

that one last tender place

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by [oopshidaisy](#)

Summary

Post-Avengers (2012). Tony and Loki get hit with a soul-bonding curse, courtesy of Enchantress. They've got to find a way to make it work—for at least as long as it takes to track Enchantress down and get her to reverse the spell.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

this fic has been my nanowrimo project, so it's up to about 50k words so far. this means that, for the first time in the 8 years i've been writing fanfiction, i have a posting schedule! there'll be a new chapter every sunday. i promise.

the title and epigraph are both from richard siken poems, because i figure everyone's allowed at least one instance of pilfering siken poems for fic purposes.

i also have a lot of people to thank, because i've never written a story this long before and i needed a hell of a lot of support. i couldn't have done it without alyx, alex, alex (seriously, there were three of them), meg, eleanor, lottie and gemma. it's thanks to them that this story received the motivation, editing, ideas, and support that it needed to come to life. and it's also thanks to them that accompanying fanart and a podfic are in the works <3

*There's a niche in his chest
where a heart would fit perfectly
and he thinks if he could just maneuver one into place—
well then, game over.*
“Road Music”, Richard Siken

The worst kind of battles, if Tony had to pick, are the ones where they're fighting two enemies at once. As in, two enemies who are bent on destroying each other as well as everything in a ten-mile radius. As in, today, Loki and Enchantress, rekindling some kind of centuries-old hate-on for each other. Tony doesn't actually know the specifics; Thor's rundown of the situation had been annoyingly vague.

He's been Iron Man for a good while, been an Avenger for the better part of a year, and Tony wouldn't trade any of it for the world. But sometimes he's surrounded by nutjobs with green color schemes who are trying to murder each other and then him, and it does make him question his own sanity.

Small mercies: the two emerald sparklers have elected to have their tiff in what is, for the large part, Canadian wilderness. The lack of civilians constitutes a definite point in the bad guys' favor. Counting against them is the climate, which had become a problem when the Iron Man suit's in-built heating system was set on the fritz by a well-timed blast from Enchantress. As a result, Tony's in the unenviable situation of both sweating from exertion and shivering from the cold.

“Put the wand down!” he shouts at Enchantress—seriously, how is this his life?—but the words have no effect. Not that he had much hope that he could make Enchantress see the error of her ways by yelling at her.

He goes back to trying to aim repulsor blasts in her direction, with varying degrees of success: Enchantress deflects most of them, and he’s not sure if the ones that actually do hit have much of an effect. As he’s pondering this issue, Enchantress shoots a bolt of nasty-looking red energy straight at Natasha, who rolls expertly out of the way but still loses a chunk of hair in the process.

“Widow?” That’s Clint over comms, voice just a tad worried. He’d stayed behind in the Quinjet as aerial support, hovering just far enough out of the way that he won’t be targeted directly. Unfortunately, his eyeline is unencumbered and he’s a terrible backseat driver when he’s not on the front lines.

“I’m fine,” Nat says. She sounds winded, which is never a good sign.

“Loki,” Tony tries, because the phrase ‘better the devil you know’ has rarely been so applicable, “what in fuck’s name is going on?”

He can *feel* Steve’s disapproval—Steve doesn’t like swearing when they’re suited up, and he loathes Tony and Loki’s little chats—but Tony does what he does best and ignores it.

“This doesn’t concern you, mortal,” Loki snarls.

Well, he tried.

It’s then that Enchantress gets the surrounding trees to do her bidding, and Tony finds himself pointing his repulsors at thrashing spindly branches. Straight away, it becomes clear that never in the process of designing the Iron Man suit did he prepare for this shit. One of the glorified twigs manages to hook itself around his ankle, but is easily snapped when he puts on a spurt of speed with his jet boots.

He sighs, loud enough to register through the voice modulator, and flies out the flailing reach of the uppermost branches. Sometimes it’s worth just relying on the Hulk to smash stuff.

And from there it’s all too simple to pester Loki, who’s chosen a rocky outcropping to make his stand from. His figure doesn’t inspire confidence; he’s snarling like a feral animal as he flings curses at Enchantress and Thor alike, and there are copious tears in his clothing that speak to the battle starting a good while before the Avengers had arrived. His ubiquitous gold helmet is nowhere to be seen.

“I think you’re losing,” Tony says, hovering. It’s not a lie: Loki’s magic is usually enough to raze a city block, but today his performance is surprisingly feeble. Either he’s holding back, out of practice, or he’s just plain out of his league against a fellow Asgardian sorcerer. It should be fun to watch Loki get a taste of his own medicine—struggling to hold his own against an enemy who outmatches him. It isn’t. As Tony watches, a droplet of blood rolls from his hairline down to the corner of his lips, staining them with a red so dark it’s almost black. Tony swallows back anything resembling sympathy and continues with his taunts:

“You better be planning something smart, Loki-dokie. I wouldn’t put money on you right now, and I’ve got plenty to spare.”

“*Quiet,*” Loki snaps. Tony almost pouts. He’s gotten used to a certain level of mid-battle repartee from Loki. There’s a part of him that almost looks forward to it—and he doesn’t think he can be blamed for that, either. It’s just that Loki’s far and away a more interesting opponent than, say, all the humans who got their hands on Chitauri weapons and decided to be idiots about it. For all his numerous flaws, Loki at least has a sense of humor.

Plus, ever since the invasion, Loki’s modus operandi has gone right from ‘world domination’ to ‘turning people into various animals and laughing maniacally about it from atop a skyscraper.’ It’s still evil, since they haven’t figured out a way to transform the animals back yet, and SHIELD keeps having to deliver small, fluffy bunnies to families with the assurance that the pile of fur is actually their loved one. But Bruce has been working on fixing them when he’s not Hulked out—and Loki hasn’t made any moves to steal his scepter back, open more wormholes, or inflict another army on Earth—so it’s still a marked improvement.

It’s weird, is what it is. Tony doesn’t know what to make of it.

In fact, Tony realizes with a start, this is the first time he’s seen Loki truly pissed off in about a year. He flies closer, easily dodging a green tendril that could’ve come from either one of them.

“Just give me a—*hint,* Loki. Jesus,” Tony says, panting when Enchantress’ fire trails a scorching path all around the exterior of the suit. At least that’s solved the weather problem, he thinks, as he unibeams her in the face.

“And why should I?” Loki sneers. “What concern is it of yours, Tin Man?”

“Okay, first: do they even *have* tin on Asgard? Like, how do you *know* that’s an insult? Is this an Allspeak thing? Oh, and second: you’re damn right it’s my business. You wanna have catfights in my back yard, you do me the goddamn decency of telling me what they’re about.”

Loki considers him, and the momentary break in concentration gives Enchantress her in. She cackles a laugh, raising her arms above her head and yelling, “I shall show you what you have wrought upon me!” Tony gets halfway through saying, “Wait, are we dealing with a jilted lover situation here?” before he and Loki are both slammed by a wall of bright pink light. It’s a shade of pink more commonly seen on pre-teen girls’ bedroom walls, and Tony has a moment to think *that’s weird* before he loses consciousness.

When he comes to, the first thing he’s aware of is how cold he is. The metal encasing him is crusted with ice, and—worse—it’s entirely non-responsive, little more than a particularly claustrophobic coffin. He breathes shallowly, trying to get a handle on himself. There’s a way to get out of the armor when it’s shut down, he just—can’t—remember—

And then he hears, *Weak mortals,* almost a mutter originating from inside his own skull. In the next moment, he’s infused with a sensation of warmth, spreading through him like he’s

just sunk into a bath. The shock of it is so intense that, for a second, he forgets to panic.

“What the *fuck*,” he hisses. Then, louder: “Thor! Buddy? I could use an assist.”

Of the members of the team strong enough to rip the Iron Man suit apart, Thor is preferable to the Hulk. Tony just has no idea if either of them can hear him.

Calm yourself, comes that same voice as before, but unlike the first time, it isn't accompanied by any tangible relief. Also, its tone is more irritated than calming. *Also*, Tony recognizes it.

“Loki,” he says, steadier than he feels, “what in the name of every god I personally know are you doing in my head?”

There comes a noise of exasperation, point of origin inside Tony's brain. It's about the weirdest thing that's happened to him since last week, when the Avengers fought some creatures that were suspiciously similar to vampires.

Cease your whining, he hears, and then the suit's coming apart smoothly, the way neither Thor nor the Hulk could manage it. He blinks, sees green dissipating into the air, sees Loki a few feet away. He still has little to no idea what's going on, but he knows it's not good. The expression on Loki's face is grim, mouth a dark, ominous slash across his pale face.

Tony's bracing for the vicious cut of the wind to hit him when he sits up, and he frowns when he realizes he's still reaping the benefits of magical insulation. Flurries of snowflakes are landing on his arms and hands, accompanied only by a slight cool tickle.

Beneath him, the Iron Man suit has neatly parted into a nest of frozen metal. He groans and rolls out of it.

“You could do that the *entire time*?” he demands, first and foremost.

Loki wrinkles his nose. “Not when it is operational,” he admits. Tony wonders why Loki's admitting to a weakness in his own magic, and then he realizes he can hear the echo of the statement in his mind, telling him definitively that it's the truth.

“Wait, holy shit,” he says. “Try and lie to me.”

“You are intelligent and worthy of respect,” Loki says flatly.

That sentence is accompanied by a mental jumble of sarcasm and irritation, and Tony isn't recovered enough from being knocked out to parse through it.

“Come *on*,” he whines. “A proper lie. Tell me I'm ugly or that you really hate your brother.”

Loki doesn't respond with words, but Tony's already starting to adjust to the influx of data, the way a small part of his mind rings with—

frustration-exhaustion-pain-anger

“Hey,” Tony says. He looks at the way Loki’s sort of slumped on the ground, his cape a wrecked green swirl around him. One of his slender hands is clenched into the snow, and everything he’s sending across the bond is acid. “I do realize this isn’t an ideal situation, you don’t have to be a mental dick about it. Where’s the rest of my team?”

“I concealed us from them,” Loki says haughtily. The effect of his tone is mitigated by Tony’s look behind the curtain; he can tell that the arrogance is nothing more than a front—that behind it is a toxic concoction of fear and anger. He can’t help but be impressed, though, by how well Loki’s hiding his true feelings. If Tony didn’t have access to his mind, he’d have no idea.

“Oh, you *concealed* us? That’s just spectacular. How about you stop?”

panic

“Whoa, hey, shit,” Tony says, although Loki hasn’t moved at all. His face has barely twitched. It’s just that Tony knows beyond doubt that Loki is on the verge of violence towards himself or others, and since Tony’s a useful conduit for both right now...

As quickly as the flash had arrived, though, Loki calms right back down. Calm’s the wrong word for it, because he’s still providing a distinct point of turmoil in the existing turmoil that is Tony’s brain, but relative to either of their baselines Loki’s back to acceptable levels of rage and anxiety.

“Okay, so explain to me why you don’t want to be found right now,” Tony says. “With either your out-loud words or the ones you can project directly into my brain, dealer’s choice. I just think it’s worth pointing out that Enchantress could still be out there in the real world, and if she’s killed anyone on my team—”

“Enchantress is gone,” Loki says.

“Cool, cool. Good riddance to her,” Tony says, nodding. “*Why*, though?”

“She has fulfilled her purpose,” Loki says. “She cannot kill me, and as such has decided to enact her revenge by making my life a living hell.”

“I’m gonna go ahead and not take that personally,” Tony mutters.

But the thing is, with his newfound insight he knows it’s only a little bit personal. Loki is abjectly miserable when faced with the idea of Tony having access to his mind, not just because it’s Tony but because it’s *anyone*. There’s context to that, a reasoning behind it, but Tony can’t quite get to it and he doesn’t want to push. Pushing his way into Loki’s head seems like a surefire way to get dismembered or transformed into a small and non-threatening cat.

“Not everything is about you, mortal.”

“Yeah, well, this thing goes both ways,” Tony points out. “Having you up here isn’t exactly a picnic for me, either. And I’d really appreciate being able to discuss it with your brother, if

you'd let us out of our super-secret forcefield.”

Loki conveys deep offense at the description of his magic, both facially and mentally. It's the first time there's been synthesis between the two, Tony notes.

“It is shameful,” Loki says stiffly.

Tony waits.

“On Asgard, it is considered demeaning. They will not offer help, only judgment.”

“Is this some kind of intergalactic homophobia?” Tony asks, taking a wild guess based more on the color of Enchantress' spell than anything. “Because, I gotta say, I was rooting for that to only be an Earth thing.”

“Our genders are irrelevant.” Loki waves a hand. “It is weakness incarnate to share one's soul with another. Asgardians should have the strength to stand alone.”

“Yeah, but we *do* have the strength to stand alone,” Tony says slowly. “We've been doing it for—well, I've been doing it for forty years, and you've been doing it for however old *you* are.” The answer darts its way into Tony's head, and he jerks backward in shock. “Holy shit. Well, there's the definitive proof that older doesn't equal wiser. But my point is that there's no way this is shameful, because we didn't even *ask* for it, and there's got to be some way to get rid of it.”

“Enchantress is the only one who can remove a curse of her own making.”

“Oh, you have *got* to be fucking kidding me,” Tony mutters. “Fine, whatever, we'll find Enchantress and make nice, and then hopefully she'll give us our brains back. But to do that, and I cannot emphasize this enough, we have to *rejoin the real world*.”

Tony's realizing that he's not exactly privy to Loki's internal monologue—which is a relief, because he wouldn't want Loki having access to his—but he gets the vague intention and the dour resignation with which Loki removes the enchantment.

“Thank god,” he says. Loki shoots him a look.

The snowstorm is getting worse by the second, but Tony can make out the dark shape of the Quinjet, which has landed nearby, and if he squints he can see shadows that might be his fellow Avengers.

“Hey, over here!” he yells. At least a few of them have got super-hearing, so he's not too worried about the way his words get carried away by the wind.

Regardless, it's Nat who finds them first. She looks supremely wary, keeping her distance with a hand on the gun in her thigh holster.

“He's safe for now,” Tony says.

She arches an eyebrow at him but moves closer. Loki, for his part, is deeply mentally offended by being called *safe*. Tony almost laughs at the childish indignation, but in the interest of Nat staying alive he tries to tamp down the amusement.

Within seconds, Steve and Thor—who's carrying a cape-wrapped form Tony assumes to be Bruce in his arms—make their appearances. Steve's frowning, but Thor looks honestly confused and a little hopeful at the sight of his worse-for-wear brother, still there for once instead of fleeing to wherever chaos gods go when they aren't making a nuisance of themselves.

"Loki," Thor rumbles.

Loki gets smoothly to his feet, and then stumbles. It's so rare to see him being anything other than graceful; Tony winces before he can help himself. As he does so, Nat catches his eye, and the suspicion in her expression increases by degrees. She's letting him see it, though, so that's something.

Tony schools his own expression into something neutral and unsympathetic.

"So, we have a situation," he says, ignoring the curious look Loki is shooting his way. He supposes he's emitting some pretty mixed signals right about now, emotions-wise. "How many of you guys have seen *Star Trek*?"

Steve rubs wearily at his own temple. "How about you tell us what's going on without a pop culture reference, Iron Man?"

He always calls Tony Iron Man when they're in the field, even when he's not wearing the suit. It's kind of adorable.

"It's not *my* fault Enchantress did some kind of freaky mind-meld spell and got me and Loki all up in each other's heads!"

Bruce pokes his head out of the lump of blankets. "Mind-meld?"

"This is why Bruce is my favorite," Tony says, trying not to yawn. He can't tell whether his tiredness originates from himself or Loki, but he'd much rather be lying down than attempting to explain what's happened to Captain America.

Loki says something that doesn't translate, then, directing his words at Thor alone. Even without understanding the words themselves, Tony's privy to the deep, suffusing shame that accompanies them. He almost goes to cover himself before he remembers that he's fully clothed, and that the source of the shame is someone else for a change.

Thor's expression is something to behold. Tony doesn't think he's ever seen him so *worried*—even during the Battle of New York, Thor's bravado had seemed utterly unshakeable. Tony feels an answering bolt of fear, from himself or Loki or both.

"Oh," he says, "so this is *bad*."

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Our heroes return to Avengers Tower and try to figure out what the hell is going on.

Chapter Notes

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

It takes no small amount of coaxing to get Loki to agree to board the Quinjet, and then there's Clint to contend with.

“So I guess you heard all that,” Tony says flatly. For a moment, he almost regrets the effectiveness of the comms units he'd designed for the team—not that Clint's reaction would be any better if he *hadn't* been privy to the exposition. Drawings of Loki's face are still the most common thing Clint uses for target practice these days. It's probably worth just being thankful that Clint hadn't immediately attempted to shoot Loki in the face with an arrow designed for exactly that purpose.

Instead, he's barring their entry to the cockpit with crossed arms and a face like a storm. Tony, who just wants to lie the fuck down and give himself a minute to process what's happened, glares right back at him.

“Like hell is he coming back with us,” Clint says. He's not one of the most physically imposing people on the team, but the sheer malice in his expression pulls Tony up short. “Unless it's in handcuffs.”

Tony sighs, deep and slow, and beside him Loki blinks neatly out of existence. It just so happens that Tony can sense his presence through the glamor, and knows that he hasn't actually moved an inch. For all its disadvantages, at least this situation is giving him new insight into Loki's tricks.

“Good riddance,” Clint mutters.

“Barton, no one's asking you to *like* him,” Tony snaps. “But we have a situation here.”

“He's playing a trick on you,” Clint replies instantly. “Getting into people's heads—it's what he *does*. I've been there.”

“Control of minds is not a talent my brother possessed before the scepter,” Thor says. It's not a helpful clarification, and it doesn't do anything to soften Clint's scowl. “He can enter your mind no longer, my friend.”

Tony suspects that this isn't *exactly* true (whether Thor knows it or not), because the input he's getting from Loki is more offense than agreement. He tries to send a warning through the bond for Loki not to emerge and attempt to defend his magical prowess; he has no idea whether he succeeds, but Loki keeps quiet and invisible regardless.

Thor lays a hand on Clint's shoulder. Clint shrugs it off, roughly, and turns away.

"It doesn't matter," Clint says. "He's *been* in there. *Fuck.*"

He stalks away, tailed by Natasha. But he leaves the entryway clear.

"Well, that was exciting," Tony says. "You can come out now, scaredy-cat."

Loki reappears in a puff of affronted green smoke.

"You presume to tell *me*—"

"Shut it," Tony says. "Clint has a point—you're lucky we're not arresting you. That could change anytime."

"You require my help if you wish to get your precious mind back. And I can assure you I will provide no such assistance in *chains*," Loki hisses. The anger evident in his voice is just as intense in his head, but there's no small amount of fear accompanying it. He's more of a cornered animal than a vengeful god. It's that vulnerability, more than anything, that leads Tony to hold his hands up in surrender.

"Like I said, we're not going to do it unless you make us." He's not expecting to gain Loki's trust, exactly, but he knows Loki can sense the truth behind his statement.

"What *will* you do with me?" There's something challenging in the tilt of Loki's brow, the curl of his lip. Tony meets his stare head-on.

It's difficult to adjust to, this thing between them. Tony feels as though his center of gravity has been ever-so-slightly shifted without warning. It makes him unsteady on his feet. He notices that he's closer to Loki than he's ever been, in the literal sense: there's less than a foot of space between them. His fingers clench around nothing, and he turns his face away.

It's then that Tony registers the five pairs of eyes trained on him and Loki. He's never been good with reading others' emotions, but he quickly constructs a mental range of hostility that goes from Bruce, whose scientific curiosity reliably erodes his moral qualms, to Clint's heated glare, no less intense for being further away. Before he can think better of it, he pushes the imaginary scale in the vague mental direction of Loki, as much as an experiment as a joke. They've only exchanged words thus far; Tony wants to know if images can be conveyed in the same manner. The test is more than worth it for the way Loki laughs and responds with a perfect imitation of Steve's voice saying: *You should know better than to fraternize with Loki, Iron Man.* It's something Steve *had* said, a few months ago, when Tony and Loki had (admittedly) gotten a little too into their mid-fight stand-up comedy routine. Somehow, hearing Steve's voice in his head is even weirder than hearing Loki's; Tony can't help but grin at the sheer absurdity of it.

Before things can get tense again, he heads toward the pilot's seat and gets them in the air, relying on JARVIS to steer them home. As he does so, he mulls over the answer to Loki's question.

What *are* they going to do with him?

“First, we're gonna spend some quality time in the lab, because we're all gonna feel really stupid for worrying if there's an easy fix with Earth science,” he says, without much optimism.

“And when that doesn't work?” Loki asks, hovering at Tony's shoulder and blatantly studying the Quinjet's operating system. Once this is all over, Tony's going to have to prioritize some anti-Loki safeguards.

“*If* that doesn't work, we'll move onto plan B. Which I am currently working on.”

Loki doesn't say a word, but he still conveys his condescension loud and clear.

“This is fascinating,” Bruce breathes. He's fully-clothed once more, glasses perched low on the bridge of his nose as he stares at one of the holographic screens in the lab. Tony, who's just spent an hour having his brain scanned every which way and then a further hour convincing Loki that they're not about to take him out with an MRI machine, hums noncommittally.

He's tired, and his body aches all over, the way it always does after he's spent a couple hours flinging himself around in the Iron Man suit. He's also hungry.

“Eat, then,” Loki snaps. He's cross-legged on the center of a table, and he's radiating fury so strongly that Tony's sure Bruce can feel it too. The general vibe from Loki is such that it seems as though, at any moment, things are going to start bursting into flames. Evidently, there's very little Loki hates as much as being treated like a lab rat.

Bruce blinks over at them.

“And that was in response to?” he asks.

“The feeling of hunger, I guess, rather than a conscious thought about it,” Tony says. “Unless I'm accidentally projecting.”

He's been continuing his experimentation with intentionally sending thoughts Loki's way, and although Loki keeps insulting his lack of mental grace, it's been easy enough to keep the lines of communication open. It's the kind of thing that would be incredibly useful if they were on the same team.

Getting Loki into Avengers Tower had been a trial in and of itself. Clint had pitched another fit right as they were landing, threatening to call Nick Fury and turn both Loki and Tony over to SHIELD. And then Loki had held a dagger to Clint's throat, and the whole thing had been

extremely unpleasant, especially for the person who had to try to block out the second-hand murderous rage from his own brain.

Right now, Natasha's gone to talk Clint down, unexpectedly agreeing that it's best to work something out for themselves before they approach SHIELD. Steve's in charge of giving a report to Fury that carefully excludes the little detail that they've acquired an extra Asgardian, on the logic that Fury will be least likely to suspect duplicity from his favorite soldier. Tony, for his part, has spent the last couple of hours composing several texts for Pepper and Rhodey, attempting to explain the situation. He still hasn't sent any of them.

Thor has returned to Asgard to explain the state of affairs to—someone. He and Loki had discussed the matter in a language none of the rest of them could understand, and had both proved resistant to further questioning.

And then Loki had balked at the idea of actually coming into the lab, mind skittering into alarm when confronted with the mere sight of Tony and Bruce's wonderland, all gleaming metal and mechanical toys.

"You'd be able to tell if I was luring you into a trap," Tony had said, reasonably, and Loki had hissed at him. An actual hiss.

So it had taken rather a lot of cajoling, but thus far Loki's made it through the afternoon without doing anything horrible other than glaring at everyone mistrustfully. And now he's safely sequestered in the lab, still glaring mistrustfully. The constant negativity is beginning to give Tony a headache. Or maybe it's the forty hours without sleep and the sixteen hours without caffeine.

Loki makes another noise of irritation and flicks his wrist. Bruce and Tony both rear back automatically, but no devastation is wrought. Instead, Loki appears to have conjured up—breakfast.

"Those are pancakes," Tony says.

"Yes," Loki says.

"And that's coffee." Because it is, unmistakably, the rejuvenating scent of it wafting through the room.

"Yes," Loki says. He's got the little smirk on his face that Tony's come to associate with Loki playing his equivalent of practical jokes on unsuspecting bystanders. At least this time the stunt appears to be harmless.

There's something unnervingly polite about it, too: there are three plates, three mugs. Loki has included Bruce in the impromptu breakfast order.

"Where are they *from*?" Tony asks.

Loki laughs, possibly in response to the dueling bewilderment and gratitude Tony is absolutely, for sure projecting. He can't help it if the smell of coffee is his weakness.

“The International House of Pancakes,” Loki says. His amusement over his own joke is winning out over his residual anger, which Tony considers an absolute win. “I am partial to the blueberry, and have provided thusly.”

Tony is aware that he’s gaping, but he can’t help it.

“Have you,” he says. “Have you just been *hanging out* on Earth?”

Loki’s brain launches itself into an unhelpful mess, an absolute jumble of conflicting impulses and emotions smashed together.

guilt-irritation-amusement-exasperation-discomfort

“Christ,” Tony mutters before he can help himself. “It’s just a question, I don’t mean anything by it. I was just surprised.”

Bruce is making notes.

“I have sampled some of Midgard’s cuisine,” Loki says, imperiously.

“Dunno if IHOP counts as Earth’s finest cuisine, but good for you,” Tony replies. When his legs have recovered from the shock, he grabs his and Bruce’s plates. The plates and cutlery definitely *aren’t* from IHOP, but Tony’s relatively certain of their place of origin: Asgard. They’re beautiful, actually, deep red edged with gold. The mugs are just regular human mugs, though, plain ceramic white.

It makes for an intensely odd dining experience.

“So—and bearing in mind that I’m not trying to offend your godliness here—how are you just wandering in to restaurants nationwide? Do you put on a fake moustache? Ditch the BDSM gear?”

Loki sighs and shimmers. One moment he’s the Loki Tony knows and loves to hate, and the next he’s a relatively normal-looking guy, in a silky green shirt and black skinny jeans. It’s not even that Loki’s turned himself into another person. His face is the same—or, perhaps a little softer somehow, lips not pressed into a permanent sneer—and his raven-black hair is tied back, a few strands hanging loose against his cheeks.

“Huh,” Tony says, not trusting himself to say anything else.

“And no one recognizes you?” Bruce asks. He looks intensely interested. Bruce has a better relationship with magic than Tony does; it excites him, makes him want to find out more. When Tony sees ‘magic’ happening, he wants to close his eyes and walk in the opposite direction.

Still, he can admit Loki’s transformation is a little bit cool.

He knows Loki notices the admiration, too, because a smirk takes over his mouth once more and his mind is very, very smug.

“Mortals see what they wish to see,” Loki says by way of explanation, taking a long sip of his own coffee.

He looks younger like this, Tony realizes. It’s as though a weight has been lifted off him with the abandonment of all his usual attire. And Tony knows it should be creepy, the idea of Loki just wandering into McDonald’s whenever he feels like it, walking freely among the inhabitants of Earth, all those people he’d tried to subjugate and rule. But it’s more confusing than anything. Why would Loki even *want* to...? If he’d thought himself so far above ‘Midgard,’ why bother to return? Why deign to try a stack of blueberry pancakes?

There aren’t any clear answers coming through across their mental highway, so Tony says aloud: “That’s how you’ve been spending your free time lately?”

“My brother is pathetically attached to your realm,” Loki says, and his defensiveness is abundantly clear to Tony. Evasive maneuvers, too, are apparent. “I wished to understand his defection from his rightful duties.”

“Hey, Thor still hangs out on Asgard,” Tony points out. “Have you even been back since your jailbreak?”

Loki shifts, and takes another long sip from his mug. Tony and Bruce wait.

“It would be unwise for me to return,” Loki says. “Evading Heimdall’s eye is no trifling matter.”

Tony takes a moment to sift through that, using the additional context of their meld.

“So you *have* been back,” he surmises. “Just not frequently. Bruce, buddy, I cannot tell you how fun it is being able to tell when the ‘god of lies’ is lying to you.”

Bruce nods and makes a note.

“That wasn’t a lie,” Loki says. He seems honestly surprised, and less nettled by Tony’s use of air-quotes than Tony had hoped he’d be.

“Oh, yeah, you’re being careful not to. But I can still feel your intent up here.” Tony taps his own temple.

Loki’s expression grows stormy, but his feelings on the matter are a little more complex. He’s not a fan of their bond, that much is obvious, but how much of that is Asgardian conditioning and how much is just regular intimacy issues is difficult to figure out. Because there’s this thread of something Tony doesn’t know how to attach a label to in amongst all the posturing.

He chews his blueberry pancake thoughtfully and peers over Bruce’s shoulder at the readings from the brain scans.

“Oh,” he says, “that *is* pretty cool. Hey, Lokester, check this out.”

He’s not a biologist, but he has enough of a working knowledge to know increased brain activity when he sees it. Loki’s brain, of course, is like nothing he—or probably Bruce—have

ever seen before, but Tony's is also doing some interesting stuff.

"I'll have to take more scans," Bruce says, "to see how it develops. But right now every single part of your brain is lit up with—well, with *something*."

"Magic," Loki provides.

"Magic," Tony agrees, with considerably more disgust in his tone. "But what's interesting about *that*," he continues, tapping at the screen and zooming in, "is that it implies full access. The occipital lobe, for example." He points it out to Loki on the scan of his own brain, not wanting to make any assumptions about alien brain anatomy. "That implies that you should be seeing what I see, or at least have access to my visual processing."

"Interesting," Loki murmurs.

Tony looks at him dubiously. "I mean, you're the expert on this stuff. What usually happens to Asgardians who are bonded?"

"Every curse is different," Loki says. "Most have been driven insane by a bond of this nature. The Curse of Knowledge has often ended in bloodshed."

Tony makes a questioning noise and tries not to think too hard about grievous bodily harm or madness. Down that avenue lies panic.

"It is named as such because each being should only be privy to knowledge of oneself," Loki says. It sounds overly formal, even from him.

"Doesn't seem like you've ever given much of a shit about *should*, though," Tony points out. "I mean, if anyone's going to defy Asgard's weird individualist bullshit—"

"I do not require pity."

Tony doesn't try to pretend he doesn't feel it. "All I'm saying is that this—this *curse*, it's not the end of the world or the Nine Realms or whatever. We'll just have to try *really* hard not to go crazy and kill each other until we can get it fixed. Deal?"

"It may not be so simple, mortal."

Tony sighs. "Yeah, and you can feel exactly how much I'm freaking out, since it's playing out inside your head *right this very second*. So if you could go ahead and do me the favor of not patronizing me, that'd be real great."

Bruce looks worried, as though he thinks the stabbing is going to begin any minute. It does very little to calm Tony's frayed nerves.

It doesn't *feel* like the curse is going to wreck his mind. It feels relatively unobtrusive, and he's felt fewer homicidal urges towards Loki than ever before since Enchantress hit them with it. Plus, if Loki was about to kill him, he'd at least see it coming.

“There are other stories,” Loki says quietly. “Not widely told. Of those for whom the curse was not a curse at all.”

Tony turns to look him in the eye. Loki’s expression isn’t betraying any of the—

contrition-hope-worry

—apologetic tenor of his thoughts. It’s unnerving, knowing what’s beneath the surface of such careful blankness.

“And who told those stories?” Tony asks, equally quiet.

“It is not of importance,” Loki says. But their link gives him away once more, and Tony finds himself surprised by, in an instant, *knowing* that it was Loki’s mother who provided him with this one small hope.

He draws in a breath. “Bruce,” he says, “note down that there was just an informational transference, rather than emotional. I’m guessing it wasn’t intentional?”

Loki’s eyebrows draw together. “No.”

“What was it?” Bruce asks.

“Doesn’t matter,” Tony says, waving a hand. “But it was an emotionally charged informational exchange, to contextualize it. Like a fact snuck in because it was couched in feelings.”

Loki radiates embarrassment, and Tony absently pats him on the shoulder. And gasps.

Loki does, too, so the feeling goes both ways.

And what a feeling it is. It’s just *nice*—there’s no other word that encompasses the warmth and pleasant hum singing across Tony’s skin, radiating from the point of contact. He’d compare it to the feeling of petting a cat, magnified tenfold.

“That’s worth noting,” he says. His voice is a little unsteady. He keeps his hand on Loki’s shoulder.

“What just happened?” Bruce asks.

“There’s a—” Tony draws back, realizing that too much of a good thing, in this instance, would be a very bad thing. Loki makes a small noise at the loss of Tony’s hand. “There’s a touch element.”

“Oh,” Bruce says. His face goes a little pink.

“Not sexual,” Tony amends.

Amused glee shoots over the link. *I could show him a thing or two if he thinks that was sexual*, Tony hears. It’s the first thing Loki’s deliberately projected at him in hours, and Tony

laughs aloud.

“My guess is it’s got something to do with serotonin,” he says.

“Or magic,” Loki points out.

“Don’t spoil my fun, dear.”

Loki makes a face at the endearment, and through the bond Tony can tell that he’s trying to figure out whether he’s being insulted. He stifles another laugh.

“So, Brucie-baby, are we seeing any way to get rid of this scientifically?” Tony already knows the answer, but he’s loath to admit defeat so quickly.

“Not yet,” Bruce says. He doesn’t say it like it’s an affront to the entire earthly conception of science, so Tony tries not to treat it as such. “But I’ll need to take more scans of the two of you to gain more insight into the progression of the—curse.”

“But you still have my brain scans from...May?” Tony asks. “So we can at least begin to compare and contrast.”

“Mm,” Bruce hums. “And I want to check on your heart, as well, just to make sure there’s no physiological impact we should be aware of.”

Tony wrinkles his nose, trying for flippant. He forgets Loki has a window into his head.

“No,” says Loki.

His voice is harsh enough that Bruce steps back, eyes flashing momentarily green. Tony shakes his head, a touch frantic, and wraps a hand around Loki’s wrist. It has the desired effect, sending the feeling of contentment ricocheting through them both. The feeling is more intense, skin-to-skin. A small part of Tony’s mind makes a note of that: it bears further investigation.

“It’s fine,” he says. “I’m fine.”

“No,” Loki says again, less heat to his tone. Tony relaxes by fractions. “You’re not.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Look, it’s an instinctual thing. I don’t know if you’ve heard of fight or flight, but it’s just a base reaction. I trust Bruce, and he’s allowed to give me medical check-ups on very special occasions.”

Bruce is frowning, eyes (blessedly back to their natural brown) trained on Loki. Loki’s stance is still tense, coiled to strike. Tony huffs through his nose.

“I need the vibes in here to stay *very* calm, because there’s a lot of expensive equipment that the Hulk would be thrilled to smash. You know, if he was provoked into making an appearance.”

Loki blanches at the reminder of the Hulk, and backs down with no small amount of reluctance.

“Okay!” Tony claps his hands together. “Let’s just finish our pancakes and try not to kill each other.”

When they do get around to checking up on Tony’s fucked up heart and fucked up respiratory system, there’s not much of a change.

“Not enough to draw any conclusions,” Bruce says. “But your blood pressure is one-thirty-four over eighty-two.”

Tony does a quick recall. “That’s the lowest it’s been since Afghanistan,” he says slowly.

“Not by much.” Bruce starts packing his medical kit back up. “And it’s still not good.”

“I know, doc.” Tony tries to think about his impending heart attack as little as possible, but he knows he’s got another decade at most. “So is this Loki’s good influence at work, or just a coincidence?”

Loki, dark and threatening in the corner, frowns. “I do not understand.”

“Most of the time, my blood pressure’s concerningly high,” Tony explains.

“It’s still concerningly high,” Bruce hastens to add.

“It’s to do with this,” Tony carries on, tapping at the circle of light shining through his t-shirt. He doesn’t bother trying to hide his discomfort with the topic, knowing that Loki will sense it anyway. “And today it’s looking just the tiniest bit better.”

“It could be attributed to lifestyle changes,” Bruce says. “You’ve been drinking less.”

Tony hums in noncommittal agreement. He hadn’t thought any of the team were paying attention to his drinking or lack thereof. It should feel reassuring, probably, but instead it makes him wonder if there’s a dossier Nat’s preparing for SHIELD full of unflattering paragraphs about hereditary alcoholism and the ways in which it makes Tony Stark a liability.

Loki’s eyes are sharp on the side of his face. Tony refuses to meet them.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says eventually. “As long as this magic bullshit isn’t making it worse, we’re in the clear. Can I go to sleep now?”

It’s not even dark outside, but Tony thinks he can be forgiven; he’s been through a lot today.

“Will you be able to sleep if Loki stays awake?” Bruce asks, receiving a shrug for his troubles.

“We’ll never know until we try,” Tony says. “Can you or Nat or someone keep an eye on him?”

Loki makes an affronted noise.

“I am not an *animal*,” he says. “I need not be *watched*.”

“And yet I’ll feel so much better if you are,” Tony responds easily. He’s too tired to get into a proper argument about it.

“I’ll take him up to the team level,” Bruce says, referring to the communal area on floor eighty-seven. Chances are there are at least a few trusted people there to keep Loki in line. The top of Avengers Tower is technically meant to house only the six Avengers, but new people keep showing up, and it’s not worth objecting—especially when some of the new arrivals are internationally recognized scientists like Jane Foster and Helen Cho. All in all, Tony’s relatively confident Loki can be securely watched for long enough that Tony can get some rest.

“You do that,” he says around a yawn. “And I’ll see you in twelve hours.”

Just over four hours later, just after midnight, Tony wakes up to a searing pain that’s everywhere but mostly concentrated inside his own skull. It’s worse than every migraine he’s ever had combined, and his skin feels like it’s on fire.

“JARVIS,” he gasps. “Get...help.”

It’s as though the sound of his own voice is coming through a very long tunnel. He can’t see through the large black spots in his vision, but he can feel liquid running from his nose and ears.

The panic is like a vice cutting off his breathing. There is no doubt in his mind that he’s going to die. This level of pain can’t be sustainable; it has to be destroying him from the inside out. Soon enough there’ll be nothing left.

Something heavy lands on him, and he comes back to himself so fast it’s dizzying.

“Fuck,” he croaks, blinking away—tears? He touches shaking fingers to his cheeks and they come away red. Blood. His vision’s still blurry and black around the edges, but the crimson is in sharp focus. “Oh, Jesus fuck, what was that?”

The heaviness on top of him shifts.

“The curse.” It’s Loki, of course it’s Loki. If anyone in the tower was going to be at fault for Tony crying blood, it would be him.

“I got that,” Tony says.

He tries to sneakily touch his fingertips to Loki’s wrist in a way that seems like an accident, because some of that magic serotonin contact sounds lovely right about now. Unfortunately, he can barely see and his coordination’s off, so he ends up just grabbing Loki’s hand. It’s more than worth it: the soothing feeling combats the agony, leaving him achy and sore but not in imminent danger of passing out.

Loki's body is slumped diagonally over his own, so it's impossible to see his face, but when Tony looks he can see a trickle of liquid running from Loki's ear. It's that dark shade of red again, deeper than human blood but no less recognizable for it.

They lie there in silence, getting their breath back and holding hands, until the bedroom door slams open to reveal the Avengers in varying nightwear. Tony blinks against his own double vision and takes in Bruce's cozy college sweater, Nat's black silk pyjamas, and Steve's boxer briefs. Steve is also holding the shield. It's always great to see his priorities in action.

"We have a problem," Tony rasps, tasting yet more blood in his mouth. On top of him, Loki groans in apparent agreement.

Steve, for the first time that Tony's ever heard, says: "Fuck."

Chapter End Notes

three bros.....chilling in a science lab.....eating blueberry pancakes and they *are* gay

come hang out with me on tumblr at morgans-starks

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

A plan begins to take shape.

Chapter Notes

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

It takes an embarrassing amount of pleading, but in the end no one forces Tony to undergo another medical exam that night. Bruce does hover while he gets changed and washes the worst of the blood off his face and neck, asking an endless string of questions about how he's feeling, but he seems reluctantly willing to trust Tony's instinct that being close to Loki is enough to ensure a full recovery.

Loki observes all this with impatience, having magicked himself pristine within seconds of the Avengers' arrival. *Must be nice for some*, Tony thinks, irritated. The mocking smile Loki gives him in return isn't enough to distract Tony from the fractured unhappiness evident in Loki's mind.

After that, the reduced ranks of the Avengers sit them both down on one of the couches in the living area. Steve provides mugs of good old-fashioned hot cocoa in a way that should be condescending but is, mostly, appreciated.

"Are you okay?" Bruce asks for possibly the seventeenth time in the past ten minutes, hovering nervously. He keeps checking the heart rate monitor on his wrist—understandably, since seeing one of his teammates prone underneath one of their enemies with blood everywhere can't have been the most relaxing experience.

"Hunky dory," Tony says. "Never felt better."

"He's lying," Loki says flatly. For someone who calls himself the god of lies, he's more of a tattle-tale than Tony would have expected.

"*Obviously.*"

"What happened?" Steve asks. He's using his best 'leader of the Avengers' voice, but he still doesn't have a shirt on, so the effect is somewhat diminished. Interestingly, both Tony and Loki seem to be on the same page, mentally, about how nice a view it is.

"I attempted to leave," Loki admits at length.

"You escaped," Nat corrects. She sounds a little bit approving; he must have been under her watchful eye when he'd managed it.

“You told me I was not your prisoner,” Loki says haughtily, drawing himself up to his full, seated height.

“Yeah, but the implication was that you’d stay put until we worked out our next move,” Tony shoots back. His voice is harsh, but he feels like it’s justified on account of how Loki had made him bleed out of his eyes in the middle of his first good night’s sleep in weeks. “Where did you even *go*?”

“I thought it prudent to leave Midgard and seek answers elsewhere,” says Loki, which is only half an answer—if that. Under the circumstances, Tony decides to let it go.

“Right. So now we know that being on different planets causes all our facial orifices to start bleeding, let’s not do that again.”

“I shall not be confined to this *speck* of a planet,” Loki fumes.

“As fun as the Asgardian superiority complex is, it’s not actually helpful right now,” Tony says. He’s sat close to Loki even though the couch is big enough for four, with their legs pressed together and arms occasionally brushing when they bring their mugs up to their lips. It’s nothing compared to the relief of skin-on-skin contact. He bites the bullet and makes a grab for Loki’s wrist, not stopping with his line of argument. “We need to figure out whether we’ve just got to be on the same planet, or if there’s a fixed radius on this thing.”

“Or you could just stay together,” Bruce says, looking pale.

Steve adds, “When we came in, you looked dead. I understand that you want to test your limits, but are you sure it’s worth it?”

Tony’s body feels about as terrible as it did after he got blasted by a missile and underwent open-heart surgery with no anesthetic, even with the feeling of Loki’s skin, his too-quick pulse, secure under Tony’s fingers. But there’s also a part of him that *needs* to know the limits. If there’s one thing he hates more than physical pain, it’s being in the figurative dark.

“I’m not saying we have to start tests right away, or that it’s even close to our biggest priority,” he says. “But I refuse to do this thing blind. I need data. I need *something*.”

“Tony...” Steve looks pained. “It’s magic. It’s possible that you’re not going to be able to understand it.”

“He can,” Loki says.

“What?” Tony turns to him, trying to tap into their bond to get what Loki is trying to say. He doesn’t get a mental explanation, just a feeling of irrefutable confidence.

“It is within Stark’s ability to understand magic,” Loki says, with about as much gravitas as if he’d been discussing the weather.

Tony’s hand tightens around Loki’s wrist in shock.

“Seriously?”

“It is not...so different from your Midgardian science. If you would merely open your mind, you could learn much.”

The amount of insult wrapped up in Loki’s words is oddly reassuring after his pronouncement. Even so, Tony knows he’s projecting embarrassing amounts of gratitude right into Loki’s mind. It’s just that the reason he’s so resistant to magic is that it flies directly in the face of everything he’s ever learned to be true; it recontextualizes his entire perception of reality. Trying to ignore it hasn’t really worked, given the nearly-immortal so-called god on his team. The idea that it’s something he could learn to understand—it’s like being told he can go back to having full lung capacity after a long while of not being able to take a complete breath.

“Cool,” he says, because at least his teammates don’t have to know that he’s being soundly flattered by their arch-nemesis. “Is Thor back yet?”

“Not as far as I know,” Nat says, which means he’s not.

“Alright,” Tony says, “then I guess I’m going back to bed. Loki?”

Loki arches an eyebrow in his direction, all arrogance—despite the fact that Tony can feel exactly how beaten down Loki feels by his midnight excursion.

“I am in an intense amount of pain right now,” Tony says slowly. “Unless someone has a secret supply of morphine lying around, you’re my single best source of pain relief. And I know it’s going both ways.”

Loki looks down at Tony’s grip on his arm; Tony follows his gaze. Steve, Nat, and Bruce are carefully looking anywhere but.

“Are you sure that’s a good—?” Bruce starts, only to get interrupted.

“Fine,” Loki says. There’s something difficult to analyze in the way he feels: the vestiges of pain, the exhaustion, the contentment in response to Tony’s touch, all wrapped in another emotion that doesn’t have an easily applicable descriptor. “Show me to your quarters.”

They take a guest room. It makes sense, since Tony’s bed is a mess of bloody sheets that he doesn’t want to have to deal with until morning, and since he doesn’t really want Loki in his bedroom if he can help it.

There are a number of guest rooms in Avengers Tower. Tony chooses the one with a green color scheme, just to be a bastard. And then he flops down on the right side of the bed without a moment’s hesitation, because there’s no use in making things awkward when the situation has made sharing a bed a necessity.

Loki seems to agree, and changes into his sleepwear without comment or, indeed, movement. One second he’s in his full Asgardian regalia, and the next he’s in some sort of flowing green (of course) attire, hair loose and without any visible knives on his person. Tony looks down at his own t-shirt and boxers and tries not to feel underdressed by comparison.

It's a king-size bed, as all the beds in Avengers Tower are, so when Loki gets in on the left side there's enough space between them to fit an entire extra person. Across the gulf, Tony stretches out his arm, prompting Loki to, with a hesitance Tony would never expect from him, rest a hand over his wrist.

"I have heard that Midgardian infants require lullabies to fall asleep," Loki says slyly. "Shall I regale you?"

Tony laughs. "Just go to sleep, asshole."

In the end, it's surprisingly easy to sleep with Loki by his side. It's mostly because Loki can't hurt Tony without doing just as much damage to himself, but it's also a little bit because Loki doesn't complain about Tony's constant restless motion and his habit of shamelessly stealing the covers, both of which had been issues back when he and Pepper had been dating.

It hadn't been for long: after the disaster that was Stark Expo, they'd had a whirlwind month of Tony's best attempts at romance and Pepper's best attempts at pretending he could make a good boyfriend. And then they'd been sat in a restaurant Tony had bought out, sipping at overpriced wine, and they'd both looked at each other and known.

It wasn't as though Tony had expected it to work, even. But there are only two people in the world who *know* him, truly and completely. There's Pepper, who sees through every front he's ever tried to put up, and Rhodey, who's been there to see all the fronts fall down. The Avengers are great, too—Bruce especially—but Tony still has the sense that he's just too much for anyone to want all of.

He wakes up bright and early, in a nest of blankets with his hand poking out to lay atop Loki's arm. There's a tingling sensation radiating outwards from the point of contact, like a pleasurable variation of pins and needles. His head still hurts, but it's a hurt that's so insignificant as to not be worth mentioning, the kind of pain where you take one aspirin instead of two. *Magic*. Tony snorts, wincing when the facial contortion pulls at the remnants of dried blood still littering his face.

He sits up, stretching, and the movement alerts Loki into wakefulness.

Against his better judgment, Tony laughs.

He's only ever seen Loki when he's fully put together, six-foot-something of imperious dignity, the traces of his royal upbringing all over him. Right now, his hair's a tangled wreck and his eyes are only half open. He's wearing the sullen expression of someone who deeply resents being awoken before noon.

