from Loki to Tony and back, his voice joyful, a clear blessing.

"That's it?" Clint asks. "We're just leaving Tony with *him*?"

"Hey, I'm an adult," Tony says. "I do get to decide this stuff, you know."

"Take care, Tony," Bruce says, and Tony reaches out to shake his hand, but before he knows it he's been pulled into a gentle hug with Bruce, and Tony's not even sure which of them initiated it. But then he's hugging everyone. Tony hugs Nat, then Clint.

"If you're sure about this," Clint says doubtfully.

"I am," Tony assures him. "If I change my mind, you'll be, like, the sixth person I'll email."

Pepper comes forward again, and Tony meets her eyes, and when she throws herself into his arms all he feels is the gentle coolness of the Rescue armor, contentment and a trace of bittersweetness. "I'm so happy for you, Tony."

"You too Pep," Tony says. "Always."

Then Tony finds himself face to face with Steve. "I'm so sorry Tony," Steve says, but Tony dismisses that with a wave.

"My mom used to say everything works out for the best," Tony tells him. Tony holds out his hand to Steve knowing they're going to hug, and no sooner have they gripped hands than they're embracing.

After Steve there's only one person left, and his Rhodeybun hates goodbyes. "I'll see you, Tony," Rhodey says. "I *better* see you."

"You will," Tony promises, and this is one hug he's a hundred percent up for. Rhodey leans in to snag him, and even though Rhodey's encased in the War Machine armor, their groins stay at least five inches apart. As is tradition.

After they've slapped each other's backs-- hugs are honestly just weird social behavior-- and Rhodey's pulled away and takes a step back, Loki slides an arm around Tony's waist. Loki begins, "Would you like to stay for--"

"I think they're probably ready to head home," Tony interrupts, because this unwanted intervention and aborted rescue is awkward and has gone on long enough. "They can't stay, you got rid of our dining room furniture, *honey*."

Loki plays right along, not missing a beat. "I did that for you, dear."

Tony turns to the others with a straight face. "Thanks for coming out, guys. I really do appreciate it. I'll be in touch."

Loki and Thor look at each other, and Loki lets go of Tony to mutually fold into another embrace with Thor. Their hug involves no incestuous kissing this time, but it lasts long before Thor finally slaps Loki's shoulder and Loki playfully yanks a thick handful of Thor's hair, pulling his brother's head backwards and making Thor swat at him. When they pull apart, they're smiling at one another.

*

Tony and Loki stand side by side on the deck and watch the quinjet take off. Tony turns to Loki, who has his eyebrows up and his forehead wrinkled, looking almost bemused by what just took place. When Loki sees Tony gazing at him, he turns, a pleased smile pulling across his face. Loki looks good when he smiles. Younger. Softer. Happy.

"So Goblin King... where's our home here?" Tony asks, because that's the first thing that comes into his head.

Loki tells him.

End Notes

1. 'Moose Jaws' is a proposed, probably never-going-to-be-made Kevin Smith project, basically the movie *Jaws* but set in Canada instead of a beach town, with a moose instead of a shark. So... it's another Loki antler joke.
2. Title from Aberjhani: "Souls reconstructed with faith turn agony into peace."
3. Irene Merryweather is totally a ruthless, amoral event planner in this universe. Her life took some wild turns, clearly. Andrea Zaleski is a name put together at random and refers to no actual person living or dead.
4. Writing this, I had a minor crisis in which I realized I'd completely forgotten the proper way to write numbers in fiction, and I had to read a grammar guide, and I'm still not sure I did that shit right.
5. Kratosanthropophobia is a neologism synthesized by me. I tacked *kratos* from the ancient Greek for strength and/or might onto anthropophobia which is a real and defined phobia meaning a fear of human beings. I feel like the Marvelverse needs a clinical definition for the extreme fear of superhumans, because realistically it would be at least as prevalent a fear as the fear of garlic or colors or rain.
6. The pie charts herein are based on actual [pie charts](#) I had the lulzy fortune to google. Thank you, internet.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!