"JARVIS," Tony says, "I want this on a t-shirt."

Loki growls, but it's a surprisingly unthreatening noise.

"Okay, okay, you go back to sleep." Tony gets up and backs out of the room, hands raised in apology. "I will be back to check on your highness shortly. You want coffee?"

“That would be acceptable,” Loki mumbles.

Tony grins to himself as he makes his way to the kitchen, whistling a cheery tune. Interestingly, though he can sense Loki’s grogginess through the bond, it has only a small discernable impact on his own state of mind. That’s convenient, at least.

Tony’s not so much a morning person as he is a person whose body generally runs on very little sleep and appreciates any amount of rest it gets. Even so, he’s a big fan of coffee—heart problems be damned—and the first thing he does is start on a pot for himself and the ‘god’ in his bed.

Then he takes a moment to laugh disbelievingly at the state of his life.

“I’m glad *you* find this amusing.”

“Fuck,” Tony says, jumping guiltily into the air. “Pepper! Hey! I’ve been meaning to call you. Wait. How are you here?”

Pepper is in an immaculate pantsuit and heels even though it can’t be later than seven am. Her hair’s twisted into a severe bun and her lipstick is a threatening shade of red. For the second time in less than twelve hours, Tony feels underdressed in his own home.

“Natasha knew you might have neglected to appraise me of the situation,” Pepper says.

“I thought you were in LA,” he says. “I didn’t want to bother you.”

“You didn’t want to *bother me*?” Pepper says, voice rising to the pitch that means trouble. “You went and got your mind connected to the alien who tried to take over the world, and you thought you’d just—”

“I’m sorry! There, Pep, I’m sorry, it was stupid and I should’ve let you know right away, but it was kind of a lot to take in, and telling you would’ve made it *real*, and—”

“Was it not *real enough* when you started bleeding out in the middle of the night!?”

“Okay, that’s an exaggeration, that’s just Romanoff being overdramatic, you know how she gets. It was just some light facial bleeding, not worth getting upset over.” Tony’s aware that he’s not helping his case, but he also can’t stop talking. It’s like the time with the strawberries all over again.

“Can you just accept that I care about you?” Pepper asks. She seems more upset than angry, which—in the tradition of authority figures everywhere—is far worse. “I know we broke up, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to be a part of your life.”

“You can’t *be* out of my life, you run my company,” Tony says, and then winces. “Sorry, I mean I care about you too and, uh, are you seriously trying to get me to do emotional intimacy before noon? Can it wait until I’ve prepared? Did you call Rhodey?”

She nods. The disappointed look is still there, making him feel like he didn’t deserve to be born. “He’ll be here this afternoon.”

“Will he be as angry as you were?”

“Oh, angrier.”

Tony rubs a hand down his face. “He’s gonna do the whole lone gunslinger speech again, what have I *done*?”

“Something stupid. But that’s nothing new, so talk to me,” Pepper says, helping herself to a mug and some of the coffee he’s just brewed. She drinks it black by preference, which is just one of the many terrifying things about Pepper Potts. “Tell me what happened.”

“I don’t have a whole lot of information for you,” Tony says. “Besides, I guess Agent Romanoff’s debrief covered most of it.”

“It didn’t cover how you’re feeling.”

Pepper sits down at the breakfast bar, staring levelly at him over her mug.

Childishly, Tony turns his back on her to make his own coffee, loading it with sugar and a dash of cream.

“Fine,” he says. “I feel fine. In the kind of way where Bruce would say I’m dissociating.”

“And what would *you* say?”

Tony shrugs. “I don’t know. Nothing’s felt real since yesterday.”

That’s not quite accurate: the *pain* had felt real. But he thinks it’s probably best not to bring that particular tidbit up with Pepper until he’s back in her good graces.

“That might be for the best,” Pepper points out. Her expression has melted into something gentler, something that makes Tony feel just as bad as the disapproval had.

He laughs through the unease. “Yeah, I would not want to be fully present right now. Jesus.”

“But you think it can be fixed?”

“If we can track down Enchantress and, I don’t know, beg her forgiveness? Which she probably won’t give, because she’s insane and out for revenge for reasons I am not yet entirely clear on. Or we can try and science our way out of it, but even then...”

“There’s my eternal optimist.”

“Yeah, no, that was always you. I’m more of a ‘the world is ending one day at a time’ kind of guy.”

“I know,” says Pepper, because she does. “But if there’s anyone who can work out how to fix this, it’s you.”

Tony makes good on his promise of coffee in a less-than-timely fashion, but Loki still accepts it gratefully from a cocoon of blankets and general dishevelment. Or, more accurately, he's sort of thankful inside his head, without saying a word out loud. Then again, Tony's getting used to that sort of thing.

"Is there anything like coffee on Asgard?" he asks, first and foremost. "This is Pepper, by the way. She's the scariest person I know, including you, so try not to do anything terrible."

Loki, more invested in caffeine than Tony would've thought it possible for a god of legend to be, doesn't deign to reply until he's drained his mug.

"There are similar beverages on Asgard," he says once he's done, placing the empty mug delicately on the bedside table and getting to his feet. "Enchanted drinks that transfer energy. None that taste like this, however."

"Yeah, well, it's like all cool stuff: not good for you," Tony says, trying not to smile. "You should be careful with how much you drink."

Pepper, hovering in the doorway, looks between them with nothing but bewilderment in her expression. There's no way to explain it to her; he can't explain it to himself, the way his mind refuses to compute Loki as a threat right now. If he allows himself to go down that road, the panic will set in and, worse, it will be broadcast straight to Loki, agitating him in return. Far easier to simply allow himself to relax, to pretend that what's going on is normal—or at the very least manageable.

"Will there be more tiresome brain tests today?" Loki asks. He switches back into daywear in a blink, but it's not Asgardian, nor is it green. It's a black t-shirt and slate grey jeans, his hair hanging loose and a touch of eyeliner, all combining to make him look like the hottest college kid on campus. Tony raises his eyebrows, but Loki gives no explanation for the sudden shift in aesthetic.

Possibly he thinks it makes him look harmless.

"There'll be more brain tests every day until our brains are back to normal," Tony says. "But first we need to get the low-down from Thor, if he's back."

"He is," Pepper says. "He arrived right before I did. They're all in the kitchen on eighty-five."

"Right," Tony says. He feels a prickling of anxiety; now that Thor's back, it's time for them to figure out a plan of action, and to reckon with what might happen if they fail. He digs his short, ragged nails into each of his palms and tries to steady himself. "Okay. Let me get some clothes on, and then we'll get this show on the road."

Thor looks haggard in comparison to his appearance just the previous day. His eyes are shadowed, his hair lank. It's not an encouraging sight.

The others in the kitchen aren't much better, evidence of the stressful night on all of them except for the supersoldier. Even Natasha is unusually casual: barefoot in a (stolen) hoodie and shorts, her hair pulled back in a bun that, frankly, looks sloppy next to Pepper's.

There's an array of fruit and toast laid out on the counter, so Tony helps himself to some grapes with a carefully cultivated air of nonchalance. He's doing his best impression of a man who is utterly unconcerned with the situation that has befallen him. As long as Loki doesn't rat him out, he'll seem totally fine.

"Thor, buddy," Tony says, "you got any good news?"

"I wish I could bring you better tidings, my friend," Thor says gravely. "But Asgard cannot offer assistance for your plight. Loki has been banished from our realm for his crimes...and the All-Father does not wish to extend our aid to a mortal."

Loki's mental hackles rise, a broth of shame and anger that settles in Tony's gut, sickening. And Tony's not exactly thrilled about being told he's too human to deserve help, besides.

"I could have told you they would spare nothing for the likes of us," Loki spits. "It would have saved precious time."

"You have my apologies," Thor says. It stuns Loki into brief silence. "I thought to consult our mother on this matter, but she could impart no wisdom aside from that which we already know."

"That we have to get Enchantress to remove the curse," Nat says thoughtfully.

"Okay, so this isn't great news," Tony says. "But we don't *need* Asgard, right? We can think of something else, or figure out some way to find Enchantress and change her mind."

"She will have warded herself from most spells of location," Loki says. "She is a most cunning foe."

The compliment is grudging, and it sparks Tony's curiosity once more about the exact nature of Loki and Enchantress' past relationship and current tiff.

"But you guys know her, right?" he says. "You've known her for millennia. There's gotta be some way for you to narrow down all the potential hidey-holes she could be in, or find a way through those...magical wards."

Despite Loki's assurance that he could understand magic if he put his mind to it, thinking about how spells work is still liable to give Tony a headache, on top of all the other factors that are conspiring to give him a headache.

"Or should we prioritize a medical solution?" Bruce asks, proving he's come to the same conclusion as Tony about how useful finding Enchantress will be. Tony looks from Bruce's mug of herbal tea to his serene expression and feels a small furl of relief that he doesn't have to worry about the Hulk this morning, on top of everything else.

“There’s nothing to *prioritize*,” he says, grimacing. “We have to fight this on all fronts, and whatever works first is what we go with.”

“That’s not much of a plan,” Steve pipes up.

“No, it’s not. But it’s what we’ve got,” Tony says. “Loki? Any bright ideas?”

His head’s a bit of a mess right now, and he knows Loki can feel it. What he doesn’t expect, however, is for Loki to slip into his space, close enough that Tony’s skin prickles with the urge to touch, to feel the rush of relief that contact between them provides.

Damn. It’s one thing to know he has an addictive personality, and another entirely to work out how to safeguard against finding new, magic things to get addicted to.

“Enchantress has allies. They will be far easier to find than her,” Loki says. He smells like eucalyptus, Tony can’t help but notice. It’s incongruous, but not unpleasant.

“Okay, that’s a start. And how are we going to track them down, exactly?” There’s a sinking feeling spreading throughout his entire body as he speaks, as though he’s just stepped into quicksand. On one level, he’d known this was coming. There was never any way to solve this with Tony staying safe on Earth and Loki going out to hold negotiations with Enchantress all alone. Tony just has this feeling that Loki doesn’t excel at diplomacy.

“Travel between realms is...difficult for a mortal,” Thor says. “But not impossible.”

Loki scoffs. “It’s easy if you know how.”

“And you can take me with you?” Tony asks, thinking about Loki’s neat teleportation trick with no small amount of panic. It hurts to even ask, the words scraping their way violently out of his throat.

Loki’s eyes are sharp and knowing, visible in the corner of Tony’s vision. He keeps facing forward, willing his legs not to shake. Silently, Loki moves even closer, just barely touching their fingertips together. They’re on the side of the breakfast bar that conceals them from the other inhabitants of the room—aside from Bruce. Even with the cover, and his faith that Bruce will understand, it feels reckless to indulge in this particular calming technique.

Tony does it anyway, accepting the touch.

The analytic part of his mind is still able to pay attention to variations in the tactual input: it does seem that the amount of contact is a contributing factor. When he’d had his entire hand around Loki’s wrist, the tranquility and pain relief had both been more intense than now, when the only physical connection is between the tips of their fingers. Even so, the calming effect is palpable.

It’s definitely self-serving on Loki’s part—Tony’s impending panic attack can’t feel any nicer secondhand—but he still feels a rush of helpless appreciation in response to the soothing comfort radiating outwards from the place where their fingers brush.

And then, loud and clear except for how it's not loud at all, he receives the impression of a memory. It's not a nice memory, although its effect is mitigated somewhat by the continuing contact between them: he feels the sensation of falling, the pitch dark silence of uncaring space, and it's like his own memory of going through the wormhole except in all the ways it's not.

This happened to you? he thinks.

Loki doesn't bother with an answer to that question; the origin of the memory is clear, although the context is less so.

Instead, Loki replies: *I would not let it happen to you again.*

It's weirdly reassuring coming from the person who'd been partially responsible for Tony's sojourn into space in the first place. But he knows Loki's telling the truth, and he can pick up on wisps of guilt in amongst the endless swirl of Loki's emotions. As insubstantial as they are, Tony had never considered that Loki felt any regret whatsoever for what he'd done during the Battle of New York, and the revelation of even the barest hints of remorse...it's enough to pull him up short.

When Tony looks up, he's being stared at by rather a lot of people.

"Um," he says. "Sorry. What were we saying?"

"You don't have to go...out there," says Bruce. He knows about the panic attacks Tony's been having since the Battle of New York; no one else does. "Thor can search for Enchantress, and you and Loki can remain on Earth."

Although he's clearly not happy about it, Loki manages to keep his dissatisfaction with that course of action to himself. Probably because he can feel Tony's determination, and knows he's going to get his way with no manipulation required.

"That'd be swell, except for how we can all picture exactly how bad it would be if Loki got cabin fever," Tony says.

There are murmurs of agreement from everyone. Loki tilts his head in acknowledgment.

"I'll be fine," Tony continues, and wonders if he's ever going to be able to say it again without the lie detector beside him hearing it for the falsehood it is. If he and Loki are stuck like this forever...

It's not worth thinking about. Nothing is permanent, not even freaky alien mind-meld magic. There's always a way out; he's proven that much time and time again, beaten the odds when they're stacked so high against him that it's all-but-impossible to see an escape route.

"You shall be," Loki agrees, and—what do you know?—*he's* not lying.

Rhodey arrives while Tony's in the middle of his MRI scan. Tony can hear him talking to Bruce in low tones, and he can feel Loki's wariness in response to the new presence in the

room. He waits it out, though, and only comes out of the machine when Bruce gives him the all-clear.

“Cupcake!” he crows, throwing himself into Rhodey’s not-waiting arms. Rhodey huffs but returns the hug, running his hand down Tony’s back soothingly.

“You alright, man?” he asks.

“Always,” Tony says, and there’s a relief in knowing that Rhodey can tell it’s not the truth without being in his head.

“I should’ve known it was only a matter of time before you got yourself into something ridiculous like this.”

“Mm, I live to impress.” Tony tucks his head into Rhodey’s shoulder, staying there a touch too long before he pulls back. “Loki, this is Rhodey. You may remember him as the guy who totally bailed on kicking your butt. And Rhodey, you might remember Loki as the Norse god from outer space who tried to destroy all that we hold dear. I’m sure you’ll be great pals.”

“Sure,” Rhodey says dubiously. Then, because he’s an angel, he actually holds out his hand for Loki to shake.

There’s a moment during which Loki simply stares at the proffered hand, dumbfounded. And then, to Tony’s delight, he accepts it. It’s so unexpected, given Loki’s general level of impoliteness, that Tony snorts out a laugh, and when he looks to his left Bruce has got his palm pressed over his mouth, shoulders shaking. He can feel Loki basking in being the center of attention, the dramatic son of a bitch.

“Now that introductions are out of the way, how’s my brain looking?” Tony asks. He peers over Bruce’s shoulder at two side-by-side images of his own brain—the one from yesterday and today’s, both showing roughly the same story.

“The changes are negligible,” Bruce confirms, “which is a relief after last night. But you’re still displaying huge amounts of activity, and there’s no way of knowing what the strain of that will do to you over time.”

“So now I’ve got dementia to worry about, too,” Tony surmises.

“I’m not coming to any conclusions,” says Bruce, ever the good scientist.

“That’s what I’m here for,” Tony says.

He sees what Bruce is getting at. The increased brain activity had seemed exciting at first, as if he was in one of those idiotic movies that pretended humans only used a fraction of their brain’s potential. But with a little time to think it over, he’s not so sure. It’s pretty clear that taking his mind to the outer reaches of what it’s possible for humans to experience might have some lasting consequences.

Great.

“We’ll worry about that some other time,” Tony says. “Because now we get to move on to the second, fun order of business: a spaceship.”

“Oh, dear god,” says Bruce.

“*Tony*,” says Rhodey.

“What need have we of a spacecraft?” asks Loki.

“You are all such buzzkills,” Tony says fondly. “JARVIS, open up a new file. We’re totally building a spaceship.”

Chapter End Notes

some of my favourite comments from my beta reader on this chapter: "okay NOW i ship it" and "ellie.....you can't just talk about yourself [through tony stark].....ellie....."

huge thanks to everyone who's been reading and commenting!

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

In which a spaceship is planned and a story is told.

Chapter Notes

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

“You can’t make it look like the Enterprise,” Rhodey’s saying, messing with the shiny holographic schematics Tony had gotten JARVIS to mock up. For as long as Tony’s known him, Rhodey’s preferred working with physical mediums: pencil and paper followed by models followed by complex machinery, but he’s gamely working with what they’ve got for now.

“What about—?” Tony starts.

“No Millennium Falcon, either. Also, none of this technology exists yet.”

“The Iron Man technology didn’t exist until I invented it,” Tony reminds him. “Or, I guess it kind of did, but Dad always used it for boring stuff like powering factories, and then *I* invented miniaturizing it. Plus, we’ve got Loki to do the impossible.”

“I know nothing of your planet’s crude modes of transportation,” says Loki, affecting boredom. He’s essentially twiddling his thumbs in the corner, watching them, already on his seventh coffee of the day. The overall effect is somewhere between creepy and cute.

“You’ll get it eventually,” Tony says. “Until then, we’ll try and speak in short sentences. One-syllable words only.”

Loki scoffs.

“Even *with* Loki,” Rhodey says, “there are variables we can’t account for. I mean, this is so far beyond anything—”

“You worry too much,” Tony interrupts, patting him on the arm.

Rhodey shakes his head, turning to Bruce for support. He has, like so many before him, made the grave error of underestimating just how much Bruce Banner loves science. Tony knows better, having already leveraged state of the art labs to get Bruce to move into his tower in the first place.

“It could work,” Bruce says wonderingly. “The combination of technologies, creating something new.”

“And you’ll be needing my help?” Rhodey sighs. But it’s the kind of sigh that means he knows he *shouldn’t* be doing something—not the sigh that means he doesn’t *want* to. Tony knows the difference.

Hitting him with his best pleading eyes, Tony pulls out the big guns: “Remember when we redesigned SHIELD’s shitty Quinjets together?” he says. “Wasn’t that fun? Just think of that, except it’s about a thousand times cooler.” He does his best wheedling voice: “We can go where no man has gone before...”

He can practically feel Rhodey relenting. He’s not as blatant about it as Bruce, but Rhodey can never resist a chance to get his hands on some groundbreaking engineering.

“I shouldn’t even be entertaining this,” Rhodey says, “but...fine. I’ll do it.”

Tony claps him on the shoulder, grinning. “And it’s totally going to look like the Enterprise.”

“Tony, no—”

Day one of designing goes as well as can be expected. The four of them make an odd but not ineffective team, with Loki and Tony’s bond smoothing the way when things threaten to get tense between Loki and—anyone in the room, tower, or city. Tony does have to grab Loki’s arm a couple of times in an attempt to short-circuit his less-than-ideal impulses, which are mainly directed towards Bruce. It’s just that Loki seems to be experiencing a few issues separating Bruce from the Hulk, and if there’s one thing Loki seems to hate more than he hates everything in general, it’s the Hulk.

But Rhodey and Tony work as well together as they ever have. They’ve had decades to learn the way they work as individuals and how to bring their distinct methods together sinuously, and that familiarity pays off in a big way. Tony’s used to receiving a fair amount of pushback from JARVIS, but Rhodey’s just better at picking apart Tony’s ideas, seeing how they work, and declaring that they’re either ridiculous or genius—and suggesting improvements either way.

Bruce isn’t an engineer, but he’s fascinated by the intersection of magic and technology, so he looks on and listens avidly—all the while making frequent notes regarding the progression of Loki and Tony’s bond.

At first, while Tony and Rhodey are laying down the basic groundwork that requires no magical interference whatsoever, Loki simply watches and conjures up food and coffee at regular intervals, effectively rendering Steve and his usual mother-henning useless. Steve and Nat do stop by for a few minutes to watch and get an update on the situation, but they’ve both been summoned to SHIELD HQ by Maria Hill and can’t stay for long. There’s no mystery there—Tony has no doubt that Fury’s worked out something is going on outside of his line of sight and is pressuring both of his most loyal agents to bring him into the loop. He doesn’t much care what happens either way: he’s going through with this, with or without SHIELD’s approval. They didn’t want Tony Stark? They’re not getting him.

Pepper, too, makes regular appearances—but she’s more uncomfortable around Loki than anyone save Clint for some reason, and none of her visits last long as a result.

Everything in the lab is suspended in a delicate balance while they work, a fragile equilibrium that’s strained but also, somehow, peaceful. It helps that they’re all on the same page, able to understand what’s going on even when it falls outside their respective realms of expertise. Even Loki, though intrinsically uncurious about Earth science, is able to converse on the three doctoral graduates’ level once he grasps the basics.

The important thing is that Tony doesn’t want to just build a spaceship that’s powered by magic. He’s a mechanical engineer; there’s no fun in letting someone else do all the heavy lifting.

Equally, though, he’s aware that he’s not going to figure out hyperspeed in one afternoon. So he’s trying to push himself to compromise.

He’d assumed the main barrier to making the spaceship work would be his own lack of understanding of magic, but having a window into the mind of one of the universe’s most powerful magic users (he assumes, since he hasn’t met all that many) is a big help. With the efficiency of mentally transferring concepts and questions, he starts to get a sense for it.

The problem is that it’s not exact. There are no numbers or figures Tony can attach to the way Loki conjures his illusions or levitates objects. It’s more of a feeling, something intangible but nonetheless real for it. He still finds the lack of precision difficult, to say the least, but there’s something undeniably beautiful about the whole thing. Magic, he finds, is more similar to painting than to math.

Although, of course, he doesn’t paint.

“And you’re sure it can just...run on magic?” he asks, a dubious eyebrow raised. “No other fuel required?”

Loki blinks slowly at him, which combined with his internal disdain has a somewhat crushing effect. Then, at length, he gives Tony a glimpse at his thought process, alongside a quite unnecessary mental shove. And Tony realizes he *is* being a little bit dense.

Magic is a form of energy, that much is obvious. And what Loki’s proposing isn’t enchanting the ship, which would be risky and reliant on continued focus, but on enchanting a smaller object which could, if all goes well, serve as a source of endless ‘fuel’. Loki still thinks of the whole thing as crude and unnecessary, but that’s what comes of being able to go wherever you want at the blink of an eye. As cool as that sounds in theory, Tony doesn’t think he actually wants to test out the effects of mystical teleportation on the human body. It’s less about not trusting Loki’s magical prowess and more about the fact that Tony can’t find any way to twist the theory so he doesn’t come out of it dead. Maybe that’s shortsighted of him, still thinking about things within the constraints of the laws of physics—but he finds himself unwilling to step yet further out of his comfort zone on this particular issue.

It’s just...so much of what’s happened over the past few days has been out of Tony’s control, and he hates it. Even *with* the spaceship, he’s still having to rely on forces he doesn’t

understand, to try and reach a place he still can barely bring himself to believe exists, while his mind is connected to a being who should, by all rights, be impossible.

He's taking back a small degree of control wherever he can, is the point.

Plus, it won't just be the two of them flying off into the unknown—Tony fully intends on dragging Rhodey into this, too.

“Fine!” Tony says, throwing his hands up. “Fine. We can find a pretty rock and use it to power our spaceship. That might as well be a thing we do.”

“A *rock* would not suffice,” Loki says, sounding affronted.

“Not even a really nice one?”

“The object must be meaningful,” Loki explains.

“What, like, to you?” Tony asks.

He reads the affirmative from Loki's thoughts and bites back a laugh.

“Okay, fine. What do you propose we use instead?”

Loki considers. “I will return shortly,” he says.

“Wait, hey!” Tony says, grabbing Loki's wrist. “You can't leave, remember? Not without our faces going all *Raiders of the Lost Ark* again.”

He provides Loki with the mental image to support the reference, and Loki's face takes on a terrifyingly intrigued smirk.

“Don't get any ideas,” Tony warns. “About that, *or* about leaving.”

“I am no fool, Stark. I can summon the item I need, but I would prefer to be alone and without distraction whilst I do so. Would it be acceptable for me to return to your quarters?”

“The guest room?” Tony says, a little dumbfounded by Loki asking permission at all. “Sure. Go nuts.”

Loki melts into the air with a jade green flourish, and Tony's lips twitch in amusement at the dramatic bastard. He has a blissful moment of being unencumbered by worry before Bruce appears at his shoulder.

“Are you sure about that? It's risky for you to be apart.”

Tony shrugs. “A few floors won't kill us. But if it does, feel free to say *I told you so*.”

“I've always admired your instinct for self-preservation, Tones,” says Rhodey, flat.

“Thanks, babycakes. I've always admired *your* gift for sarcasm. Now, where were we?”

“Tony,” Rhodey says, and it’s his serious voice, the one that never bodes well. “How can you be sure he’s not manipulating you? The way you are around each other—”

“Yeah, side effect of being mind-melded without our consent,” Tony interrupts, “we have to learn to live with each other. Sorry I haven’t tried to—what? Hand him over to SHIELD? Kill him?”

“Of course not. I just need to know that you’re safe.”

Tony takes a breath. He’s always had a problem with accepting concern as anything other than condescension, but he knows beyond doubt that Rhodey just wants what’s best for him.

“He’s definitely manipulating me,” Tony says eventually. “But—I’m manipulating him, too. It’s a side effect of this thing. It’s forced empathy, all day, all the time. And he’s leaning into it, sure, but why wouldn’t he? Before yesterday, we were sworn enemies, and now he’s wearing human clothes and summoning coffee for people. Not out of the kindness of his heart.”

Bruce nods and types something into his StarkPad. The uncomfortable feeling of being studied is outweighed by how much Tony loves Bruce’s commitment to collecting all available data.

“The harmlessness is a show,” Tony says, “and I know that, and he knows I know that. It’s like Natasha.”

Rhodey looks quizzical, but Bruce gives a nod of understanding without looking up from his screen.

“Everyone in this tower knows that Natasha is a spy,” Tony explains. “And we all know that she’s providing Fury with detailed assessments about our behavior. I’ve seen one of said assessments, and trust me they’re not flattering. So we’re all on the same page about what’s underlying the friendship. And yet, we’re still friends. It’s less important to know how much of it is real and more about trusting that at least some of it is.”

“Huh,” says Rhodey. “I guess you never claimed things around here weren’t complicated.”

Tony grins. “Don’t think I’m not still sore about you deciding not to join us.”

“But we’re getting off the point,” Rhodey says. “Agent Romanoff isn’t a threat. Loki very much *is*.”

“Not right now, not to me,” Tony responds. “That’s all I can say I know for sure: he has no intention of hurting me. I’d be able to tell if he did—it was pretty damn obvious when he wanted to murder Barton.”

“You don’t think he hates you?” Rhodey asks.

Bruce snorts.

“What?” asks Rhodey.

Tony scratches at the back of his neck. “Sorry. Bruce is just recalling some of his fond Avenging memories.”

“And by that, you mean...?”

“Loki likes him,” Bruce says. “As much as Loki likes anyone.”

“Which isn’t a lot,” Tony hastens to add.

“I’m gonna need you to go ahead and explain,” Rhodey says, sitting down heavily and lacing his fingers together.

And it’s like this: Tony hadn’t meant for it to happen, but the conversation in the tower during the Battle of New York laid the groundwork for something that wasn’t friendship but didn’t fit in with the typical ‘enemy’ dynamic either. By this point in his superhero career, Tony’s had a fair few people threaten to enjoy killing him painfully and slowly—but with Loki, it’s never been exactly like that.

The first time they’d encountered Loki, post-invasion, was just a few weeks after his escape from whatever shoddy Asgardian cell they’d tried to keep him in. Loki had stuck to New York, possibly for the nostalgia factor, or just because it was the best city in the world for an insatiable attention-seeker. Times Square had been the target, because Loki never wants to do anything if he can’t be sure the maximum number of people are watching, and so of course he’d cast some kind of spell to make every screen show his face as he spouted some bullshit about how Earth had not seen the last of Loki. And then he’d waited, patiently, at the top of the red steps, for the Avengers (sans Thor, who’d gone home) to show up.

There was no mayhem, no destruction of property or civilian casualties. There was just Loki, cross-legged with a shit-eating grin on his face, his green cape clashing with the red beneath him.

“You’re back,” Tony had said, Iron Man suit providing a protective cocoon except for the part where he’d flipped the faceplate up out of a terrible instinct to look Loki directly in the eye.

“And *you* are more resilient than I expected,” Loki replied, grin still dancing on his lips.

“That’s me,” Tony said. “I have it on good authority that I’m annoyingly hard to kill.”

“How interesting. I’ve been told the same.” There was this devilish light in Loki’s eyes that was impossible to look away from. It made Tony’s own smile turn from defensive to real. Somehow, he thought Loki could tell.

“Asgard’s prison system not suiting you?”

Over the comms, Steve had hissed, “Iron Man, focus.”

Steve was always misinterpreting Tony in ways like that. Tony had never *been* more focused than he was in that moment, eyes trained on Loki’s relaxed, non-threatening pose. In his other ear, JARVIS was conducting a scan for weapons. No scepter—that was still in the wind—and only a couple of daggers, one strapped to each of his thighs.

“I am destined for greater things than captivity,” Loki said. “We shall be seeing more of one another, Man of Iron.” He said it so differently from Thor, with a twist of irony like the name was a joke only he was in on. And then he was gone, as suddenly as he’d arrived, without a trace.

Tony had received lectures from Steve, Fury, Maria Hill, Pepper, and the Mayor of New York for that stunt, which had been filmed by several bystanders.

“It was de-escalation!” he claimed, during each of the tellings-off. “In many ways, I prevented another city-wide catastrophe. You’re *welcome*.”

He could admit, privately, that it had been more of an instinctual tactic than a planned one. Still, it was difficult to deny that it had been effective, by the measurement of Loki not wreaking any havoc on that particular occasion.

He started popping up around the globe, after that, playing his evil practical jokes everywhere from Sydney to Seoul to Liverpool. Loki may as well have been doing a world tour with the specific intention of letting everyone know that, this time around, he was a trickster god rather than a harbinger of doom.

Still, he always made time for New York.

And he always had something to say. Or, most of the time, a whole lot of things to say. He could be drawn into verbal sparring more easily than Tony could be drawn into making bad decisions (of which, coincidentally, engaging with Loki was one).

Often, Loki would simply disappear once he’d had his fun, or after the Hulk had given him another good thrashing.

There wasn’t really any easy way to capture someone who could teleport, Steve kept apologetically telling the President.

Another problem was that his fellow Avengers felt like Tony wasn’t doing enough, which was ridiculous. Tony could carry a conversation *while* shooting someone with repulsor beams—it was actually something of a specialty. He wasn’t going easier on Loki in order to ‘banter’ with him (as Barton horrifyingly put it). It was just that the back-and-forths were a natural side effect of doing battle with someone as chatty as Loki.

“He’s basically a middle child,” Tony had tried explaining. “Acting out for attention. We give him a little bit of it and—*poof!*—the Wicked Witch of the West is gone. Hooray for us!”

“He’s racked up millions in property damage this month alone,” Steve countered.

“And I’m the one paying out of pocket to fix it, so I don’t see how that’s any kind of argument against my methods,” Tony said.

“Don’t forget what he did because of what he’s doing right now,” Agent Hill, also present for that particular lecture, said.

“Wow,” Tony said, “that’s my inspirational quote for the month. I might cross-stitch it onto a pillow when I’m not busy saving the world.”

He’d been soundly dismissed after that, which suited him just fine. Everyone seemed to think Tony’s moral compass was a broken pile of scrap, just because he was more interested in understanding Loki than condemning him.

Well, he thinks ruefully, he’s certainly ended up with more of an understanding than he ever expected.

At the end of his explanation, Rhodey looks like he’s been drained of his will to live.

“Jesus, Tony,” he says.

“Yeah, okay, it sounds bad when you put it all together like that,” Tony admits.

Rhodey shakes his head. “No,” he says, “what it sounds like is that he was lonely, and you’re an idiot who doesn’t believe in the term *lost cause*.”

As a former ‘lost cause’ himself, Tony can’t argue with that assessment.

“I can’t promise my judgment’s not impaired,” he says eventually. “But—whether he deserves it or not—I’d rather he has one person who’s willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Does that person have to be you?” Bruce asks.

Knowing that his response is about to be noted down for posterity, Tony thinks *fuck it* and just tells the truth.

“I want it to be me.”

Loki returns, not for the first time (he’d had to come back once or twice when the pain of stretching the bond had become distracting, but he’d only stayed for long enough to ‘recharge’, as it were), when the sun is just beginning to dip behind the horizon. He’s holding a dagger.

With the benefit of knowing that Loki’s not feeling particularly murder-happy, Tony steps forward. Rhodey and Bruce make matching noises of dismay.

The dagger itself is gorgeous: deep black, including the blade, with no hint of color apart from a single jewel in the center of the hilt, which flashes gold and red and silver and green depending on which way it’s tilted.

There’s a brief moment of a thrilling feedback loop: Tony’s appreciation of the weapon coupled with Loki’s glowing pride.

“You made this?” Tony asks. He spares a moment to check that Bruce isn’t in danger of Hulking out, and then steps right into Loki’s space in order to run a delicate finger along the

blade. He can *feel* the power of it, like a more intense, less annoying version of static electricity. “Holy shit.”

“I merely summoned the first dagger I remember from my childhood,” Loki says. Tony chooses not to ask what ‘childhood’ here means, because the image of six-year-old Loki with a dagger is right on that line between comedy and tragedy, and he doesn’t want to lose it. “And then I made a few...adjustments.”

“It’s us,” Tony breathes.

“Not precisely,” Loki says. “It is attuned to our distinct magical energies. You were anxious about your vessel being hijacked.” Tony had considered that worry, but he hadn’t said it aloud. He doesn’t know whether Loki had picked up on a stray thought through the bond or simply anticipated it. He doesn’t know which option he’d prefer. “Now you need not worry.”

“I have a...magical energy?” Tony asks.

Loki’s only mildly offended by his skepticism. “Yes. Many beings do.”

“So I could—do magic? If I tried?”

“What do you believe your armor to be?”

“Um.” There’s a catch in Tony’s throat, and he couldn’t explain how he feels about that if he tried. “Science?”

Loki scoffs. “I thought we had established that there is not so much of a difference as you believed. You should not underestimate your power, Stark.” There’s a feeling of hesitation over the bond before Loki continues: “After all, you have given life.”

“*What?*”

“JARVIS,” says Bruce, and Loki nods.

“And the others,” Loki says. His eyes travel over to DUM-E and U, both of whom beep in acknowledgment. Tony feels light-headed.

“That’s ridiculous,” he says weakly, and something about the perceptible emotions in his head must keep Loki quiet while he tries to think. What Loki’s saying is preposterous, certainly, but there’s also—well, not a lot of people think of JARVIS as something with consciousness, let alone DUM-E or U. As wrongheaded as Loki has to be about Tony’s secret magical powers, he can’t help but be grateful for the recognition of his bots and AI as living beings.

To avoid having to think on it any further than that, Tony reaches out for the dagger. Loki places it carefully in his hand.

Blooming in Tony’s mind is the knowledge of the dagger’s intended purpose: it is both the car keys and the fuel, the one item that will turn the ship on and keep it going ad infinitum.

When it's not being used against you, magic is sort of magical.

“This is—incredible, Loki. Thanks,” Tony says, giving the dagger back to him. “And it only works for us?”

The verbal gratitude sends some of Loki's mental walls slamming back up, unexpected enough that Tony stumbles a step back. He hadn't realized how much extra he was getting from Loki until this sudden return to the baseline, only aware of Loki's—

frustration-smugness-discomfort

—current emotional state, without so much as a hint of context.

“As long as the dagger is onboard the vessel and assured of our intentions, the ship shall be operational.”

Loki does provide a helpful explanation for that through their mental link: he's made the dagger part of the bond, in a way, giving it insight into their minds. It means the dagger can't be stolen or misappropriated. Tony realizes it's probably best not to thank him aloud for that, given his intensely negative reaction to positive feedback, but he makes no attempt to hide his general feeling of appreciation.

“Just you and Tony?” Rhodey asks. He looks suspicious, but also amused. It's an expression Tony had seen a lot of when he pitched ideas during their time at MIT.

“Indeed,” Loki says stiffly. He drops the dagger on a table and skulks back into his corner of the room, conveying an air of ‘LEAVE ME ALONE’ as well as any teenager Tony's ever met.

Which is okay, because right now Tony is far more fascinated by the magic spaceship-powering knife he's been gifted. He picks it up and turns it over in his hands reverentially before he looks over at Rhodey and Bruce.

“Let's go ahead and work this into the plans, then.”

Chapter End Notes

look at my favourite mcu boys go!! they're going to design the coolest spaceship and we're all going to ignore my very tenuous grasps on both science and the fictional conceits of magic

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

One of the more awkward dinner parties on record.

Chapter Notes

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

Loki's calmed down enough by dinnertime to eat with them on the team level. He's still more quiet and withdrawn than usual, and he doesn't so much as glance in his brother's direction, but his emotional state isn't as confusing—or concerning—as it had been in the lab, so Tony lets it go.

They're eating Steve's take on Indian, since Steve has committed himself to twenty-first-century cooking with a fervor that borders on manic, and has most recently embarked on a long journey of teaching himself world cuisine. Nothing he makes is spicy enough, but it's impossible to hold that against a guy who lived through both the Great Depression and the Second World War and probably had to make do with a lot of boiled cabbage.

Thor booms his approval right away; it's a good thing Steve always makes enough to feed an army, because that's the figurative equivalent of how much the Avengers eat once Steve, Thor, and Bruce's increased appetites have been factored into the equation.

Loki's quieter, but Tony's getting more mental feedback now that Loki's not concentrating on hiding anything, and he can tell that Loki's familiar with Indian food—probably in the same way he's familiar with IHOP.

The overall mood at the table is strained. Clint's absence is notable, and Nat's explanation that he'd been called away for a sudden mission in Poland—while convincing—is almost certainly a lie. Clint may, in fact, be on said mission in Poland, but no one believes it's through sudden fortuitous circumstance. Nat must have said something duplicitous to get Fury to send Clint on his first solo mission since the formation of the Avengers.

Replacing Clint are Rhodey, Pepper, and Jane Foster. Tony hasn't had much of a chance to talk to Dr. Foster over the year of their acquaintance, even though she and her science posse are around the tower often enough. Right now, she's sat furthest away from Loki, and is the one sending him the most frequent dirty looks. It's a shame, because she's the world's leading expert on whatever relationship there is between Earth science and Asgardian magic, and he'd been hoping to get her input in the lab.

Rhodey and Pepper, meanwhile, are sat across from Tony and Loki. Both of their gazes are so intense that Tony feels as though they've developed x-ray vision and can see that he's got his

knee pressed into Loki's thigh underneath the table. He can justify it if anyone asks: he needs a bit of serenity to get through the world's most awkward family dinner.

"How fares the company without you?" he asks Pepper, nibbling on a piece of naan.

"I'll have to go back tomorrow," she admits. "If you'll be okay."

"Please," Tony says dismissively. "When am I not? You go be the best Girlboss CEO you can be."

Pepper smiles sweetly as she flips him off. He knows it's cathartic for her; she'd be crucified if she ever gave Bill O'Reilly and his ilk a piece of her mind, but every day her patience is tested by both endless (blatantly untrue) 'Pepper Potts is the Least Qualified CEO in History' op-eds *and* BuzzFeed listicles numerating the 'Top 10 Iconic Outfits Pepper Potts Wore This Summer'. Tony likes to do his part by giving her somewhere to direct her ire that won't break Twitter.

"Rhodey?" she asks.

"I'm staying," he says. "Someone's got to make sure Tony doesn't do anything insane."

"Excuse *me*, half the times I've done something insane you've been right there by my side," Tony retorts, "stop trying to remove culpability."

Rhodey's eyes are warm as he nudges his foot alongside Tony's, kicking playfully at his ankle. There's no one Tony would rather design a magic spaceship with.

Then Steve interrupts. "I think we need to get everyone on the same page."

"Go ahead, soldier," Tony sighs. He grabs another poppadum and starts loudly crunching it; getting told off by Captain America always provides a sick thrill.

Unfortunately, he doesn't get much of a reaction beyond Steve rolling his eyes and squaring his shoulders.

"The four of you," Steve says, encompassing Tony, Rhodey, Bruce, and Loki, "have been in the lab all day. I'd like to know what you've been doing."

"As would I," Nat says.

Of course you would, Tony thinks. On any other occasion, he wouldn't have managed to stop himself from saying it aloud, but tonight he gets to content himself with sending the snide comment Loki's way. In return, he gets the mental impression of a sly grin.

It's not colluding with the enemy to make sarcastic jokes at the expense of his teammates. Or, at least, he's pretty sure it's not.

"There's not much to tell," Tony says, deliberately blithe. "We're getting ourselves on track to go find Enchantress. Once we've finalized the designs for the USS Stark—fine, Steve, don't give me that look: USS Avengers—Rhodey and I will fly up to the Stark Industries

Satellite and, with Loki's help, we should be able to actually build this thing. Then, we strike a bargain with Enchantress and live happily ever after."

"This vessel will traverse the Nine Realms?" Thor asks, sounding doubtful.

It will once I'm done with it, Loki thinks.

Out loud, Tony says: "You do remember your brother's this big scary sorcerer, right? He's got this."

"You would do well not to place your trust so easily in that which you do not understand," Thor says, sounding so downright catty that Tony nearly laughs. He doesn't, though, because Loki's reaction is the polar opposite: his mind becomes so dark and stormy that it's impossible to look—or think—away from. Tony thinks he can pick it apart: the inferiority/superiority complex he's already observed from Loki countless times, feeling out of place on Asgard, knowing that his powers will never be respected the way a warrior's prowess is—it's all there in a pungent mix of despair.

"It's easy to trust someone when you're inside their head," Tony says flippantly. His words cause something in Loki's head to short-circuit; for a good few seconds, his mind is almost entirely blank. "If you don't trust your brother, take it from me: he can do this, and he *will* do it."

"And afterwards?" Jane asks. "Does he go back to destroying cities and killing people?"

An uncomfortable hush falls over the table, during which Tony strains to figure out what Loki's thinking. There's—

indignance-regret-anger-misery

—a lot going on, as always.

"Do not think your love's hands are clean of blood," spits Loki. "He may have chosen Midgardians as his *pets*, but he has wrought destruction and death on countless worlds. Asgardians are conquerors, and my brother is a king by birth."

The one high point of that is Loki referring to Thor as his brother. Otherwise, it's pretty terrible.

"Oh...kay," Tony says. "I think that went well. We should have more conversations about how many people we've all killed, I think that could be a fun bonding time for us." His breathing's a little quick, but he's confident he can get away from the table before anything comes of it. "Loki, you want to come with me and walk this off?"

He doesn't wait for a response, scraping his chair back and getting away as fast as he can without looking like he's escaping.

He's out on the balcony before the shaking starts in earnest.

“I do not understand,” Loki says from behind him. It’s a half-lie. He knows all about Tony’s blood-soaked past: Barton had told him. But what Loki doesn’t seem to understand is why Tony’s having any reaction to that right now.

Which is fair enough: most days, Tony would be fine. But the combination of the conversation topic and the sheer intensity of Loki’s emotions battering the inside of his skull are enough that Tony can feel himself spiraling.

“You and Thor speak in such absolutes,” he manages. He sinks to the ground and hooks his legs over the edge of the precipice. “Good and evil. Mayhem and order. Glory and shame. Not a lot of middle ground with you guys, is there?”

Loki sits beside him, leaving a slight distance between them. He lays his hand deliberately in the middle of that space and waits. Tony looks down at it, reads Loki’s intention—the offering of comfort—and takes a moment to wonder why Loki seems to find it so hard to actually reach out and touch.

That line of questioning leads him quickly to: who touches Loki? The life of a would-be destroyer of worlds doesn’t seem as though it would open up a lot of opportunities for simple human—or Asgardian, whatever—contact. So Tony bridges the gap for him, shuffling his trembling hand over to lay his pinky finger over Loki’s. The calming effect that produces isn’t quite enough to stop the shaking and gasping for air, but it helps.

“It is not in our culture,” Loki says quietly. “This *middle ground* you speak of.”

“That must suck,” Tony says. “A thousand years of thinking your only options are being holy or damned. In a manner of speaking.”

“I was *never* an anointed one,” Loki says bitterly. “I am not even Asgardian, not by birth.”

There’s something interesting to latch onto. “Tell me.”

“Millennia ago, Asgard was at endless war with Jotunheim. My homeworld. Land of the Frost Giants.” The disgust with which Loki says ‘Frost Giants’ is so thick Tony can almost taste it.

“Aren’t you a little...small, to be a giant.”

“Do you wish to hear this or not?” Loki snaps.

“Go on.”

“The All-Father and his army defeated the hordes of Frost Giants. Odin took the artifact that gave them their power for himself, to be locked in the palace of Asgard. As he was leaving, he saw a baby. Laufeyson. No, he did not see a *baby*. He saw an opportunity.” Loki’s breath is almost as ragged as Tony’s, at this point. Tony wonders if panic attacks are universal constants. “He took me for himself and raised me as a second, lesser son. For one and a half thousand years, I believed myself to be one of them.”

“He lied to you?”

“They all did,” Loki says. “They *knew* I was different. As did I—and yet I refused to accept the truth of myself until there was no other way.”

Tony covers more of Loki’s hand with his own, by fractions. The increased reassurance it produces doesn’t drown out the other things they’re feeling, but it does lie alongside them, offering a respite.

“As someone who knows nothing about the—what it means to be Asgardian or a Frost Giant or any of it,” Tony says, “I can’t say Asgardians sound like the hero of that story. *No one* sounds like the hero of that story—which is sort of my point. My entire life, I was supposed to build things that killed people. It was what my dad did, and people called him a hero. And the only times I ever impressed him, as a kid, were when I did my best to follow in his footsteps.

“Right after I got this—” He taps at the Arc Reactor with his free hand. “—someone called me the most famous mass-murderer in history. This was a couple days after I’d received an award for being a ‘hero’. And that’s about when I realized I’m neither.”

“And yet you call yourself a ‘super hero’,” Loki says derisively.

“Sure,” Tony says. “And that’s a joke I’m playing on the whole world. They call me a hero, but I’m just a man who’s been responsible for more death than he’ll ever be able to reckon with. *Merchant of Death*. Even now, all I’m good for is killing.”

He thinks of the Chitauri ship he’d thrown the nuke at. Often, he wonders if Captain America would’ve done the same thing, given the opportunity.

“And this is supposed to—inspire me?” Loki asks derisively. “Turn me to the side of the light?”

“God, no,” Tony laughs. It comes out sounding hollow. “I’m just saying you’ve got to stop thinking of Asgardians as heroes and Frost Giants as monsters, when chances are it’s not so different from us here on Earth. We see something we don’t understand, and that scares us, so we turn it into a monster.”

“The Frost Giants are Asgard’s greatest foes, responsible for more death than the likes of *you* would ever be capable of.”

“Well, that’ll help me sleep easier at night,” Tony says, refusing to rise to Loki’s bait. “And I’m not saying I’ve got the intergalactic geo-political answers on this one: all I’m saying is that, if you do the wrong thing, it’s not because you’re a Frost Giant. It’s not because you’re destined to be evil on a cosmic scale, or even because you *are* evil. It’s because you made a bad call. I was in a hole, before Afghanistan. And I managed to claw my way out—I have to believe that counts for something.”

Loki’s got a lot going on in his head, but Tony chooses to focus on the barest spot of light: *hope*. That’s not nothing.

“After all I have done to your realm, you find it so easy to forgive me?” Loki asks, voice quiet but harsh.

“It’s not really my place to forgive you.” Tony’s met a lot of the families of people who’d died or been permanently injured by the events of the Battle of New York. Some of them had been angry with him, others had sobbed in his arms. He can’t pretend to speak for those people. But he also doesn’t want to send Loki flying into guilt right this moment, so he says lightly: “I’m not King of Earth. But for what you’ve done to me, and me alone?” Breaking into the tower; trying to get inside Tony’s head (in the creepy mind control way); throwing Tony out of the window as though he was a rag doll to be cast aside once he ceased to be amusing. And then, after that, all the bruises and concussions and occasional broken bones Tony’s acquired doing battle with Loki. “Sure. I forgive you for all that.”

He sees Loki’s response coming right before it happens. He’s assaulted by a barrage of images, sensations—Asgardian memory must be slightly more sensory than the human equivalent, or maybe it’s something to do with the connection between the two of them. It’s all of those events from Loki’s perspective. He feels how much Loki had wanted to have control over Tony when he’d poked at him with the scepter, how much he’d wanted to make a puppet out of this aggravating mortal; he feels how badly Loki wanted to have control over someone else because he didn’t have control over *himself*—but before that thought can fully play out it shifts into the memory of throwing Tony out of the window, not caring whether he lived or died in the heat of the moment, seeing him as little more than an insect who deserved to be crushed on the pavement below. And then the multitude of times Tony’s pissed Loki off enough that Loki wants to hurt him, playing in vivid technicolor, a string of blasts and slices and pain. Loki’s pain, Tony’s pain—it’s not kept carefully separate, it’s just an overwhelming, crushing sensation, and somewhere in the chaos are their physical bodies, still connected via their hands even though no amount of soothing physical contact could hold a candle to this sludge of blackness.

It’s Loki who wrenches his hand away and backs off, mentally.

Tony crawls back from the ledge of the balcony, not trusting himself not to fall over it in his current state.

“So you want me to hate you,” he says. His voice is sandpapery, and there’s a taste like ash from his mouth down to his throat. “I knew that already.”

“*How?*” Loki hisses. He sounds—and looks—like a wounded animal, curled in on himself a few meters away.

“It’s easier that way,” Tony says. “It’s easier not to have to worry about disappointing people when you’ve made yourself a disappointment. Don’t worry, everyone does it. That was me for the last decade of my dad’s life.”

“I am *nothing* like you.”

“Sure,” Tony agrees. “When we were mind-melding just there, it was like fire and ice. Oil and water. No similarities whatsoever.”

Being sarcastic won't help the situation, he knows that, but his heart's beating too fast and his skin's prickly and tense, and Loki doesn't have the exclusive rights to lashing out.

"Who was pulling your strings?" Tony asks.

Loki's head whips up.

"You may as well tell me. In the memory from—well, you know the one. You were thinking about how you couldn't fail someone. And here I thought you were a big boy, invading Earth all on your own."

"You are an arrogant *fool*."

"I know you're scared of them, whoever they are. Scared of them like you've never been scared of anything before. Scared of them the way I'm scared of *everything* that's out there—" He tosses his hand up towards the dark sky, littered with the barest few stars that aren't obliterated by air pollution. "Because you *did* fail."

Loki's on him, then, uncoordinated and without the element of surprise, but still with Asgardian strength. He doesn't hit Tony, or stab him—he pushes his right forearm over Tony's windpipe and covers Tony's mouth with his left hand. Tony groans when his head knocks back against the very solid floor.

It's okay: all he has to do to summon a suit is move his hand in the way he'd programmed JARVIS to recognize. He's not *safe*, exactly, but he can put up a fight.

He doesn't call the Iron Man armor.

For a long moment he just lies there, eyes open and boring into Loki's. Cutting off Tony's ability to talk is more symbolic than anything; at any moment, Tony can transmit a thought or several directly to Loki. For once in his life, he stays quiet.

Loki's panting softly, puffs of breath that seem liable to give way to sobs at any moment. His mind is no longer merely a jumbled mess of conflicting feelings—it's like a flood of too many emotions for Tony to comprehend, all of them bad. He can see it in Loki's eyes, too, this manic glint showing he's not all there.

Tony breathes in through his nose for a count of four, then out for a count of seven. He does this six times before Loki's grip loosens without going anywhere.

"You thought of summoning your armor," Loki says. His voice is quiet. "Why didn't you?"

Damn. Tony hadn't consciously let that thought slip through. But then, they're touching more now than they've ever done before, Tony blanketed entirely by Loki's body—it's possible that the increased level of contact intensifies the effects of the bond. This would be an interesting discovery if not for how fucking tense Tony feels right now.

"You want me to be scared of you," Tony says. His voice should be muffled by Loki's hand, but the fingers are separated enough by now that the touch is less of an obstacle and more—

something else. “Almost as much as you want me to hate you. I’m not giving you the satisfaction.”

At some point he’s going to have to stop poking the snake with a stick.

“You are so sure of yourself,” Loki says.

Tony’s laugh is soundless, a gust of breath through the cage of Loki’s long fingers. “I certainly come across that way,” he says. “It’s always good to have the upper hand.”

Loki stares down at him, arching a disbelieving eyebrow. He increases the pressure of the arm on Tony’s throat, just a little. Just enough to remind him who *really* has the upper hand. And yet—there’s something almost playful about it, now that Loki’s ferocious defensiveness has subsided. Tony’s finding that being privy to Loki’s emotions is like being on a Tilt-a-Whirl that just never fucking stops.

And then they kind of—stay there, getting their breath back, studying each other through the bond. A minute passes. Then two.

Tony had thought he’d experienced most of the downsides of sharing a mental link with someone by now. As his anxiety dissipates (thanks in large part to the several spots of skin-to-skin contact), he discovers a new one: mortification.

It’s not his fault that, in his decades of exploring everything from vanilla sex to far kinkier fare, he’s never found anything he likes quite as much as having another person on top of him. His heart hammers away, spreading heat through his body that can’t be attributed to the warm air of a summer night. *Fuck.*

Loki’s expression turns downright dangerous, far scarier than it had been during the attack.

“Interesting,” he murmurs. He presses his spread fingers down, hard, for a fraction of a second. Asgardian strength: Tony can feel his lips swelling up—maybe not bruising, but getting there.

And then Loki’s getting up and moving a safe distance away, leaving Tony to clench his eyes shut, trying to imagine he’s anywhere but here. In his underwear in front of the whole school on the day of a big exam would be better than this.

“Sorry,” he grits out.

“It is unimportant,” Loki says. “His name is Thanos.”

Tony has to skip back several steps in the conversation, all while willing himself to regain control of his body.

“He’s the puppet master?”

“He seeks to restore ‘balance’ to the universe,” Loki says. “A goal that has never appealed to me. I much prefer—”

“Chaos,” Tony finishes, smiling. He sits up, biting back another groan. He’s going to have a fun array of bruises courtesy of the rough way Loki had pushed him down. “So how’d he get you to do his bidding?”

“Torture,” Loki says, almost off-handedly. “And he promised me a throne...my own kingdom. That I would be left alone to rule over Earth. It was an appealing prospect at the time.”

“Before you found out how annoying we can be.”

Loki inclines his head in agreement. “He wanted the Tesseract for himself, and in return I was given the Scepter. Given the power to control others’ minds. I presumed that the holder of the Scepter would be immune from its effects.”

“You weren’t...?”

“Do not think me as blindly subservient as your compatriots,” Loki snaps, lip curling. Tony waits him out. “I knew something was wrong from the start, but I did not fully comprehend the impact Thanos was having on my mind until it was gone.”

“Christ,” Tony says. “This must *suck* for you.”

Loki hums. “Although you are in my head, you would have no hope of controlling my mind. It is...acceptable.”

“Aw,” Tony says. “Thanks, babe. I think you’re acceptable, too.”

Loki rolls his eyes, but something warm blooms in the space where their minds are connected, something both of them know better than to comment on.

By the time they get back inside, nearly twenty minutes later, only Bruce and Jane are left. They’re doing the dishes and having what seems to be a heated discussion about the multiverse theory.

“Are you okay?” Bruce asks delicately when he catches sight of them.

“Mm, peachy,” Tony says. “You know there’s a state-of-the-art dishwasher just to your right.”

“It has at least fifty buttons,” Jane says.

“No one knows how to use it except you,” Bruce adds.

“That’s not true,” Tony says. “Nat managed it once.”

“Both methods are inefficient,” says Loki, waving a hand. In an instant, the dishes are spik and span, almost gleaming with it.

“Well,” Tony says, “no one can say it’s not handy having you around.”

They head back to the lab after that, with Jane in tow. She's had the rundown of how exactly the Nine Realms work from Thor, besides spending most of her life studying it, so it'll be great to get her input as long as Loki doesn't provoke her.

Loki, who's mentally worn down from all his truth-telling and violent outbursts.

"Okay," Tony says, once he's given Jane a refresher on how to interact with the various holograms and screens and invisible AIs that inhabit the room, "so me and Loki are just gonna sit here and braid each other's hair while you have a play. Call me if you need anything."

He lowers himself onto the couch, pulling Loki with him, and gets a hand around Loki's wrist. It won't be enough to stop him from getting agitated, but it might slow the process down somewhat.

"What did you mean?" Loki asks lowly. "*Braid each other's hair?*"

"It's a figure of speech. Just means we're gonna stay out of her way because she hates you."

"Ah."

"So what's the story there?" Tony asks. "If you're still in story-telling mode?"

"She did not meet me at my best," Loki admits. A few feet away, Jane snorts. "It was after—in the days after I was told of my true heritage."

Tony sucks in a sympathetic breath through his teeth.

"When I confronted my father, he fell into the Odinsleep. He had banished Thor to Midgard to teach him a lesson about his pride, and this left only me to fill the throne."

"Hereditary monarchy, got it," Tony says. "And I assume you were a wonderful, stable ruler who raised taxes on the rich and nationalized healthcare?"

"He tried to kill Thor," Jane says, not looking at them. She's manipulating the hologram protruding from the central console with ease, which isn't surprising exactly, but—very few people are able to pick up the new interface so quickly. It bodes well.

"Did you now?" Tony asks. He rubs a thumb over Loki's skin—the movement doesn't change the impact of the bond, but it reminds Loki that he's there.

"I was not thinking clearly," Loki concedes. "I thought only to keep the throne out of his grasp."

Tony thinks of being ruled by Thor. He loves the guy, but there's a small part of him that sees Loki's point.

"Sounds like a fun time was had by all," Tony says. Then, delicately, "Think you can apologize to Jane for attempting to murder her boyfriend so we can all move on with our lives?"

“It was a mistake,” Loki says. It’s maybe as close as he’s going to get. Tony casts a glance in Jane’s direction.

“I don’t accept your apology, since you didn’t give one,” Jane says, “but I know you’re important to your brother. And I think you *are* sorry, deep down. So I’m willing to help you with this.”

Tony manfully does not fist pump the air.

Jane continues: “If you hurt him again, I *will* kill you.”

“Good,” Tony says, before Loki can respond. “Glad we got that sorted. Now, can you tell me what kind of distance we’ll be able to cover with this thing, taking weird alien magic into the equation?”

Jane grins, the smile of someone who’s just been asked to expound upon their favorite subject, and starts to explain.

It’s around two in the morning when Jane says she has to head to bed, and after that there’s not much Tony can do except to go over the specs again, firing a few ideas back and forth with JARVIS, and getting more of the details of Loki’s tragic backstory.

It *is* a sad story, or really a series of sad stories all stacking up on top of each other and activating Tony’s empathy almost without his permission. Loki, for his part, seems to be telling all this for the first time. On more than one occasion he lies, like it’s an automatic impulse, but other than those few blips it’s over an hour of undiluted truth from the one person Tony would least expect it from. Loki talks about the isolation of his childhood, the constant reminders of his inferiority compared with his brother, the inability to find a place where he fit. Being tolerated but never understood. Finding out he was nothing more than a bargaining chip, that his father had seen him as useful rather than lovable.

It’s pitch black outside, and the lights in the lab are low. Loki’s face is illuminated blue through the light of the holographic specs. In the middle of reminiscing about sparring with the ‘Warriors Three’ (Thor’s posse, as far as Tony can ascertain), he yawns.

He’s polite about it, too, covering his mouth primly and turning his face to the side. Tony just laughs and says, “Bed?”

“You do not wish to retire to your own quarters tonight?” Loki asks.

“Um,” says Tony, “not really? It was okay, last night. Right?”

Loki nods but doesn’t say anything further, so Tony just starts leading the way to the guest room, a little tense with how close he’d been to saying he *wants* Loki there with him. The bond had been—stable, today, for the most part. They probably wouldn’t be in physical danger if they spent the night in separate beds. But Tony doesn’t want to spend eight hours on different floors and then subject himself to a shitty day as a result of a bad night’s sleep—and he knows that it *would* be a bad night’s sleep, even if there wasn’t any more blood.

They've been doing the barest minimum of experimentation at various points throughout the day, spending less than four hours apart in total, but Tony had started cataloging slight aches and pains from the twenty-eighth minute of Loki being on a different floor. Not enough to prevent him from working, or even to bother him too much—but then it started to get worse. After an hour of them being apart during the afternoon, Loki had appeared back in the lab, wincing, and had stumbled over to press his cool fingers to Tony's forearm.

Tony, who's used to enduring a certain amount of discomfort when he's in the lab anyway, had been shocked once again by the intensity of the relief provided by that touch.

Spending the night together might give them a chance to recharge, so to speak, providing the bond with enough close contact that it won't protest so much when they're separated during the day. It's just a theory, but Tony's happy to test it out. Sleeping beside Loki in a king-size bed isn't the worst trial he's been through since becoming Iron Man: Loki doesn't snore, or move, or drool onto Tony's expensive pillows. And there's the prospect of once again getting to see his impressive bed-head, which Tony doubts will ever get less funny.

So. It's not a problem.

They don't start out touching this time. It's not necessary, since they're not in any pain. They keep to their own separate sides of the expansive mattress, accompanied only by the sound of their breathing and the faint New York hum far below.

Tony drifts off feeling secure in the fact that he's handling this pretty well, all things considered.

Chapter End Notes

that last line? a set-up? what could you possibly mean

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Tony is not handling things well.

The following morning, Tony wakes up with his palm pressed flat against the ridge of Loki's collarbone and his nose pressed into Loki's dark hair, which smells faintly of something rich and dark but not unpleasant. He feels warm and content for the four seconds it takes to realize where he is and what, exactly, he's doing.

"Christ," he mutters, pulling back. He loses the simmering warmth of the contact, but regains a little of his dignity. It's a rough trade.

Through the link, he can feel how awake Loki is: he's just about conscious, having woken up about the same moment Tony had. His mind is hazy, though, only half there. In the interests of being a decent person to be mind-melded with, Tony makes the quick decision to be magnanimous and allow Loki to continue feigning unconsciousness. It's not like *he* wants to have the conversation about how the bond pushed them from their separate sides of the bed into each other's arms, either.

They're slap bang in the middle of the bed, too, which absolves them both of responsibility. Or makes them both guilty.

He makes his escape to the en suite and does some of the breathing exercises Bruce taught him while he showers.

Then, clean and re-dressed, he decides to go on the hunt to find someone who'll make him breakfast (Bruce and Steve both make heavenly omelets, and are always kind enough to share). Before he leaves, he spares a quick glance for the 'sleeping' form in his bed. Loki's robes, or whatever the fuck they're called, have been pushed askew by Tony's seeking hand, and the pale skin of his shoulder and upper chest are both on display. Compared to how covered-up the Asgardians Tony knows usually keep themselves, it seems downright risqué. Then there's his hair, spread out in the way hair only looks in shampoo commercials.

Turns out there's knowing Loki's attractive and then there's—whatever this is, a feeling like his entire respiratory system is happily on fire. It's probably just the lingering effects of how much they'd been touching during the night, Tony thinks to himself. Nothing to be concerned about.

Guiltily, he shakes himself out of his tried reverie, trying to push that whole line of consideration somewhere Loki won't find it, and heads in the direction of sustenance.

His doctor (read: Bruce)'s official advice is that he limit his caffeine intake in order to reduce the strain on his heart. Tony hadn't exactly been following this advice before, but this morning he takes special exception. By the time he finds Bruce, he's on his fourth cup, and he's having his sixteenth epiphany about what to do with the steering system on the ship.

"So make *those* adjustments, JARVIS, but save them as a separate file so I can compare performance in a simulation—remind me to design a simulation—and then put the files in a folder and—hi, Bruce."

"Tony. You seem..."

"Well-rested? Handsome? Energized?"

"Manic."

Tony considers this. "Sure. But our baby isn't going to build herself, so a little mania's a good thing."

"And this has nothing to do with Loki?"

Tony's laugh comes out a little high-pitched. "Loki? What would it have to do with Loki? Besides the fact that we're in this whole mess because of him. What a guy. What an... enemy...to have."

"You slept with him again last night."

"*Phrasing*," Tony says. "I slept beside him. In a huge bed. Because of how we didn't want mind-meld hangovers this morning. And, anyway, how did you even know that? Did JARVIS rat me out?"

"Certainly not, Sir," JARVIS says, sounding offended.

"It was a hunch," Bruce says. "Based on—" And he gestures, insultingly, at Tony's general countenance.

"Yeah, no, we just—"

"And Dr. Foster mentioned that you stayed late in the lab," Bruce continues. "That you seemed, well. Close."

"God, it's like high school in this tower. Can a guy not have a conversation without it turning into today's hottest gossip?"

"She only asked because she wasn't aware of the physical nature of the bond," Bruce says. "She wanted an explanation for why you were touching him so much. Because she was worried about you."

Tony has no response to that, so he concentrates his energy on discovering a way to spontaneously shrivel up and die for the purposes of avoiding this conversation and all others like it.

“Tony,” Bruce sighs. “You’re doing the thing again.”

“The thing? What thing?”

“Remember when we first met?” Bruce asks. “You were so delighted that I could understand your science jargon that you moved me into your home the following day.”

“So?”

“You have a way of imprinting like a baby bird,” says Rhodey, either appearing from nowhere or having been there the whole time. Tony’s been accused of having tunnel vision before, so either’s possible.

“Okay, no, you two are just biased because you’re both fabulous and I love you,” Tony says. “It’s not like I’ve—whatever you want to call it—*imprinted* on Steve or Barton or any of the others.”

“Except...you kind of have?” Bruce says. “You didn’t have to move us all in here. No one asked you to. According to Nat, Fury already had something all set up at SHIELD.”

Tony’s too jittery to come up with a cogent line of argument to dispute that, so he latches onto something else. “Okay, but *Loki*? No. I’m not going to ask him to move in with us, you don’t have to worry.”

“Give it three more days,” Rhodey mutters.

“It’s nice, isn’t it,” Bruce says, quiet. “You like having him in your head.”

Tony rolls that idea around briefly. Loki tends to never be feeling more than one positive emotion at a time, whereas he’s stacked full of varying shades of anger, sadness, and discontent on a near-constant basis. Even now, Tony can feel that although Loki is physically content—lying lazily in bed, warm in a patch of sunlight, Tony can almost feel it on his own body—he’s still not *happy*. He can’t think of more than a handful of moments over the past few days when Loki has felt happy. And even then, it’s usually at someone else’s expense.

So it should be awful, having to deal with all that on top of the mess that’s Tony’s own brain. They should be dragging each other down under mountains of undiagnosed depression, probably.

They’re not.

“He only thinks about murdering someone, like, twice a day,” Tony says flippantly. “It’s alright.”

“Tones,” Rhodey says. Just that.

There’s no way to explain it without sounding crazy, delusional. Because he doesn’t know anything about Asgardian mind-meld magic but he knows for sure: this has been surprisingly bearable. As different as they are, he has an awareness that Loki’s mind fits alongside his, complementary. It shouldn’t come this naturally to them, but it does.

And he *knows* that should feel terrifying, or at least *wrong*.

But Tony's felt alone for as long as he's been alive.

It's not anyone else's fault (with the exception of his father, maybe, which is an issue for his nonexistent therapist to unpack) but he's always been out of step, even with the people he knows care about him. His mind is a foreign object to them, impossible to understand. Without checking, Tony has a bone-deep certainty that despite the difference in moral code, in species, Loki understands him.

He's not thrilled about it, except for the part of him that is.

"You struggle, don't you," Tony says to Rhodey, to Bruce, "to *get* me. Some of the stuff I do—*most* of the stuff I do—it makes no sense to you. Tell me I'm wrong."

"You're not," Rhodey says. "But—you know I love you."

Tony flashes him a grin. "Sure do, sweetcheeks. My point is that—he understands. You can say it's because of the spell, that we're being forced to empathize with each other, but I don't think that's it. I think there's something essential in both of us that's recognizable to one another. Not the same, but close enough."

He fucking hates things that can't be explained scientifically. Almost as much as he hates opening up about his feelings.

"Tony," Rhodey says, "you're not like him."

Tony laughs bitterly. "I'm not saying I'm a genocidal maniac, sugar plum. But we can't exactly claim I haven't had my moments."

He doesn't talk a lot about what happened to him in Afghanistan for two reasons: one, the acceptable reason, is because of what he'd suffered while he was there. The explosion; waking up to seeing his own chest cut open; waking up *again* attached to a car battery and being told he'd die without it. And that was only the start. The Ten Rings' campaign of torture to get him to build them a weapon had rung of practiced efficiency; he had been the latest in a long line of bodies to bend to their will. And he could never allow his mind to flit away, had to stay constantly focused, because if not he'd drop the battery and that would be it for the 'great' Tony Stark.

The second reason he doesn't like to mention Afghanistan is the one he's never told anyone.

He'd lived a sheltered life up until he ended up in that cave. Injuries had been minor, emotions fuzzy and indistinct—made more so by a constant shroud of alcohol—and ugly things had been easily avoided. God, had he avoided them.

Even his parents' death had only driven him to dull his senses further, to the extent where he doesn't remember large chunks of that year. His mom and dad's funeral is forever lost to a bottle of thousand-dollar whiskey.

So he'd never wanted to kill someone with his bare hands until that first day of his captivity. When he'd seen Jimmy's watch on the terrorist's wrist. His thoughts hadn't been of escape or removing a threat; he'd wanted to close his hands around the man's throat and watch the life leave his eyes, and he'd wanted to smile while he did so. He'd wanted blood in his teeth. In that moment, only the car battery attached to his chest had held him back.

But even that had been justifiable: it was for Jimmy. Jimmy, who'd held up a peace sign after he shyly asked Tony for a selfie. Jimmy who, seconds later, had run directly into danger to keep Tony safe. Avenging Jimmy was the right thing to do, at least from a certain perspective.

And that was a convenient lie, right up until Tony had enjoyed setting the place on fire. The screams hadn't disturbed him—far from it, they'd been a balm to the dark, ugly place inside of himself that had taken the pain of the torture and twisted it into rage. The screams of people engulfed in flames had been pleasing to him. The acrid smell of burning flesh had been repulsive, and yet at the same time brutally satisfying.

He might have liked to pretend the overkill was because of Yinsen, but to say so would have been disrespectful to Yinsen's memory. He killed because, in that moment, the killing felt good.

He loses considerably more sleep over that than he does over the memory of waterboarding.

It hasn't stopped since Afghanistan, either. He wishes that taking the nuke up through the wormhole had given him pause, that he'd thought of the Chitauri as anything over than an enemy to be destroyed with extreme prejudice. He wishes that he'd felt regret when he saw Obadiah's burned, blackened corpse. There is a potential inside him for a rage so deep and all-consuming that it's frightening, and there's only one other person currently residing in Avengers Tower who can relate to that.

Steve has killed people, but he's done so with the grim determination of a soldier, because it's his job and his duty, and because he wants to keep the world safe. Nat has killed people, but she's pragmatic about it. Bruce has only ever killed people by accident, and the guilt from that is enough to nearly swallow him whole. Tony's the only Avenger who can kill and take satisfaction from it, even if it's only for the briefest of moments.

When he looks up, several things are surprising. Firstly, that he's on the floor, back against the wall. Secondly, Loki is crouched beside him, running a hand over his forearm repetitively, so light it's ticklish.

“Was that you?” Rhodey's demanding, directed at Loki. “Did you do something?”

“He had a panic attack,” Bruce says, at the same time as Loki says, “You humans require little help allowing your emotions to take hold of you.”

Hypocrite, Tony thinks without rancor.

Loki's not taken even the split second it takes for him to get dressed, apparently. Tony lets out a shaky breath that skirts around a laugh at the sight.

“That was weird,” he says. “I don’t normally get so out of it.”

“This has happened before?” Rhodey asks.

“A few times,” Bruce confirms. “He self-reports at around one a month.”

“He’s lying,” says Loki.

“I know,” Bruce and Rhodey say.

“Give me a second to get my breath back before you start insulting me,” Tony says. He tips his head back against the wall and takes stock. There’s sweat cooling on his skin, itchy, and his heart’s thudding with typical irregularity. He feels nauseous but not overly so. He can’t remember anything from the last—however long it’s been, except for the flashbacks.

“I saw them,” Loki murmurs.

“Well, shit,” Tony says.

“Saw what?” Rhodey asks.

“I was—remembering some stuff.”

“You were having PTSD flashbacks,” mutters Bruce, who keeps trying to tell Tony that there are a plethora of mental health professionals he could—and should—go see. “And those meant you couldn’t block Loki from seeing your thoughts?” Despite himself, he sounds interested.

“It’s possible,” Tony says, “although it’s not like I’m consciously blocking him out most of the time. It’s just automatic.”

“What did it feel like for you, Loki?”

“Delightful.”

“Dude, seriously,” says Rhodey. “We all saw you when you showed up here.”

“I didn’t,” Tony puts in.

“His state of mind did not overwhelm my own,” Loki says stiffly. “And yet it was undeniably present.”

“And the—touch,” Bruce says, not actually looking at where Loki’s still stroking Tony’s arm. “That’s helping?”

“Mm,” Tony says. “How long was I out?”

“Less than five minutes.”

“Then it’s helping.”

Bruce grabs a StarkPhone from the side table and starts making notes on it, brow furrowed.

“That’s good news, right?” Tony says.

“For now,” Bruce replies. “But what happens when the bond’s gone? If you start using this as an emotional crutch...”

“Okay, fine, I take your point.” Tony clenches his eyes shut and breathes in time with the sweeping motion of Loki’s fingers. “Jesus, all this before breakfast.”

At that, Rhodey launches into motion. “I’ll get you something to eat,” he says, and disappears in the direction of the kitchen.

“Okay, doc, give me the news,” Tony says.

Bruce looks uncomfortably at the floor. “Rhodey was asking you about—what exactly you thought was similar, about you and Loki—” Tony feels the sudden, sharp interest from Loki; of course he’s the kind of person who always wants to know what people are saying about him behind his back. “—but you weren’t responding. You weren’t responsive, at all. But we managed to get you to sit down before you fell. And then...”

“Then?”

“Loki,” Bruce says. “He—appeared.”

Loki stays stubbornly silent. He doesn’t stop touching Tony, but he doesn’t look at him, either.

“And we thought he was going to hurt you, or that he’d *done* something to hurt you,” Bruce says, with no small amount of awkwardness to his tone, “because of how, um, frenzied he looked. But he—I mean, obviously he knew he could help, so he started—” With an embarrassed gesture at Loki’s hand, he trails off.

Tony doesn’t say thank you, or send the words *thank you* in Loki’s direction; to do so would only close him off. He does, however, allow the full swell of his gratitude to seep through the bond. A really bad panic attack has been known to leave him out of commission for a day, and without Loki on hand he knows this would’ve been one of the bad ones.

“God, how embarrassing,” Tony says, right as Rhodey steps back in with a glass of water, a banana, and a packet of aspirin. “Rhodey! Let your mother hen flag fly.”

“Here you go, you ungrateful bastard,” Rhodey says, setting the glass of water in front of him. Tony doesn’t generally have a problem with Pepper or Rhodey handing him things, but Rhodey’s probably being cautious on account of the massive panic attack. Tony appreciates it. When he picks the water up, he realizes his hand is still shaking, a slight tremor that sends the water sloshing back and forth. He drains half the cup in one go and makes a grabby hand for the aspirin. He hasn’t got a headache yet, but he knows it’s lying in wait.

“I would speak with Tony privately,” Loki says. If Tony wasn’t privy to his thoughts, he’d think he sounds angry.

It's also, he realizes, the first time Loki has called him Tony.

Rhodey begins to protest, but Bruce grips him by the arm. "Five minutes," he says. "I want to take another scan and make sure the bond wasn't what caused the anxiety attack as soon as we can."

"Ugh," says Tony. "Can't a panic attack just be a panic attack?"

"Not when you've been mind-melded," Bruce says.

"This sort of thing seemed so much easier in *Star Trek*," Tony complains, earning matching snorts from Rhodey and Bruce as they leave the room. "Alright, darling, you've got me alone. Now what?"

Loki still isn't looking at him.

"I had not realized," he begins. There's a stiffness to his voice and the way he's holding himself, a counterpoint to the delicate way he's running his fingers over Tony's skin. "Last night, when you spoke of good and evil, of a...grey area. I thought you knew nothing of which you spoke."

"You thought I was just trying to make you feel better."

Loki nods. "I thought that, despite the curse, you could not see my nature for what it truly is. I thought that you were like Thor, always seeing good in me where it does not exist."

It occurs to Tony that Loki hasn't got many people who understand him, either.

"I'm not saying I don't see good in you," Tony says. Pauses. "Or the *potential* for good, at least. Look, I don't know if this is a cliché on Asgard, but I'm saying it anyway: good isn't a thing you are. Unless you're Captain America, that is. Good is a thing you *do*. Sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

Tony shrugs. "And sometimes it's fun to be an asshole. Leave the being perfect to Steve."

"I did not expect you to have such insight," Loki says. "I thought that you were only human."

"I *am* only human," says Tony. "Or do you just mean that you thought I'd be too puny and dumb to ever understand what you're going through?"

"Perhaps," says Loki. His hand pauses in its movement, although he doesn't pull it away. "I am sorry you felt such distress."

"I'm sorry for interrupting your lie-in," Tony responds easily. "You can go back if you want."

"No," Loki says. "I'll stay."

Bruce's scan confirms what Tony already knew: that his brain is plenty messed up without any outside interference. The verification seems to have a calming effect on Loki, who had refused to stop looming within touching distance until Tony had physically entered the MRI machine.

"While we're treating me like an invalid, can I get some waffles?" Tony asks.

As if summoned, Steve appears at the door of the lab holding a plate stacked high with French toast. It'll do.

"Did you skimp on the sugar this time?" Tony asks. "Or did you remember that we're no longer rationing?"

Steve sighs and shakes his head, but he's smiling. "Eat your toast, Tony."

Tony snags a piece off the plate and takes a bite, moaning in delight. "Mm, perfect," he says. "I should lose my mind in public more often, this is what I get."

"One-time offer," Steve says.

While all four occupants of the room work their way through the toast, Tony flips through the plans they've got so far for the spaceship. The vessel itself is small—less chance of things going wrong, and easier for Tony to source the materials on such short notice—and, hopefully, powerful. Designing the weapons system had forced him to open some files he'd promised himself he'd never look at again, but he can't bring himself to fully regret it. When he pits the righteousness with which he'd shut down the weapons manufacturing arm of Stark Industries against how he'd felt suspended in that yawning expanse of space, staring at the impossible size of the Chitauri ship: the behemoth against which no one could hope to stand, least of all six Avengers—there's just no competition.

"Stop," Loki says, eyeing him from the corner of the room.

"Yes, dear," Tony says.

Rhodey sighs. "Can you two try to have your conversations out loud? For novelty, if nothing else."

"Loki's just telling me to avoid some of my emotional triggers," Tony says. "What he's struggling to wrap his head around is the fact that *one of my triggers is space*, and our plan is to *go into space*."

"We can still think of something else—" Bruce starts, but Tony waves him off.

"What we're not going to do is start treating me like a delicate flower. This is my problem, and I'm gonna deal with it."

"You stubborn, pig-headed fool," Loki mutters.

"Mm-hmm," Tony agrees. "Can you come up with some magic way to ensure that we don't lose communication with Earth while we're out there instead of lecturing me? Because that's

what would actually be useful right now.”

Loki continues with his stream of insults unabated. But they’re no longer out loud, so it’s easier to tune him out while Tony makes adjustments to the targeting system.

About five minutes later, he realizes Loki might be onto something. Every time he starts to retreat into the darker parts of his psyche, Loki’s inner monologue is right there, calling him a *ridiculous human, idiot mortal, arrogant wretch*.

The insults are oddly soothing, in their consistency if nothing else.

“Rhodey,” he says, “can you check these over? I’ve prioritized firepower, so the maneuverability’s not ideal, but I think we should be able to hold our ground if we run into any Klingons.”

“Sure,” Rhodey says, grabbing the StarkPad out of Tony’s hand and sitting down with it.

“The Chitauri,” Bruce says, turning to Loki. “Are they still out there? Or were all of them...?”

Killed, Tony fills in mentally. *By me*.

Loki’s eyes snap towards him. “You can’t take credit for annihilating their race,” he says. “Far more exist than you could ever hope to kill, spread across the galaxy. Not all races are so primitive as to be confined to one planet, or one battalion.”

“You might be shocked to hear that that doesn’t actually make me feel better,” Tony says.

Loki doesn’t reply immediately—why would he, when he knows Tony’s lying. He’s continuing his trend of appearing human, today with a soft, fern-green sweater and shimmering earrings climbing up his left ear. His hair’s hanging loose, no visible product; Tony thinks that if he’d gone with this look during his attempted takeover of Earth, he’d have gained at least a couple of supporters without the scepter’s help.

“My goal in life is hardly to cater to your feelings,” Loki says. “It would seem a thankless mission.”

He’s smiling a little as he says it, so Tony replies in kind: “Right back at you, Eeyore.”

“The Chitauri,” Bruce reminds them both, while Rhodey stifles a laugh at Tony’s extremely topical *Winnie the Pooh* reference. How anyone ever calls Rhodey the responsible one, Tony will never know.

“They are no threat,” Loki says. “A warrior race requires a master; at this moment, they have none.”

“Not even—you-know-who?” Tony asks.

“Thanos does not currently have use for them,” Loki says. “He seeks treasures, and to find them requires delicacy. The Chitauri are not known for their precision.”

“Thanos?” Bruce asks.

“The evil behind the not-so-evil,” Tony says, gesturing at Loki.

“Great,” says Rhodey. “Another thing to worry about. I was just thinking we didn’t have enough already.”

“We’re taking them one at a time,” Tony lies—he’s already started percolating ideas to hold whoever this Thanos character is off, a defense system for the Earth. It’s still too rudimentary to bring anyone else in on the project. “We can afford to save the Thanos issue for another day. Probably. Let’s hope for another year, at least. What’s his timeline on getting those ‘treasures’?”

Loki shrugs. He has a lot of these mannerisms that appear human and idiosyncratic: rolling his eyes, raising his eyebrows. And yet...something about the way he carries them off is distinctly inhuman.

“The Scepter is one of them,” he says. “The Tesseract was another. He cared little for the Earth; all he wanted was the Tesseract.”

“And what else does he want?”

“There are six infinity stones in total,” Loki says.

“Infinity stones,” Tony says. “Fucking hell. Can anything ever just be normal around here? For five minutes?”

“If you need some time to get your feeble mind around it...” Loki smirks.

“Oh, shut up,” Tony says.

He does take a seat, though, trying to parse his way through *that* info-dump before he goes back to working on their current mission to disconnect his and Loki’s heads. He takes a moment to wonder what will happen after they’ve succeeded—will Loki remain with them to take down Thanos? It doesn’t seem like he’s much of a fan of the guy. But the longer Loki stays, the more necessary it will become to let more people into the loop. Tony imagines asking Fury if *Loki* can join the Avengers. Yeah, no.

“Basically what you’re saying is that there could be any number of threats out there, but that we probably won’t have to deal with the Big Bad just yet,” he ascertains.

“Basically,” Loki parrots.

“In that case, let’s get this show on the road.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Getting the show on the road.

Chapter Notes

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

The Stark Industries Satellite had been a whim of Tony's after the Battle of New York. Although 'whim' makes it sound too fanciful: really, Tony had pursued sending a satellite into orbit with single-minded intensity in the immediate aftermath of the attack, intent on being able to see future invasions coming even if he didn't know how to prevent them yet.

It's technically within the reach of both the Iron Man and War Machine suits, with very few adjustments required to get them up that high. It's not so much the result of a deliberate design choice as it is a feature that comes right along with making the suits functional in the upper atmosphere. But the long and short of it is that they've got enough oxygen for a couple of hours in non-breathable atmospheres, as long as the suits aren't damaged, and the Arc Reactor's proven it can function in space. Kind of.

The Mark XLVII should be up to the job, anyway.

"This is going to work," he announces triumphantly.

"Is it, now? Because I'm seeing a hell of a lot of ways this could go wrong, Tones," says Rhodey.

"Again, this is why we've got our failsafe," Tony says.

"Excuse me if I don't feel comfortable using *Loki* as a failsafe."

"I resent that," says Loki lazily, playing with one of his daggers. There's a special kind of happy Loki gets when he's fucking with people. It's one of Tony's favorite things to feel over the bond.

"We have no idea what'll happen to Loki if I die while we're mind-melded," Tony points out. "Severing the link could kill him, too. And I'm guessing he doesn't want that."

"Not today," Loki agrees easily.

"So this is about as safe a plan as I've ever come up with, when you think about it," Tony concludes.

“I hate it when you’re logical,” says Rhodey.

Rhodey and Tony do some test runs into the upper atmosphere, first, and then it’s time for the real thing.

For the first attempt in space, Rhodey gets left behind. Tony’s logic—that Loki can’t let Tony die while they’re still bonded—had been infallible, but it doesn’t apply to Rhodey. Putting Rhodey at risk before Tony’s tested things himself would be untenable.

And that’s how Tony ends up perched on his own satellite, with no one but Loki sat by his side. He’s all sealed up, both by the Iron Man suit itself and by a forcefield of Loki’s creation, helpfully tinted green so that Tony’s aware of its presence.

He’s breathing steadily, but his heart’s a tumbling nightmare and he can feel every muscle in his body tensing up.

Through the link, Loki says, *You’re ridiculous. Look at how beautiful it is.*

With effort, Tony looks down. He’s never been afraid of heights—of course not: he could hardly be Iron Man if he balked at being high in the air—but this is something else. Loki’s right, though: *it is beautiful*. It’s one of the most beautiful things Tony has ever seen, right up there beside Pepper that first night he’d really *looked* at her, and the sight of Rhodey emerging from the helicopter when he’d been wandering the Afghani desert. The Earth, from a distance, is a swirling mess of white and blue and green. Unbelievable, that everything he’s ever loved and fought for is down there.

Wow, he sends Loki’s way. It’s an inadequate word to encompass what he’s feeling—not that Loki needs a word when he’s got a front-row seat to emotions firsthand. *Wouldn’t have thought you’d find it beautiful, though. I bet Asgard’s ten times better than this.*

For his trouble, he gets an image of Asgard straight from Loki’s thoughts. It’s more than just an image: it’s Loki’s impression of the place, with all that comes with that. There’s love, and the call to home, as well as rejection and pain and even a little hatred. That many emotions stuffed together is almost par for the course where Loki’s concerned, but it’s still a lot to handle, all coming at him at once. It makes his eyes sting, but it also makes him smile.

Yeah, that’s what I mean, he thinks. There’s nowhere on Earth like *that*: all clean and golden.

Beauty’s a matter of perspective, Loki responds. There’s something about his skin, out here—normally it looks human, but here, halfway between the Earth and the moon, there’s a blueish glow to it. It could be a trick of the light. Or it could be what Loki really looks like, underneath all the glamors and lies.

He’s a little bit beautiful, too, Tony thinks, although he takes care to keep the thought to himself. It’s worth being grateful that the bond allows them this much, a small measure of privacy in and amongst the constant exposure.

This isn’t so bad, he thinks more directly, allowing Loki to ‘hear’.

Loki grins, a flash of a thing. *It's not.*

Okay, Tony thinks. *Let me go.*

Loki knows what he means.

There's a chance that, once Loki withdraws his forcefield, things are going to go very wrong very quickly. It would only take around fifteen seconds for Tony to suffocate in the event of the Iron Man suit not holding up to the pressure. Theoretically, Loki will be able to feel the worst-case scenario happening through the bond and bring the forcefield back up in time, but even with that safeguard it's comfortably one of the riskier experiments Tony's ever done on himself.

The chances of something going wrong are negligible, he reminds himself. According to every calculation he and JARVIS had done, the Iron Man suit's structural integrity should be absolutely fine.

Still, there's knowing intellectually that nothing bad is likely to happen, and then there's trusting that fact.

The forcefield disappears in increments, as if that would help.

When Loki's protection is gone entirely, and when Tony is finished holding his breath, he's still alive. There's still plenty of air in the suit.

Huh, he thinks, and though the word is glib, it's nothing compared to the swell of relief Loki must be feeling from him. *That's pretty cool.*

Loki, with a crease between his eyebrows, thinks: *Not worth the risk.* The green shell makes a comeback, and Tony chooses not to be a dick about it. Loki's not wrong, after all; it's nice to have a second layer of security, even if Tony would prefer to trust his technology over Asgardian magic.

Back down? he asks. Loki nods and allows himself to be scooped up against the side of the Iron Man suit. Loki can teleport, sometimes, but he can't fly through space. It makes very little sense to Tony, but he's resigned to being the one with the power of movement in this partnership. It's nice of Loki not to leave him alone, he supposes, when he could teleport away at any moment instead of suffering the indignity of being carried side-on.

Although there's a pragmatic explanation: teleporting too far away might set off the facial bleeding again. Or worse.

But then there's the fact that Loki loves flying. He doesn't say a word, or articulate anything inside his head, but Tony can feel the thrill that races through him—that races through them *both*—as they hurtle back toward Earth at ridiculous speed. Tony hoots a giddy laugh when they re-enter the atmosphere; Loki is more reserved, but inside he's lit up as bright as Tony's ever known him to be.

It must be new to him, Tony thinks. He doubts Thor was offering many ride-alongs when he flew around Asgard.

All those centuries, and Tony still gets to give Loki something new to experience. Now *there's* a trip.

They get back down to the tower without incident, landing on the helipad of the Tower where Rhodey, Bruce, Pepper, Thor, Jane, Steve, *and* Nat are all waiting.

“All this for little old me?” Tony says, stepping out of the suit and accepting a tight hug from Pepper.

“You’re an *idiot*,” she says, hitting him on the arm as she steps back. “I delayed my flight for this.”

“Aw, you shouldn’t have,” Tony says. “No, seriously. JARVIS, tell her.”

From the suit, JARVIS’ tinny voice says, “There was only a 0.000468% chance that Mr. Stark would face any adverse effects from wearing the Iron Man armor in space.”

“Exactly!” Tony says brightly. “We did the math, and Loki was there in case math was wrong. And here *I* am, alive and well, and having gone to space.”

“And you’re feeling alright?” Bruce asks.

“Never better,” Tony says. He might be overdoing it.

“He’ll be fine,” Loki says, standing apart from the little huddle and avoiding his brother’s seeking eyes. There are still traces of euphoria on him, the lingering high of launching one’s body through the skies so fast that everything else fades away, becomes an almost hypnotic blur. It’s helpful to focus on that, to attempt to eclipse everything that’s going on in Tony’s head.

“And now we can get started!” he says, trying for a smile that assures everyone he’s not about to have a meltdown on the landing pad of his skyscraper. “On actually building this thing!”

He receives six matching dubious looks for his trouble. At least Rhodey believes in him.

There’s still fine-tuning to do, and Bruce refuses to let Tony go back up until he’s well-rested and has processed the earlier trip. Which is all well and good, but Tony’s itching to get started, to build a spaceship and to use it to traverse further than any idiot at NASA could manage. Like, sure, he’s got the advantage of a sorcerer from an alien race, but he still thinks he gets to feel a little smug about it.

Any residual anxiety has been put reliably on the back-burner by his favorite thing: work. He loves having a problem to solve, or something to build. When he breaks this space mission down to its component parts, it’s almost easy to deal with.

That's how he passes the rest of the day, allowing himself to slip in the fugue state that generally emerges these days when he's building a new Iron Man suit. It's possible that he eats, and drinks, but he doesn't remember doing so, or who provides the sustenance. Even the presence of Loki in his head is easy to tune out while he's working with JARVIS to build some of the component parts. And then there are the moments where it comes in handy, when he's thinking hard about the particular tool he needs and the next thing he knows it's levitating beside him, inside a ring of ostentatious green light.

The basic skeleton of the ship is coming together, being rendered in drips and drabs inside the lab. Tony keeps running his hands over cool metal, trying to convince himself that it will come together seamlessly into a larger whole. He's gone with the same titanium-gold alloy plating that adorns most of his Iron Man suits for the outer hull, and it's soothing to think of the ship as somehow an extension of the suits.

He finally gets dragged out of the room by Rhodey at three in the morning; it's been about twelve hours, and he doesn't remember much except for the productive swirl of being deep into a project.

"That's our baby," he says to the three of them who'd remained in the lab, grinning.

"Uh-huh," Rhodey says, "sure is. You'll make sure he goes to bed?" The last sentence addressed to Loki.

"I will do my utmost," Loki says, voice too grave to be anything other than sarcastic.

But he does, not allowing Tony to backtrack when he has an idea about the steering halfway to their room. For the first time in half a calendar day, Tony consciously tunes into the part of his mind that's Loki's. He has the breath sucked out of him by what he finds there.

Loki's mind is incandescent—so far from its baseline of sharp-edged despair that it's like clearing the dust off something only to discover that what's underneath is solid gold. There's still too much to get a handle on—

hope-admiration-determination-worry

—but once he's tuned into it, he doesn't want to leave.

He chooses not to comment on it, the same way he hadn't commented on the way they'd woken up this morning, the same way he hadn't mentioned it when he'd thought Loki beautiful up in space.

It's remarkably easy to keep things hidden, despite the bond.

When they get into their room, though, Loki plants himself in the middle of the bed—similarly without comment—and Tony allows himself to take the same liberty. They're not exactly touching, their sides kept carefully an inch apart. As the minutes tick by, though, Tony extends his pinky finger and puts it into delicate contact with the back of Loki's hand. It's when he does so that he becomes aware of the ache in his back, alongside the various discomforts of a day spent neglecting his physical needs, just in time for them to begin to

dissipate. He also feels Loki's tiredness as if it's his own, even though usually tonight would be one for staying in the lab until sun-up, not allowing JARVIS to mention insomnia even as twenty-four hours stretched to forty-eight stretched to seventy-two.

When he's lost in a project, sleep always feels like a distraction, like something to be avoided if he can help it. Sometimes he needs to rest in order to keep his mind alert, but it's never something he looks forward to the way other people do.

Loki, though. Tony read something, once, about how many hours a day a snake spends sleeping. The comparison seems apt enough. Loki seems to enjoy sleeping for its own sake, and even though he's a dubiously immortal god, he doesn't appear to feel any compunction to act like it. So far, Tony's seen him indulge in lie-ins and unhealthy human food and a truly terrifying amount of coffee. It's not what he'd expected from Loki's free time—although, based on what little Norse mythology he's familiar with, he'd only gotten as far as 'setting things on fire' and 'giving birth to wolves and horses' before he'd given up on theorizing.

In fairness, when you've got unlimited time, sleep must be just the thing to break up the tedium. That, or having a bit of morally suspect fun with random, comparably insignificant planets.

Sleep, Loki hisses into his mind, and Tony does.

He wakes with the dawn, the way he often does. Unless he has black-out blinds installed, he generally bows to the rhythms of the sun without any need for JARVIS to provide an alarm. It's a good system except for in the winter, when his productivity tanks.

But today is a bright-and-early summer day, sunbeams slipping through the window and onto the bed, encasing him in warmth. Beside him, Loki is still asleep, breathing steady and even. Tony checks in with his emotional state, curious, and finds that Loki's sleep is undisturbed. Come to think of it, Tony hasn't had any nightmares these past few nights, either.

He doesn't manage to creep out of the room without disturbing Loki, who takes hypervigilance to disturbing levels. Loki's eyes crack open into suspicious slits, but he falls right back to sleep after he's ascertained that it's only Tony who's responsible for the disruption.

Tony has to fight the itch to go back to the lab, but he's not so hyperfocused as to be unaware that they're in urgent need of an actual plan. They need to start looking forward, working out their next move once the ship is operational. Tony kind of wants a roadmap of the universe; he doesn't like the thought of flying in blind.

He could wait until Loki wakes up, but he's unlikely to get a straight answer from him. So he decides to locate the next best thing.

"JARV, where's Thor?"

"Level eighty-six, Sir."

Bruce's floor. If they've started on breakfast without him, Tony's definitely stealing some.

When he steps out of the elevator, he sees Thor and Bruce sat at the large, round dining table. Thor's not in his armor—instead, he's wearing garb that looks a lot like the cape they give people to wear at the hairdressers', proving that an intimate understanding and implementation of Midgardian fashion is pretty much just a Loki thing. Bruce is in his lucky purple shirt, which Tony, with a complete lack of superstition, thinks bodes well about where today is headed. He's also surrounded by both physical and digital notes, the looping slant of his handwriting almost impossible to read upside down, except for where Tony sees his own name.

"You're talking about me?" he asks. "And I wasn't invited?"

Their breakfast set-up is pitiful: just a pot of Bruce's herbal tea and a bowl of sliced pear. Tony nabs some for himself anyway, on principle.

"I needed more information about the—curse, from Thor," Bruce says. "And I didn't want to worry you until I had some concrete data."

"Mm, you know I love you for your data," Tony says, sliding into the seat beside him and slinging an arm over the back of Bruce's chair. "So gimme the bad news."

Bruce sighs. "We already know that the bond doesn't allow for significant distance between the bonded, but that may not be a problem forever—for much longer. Apparently, the bond's effects are most pronounced in the weeks immediately after the spell has been cast. Unless Enchantress has cursed you in a way that drastically differs from the norm, the orifical bleeding while apart should stop after a period of around fifteen days."

"Cool," Tony says. "I can't say I was a fan of the orifical bleeding."

"However, Thor reports that most bonded pairs don't last that long."

Again, Tony can't help but wonder why. The pain while they're apart has been by far the worst part of the bond, and if they can just stick that out...

But they won't *have* to stick it out. They'll be rid of the 'curse' by the time any of that becomes an issue, Tony's sure of it. Enchantress may be crazy, but there has to be something they can offer her to get her to remove the spell. And then they'll be back to having separate minds, unencumbered by an outside presence.

"Most beings," Thor says gravely, "have fundamentally incompatible minds. To be joined in such an unnatural way causes them great distress, until they are forced to seek any escape they can find."

Death, Tony fills in.

He does a quick check-in with the Loki part of his brain. Still asleep, apparently having a dream that causes a combination of—

confusion-satisfaction-annoyance

—typically conflicting emotions.

He's not sure what 'compatible' even means in this scenario. He doesn't feel as though having a connection to Loki's mind is having any adverse effects, even though Loki doesn't think or feel in the same way—Tony assumes—any human does. He's a smorgasbord of feelings even when he's 'calm'; Tony understands more than ever why Loki comes across as chaotic and unpredictable. Tony tends to go in for the more typical 'fewer than five emotions at a time'.

"You and Loki, it would seem, are mentally compatible," Bruce says.

It's the line of reasoning that had occurred to Tony yesterday, right before the panic attack. But now that he's back to thinking rationally—

"Hm? No, I was just thinking that we're—well, we're probably as close as a human and an alien could get, but come on. There is the species barrier to bear in mind," Tony responds.

"It's not about being identical in the way you think and feel," Bruce says, effortlessly intuiting what Tony's next line of argument was going to be. "It's like you were saying yesterday, about how you two 'get' each other."

Tony should have known that things said under the influence of enough caffeine to send the average person to the astral plane would come back to bite him.

"Yesterday, I was just—"

He's lucky he gets interrupted, because he doesn't actually know how to end that sentence.

Bruce continues: "The bond's more about existing on the same general wavelength than being entirely alike. We're incredibly lucky that it was you and Loki who got blasted, instead of, say, *Steve* and Loki."

But it's not luck; these days, Tony's almost always the one who's closest to Loki on the battlefield. It's a sticky combination of the death wish he keeps being told he has and the fact that Loki doesn't actually frighten him any more. And hasn't frightened him for a long time.

"Yeah," he agrees, "lucky. And this means we've got a little time to burn without going insane and murder-suiciding. That's encouraging."

Thor looks down at the table. "I am glad it was you, Anthony Stark. My brother is—not many would be able to see him as you do."

Tony clicks his teeth together and tries to think of a way to maneuver them away from emotional honesty.

"Look," he says, "Thor. I need some more details about what it's going to be like out there. I've only ever hung out on Earth, and humans haven't really gotten further than discovering what's in our own galaxy. So I'm gonna need a rundown on these Nine Realms everyone keeps going on about."

“Excellent,” Thor says, nodding to himself. And he begins to explain.

Tony’s generally good with new information, even when he’s not paying a great deal of attention; not paying attention and somehow learning anyway had been the story of the majority of his schooling. He’s got an eidetic memory (for all the good it does him) and he’s been told he’s a genius since before he could walk.

Still, Thor’s lecture is a *lot* to wrap a head around.

His whole life, he’d thought of science as a reliable friend, there to lean on when things got tough. He’d never gone in for whimsy, never believed in much that he couldn’t reach out and touch, and then take apart to figure out how it worked.

Theoretically, he’s had time to try and reconcile what happened during the Battle of New York with what he’d previously believed possible. In practice, he’s spent the last year designing and building over forty new Iron Man suits and ignoring half the stuff that comes out of Thor’s mouth. Accepting the existence of humanoid aliens had been one thing, and now everything’s being upended again. Just hearing the term ‘Rainbow Bridge’ makes him want to bury his head in some astrophysics and never emerge.

Bruce seems to intuit his distress, and he brings his chair in closer to Tony’s.

Oh, and there’s another thing.

Even having seen Asgard through the prism of Loki’s memory, Tony’s unprepared for Thor to describe it. He’s even more unprepared for him to uncritically spout off his father’s (and his grandfather’s) role in ‘keeping the peace’ throughout the Nine Realms. Tony looks to Bruce for support at that, and is glad to see that Bruce looks just as uncomfortable with all the divine right imperialist bullshit as he is.

Tony knows Loki’s asleep, but fuck if he knows how the Asgardian—or Frost Giant—subconscious works, so he loudly thinks *Your dad fucking sucks* in his direction all the same.

“And all the other realms,” Tony says, trying to be delicate, “they’re cool with that? Being under Odin’s thumb?”

“Why wouldn’t they be?” asks Thor.

Tony makes an indistinct noise.

Thor continues: “There have been conflicts between Asgard and the monsters of Jotunheim throughout the millennia, and once our greatest enemies were the Dark Elves of Svartalfheim. But the Dark Elves are gone, and even the Jotun cannot deny the value of stability over chaos.”

Chaos. Now there was an interesting look at where exactly Asgard valued *that*.

“Sure, fine,” Tony says, shunting all his desired commentary over to the sleeping Loki in order to avoid saying it out loud. Having another place to put his internal monologue is actually doing wonders for his impulse control. “But what I’m getting is that this is kind of a

nightmare in terms of, uh, the sort of thing we're looking to do. Typically, empires on Earth haven't been the best at keeping track of what goes on in the colonies. The unrest could provide someone with a place to hide, if they were looking for one."

"Your Earth conflicts are nothing like—"

"Yeah, of course, buddy, not saying they are. All I'm suggesting is that Enchantress could be in one of the—colonies, taking advantage of the set-up."

Or she could have shunned the Nine Realms entirely, gone to any planet in the universe, and they'd have no way of knowing. Tony's just trying to have faith in her homing instinct.

"She's Asgardian," Bruce adds, "but she's made an aggressive move towards the crown princes of Asgard. In—Jotunheim, perhaps, that aggression would be a bargaining chip. She could use it to convince them to allow her to hide out there. It might even be enough that they would pledge to defend her, should we come looking."

"Not Jotunheim," Thor says. "They would allow no Asgardian to make deals with them, not after Loki."

"Loki?" Bruce asks.

Tony clenches his jaw.

"Attended to annihilate their realm," Thor answers.

Bruce lets out a carefully controlled breath. "Exactly how many planets has Loki attempted genocide on?"

"Just the two," Tony says.

He thinks about revealing Loki's true heritage as a defense, but it would sound like Tony was trying to justify mass murder, which he tries to avoid wherever possible, and it would be a betrayal of trust besides. Loki obviously doesn't like the idea of everyone knowing he's a Frost Giant by birth, and Tony's not so much of a dick that he's going to go around telling people, even people who couldn't care less *which* magical alien race Loki happens to be.

"Great," Bruce says dully. "Where else could Enchantress have gone?"

"She has close ties with the Light Elves," Thor says.

"Are," Tony says. "Are the Light Elves the good ones?"

"Yes," says Thor.

The internal monologue Tony's sending Loki's way, at this point, is a lot of incoherent yelling about how he'd really been hoping humans were the dumbest race in the universe but *apparently* having magic multi-colored bridges and an entirely golden infrastructure means jack shit.

“As sworn enemies of Asgard, the Dark Elves would be most sympathetic to Enchantress’ goals. But they have not been seen in millennia,” Thor adds.

“Okay, so we can probably rule them out,” Tony says, remarkably level. “Also—and I’m just checking here—did the Dark Elves happen to go into hiding because of a huge battle with your dad?”

“No,” says Thor. “The Dark Elves were defeated by my grandfather.”

Bruce is taking extensive notes, but Tony suspects it might be more for the purpose of avoiding looking Thor in the eye than intelligence gathering.

“So where are we landing on whether *he* committed genocide?” Tony asks, and sees Thor bristle. “I’m just asking because either there are no Dark Elves left, *or* there are a few really pissed ones hanging around, with plenty of motive to harbor a fugitive.”

“I...do not know,” Thor admits. “I may have to return to Asgard, to consult with my father upon this.”

He stands up, then, and turns on his heel with a swish of his hairdressing cape. It’s the sulkiest thing Tony’s ever seen Thor do.

“Well, that went well,” Tony says to Bruce, who snorts.

“Does Loki not get mad when you—you know?”

“When I’m incredibly culturally insensitive?” Tony fills in. “Not really. The guy’s got his own mixed feelings about Asgard, so it’s not so much of an issue with him.”

“That’s a relief,” Bruce says. It’s more than a relief—it’s a miracle. Tony has a talent for pissing people off, and Loki has a talent for *getting* pissed off. It’s amazing that the worst Tony’s suffered over the past couple of days are a couple of bruises and a few embarrassing faux pas. “How’s the bond this morning? Anything different I should know about?”

The question throws Tony, for some reason.

He concentrates and reaches out toward the spot in his mind that he knows to be Loki. He’s definitely awake, now, and he’s—

irritated-flustered-anxious

—as confusing as ever, a bruising bloom of conflicting emotions and impulses. Loki just feels *so goddamn much*, all the time. It’s difficult to keep track of, even with Tony’s front-row seat. He’s probably closer to understanding Loki than anyone’s ever been, and he still can’t help but feel like half of it’s getting lost in translation.

“I feel like I need one of those translation guides for tourists. Loki-to-English,” he says.

Something passes over Bruce’s face, then, and it looks like he’s on the verge of speaking. With absolute certainty that whatever he’s about to say is not something he wants to hear,

Tony interrupts.

“Back to the lab?” he asks. Bruce nods, expression grim.

Loki’s there when they arrive. Tony hadn’t quite seen it coming; he’d felt Loki waking up, but had assumed he had more lounging to do before he actually moved anywhere. Rhodey, too, is already hard at work at the center console, having an animated discussion with JARVIS about the ethics of disposing of trash in space. He stops himself when he sees Tony.

“I’m beginning to doubt your commitment to Sparkle Motion,” he deadpans. Tony loves him a lot.

“You’re locked in, now; our spaceship’s called Sparkle Motion. No takebacks.”

“It’s better than everything you’ve come up with so far,” Rhodey points out.

“Ooh, harsh. But true,” Tony says. “It would’ve been a real downer if we’d actually gone with USS Avengers. It’s already a boring name for a skyscraper; I couldn’t bear to be so asinine in *space*.”

“God forbid,” Rhodey agrees.

Tony makes his way over to what he’s starting to think of as Loki’s corner. It’s the darkest space in the lab (which, in a space so perpetually bright, doesn’t actually mean much) and it’s got a comfortable enough table to perch on.

“I hear your discussion with my brother went well,” Loki smirks as Tony settles in beside him.

“Tony...” Bruce says, shooting them a capital ‘L’ *Look*.

“Yeah, okay, as if you wouldn’t have been sending a running commentary to *your* mental bunkmate,” Tony says. “You heard the whole lot?”

“No,” Loki says. “You awoke me when you become increasingly shrill.”

“*Shrill?*” Tony protests shrilly.

“You should learn never to engage my brother in debate. I assumed you had been comrades-in-arms for long enough to know *that* already,” Loki continues. “He is always certain of his—and our father’s—righteousness. No amount of mere logic can sway his course.”

“We got that much,” Tony mutters. “It doesn’t matter. He mentioned that the Dark Elves have ties to Enchantress. Do you know anything about that? Or whether they’re still around?”

“I confess I do not. However, Enchantress would be unlikely to reside on their homeworld. It is a barren wasteland, with little magical energy remaining. The Dark Elves, if any remain, are invisible to Heimdall and therefore just as imperceptible to Enchantress.”

“It would’ve been so nice to believe Asgard was a bunch of rainbows and unicorns and elves but the kind from *Lord of the Rings*,” Tony says. “And instead we get colonialism on speed, and the ‘inherently evil race’ rhetoric that’s the only thing that sucks about *Lord of the Rings*.”

Loki rolls his eyes. “You would do well to focus on your world’s problems before you preach to Asgard about theirs.”

“Sure, like you don’t see it, too,” Tony says, brushing Loki’s defensiveness aside. He’s not sure Loki *does* see it, not really; conquering seems to be ingrained in the Asgardian way of thinking too deeply for them to think of it critically. “Look, let’s just decide on our first destination. If we’re sticking with the Nine Realms, then I vote we go to the...Elf...place...”

“Alfheim,” Loki corrects.

“Okay, but you see how that’s essentially ‘Elf Place’, right?”

“Alfheim is the home of the Light Elves,” Loki says.

“Fucking *Light Elves*,” Tony mutters. “Fine. Do you think Enchantress might be holed up there?”

“It is as likely as anywhere. Enchantress is a proud, pure-blooded Asgardian; she will dislike deigning to reside too far away.”

“Got it. Pure-blood. All that good stuff,” Tony says. “Where’s the closest place she could be to Asgard without actually *being* on Asgard?”

“Have we ruled out Asgard?” Bruce asks softly.

“Oh, fucking shit,” Tony says.

Loki narrows his eyes. Rhodey makes a sound that’s half-laugh, half-gasp.

“Don’t you get it? Where’s the one place Enchantress *knows* we won’t be able to follow her to? Fucking Christ, how were we so stupid?” Tony’s all but slapping his own forehead, getting up to pace around the room.

“It would be unwise to hide under Odin’s purview—so close to Heimdall.”

“Except Asgard clearly doesn’t give a shit about us,” Tony says. “Sorry, I know it’s your home and Odin’s your dad, but they haven’t exactly been racing to help us out with this one. Suppose Enchantress isn’t even really hiding? For all we know, she’s just hanging out.”

Bruce looks down at his notes with a frown. “It makes a certain amount of sense,” he says. “Although, according to Thor, Enchantress has been wanted for crimes in Asgard for hundreds of years. If she’s there, she’s not being open about it. Loki, is there any way she could be hiding herself from Odin and Heimdall?”

“...Yes,” Loki says. “But it requires no small amount of effort. To expend that amount of magic constantly...”

“Does that mean she’s weakened. *Please* tell me that means she’s weakened,” Tony says.

“It is a possibility.”

Tony grins at them. “Deities and gents, this is no longer a search,” he says. “It’s a heist.”

Chapter End Notes

please do not get your hopes up too high for heist action. these people are dumbasses. they’re all very smart but they’re idiots. why am i even saying this, you all saw how the endgame time heist went

and i made a fandom/writing twitter! so if there's any interest i'll be posting updates/bonus content about this story [here](#)

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

and we're off!

Chapter Notes

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

They agree not to tell Thor about Enchantress' possible whereabouts and their plans to sneak into the most heavily fortified kingdom in the known universe. Tony's a little surprised Bruce agrees—he and Thor are as close as anyone in the tower, with the optimistic exception of Bruce and Tony himself—but he must see that it's for the best not to force Thor to choose between his duty to his nation and his brother. None of them has any desire to see where he ends up landing on that one.

“Bruce, you want to come with? There's just about enough room,” Tony offers.

Bruce smiles ruefully. “If the Other Guy makes an appearance up there, I'm putting you all at risk. Better not.”

“Spoilsport,” Tony says. “Well, we'll miss you.”

“If all goes well, I'll be able to stay in contact with you the whole time,” Bruce reminds him.

“Oh, yeah. Loki, how's that magical walkie-talkie coming?”

Loki gives him a sly look, one eyebrow curving upward. “I have discussed the matter with your JARVIS. We have come to an arrangement.”

Over the bond, Loki's poking for a reaction.

“JARV, baby, did he do magic on you?” Tony asks, carefully level.

“...Yes,” says the AI, sounding the tiniest bit guilty. “It was within allowable parameters for functionality.”

“Oh, well, if it was in the parameters,” Tony responds. “When did this even happen?”

“You were deep in your work,” Loki explains. “I was keeping myself busy.”

“Is that, um...?” Rhodey trails off, visibly trying to find the most diplomatic way to accuse Loki of tampering with JARVIS.

“It's fine,” Tony says.

Loki's intentions—easily accessed through the mental link—are as pure as Tony thinks it's possible for them to be. There's mischievousness there, obviously, because Loki can't seem to resist ruffling people's feathers even when he's doing good. At some point, Loki decided that good attention and bad attention were all the same to him and never looked back, and now Tony's here dealing with the fallout.

He can't pretend to be thrilled about someone else messing with his AI without telling him, but he's also not about to start accusing Loki of dastardly plans involving Artificial Intelligence. Plus—JARVIS seems to like Loki. He's not willing to undergo system updates for just anyone, after all. That counts for something.

Rhodey's eyes widen—he knows how possessive Tony is over his tech, after all—and he crosses his arms, but he doesn't press the issue.

“I did want to thank you for your most gracious co-operation, ⚡ ⚡ ⚡ | ⚡,” Loki says.

“You are welcome, ⚡ < |,” JARVIS responds.

Tony blinks. Loki smirks over at him.

“Oh, don't flatter yourself,” says Tony, with a record recovery time. “He speaks Russian with Natasha. Speaking of which...” He gives it a couple seconds of thought, priding himself on his restraint as he does so. “Yeah, I think we should bring Nat. If there's anyone I want on my side during a space heist—other than you and Rhodey, of course—” He addresses the last to Loki, whose face slackens in surprise for a split second. “—we could do worse than Nat.”

“Can we trust her?” Loki asks.

“You're kidding, right?” Bruce asks.

But Loki's not, because he's one of the many people who've found themselves underestimating Natalia Romanova and getting themselves manipulated as a result. She was the first one to find a way to make the god of lies tell the truth *without* getting literally inside his head. It's no wonder Loki's frightened of her.

“We can trust her to do what's best for the team,” Tony says with certainty. “She might report back to Fury about it afterwards—or she might not. It's worth asking, either way.”

And with that, they have a team.

Asking Nat goes well, in as far as she intuits what they're approaching her about before they even have to say it.

“I was wondering when you would bring me into the loop,” she says, and proceeds to inspect everything they've got so far: Bruce's notes, Tony and Rhodey's specs, the mess of raw materials, Loki's magic dagger. She spends a lot of time on the magic dagger.

“This gem...” she says, addressing Loki. She turns the dagger back and forth, allowing the jewel to flash its tetrad of colors. “It's you?”

“It’s both of us,” Tony replies, while Loki silently radiates embarrassment for some reason.

“I see.”

Tony feels like there’s something he’s missing, and he’s a little put off by Nat apparently having more insight than he does.

“Alright,” Nat says, putting the dagger down. As soon as her hands are off it, Tony’s shoulders drop from taut rigidity back to relaxation. He rolls them out, and Nat’s eyes track the movement. “Based on what we know of Enchantress, she’s accustomed to luxury, and to controlling devoted entourages of men.” That must have been covered in Bruce’s notes. “It’s unlikely she’ll be able to keep a low profile for very long if she’s sticking to her usual tricks. The question is whether she’s trying to hide, or whether she’s been accepted without dispute from Odin or Heimdall.”

“That they would allow her refuge seems...unlikely,” Loki says. “The crime for which she became a fugitive was enchanting my brother.”

“Oh, holy shit,” Tony says. “So it’s *not* a jilted lover thing?”

Loki wrinkles his nose. It’s adorable, which somehow leads to a charged moment in the space of the bond where Loki both objects to being thought of as such and casts a considering flashlight beam of insight right back in Tony’s direction. They both take a step back from each other, clearing their throats.

“No,” Loki says. His voice is, briefly, unsteady. “It is a ‘she bewitched my brother into loving her for her own selfish gains’ *thing*.”

Which isn’t the end of it, Tony can tell. There are little flashes of pride coming through the bond—and, knowing Loki, he didn’t take Enchantress’ mischief lying down. Whatever he did in retaliation must have been pretty bad, for Enchantress to attempt to condemn him to violent murder-suicide. Tony vows to get the full story when they’re alone sometime.

“She wanted to be Queen of Asgard?” Rhodey guesses.

Loki nods. He’s still undeniably present in Tony’s head, insistent and curious.

“That’s decent leverage,” Nat says. “Worth bearing in mind.”

Tony had been filled in on the basics about Enchantress—real name Amora—back on that morning before the battle that changed everything. He knows that she’s able to force men (only men, apparently, which seems like an arbitrary limitation) to fall in love with her. Thor hadn’t mentioned that he’d suffered at her hands, but he’d also seemed fine when talking about and fighting her.

What happened? he asks Loki through the link, with the sort of emotional stupidity that Pepper’s always accusing him of.

She turned him into a mindless drone, Loki returns. *Subservient, entirely under her thrall. She enchanted him so that all he would want in the world was her, and then refused to give*

herself to him.

So that sounds pretty awful.

“What’s our play once we find her, though?” Nat asks, forcing Tony and Loki to refocus on something other than each other. “The goal is to convince her to remove the curse, but it doesn’t seem likely that she’ll want to.”

“I guess the question is why she even did this to us in the first place,” Tony says. “It’s a mind-melding spell—sorry, curse—not a love spell-slash-curse, so it’s outside her usual wheelhouse.”

Bruce clears his throat delicately. “And you’re sure of that?”

“Sure of what?”

“That the—bond has no love components? It’s possible that you might not have noticed.”

Icy dread floods the bond from both sides: neither participant being an especial fan of having no control over their own emotions. Tony tastes sawdust in the back of his throat.

It takes both of them more than a few seconds to calm down, but Bruce, Rhodey, and Nat don’t try to push the matter.

“No,” Tony says, and it’s with certainty. “I haven’t felt anything for Loki that I—that doesn’t fall within the range of what I felt before.”

Nat raises both her eyebrows, and Tony struggles, for the first time in at least a decade, not to blush. He doesn’t even *look* at Rhodey.

“Although I cannot remove the spell,” Loki adds, his voice only slightly shaken, “I am well-enough aware of its intent and effect. Magic is its own language, and I am more than capable of understanding it. If there were emotional coercion present in Enchantress’ curse, I would be able to sense it.”

He’s sure of himself—the bond doesn’t register any of that as a lie—but there’s still unease dancing through both of their heads, simply at the implication.

“I’m going on the theory that she thought we’d try to kill each other and then ourselves,” Tony says. “If the curse is really as bad as you say most of the time.”

“If so, merely showing her that the curse hasn’t had too much of an adverse effect could be enough to make her remove it,” Nat says consideringly. “Whatever her purpose was, it clearly hasn’t been fulfilled. You two are—fine with this.”

Loki bristles, because he categorically is not fine with this. At least a few times a day, Loki remembers he’s not alone in his head and Tony gets a fun wave of rejection directed towards him.

Tony, on the other hand—well. It doesn't matter how he feels. Soon enough, the bond will be gone and things will be back to normal.

"It's definitely not the worst thing either of us has suffered," Tony says diplomatically.

"Sure," Rhodey says. He manages to keep his tone only mildly dubious, which Tony appreciates. "But the issue with *that* plan is that it'll just provoke her to try something worse after she removes the curse."

Tony strolls back over to Loki's corner, and luckily Loki reads his intent through the bond, positioning his arm far enough out from his body that Tony can 'accidentally' brush his own arm against it. He doesn't know why this conversation's got him so on edge, other than the obvious reason that plotting to track down and reason with a dangerous enemy is never a brilliant idea.

Loki's confusion at Tony's state of mind is evident, although he doesn't ask outright. And if he had, Tony wouldn't have an answer for him.

Instead, he moves the topic onto safer waters. "Dr. Foster's best guess is that it'll take us a month to reach Asgard," he says. "But it's impossible to predict, given the fact that it's all magical and shit. My personal take is that we should get on the road, so to speak, and work out the details of the plan on the way. Otherwise we're just wasting precious time."

It will not take a month, Loki thinks, offense in his mental tone. As if Tony had been impugning his spaceship-enchanting magic.

"Okay, so Loki thinks it won't take a month," Tony says aloud. "Either way, we should go."

"There's the tactical mind that made Fury pass you up for leader of the Avengers," Nat comments wryly.

"Tell me you disagree," Tony counters. "We can stay down here on Earth, trying to predict Enchantress' responses to our approach, or we can go out there and find her. Bearing in mind that we still can't know for sure that she's on Asgard."

"You have a point," Bruce says. "But the ship's not built yet."

"That's this afternoon's job," Tony responds easily. He catches Loki's eye and sees the answering anticipation there. "You up for it, Elphaba?"

Stepping into the magically constructed spaceship four days later makes Tony's heart leap into his throat in a good way. Most of the actual 'construction'—such as it was—had fallen to Loki and his telekinesis, but its origin was still Tony's brain, and so he loves the USS Sparkle Motion (no better names had been forthcoming) as much as anything he's ever built with his own two hands. He loves it, with its cheesy sci-fi aesthetic and cramped layout, the same way he loves the Iron Man suits—the way he loves DUM-E and U—the way he loves JARVIS. Speaking of which...

“JARVIS? You there, buddy?”

“I have been successfully uploaded, Sir.”

Tony’s heart trips pleasantly in his chest. He’s smiling helplessly, widely, when he turns to where Loki is sprawled in the captain’s chair.

“I should tell you,” Loki says, half-smiling back, “this is far inferior to any Asgardian vessel.”

“Nope,” Tony tells him. “You don’t get to ruin this for me. Besides, I know just how much you love it.”

Because that’s the name for the emotion barraging the bond from both sides. This thing is *theirs*. The ownership is visible right there in the dagger glinting dangerously, beautifully, on the center console, a tetrptych of forest green, blood red, silver, and gold. Now that the ship’s fully constructed, Tony can *feel* the power he has over it. He’s doing—or channeling—magic, whether he likes it or not. And he’s surprisingly okay with that. He supposes that most forms of magic feel manageable in comparison to what he and Loki have going on in their heads.

The ship is Rhodey’s and Bruce’s, too, and even JARVIS could make a convincing ownership claim, but you don’t hook your brain up to a magic spaceship without feeling like you have the biggest stake in it.

“You don’t often create, do you?” Tony says. He’s using insight from the mental link: over the past few days, he’s gotten bolder, testing the boundaries of the bond. Might as well, when it’ll be gone soon enough. “Someone should’ve told you it’s just as good as destroying.”

“Not better?” Loki asks, quirking an eyebrow.

Tony scoffs. “I used to design weapons. I know how satisfying it is when something goes boom.”

Loki’s eyes glitter with understanding, and Tony’s reminded of the way they’d woken up this morning: Tony’s face nudged against the long, pale line of Loki’s neck. As has been the case every morning, they haven’t discussed it.

It’s just—it keeps happening. Even when they’re awake, they end up drifting closer to each other instinctively, some combination of the physical effects of the bond and—

It’s probably just the first thing.

But Tony’s becoming increasingly aware that he’s in danger of having—less-than-pure feelings about the one person in the universe who’s privy to said feelings. It’d be ironic if it wasn’t so predictable; Tony’s always had a habit of being attracted to people who are bad for him. And, right now, the way Loki’s legs are parted carelessly over the arm of the chair is just unfairly tempting. He’s back in the Asgardian leather garb Tony most associates with him, and only with its return has he realized how much he missed Loki’s kinky alien outfits.

If he's honest with himself—although he's trying not to be, especially with the bond to consider—a lot about Loki is tempting, in a way that hadn't been so much of an issue when it was just a few guilty daydreams about an enemy. Now, it's quickly becoming an uncomfortably revealing situation, with Tony's desire clearly on display to its object.

Loki likes being looked at, though: stretches himself out with a lazy grin and a flick of his eyelashes in Tony's direction.

“Yeah, yeah, you're hot, we get it,” Tony says, rolling his eyes. “JARVIS, patch us through to the lab for me? Let's see how the long-range comms are getting on.”

“Tony?” comes Rhodey's voice a second later, starting crackly but getting clearer with every word until it sounds like he's right there with them. “How're you doing up there?”

“Pretty great, actually,” Tony says. There aren't any windows, because of radiation and structural integrity and a hundred other logical scientific things, but mostly because Tony doesn't want to see what's out there. Not being surrounded by constant reminders of where they are is doing wonders for his state of mind. There are optional viewscreens, in case of emergency, but for now Tony's more than content to rely on JARVIS' sensors to tell him what's going on in their immediate surroundings. And, besides all that, Loki's mind is so supremely confident that Tony's absorbing some of the excess, internalizing it. They'll be fine. “Loki's arrogance is better than Valium,” he explains.

Loki snorts in honest amusement, breaking him out of his intentionally provocative pose.

“Stark has nothing to worry about,” he says. “I am simply reminding him that he's safe.”

“Oh, it's back to ‘Stark’, now?” Tony teases. “I thought we were closer than that. I'm wounded, Your Highness.”

“No flirting on comms,” Bruce says, having instituted a ‘no flirting in the lab’ rule (itself a descendant of Steve's ‘no flirting on the battlefield’ rule) on Tuesday morning, on pain of extra MRI scans.

What Bruce doesn't get is that it's harmless. Tony and Loki both like flirting for its own sake, and it's hardly their fault if those around them aren't in on the joke.

“The heart wants what it wants,” Tony sighs dramatically. “Maybe if you'd given in to my charming science-based advances, dear—”

“Focus up, Tones,” Rhodey says. “You ready for us to join you?”

“Sure, more the merrier,” Tony responds. “How's the Rescue armor treating you, Miss Rushman?”

After a year of being beaten up by Nat in the training room (they'd gravitated towards each other for sparring practice on account of being the two Avengers without a height advantage) he thinks it's fair to be a little amused by Nat's lack of proficiency in an Iron Man suit. It had

taken her hours, and a lot of broken glass, to get the hang of hovering. Tony considers it payback for all the times she'd laughed at him while he was flat on his ass.

"It's still too tall for me," Nat says.

"Yeah, sorry I didn't have time for a custom build," Tony replies, genuinely repentant. If he hadn't been so focused on the ship, he would've loved the opportunity to design and build an Iron Widow suit. But the Rescue armor had been good enough: the result of a week of insomnia following the Battle of New York, when he'd been desperate to provide Pepper with a way to protect herself. He hasn't ever shown the finished product to Pepper—there's no need to inflict his paranoia on her. Having the suit is enough. "But you only need it for the trips up from and down to planets. And, even then, JARVIS will be doing all the heavy lifting for you."

"I'll be fine," Nat says.

"That's the spirit. It takes about forty-five minutes to get up here if you're going full pelt, so we'll expect you a little after that," he says.

"See you then," Nat says, and JARVIS ends the call.

"Forty-five minutes," Loki parrots. "However shall we pass the time?"

"Oh, I have just the thing," Tony says. "JARVIS, it's about time we introduce Loki here to the best of what Earth culture has to offer."

"Of course, Sir," JARVIS responds. "Which episode?"

"*Amok Time*, if you please," Tony says. Then, to Loki: "Shut up, you're gonna love it. Budge up."

There's no point in making a pretense of personal space a week into being soul-bonded, particularly not when Tony's actually *meant* to be using Loki to ward off anxiety. The seat's pretty much big enough for both of them, as long as Loki slings his legs over Tony's and allows for a bit of contact between their arms.

He does.

"You liked it," Tony says delightedly as the credits roll. At first, he'd felt a lot of confusion from Loki, but that was to be expected. Thor had also found it difficult to wrap his head around TV and film. But that confusion had melted away as the purported god of stories found himself transported into the world of—well—a good story.

"Such a human invention," Loki now muses. "Finding a way to depict false adventures so as to avoid having any for yourselves."

"Hey," Tony says lazily, flicking at Loki's arm. "I have adventures. Besides, I bet you've read a book or two in your time. Watched a couple of plays."

“Of course. I have devoured most of the libraries of Asgard. But I have never seen anything...*quite* like this. Besides, our plays only portray battles and quests that really happened.”

“Huh. So you never checked out a movie theater in between all your trips to IHOP?” Tony jokes.

Loki ignores the question, instead asking one of his own. “These are the stories you were raised on?”

Of course—he must be feeling the nostalgic tinge to Tony’s thoughts.

“Watching *Star Trek* was about the only ‘bonding time’ I remember with my dad that wasn’t about, you know,” Tony says bitterly, “fulfilling my potential genius and grooming me to take over the family business. There was always a little part of him, I think, who wanted to be the Man of the Future—not just a guy who sold weapons. Decades before I was even born, he had this big idea for a flying car. It didn’t work worth a damn, but even all those years later I found the plans in his study. Covered in notes. I guess, in an ideal world, he’d’ve been remembered for the flying car and not the atomic bomb.”

“Does it make you feel better to think of him that way?” Loki asks, oddly gentle in tone. His fingers dance along Tony’s forearm. He’s still hesitant with his touch, as though he’s holding back. It’s intriguing, juxtaposed with the confident way he does everything else.

“Yes,” Tony says. “No. I don’t know.”

Loki hums and increases the pressure of his fingers. Tony pushes back into them.

“I guess it’s just hard to believe that someone would want their legacy to be—death. Destruction.”

“You do realize who you’re talking to,” Loki says.

“You’re nothing like him,” Tony responds, shaking his head. “He was in it for the money. I don’t know. I wasn’t raised like him—I never had to grow up poor. I see the money as a tool, something I can use. He saw it as something to acquire, endlessly, for its own sake. That’s not you.”

“I suppose not,” Loki says, tipping his head back. It means Tony can’t look him in the eye. “But I sought power for much the same purpose. Not to *do* anything with it. Simply to *have*.”

That checks out. Loki doesn’t seem like the type of guy with a lot of interest in actually *running* things. If he’d succeeded in his takeover of Earth, Tony imagines he would’ve found the aftermath boring.

“And now?” he asks, keeping his tone neutral.

“Now I would rather survive,” Loki says. “Thanos would have me dead for failing him. And I imagine your Midgardians would be buying for my blood if any of you could catch me.”

Tony doesn't point out that, right now, Loki is rather thoroughly caught.

"You can't live a life that way."

"I still have my fun," Loki reminds him.

"Right. Turning people into animals is fun."

"It passes the time," Loki shrugs, the movement jostling them both. "And I do have so *much* time."

Easy to forget that Tony's currently trapped under the legs of a thousand-and-a-half-year-old alien being. The thought, far from inspiring fear in him, sends a thrill up his spine.

"So after all this," Tony says, "you...what? Where else is left for you to become king of?"

A sort of blank hopelessness sinks into Loki's mind at the question, and so when Tony links their hands together it's in self-defense more than anything.

"I shall be king of nothing, I suppose," Loki says. "God of nothing."

Tony realizes that his heart aches for him, in a way that's separate from what Loki's sending through the bond. Loki was raised in much the same way as Tony was: heir to a questionable empire. The only difference being that Loki had a competitor, and he lost out.

"It's not king or nothing, you know," Tony says.

Loki scoffs. "Oh? And what else have *you* found?"

"Again, I'm not King of Earth," Tony says with a frown. "That's not how it works down there."

"You did not answer my question," Loki says harshly. "What else *is there*?"

"Agent Romanoff and Colonel Rhodes are requesting entry, Sir," JARVIS interrupts. Tony releases his breath in a gust.

"For now," he says, "there's this. There's the next mission. Let 'em in, JARV."

He expects Loki to get up and move a more appropriate distance away, but in retrospect he can't exactly say *why* he expects this.

And so it is that when Rhodey and Nat make their way onto the bridge, metal boots making a terrible clanging noise against the floor, they see Tony—boldly sans Iron Man suit—with Loki insinuated almost in his lap.

"Are we interrupting something?" Nat asks, flipping the faceplate of her armor up. Her eyes are piercing, and Tony looks away. He's not embarrassed, exactly, but he thinks Nat might read something into his expression that he's not comfortable with her seeing.

“I am *supposed* to be keeping him calm, am I not?” Loki says huffily. “Would you rather I leave him to his emotional spells?”

“Way to make me sound like a fainting damsel, pal.”

Rhodey takes his own helmet off, and his eyes are even harder to meet than Nat’s.

“Keeping him calm, sure,” he says. “*That’s* what that looks like.”

“I feel like I’m being slut-shamed,” Tony says. If he makes it into a joke, that’ll force the scrutiny off him. It’s always worked before. “I promise I’m not that kind of girl. Loki and I barely know each other.”

“Uh-huh,” Rhodey says, unimpressed. On second thought, maybe this technique has *never* worked before. He forgets.

“Perhaps neither of us could decide who got to be Captain,” Loki suggests with a smirk.

“It was a hard-fought battle,” Tony adds. “Sometimes it’s best to learn to share.”

“Oh, please,” Rhodey says. “Neither of you has the expertise to captain this ship.”

“It’s a *magic spaceship*,” Tony says. “You know I’d never besmirch your credentials, sweet pea, but being a colonel in the Air Force does not automatically give you ‘captaining a magic spaceship’ rights.”

“As opposed to *your* credentials?” Nat quips.

“Okay, alright,” Tony says. “I’m declaring the USS Sparkle Motion a Marxist utopia, and we’re *all* the captain. But Loki and I are keeping the chair.”

“Christ,” Rhodey says, shaking his head.

“I remember that part of *The Communist Manifesto*,” Nat says. “Workers of the world, unite, and co-captain an enchanted spaceship.”

“Ahead of his time, that Karl,” Tony says.

Loki is looking between them all like they’ve started speaking in tongues. Tony can’t help but be amused by the thought of how badly Allspeak must have butchered all that.

“Sorry, your grace, we’ll explain the different theories of Midgardian government to you another time. For now, we should probably get going,” Tony says. “Unauthorized space vehicle and all that.”

He’d already known that Rhodey hadn’t told the Air Force the truth about why he was requesting leave, but the guilty way he now shrugs confirms it. Tony’s always known he’s a bad influence, but getting Rhodey to blow off his military responsibilities for a joyride around the galaxy? There’s nothing like it.

“You do the honors,” Rhodey offers.

“You’re too kind,” Tony drawls. “Okay, JARVIS, let’s get moving. Lots to see, more to do. Time waits for no AI.”

“Quite, Sir,” JARVIS says, and then they’re off.

Chapter End Notes

no i'm not touch-starved why do you ask

quick note on the runes: i like the idea that asgardian, as a spoken language, is fundamentally different from any human language. unfortunately, that's a difficult concept to depict. i went with old norse runes (as marvel sometimes does in the comics) just to indicate that jarvis and loki are speaking in a way that tony can't understand. long story short, loki and jarvis are saying each other's names but in asgardian

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Self-care in space.

Chapter Notes

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

Loki claims it's impossible to calculate how long it will take them to reach Asgard, for reasons Tony's chalking up to 'magic' and not examining much further. In an ideal world, they'd have hopped on the Bifrost and been done with it, but there are downsides to being bonded with a fugitive from justice, and this is one of them.

When asked, several times, over the course of several days, by several different people, Loki had remained frustratingly evasive about where exactly Asgard is located, and how long it will take to get there, and how they're going to sneak in without anyone noticing. The lack of a solid plan of action is doing wonders for Tony's anxiety.

"Trade secrets, I get it," Tony says, now on his fourth round of 'are we nearly there yet's. "Can't be telling all the plebians how to find Valhalla or we'll all want a piece of it."

"Can't believe I'm saying this," Rhodey says, "but leave the poor guy alone. It's only been a few hours."

A few hours here meaning *seven hours*. Tony thought he'd been prepared for anything, but it turns out all he was prepared for was a space journey around the length of a road trip from LA to San Francisco. He has officially reached his limit, and he wants to be somewhere where hurtling through space isn't a thing you can *feel*.

"He's panicking," Loki comments, looking interestedly at his own fingernails. He's still in the central chair; Tony isn't. Tony had started pacing around forty minutes ago, fiddling around with the screens and displays situated around the bridge. It makes him *feel* like he's doing something, at least. Other than that, he feels jittery and useless and overall not a fan of the endless mysteries of the universe.

"Tony," Nat says. She's reclining on the bed that's stashed in a nook off to the side. There's a thick, intimidating book in her hand. "I think you need to go back to Loki."

And, okay, Tony *knows* he's wound up and that the best way to calm himself down is to be closer to Loki, but he doesn't *want* to sit still right now. He's not even sure he wants to calm down.

"Stark," Loki says, "sit down."

Tony doesn't ignore him, exactly, inclining his head to show he's heard the command. But he also doesn't stop moving, nor does he allow himself to get any closer to where Loki's sat.

“Tony.”

Something about the way Loki says his name reverberates through Tony's head, given extra weight by the bond. It's not that Loki's controlling him; it's that he gets a moment of clarity where he can see Loki's perspective on the situation. It makes him stumble, and reconsider. He could continue working himself up—which always seems oddly appealing up until his air cuts off or he passes out—or he could allow himself to accept the logic of Loki's opinion, which is that Tony will feel better if he just sits down.

Not at all sulkily, Tony folds himself down on the floor at Loki's feet. His knees don't thank him for it, but it allows him to rest his head against Loki's thigh without looking at him, which in turn offers the opportunity for more experimentation with the magic serotonin rush. They've mostly stuck to touching each other's hands, wrists, and arms thus far; Tony wants to know more about the variables.

He almost sighs in relief at the wash of pleasure the contact provides, even accounting for the thin layer of Loki's trousers. Trying not to think about how he won't have this on the way home, he presses closer and sends a visual request through the bond.

Loki's hesitation is evident, although Tony doesn't think it's because Loki doesn't want to. It could be to do with the strangeness of the request, he supposes; Asgardians could have a different cultural attachment to heads or hair or the touching thereof. But right now Tony just wants human comfort, and so he tells Loki that via the bond: he shares the memory of how, when he'd gotten rowdy as a child and she was there, his Aunt Peggy had sat him down and brushed her hands through the unruly mop of his hair until his breathing slowed out and he fell asleep.

You wish to test the extent of the touch's power, Loki also surmises, correctly.

Well, I'm running out of time, Tony points out.

For a long few minutes, Loki doesn't move; Tony supposes he wants to keep his hands to himself, which is fine. Tony asks Rhodey about whether he's going to tell the army broads or the President about this little excursion once they're back, and Rhodey dithers. It's a new thing for Rhodey, who's normally pretty sure of himself. Tony likes it.

“President Ellis is an opportunist,” Tony says. “He'd use this to win re-election in November, you just know he would. The space race on steroids.”

“Unless it was revealed that the reason we were able to get so far was by enlisting the help of Earth's most wanted criminal,” Rhodey points out.

Loki feels smug at that, which makes Tony laugh.

“Sure, Saruman, you're the scariest wizard of them all,” he says, still laughing, and that's why it's a shock to the system when Loki's hand does drift down to curl into his hair, thumb

resting over the skin right behind Tony's ear.

It's everything and nothing like it had been during his childhood: the comfort of the gesture is almost overwhelming when combined with the properties of touch through the bond. He feels himself going liquid, tension draining out of his body in a rush.

He remembers how he had initially thought of the contact high between them as being akin to the sensation produced by petting a cat; right now, he wants to purr.

He settles for closing his eyes and leaning into the touch.

Rhodey must notice, because he doesn't try to engage Tony in conversation again—and so, for a time, Tony drifts. He's not falling asleep, exactly, but he's also not fully aware of his surroundings. As such, it takes him a couple of moments to notice when Loki starts communicating with him through the bond. Explaining.

As out of it as he is, he just barely follows at first, but he's able to glean that their initial destination is somewhere where Loki's magic is strongest.

You mean your power varies? Tony asks. Loki's hand pauses in its movement.

It is less easily quantifiable than you are hoping, he responds. *But to both transport us to Asgard and conceal us from Heimdall, I require...*

Extra juice? Tony suggests. Loki tugs on a couple strands of his hair in reproach, and Tony has to fight not to shudder. He knows Loki can feel the sudden spike of arousal, but thankfully he doesn't draw attention to it besides an answering feeling of harmless curiosity.

A crude analogy, but acceptable for your purposes. It is taking...longer than I anticipated, to reach our destination.

Why not just tell me when I asked? Tony thinks, although he's pretty sure he already knows the answer. Loki prefers to do things on his own terms; anything else causes him to clam up defensively. And it is defensive—surprisingly enough, Loki's not always *trying* to be a dick.

I'm telling you now, Loki responds, grouchiness creeping back in.

Saying—or thinking—'thank you' will only make it worse. Instead, Tony dredges up another memory to share with Loki. This time, it's of the first night he'd flown in the Mark II. It's been a while, so the accompanying emotions aren't as fresh as they'd once been, but it's a memory he breaks out whenever he's having a shitty day. Or whenever he's in danger of taking being Iron Man for granted. Either way, he thinks Loki might appreciate it, given how much he's enjoyed their flights between the spaceship and Earth.

And although he seems surprised at first—it *is* something of a non-sequitur, Tony supposes—Loki quickly gets with the program, allowing himself to enter the unique headspace that memory-sharing produces.

Having Loki's influence does seem to intensify the memory, proving Tony's hypothesis from the last time they'd entered this state. The physical sensations are tangible once more; he can

even smell that new-car scent that has been an amusing feature of all his Iron Man suits during their first outings. His heart pounds a staccato rhythm against his ribs, and for a moment he can feel Loki's respond in kind.

And then Loki's coming through with a memory of his own, so unlike the dark ones he'd assaulted Tony with that night on the balcony.

This is the first time you did magic? he asks.

Through the eyes of child-Loki, he watches as blue sparks—*so the preoccupation with green came later*, he thinks as an aside—dance through his chubby fingers. Odd, to think of Loki as once having had chubby fingers.

This is the first time I used magic deliberately, Loki corrects. *I had already been unknowingly using a glamor to conceal my Jotun appearance. A futile attempt to fit in.*

You mean you don't really look like...you?

A foolish question. I am always me, no matter the form I take.

Right, Tony thinks. *Of course. But—what's a Frost Giant look like, anyway?*

Loki shows him. Naturally, the basic image is distorted somewhat by all of Loki's preconceived notions, and no small amount of disgust.

Hot, Tony responds, garnering the desired effect. Amusement sparks through the bond, vibrant.

You are so... Loki starts.

Yeah, not a lot of people know how to finish that sentence.

I'll figure something out, Loki thinks. Then he's gently disengaging from their shared mindscape, allowing them to drift back into awareness.

“You guys done?” Rhodey asks when Tony's eyes blink open. He's got half a smile lingering on his mouth, and his tone isn't as harsh as it would have been even a couple days ago. “Because I was thinking of getting some shut-eye.”

Tony feels groggy, or—something. Like part of him is still wrapped up with Loki, unwilling to come out. It takes him a couple of seconds to register and respond to Rhodey's words.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” he says. “We can leave JARVIS in charge—he'll make sure we don't crash into any planets.”

“Are you sure we shouldn't sleep in shifts?” Nat asks.

Tony shrugs. “If it makes you feel better. But, in general, this thing's steering itself. Or, sorry, it's being steered by Loki's magic as concentrated through my state-of-the-art AI. No need to get offended, dear.” He reaches back blindly to pat Loki's knee.

“That never gets less creepy,” Rhodey mutters. Tony ignores him.

“His highness and I get the big bed—you two can have the bunks,” he says. “That good with everyone?”

Rhodey and Nat both make tired sounds of agreement. Nat vacates the bed that Tony had just staked claim to, and both of them head in the direction of the multipurpose room that contains both supplies—food and emergency spacesuits, along with other essentials—and a narrow but comfortable bunk bed. Tony’s not normally one to skimp on luxury, but finding room for everything had been an issue when they were trying to keep the size of the vessel to a minimum.

And then his and Loki’s bed is there, just waiting for them. It’s nowhere near the size of the bed they’ve gotten used to sharing; it’s closer to a standard double than king-size. Not that it matters so much when they’ve been consistently waking up right next to each other, in the center of the bed, with miles of space to either side. The only difference is that now they won’t have the false propriety of falling asleep while keeping themselves carefully apart.

“We *can* take it in shifts,” Tony says, eyeing the bed dubiously. It had seemed bigger before he’d needed to actually sleep in it. “If you want.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Loki replies.

He’s right; Tony should stop overthinking this. He makes his way out from under Loki’s hands, dropping onto the mattress and shucking his jeans without ceremony before he crawls under the sheets. Loki watches him, not making a move of his own until Tony has wrapped himself up, selfishly, in the covers.

“Comfortable?” he asks.

“Mm,” Tony agrees. “Be better with you here.”

He says it like it’s a joke, but they both know it’s not.

Chapter End Notes

not editing out the instance of 'trousers' because i physically could not bring myself to call them 'loki's pants'. i hope you all understand

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The space adjustment period.

Chapter Notes

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

There's no sunrise to wake Tony up in space, so by the time his eyes flicker open he's the last to wake. Goddamn military and spy internal clocks.

"It'd be heartwarming if it was anyone else," Rhodey comments, because—of course—Loki is on top of him, a sprawl of unexpectedly warm limbs. Tony wonders if it would be impolite to ask Loki *why* he runs hot, given the Frost Giant thing.

"Maybe he's trying to smother him," Nat says. She's taken a claim on the captain's chair, sat in a way that shares a remarkable resemblance to Loki's patented languorous sprawl.

"Maybe," Rhodey agrees. "Hey, Tones, can you breathe?"

Tony, trying valiantly not to think about the thigh that's insinuated between his legs, makes a noise that's closer to a groan than he intended. Loki's awake but choosing not to show it, so he has to deal with this alone. Typical.

"It just happens," he explains. "The bond—"

"The curse," Nat corrects, obviously just to monitor his reaction, given that even Loki's using the two terms interchangeably by this point. Knowing she's examining him does nothing to prevent the crease in Tony's brow when he hears the word.

"Sure," he says. "The curse, whatever. You want to try telling me your subconscious could resist going after a feeling like every lazy summer day you've ever had all rolled into one, you go right ahead."

"Sounds nice," Nat says. "That kind of feeling."

He knows what she's getting at, and he doesn't bite. If any of them want him to admit that he *likes* the curse, they're going to be waiting an awful long time. There's only one person he can't help but tell the truth to, and he knows that person won't ask.

"It's not terrible," Tony says. Then addresses Loki: "You *are* heavy, though."

"He's asleep," Rhodey says.

Tony rolls his eyes. “No, what he *is* is a liar who likes listening to people talking about him behind his back.”

“I would *rather* be asleep, but your prattling is an unwelcome disturbance,” Loki says, not opening his eyes.

“How long have we been out, anyway?” Tony asks.

“Five hours,” Nat says. “You know, Thor only sleeps a couple of times a week.”

Tony doesn’t ask how she knows this.

“Thor is an idiot,” Loki mutters. Every time he speaks, his lips catch against Tony’s jaw.

“Okay, sleepyhead,” Tony says. He doesn’t sound as strangled as he’d worried he would. “Time to get up and at ‘em.”

“For what purpose?” Loki asks. This time, the contact between his mouth and Tony’s skin is purposeful, teasing. Tony flicks at his side in retaliation.

This, right here, is the closest Tony’s come to thinking Loki’s evil since the invasion. Because of the constant presence in his mind, he hasn’t been able to bring himself to jerk off in a week. The frustration wouldn’t be so much of an issue—his sex drive isn’t *that* bad—if not for the way Loki sometimes touches him, mostly when he’s like this: halfway between sleep and waking.

Loki gets bored easy, is the thing. And he’s endlessly curious, prodding for reactions from Tony and examining them with interest. Tony vacillates between being flattered—it’s not often he gets to fascinate a near-immortal alien, after all—and perturbed by the attention.

The long and short of it is that Loki might be immune to human reactions to bodily contact, but Tony most assuredly is not. He digs his nails into his palms and tries to think of unsexy things, like the fact that they’re in space.

Fine, Loki thinks, and there’s the mental impression of a sigh coloring the words. *Do not incite an anxiety attack on my account.*

He’s been picking up Earth terminology for mental health from Bruce, clearly. And, true to his word, he rolls to the side and allows Tony to catch his breath, although he retains some of the contact with the clear intention of ensuring Tony doesn’t spiral into panic.

Thanks, babe, Tony thinks, and proceeds to attempt to not think about his dick.

“Out loud,” Rhodey reminds them.

Tony grins. “I was just telling Loki that it’s not nice to be a tease.”

“Urgh, fine.” Rhodey looks adorably disgruntled. “Keep it to yourself.”

“I am not a *tease*,” Loki says, muffled by the pillow he’s wrapped himself around in lieu of Tony. Tony pats him condescendingly on the head and gets up, tying the blanket around his waist to cover his boxers. It’s not like Rhodey and Nat haven’t both seen more of him, but he figures he’ll spare them on this particular occasion.

“We’ve got coffee, right?” Tony asks.

“It’s disgusting,” Rhodey warns him.

No sooner has Tony wrinkled his nose than a floating mug pops into existence in front of him. The coffee inside it smells divine.

“I will not be subjected to bad coffee,” Loki mumbles from his nest.

“It’s not like you’re able to *taste* through the bond,” Tony says, but he wraps his hands around the offering all the same, ignoring Rhodey and Nat’s judgmental stares. “Or are you? Because, if so, we should get Bruce on the line.”

“I can feel your disgust,” Loki explains. “Now cease your disturbances.”

He gets even more bossy when he’s tired; it’s sweet. Tony takes the hint and makes his way into the next room to get dressed and ready. He has to use a pouch of soapy water and a cloth to rinse off; he and Rhodey had managed to crack artificial gravity without any help from Loki, but a working shower had been beyond them in the limited timeframe. The more it looks like they’re up for an extended stay, the more he regrets the corners they’d cut.

Still, he thinks, sipping at the magically summoned coffee, he probably doesn’t have much of a right to complain. It tastes wonderful, with just a hint of the hazelnut that Loki must’ve somehow picked out as one of Tony’s favorite tastes. The unexpected thoughtful gesture makes a torrent of gratefulness pour out from him towards Loki, who mentally bats it aside.

It is only a simple beverage, Loki thinks. You humans are so easily pleased.

Uh-huh, that’s us, Tony responds. He gets a pleasant buzzing of amusement from Loki in return.

For his first ‘morning’ in space, it’s shockingly tolerable.

They watch a lot of *Star Trek*. It just turns out that there’s not a great deal to actually *do* on an interminable journey towards an unknown location, and Tony still doesn’t deal well with concrete reminders of where they are. *Star Trek*, despite being set in space, is remarkably successful at assuaging his anxiety, perhaps because it’s so campy and *nice* that it’s impossible to feel anything other than fond amusement whilst watching it. There’s also the fact that Loki prefers it to their attempted forays into sit-coms (which he finds bland and saccharine)—and keeping on Loki’s good side is a priority for everyone on-board.

Over the course of all eighty episodes and two of the movies, Loki takes a liking to Spock, which is about the funniest possible outcome of introducing a mythic god to human

television.

“Figures,” Rhodey says, “that he’d be into the most overrated character in the history of media.”

“You take that back or I’ll divorce you,” Tony replies.

“Have at it,” Rhodey grins. “I’ll take you for half of what you’re worth—although you’re right. He’s not the *most* overrated.”

“Oh, no you do—”

“I was forgetting about Captain Kirk himself,” Rhodey, the dirty *Star Wars* fanboy, continues.

“Just because you have to be a hipster pilot about everything doesn’t mean that Sulu’s the secret best *Star Trek* character,” Tony grumbles to himself. They’d had this exact argument more than a few times at MIT, and it’s been a fun one to come back to in the years since.

“That ship would be nothing without Uhura,” Nat says, not looking up from her book. She’s switched out the terrifying Russian one for a succession of John Grisham thrillers. Natasha Romanoff is a woman of many confusing layers.

“Noted,” Tony says. “You up for the next movie, Loki? Or do you want to start on *Rhodey’s* favorite show—”

“*Buffy* is *not* my favorite show, Tony, I’m not seventeen anymore—”

“You were in your late twenties by the time that show even started airing, you dirty liar.”

Loki laughs.

It’s not that Loki laughing is particularly unusual, or noteworthy. It’s more—the *way* he does it. There’s no vindictiveness there; it’s an expression of happiness, of simple joy. Tony’s heart judders in a concerning stop-start. He doesn’t know what he did to earn this.

Then Loki says, as though nothing out of the ordinary has occurred, “I wish to view this *Search for Spock*. But, afterwards, you will explain what *Buffy* is,” and settles back against Tony’s shoulder.

It takes until the fifth day (or thereabouts, what with time being significantly more difficult to measure) for Loki to start going stir crazy. In retrospect, he’d lasted an impressive amount of time for a magical being who’s used to having the power of teleportation. But Tony knows from the moment they wake up that something’s amiss; through the fog of comfort their skin-to-skin contact affords them, something is hissing ominously. In typical Loki fashion, the multitude of emotions are muddled beyond belief, but Tony feels distinctly uneasy with what he’s able to perceive.

“Loki?” His voice is tentative.

“Let me be,” Loki says into the pillow.

Tony, on the record as not being a fan of getting stabbed, climbs out of their bed and goes to make himself a dismal breakfast out of the fare that comes in silver packets.

“You’ve left your shadow behind,” Rhodey says when he comes in.

“He’s not feeling well,” Tony says, a little irritable himself. Loki’s black mood evidently has no intention of staying in its mind of origin.

“Oh, good,” Rhodey says sarcastically, but he pushes his coffee over to Tony and allows him to indulge in a sip (or five) before taking it back. “How bad is it?”

Tony shrugs. “Not as bad as when he tried to murder Clint, worse than he’s been since.”

“Don’t you want to—you know,” Rhodey says. He raises his eyebrows meaningfully.

“No,” Tony says, too second-hand moody for this, “I don’t know.”

“Touch him back to normal?”

“God, there are a million better ways you could have phrased that,” Tony says, mouth flashing upwards into a smirk. “And, no, unfortunately. I can’t. It’s not a cure-all: we can still feel like shit when we’re touching. Also, right now? Trust me when I say the guy does *not* want to be touched.”

Rhodey lifts his eyes heavenward. “Magic,” he says.

“Fucking *magic*,” Tony agrees.

Loki doesn’t get out of bed for three more hours, and when he does he stalks the length of the spaceship a dozen times, back and forth. He gets steadily angrier as he does so, until Tony silently joins him, offering a hand.

It won’t help, Loki thinks. If Tony had a tad more self-preservation, he’d be staying far away. But the longer this goes on, with Loki spiraling into self-pity and misery, the more Tony feels like an asshole for not at least *trying* to help.

Yeah, it probably won’t, Tony agrees. *But—*

He tries to think of a way to express himself that isn’t unforgivably sappy.

Just suck it up and hold my hand, he manages. For the span of a blink, there’s a glimmer of amusement from Loki. Then he’s back to feeling a general hatred for his circumstances and everyone around him.

Tony thinks at some point he’ll stop being surprised by how low Loki’s mood can sink.

Despite how shitty he's feeling, Loki does what he's told. Not to the extent of taking Tony's hand; instead, he opts to grasp his elbow, fingers tight with tension. Tony shrugs and accepts it. Instantly, he feels a smidgen of the day's tension ebb away in response to the touch.

He knows that its effect on Loki is limited, that no amount of magic serotonin rushes could penetrate the fog of Loki's dark moods. But they stay like that until JARVIS dims the lights in a facsimile of night, wandering through the limited space—keeping their hands on each other and feeling shitty together.

On the tenth day, they're all antsy. Nat's run out of physical books and refuses to read on a tablet; Rhodey is forbidden from attempting to tinker with the ship while it's in motion; Tony is liable to tip into a panic spiral at the slightest provocation, and Loki rarely leaves the bed. For all that Tony hates staying still, he thinks Loki might be onto something.

"We should probably stop feeling sorry for ourselves," Tony comments. He's sitting on the floor, cracking his knuckles intermittently and fielding frustrated glances from Rhodey and Nat.

"You better just be talking about yourself and the poster child for depression over there," Rhodey says.

Loki's probably fair game for barbs like that, but Tony still winces.

"It's getting to you, too, sugarbuns," he points out. "Even big strong military boys need something to keep their spirits up in the uncaring void of space."

Rhodey's mouth does quirk into a smile at that, fond and just the slightest bit irritated. It's one of Tony's top ten favorite Rhodey expressions. "Fine," he says. "What do you suggest? If it's spin the bottle, I'm getting in an escape pod."

The ship doesn't have escape pods—functionally, that's what the Iron Man, War Machine, and Rescue suits (and Loki) are for—but Tony takes his point with grace.

"You'll realize you want to kiss me someday," he says, anticipating Rhodey's eye roll before it happens. "No games required. And anyway, that's so juvenile it's not worth considering. No truth or dare, either. What we're *going* to do are magic lessons."

Loki's head perks up.

"So, like school?" Rhodey asks. "How is *that* not juvenile?"

"Don't criticize what might end up saving your life," Tony says.

"It's a good idea," Nat says. "If Loki's telling the truth and humans have magical potential —"

"I *am* telling the truth," Loki says, as though he's offended that anyone could think otherwise.

“—then it’s worth adding that to our arsenal,” Nat finishes without acknowledging the interruption.

Loki sits up slowly. “I have never—tried to impart my knowledge to others before,” he admits. It goes unsaid, but Tony senses the shape of *No one’s ever wanted me to*.

“Well, no pressure,” Tony says. “It’s just an idea. Gives us something to do.”

“I will think on it.”

Loki takes to teaching with surprising success. He’s not patient by nature, but he loves the sound of his own voice enough that his explanations are lengthy and encompassing. He also gets instant feedback from Tony’s mind, which means any confusion or boredom is swiftly cut off.

The boredom is most often combated by Loki casting a spell that causes a sensation not unlike an electric shock to assail Tony, but it’s a small price to pay for knowledge.

The bond also puts Tony leagues ahead of his ‘classmates’, because of a neat trick: Loki can do magic through Tony, using him as a conduit. It’s similar to what’s happening with the dagger, he supposes, and it helps establish neural pathways for Tony to recreate the magic tricks on his own.

(Loki hates it when he calls them ‘magic tricks’, but since one of the first things he’d taught them to do was make things disappear, he doesn’t get to complain.)

It’s surprisingly non-invasive, too. Tony doesn’t feel out of control when Loki takes the wheel; it’s more of a collaboration than a hostile takeover.

Nat’s a fast learner even without the extra help, but it still takes the better part of twelve hours before she’s able to shift a cup two inches to the right.

For his part, Rhodey gets more frustrated with the whole endeavor than Tony’s ever seen him before. He understands it all in theory, the way to have to open your mind up to the intangible energy of the universe, but every time he tries he says it just feels stupid.

“Fair enough,” Tony says, patting Rhodey on the arm. “We were bound to find something you were bad at eventually.”

“You think you’ll still be the star pupil once he’s out of your head?” Rhodey asks. It’s not a dig; he sounds genuinely curious.

“He—might have been a little bit right,” Tony says. “About JARVIS and DUM-E and the rest. It’s tapping into this feeling, this sort of spark that brings everything into alignment. I know it sounds like bullshit. I promise I’m not about to start telling you your horoscope.”

“Now if *those* turn out to be real...” Rhodey says.

Tony laughs and tells him to get Bruce on the line; it's not fair to leave the guy out of all the fun just because of his earthbound condition.

"Fury knows," is the first thing Bruce says, once pleasantries are out of the way.

"Well, that's ominous," Tony says. "Knows *what*, exactly?"

"He's playing his cards close to the chest, but he paid a visit to the tower earlier today," Bruce explains. "Apparently, SHIELD's been keeping its eye on what's in orbit, same as you have."

"Ah."

"I didn't tell him about Loki, but I couldn't explain how you'd managed to build something that travels that fast, so quickly. He's suspicious."

"When is he not?" Tony says.

"This isn't a joke, Tony. If SHIELD finds out about Loki—"

"It's not exactly like they can come after us," Tony points out. "We're pretty far outside their jurisdiction."

"And when you come back?"

Tony swallows. "We'll be sans Loki. Everyone'll be happy."

Within the space of the bond, something ugly lurks. Tony can't quite tell which side it's coming from; he's trying to ignore his own feelings on the matter.

"What did he threaten?" Nat asks. Her voice is flat, steady.

Bruce sighs. "He knows Rhodey's with you."

There's a long, silent moment before anyone speaks.

"Has he already gone to my superiors," Rhodey asks, "or is he just planning to?"

"He wouldn't say."

Nat puts a hand on Rhodey's shoulder. "Fury hates coordinating with other military branches. And this is the sort of information he'd prefer to sit on—it doesn't make any tactical sense to expose you."

"That...actually does make me feel better," Rhodey says. "Thank you."

Nat shrugs. Much like Loki, she's never gotten the hang of accepting gratitude.

"We knew this was a possibility," she continues.

“He was as angry as I’ve ever seen him,” Bruce says. His voice is hesitant. “With you, Nat—he’s taking it personally.”

Again, Nat shrugs. “Nothing we can do about that now. What about Thor?”

“He’s curious, but he seems to have accepted that his brother doesn’t want his help,” Bruce says. “Well, accepted is the wrong word. He’s taking it out on the training room. With the hammer.”

“Damn it,” Tony says. “Call Pepper when he’s done with his temper tantrum. She knows how to talk sweet to the contractors. Although I just want to remind everyone on this call that this is the thirtieth time we’ve had to fix that room up. At some point, even Pepper won’t be able to get anyone to come out for it.”

The blame can be assigned thusly: two counts to Clint and his exploding arrows; six counts to Steve, who tends to store up a lot of anger and unleash it on unsuspecting exercise equipment; ten counts to the dream team of Thor and Mjolnir, and the reigning champion, of course, is the Hulk, who’s destroyed the training room at least twelve times.

“How about Barton? Is he back yet?” Tony asks.

Bruce shakes his head. “He hasn’t come back here, but I assume Fury’s having a conversation with him.”

“You think he’ll talk?” Tony addresses Nat.

“He’ll do what he thinks is right,” Nat says. “I’ve tried to predict him in the past. It’s—difficult. He’s not always rational.”

“No kidding.”

“He wouldn’t betray us lightly.”

There’s a crease between Nat’s brows, a tension in her posture. It could just be what she wants them to see, but there’s something about it that makes Tony think that even if it’s calculated, it’s coming from a genuine place.

“Those are all our main worries covered, right?” Tony says, turning back to the screen Bruce is frowning at them from. “And there haven’t been any supervillain attacks on the city?”

“No. Cap went to give some Neo-Nazis in Central Park a talking to, but the one who tried to hit him broke his hand and the rest dispersed pretty quickly after that.”

“God, I hope there’s a video,” Tony says wistfully. “I love it when he gets all righteous.”

“It was one of his best lectures yet,” Bruce agrees. “But never mind what’s happening down here. Tell me more about the magic...”

It's been long enough that Tony's gotten somewhat used to the motion of the ship—it's not that he doesn't notice it anymore, but it's relegated to the back of his mind.

He sure as hell notices when they stop.

It wakes him up from a post-magic nap (turns out that altering reality is exhausting, which maybe explains more about Loki) and he blinks up blearily at where Rhodey and Nat are stood, having what seems like a spirited debate with JARVIS.

"We've stopped," Tony says. Time continues to mean nothing in space, but he still feels the distinct grogginess of a mid-afternoon nap, and it's taking his brain a minute to reboot. By comparison, Loki is already sat up and alert. The mental juxtaposition is like double-vision, except worse and all-encompassing.

"We know," Rhodey replies. "JARVIS is saying we're in the right place, but we're sure as hell not in Asgard."

"Loki? I assume you have some sort of understanding with my AI?" Tony says through the dust coating the inside of his mouth.

Loki pats him condescendingly on the head as he springs out of the bed, apparently imbued with new energy by the prospect of getting to do something morally dubious.

His mind is—it's flung wide open, the way it often is when they've just woken up, and Tony's able to feel the—the *power* that's coursing through him. Loki's aware (and so Tony is, too) that it's not quite as intense as it had been when he'd held the scepter, but it's close enough. It's like nothing Tony's ever felt before; there's something addictive, electric, about it.

"Whatever you're going to do, make it quick," Nat suggests, and points to where a red light is flashing on the main console. "We're a little too close to getting sucked into a black hole for my comfort."

JARVIS speaks up: "I did try to warn you, Sir, but you were—otherwise occupied."

It's always amazing how much judgment JARVIS can insert into a seemingly oblique turn of phrase.

"We are where we're supposed to be," Loki says, unconcerned.

If that means—if Loki's drawing his power from a *black hole*, Tony sort of wants to weep and laugh at the same time. He settles for making a noise like a squawking bird.

"I'd find something to hold on to, if I were you," Loki suggests. "I cannot promise a smooth ride."

Tony manages to roll gracelessly out of bed and claims the captain's chair, where he clutches tightly at the arms. Even if he didn't know for sure that Loki's telling the truth, which he does, he's sliding rapidly back into his default state of fearing space without Loki to cuddle him through it. How embarrassing.

“I *said* I wouldn’t let you fall again,” Loki says irritably, picking up on Tony’s trepidation.
“Don’t you trust me?”

God help him.

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

it's official: this is the longest thing i've ever written!

Chapter 11

“Don’t you trust me?”

“Yes.”

Loki stares at him, his eyes bright and a little wild. In the space of the bond, something fluctuates, but Tony’s not paying attention to that right now. His pulse jumps uncomfortably in his neck.

And then the ship’s lurching upwards like it’s been caught on a hook and *wrenched*. Tony’s hands tighten around the armrests. Loki stays standing, eyes locked with Tony’s. His hands are shaking—he must be expending a ton of magical energy right now, because Tony can feel the strain of it right there in the mental link.

And then—

Well, to say the rest of the ride isn’t smooth would be putting it mildly. Within seconds, Tony’s flung to the floor by the wild, careening motion of the ship, and he hears the noises of Rhodey and Nat doing the same. His hip jars against the hard metal floor; he tries to roll to the side and ends up falling some distance as the gravity shifts. On top of *that* shit, he’s dealing with the secondary disorientation of being entwined in Loki’s thoughts, which are too intense to mentally look away from, a kaleidoscope of colors and textures and patterns.

Oh, Tony thinks. So this is what real magic feels like.

And then he passes out.

When he comes to, they’ve already crashed.

He’s not in pain, but mostly insofar as he can’t feel his body.

“Now you see what becomes of those who trust Loki,” says Loki. He’s blurry; Tony tries blinking him into focus, but his brain feels both scrambled and fried.

Oh, I don’t know, Tony thinks, not trusting himself to speak. *I’m still alive, aren’t I?*

“For now,” Loki says grimly.

“Rhodey?” Tony croaks out.

“I’m here, Tony.” Tony feels pressure on one of his hands.

“Me too,” says Nat.

Tony nods and nestles further into the warm thing that’s holding him up. It feels nice.

That's because it's me, you idiot, thinks Loki.

That's not a very nice way to think at a guy who's having a medical emergency, Tony thinks back. He doesn't stop nestling.

"Tony," Rhodey says, "we have to move. We've crashed—"

"In the middle of the Rainbow Bridge," says a new voice. "Loki. I had thought you more adept at sneaking."

"Heimdall," says Loki. *Oh. Shit.* "Sometimes, one must be bold."

"I have informed your parents of your return."

"Naturally." The way Loki says it is unaffected, although his mind froths with something dark and untamed; it's the same way he gets, sometimes, when Thor is referred to as his brother. Like the inference of familial relation can only be a slight.

Tony finally regains control of his eyes, and takes the opportunity to look up—and up—at the man (god?) who must be Heimdall. Even while slumped—yep, right in Loki's arms—he allows his gaze to turn appreciative.

Not now, Loki thinks.

It's not my fault Asgard is apparently a realm populated exclusively by stupidly attractive people, Tony responds. Loki preens a little at the clear mental inclusion of him; it's nice to know that even in moments of crisis, Loki's vanity can be relied upon.

"You will be placed under arrest," Heimdall says. He almost sounds confused. Tony squints at him, trying to figure out what's really being said.

He expects me to escape, Loki translates.

Sorry to throw a wrench in that plan, Tony thinks.

Loki throws him the mental equivalent of a shrug. *I have another plan.*

He doesn't let Tony in on it, and he still seems very much on edge. Tony steels himself and asks: *Was it my fault we crashed?*

"Silvertongue? Have you nothing to say in your defense?"

Silvertongue, Tony thinks. Loki mentally shushes him.

"I am saving my words for those whose opinion on them matters," he says frostily.

"And your friends?" Heimdall asks. He doesn't seem all that offended by Loki's bitchiness.

"We're only here to try and fix the—they've been cursed," Rhodey says, waving his hand towards Loki and Tony.

“Indeed,” Heimdall says. “You seek Amora.”

“She’s here?” Rhodey asks.

“If she is, she has hidden herself well,” Heimdall admits. “But there are others who have evaded my eye in the past.”

He looks pointedly at Loki, who smirks pointedly back.

“Not today, though,” Heimdall continues thoughtfully. “Today, young Loki, you were all too visible. Even knowing the consequences of such a flagrant reappearance. I wonder why.”

Was it me? Tony asks again. His passing out could have caused a break in the concentration Loki so desperately needed to get them into Asgard unseen. A lot of magic, he’s realized over the past couple of weeks, is dependent on unbroken concentration. *Loki. I’m sorry.*

Hush, Loki thinks. He brings his hand up to cradle the back of Tony’s head, and glares around as if daring anyone to comment on it. No one does.

You should know by now that I don’t shut up so easy, Tony thinks.

I do know, Loki responds. *I was hoping you might make an exception.*

Loki’s nerves seem frayed, even worse than they had been after Tony’s worst panic attack. Tony presses at the place in his mind that belongs to Loki, and finds only a couple of stray thoughts about the extent of Tony’s injury. Although Loki seems to think it’s bad, Tony can’t currently feel it.

The better news is that Loki seems assured of his next course of action, even if he won’t reveal what it is. Tony has to trust that Loki knows what he’s doing on this one.

And, despite what Loki says, Tony doesn't have much of a problem trusting him. Being injured hasn't changed that: Loki clearly didn't mean him any harm. If he'll feel the same once he's not in Loki's head remains to be seen, but...he thinks in Loki's own emotionally stunted way, he cares about Tony. At least a little bit. It's right there in the gentle way he's holding him.

“Loki...” Heimdall says, after the silence has stretched into minutes. “I *am* sorry. But you know I must serve my king.”

Loki laughs bitterly while Tony tries to work out why Heimdall’s apologizing. His theorizing is interrupted, however, by a new figure entering the shell of the cracked-open ship. Loki’s tension ratchets up another notch.

“My son...” says the new arrival.

“I am *not* your son,” Loki hisses. Tony, doing his part, presses his palm to the first part of Loki he can reach, which happens to be his stomach. It probably won’t have much of an effect, but it’s better than doing nothing.

“As ever, I regret that you feel this way.”

Tony already knew Odin to be a dick, but the guy’s not making a stunning first impression, and Tony feels comfortable sticking with his preconception. He’s in full, ceremonial armor, and his expression—well, Tony *could* be projecting, but it automatically reminds Tony of childhood lectures from Howard.

“Come,” Odin says, “there is no use in remaining on this...wreckage. The throne room should suffice for our purposes. Heimdall, would you restrain our prisoner?”

“Can you walk?” Loki murmurs to Tony, even as Heimdall looms ever closer.

“We’ll never know until we try,” Tony says, and levers himself to his feet. He does end up leaning on Loki for support, but he thinks he does a pretty good job of it, all things considered.

Rhodey takes Tony’s other side, and then Heimdall’s wrenching Loki away to bind his hands behind his back. As soon as Loki is no longer touching him, Tony whimpers at the icy wave of pain that hits him. He half-falls, but Rhodey keeps hold of him.

Heimdall hesitates.

“My king,” he says, “we know Loki cannot leave, not with the curse upon him. Might we not save the restraints until we are in the throne room?”

“You are too soft,” Odin says, but he inclines his head. Heimdall allows Loki to slither out of his grasp, and then Tony’s being held up on either side by Loki and Rhodey.

After that, it’s a valiant team effort that gets him to Asgard’s ornate throne room. On the way there, Tony struggles to take in all the impossible things on display; he’s already seen them through the frame of Loki’s memory, but with remaining disorientation from the spaceship crash, being knocked out, and apparently being drastically injured, he’s struggling to focus on anything other than the sweet pain relief that Loki’s hands provide.

“Just a little further,” Loki says, as Tony struggles to get his feet to co-operate.

Thank you, Tony thinks, forgetting how much Loki will hate that.

The throne room is relatively unimpressive when compared with the rainbow bridge they’d walked across to get to it, so Tony feels comfortable shutting his eyes as soon as they’re at a standstill, contending with his dizziness behind the comfort of his own eyelids.

“Get him a chair,” Loki snaps, and someone must follow his order because the next thing Tony knows he’s seated, and the contact between him and Loki is reduced to a mere hand on his shoulder. Tony gets a chance, then, to register where the pain is actually coming from, and he touches shaky fingers to the not-inconsiderable gash in his side.

Do you have doctors on Asgard? Tony asks.

We have healers, Loki replies. *You will be made well.*

Sure. Tony suppresses a groan. *You got any magic to take the edge off?*

“Loki, you were warned of the consequences should you return to Asgard,” says Odin, taking his own seat on the huge, imposing throne.

“Yes, well,” Loki says. He sounds desolate, and his mind is worse. “Exceptional circumstances.”

“Ah, yes,” Odin says. “This curse.”

“Look,” Loki says irritably, “you can do whatever you must to me later. Right now, this man is injured, and—”

“And whose fault is that?” Odin thunders. Tony winces.

Not yours, he hastens to point out through the bond. *Loki. Listen to me. It's not your fault. You did the best you—*

But he's insignificant—less than insignificant; he's *nothing* against the dark turmoil of Loki's mood.

“Please,” Loki grits out. “I can't heal him. I'm not—strong enough. If you would summon Mother...”

He doesn't seem to have any problem referring to his mother as such. That's nice, Tony thinks hazily.

“Why?” Odin asks.

“Why summon Mother?”

“No. Why are you not strong enough? The boy I raised could heal a wound of that nature if he put his mind to it. I have seen you do as much for your—for Thor.”

“It matters not,” Loki says. Tony feels that indefinable ghost of an emotion once more, pressing at the boundaries of the bond. He looks up at Loki, confused. Loki's not looking back at him.

“Your mother has been summoned,” Odin says. “You would do well to be patient, as she left for Nornheim this morn.”

Loki makes a wordless noise of frustration.

“You understand, of course,” Odin continues gravely, “that I cannot be seen to be giving you special treatment. Heimdall? If you would do the honors.”

There's something wrong about seeing Loki allowing himself to be bound, not struggling against Heimdall's quick, sure hands as they secure Loki's wrists behind his back with what looks more like thick golden thread than chains. Selfishly, Tony wants Loki's touch back. Without any physical contact, there's nothing keeping his pain at bay. He grits his teeth and

reaches out for Rhodey's hand, biting the inside of his mouth so hard that it floods with the iron tang of his blood.

"He's in pain," Loki says. "I can help. Let me help him."

Of course, Tony's pain is probably making things very uncomfortable for Loki. All other emotions have been pushed out of Tony's mind to make space for the one, overwhelming sensation.

"I will not allow you to play one of your tricks, Loki," Odin says. "The time for that is past."

"Your—highness," Rhodey says, obviously not knowing exactly how to address him, "it's not a trick. Can you just allow him to—"

"Silence!" booms the All-Father. "Loki was warned that the penalty for escape would be his life. He leaves me no choice, and I can make no allowances for him."

"*What?*" Tony bursts out. "No! Loki, you *fucking idiot*, you never told us that."

"It did not seem relevant," Loki says.

"Not relevant? We wouldn't have come! You can't—you can't just *die*."

"I had rather hoped that we wouldn't get caught," Loki says. He sounds almost serene, now that Odin has clearly stated his fate.

"Fucking Christ, this is why you didn't want us to tell Thor," Tony realizes.

"Enough!" Odin shouts. "You forget yourself, mortal."

"No, fuck that," Tony says. "What does he stand accused of? Other than the escape. Tell me *specifically*."

He's on his feet, now, even as his side protests and the pain lies in wait, ready to overtake him once more.

"Tony..." says Rhodey.

"*Tell me*," Tony snarls.

"If you do not get yourself under control, we will be forced to take measures to subdue you," Odin says.

Tony lets out a bitter laugh. "Subdue? Oh, we're way past that. I stand here as a representative of Earth, and I will not *allow* you to kill him."

"And just how would the likes of you go about stopping me?" Odin asks, looking almost amused. Tony bares his teeth. He knows they're a little bit bloody.

“You don’t know who I am,” Tony says. “And that’s fine. But it means *you don’t know what I’m capable of*. And I assure you, you don’t want to find out.”

It’s not even a bluff.

Before he can say anything more, Nat steps forward for damage control. “Their minds are connected. Do we have any guarantee that killing Loki won’t take Tony right along with him?”

“These curses are unpredictable,” Heimdall says. “It is impossible to know what impact Loki’s death would have.”

“Is that acceptable to you?” Nat challenges gently, ruthlessly.

“Would you want the death of a *king* on your hands, All-Father?” Loki asks.

His hands are still bound securely behind his back, but he stands tall.

“You claim *this man* is a king?”

“I do not claim,” Loki says. “It is the truth.”

“You will forgive me if I do not easily take your word on such matters,” Odin says.

Loki... Tony thinks. This might not be the easiest sell.

And Loki responds: *Listen to me. Am I lying?*

“Anthony Stark is a king in his own right, and to sanction his death would be tantamount to declaring war on his realm.” It’s the truth—or, at least, it’s *Loki’s* truth. “I know you do so love to declare war, but Midgard has weapons beyond what we are prepared for. They may not excel at much, but their weaponry is advanced.”

The silence stretches out between them, with Odin looking down his nose at Loki, Tony, Nat, and Rhodey in turn. His face is like stone, impossible to read. Cold, and hard.

“I see,” Odin says. “No punitive action shall be taken while the mortal’s life is tied to yours, Loki.”

Tony wants to say that he doesn’t care if they’re bonded or not: Asgard can execute Loki over his dead body.

He’d love to claim it’s a matter of principle—that he doesn’t support the death penalty and he believes everyone deserves a second chance. But it isn’t. He just doesn’t want Loki to die.

“That is acceptable,” Loki says. “But might I ask you to consider going further: it is in your interests to help us remove the curse, is it not? The faster the curse is gone, the faster you can seal my fate. So why not lend us your aid? Deal with me afterwards.”

“You will escape,” Odin says, almost weary.

“I always escape. That’s the story. I do misdeeds, I am captured, I escape. The cycle resets.”
Loki doesn’t reveal his own disillusionment on the surface, but it matches Odin’s.

What a way to spend eternity, Tony can’t help but think in response. It’s more than tiredness; Loki’s misery is as evident as ever.

All this religious bullshit—Loki can’t see past the hand he’s been dealt.

I already asked you what else there is, Loki responds.

And my answer wasn’t to your satisfaction?

Loki replies: *It wasn’t the answer I wanted.*

“You may remain in Asgard and search for Enchantress,” Odin pronounces at length, with an air of finality to the decision. “I will not offer you Asgard’s assistance; I doubt you truly desire it. You have rejected your home time and again, Loki, and you have rejected me. Once your objective is carried out, you will be taken back to your cell.”

“And the death sentence?” Loki asks. He’s straining to sound bored, and he’s probably managing to carry it off to anyone who’s not got a behind-the-scenes pass.

Odin sighs. “I have no more wish to see you dead than any father. No matter what you have become, it brings me no joy to dispense Asgard’s justice. And yet if I allow myself to be swayed by mere sentiment, what kind of king am I?”

Tony bites his tongue.

“You are being given a chance, my son, to prove yourself worthy,” Odin says.

“*Worthy*,” repeats Loki, lip curling.

“What does that mean?” Tony asks. “He has to prove he’s worthy of being alive?”

“Your insolence may be forgiven, because of your lack of familiarity with our customs,” Odin says sharply, “but only to a point. A point you are fast approaching.”

“We’re sorry,” Rhodey says. “It’s—look, he’s probably in shock, and we’re all—”

“You, too,” Odin cuts him off. “Loki. These past few decades, I have watched you care for nothing but yourself. *Your* goals, *your* ambition. Like a child, you believe nothing should prevent you from getting your way. All I wish is that you would prove me wrong.”

What kind of bullshit, Tony narrowly avoids saying out loud.

“Thank you, All-Father,” Loki says, inclining his head.

“You may reside here in the palace until the curse is dispelled,” Odin says. “I must say, when your brother told me you had been afflicted with the Curse of Knowledge, I did not expect...”

But he doesn't finish the thought; instead, he turns his sharp eye onto Tony, who gets the distinct impression that he's being evaluated.

"Vandil, show our—guests to their quarters," Odin says, and a heavy-set guard peels off from the formation around the room, getting a grip around Loki's arm that sends tension and anger ricocheting through the bond.

"Do you have to touch him?" Tony mutters.

"Tony," Loki says, quelling. Then he turns to his father: "And a healer?"

"Ah, yes. I forget how delicate mortals are. Ljot—" A guard with deep red armor stands to attention. "—find someone to attend to our Earthly king."

Tony would be more offended by the mockery if he wasn't so focused on the blood seeping through his shirt. It's not dripping, at least, although he still has the additional stressor of Loki worrying about him through the bond to contend with.

It's fine, he thinks, but everything he's sending through the bond is awash in a mortal agony that Tony doesn't know if Loki's familiar with. Everything he's seen from Thor indicates that Asgardians heal quickly from pesky things like stab wounds.

From Loki's side, there's—

worry-anger-regret-

—a lot of negativity, so Tony clears his throat and asks Vandil: "Hey, d'you think you could take those fancy handcuffs off him? Since he's not currently under arrest and all."

Vandil casts a questioning look up to Odin, who nods.

As soon as the cuffs are off, Tony gets a hand around Loki's wrist. It might be foolish to do so in full view of Odin, Heimdall, and at least twelve guards, but right now Tony can't bring himself to care.

Relax, Tony thinks. *I've got you.*

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

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

If the trip to Asgard turns out to be a bust, Tony thinks it'll still be worth it for the chance to see Loki's room.

"Wow," he says for the eighth time, lounging on the bed. He's been told to attempt no strenuous movement for the next twenty-four hours while the Asgardian healing works its magic on his side, and he's allowing himself to enjoy the relaxation. Rhodey and Nat—having been given rooms of their own—are currently on a tour of the palace that felt less like a generous offer by the guard and more like a veiled order. Tony, by virtue of his injury, has gotten out of it. It works for him; he thinks Loki's lair is the most interesting thing he could hope to see today. "I feel like this is a real glimpse into your mind."

Loki glares at him.

"Yeah, sharing headspace with you for a couple weeks has nothing on this," Tony continues, unabated. "Also, can you come lie down with me? I'm getting nervous with you hovering like that."

Loki sighs. "You are no longer in pain."

Tony considers this. "Not too much, no. This Asgardian healing magic is no joke, you guys ever thought of bottling and selling it? Oh, wow, you *don't* like that. If I promise not to capitalize on your culture's mystic arts, will you stop thinking about how you'd like to dismember me? Just go on looming over there, that's fine. Do you want to talk about how we're going to track down Enchantress or how we're going to get you the fuck out of dodge afterward?"

Loki's eyebrows go up.

"What, you thought I wouldn't want to help you escape?"

"Why would you?" Loki asks. "You are only here to sever the bond. What happens afterwards..."

Tony lies back and lets his eyes drift to the high, dark ceiling above. "I can't leave you here to die, Princess. And—I know you've probably got something in mind already, but if there's anything I can do to help—"

"So that you can hand me over to the authorities on your planet?"

"No," Tony says. "Look, I just—you're a pain in my ass, and in the collective ass of the Avengers, but you've gotta accept that I don't want to see you dead. Alright?"

Loki's voice is quiet when he says, "Alright."

“Glad we’ve got that sorted. Now, where do you want to start on our search for Enchantress?”

“We start with the men,” Loki says.

“Sure, works for me.”

The noise Loki lets out in response to that is gratifyingly close to a laugh. “Enchantress herself will be well-hidden, but her minions may be less so. They will be the ones performing menial tasks for her, and her conceit will lead her to choose higher status targets—nobility, for the most part. We should attempt to find high-class men who have been acting strange as of late, seeming distant to their loved ones.”

“Sounds like a good enough place to start. Although, if Asgard’s anything like Earth, there may be a fair few men whose wives think they’re acting suspicious,” Tony says. “Still. We’ve got the best spy on Earth in our corner, so I imagine we’ll be done in a flash.”

“Mm,” says Loki. He sounds further away, so Tony levers himself back up onto his elbows.

“What’s got you so down in the dumps? Other than the obvious, I mean,” Tony says. “Just come lie down, I can make you feel better.” He pauses. “I didn’t mean for that to sound dirty, I promise.”

Loki’s grin is lightning-quick, but it’s still nice to see. And he does come over to the bed, sitting up with his back against the wall. Tony takes the initiative and nudges his head against Loki’s leg, trying to give them both a bit of optimism to play around with in the form of soul-bond magic.

Tony will admit that the longer this goes on, the less the serotonin theory holds up. Whatever passes between them during physical contact seems to be less about any specific neurotransmitter and more about the bond anticipating their needs and providing a boost accordingly. Which is horrifically imprecise, and not within the comfortable realms of Earth science, but Tony would be a terrible scientist if he only allowed himself to think about this situation through the limited scope of Earth science.

“You are remarkably upbeat,” Loki comments.

“I s’pose,” Tony says. “It’s just—none of this feels real. Your room is like something I would make up, honestly.”

“I did rather commit to the aesthetic,” Loki admits.

“Yeah, at which point in your life did you decide *everything* had to be green?” Tony asks, because he’s really never seen anything like it. The contents of Loki’s room range between green, black, and gold. It’s like what every depressed teenager on Earth’s bedrooms would look like if they were given unlimited resources and magic. “And the snakes!” He points at one of the four posts of Loki’s bed: all of them are carved to look as though hundreds of pitch-black snakes are slithering up towards the (green) canopy above their heads. “I don’t

know if any of this stuff has the same connotations in Asgard, but you're giving off major Evil Supervillain vibes in here."

Loki's reaction to that is a sliver of amusement, and a hand coming down to scratch lightly through Tony's hair. Tony closes his eyes again, pushing into the touch.

"They do not have the same associations here," Loki explains. "Green is one of the colors most closely tied to magic, for us."

"So red is for warriors, like Thor," Tony guesses.

"Sometimes. It also denotes royalty," Loki says. He doesn't sound annoyed about that, for a change.

"What's the gold for, then?" Tony asks.

"Wealth," Loki sighs. "Not merely material wealth, as you humans would see it. Wealth of spirit, of the mind."

"Although you're not exactly lacking in material wealth, either," Tony points out. "Or you weren't, before you became a fugitive from justice."

"Nor are you," Loki says. "But you would value the wealth of your mind over what you physically possess, yes?"

Tony considers. "Hard to make an Iron Man suit without being richer than god, but I take your point."

"Richer than god?" Loki inquires, voice wrapping around the words like judgmental silk.

"Just a saying," Tony says, hiding his smile against Loki's thigh, although his amusement ricochets through the bond regardless. "I'm sure your daddy has more money than me."

He braces himself for Loki's reaction to Odin being called his father, but there isn't one. Tony's amusement is just reflected back at him, practically tranquil by Loki's standards.

"His conquests did provide much by way of riches."

"And by way of power."

He can feel Loki's agreement, both of them in complete tandem on their opinion of Odin. It's sort of heartwarming, in a literal sense. Tony's chest feels more full than it has since the introduction of the arc reactor into his life.

"You can't claim the black represents anything other than teenage angst, though," Tony says. "And the *snakes*..."

"Tell me what your people believe of snakes." It's phrased like a demand, but Loki's mind is only gently inquisitive, wondering.

“Oh, I guess you guys never had Christianity to make snakes the symbol of all that’s wrong with the world,” Tony says. “And, uh, I can’t claim to speak for the whole of ‘Midgard’, so let’s just stick with home. For a lot of humans, the story goes that God—the one and only God, mind you—created two humans and gave them this wonderful garden and let them name all the animals and eat all the fruit. Except for fruit from one tree. The tree of knowledge of good and evil.”

“I would simply eat the fruit from that tree,” says Loki, confusion threading its way through the bond.

Tony laughs. “Of course you would. Although—yeah, I probably would, too.”

For some reason, his mind flashes back to the moment he’d first seen his name on the missile that blew him up in Afghanistan. He winces, and tries to concentrate on the slow, precise way Loki’s touching him, sending little sparks of pleasure through their link.

“The humans ate the fruit?” Loki asks.

“Not right away,” Tony says. “First, the devil—uh, Satan? I’m not up on my Norse mythology; I don’t know if you guys have an equivalent. But anyway, he took the form of a snake and told Eve—the woman—that she should totally eat this really cool fruit. I’m paraphrasing.”

“Mm,” Loki says, not pausing in stroking through Tony’s hair.

“He manages to tempt her into it, so she eats this fruit, and she’s suddenly got all this knowledge of good and evil, and she’s no longer innocent,” Tony explains. “She’s been corrupted, and in the grand tradition of people who feel shitty about themselves, she decides to drag someone else into her mess. So she, in turn, tempts the other human to eat the fruit.”

“She succeeded?”

“Yeah. And so the humans realize that they’re naked—oh, yeah, they’ve been naked this entire time—and they cover themselves with leaves, and then God realizes they’ve eaten the forbidden fruit, and he kicks them out of the garden.”

“That,” Loki says, “is a remarkably stupid story.”

“It’s probably not meant to be taken literally,” Tony says, feeling oddly defensive of a religion he’s never ascribed to. “And even if people don’t believe in it so much anymore, the whole thing with the snake stuck. Humans see them as sort of—creepy and conniving, I suppose. I think the story goes that they used to have legs, and God took them away to punish them for being a vessel of Satan? And then you’ve got the fact that snakes really *do* poison people and swallow things whole, which even you’ve gotta admit is a little sinister.”

“I never said snakes were not creatures of cunning and power—it is that which endears me to them. The story is still a ridiculous mortal construction,” Loki persists. His mind isn’t as disdainful as his words; Loki has turned out to be a remarkably curious student of Midgardian culture, even as he outwardly dismisses it.

“I don’t know, your godliness,” Tony says. “A couple years ago I would’ve told you religion was a bunch of horseshit. But then I met you, and I figured it was shortsighted to count anything out in this—fucking insane universe.”

Loki takes a moment to absorb his words; Tony can feel him turning them over in his mind.

“Why was it wrong for them to seek knowledge?” Loki asks, after so long that Tony had half thought he’d dropped the topic.

“Um,” Tony says. “I don’t really know? I wasn’t raised Christian—never did the whole church or Sunday School thing. Steve would know. And I think Rhodey goes to church on major holidays, though that’s just for his mom.”

“I’m not asking them.”

Tony turns his face, nose bumping into Loki’s hip.

“It was disobedience,” he says, half a question. “It was this—their lives were perfect, right? They’ve got this beautiful garden, all the fruit they could ever want, but they see something that’s off-limits to them and they take it. It’s a sort of comment on human nature, I suppose.”

Loki makes an inquiring noise.

“That we’re never satisfied with what we’ve got. That we want to be free and independent more than we want to be happy—take your pick. There are more interpretations of the Bible than any human would ever have time to explore. You could probably make a decent crack at it, being immortal and all.”

“And what of the snake? This...Satan,” Loki asks.

“Oh, you might like this. Again, there’s a ton of different stories surrounding this stuff, but from what I gather Lucifer—Satan, he’s got a ton of different names—started off as an angel—one of God’s favorite. And then, for whatever reason, he decided to rebel, and God cast him out of Heaven. He takes the form of the snake, as a sort of *fuck you* to God, I guess. He deceives the humans, and in doing so introduces sin into the world.”

Loki’s smile is audible when he says, “Perhaps he found perfection tedious.”

“Perhaps,” Tony repeats with a smile of his own. “I never read the Bible, but I *did* read *Paradise Lost* when I was in college. It’s this long poem coming at things from Lucifer’s perspective.” He dredges up the memory easily, although it’s been a few decades since he read it. “*Nor hope to be myself less miserable / By what I seek, but others to make such / As I, though thereby worse to me redound: / For only in destroying I find ease / To my relentless thoughts.*”

Loki’s hand stills, and for a moment Tony thinks he’s pissed him off—but there’s no anger coming through the bond. Actually, for a second, there’s *nothing* coming through the bond. Tony’s heart thuds to a brief standstill. After hundreds of hours of Loki’s consistent presence in his head, he feels helpless and afloat, like he’s tethered to nothing.

“Loki—” he starts to say, but in a rush they’re back, Loki’s consciousness slotting back into its rightful place, although it still seems weaker than before. “Did you do something?”

It’s a relief when Loki’s irritation snaps over towards him, wordless and acute.

“It is of no matter,” Loki says.

Tony sits up, pulling away so they’re no longer touching. “If I was Bruce, I’d be making notes,” he says. “But I’m not Bruce, so I’m just asking: what was that?”

“I don’t know,” Loki lies.

Lies through the bond are like a bad taste on the roof of his mouth, and he shudders away from the feeling.

“Okay,” he says. He stares into Loki’s eyes, as if he’d be the first to actually find the truth there. After a long ten seconds of silence, he gives up. “I won’t ask again.”

If that tastes like a lie to Loki, he doesn’t call him on it. He doesn’t meet Tony’s eye, either. “Thank you,” he says. The words sound wrong coming from him, just as they had when he’d said them to Odin.

“Don’t mention it,” Tony says.

“Lie back down,” Loki orders. “If you re-open your wound, the healers will not take kindly to your idiocy.”

The healers had, indeed, been a group of no-nonsense practitioners who had seemed both intrigued by the fragility of the human body and annoyed by Tony’s insistence on getting himself impaled by parts of his own spaceship.

They’d also cast some sort of spell on Loki that had been meant to bind him to Asgard, ensuring he won’t escape. Tony, privately, thinks their track record on this sort of thing isn’t anything to write home about. Still, he has to keep telling himself not to worry: Loki will escape. It’s inconceivable that someone like Loki would allow themselves to be led to whatever medieval killing device Asgard reserves for the purpose. Would they behead him? Burn him? Or is there a spell, fit for purpose, that drains the life from a god?

Tony lies himself back down carefully, closing his eyes and trying very hard not to think. He imagines Loki’s got enough on his mind without Tony’s contribution. “Wake me when it’s time for food,” he says.

Again, the bond seems to quieten; Tony gets the sense that Loki’s holding back, or maybe it’s just the kind of magic that gets less intense the longer it’s in effect. After all, Thor had said that, with time, they’d be able to be apart without violent consequences. It tracks that the other aspects of the meld would fade, too.

The disturbing thing is how much Tony hates it.

“Sleep well,” Loki says, and then follows it with a couple of words in what Tony presumes to be Asgardian.

Tony’s asleep before he can ask what they mean, or why Loki hadn’t used Allspeak to say them.

When he wakes once more, it’s dark outside. Loki hasn’t slept—he can tell—and he hasn’t moved, although at least six hours have passed. Tony tilts his head up and observes the bright glint of Loki’s open eyes.

“You didn’t have to stay.”

Loki glares down at him; it’s too close to a verbalization of gratitude for him to be comfortable with.

“Okay, fine, you *did* have to stay, and I’m not grateful at all. Keep on doing the bare minimum,” Tony corrects himself.

“I told your companions I would inform them when you awoke,” Loki says, and then he’s gone, teleporting out of the bed, and room, and leaving Tony to shake his head and do some prodding through the bond.

You’re being weird, he sends.

No response, but he didn’t really expect one. He should probably try to be a little more understanding—Loki’s back in his home as something halfway between a prisoner and a guest, under his father’s watchful eye, having done everything he possibly could to cut his ties to this place and its people. He’s bound to be feeling a little ‘weird’ about the whole deal.

For his part, Tony’s not feeling any urgency. The sooner they find Enchantress, the sooner they have to deal with sneaking Loki out undetected. And he’s willing to bet that Odin has a whole host of contingencies to prevent Loki’s escape, not just the healers’ magic.

The problem is that, if their entry into Asgard is anything to go by, they’re not very good at sneaking.

The other problem is that Tony, Nat, and Rhodey *helping* Loki to escape will almost certainly be perceived as an act of aggression by the race of space warriors with a thirst for colonizing troublesome planets.

Point is, Tony could actually do with a couple more days to think things over before he dedicates himself to tracking Enchantress down.

It takes just over ten minutes for Loki to bring Rhodey and Nat to the room, with what must have been a detour to the kitchens; he’s holding one of those red-and-gold plates Tony remembers from that first conjured IHOP meal. The color of royalty indeed.

“You’re the best,” Tony says, making grabby hands and accepting the plate when Loki passes it to him. That gets him sharp looks from both Rhodey and Nat, but he—he hadn’t thought

about it. Loki passing him things doesn't make him uncomfortable, the same way...

Well, not the *same* way, but—Pepper and Rhodey passing him things isn't too bad, either. Maybe it's something to do with the mental link.

Nat, who's probably analyzed this particular quirk of his in writing, is looking at him like she's just had an epiphany. The grogginess that accompanies waking up in the evening makes the whole thing remarkably unpleasant, and Tony digs into the Asgardian cuisine in order to avoid dealing with any of it right now.

"This is good," he says. "What is it?"

"Glazed meat," Loki says. He doesn't specify *which* meat, but Tony doesn't press the matter; as long as it tastes this good, he's fine with it. "I did not know whether to bring you wine or mead."

Tony smiles ruefully. "Yeah, maybe another day. Plain old water's good for right now."

A remarkably tasteful gold goblet pops into Loki's hand, and he passes that along to Tony, too. Tony takes it with a deliberate avoidance of anyone's eye.

"We asked the guard about Enchantress," Nat says. "She said that there are always rumors that Enchantress is on Asgard; she's taken on a mythic status, a story to tell children and the like. The kind of thing where if your husband leaves you, you curse Enchantress."

"Is that a good thing or a bad one?" Tony asks.

Nat shrugs. "If people are aware of her existence and her methods, it could make her easier to track. But the guards haven't noticed anyone inside the palace acting unusually."

Tony doesn't ask Nat to substantiate this information; he trusts that she asked the right questions to come to whatever conclusion works for her.

"Just the one guard?" he asks. "Or did you ask around?"

"I spoke to a few," Nat says. "Obviously they weren't especially forthcoming, but their only suspicions were directed toward us—not anyone on Asgard."

Tony sighs. "It would've been so nice if the first person you asked was just like, *Oh, yeah, actually. I've noticed that my friend Gary's been walking around with a green mist over his head talking about someone's beautiful golden hair. Glad you asked!*"

"Do you think she knows we're here yet?" asks Rhodey.

"Odin promised to keep news of Loki's return inside the palace, but—" Nat shrugs. "—I know how news travels."

"This would be so much easier if we knew *why* she put this damn curse on us in the first place," Tony says. He puts the crockery to the side and flops dramatically back against the pillows. "Or why she cast it on Loki, at least, since I'm an innocent bystander."

“I thought we agreed it was because she thought you’d kill each other,” Rhodey says.

Tony sighs. “I’ve thought it through a dozen ways, and it just doesn’t make sense. Or—bits of it do, but it’s not enough. She wouldn’t think a human would be capable of killing an Asgardian, anyway, so it’s not like it was just a convoluted way to murder Loki.”

“Speaking of which,” Nat interrupts, “Loki? You’re being uncharacteristically quiet.”

She’s right: both verbally and mentally, Loki isn’t giving much away.

“I see little use in discussing her motivations,” he says now, archly. “It is her location that is of import. We would be better served by focusing on that.”

Tony recoils a little from the iciness of his tone.

“Fine,” he says. “But it’s not like any of *us* have got a chance of tracing her magic. That’s all on you. And then the rest of us will search the old-fashioned way.”

“My mother will be returning shortly,” Loki says. “I shall seek her counsel.”

“You do that,” Tony responds, just the slightest bit snappish. Just when he felt like he was making progress with Loki, that Loki might give a shit about him, they end up antagonizing each other like always. In retrospect, it was egotistical beyond belief to think that Loki might have seen them as—what? *Friends*? Tony doesn’t think Loki’s had any of those in a long time, and he probably likes it just fine that way.

“What will you do?” Loki asks.

Embarrassed, Tony realizes that Loki’s trying to use a calming tone, since obviously he’s privy to every emotion that’s just assaulted Tony’s self-worth.

He tries to shake himself out of it.

“I think the rest of us should have a chat with Heimdall.”

Chapter End Notes

we've reached the end of the line in terms of the slack i gave myself: chapters are now being written in real time. this shouldn't affect the posting schedule, hopefully, but i can no longer make any guarantees!

anyway, happy valentine's day! hope you enjoyed probably the weirdest chapter of this fic so far. it just goes to show that you can't choose when the religious upbringing is going to pop out and make you write some heavy-handed comparisons between comic book characters and adam & eve/satan

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Say, what's going on with Loki?

Chapter Notes

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

That night passes in a haze, with neither Loki nor Tony falling asleep for more than snatches of a few unrestful minutes at a time. Tony manages to stick to his side of the bed, curled in on himself with his back to Loki. The bed's more than big enough for it, after all: it's not like the cramped quarters they'd become used to on the spaceship. Finally, they can spread out.

Loki's mind buzzes with directionless discontent, and Tony supposes his own can't be much better. He spends those long eight hours unsure if a headache's forming, or if their shared emotional state is simply so unpleasant as to induce physical pain.

As soon as daylight begins to filter through the long, thin windows, Tony rolls to his feet, intending to head to the washroom. He tries not to glance behind him, although he's undeniably curious about whether Loki looks as bad as he feels.

"It is better this way," says Loki, right as Tony's on the cusp of escaping the room. He murmurs it so quietly that Tony's unsure of whether he intended to be heard.

"Sure it is," he bites back, not quite sure what he's agreeing to but too pissed off (*too hurt*) to ask.

In the washroom, he curls against the rim of the ornate tub and shudders through one dry sob before he tells himself to pull it the fuck together. He doesn't need Loki to hold his hand: he's Tony goddamn Stark, and it's about time he starts getting re-acquainted with self-sufficiency.

After that, all that's left to do is going through the steps of getting ready, all the while making a concerted effort to ignore everything he can feel from the other side of the bond. It's surprisingly difficult: every time he allows his mind to drift, it seems to float inexorably toward Loki. He's far too used to knowing what Loki's feeling at all times; even if the emotions themselves aren't stable, the presence of them has become an all-too-temporary bedrock.

Christ, he's pathetic.

He looks it, too: although he's clean and healed and well-fed, there are unmistakable shadows swamping his eyes. His beard is drifting out of the confines of its trademark goatee and into

something untamed, and the weeks in space have leached a fair amount of the color from his skin. No wonder Odin had scoffed to hear him described as royalty.

By the time he emerges, Loki is dressed and ready, looming at the window with his back to the door.

Tony clears his throat.

“Have you got anything I can wear?”

He’s in one of the robes he’d found hanging in the washroom, the fabric thin and clingy. The guards stationed in the corridor outside hadn’t even bothered to hide their leers, and he’s anxious to change into something more substantial.

Loki waves a hand without looking at him. A set of clothes appear on the abandoned bed, without any of the adornments Tony’s come to associate with Loki’s magic: no puff of smoke, no green sparks. There’s something depressing about the lack of showmanship. The clothes themselves aren’t Asgardian, but they’re not exactly of Earth, either. The trousers are a deep burgundy and the tunic is stitched with gold thread. Tony recalls what Loki said about the connotations of those colors.

“Thanks,” he says. Loki doesn’t react.

He considers retreating back to the bathroom to change, but to do so would feel like ceding ground in whatever strange battle they’ve found themselves in. Besides, Loki seems to have no intention of even glancing in his direction. Unlike the royal guard.

He strips off the robe and begins to pull the unfamiliar clothing on in its place, keeping his back to the figure at the window. Loki hadn’t been so kind as to provide underwear, but Tony doesn’t ask.

“Is your mother back yet?” he asks, once the trousers are secure around his waist.

“Yes,” Loki replies. “She sent word of her arrival a few minutes ago. It seems she has requested to meet you.”

“Oh?”

“I would speak with her privately first,” Loki continues. “You will see her at tonight’s banquet.”

“There’s a banquet, now?”

“Now that you are healed, yes. It is customary to receive visiting dignitaries thus.”

“Lucky me,” Tony mutters. He pulls down the shirt and drags a hand through his hair, which is longer and wilder than it’s been since Afghanistan. When he’s relatively sure he’s presentable, he turns. A small, vain part of him hopes to catch Loki looking. It’s not really because he wants to be looked at: too many sex tapes have been filmed without his knowledge and sold to TMZ over the years, and the novelty of people seeing his body has

more than worn off. What he *wants* is the vindictive satisfaction of catching someone in the act.

It doesn't matter either way: Loki is doing his best impression of a statue.

“What are you hoping your mom’s going to tell you?” Tony asks. “Thor already asked her about the curse, didn’t he?”

“It is none of your concern,” Loki snaps. The words whip through the bond, too: a double-pronged attack.

“Yeah, well, fuck you,” Tony says, eloquent as ever.

It’s at that moment that a knock sounds on the door, cutting off the argument before they can really get into it. Tony thinks he should be relieved. It’s too late, though; the heat’s already risen to his face and his pulse is thrumming with adrenaline. He *wants* a fight.

“Enter,” Loki says. His mind, by comparison to Tony’s, is as placid as a lake on a windless day.

Rhodey and Nat shuffle in, and it’s evident from their faces that they’ve heard at least the final part of the conversation.

“Good morning,” Rhodey hedges.

“Loki was just leaving,” Tony says.

Without another word, Loki sweeps from the room. He doesn’t so much as look at Tony, and nothing in his head indicates he feels anything beyond—

exhaustion-?-trepidation-?-focus

—slight discomfort. He leaves the door ajar, and Tony takes childish pleasure in slamming it shut behind him.

Which leaves Tony with the two people most capable of perceiving his emotions without magical assistance.

“You doing okay?” Rhodey asks. No preamble, then.

“Hm? Fine, you know me.”

“You want to tell us why you’re mad at him?”

“I don’t—” Tony’s hands are balled up in tight fists; he makes the conscious effort to loosen them. “I don’t care what he does. He’s just being a dick.”

“How unusual,” Nat says dryly.

“Look, Tones, it’s okay,” Rhodey says. “We all saw the scene you made in the throne room: you care about him. No one here’s going to judge you for that.”

Tony slides his gaze toward Nat, who grins in acknowledgment.

“I’m judging you a little,” she says. “But only because you’ve managed to find a way to complicate a relationship in which both of you can feel each other’s emotions.”

“It’s not as simple as that,” Tony says. “It’s not like every feeling’s sectioned off with a label attached for context. It’s a mess of...sensation, I guess is the best way to put it. This whole time I’ve thought it’s only Loki who feels too much all the time, but—I think it could just be the nature of the thing. It’s raw data, in a way. Everything at once.”

“It’s overwhelming,” Nat surmises.

“Absolutely.”

“But that’s been true the whole time,” Rhodey says. “And it hasn’t bothered you so much until now. Why?”

“Last night, the bond went quiet,” Tony replies. He can’t be bothered to hide how shaken he is by it. “Just for a moment. He lied to me about it.”

“Loki lying, there’s a new one.” Rhodey’s clearly aiming for levity, but it settles wrong.

“It is, actually. He’s been truthful with me, even when he didn’t have to be.” Tony thinks of all Loki had divulged about his past: he could have just as easily not said anything. Tony having his mental lie detector doesn’t account for a damn thing as long as Loki stays quiet. “Look, I don’t know what that silent moment meant, but it felt—wrong. Worse than when he lies, worse than anything he’s felt while we’ve been connected.” He takes a rough breath. “Still, I thought it was a blip. Nothing to be concerned about, until he started treating me like —” Tony cuts himself off, because every end to that sentence is absurd. *Like he doesn’t want me here; like I don’t mean anything to him.* As if he could have expected anything different. “It just fucked me up a little, that’s all.”

Neither of them attempts to remind him that putting a stop to the bond is exactly what they came here to do; Tony appreciates it.

“Do you think it was him or Enchantress who caused it?” Rhodey asks. “Now we’re closer to her, she could be pulling the strings.”

“Or it could be an anomaly inherent to the spell,” Nat points out. “None of us know enough about magic to come to a judgment, and if Loki’s not talking we’re stuck.”

“He’s barely spoken to me this morning, and he was weird last night,” Tony says. It comes out whiny, like he’s bitching about Loki behind his back—which, he supposes, he is.

He settles heavily back on the bed. His injury’s barely noticeable anymore, but it’s as good an excuse as any to indulge the weariness he feels.

“What were you doing when it happened? The silence,” Rhodey asks.

“Nothing,” Tony says, a smidge defensive. “We were talking about the Bible, of all things.”

Rhodey stifles a laugh. “*You* were talking religion? If we weren’t on an alien planet, man, that’d be the weirdest thing that’d happened all week.”

“Hey, I’m not *that* bad.”

“You made six members of the MIT Christian society cry. On *multiple occasions*,” Rhodey says.

“Yeah, well, I was an asshole, what else is new,” Tony says. “Although, in my defense, *they* were the ones telling a fifteen-year-old he was going to hell for his—” Here he affects a breathy imitation of a college girl’s voice. “—*proclivities*.”

“There was a tribunal,” Rhodey says to Nat as an aside. “He was accused of religious discrimination.”

Tony waves a hand. “And a hefty donation to the local church smoothed the whole thing out, *whatever*. It still doesn’t explain why talking about God severed the connection. Unless the big guy’s really out there, and he’s got a sense of humor.”

“Let’s count that theory out for now,” says Nat.

Rhodey comes to join Tony on the bed, and Tony gratefully snuggles up against him. There’s no surge of magically-enhanced contentment, like there is with Loki, but Tony doesn’t actually want that right now. He wants good old-fashioned comfort from his best friend, no mystical strings attached.

“When the bond’s gone for real,” Rhodey says, thumb rubbing circles into Tony’s outer arm, “are you gonna be okay?”

Tony doesn’t answer. He’s not trying to be rude; it’s just that he thinks Rhodey already knows.

He can only take so much inactivity. For maybe ten minutes, he indulges himself with a bit of snuggling (Nat briefly joins him and Rhodey on the bed, though she makes sure to warn that if either of them tell the other Avengers she’ll remove their tongues with a butter knife). After that, they track down some food with the help of the servant who’s waiting on Nat and Rhodey hand and foot, something he can tell neither of them is at all comfortable with. Her name’s Sigrid, and she gets into Tony’s good graces immediately by sneaking them into the kitchen by way of the servants’ route. She isn’t able to provide anything close to coffee, but Tony doesn’t expect miracles.

Once they’ve stuffed themselves with rich Asgardian breakfast—sweetened bread and tangy, unfamiliar fruits—he tells Rhodey and Nat that they’re making good on the decision to speak to Heimdall.

“You don’t think he’s already told us everything he knows?” Rhodey asks.

“No,” Tony says. “It’s not—I don’t think he knows where Enchantress is hiding, or anything like that. I just got the sense from him that there was more he wanted to say.”

“It’s as good a lead as any,” Nat says.

“Ms. Romanoff.” Tony grins, his first real smile of the day. “That was almost a compliment.”

“Positive reinforcement,” she says. “You’ve had a bad morning, you deserve it.”

“Sigrid,” Tony says, gesturing for her to come closer. “Okay, first, sit down and eat something, you’re giving me anxiety. Second, can you tell us where to find He Who Watches All?”

“Himinbjorg,” Sigrid says.

“Gesundheit,” Tony says.

“It is the post from which Heimdall commands the Bifrost,” Sigrid explains. “It lies at the far end of the Rainbow Bridge. Are you sure you want me to sit?”

“Sure, go for it,” Tony says. “We promise we won’t tell.”

She looks behind her, in the direction of the bustle of the main kitchen: they’re in an alcove clearly intended for the staff to take their breaks, with a small stone table and a motley collection of seating.

Decision made, Sigrid sits down and shares the rest of the meal with them, picking her way through the slimy green substance that Tony had been too wary to try at such an early hour.

“What do you do when we’re not here?” Rhodey asks her.

“A little of everything,” Sigrid says. “Cleaning, cooking, caring for children. I go wherever I’m needed.”

“And how is it?” Rhodey continues. Tony leans back to watch him work his magic. Without ever seeming to try, Rhodey manages to put everyone he meets at ease. It had worked when Tony was a kid on his first day of college, and it apparently works on alien planets, too.

“It’s fine,” Sigrid responds. “The work is hard, but I get to meet interesting people.”

There’s something private about her smile when she says that. Rhodey sidesteps it.

“You want to come with us, to talk to Heimdall?” he asks

“I cannot,” Sigrid says. “There is only so long I can get out of joining the preparations for the banquet tonight.”

“We’ll see you there?” Rhodey asks.

“I’ll be the one with the wine jug,” she responds wryly, and then she excuses herself.

They make the journey back across the Rainbow Bridge with considerably less difficulty than they’d had the day before. At the halfway point, Tony starts to feel the tug of the bond wanting him to return to Loki.

He ignores it.

“Where’d the wreckage go?” he asks, frowning.

“It was removed almost as soon as we were evacuated,” Nat says. “In the hopes that no one would see.”

Tony feels a jolt of something like panic. “And the Iron Man suits?”

“Survived,” Rhodey says. “We’re just—well, it was suggested that we shouldn’t attempt to use them while we’re guests here. Our guard implied it would be an act of aggression.”

“Christ,” Tony responds. “If we get out of here without accidentally causing Asgard to declare war on Earth, it’ll be a miracle.”

“You said it,” Rhodey agrees grimly.

Heimdall doesn’t seem surprised to see them.

“I had wondered when I would next make your acquaintance,” he says. “I had thought at the banquet tonight, but…” He spreads his hands.

“I wanted to ask you about what you know about this—curse,” Tony says, remembering the correct word at the last second.

“Surely Loki has told you all he knows of this magic,” Heimdall posits, an eyebrow arched.

“It’s always good to get a second opinion,” Tony says. “Especially from the guy who taught him.”

Heimdall looks taken aback. “His mother taught him.”

“You did, too. I’ve seen his memories.” In the blur of the crash, his injury, and the scene in the throne room, Tony hadn’t had time to pinpoint where he’d seen Heimdall’s face before. But during the endless hours tossing and turning in bed it had come back to him: the child that was Loki, playing with sparks. The two faces watching over him.

“It has been many years since Loki has sought my counsel, or anything to do with me,” Heimdall says. “Your lifetime is but a speck compared to how long we have been estranged.”

“I’m not asking you guys to kiss and make up,” Tony says. “I just figured you might have something to say on the subject. It seemed like you might have done, yesterday.”

“I know no more of the nature of this spell than you do,” Heimdall states. “Only Amora knows the intricacies of the magic she has woven.”

“See, that’s actually not what I care about right now,” Tony says. “What I care about is the *why*. That’s what Loki won’t tell us. Why Ench—Amora decided this was the best punishment for him.”

“You haven’t guessed?” Heimdall asks.

“He told us about what she did to Thor,” Tony says. “But he wasn’t exactly keen on sharing the extent of his involvement in the whole thing.”

“He was young,” Heimdall says cryptically. “Impetuous. And he loved his brother.”

“He *loves* his brother,” Tony corrects.

Heimdall inclines his head. “My mistake. You would know better than I, after all.”

“So what was it that he did to piss her off?”

“Tell me,” Heimdall says, “does Loki know you are here?”

“Sure.”

“Does he know the nature of your questioning?”

Tony hesitates.

“I see,” Heimdall says. “Then let me just say this. Amora believes in equal retribution. She believes that what she has done to Loki is the equivalent of what was done to her.”

“Okay.” He can accept that he’d probably not going to get much more than that. “One other thing, then. When this first started, Loki thought it was something to be ashamed of.”

Heimdall sighs. “We Asgardians are a proud people.”

“No shit,” Tony mutters. Rhodey punches him on the arm, but Heimdall only smiles indulgently.

“Loki was not wrong to think that there would be some who would condemn him for what has befallen him. There are, too, those who would delight in his misfortune. He has always struggled with the censure of others.”

“Does it mean he’s in danger?” Tony asks. He tries to keep his voice level, but some of the emotion he’s feeling still slips through. “From more than the impending death penalty, I mean. He’s been acting strange, and I wondered if—if he might be afraid.”

“If he were afraid, surely you would know it,” Heimdall points out gently.

“Not if he was hiding it from me.”

“I have never known of anyone who could shield emotions from the Curse of Knowledge,” Heimdall says. “Although, if anyone could...”

“But he’ll be okay?”

“He will come to no harm before the day his sentence is carried out.”

Tony winces at the cavalier way Heimdall can discuss Loki’s death.

“But he’ll be ostracized?” It’s Nat: she’s studying Heimdall closely, although her body language is relaxed.

“He would have been ostracized no matter what,” Heimdall says. “He attempted to bring ruin on this realm, and such a crime is not easily forgot amongst our people.”

“There’s more than one type of ostracization.”

“That is true,” Heimdall responds. “Forgive me for speaking so bluntly, but perhaps his concern was that it is particularly shameful for him to be tied to a mortal.”

“Tied to?”

“The Curse is sometimes known as a binding,” Heimdall explains. “It often encourages those cursed to remain close, even if they do not wish to. That is part of the reason it so often ends in tragedy: those cursed cannot get away from each other.”

His eyes are so piercing that Tony almost imagines he can sense the pain Tony’s currently in, the pull that’s like a fishhook embedded in his mind. The palace isn’t so far away, but Tony thinks he might have stretched the curse to its breaking point to get here.

“Why does a spell like this even *exist*?” Tony mutters. It’s rhetorical, but Heimdall answers.

“It was originally intended to bond warriors. The spell was supposed to ensure that they could not desert one another in battle—that they would not want to. And yet the magic was often perverted, minds and souls being too distinct to be easily linked together. They would resist each other, and the incompatibility led to yet more bloodshed.”

Tony wonders if that’s what’s happening: that the inevitable irreconcilability is finally rising to the surface, driving a wedge between him and Loki that will end with a knife to his throat, or an unraveling of his mind to the point where he would rather be dead.

“The Curse of Knowledge fomented a deep distrust between warriors and those who wielded magic. It lasted for many centuries,” Heimdall continues. “Those cracks still linger.”

“What happened if one of the warriors died?” Tony asks. “If they were killed in battle.”

Heimdall sighs. “You must understand that to die for Asgard was regarded as the highest honor.”

“What happened?” Tony repeats.

“The surviving half of the bond would lose whatever remained of their mind. Higher thought was replaced with bloodlust, and they would kill whoever was set in their path, until they were killed themselves.”

As if reacting to Heimdall’s words, Tony feels a bright bolt of pain piercing his head, overwhelming his senses. No sooner has he let out a gasp of pain than the air beside him shifts and Loki is there, at his side, bringing with him a deluge of cold anger.

“You should have stayed in the palace,” are his first, harsh, words. Tony remembers that Loki must be in the same amount of pain as him. “Or you should not have stayed away so long.”

“Flawless hindsight, there, Your Highness.” Tony grabs Loki’s wrist, since Loki doesn’t seem to be up to taking the initiative. Pain still thuds dully behind his eyes, but he feels considerably less like his brain is being stabbed, which is a definite plus.

“Your nose is bleeding,” Rhodey says. He pats himself down, but the Asgardian clothing he’s in doesn’t have any pockets, and even if it did, Tony doubts any tissues would be forthcoming. He staunches the flow with his sleeve. When he glances at Loki, there’s none of his deep crimson blood to be seen. Something about that seems wrong; Tony struggles to remember if Loki had been bleeding as profusely as him, that night in the Tower.

“Look on the bright side,” Tony says, “it’s not my eyes this time.”

No one in attendance looks impressed.

“I thought you’d know your limits by now,” Rhodey says.

Tony shrugs. “Maybe all that time together on the spaceship gave us a shorter leash.”

“Loki,” Heimdall says, and the gravity of his voice gets everyone’s eyes on him in a second. “You should tell him.”

Loki bares his teeth.

“You have no right to interfere with what I choose to tell my—”

“Your what?” Heimdall asks mildly. “He is his own being, and he has a right to know why this is happening to him.”

“It’s just a nosebleed,” Tony mutters. He’d wanted Heimdall to tell him what Loki had done to Enchantress, sure, but the look on Loki’s face is enough to quash any remaining desire to find out. Loki’s anger seeps through the bond, unremitting, and although Tony doesn’t know whether it’s more directed at him or Heimdall, he feels caught in a chokehold of guilt.

“You ask too much,” Loki says, to one or to both of them. And then he’s turning on his heel, using Tony’s grip on his wrist to all-but drag him from Himinbjorg.

They’re only a hundred meters or so across the Rainbow Bridge when Loki rounds on Tony, something unhinged and terrifying in his expression. Tony takes an automatic step back, and

it's only Loki's hold on him that stops him from toppling into the abyss. He breathes harshly through the panic doing its utmost to seal his airways, and says nothing.

"You are too inquisitive by half," Loki says. His voice isn't what Tony might have expected: he's not loud, or even harsh. It's—oh, Jesus Christ—it's *hurt*.

Tony steps closer, right into Loki's space. His head's a mess of pain, anger, fear, and guilt; he can hardly see straight.

He says, "Fuck, I'm sorry," and tips his head onto Loki's shoulder. Even though he knows Rhodey and Nat are watching, no embarrassment comes. He revels in it, breathing in the familiar eucalyptus scent and trying to latch on to the relief of their skin-to-skin contact.

For a short time, Loki lets him.

By the time they get back to the palace, Tony feels far steadier on his feet. He's also endured lectures from each of his companions in turn. Nat's had been the shortest, just a few sentences about how he was 'compromising the mission,' whereas Rhodey's had lasted most of the way back, covering a lot of ground but mostly boiling down to 'stop putting yourself in danger, you idiot.'

Loki had stopped touching Tony as soon as it was safe to do so, yanking his wrist out of Tony's grip.

Not that Tony had expected anything else.

"I assume you received no guidance from Heimdall," Loki says, once they're all back in his room. "As your true purpose was only to extract private information about me."

"He seems to think it's relevant," Tony says, meeting Loki's glare head-on.

"He is wrong," Loki says.

"And what about your mom? Did she have anything to say about Enchantress, or was it just a fun family reunion?"

He knows he's being a dick; in truth, he thinks it's a good thing that Loki got to see his mother, whom he thinks about with far more fondness than he expends for anyone else. Loki doesn't appear to take offense; in fact, he shows no reaction to Tony's words.

"She knows of ways to reduce the strain of the bond," Loki says. He seems to be choosing his words with care. "There are potions that, taken sparingly, could give us the power to shield our feelings, and to travel farther apart."

"Oh," Tony responds.

"That's good," Rhodey cuts in, providing the words that had, for some reason, eluded Tony.

“Yeah,” Tony says. “Let’s get us some of that.”

“It is not so simple,” Loki says. “The potion is complex, and would require some time to brew.”

“How much time?”

Loki returns to his post by the window, the tense lines of his back providing little by way of answer.

“To make it would be a crime,” Loki says. “The potion requires blood magic to complete. It is the darkest of all known magic.”

Tony, not particularly invested in the potion, shrugs. “Well, it was a nice thought. But we’ll just have to stick with the Enchantress plan.”

“And what plan is that, exactly?” Loki asks, whirling back around. “The plan where we ask nicely and she gives us whatever we want? Forgive me if I wanted for something else to rely on.”

Tony steps back, and out of the corner of his eye he sees Nat shift into a defensive stance.

Not that he thinks Loki is dangerous: the anger Tony can feel from him is less rage and more frustration. Neither are ideal, but the latter is manageable.

“Look, you’re already on death row: you can’t start doing illegal blood magic when we already had to bargain to keep you alive for as long as it takes to negotiate with Enchantress,” Tony says. “Which, by the way, I’m not bad at negotiating. I’m not saying it’ll be easy, but there are ways to get people to give you what you want. Ways that don’t involve stabbing them.”

“I know that,” Loki says, surly.

“Can we just try plan A before we move on to violating magical law?”

“What exactly is blood magic, anyway?” Rhodey asks.

“Magic involving blood,” Loki says dryly.

“No, I got that,” Rhodey says. “What I’m thinking is that there’s a world of difference between a few drops of blood and, say, human sacrifice. You get me?”

Loki twists under their combined gaze, caught.

“The amount of blood corresponds with the power of the magic,” he admits. “The blood of a powerful magic-user, too, would be more valuable than that of a commoner. Hence why the practice was banned.”

“Every time I think this place can’t get more fucked up,” Tony says.

Loki is silent for longer than he's comfortable with.

“If we were to catch Enchantress—”

“No,” Tony says.

“We could remove the spell in its entirety—”

“I said *no*,” Tony snaps. “I’m not killing someone over this.”

“I would not ask *you* to,” Loki says calmly.

“That wasn’t a loophole. You’re not killing anyone either, not as long as you’ve got me in your head.”

Quietly, Loki says: “As if you could stop me.”

“Whoa, hey,” Rhodey says, getting physically between them. “You’ve both had a stressful day—maybe it’s best if you just try to calm down.”

“And how exactly should we do that?” Loki asks.

“Stay close but don’t talk to each other,” Nat suggests.

“Sounds perfect,” Tony says.

True to his word, Tony doesn’t speak another word to Loki until that evening. He thinks he might let a few things slip through the mental link—snatches of thought about how insane Loki was to believe that Tony would condone murdering someone to use their blood for magic, mostly—but the afternoon passes in blissful quietude.

Or it would have been blissful, if there had been anything to do.

“They can’t just requisition my ship,” Tony says. Behind him, Loki snorts but doesn’t comment.

Sigrid, who’d only come to provide changes of clothes and to bathe Natasha (an offer that had been firmly refused), looks uncomfortable.

“The All-Father believes it best for you to remain solely in our care for the duration of your stay,” she says.

“Okay, but Asgard’s not a fucking *hotel*, so that’s just bullshit. Sorry, Sigrid,” he interrupts himself, “I know it’s not your fault. But if I vent to Odin I’m pretty sure I get executed, so...”

“It would depend on how insulting you were,” Sigrid smiles slyly. “You might only get a few lashes.”

Tony's eyes boggle. "This place is downright medieval, I just hope you all know that." He gets a gratifying bolt of irritation from Loki at his words. Now that the guy's decided to embrace Zen, Tony's more determined than ever to get a reaction out of him.

"We need to contact our team, back home," Rhodey says before Tony can pursue the feeling. "They'll be worried if they don't hear from us, and we need our ship to do so."

Tony's pretty sure Loki would be able to magically patch them through to Bruce any time he felt like it, but it's also abundantly clear that he's not feeling like it right now.

"You could try asking the All-Mother," Sigrd suggests. "She has been known to challenge the rulings of the All-Father on occasion. When she believes his decisions to be unjust."

Loki lets out another derisive snort, because even when committed to silence he can't resist being the center of attention. If he had to guess, Tony would hedge that Loki had asked his mother about the death sentence that morning—had asked if she could convince her husband to overturn *that* ruling. Tony doesn't have to wonder at her answer.

"We'll do that," he says to Sigrd. "Thank you, really. For all your help."

Sigrd nods and bends into a small curtsy. And Tony's fully aware that he's been waited on his entire life—by nannies and Jarvis and the staff at boarding school and JARVIS—but he's never been fucking *curtsied* to before.

"Yeah, don't do that," he says, trying not to cringe. "I mean, thanks, but it's not necessary."

"As you wish," Sigrd says. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"You are done here," Loki says, seeming to forget his vow of silence. His tone is so sharp that Tony nearly feels compelled to check for blood. Sigrd, for her part, doesn't look cowed. Quite the contrary: she shares an eyebrow raise with Tony before she leaves, letting the door swing shut behind her.

"Bet all the servants *loved* you, growing up," Tony snipes, also forgetting his vow.

Rhodey steps between them once more. "And it was going so well," he says. "I can't say I know what's gotten into you two, but I need you to behave like grown-ups for a couple hours, okay?"

"I am more than capable of performing my duties," Loki says icily.

Tony doesn't look at him. "Let's get this over with, then."

Chapter End Notes

[devil emoji] wow, sure seems like loki's desperate to get rid of the bond, huh

my beta reader responded to this chapter with sad faces and suggested that i offer a chapter from loki's perspective this week to tide you all over. i've been planning to write a companion fic from loki's pov for a while, and i've made a decent start on it these past few days, so you can be cautiously optimistic about seeing that soon! it won't be necessary to read either fic to understand the other, but hopefully it will provide some insight into the loki of it all. okay, that's all! sorry about the angst x

Chapter 14

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” Tony says, eyes sweeping from the impossibly tall, gilded ceiling to the pure gold beneath their feet. The walls of the banquet hall are lined with rows upon rows of candles, along with imposing statues tucked into alcoves depicting—Tony assumes—the kings who had come before. His cursory scan reveals no statues of queens, once again affirming Tony's belief that Asgard is just all of Earth's shittiness on a cosmic scale. Or perhaps the queens just had better taste, and didn't commission twenty-foot statues of themselves in pure gold. “Has anyone ever told you guys to tone it back? Just a bit?”

“I'll take ‘things I never expected Tony Stark to say’ for a thousand,” Rhodey quips, although he sounds just as uneasy. The hall, large as it is, is packed with people. The scent of rich food and alcohol hangs thickly in the air. There's a table clearly reserved for royalty, and three others besides; all are piled high with what looks like enough food to solve world hunger. So much for keeping Loki's return a closely-guarded secret.

“Calm yourselves,” Loki suggests helpfully. He's being hypocritical to the extreme, with the thrum of his disquiet tucked right alongside Tony's. “We need only stay for a few hours.”

“Oh, great,” Tony says, making no effort to hold back the sarcasm. “Only a few hours.”

He starts to move forward, since the guards stationed to either side of the flung-open door don't seem inclined to announce their presence. Loki grabs his arm.

“We must wait for the All-Father's address,” he hisses.

Tony looks up at the royal table, where Odin seems entirely oblivious to their arrival. The banquet ostensibly hasn't started yet, but he seems to have jumped the gun with his goblet of wine. As Tony watches, the woman to Odin's left places a hand on his arm. She murmurs something inaudible, directing his attention to the four of them stranded in the doorway.

Tony finds himself fixated on her. Thor and Loki's mom. The resemblance to Thor is unmistakable, with the golden hair and eyes so startlingly blue that their color is notable across the distance of the hall, but there's no denying that there's also something of Loki to be seen in her poise.

She stands, pulling her husband up with her.

“Our esteemed guests,” she says. The hall goes suddenly, eerily quiet as everyone turns to inspect them. The humid atmosphere seems to drop in temperature as Loki's return sinks in with the assembled masses. “King Stark,” Frigga continues. “Sir Rhodes. Lady Romanoff. And my son. Loki.”

Loki may be trying to keep himself at arm's length in the space of the bond, but Tony's more than familiar with the emotion that's rising in both of them: sheer awkwardness.

“It is my honor,” Tony says, trying a bow to see how it feels. Rhodey and Nat follow his lead. Loki seems frozen.

“Come,” Odin says. “Let us dispense with ceremony and eat.”

Tony gets a hand around Loki’s sleeve and pulls him over to the head table. There are four empty seats to either side of Odin and Frigga. By mutual agreement, Rhodey and Nat take Odin’s side and he and Loki take Frigga’s. It’s in the interest of not causing inter-planetary incidents, as well as because Tony thinks Odin’s a dick and would much rather talk to the only person Loki actually seems to *like*.

“Your grace,” Tony says. At this point, he’s essentially drawing on his familiarity with Arthurian legend and Clint’s fondness for *Game of Thrones* when it comes to addressing royalty. He hopes any gaps in his knowledge can be excused under the banner of cultural misunderstandings. “It’s a privilege to finally meet you.”

Frigga laughs. “He is far more polite than you led me to believe, Loki.”

“When he tries,” Loki says sullenly.

Tony, meanwhile, brightens. “What else did he say about me?”

“That you are quite different from what he expected of your race,” Frigga replies.

“Sure,” Tony says. “And one day he’ll get past all the racial profiling, and then he’ll see me for who I truly am.”

“You will have to forgive him,” Frigga says, mirth dancing through her expression. “And the rest of us, too. We are not well-versed in the ways of your Earth.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Tony says, “Loki’s been all over the cuisine.”

Loki’s end of the mental link is awash with embarrassment; this is almost as good as going through baby pictures. Tony grins and helps himself to a hunk of bread while a servant pours wine into his goblet.

The food is still a lot to get used to; even staples like bread are slightly differently flavored from Earth’s equivalents. He also suspects an increased calorie-count, since even a few bites have him feeling full. He grabs some fruit—hoping it won’t be as stodgy—so as not to offend his hosts and switches to sipping at his wine.

Loki’s plate remains empty as Tony exchanges pleasantries with Frigga—complimenting her on her kingdom and her castle, and exclaiming over her gown. She takes the flattery with geniality, but her eyes are shrewd and knowing. And even though it’s not as if flirting Frigga into commuting her son’s death sentence was his plan A, it’s useful to know right away that it’s not a strategy worth pursuing.

To their left, Odin seems to be regaling Rhodey and Nat with tale after tiresome tale of conquering and battle. Tony’s relieved to have the option of tuning it out.

“Explain to me, then,” Tony addresses Frigga, “this curse—the fact that it’s only able to be reversed by the one who cast it.”

“The same is true of most magic,” Frigga says. “Each spell is distinct from the next, and from the lack of consistency breeds protection for the caster.”

“Like a mutating virus,” Tony says.

“Like water,” Frigga counters. “Ever changing, and yet always the same.”

Tony thinks of the magic Loki had taught them, and this checks out. There aren’t any magic words, no wand to wave in a specific manner. It’s all about feelings and channeling power, shifting the world around you to make it the way it is in your head.

“It is not that there cannot be conflict between two magic-wielders, each seeking to influence a particular spell cast by one of them,” Frigga continues. “The sorts of spells you would see as parlor tricks are easily influenced: making things disappear, duplicating oneself. But when the mind is involved, to attempt to alter the spell would be foolishness at best. Damage to the mind is irreparable, and what is lost can seldom be regained.”

Tony wants to tell her everything: about the second when the bond had gone silent, about Loki’s shifty behavior ever since. It seems that Frigga comes from the Bruce Banner tradition of person—the ones who make you feel as though your thoughts and feelings are safe with them, will be treated with care.

But she’s married to Odin, Tony reminds himself.

“Don’t worry,” he jokes, and if it sounds a little hollow he doesn’t think she notices, “I won’t try to mess with the magic in my head.”

She smiles. “Your wisdom does you credit.”

“Do you think we’ve got any chance of getting rid of it, then?” Tony asks. “I know Loki’s chomping at the bit to have his brain back to himself.”

He hasn’t been looking at Loki since they sat down, and he doesn’t start now. He’s still too angry with him to risk it, even as he sympathizes with how uncomfortable Loki feels.

“It is possible Amora will become bored with her little trick,” Frigga says. “Or perhaps her heart will soften. She and Loki were close, once.”

“Oh?” Tony asks, while Loki audibly bristles beside him.

“There are so few powerful sorcerers on Asgard,” Frigga says. “Both of them grew up in my tutelage, although Amora was born outside of the city. Her parents, nobles without any love for the art of magic, brought her to me. They hoped that I would teach her the control she so desperately needed.” Tony silently wonders exactly how many students of Frigga’s have turned to the dark side. “As children, she and Loki adored one another.”

“Mother,” Loki says warningly. Either he doesn’t notice what he’s called her, or he’s suddenly gotten over his family issues. Tony suspects the former.

“Surely you cannot mean to keep your—”

“*Mother.*”

“You cannot mean to keep him the dark about everything,” Frigga continues. “He is inside your mind, is he not?”

“That does not mean—”

“I see no reason you should make yourself miserable,” Frigga says. “A spell such as this can be a wondrous thing.”

“It cannot,” Loki says shortly.

Feeling an impulse to back him up, Tony adds, “Isn’t it meant to make us go nuts and kill each other? Sorry to contradict you, but that seems like the opposite of wondrous to me.”

“No magic is wholly good or wholly evil,” Frigga says. “It is what you make of it.”

The gravitas in her tone somehow transforms the cliché from trite to profound. Tony finds himself nodding along.

Still, he can tell Loki doesn’t believe her. Loki’s mind is continuing to send out waves of consistent distress, which is understandable given the number of suspicious eyes around the hall that are trained on him. With the exception of his own mother, Tony very much doubts anyone here is happy to see the prodigal son return.

Or it could just be the projections of Loki’s anxious mind: Tony has to wonder how many of Loki’s crimes are public knowledge. The attempt to take over Earth, probably, but the business with the Frost Giants? He doubts Odin would have announced something like that. It feels rude to ask.

“Loki did start teaching us magic,” he says, changing the subject, “on our way here. It was a long journey.”

“I suppose it would be, if one could not make use of the Bifrost,” Frigga responds. “But it gladdens me to hear that you were able to find such a diversion. Tell me, how did you humans take to wielding magic?”

“Bit of a mixed bag,” Tony says. “And I had help.” He taps his temple in illustration, and Frigga inclines her head.

“Then we see how the so-called Curse of Knowledge can be a force for good.”

A few days ago, Tony wouldn’t have needed convincing on that point. He had been getting used to the outside presence in his head—getting yet more used to the easy comfort of physical touch and the unifying nature of being able to hold secret conversations inside the

space of the bond. Now, the link feels cold and stretched-out, their feelings visible to one another but distant. It's lonelier, Tony thinks, than not being bonded at all.

"Point taken," he says aloud.

Frigga places her hand atop his. "You may not believe me now," she says, and Tony is once again struck by her astuteness, "but perhaps there will come a time when things fall into place. They have a way of doing so, in my experience."

Tony doubts this, given the state of her sons, but he admires her optimism all the same.

"You say that like we'll be stuck this way for a while," he says, pushing back against the dread that rises, predictable, in Loki's mind in response to his words.

Frigga shrugs, a charmingly un-royal gesture. "The future is never set in stone. Your fates are up to you. And yet, beings of all races and creeds are so often predictable. Do try to remain calm."

For a moment, Tony thinks she's talking to Loki. But then, in a whoosh of air that billows through the hall, darkness descends.

It isn't just that the candles have gone out—although he has to assume that they have. It's that they've been plunged into an entirely shadowed world. Tony can still feel his chair beneath him, can tune into the shock Loki's projecting, can hear the gasps and the whispers and the one or two screams of the other occupants of the hall.

But he can't see.

He flails a hand out and grabs the first part of Loki he can reach. It's instinctual, and he apologizes for taking the liberty through the bond. But Loki doesn't pull away from him.

"She was always so dramatic," Frigga murmurs from his other side.

Tony's confusion must be irritating Loki, because he thinks, *She is a Seer.*

She can see through this? Tony asks.

Loki gives the mental impression of sighing loudly. *She sees the future.*

The relevance of this is somewhat lost on Tony until he realizes something is emerging from the darkness. It is, in the ongoing universal conspiracy to make his life a joke, fucking *green*.

The emerald figure dances like flames, but it bears more than a passing resemblance to a woman. Tony doesn't think he's going to receive any prizes for guessing *which* woman.

"You should not have come here."

The voice is both within his head and without, and Tony's hand clenches down on whatever part of Loki it is he's holding. It's not like the way he and Loki communicate mentally: it *hurts*, burrowing its way into his mind with the pointed intensity of a drill. Distantly, he

wonders how many people are hearing the threat. Just him and Loki? Everyone in the hall? Either seems possible.

We are safe, Loki thinks. He doesn't manage to coat the words with any degree of reassurance. *I have shielded us*.

And yet the prominent feeling he's getting from Loki is doubt.

Tony understands to an extent: Enchantress has erased light from the world and infiltrated their minds. The previous day, Loki had experienced a lapse in his magic that caused him to crash a spaceship and revealed that he didn't have enough power to heal a flesh wound. Tony still thinks that one or maybe both of those things are his fault, but they don't set an encouraging precedent for how Loki's magic will fare against Enchantress'.

He wishes he had the Iron Man suit. It's not logical: there'd be no use in firing repulsor blasts at nothingness. But it would make him feel less useless, less like a damsel cowering behind Loki's shield.

Rhodey and Nat? he asks Loki through the bond. Can Enchantress hear him? Has she been witness the entire time, able to access his thoughts whenever she feels like it? He feels sick.

Both under my protection, Loki responds.

For all that it feels one step forward, two steps back with Loki, Tony knows that a few weeks ago Loki wouldn't have bothered trying to shield anyone besides himself (and maybe Tony, but only on account of the curse). He doesn't know what it means for that to have changed.

The green figure has duplicated, swirling at various points in Tony's field of vision. Its next words produce an echo.

"Your downfall will be of your own making."

And then, rising in volume, shattering its way through Tony's head:

"You will not be able to keep him in the dark forever."

Light bursts back through the room. It takes Tony's eyes a few seconds to adjust, and then he realizes that the light isn't just light—it's fire.

The room erupts into panic. The flames surround them on all sides, licking up the walls and toward the ceiling. The heat is already unbearable, and the stench of burning flesh brings back memories Tony works hard to avoid.

Panic threatens to claw its way up from Tony's chest and consume him, but for once he doesn't let it.

Your magic, he thinks frantically at Loki. *Can you summon my armor?*

His hand is still pressed to Loki's waist, and now that his eyesight's back he can perceive the extent of the shield Loki's created, the way it encircles the royal table.

What good would it do? Loki asks. His eyes are strangely blank, his mind even more so. Tony digs his fingers into his side and drags him to his feet.

I can help these people, he thinks. Let me help them.

One brief bolt of fear passes through Loki's head, revealing the strain he's under, trying to maintain the protective enchantment. *I cannot do both, he thinks. The shield—*

We can't stay shielded forever, Tony points out. Stop arguing with me on this and just do it! Please.

Loki's eyes close, and Tony feels it when they lose the protection they'd had. If he'd thought the heat was bad before, he was an idiot. It's more than mere heat; it's a physical weight pressing down on them. The only silver lining he can see is that magical fire doesn't seem to produce smoke—or at least not in the quantities he'd expect from a fire of this size.

It's an agonizing few seconds before the Iron Man suit comes barreling through a wall, its red-and-gold shell opening as it gets closer.

Just step in, Loki thinks. I will close it behind you.

Tony does so, heart pounding in his throat. What if they've done something to the suit? What if JARVIS isn't online? The armor alone can protect him for a few minutes, but he doesn't need that; he needs to protect everyone else.

"Sir," JARVIS says, and Tony's breath releases in a rush of pure relief. "You seem to be experiencing a problem."

"Small one," he says. "You got any bad ideas?"

He's already engaging the thrusters and rising above the worst of it, scanning over the occupants of the hall. He thinks some might already be dead: those near the edges of the room must have been victims of the worst of it. But there are still at least a hundred others, trapped and running for their lives.

"I would advise creating exit routes until the fire can be contained," JARVIS suggests.

Tony heeds the advice, starts blasting holes in the walls where the fire hasn't spread too high to get over. "Go!" he shouts to the panicked revelers below. He's hoping beyond hope that all Asgardians have similar healing factors to Thor and Loki, and that a few burns won't cause permanent damage.

When he looks back toward the royal table, Loki's got Rhodey and Nat under a forcefield. He appears to be arguing with Rhodey—if Tony had to guess, Rhodey's after the armor of his own.

But Frigga has stepped out of the protective bubble and is raising her own arms, eyes closed and hair blowing in an impossible wind. Tony hopes she's able to conjure carbon dioxide.

"JARVIS," he says again. "What've we got: water? Powder? Foam?"

“You did not design this suit with firefighting functionality, Sir,” JARVIS says. “Particularly not with the ability to fight fires of magical origin.”

“Fuck,” Tony hisses. “There isn’t a fire extinguisher in the world for this.”

He blasts through the ceiling, hoping to at least give the flames somewhere to go. Then he swoops low, shouting, “Grab on to me!” to the first people he sees. In their panic, they don’t question him—he gets a few hangers-on and just as quickly realizes it won’t be enough.

He flies the first few up and out of the hall, but he’s already trying to think through a new plan.

To do this, he thinks at Loki, would she have to be close by?

Yes, comes the reply.

How close?

You will not be able to find her, Loki thinks.

I don’t need to find her, I just need to break her concentration, Tony thinks. He doesn’t add that he’ll be using a largely untested feature of the suit, because Loki’s blank façade seems to be coming apart at the seams.

Within the palace or its grounds, Loki replies.

Good enough.

“Okay, JARVIS, it’s sonic disruptor time,” Tony says.

“Sir?”

“I know, I know. Largest radius you can. How high do you want me?”

“Another fifty feet should do,” JARVIS replies.

Tony puts on a burst of speed and gets into position. “Okay,” he says grimly, “here goes nothing.”

The Iron Man suit blocks him from facing the effect of the blast, but he knows it works through Loki’s reaction, which involves a panicked moment of disorientation followed by a gut-churning realization that the shield has dropped from his control. And there’s...something else, too, but it all happens too quickly for Tony to get a grasp on Loki’s unguarded mind. He’s got more important things to be worrying about, anyway.

It’s okay, Tony thinks. It’s halfway to a lie, but there’s nothing else he can think to say. It should have done the same to her.

Breathing heavily, he directs the suit back towards the charred, open-roofed hall, going as fast as he possibly can whilst maintaining directional control.

The fire isn't gone.

Tony's lungs constrict painfully until he realizes that, at the very least, it's reduced in size. There aren't any flames blocking the doorway anymore, and what fire remains doesn't appear to be magical in origin: it's producing smoke, and it's mostly centered around the areas where the candles had been. They must have been knocked over, either by Enchantress or during the chaos.

Still, there were a shit-ton of candles.

Frigga's on the ground, but as Tony watches she raises her hands once more and swirls of water rise from the palms. She hurls them in the direction of the worst-hit corners of the room, where only a few people remain. One's trapped under a fallen statue, and the rest are trying to help.

Tony flies over. It's not easy to lift the statue: its size and weight are a match for even the Iron Man suit, and he once again curses the Asgardians' ostentatious displays of wealth. But he manages to get it high enough that the injured party can be pulled out from beneath it and lifted to their feet by two of the surrounding feast-goers.

Although, Tony realizes, they aren't feast-goers—most of the lords and ladies are gone. They're all servants. He recognizes Sigrid, her arm around the injured person's waist, but the other four are unfamiliar to him.

"I'll get them out," he says, gesturing at the incapacitated one, who's groaning in pain.

"I can see why you wanted your armor back," Sigrid says, passing him the wounded party. Their legs look to have been crushed beneath the statue, so Tony dispenses with dignity and scoops them into his arms.

"It gets me out of scrapes," he says, before addressing the person in his arms: "Hold on."

He carries them away from the danger, this time through the doorway and along the walkway where panicked nobles are running in every which direction. He notices a few figures running *toward* the hall, one of whom he remembers from the healing of his side.

"Please," he says, hovering in her path. She looks startled at the appearance of a man-sized robot in her life, but she doesn't run away screaming. "They're hurt, I need you to—"

"Stark," she says. He's unsure of how she recognized him, not that it matters. "I will do what I can."

He leaves the servant with her, shouting a 'thanks!' over his shoulder as he spins the suit around in midair and flies away.

By the time he returns, Loki's helping his mother to direct water to what remains of the fire, although he doesn't appear to be producing any himself. This isn't so much of a surprise: Tony hadn't thought water magic was in Loki's repertoire.

"Is everyone safe?" he asks, flipping the faceplate of the armor up.

It's only Frigga and Loki left.

"Your companions went with my husband in an attempt to find Amora," Frigga says.

"She will be long gone," Loki mutters. He doesn't deign to look in Tony's direction as he speaks.

"Your help was instrumental," Frigga says, ignoring her son. "I thank you."

"You never know when a long-range sonic disruptor's going to come in handy," Tony laughs weakly, trying to deflect the compliment. There aren't any bodies left on the floor; he wonders where they've gone.

"It was foolish to provoke her further," Loki says. "If she knows it was you who interfered with her magic, she will retaliate."

"She's already tried to curse me to a lifetime of being insulted inside my own head," he responds. "And I'm ready for whatever else she tries to throw at me."

The stress of the fire seems to be taking its toll on Loki: his only response to Tony's bad attempt at levity is to project yet more anxiety into their shared mindscape, coupled with something that Tony thinks he'd term misery, for lack of a better word. It doesn't make sense, given the situation; Tony doesn't see what Loki has to be miserable about. He wouldn't have thought Loki would be bothered by the destruction of the hall or the loss of life, beyond the panic the situation had induced while it was ongoing.

"Loki?" Tony asks. He half-reaches out, not sure whether he still has tacit permission to touch. Through the metal of the suit, he doubts the bond could produce the same neurochemical effect, but he also doesn't like the sight of Loki stood there alone, ash streaked across his face and a barely perceptible tremor running through his body.

"Don't," Loki says harshly.

"Are you alright?"

"What concern of it is yours?" Loki snaps. "There is no *reason* for you to pretend to care."

Tony throws his arms up, frustrated.

"Of course I care about you, you stupid bastard!" he retorts. "Why in the hell would I be pretending?"

For not the first time, he resents the bond: this time, because it gives him a unique insight into the way he's just made Loki feel worse.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

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

“You should not have come here; your downfall will be of your own making; you will not be able to keep him in the dark forever,” Tony recites, counting each sentence off on his metal fingers.

“I don’t know, man,” Rhodey says. They’re outside the impromptu medical wing that’s been set up in the palace, both suited up. Odin had grudgingly acknowledged the utility of the Iron Man suits, given the fact that without them he’d be a pile of bone and ash, and as thanks he’s stuck them with guard duty. It’s not so bad; it gives Tony an excuse not to have to talk to Loki after his embarrassing outburst.

He almost shudders, thinking about it. How could he have been so pathetic? Loki’s made his views on the bond perfectly clear, and Tony shouting about how it’s given him mushy friendship feelings about the guy—well, no wonder he scarpered at the first opportunity.

“Come on,” Tony says. “If we figure out what she was talking about, maybe—”

“Maybe what?” Rhodey asks, voice made harsh by the armor’s modulator. “It just seemed like generic threats to me. You know: keep out or else.”

“It’s the last one,” Tony says, refusing to let the subject drop. “The one about keeping him in the dark. You think she meant Loki?”

“I don’t know. Are you keeping him in the dark about something?” Rhodey asks.

Tony shakes his head. “No, she couldn’t have been talking about the two of us. What would we be able to hide from each other, with the curse?”

Rhodey mutters something that sounds like, ‘a hell of a lot,’ but before Tony can respond he’s saying: “Could be that Odin’s lying to him, but this all seems like a Loki problem. And I thought you said you didn’t want to talk about him.”

“I don’t,” Tony says quickly. “The thing about the downfall was ominous, though.”

“It was *all* ominous,” Rhodey says. “The freaky witch lady got inside all our heads and said some creepy shit, and then she set the entire place on fire. I wasn’t thinking much about her choice of wording.”

“There’s got to be something we’re missing,” Tony insists.

“Oh, there’s a *lot* we’re missing,” Rhodey responds. “And everyone on this goddamn planet acts like being cryptic is their job, but we’re meant to be focused on getting your mind back to normal and getting *out*.”

Tony swallows. It's unfair to drag Rhodey into what he's planning, but he flips up his faceplate to murmur—

“I promised Loki I'd help get him out, too.”

“Of course you did.” Rhodey sounds exasperated, although he opens his own helmet and keeps his voice low enough that they won't be overheard. “And then what? You gonna invite him to join the Avengers? Or just install him in the Tower like a kept woman?”

“Christ, no. We'll go our separate ways. But I don't want his death on my hands,” Tony says. “I'm meant to be done with that.”

“Loki's not an innocent,” Rhodey points out. It's a reasonable enough statement, but Tony still thinks there's a world of difference between killing someone who's trying to kill you—as he'd done with the Chitauri and the Ten Rings—and letting Loki die. He's not sure he'll be able to fully articulate the difference to Rhodey, though. “No one could blame you for leaving him to face justice.”

“Justice,” Tony says, voice bitter.

Rhodey makes a sound that Tony knows means agreement. “I don't want him dead, either,” he admits. “Especially not when this whole thing seems like it's less about him and more about protecting Asgard's precious reputation.”

“But you think he deserves it.”

Rhodey catches his eye, and it's instantly clear that he's seeing past Tony's words and right to the question that's plagued Tony ever since the shrapnel started its long journey toward his heart.

“Loki's not beyond redemption,” Rhodey says. “He saved people's lives today, mine included. I mean, I wouldn't exactly say I *like* the guy, but...”

“Yeah,” Tony says, ignoring the stinging feeling in his eyes, “I know what you mean.”

Nat finds them, still at their posts, half an hour later. She's got Sigrid by her side.

“Hey,” Tony greets them. “You guys okay?”

“Well enough,” Sigrid replies.

“There's no trace of Enchantress anywhere,” Nat says, all business. “She must have fled as soon as you took her magic out.”

Her dress and hair are both singed, but she gives every appearance of being ready for anything.

“No surprises there,” Tony replies. “She's had the upper hand so far. She doesn't want to give that up.”

“Which means she won’t attack again tonight,” Nat points out. “You two can probably stop with the whole knights of the realm routine and get some rest.”

“I meant to ask,” Tony says, “where are you two sleeping?”

Nat sighs. “We won’t let you avoid him forever.”

“I didn’t ask for forever,” Tony says.

“Fine, you can come with us. Sigrid?”

“I’ve got nowhere else to be. The servant-master told me to go home, but…” Sigrid shakes her head. Below the streaks of ash and dust, her eyes are dull. “It doesn’t matter. I’d rather be here.”

Rhodey and Nat, it turns out, are in a room a couple of floors below Loki’s. Together.

“I didn’t realize you two lovebirds were sharing,” Tony smirks, taking in the double bed before doing one better and shucking his armor to flop down on it.

Nat rolls her eyes. “We thought it would be best if we weren’t split up. This way, Enchantress shouldn’t be able to pick us off one by one. Her, or the royal guard.”

Rhodey, stepping out of the War Machine armor, holds his hands up. “It was her idea. This place may be making me paranoid, but I’m not *that* paranoid yet.”

“Being paranoid’s kind of her thing,” Tony says.

“It’s got me this far.” Nat’s removing her half-burnt clothes, seemingly unconcerned by her audience. Tony wonders if they’re ever going to get past the ‘power play’ phase of the friendship.

“So you’re pretending to be a couple,” he surmises. “Smart.”

“Necessary,” Nat says.

“Be honest, sugarbuns,” Tony says, winding an arm around Rhodey’s waist to pull him down onto the bed, “if you had to pick an Avenger…”

“Yes, Tony, I love you best,” Rhodey says, gentle and teasing. “Though I wouldn’t say no to Thor.”

“Who among us would?” Tony agrees.

Sigrid clears her throat.

“Sorry for objectifying the crown prince,” Tony says quickly.

“If we could *focus*,” Nat suggests.

But Tony doesn't want to focus; not when getting down to business means he'll have to go back to his own room—Loki's room—all the sooner. Loki's mind is still a tidal wave of gloom, and Tony's not sure he can bear another night like the one before. Maybe he can convince Nat and Rhodey to let him bunk with them, even though the bed wasn't made with threesomes in mind.

It's not small by any means: nothing in the palace is done by halves, and this room is no exception. It's a little more cramped than Loki's, but it isn't decorated like a lair, and it opens onto a gorgeous balcony with a view of the Rainbow Bridge.

"Nice place you got here," he comments.

Nat just gives him an unimpressed look, which is somehow only enhanced by the fact that she's half-naked. In the corner of the room, Sigrid has gone very pink. Tony doesn't think anyone could get her to tear her gaze away for love nor money.

"Do you think Enchantress intended to kill Loki tonight?"

Tony shifts uncomfortably, tucking himself closer to Rhodey. "Maybe," he says. "Or maybe she was just lashing out."

He wonders, briefly, if staying away from Loki is putting him at additional risk. But Loki had made it very clear that he didn't want Tony's protection—that he wants a reprieve from Tony's cloying concern.

"Maybe we should try to decipher what Amora said." Nat, now in a black, Asgardian-style nightgown, sits at the foot of the bed. She gestures for Sigrid to join them and the girl, still blushing furiously, does so.

"That's exactly what I told Rhodey."

"Yeah, yeah, savor the last *I told you so* you'll get in a while," Rhodey says.

"*You should not have come here*," Nat begins. "Relatively unambiguous. Do you think the 'you' is singular or plural?"

"As in, does it refer to Loki or all of us?" Tony asks. "I don't know, but probably Loki. Frigga told me they used to be close, because apparently Asgard has its own Frigga School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and they were both students."

"Right," Nat says. "And the timeline of that is: they were friends as children, until Amora cast her spell on Thor? We're missing some steps."

"You want to find out who started it?" Tony asks.

"My bet's on Loki," mutters Rhodey.

"He doesn't want to talk about," Tony says. "Trust me. He almost bit his mom's head off when she brought it up."

“Yeah, there’s a lot he doesn’t want to talk about,” Rhodey sighs.

“Hey, Sigrid?” Tony asks, poking her ankle with his foot. “What do you know about it? All this intrigue in the palace, seems like something a servant might see.”

“I am not as old as Prince Loki,” Sigrid says. “I only know the rumors.”

“Lucky for you, I *love* rumors.”

She smiles, shedding the timidity of before. “I will tell it the way my mother told me.” She stops to clear her throat, and then the story begins. Immediately, Tony gets the sense that it must have been a bedtime story she heard often as a child. “The Prince and the Witch were friends in youth, it is true, but their friendship was never untinged by rivalry. Each was obsessed with being more powerful than the other. They set about proving their power, setting challenges for each other—showing off.”

“Sounds about right,” Tony mutters.

“What started as friendly competition soured, the older the two got. The Witch set her eyes upon the other prince, and although the younger did not want the Witch, he was jealous. He wanted admiration, and she had denied it to him.”

Tony can imagine it. Loki’s thoughts about Thor are never free from envy, after all.

Sigrid continues: “The Prince cared for his brother, as much as he could care about anyone, but he could not help himself. He taunted her. *You could never make him love you*, he told her, the words ringing of their childhood competitions. She set about proving him wrong.”

“That’s when she cast the spell on Thor?” Rhodey asks.

“Supposedly,” Sigrid says. “I’ve heard different versions over the years. In some, it’s Loki who baits Amora into enchanting Thor. In others, she does it by herself, and it’s his retaliation that destroys the friendship beyond repair. Sometimes—” She glances quickly at Tony and then away. “—Loki really was in love with her, and so the betrayal is doubly vicious. My sister always used to tell it with them as star-crossed lovers, destined to find their way back to one another.”

“Doesn’t seem like much chance of that, given the attempted murder,” Tony says.

“My mother always said that the Prince was incapable of love,” Sigrid continues. “That there was something wrong with him from birth.”

Not wrong, Tony wants to say. *Just different*. But the Frost Giant secret is even more sensitive here on Asgard, and no matter how frustrated Tony is with Loki, he’s not about to spread that rumor.

“Most of that lines up with what Loki already told us,” Nat says. “Her control over Thor being the inciting incident of the rivalry—we need to know what his retaliation was.”

Sigrid shakes her head with a sigh. “That story’s even less reliable. Some say he transformed her so that she was hideous, and every time she’s been seen since then, her true face has been hidden behind a glamor. Or he stole her . . . ability to make children. The way Halla’s mother told it, he forced himself on her, but I think that was only so she’d be wary of men.” She smiles ruefully.

“Halla?” Nat asks.

Sigrid’s hand twitches against the bed and a grimace briefly mars her face. “My friend.”

Nat’s hand comes up to tilt Sigrid’s face in her direction. It’s not subtle, but Tony doubts that will impact its effectiveness.

“What happened to her, Sigrid?” she asks.

“She left,” Sigrid says, eyes downcast. “We lived together, in a house close by. A few weeks ago, I came home to find her loading a bag with the food that was supposed to last us through the winter.” Tears glimmer on her lower lashes but don’t fall. “I begged her to stay, to at least explain where she was going. We’ve known each other since we were girls. I was the daughter of a palace servant, and her father was one of the king’s personal guard. Ever since then we’ve been inseparable. I never thought she’d just—disappear.”

“That’s why you don’t want to go home,” Nat murmurs, and Sigrid nods.

“She left behind everything but the food. Her clothes, the dagger her father gave her. It’s all still there, waiting for her to come back.” Her breathing hitches. “I’m sorry, you don’t need to hear this.”

“Actually,” Nat says, “I think we might.”

She turns her gaze on Rhodey and Tony. “The timing lines up.”

“The gender doesn’t,” Tony points out.

Nat seems unconcerned by this technicality. “Can you tell Loki to come here? Tell him we’ve got a lead—that should cheer him up if he’s still sulking.”

A childish impulse rises in him: he’s going to refuse. But Rhodey puts a firm hand on his arm, heading off his protests before they can start.

He reaches out, tentatively, through the bond. *Can you come here?*

For what purpose? is the immediate, surly reply.

Tony doesn’t bother to respond, knowing he won’t have to wait long before Loki’s curiosity gets the better of him. He’s reliable that way.

“Five,” he says, “four, three, two—”

Loki appears.

“How nice of you to join us,” Tony greets him, trying to project enough indifference to cancel out whatever Loki can feel through the bond.

Loki’s eyes rove over the four of them in the bed, and his eyebrows climb to impressive heights. He remains standing.

“For what reason have you summoned me?” he asks imperiously. He’s not looking at Tony, instead addressing his words to the room at large.

“Does Enchantress’ love magic work on women?” Nat asks.

Loki’s eyebrows, impossibly, go higher.

“I do not believe so,” he says slowly. “Her enthrallment is romantic in nature—”

“And that means it’s always heterosexual?” Tony asks.

Loki shifts on his feet. “It is not—”

“I thought you said Asgard *isn’t* homophobic,” Tony says.

“I never said that,” Loki snaps. “It isn’t like your planet—it matters not whom we choose to share our bodies with.”

“What about relationships?” Nat asks shrewdly. “Marriage?”

“It is not...the done thing,” Loki says.

Sigrid cuts in, her eyes shining with possibility. “Do you mean to say it’s different where you’re from?”

“Um,” Tony says.

He thinks of how Rhodey’s never officially come out to him—or, indeed, to anyone—lips first sealed by Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and now by his fear of losing the respect of his fellow soldiers. It’s a bad break, and Tony’s never known quite how to deal with it, with the secrecy and the shame. They joke around a lot, always with the sheen of plausible deniability hanging over them. Tony doesn’t know if Rhodey thinks of himself as gay, bisexual, or any other applicable label; the only reason he knows Rhodey likes men at all is because they’d both slept with the same guy (at different times) during their final year at MIT. For as long as Tony’s known him, Rhodey’s never seriously dated anyone—at least not publicly. Tony doesn’t think he’s lonely, exactly: he loves his work, and he’s not lacking for friends. But he’s never given himself the chance to look for something more, the way Tony had with Pepper, and Tony’s inclined to place the blame squarely at a homophobic society’s feet.

It’s different for Tony: he’s been ‘out’, for a given value of the word, ever since the first pap pic of him kissing a man surfaced when he was a teenager. The media periodically forgets, presumably because of how uneasily it aligns with his ‘playboy’ persona. (Dating Pepper had not given them similar problems, because it meant the tabloids could publish near-constant fabrications about who he was cheating on her with.) When they remember, it’s usually to tie

it in with the hedonism of the super-wealthy: orgies in Stark mansion; high-priced escorts of all genders; the wild child who'll sleep with anything that moves. From the age of sixteen onwards, he'd endured lecture after lecture about the damage he was doing to his public image from Howard and then, in a seamless post-death switch, Obie. Eventually, the lesson had sunk in. He hasn't slept with a man since 1998, for his sins.

"Different, yes," Nat says, thankfully taking over. "Not perfect."

"Not even close," Rhodey mutters.

Sigrid nods, accepting this latest disappointment with grace. "It wasn't so bad," she says. "We never cared much that we couldn't tell anyone. It was enough to be together."

"And then she left." Nat's words are blunt, but they're purposeful. "Without warning, without explaining why. Taking necessities but no personal items."

"Amora prefers—" Loki begins.

"Leave her preferences out of it," Nat says. "Right now, Enchantress' priority is not being found. She knew that we'd come looking for her, and that women would be a blind spot in our search. It's what I'd do, to throw people off my trail. Do the unexpected."

"It fits," Tony says. "But how are we supposed to find Halla?"

Loki sighs. "You truly love her?" he asks Sigrid. The words seem to almost pain him.

"I have my entire life," Sigrid says, meeting his eyes fiercely.

I hate love magic, Loki thinks, and Tony almost falls off the bed at the shock of being directly addressed.

Out loud, Loki says: "I can find her."

They decide to attempt a night's sleep before they go after Enchantress. After all, what have they got to lose besides a few hours' privacy?

Now that an end's in sight, Loki seems less desperate to be rid of the curse. He even deigns to lie on his back when they go to bed, instead of turning away. He doesn't instigate touch, but he's close enough that the pull of the bond is subdued, nothing more than a slight prickling on Tony's skin. Tony doesn't give in to the urge to touch, either; he's far too consumed with trying to keep the conflicted swirl of his emotions to himself, futile as the attempt may be.

Tomorrow, if all goes well, he'll be alone in his head again. He won't have to work to hide things anymore; he'll have the shield of his face to hide behind. No one will know what he's feeling unless he wants them to. There's relief in that, but there's also a longing that he wants, desperately, to ignore: a longing to have someone *with* him.

No, he realizes. Not 'someone'. Loki.

He turns his head sharply, trying to read Loki's expression in the darkness—to ascertain whether any of that has bled through. Loki's not asleep, but he's working hard to appear so. And his mind is relatively undisturbed, just some residual anxiety and frustration floating around. Nothing like Tony's.

He should cut this line of thinking off at the roots, but he can't help himself. He'd already known that the curse wasn't bothering him as much as it should, that he'd gotten used to it alarmingly quickly, and that his general feelings toward Loki had changed the longer he spent wrapped up in the bond with him. Somehow, putting all three of those things together has thrown him for a loop. So much for being the smartest person on the planet; he's fairly sure there are thirteen-year-olds with more emotional intelligence.

But what can he say? 'Hey, Loki, this curse that you despise with every fiber of your being? I actually quite like it. Would you consider staying like this indefinitely?'

Of course, keeping the bond is an impossibility. The 'perks', such as they are, are more than mitigated by the inability to be apart, and the emotional torture of the past few days—feeling like an unwanted guest in somebody else's head.

He can't ask Loki for an intimacy he's not willing to give. Besides, maybe once the curse is gone he'll feel differently. The magic could be—and probably *is*, Enchantress' involvement considered—messing up his judgment, making him feel things that he wouldn't if he was in his right mind. He'd felt drawn to Loki before the curse, sure, but it was more out of curiosity than affection. If he'd told the Tony Stark of a month ago that he wanted to be *friends* with the guy, let alone share mindspace, he'd have been met with nothing but disbelief.

And even if what he feels lasts past the termination of the bond, he'll get over it. He'll have to.

Chapter End Notes

completely unrelated bit of backstory: rhodey did have romantic feelings for tony in the past (post-MIT, pre-iron man) and they might well have been returned, but on account of tony's *complete and utter inability to differentiate platonic feelings from romantic ones*, their chances were scuppered. again, just a fun bonus fact. nothing to do with what you just read.

although i guess that means there's an au of this story with endgame lokitonyrhodey. i'd read it

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

This plan is definitely going to work.

Chapter Notes

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

The fact that he gets any sleep at all is a minor miracle, but the truth is that he can't bring himself to play the game of chicken for a second time. Even as Loki remains stubbornly conscious, Tony allows himself to give in to the pull of exhaustion. Sleeping provides a welcome respite from all the *thinking*, even if his dreams are a confusing jumble of disturbing images: blood, fire, snapping bones and blooming bruises. He's able to shake the nightmares off as soon as he wakes—he's generally fine unless they're too specific—but Loki's subdued, almost in a daze.

It's nothing like the insolent silence of yesterday. This morning, it's as though everything Loki's feeling is happening through a film of static, even as they lie facing each other, noses a bare few inches from touching.

"You okay?" Tony asks, and at the sound of his voice the emotions slide into clearer focus: Loki is apprehensive, predominantly. And tired.

"I shall be."

Tony fills in the blank easily enough; Loki's looking forward to having his brain back to himself. And it's not like he can blame the guy.

"I thought you'd get *some* sleep," Tony says, frowning. "You feel exhausted."

Loki turns away.

"You need not worry," he says.

Tony reaches out and, cautiously, takes a loose hold of Loki's wrist. "If you need more rest..."

"I don't."

"Alright."

But Loki's accepting the touch, and it seems to be soothing his anxiety somewhat—as far as Tony can tell, at least. Loki's emotions have a way of fluctuating.

With a sinking feeling, he realizes that all this knowledge he's picked up about Loki will be useless soon enough. Once they've gotten Loki off this godforsaken planet and gone their separate ways, Tony will be left with a corner of his mind dedicated to unpicking all of Loki's mental idiosyncrasies. He doesn't think he'll be able to stop; the merry-go-round of Loki's emotions won't suddenly become less fascinating when he's not steeped in it 24/7.

His hand tightens. Loki pulls away.

They're supposed to meet at Sigrid's house; there, apparently, Halla's personal effects will intensify the magic and make her easier to find, although the spell of location mainly centers on Sigrid loving Halla so much that her very soul is drawn to her.

Tony can understand why this isn't Loki's favorite type of magic.

Their first obstacle arrives early, in the form of palace guards.

"Tell me how we're meant to find Enchantress if you won't let us leave," Tony says. He's not in the full armor, because outward signs of aggression are still a big no-no, but there's a gauntlet wrapped reassuringly around his forearm—and, of course, Loki can summon the rest of the suit with a thought if need be. He makes sure to subtly draw attention to the lightly-battered metal, bringing his arms to rest in front of his torso.

One of the guards—Tony would describe him as being in his mid-twenties and Asian, if either of those descriptors meant a damn thing on Asgard—looks nervous, but the other takes over easily enough. He's older, grizzled, and built like a solid wall.

"Our orders weren't to find the Witch. Our orders were to keep *him* secure," he says.

"Yeah, great job so far," Tony snipes, and the senior guard takes a step forward.

Before anything can kick off, three figures are between him and Tony: Rhodey, Nat and, to everyone's shock (including his own) Loki. Both he and Nat have drawn knives from locations unknown.

Tony's mouth twitches up into a half-smile, smug but humorless. "Looks like I've got some guards of my own," he says.

"What if we had an escort?" Rhodey suggests quickly, words almost on top of Tony's. "Someone from the palace to keep an eye on us."

As far as solutions go, it's a bit 'kicking the can down the road' for Tony's tastes, but it'll have to do. It's not like they've made any progress on how they're going to facilitate Loki's escape, after all.

The two guards exchange a look, then simultaneously turn suspicious gazes on Loki.

"How can we be sure this isn't a trick?"

By now, Tony should be getting used to being forced to empathize with Loki. But the thought of this being the way *everyone* treated him: always with suspicion, always thinking the worst of him—Tony’s not going to pretend Loki hasn’t earned his reputation, but it must *suck*.

“You can’t,” he says. “Because you’ve already made up your mind about him. But you have my word as—” Jesus, he can’t bring himself to say ‘king’. “—Ambassador for Earth that we’re not about to abscond with your prisoner. If you need me to put it in writing...”

The phrase ‘about to’ is being forced to do a lot of legwork, but Tony always prefers his lies with a heavy dose of truth to obfuscate. He notices that Loki’s looking at him approvingly, so it must have worked.

“I’ll go with them,” says the nervous one.

“Great!” Tony says. “Glad that’s sorted.”

“Armod,” says the first guard, warningly. “We have our orders.”

His hand is on the hilt of his sword.

“You Asgardians never met a problem you didn’t want to solve with violence, huh?” Tony says. “We’re not looking for some sort of battle royale here. We’ve got a problem, know how to solve it, and you’re in our way.”

“There will be no violence,” says a new voice.

“Heimdall,” Loki says, sounding not at all relieved to be saved from committing murder before noon.

“Loki,” Heimdall replies sedately. “You will do what you must.”

Tony wonders if he’s a Seer, too. It’s that, or Heimdall’s just uniquely qualified at sounding like he knows everything, and appearing where he’s needed.

“Thank you for the *permission*,” Loki snarls. Somehow, he’s more aggressive toward the person who’s helping him than he had been to either of the guards.

“Go with them,” Heimdall addresses Armod. “Help them, if they have need of it.”

Armod looks bewildered and a little frightened, but he nods and awkwardly shuffles into place behind Tony. The senior guard’s face is quickly turning puce.

“The king *himself*—” he starts, but cuts himself off when Heimdall holds up a hand.

“Do you presume to know more about the All-Father’s wishes than I?” he asks. He doesn’t say it threateningly, or even with any particular inflection, but Tony still feels the hairs on the back of his neck rise with the knowledge of the power behind it. It’s not that he knows a whole lot about Heimdall, or about his role in the kingdom; it’s just that Heimdall exudes the air of someone that you know not to fuck with.

So that's how they get out of that scrape. Tony has to wonder whether they'll be able to rely on Heimdall going forward, or whether they're truly on their own.

Armod is a bit of a Loki fanboy, it turns out. During the five-minute walk to Sigrid's house he manages to work up the courage to ask (undeterred by the lack of response each time) *dozens* of questions about the sort of magical bullshit that Tony had erroneously assumed was common knowledge on Asgard.

More and more, he's getting the sense that magic is something of a taboo, or perhaps only accessible to the upper echelons of society like Loki and Amora. Maybe the private magic tutoring Loki had given them on the spaceship had given them more of an insight than the majority of Asgardians could ever hope for.

It's just speculation, of course. But Tony hopes he'll get a chance to press Loki on the issue before they split up.

Sigrid meets them at the door. She clearly hasn't slept, but her eyes are no less bright for it; and no wonder, when today's the day they'll (hopefully) get her life-partner back.

"You doing alright?" he asks.

She nods. "A little nervous. I've never been involved in a spell before."

"It will not hurt," is all the reassurance Loki gives before he's sweeping past her and into the house.

Tony, shrugging, follows.

It's a small, cramped affair; Loki's head brushes the rafters at his full height, though the rest of them are perfectly fine. The general impression is one of coziness, with a stone fireplace and rushes scattered across the stone floor. And clutter, everywhere clutter. Books—heavy-looking tomes—are piled all around, clothes hang from the rafters, and no surface is free of ornamentation.

Sigrid offers them all clay cups of what smells like cold green tea. She already knows Armod, having seen him around the palace, but is understandably confused by his presence until Nat explains the averted altercation. There's also breakfast, of a sort, on offer: warm bread and green-tinged cheese that Tony can't help but be wary of. He helps himself to the bread, which has a sourdough tang to it.

When he looks up, Loki is delicately running his hands over Sigrid's possessions, and there's a small throb of power perceivable through their link.

"Does he always do this?" Sigrid asks out of the corner of her mouth. She's close to Tony, and her eyes are attached covetously to the gauntlet on his forearm.

“I think it’s for the spell,” he shrugs, and then, offering his arm to her: “You want to touch it?”

She slides her fingers over the metal, a mirror to the careful way Loki’s touching her things. It’s as she’s tracing the rim of the repulsor in the center, and Tony’s quietly explaining the conversion of excess electrons into muons, that Loki says, “This belonged to her?”

He’s holding up a dagger.

Tony snorts. “Of course that’s what you’d gravitate to.”

Loki quells him with a look.

“Yes,” Sigrid says. “That’s Halla’s.”

“And it was important to her?”

“It belonged to her father.”

“But was it important to *her*?” Loki presses, clearly not one for trusting the sanctity of paternal bonds.

“Yes.”

Loki’s eyes tilt downward, absorbing the sight of Sigrid’s hand on Tony’s. His feelings are inscrutable, but he’s always been a little weird about the Iron Man armor. Tony’s never been able to tell whether he hates or admires it.

“It will suffice,” Loki says.

Sigrid stands up and moves closer to him, a tad hesitant. Tony can’t blame her—it’s not like Loki’s given her any reason to be comfortable around him—but Loki is aggrieved all the same. When she reaches him, he takes hold of her wrist with uncharacteristic gentleness. In his other hand, the dagger lies flat, horizontal. The blade wobbles where it hangs in the air, but Loki’s control is absolute. He guides Sigrid’s hand to lie atop the hilt of the weapon. It’s an ornate hilt, Tony notices, silver and patterned with some kind of water scene.

“Close your eyes. You need to think of her,” Loki instructs. “Think of the moment you fell in love. Think of the moment when you realized you wished to join your life with hers. Concentrate on her face. The sound of her voice. The—” Tony is delighted to see a blush working its way across Loki’s high cheekbones.

“Think about kissing her,” Tony guesses, keeping his voice low enough that it won’t disrupt the energy of the room. “How it feels to hold her.”

The dagger has taken on an ethereal shine; it’s difficult to look directly at it.

But there’s a strain that’s both visible on Loki’s face and in his mind. He’s struggling to work as a conduit for the power of Sigrid’s feelings; as Tony watches, his shoulders begin to shake.

Can I help? Tony asks, mental voice tinged with worry. He can tell that Loki thinks this isn't going to work.

It takes Loki a moment to respond, and when he does the words come across as they would from one gritting their teeth: *Touch me.*

Tony hastens to obey. He approaches Loki and, unsure where to touch, chooses to stick with their usual; he clasps his hand around Loki's free wrist, loose enough not to impact circulation but tight enough that his presence is unmistakable, unforgettable.

Instantly, he's pulled into the spell. That's the way it feels, like he leaves his body and steps into a different plane of being, untethered to physical attributes. Everything is sensation.

He sees a tall, dark-skinned woman who must be Halla. She's fragmented: here is a hand, there an impression of her eyes sparkling with laughter. The images begin to coalesce into wholes: now he sees Halla standing before him, her braided hair piled atop her head and her hand reaching toward him—or toward someone, at least. Next, she's in repose, on her side and naked but for a blanket over her legs. Tony tries to look away, to give this woman he's never met her privacy, but there is nowhere to look: it doesn't feel as though he has eyes, or a head.

Worse than the visuals are the ghostly sensations, echoes of what Sigrid must feel for Halla. Love so intense it makes him want to cry; desire so private it makes him want to beg forgiveness for being aware of it. And happiness—so much happiness. The uncomplicated joy of childhood, all mixed up with the mature bliss of a simple life with the person you love.

It's too much, Tony thinks, but even before the words are fully out he becomes aware of Loki's presence, and of Sigrid's. They're together. They can get through this.

Tony and Loki's feelings are both subsumed under the weight of Sigrid's, swept into a state where none of them can be separated from the others'. And, after a moment, Tony stops trying to fight it.

When his eyes open—he hadn't realized he'd closed them—his second hand is on the dagger, which is no longer glowing but does appear to be pointing in a different direction than it had been before.

He's also on his knees, as are the other two. Their breathing, in sync, is loud and harsh, audible even through the ringing in Tony's ears.

His right hand, which he'd been sure was on Loki's wrist, is now holding his hand. Their fingers are tightly interlocked—so tight it's almost painful. Tony wonders which one of them had instigated that. He suspects that it must have, unknowingly, been him. It's difficult to regret taking the liberty, though, when his hand feels pleasantly tingly and warm, and the feeling is spreading up his arm and into his chest. He'd missed having this.

He looks to his left and sees that silent tears are flooding down Sigrid's face. His own face feels slightly wet.

“Tones,” says Rhodey, closer than he’d been the last time Tony was aware of him. “Hey, you’re alright, c’mere.”

Tony collapses gratefully into his embrace, though he keeps his hand interlocked with Loki’s as he does so.

“How—long?” he asks. His voice feels hoarse, like he hasn’t used it for days.

“Only a few minutes,” Rhodey assures him.

“Three and twenty-eight seconds,” Nat specifies. Tony makes a noise of gratitude.

“Did it work?” Rhodey asks.

It’s Sigrid who responds. “It worked,” she says. “I can feel her.”

An hour later, they still haven’t left Sigrid’s house. Tony hasn’t let go of Loki’s hand. And they’re no closer to coming up with a plan.

“Our advantage is in our numbers,” Rhodey insists. “If we come at her all at once—”

“She will crush us,” says Loki. His voice is still quiet, still weak, and Tony finds himself rubbing a thumb over the back of his hand soothingly.

It’s clear that Loki has taken the brunt of the spell’s ill-effects. His condition hasn’t improved over the course of the hour, although Tony and Sigrid are both feeling much better. Loki is pallid and clammy, and he keeps leaning in to Tony like he’s the only thing holding him up.

“What’s your suggestion, then?” Rhodey asks.

“I made one,” Loki says. “You found it to be distasteful.”

“Yep, still not killing her,” Tony says.

“We can incapacitate her,” Nat says. “Between the Iron Man suits and your magic…”

“Right,” Tony says. “I can use the sonic disruptor again.”

“Don’t you think she will have prepared to face your little trick?” Loki says, more weary than accusatory. “There are thousands of spells she could use in order to block your cursed sound from ever reaching her ears.”

“Besides,” Nat says, “you’d be taking both her *and* Loki out for the count even if it did work.”

“Damn,” Tony curses. “Six against one shouldn’t be this hard.”

“It won’t *be* six against one,” Loki reminds him. “Besides Halla, there will be other enchanted soldiers to do her bidding.”

“Okay,” Tony mutters. “Okay. Loki, can you make yourself invisible?”

“Of course.”

“Could you make someone else invisible, too?”

Loki hesitates. “Perhaps.”

“You and Nat should go first, scope out the situation,” Tony says. “We need to have a fuller understanding of what we’re up against, otherwise we’re just going to keep going around in circles.”

“Amora might be able to sense my presence, even if I was concealed,” Loki says.

“Just me, then,” Nat says.

“And me,” Sigrid says. “I want to see her. And I can feel her—pulling me towards her.”

So can Tony. It’s not a strong feeling—not as strong as it seems to be for Sigrid, at least, but his feet are itching to move west, to complete the circuit of Sigrid-and-Halla. For him, it’s just a vague directional pull, but Sigrid insists that she knows Halla to be in the wild, dangerous forest on the outskirts of the city.

“No one goes in,” she’d explained. “Children dare each other to take a few steps beyond the Dark Tree, but no further. It’s full of the most hideous beasts.”

Loki had verified the general location and the stories about what the forest contained. And even if that wasn’t enough, the dagger hasn’t stopped pointing its blade in the same direction, no matter anyone’s attempts to turn it around.

At least, in the scope of worries they have to contend with, they won’t have to fear getting lost.

After a few *more* hours of arguing back and forth, they call Bruce. By then, Loki’s regained enough of his magical strength to summon the three sets of Iron Man armor, and Tony’s able to negotiate a hologram out of JARVIS.

“Nice of you to get in touch,” Bruce says dryly.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s only been a few days,” Tony deflects. They’d dropped Bruce a line to say that they were alive as soon as they were able, so his only objection can be to not being updated on their adventure. Which, Tony considers, is fair enough.

“Let me guess,” Bruce says, “you need my help with something.”

“If you’re offering,” Tony says.

He explains the situation with only six or seven tangents—which, despite Rhodey’s eye-rolls, is a new personal record—and when he gets to the end Bruce is almost vibrating with

excitement.

“I should’ve come with you,” he says.

“What about your jolly green friend?” Tony points out.

“Fuck him,” Bruce says. He’s usually so soft-spoken that it’s always a delight to hear him swear. “The things you’re describing—I could never have *imagined*—”

“Yeah, yeah, put your science hard-on away. We’re trying to figure out how to take down the Wicked Witch of the East.”

“And you’ve tried dropping a house on her?” Bruce smiles. “Look, if it’s tactical support you’re looking for, you should probably try Cap.”

“Why, is he with you?”

“No, he’s on his morning run,” Bruce says. “But he usually takes his phone with him.”

“J—let’s make this a group call,” Tony says.

“Of course, Sir.”

Steve picks up on the second ring, sounding just the slightest bit out of breath.

“Tony?”

“Sure, big guy. You busy?”

“I’ve got some time to kill before my running buddy catches up,” Steve says.

“I’m sure you do. We just need your famed tactical mind for a minute.”

Steve seems mostly bewildered by the tales of sorcerers and enchanted fires and love magic, but once Bruce suggests he view it as any other military operation he brightens right up. He seconds the plan to send a couple of ‘soldiers’ to scout the enemy encampment, though he doesn’t like the idea of involving a ‘civilian’ (Sigrid).

“She doesn’t have any training!” he says, right as another figure jogs into view, right behind his shoulder.

“Steve?” the man asks.

“Sorry, Sam. Avengers business,” Steve responds, while Tony tries to remember if he’s ever seen this guy before.

“Anything I can help with?”

“The more the merrier,” Tony says. “And you are?”

“Sam Wilson. A friend of Steve’s,” says the newcomer.

Rhodey edges closer, studying the hologram.

“Sergeant Wilson?” he asks.

“Colonel Rhodes,” Sam responds with a note of surprise, and his hand goes halfway to forming a salute before he stops himself.

“Oh, good, it’s a reunion,” Tony says. A few feet away, slumped over the table, Loki has his head in his arms. Tony can tell he’s not sleeping by virtue of the overwhelming feeling of impatience he’s exuding. “Look, we’re just trying to figure out if we should hit this alien sorceress all at once or whether we should try something sneakier.”

“Um,” Wilson says. “Yeah, that seems pretty far above my pay grade.”

“How effective is your armor against magic?” Bruce cuts in.

“Infuriating,” Loki mutters.

“Sorry?” Tony says.

“It will be able to withstand all but a direct attack from Amora,” he clarifies.

“Okay, so I just have to avoid getting directly attacked by the person I’m antagonizing. Seems easy enough,” Tony says.

Bruce hums. “Assuming her focus will be on Loki, that could work. Especially if you, Jim, and Natasha all have armor.”

‘Jim?’ Tony mouths at Rhodey, who shrugs.

“It’s too risky,” Steve says. “Especially if she has these minions you mentioned under her control. They could end up in the line of fire.”

“I hate magic,” Tony says.

“You’ve mentioned,” Loki responds.

“It bears repeating. If we knock her out, what’s the odds of her control over them staying intact?”

“If she has used a potion, or a physical charm, they would remain under her thrall regardless of her mental state,” Loki says. “However, potions and charms are unpredictable. Amora prefers to enter her victims’ minds herself, and maintaining her presence there requires focus.”

“Does that mean she’s in our minds all the time?” Tony asks.

“Sorry, what?” Sam asks, and is ignored.

“No,” Loki says. “The Curse of Knowledge is self-sustaining. Once she created the connection between our minds, her involvement was no longer necessary. Controlling someone, on the other hand, requires constant supervision.”

Tony tries to nod as though any of this makes sense.

“In that case we should probably lead with the sonic disruptor,” Tony says. “Even if she’s warded against it, it’s worth a shot. Armod—” And when he looks at the man, he realizes he’s grabbed a piece of parchment and is taking copious notes. “—you’ll be in charge of getting her victims to safety.”

Armod nods.

“Loki, you’ll have to keep her attention on you, and the rest of us will back you up. Any weaknesses we should know about?”

Loki sighs. “Amora thrives on strong emotions. Try not to have any.”

“Great advice,” Tony says. “Bruce? Steve? Any closing thoughts.”

“It’s a reckless plan,” Steve says instantly.

“Okay, sure, but be honest—when *haven’t* you thought one of my plans was reckless?” Tony points out.

“It sounds good to me,” Wilson says.

“See, your new friend likes it,” Tony says. “And I’m gonna hold that stamp of approval dear. Bruce?”

“It’s risky. Just...try not to get yourselves killed,” Bruce sighs.

“Love you too.”

Bruce’s answering smile is wan. “If you’re not back here by this weekend, I’m going to start work on the Hulk sedative without you.”

Tony gasps. “You *wouldn’t*.”

“Make it home soon and I won’t.”

Bruce hangs up before any more can be said—but Tony knows what he means.

“I won’t labor the point,” Steve says. “But remember not to let her distract you, Tony.”

Tony knows Steve means well, so he doesn’t allow himself to take offense. Instead, he offers Steve a lazy salute and a, “Yes, Cap’n,” that makes both Steve and his friend smile.

“See you soon,” Steve says, signing off.

It’s Sigrid who breaks the ensuing silence.

“How did you *do* that?” she asks. “Those people were—they were on *Midgard*, weren’t they? And you were talking to them.”

It breaks the tension as effectively as any bad joke Tony could’ve made, and he finds himself grinning as he explains phone calls and holograms and the combination thereof.

“...and it’s thanks to Loki that we can do long-distance calls,” he concludes.

During his explanation, Loki’s helped Rhodey and Nat into their suits of armor. It’ll be the fastest way to travel to the edge of the Big Bad forest, with each flying member of the party taking a passenger.

But before donning his own suit, Tony has to ask: “You sure you’re ready?”

Loki’s still not feeling his best—but he hasn’t been at his peak for days. It’s as though the curse is draining him, sapping him of power even as Tony remains mostly unaffected. He wishes there was something he could do, but if he’s the cause of the problem—

Loki lays a hand on his arm, the first time he’s willingly done so since in days.

“She won’t touch you,” he says, quiet but vehement.

Tony doesn’t know what to say, so he doesn’t say anything. And then Loki’s pulling his hand away and Tony’s encasement of metal is fitting itself around him, and the time for words is past.

Now’s the time to fight to get their minds back.

Chapter End Notes

next week: the confrontation! i'm sure nothing bad will happen

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The confrontation.

Chapter Notes

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

The Dark Tree lives up to its name. It's coal black, standing taller than any tree Tony's ever seen on Earth, with branches that droop until they brush the ground. Branches is the wrong word for them; they look more like tendrils, and Tony could swear they're moving in a way that can't solely be attributed to the wind.

"It is not malignant," Loki says, sensing his apprehension. "It's just a tree."

"Yeah?" Tony says, setting them both down a few feet away from the edge of the forest. Loki, having put up with the undignified bridal carry for the distance between Sigrid's house and the forest, immediately puts a few steps of distance between them, which is fine. Tony doesn't mind.

They're followed by Rhodey, who's carrying Armod, and then Nat and Sigrid. Tony takes the helmet off, but leaves the rest of the Iron Man armor intact for now. He doesn't think they're close enough to Enchantress that she could detect them, but that does little to assuage his unease.

"I came here often as a child," Loki says. "So did Amora."

"Together?" Tony asks.

"It was a quiet spot where we could practice spells without...encountering anyone," Loki says. His eyes have a faraway quality to them, and Tony can feel his nostalgia drifting across the link between them. "We were rarely disturbed."

"Sounds nice."

"It is also where Thor came looking for us, the day she cursed him," Loki continues, and Tony winces in sympathy.

"So," Nat says, obviously uninterested in reminiscing, "how do we go about this invisibility spell? Should I keep the armor on?"

"No," Loki replies. "You will have to leave it behind."

Nat doesn't look thrilled about this, when the suit parts to allow her out of its confines. "If she realizes I'm there, I won't have many options to defend myself," she says.

"You'll think of something," Tony says.

Loki, meanwhile, is inspecting both Nat and Sigrid with a critical eye.

"Your ring," he tells Sigrid, before addressing Nat: "And your hair tie."

Each woman passes him the item from her person. Sigrid's ring is simple, silver, with no jewel. Tony hadn't noticed it before, although it sits on the finger that would hold a wedding ring on Earth. Nat's hair tie is plain black. Neither seems like it should be of much interest to Loki, but he studies them as if they're the most precious of treasures.

"They will have to do," Loki says, and then seems to realize that he needs to explain. "I cannot cast the spell of concealment directly upon you—there is always a chance that I might become distracted. The distance between us also complicates matters. I need to charm an object that will remain on your person—tying the magic to that object will ensure that you remain concealed unless you remove the item."

"In that case," Nat says, "surely a hair tie's too risky? Can't you cast the spell on my knife? Or my gun?"

"You've been carrying a gun this whole time?" Tony asks. "*Where?*"

"Concealment magic won't attach itself directly to weapons," Loki says. "Weapons are, by their nature, attention-seeking. Jewelry usually poses a similar issue, but...there is something about this one." He holds the ring up toward the sun, as if seeking an explanation.

Sigrid smiles. "It isn't made of any precious metal, or anything. Just iron."

Tony catches her eye and grins.

"It will suffice," Loki says. He gathers both of the trinkets into a fist, fingers closed tight around them. Then he closes his eyes, lips moving soundlessly, shoulders trembling with the effort. Tony wishes there was a way to do this without dipping into Loki's obviously depleted stores of magic.

When Loki opens his hand, the ring and hair tie are still notably visible, but Loki doesn't seem disappointed. Which maybe has something to do with the four distinct pools of blood, each originating from the indents of Loki's nails.

Tony knows they're not accidental side effects.

"Blood magic?" he demands. "*Seriously?*"

The moment the blood hits the objects, it fizzles into nothing—almost like it's being absorbed. Tony watches in fascinated horror. Out of the corner of his mouth, he instructs JARVIS to open the Iron Man suit up and stumbles out of it. He moves into Loki's space.

“Do you want your friends to remain safe or not?” Loki asks.

Tony muffles a frustrated noise in his fist.

“He’s fine, Tony,” Nat says, although she takes a moment to cast a significant and threatening look in Armod’s direction. After all, he’ll endanger them all if he tells his superiors about this. “It’s only a bit of blood.”

Tony ignores her and grabs Loki’s injured hand.

“Heal yourself,” he snaps. “If you’ve even got enough magic left for that.”

“It’s not a *limited resource*,” Loki retorts.

“Really? You could’ve fooled me. *Heal it.*”

A drop of deep crimson blood rolls sluggishly from the outermost cut and into Tony’s palm.

“I can’t,” Loki says.

“Jesus,” Tony says. He takes the ring and the hair tie, tossing each in the direction of their owners. He knows he should stop cradling Loki’s hand in his, studying each bloody crescent; he knows that he’s overreacting. But there’s something about the sight of Loki injured—it feels *wrong*, intrinsically. He keeps expecting the cuts to close up, the way Thor’s injuries always do after a few seconds. They don’t.

When he finally lets go, looks up, Nat and Sigrid are nowhere to be seen.

“Holy shit,” he says.

And then Sigrid appears again, pulling the ring off her finger. She’s smiling.

“I was just speaking to Natasha,” she says. “You couldn’t hear us?”

“Not a peep,” Tony replies.

Her smile widens. “That’s amazing,” she says. And then shyly, to Loki: “Thank you.”

“Do not linger once you find Amora,” he says. “I have concealed you as best I can, but I cannot guarantee that she will be unable to detect your essence.”

Nat emerges, pulling her hair out of its tie. “Our ‘essence’?”

“Humans might call it a soul,” Loki says. “Do not worry. The charms should keep you fully hidden from her.”

“Should?” Rhodey asks.

“They will,” Loki says. “My blood is to make sure of that.”

He casts a glare at Tony, as though daring him to object. Tony just looks down at his own hand, at the streak of slick red marring it. The blood isn't drying.

“Okay, girls,” he says. His voice is too rough for the levity to land—not that he thinks Nat would've appreciated it under lighter circumstances. “You're up.”

“We'll meet you back here in an hour,” Nat promises.

“Wish us luck!” Sigrid says brightly, and then she's slipping the ring back onto her finger, Nat's trying her hair back, and they're gone.

Maybe Steve was right. Maybe it's wrong to get a civilian involved. Tony feels a creeping sense of nausea stealing over him.

After Sigrid and Nat have left, Loki asks not to be disturbed. He sits at the foot of the Dark Tree, back pressed against the trunk, mind as close as it ever gets to blank. Through the hanging branches, he's difficult to spot—it must have made for a good hiding place, way back when.

For his part, Tony climbs back into his armor; he feels a little embarrassed about taking it off when they're in potential imminent danger. Just to closer inspect a few scratches.

Armod has questions about Midgard, and about Loki, and about whether Sigrid has a husband—which is enough to make Tony bang his helmet against the nearest tree, because this guy has been around for the love magic and he *still* thinks Sigrid and Halla are just good friends? Rhodey gamely keeps answering for a while, but even he has his limits.

“No, Nat's not single, either,” he says.

“Well, that's alright,” Armod says. “To tell you the truth, she's a little scary.”

“Really?” Tony says. “I hadn't noticed.”

It's been—according to JARVIS—fifty-three minutes when Nat bursts through the treeline, visible and out of breath.

“I couldn't get her to leave,” she pants. “Once she saw Halla. She said she couldn't turn away now.”

“Fuck,” Tony says. “But she's still invisible?”

“I left her halfway up a tree. Invisible. She's as safe as it's possible to be, but—”

“We need to get to her,” Tony finishes. “What's the situation like?”

“She's got three followers that we could see. Halla, another woman, and a man.”

“What're they up to?”

Nat's hand is clutching at her side, and she's almost bent double with a stitch, but she manages to crack a smile. "They are quite literally feeding her grapes," she says. "There's a whole throne set-up. Looks like it's made out of vines."

Tony's laugh registers through the suit as static.

"Got it," he says. "Loki?"

When he looks over toward the Dark Tree, Loki's already on his feet.

Through the veil of branches, Tony can't see his face. Still, he's inside the guy's head. He sees it coming a moment before it happens.

His stupid heart stutters to a brief halt.

"Loki!" he yells, not caring if his voice carries. He engages the thrusters and launches himself toward Loki, but he's not fast enough. Jet-boots aren't a match for teleportation, after all. He ends up flying headfirst into the tree, but the pain of that doesn't hold a candle to the helpless terror he feels. "LOKI!"

"Where'd he go?" Rhodey asks, voice nearly as panicked as Tony feels.

"To face her," Tony says. "Alone."

"You're sure he hasn't left the planet?" Armod asks, and it's—it's literally his job, literally the reason he's here, to make sure Loki doesn't escape Asgard. But Tony sees red all the same, directs a repulsor blast at a tree so as not to aim it at Armod's head.

"I'm in his fucking head," he growls. "Nat, how far is it?"

"In the suits?" she asks, and despite how worn out she must be she's getting into the Rescue armor without hesitation. "A minute or so."

"Shouldn't we wait?" Armod's hopping nervously from foot to foot. "What happened to the plan?"

"Fuck the plan," Tony says. "He's—I have to stop him from—"

"Tones, slow down," Rhodey says. "Can you figure out *why* he's gone by himself?"

Tony shakes his head. "He just—I only knew he was going to because—he felt *sorry*."

He can barely breathe. They'd been so close to doing this together, and now Loki—the complete idiot, halfway drained of his magic—has decided to do the whole lone gunslinger act. Tony feels a newfound empathy for Rhodey, Pepper, and anyone else he's ever scared half to death by pulling a stunt like this.

"We've got to go," he says. "Maybe I'll figure it out on the way."

And without waiting for a response he launches himself into the air, hovering just long enough for Nat to take the lead so he can follow her.

He stays behind her, even though he can feel someone—Halla, still? Or Loki?—pulling him toward them. Even though he could probably navigate his way to where he needs to be with or without Nat's help.

The minute that passes then is the longest of his life. He's privy to Loki's emotions but helpless to know what's causing the—

fear-indignation-shame

—and too much of it is mixed up with the panic Tony's going through anyway.

He'd try demanding answers through the bond, but god knows Loki needs his full focus right now. Tony's not going to endanger him further just because he's hurt.

When they reach the clearing, Enchantress doesn't even look up. She's sat on her throne, one leg crossed carelessly over the other. Her full attention is on Loki.

Loki, who's not even bothered to put up a shield.

"Please," he's saying. He's on his knees before her, head bowed. "Take it away. I'll do anything."

It's like a stab to the chest, hearing Loki beg.

"I told you," Enchantress says, her voice and cape both shimmering, "you won't be able to keep him in the dark forever. Look up, darling. He's here for you."

Loki's head snaps up. His eyes lock with the Iron Man mask.

"Go," he says. "Please."

"I'm not leaving you," Tony responds. The sound of his voice is terrible, wracked with horror.

A grin stretches across Enchantress' baby-pink lips. She gets to her feet and stalks toward Loki.

"Maybe," she says, slowly, each word deliberate, "I'll hurt him."

If Tony had thought Loki defeated, he was mistaken. Loki's on his feet faster than a blink, and the shield he throws up is high enough that Tony can't see where it ends. Enchantress and her devotees are on one side. Loki, Tony, Rhodey, and Nat are on the other.

He flies lower, and the others do the same. As soon as they're within range, the size of the shield shrinks, becoming no more than a half-sphere covering them.

It's not tinged green this time, Tony notices. It's red.

“I think what happened,” Tony says, “is that Loki came to ask nicely for you to get rid of the curse. So why don’t you be a dear and—”

“Is that what you want, Anthony Edward Stark?” Enchantress asks. “Oh, yes, I know who you are. Son of Howard and Maria. The first time you fell in love, you were fifteen. You have fallen in love three times since.”

“I—” Tony starts, but is cut off.

“And Natalia Romanova,” Amora says. “You have been in love only once. He was taken from you, and yet your heart still burns for him. How cruel.”

Nat’s control over the Rescue suit is still questionable. Her hover wavers. But Amora is already moving on.

“You are on a precipice, James Rhodes,” Enchantress says, clearly enjoying herself. “The most wonderful precipice. You are about to fall in love. What a shame it would be if your time were to be cut short.”

“You touch him and I’ll kill you,” Tony says.

“I believe you,” Enchantress says. “Or, at least, I believe that you’ll try.”

“It’s a cool party trick,” Rhodey interrupts. “But we didn’t come to get our fortunes told. We came because whatever Loki did to you, the debt is paid.”

“You truly believe so?”

“It’s been weeks,” Tony says, “and he hasn’t been alone for a second of it. Every day the curse makes him feel worse, and he’s been sentenced to death by his own *dad*, for god’s sake. Can’t you cut him a break?”

Enchantress is laughing, high-pitched and full of honest amusement. It’s not a maniacal villain’s laugh; she just finds what he’s said funny.

“You think that’s why I did this?” she asks. “So he wouldn’t have *privacy*?”

“I mean,” Tony says, “I was just kind of going on the assumption that you did it because you’re a crazy bitch, but feel free to prove me wrong.”

Amora tuts. “Typical man.”

“Oh, yeah, big girl power moment here. You brainwashing innocent people. That’s a real win for the movement,” Tony responds. “Let them go, at least. This is between us.”

“*Us*?” she sneers. “You mean nothing to me, you smug, self-important Midgardian. Look at you. You think yourself safe in your little suit, but you are no more than an armored rat. Easily trapped.”

She points a finger, almost lazily, and a tear appears in Loki's shield. Small at first, but then branching outward. It's right between Enchantress and Tony. He swerves to the right, looking down at Loki. He's straining to uphold the protection, teeth gritted, but Tony can tell he's fighting a losing battle.

Brace yourself, he thinks.

The sonic disruptor sends both Enchantress and Loki to the ground, clutching their heads. Amora is snarling obscenities as she goes, threats and insults, but Tony's barreling into her before she can get her bearings, forcing her down.

"Halla!" he hears, and turns his head to see Sigrid, right on the edge of the clearing. She's taken the ring off. And her eyes are locked with Halla's—Halla, who's shaking her head as someone who's emerged from a nightmare, whose eyes are focusing on Sigrid's and becoming clear once more.

As he's watching the two reunite, Enchantress twists her arm out from under him and grabs his faceplate, tearing it away and crumpling the metal as though it were paper. Tony launches himself backward just before she reaches out a second time, presumably to gouge out his eyes or something equally terrible.

"Shit!" he gasps. "Sigrid, get them out of here!"

The two others Enchantress had under her control seem dazed, stumbling on their feet. But Halla, who's got the advantage of being encouraged by the love of her life, hooks an arm around each of theirs and pulls them bodily toward Sigrid, who dashes forward to meet her.

Tony looks away as the two women grab for each other; he sees Nat and Rhodey working together to keep Amora distracted, firing flares of light into her eye-line and trying to get within range to tackle her back to the ground.

Loki's half collapsed on the ground.

"Get up!" Tony yells at him.

His voice attracts Amora's attention, and she brushes past Rhodey and Nat, swatting Nat fully out of the sky, to round on Tony.

"You can't keep my magic at bay forever," she says, and he narrowly dodges the fireball she throws at him. It hits the trees around them instead, sending three up into a blaze. "And your petty toys are no match for it."

Tony's shooting repulsor beams at her, but they barely even seem to hit for all the reaction they get. He wonders if a missile would do any good, or whether it would just exacerbate the forest fire.

Without the HUD, he feels lost and clumsy in the armor. He's still fast enough to dodge her spells, which vary from bursts of deadly flame to ineffectual green sparks, but it's only a matter of time before she lands a lucky hit. Rhodey's on her back, but he's equally as hesitant

to break out the heavy artillery, it seems. Nat's armor isn't even equipped for heavy combat: it was only intended to keep Pepper safe if the need arose.

Fuck it, Tony thinks, and flies in close, too fast for Enchantress to react. He draws his fist back and aims for her head, but at the last second she jerks away and his punch only glances off her cheek. It still draws blood, which she spits back at him. The fact that she's not impervious to injury is reassuring, even as Tony struggles to restabilize himself and get out of her range.

She brings her hands together into a clap, from which streaks of black emerge and wrap themselves around the wrists and ankles of the suit. Loki's tried this move before, Tony remembers. He whirls into a spin, trying to throw her off-balance. For a moment, he thinks it's worked, but then he's hit full in the chest by something that sends the breath shooting out of him and—

Tony lets out a string of swearwords as his targeting system goes down. Whatever protection Loki had thought the Iron Man armor had afforded him, it must have been rendered useless as soon as the helmet was breached.

A gouge comes out of the chest plate, leaving nothing but a scorched hole where metal once was. The left-most side is only inches from the arc reactor, and Tony's mind starts to buzz with a mixture of panic and adrenaline. He flies back, trying to get out of Enchantress' range, but the movement only makes her pursue him more determinedly. He sees her note the damage to the suit with a smile, and his breath catches at the way her arms draw back, a form of violent, visible magic swirling between them.

He braces for impact, only suddenly there's something between Enchantress and him.

Loki's clumsily risen twenty feet in the air, bringing a shield with him.

"Shit," Tony says, and puts on a burst of speed so he can get a hand around Loki's arm, ensuring he won't fall. "I thought you couldn't fly."

"I can't," Loki grits out, and he clutches at the Iron Man suit. "I'd appreciate you not dropping me."

Tony lowers them both toward the ground, slow enough that Loki can keep the shield wrapped around them. It's not covering Rhodey or Nat, but Amora doesn't seem to care about them.

"Get behind me," Tony says as soon as their feet touch the ground.

"No," Loki says.

"I know you want to protect me," Tony responds, feeling the truth of the words as he says them, "but—you can't. Not like this. Your magic—"

Amora laughs.

“Oh, Loki,” she says. “Why don’t you tell him? The reason your magic seems weakened—the reason you have no hope of defeating me.”

“No,” Loki says again. His voice is tinged with desperation, and the shield he’s got around them both is wearing thin.

“His concentration is elsewhere,” Enchantress explains, and panic begins to fall through the bond like an avalanche. “He’s working so hard on keeping something hidden from you that he’s unable to do much else. It’s quaint, really.”

When Loki turns to look at Tony, then, there’s something wild in his eyes, something frantic. Tony takes a step in front of him.

Loud and clear, he says: “I don’t care. I don’t want to know.”

Enchantress flicks her wrist, and a flurry of sharp green spikes attacks their shield. Tony looks to his left and watches as a bead of sweat emerges on Loki’s brow—and that’s nothing compared to what’s going on in his mind, the exertion and despair.

“Don’t you?” Enchantress asks. She flies right up to where Loki’s magic separates them, slow and deliberate. “He could be hiding anything. Maybe he’s planning to enslave your quaint little planet again. Maybe he’s waiting for the curse to be lifted before he kills you. Perhaps he’s attempting to rip your precious *Avengers* apart from within.”

“He’s not,” Tony says, tasting the tang of blood on his lips. “Don’t you get it? I trust him. It doesn’t matter if he’s been keeping something hidden—hell, *I’ve* been keeping stuff hidden. You’ve got to take what privacy you can get. But it doesn’t matter. *I trust him*. And nothing you can say will change that.”

Loki’s looking at him like he’s never seen him before, and something small and hopeful ignites within the bond. It’s a flame in a wintry wasteland, both of them mentally huddled around it.

“Tony,” he says, but he doesn’t get a chance to finish.

Vindictively, a smirk stretched wide across her face, Enchantress interrupts.

“He’s in love with you.”

In the silence that follows, Tony’s pulse tries to set a new land speed record, and either Loki stops keeping the truth hidden or Enchantress tears down the wall he’s put up.

It’s like a physical thing, the rush of Loki’s true feelings to the forefront of the bond. Loki’s mind is—it’s radiant. Tony hadn’t even begun to realize how much was being held back. It’s almost too much to bear, ripping through his head: the inescapable truth of being loved. Of being loved by someone who’s right *in there*, privy to every ugly emotion Tony has, to every facet of who he is.

And Tony can’t help but think of how many times he’s felt Loki keeping something at bay, concealing and obfuscating his own emotions. *Then?* he thinks. *And then? And then?*

He's laughing, not from amusement but because the feeling cascading through him is so complete that it needs some outlet. Impervious to the danger they're in, to the threat of Enchantress just outside their forcefield, he thinks: *You have the worst taste.*

He feels Loki begin to respond.

That's almost the worst of it. That half-sentence left hanging.

I never thought—

And then nothing.

Tony's never felt so empty in his life. Even when he woke up to open-heart surgery, even when he flew a missile into space, he felt more in control than he does in this moment. He slumps to the ground, because no part of him feels real: not his body, not his mind. There's no one else there. It's only him.

"Loki?" he manages to gasp.

"I did as you wished," Amora says sweetly—and she's close, so very close. The shield must have dropped. He tries to reach out toward where Loki had been, but there's nothing there. Or maybe there is, but his hand is numb. He can't tell. "That privacy you so desired is yours."

She crouches in front of him. She reaches out and strokes a finger down his face; the feeling of it is profoundly wrong, sickening.

"You'll never be able to tell him," she whispers. "He'll never know you were beginning to feel the same way. And *that*, darling—*that* is the punishment he deserves."

"No," Tony wheezes. "No—*Loki!*"

She kisses him. Her mouth presses painfully against his own for four interminably long seconds, and then she's gone. He closes his eyes and whimpers, the taste of acid on his lips.

Before he even opens them, he knows two things.

The first is that Loki is gone. Amora has taken him.

And the second is that she was wrong. Tony isn't *beginning* to fall in love with Loki. He already is.

Chapter End Notes

my apologies

and even more apologies bc the original plan (back in november lol) was for tony and gang to come out on top after this battle. and then, in a moment of absolute sadism, i

decided to go the other way. still, the "he's in love with you" moment has been written for *months* and i'm so thrilled to be able to finally share it

if you would like to yell at me on multiple platforms i'm on twitter [here](#) and tumblr [here](#)

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

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

He doesn't know how long he lies there. All he knows is that, eventually, feeling begins to return. He registers the ache in his chest, the blazing heat of the clearing, and the persistent throbbing in his head. Sound returns in the form of Rhodey's voice, desperately repeating someone's name.

"Voiceprint: Codename Platypus. Get the suit off him, JARVIS."

He feels the metal when it recedes. It makes noises it's not supposed to; it's damaged. He'll have to build a new one. No, it's okay: there are more Iron Man suits in his workshop. He'll wear one of those when he—when he—

There's something he's supposed to do.

He thinks somebody might be holding him. There's a hand in his sweat-damp hair. He wants to tell them not to touch him, because the emptiness inside him will suck them in, too.

"We need to move him." That's Natalie—no, wrong—that's Natasha's voice. "It's not safe here. The fire—"

"It's not spreading."

"*Rhodes*. He'll be fine. He's in shock. If we get him back to—"

"What if his mind's not right? What if she broke something we can't fix?"

"Then he's still Tony, and we'll still love him." *Tony*. That's who he is. There's something else that he is, but he can't remember. It hurts to try and remember.

"Tony? Can you—we have to move. Blink if you understand."

Blink. He shuts his eyes. He opens them.

"Okay. Okay, good. I'm going to pick you up," Rhodey says. "You don't have to do anything. Just stay still." He can do that. "Nat, can you take care of the others?"

"We'll meet you there," she says.

Tony doesn't think he sleeps. But he also doesn't know how much time passes, or how aware he is for any of it. And he's in a bed. There's someone beside him. That's good; that's how it's supposed to be. He'll just reach out and touch Loki, and the bad feelings will recede into something manageable. He'll be able to get up, and do the thing he's meant to do.

He tries to reach out, but all his hand does is flop uselessly over on the blanket.

“You’re okay.” Oh. It’s not Loki. That’s alright, he supposes. Rhodey is good, too. “You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

Rhodey always has him. Tony falls; Rhodey catches him. He doesn’t know why it feels like he’s still falling.

He twitches his hand again, and Rhodey takes hold of it. His hand is warm, which means Tony’s must be cold. This isn’t unusual. His circuit—his circulatory system’s affected by—it’s been faulty ever since—

“My heart,” he says.

“It’s all good. She didn’t get the arc reactor.”

She. He remembers—a kiss? A poison kiss, like in the stories.

“Rhodey,” he says. “I don’t—remember, properly.”

“That’s fine,” Rhodey responds promptly. “You don’t have to remember everything right now. You just have to rest. When you’re ready, we can talk about what you do remember. Okay?”

“Can you get Loki?” Tony asks. “I think there’s something I’m supposed to tell him.”

Rhodey’s hand tightens. “We’ll figure it out later,” he says, and his voice wavers at the end.

Rhodey stays with him for the rest of the day, but a rotating cast of characters also enter the room at regular intervals, with things like food and water and a chamber pot. There’s Natasha and Sigrid-and-Halla, who keep their hands tightly intertwined most of the time. There’s a man and a woman whose names he doesn’t know. He’s not sure if he’s supposed to, and he doesn’t ask.

Things keep filtering back to him, but they’re normally only one sensory input at a time, and it’s difficult to attach the smells to the sounds to the visuals and so on.

“She said you were falling in love,” he says to Rhodey, nursing a cup of cold green tea. “Anyone I know?”

Rhodey’s on a chair on the other side of the room, trying to pretend he’s not keeping watch over Tony. He’s got a book about Asgardian heroes open in his lap, but he hasn’t turned a page in twenty minutes.

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Rhodey says.

“So I *do* know them.” Tony grins. The movement stretches his face in a way that feels unfamiliar. “Come on, I’m an invalid, you can’t deny me things.”

He's not quite an invalid, actually: he can walk, just not for very long. He'd tried the journey from the bed to the door and had needed Rhodey to carry him back. It feels like he's having to re-learn everything, like his energy's been cut to the roots and he needs to give it time to grow back.

"You're intolerable," Rhodey says.

"I'll just start naming people. Is it Nat? Did the whole fake relationship, sharing a bed thing work the way it does in the movies?"

Rhodey laughs. "Not exactly."

"I'm hurt, Rhodey. If I was falling in love with someone I'd tell *you*."

"Would you?" Rhodey asks. His mouth is suddenly downturned, all the levity drained from his face.

Tony frowns. "I think so."

"Something happened to Loki," he says. "That's why he's not here."

It's dark outside. There isn't a moon to be seen, so the sky is nothing more than a stretch of blank, unadulterated black. *That's appropriate*, Tony thinks, and then isn't sure why he thought it.

Rhodey doesn't lie to him. "Yes."

"We need to—we should be saving him," Tony says. "If he's in trouble."

"We're doing everything we can," Rhodey says. "The thing is, we can't go back to the palace. It's not safe for us there anymore. So we're just—we're trying our best, Tones. But we don't know where he is."

"You think I'll remember?"

Crossing the room, Rhodey reclaims his spot next to Tony on the bed. "I think there's every chance of it," he says. "You went through something none of us have any reference for. You remember how you and he were connected?"

Tony nods, slowly. "He was in my head," he says. "I was in his."

"Enchantress broke that connection," Rhodey says. "Far as we can tell, she wasn't careful enough about it. Bruce doesn't think it'll show up as physical damage, although we obviously can't get you an MRI right now. But none of us know enough about magic to be sure of anything."

"You talked to Bruce?"

"While you were resting. He's angry with you."

“Oh?” Tony shifts closer to Rhodey, basking in his warmth. “Why?”

“You promised him you’d keep yourself safe.”

“Doesn’t sound like me,” Tony mumbles. He hasn’t been able to shake the tiredness that’s been dogging him since whatever Enchantress did to him.

Rhodey chuckles softly. “Go to sleep, Tones.”

In Tony’s dream, there’s a hand. He recognizes it instantly, the long pale fingers reaching out toward him. He just has to take Loki’s hand, and then things will be alright.

It’s some kind of optical illusion, though, because every time he tries, Loki’s hand turns out to be farther away than he’d thought. His hand swipes uselessly through dead air.

He struggles to reach further, but his feet are stuck in mud or cement so thick he can’t budge them.

You have to come closer, he thinks.

And Loki’s reply: *I can’t*.

Tony gasps into alertness. His heart’s thudding and his hands are clenched tight in the bedsheets. The pain in his head is excruciating, like a festering wound. He lets out a pathetic, sobbing whimper.

“Tony?” Rhodey asks blearily from beside him.

“I remember,” Tony manages to reply. There’s wetness all over his face: a combination of tears and a gushing nosebleed. “We need to—we’ve got to *save* him, Rhodey, why’d you let me stay in bed for a whole *day* when he’s—”

“Hey!” Rhodey snaps. “You were in no condition, man. You’re *still* in no condition. Look at yourself!”

“He’s trying to reach me,” Tony says, struggling out of Rhodey’s restraining arms. “And I—”

“You love him,” Rhodey says.

“Yeah.” There’s blood in Tony’s mouth, too; he might have bitten through his cheek. “I really do.”

“And if the power of love could lead us to him, I’d be all for it,” Rhodey says, gentle. “But for all we know he’s on the other side of the universe, or—or he’s dead.”

“He’s not dead,” Tony says. “I could feel him.”

“You felt him?” It’s Nat’s voice; she’s stood in the doorway, with rings of smudged makeup encircling her tired eyes. She must have heard him wake up. “When?”

“I know it sounds—in my dream, just then. It was him. I know it was.”

“If you say so I believe you,” Nat says. Tony blinks up at her in surprise. “Hey. It’s not like magic’s a new concept for us at this point.”

“Thank god,” Tony replies. “For a minute there I thought I had your trust and respect.”

“Never,” Nat smiles, but she comes closer and sits next to him on the bed, allowing him to rest his throbbing head on her shoulder. He’s bleeding all over her borrowed nightdress, but if there’s anyone with a fix for getting bloodstains out of clothing Tony has to guess it would be Nat. “He give you any clue about where she’s taken him, in this dream of yours?”

“No. He couldn’t.”

“Can you feel him now?” Rhodey asks.

“No.” It hurts to say. “I don’t feel anything now.”

Sigrid’s the one who suggests it.

“We do it the same way we found Halla,” she says, not even phrasing it as a question. There’s something steely in her eyes. She, too, had been asleep (on some blankets on the floor - Tony and Rhodey had been given the only bed in the house), and she’s got a bird’s nest tangle of hair to go with Nat’s smudged makeup and Tony’s general dishevelment. In their current state, none of them inspire much confidence as a rescue party.

“With magic?” Nat responds. “But none of us are magic-users. Without Loki, we wouldn’t even know how to start with a spell like that.”

Sigrid shakes her head stubbornly. “We just need an item that means something to Loki. And then because Tony loves him...”

“Wait,” Tony says. “Who told you that?”

“No one had to *tell* me that.”

Tony sighs, conceding the point. “It won’t matter that I love him. I’m not powerful the way Loki is—even if I could produce magic, I’d have no idea how to channel it. Besides, it’s not the same as it is with you and Halla. You’ve been together for decades. I only realized I was in love with him yesterday.”

The word ‘love’ feels sticky in his mouth. He runs his tongue over his teeth.

“I know it’s scary,” Sigrid says. “The way you feel about him. But it *is* powerful.”

There's a childish impulse to counter, to snap *how would you know*—but Sigrid was there inside the spell that led them to Halla. She knows exactly how this could work.

“An item that means something to him...” he says instead, frowning.

“We need to gain access to the spaceship,” Nat says.

“It won't work—” Tony begins, but she's already shaking her head.

“I'm talking about what powered the spaceship. Loki *said* it was something important to him, and then he went ahead and connected it to you both. It's perfect.”

“The dagger,” Tony breathes.

“*Another one?*” Sigrid says.

“I could kill for some coffee,” Tony says, sipping at plain old water and trying to imagine being imbued with energy. “Hey, are we stranded here?”

Rhodey looks uncomfortable. “Sort of, I guess.”

Nat had explained that Armod's absence when she returned to the clearing had set off alarm bells. Armed with her invisibility hair tie (which, she says, would be an invaluable addition to her repertoire if hair ties weren't the easiest thing in the universe to lose) she'd re-entered the palace, more heavily fortified than it had been, and poked around. A gaggle of guards had been discussing what to do if any of them showed their faces again.

Evidently, the word on the Asgardian street is that they'd deliberately let Loki escape, that Armod had tried to explain whatever he thought had happened and had been thrown in a cell for his troubles.

The only vaguely positive intel is that Armod hadn't said anything about Sigrid, meaning Sigrid's house was still as safe a haven as it's possible to find on a planet that has a watcher with an all-seeing eye on it.

“Why *hasn't* Heimdall turned us in?” Tony asks.

“I think,” Rhodey says, “he's loyal to Asgard. He'll do what he thinks is right.”

“And we just have to stay on the right side of that?”

Rhodey shrugs. “It's not like there's anything else we can do.”

They only have the two invisibility aids, but Tony surprises everyone by admitting that he shouldn't be one of the ones who attempt to sneak into the palace and, subsequently, the spaceship.

“I don't think I could even make the trip to the palace right now,” he says. “Not without the Iron Man suit.”

“It’s insane that Loki has actually been a *good* influence on you,” Rhodey says.

Tony laughs weakly. “He likes me alive.”

The absence where Loki should be in his mind still stings. It’s as though his consciousness had expanded to support it, and now all that’s left is collapsing, like a dying star in the far corner of his brain.

“I’ll go,” Nat says. “I have an idea of where they’ve put the remains of the spaceship: I heard talk of some kind of vault under the palace where alien artifacts are kept.”

“The blatant theft aside, it’s kind of cool to be an alien artifact,” Tony says.

“I’ll go with you,” Sigrid says.

Nat smiles at her. “You will,” she says. “But not invisible. If I were Odin, I’d be keeping the spaceship heavily guarded. We need a diversion—and you need to evade suspicion by continuing to do your job.”

“Does that mean I get to try out this invisibility thing?” Rhodey asks.

“Sure does, buddy,” Tony says.

“We should go soon,” Nat says. “We don’t know if—or when—Enchantress is planning on killing Loki.”

It’s blunt, but Tony has to appreciate that she’s taking this seriously.

“She won’t kill him,” says Halla softly. She’s been quiet since they got back. Tony can’t tell whether it’s her usual demeanor or whether the effects of Enchantress’ mind control are taking a while to shake off.

“You think?” he asks, pitching his voice low.

“People can’t feel after you kill them,” Halla says. “And that’s what she feeds on. Emotions. The stronger the better. She would tell us all about it when she got bored. And it was—it was why I was her favorite. Because under the part of me she controlled was the part of me filled with grief. I thought that I’d never see Sigrid again.” Sigrid’s hand, already in Halla’s, seems to tighten. “She liked that. She would take me aside and tell me about it. *She’s forgotten you*, she’d say. *Or she will soon enough*. And there was something about it—if I’d been in my right mind, I’d have known she was lying. But she was able to make it feel true.”

Every inch of Tony’s skin is prickling. “So she’s torturing him,” he says.

Halla nods, her eyes downcast.

“He’s strong,” Rhodey says. “He’ll—”

“He’s been tortured before,” Tony says tiredly. He slumps, putting his face in his hands. “Right before he tried to invade Earth.”

“Ah,” Rhodey says.

It’s not that Tony thinks Enchantress is going to trigger Loki’s Evil Switch, but he does know that Loki—well, Loki had been so desperate to hide how he felt from Tony, so desperate that he’d put himself in harm’s way, not just once but repeatedly. The wisdom of those series of decisions aside, Tony shudders to think of the material Enchantress has to work with. That Loki had felt so ashamed of his feelings, so sure they’d never be welcomed—

And Tony had done nothing to disabuse him of that notion in those precious few moments after Enchantress had exposed him, had made some asinine quip and *laughed*.

There’s so much from the last few weeks he regrets. He should’ve pressed Loki on what he was hiding, should have somehow convinced him to stop punishing himself for feelings he couldn’t control. Or—if only he’d let himself see what had been right on his periphery the entire time, what must have been glaringly obvious to Sigrid and Rhodey and the rest of them. He could’ve made the first move, had enough courage for the both of them. But even with all that, his biggest regret is not taking what small opportunity he had to tell Loki he felt the same way.

He feels Rhodey’s hand on his shoulder, gently rubbing at the tension there.

“While we’re gone,” Rhodey says, “you should sleep. If that’s the only way Loki can re-establish the connection with you, we need to make sure he can get through. Maybe he can give you some kind of clue about where Enchantress has taken him.”

Tony shakes his head. “I won’t be able to sleep while you’re out there putting yourselves at risk.”

His insomnia is unpredictable, but it had been at its worst during Rhodey’s first tour abroad. For the first month, Tony had gotten less than fifty hours’ sleep total. If he managed two hours a night he considered it a win. Finally, JARVIS had gone behind Tony’s back to get in touch with Rhodey’s regiment. It was actually sort of impressive that an AI program had managed to leverage Stark Industries’ influence to get exclusive phone privileges for Rhodey. The point being: Tony’s sleep cycle has historically been dependent on how much danger the people he loves are in.

“I, um,” Sigrid says, “I have a sleeping potion.”

“*Sigrid*,” Halla hisses.

“It’s okay,” Sigrid says. “They’re not from here.”

“What about Tosti and Dotta?” Halla asks, referring to the other people who’d been under Enchantress’ mind control.

“Still asleep in the attic,” Nat replies. How she’s so confident about that is anyone’s guess, but none of them question her.

“What’s wrong with a sleeping potion?” Rhodey asks.

“It’s not that,” Sigrid says. “It’s—I made it myself.” She extricates herself from Halla’s grip and goes over to the teetering pile of books in the opposite corner of the room. The first book on the pile is a cookbook, Tony’s sure of it. But then Sigrid picks it up and suddenly it’s bigger, leather-bound, and bears no title. “People don’t really trust magic around here,” she explains.

“Can’t imagine why,” Rhodey mutters.

“It’s different in the palace,” Sigrid says. “The queen is a witch, and there are plenty of books about spell-casting in the libraries.”

“And you stole one?” Tony asks, approving.

“She stole every book in this house,” Halla says, disapproving.

“That’s some kleptomania,” Tony grins. “So you’re saying you’ve been a magic-user this entire time?”

Sigrid shrugs. “I make potions. They’re just about mixing together the right ingredients. Before Loki, I’d never had the courage to try anything more difficult than the glamors on the books.”

She goes to the kitchen and returns with a small glass bottle. There’s a pale blue liquid inside.

“One swallow will send you to sleep for a few hours,” she explains.

“Okay, good,” Tony says. “That’s sorted. We’ve got everything except how we’re actually going to get to wherever Loki is.”

“We’ll cross that Rainbow Bridge when we get to it,” Nat says.

In his dream, Loki is sat beside him. Tony can feel him there, but he can’t turn his head to look. Their sides are pressed together, and Tony feels—god, he feels like he never wants to move.

Loki, he thinks.

There’s no response in words. But there are things Tony knows: Loki is freezing, the kind of cold where he feels like he’ll never be warm again; he’s drowning in hopelessness; he wants Tony to come for him; he wants Tony to stay far, far away, safe.

I love you, Tony thinks as loudly as he can.

He doesn’t know if it gets through.

:(

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

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

Tony wakes to a nearly empty house. Dusk is falling outside, and the feeling of the blankets covering him is abruptly too confining, too much to bear. He gets shakily to his feet and makes his way down the stairs, into the communal area.

“You need more potion?”

He jumps. Halla is in the corner of the room, concealed in shadow, the dagger that had led Sigrid to her laid across her lap.

“No,” he says. “It’s—worse. Knowing he’s there and not being able to reach him.”

Halla nods like she understands. He watches the glide of her index finger across the dagger’s blade.

“Of all the people I expected to have a hand in saving me,” she says quietly, her eyes not quite with him, “Prince Loki was a surprise. You must be a good influence on him.”

Tony shifts uncomfortably. He doesn’t know whether Loki had thought of Halla as anything other than a convenient way to find out where Enchantress was hiding, but he doubts it. Saving her certainly hadn’t been at the top of his priority list.

Still, the outcome of Loki’s actions is that Halla and Sigrid are back together, free of mind control.

“He’s better than he gives himself credit for,” Tony says. For that, at least, there’s plenty of evidence. He thinks primarily of the way Loki had protected Nat and Rhodey from Enchantress’ flames at the banquet without being asked. “I don’t know how much I’ve got to do with it.”

His legs shake. This is the longest he’s remained standing since the battle, though, and he’s lost enough of his dignity that he’s proud of that.

Halla, observing his unsteadiness, indicates the chair next to her. Tony takes a seat.

“What was it like?” she asks. “I love Sigrid, but I can’t imagine her hearing my thoughts all the time.”

“I couldn’t hear his thoughts,” Tony explains. “Not unless he wanted me to. I could just—feel him there. It was his emotions, all the parts of him that are immutable, his—”

“Soul,” Halla says.

Tony wrinkles his nose. He doesn’t believe in souls.

Then again, he hadn't believed in magic until a couple of Norse demi-gods decided to fall out of the sky and fuck up everything he's ever known.

Before he can say anything—crack a joke, break the tension—the front door swings open. There's a second of empty space, and then Rhodey and Nat are both shedding their enchanted items, emerging from the darkness.

Behind them, Sigrid follows.

"Sorry," she says, immediately rushing to Halla's side. "I had to stay long enough to avoid suspicion. Even as it was, I was called in front of the All-Father for questioning."

Halla looks stricken, and Sigrid sits down on the floor, resting her head against her partner's knee.

"It wasn't so bad as all that," she says reassuringly. "I was assigned to look after Natasha and James, after all. The All-Father simply asked if I knew anything of their treachery."

"What'd you tell him?" Tony asks.

"Just that I had heard nothing, seen nothing. He never expects the servants to disobey him, so he didn't question me any further."

"Was Frigga there?"

Sigrid hesitates. It's clear she doesn't want to cause Halla any undue worry. "Yes. And it is true that she was perhaps less taken in by my deception. But she said nothing to her husband."

"We need to leave. Soon," Halla says. "We won't be safe here for very much longer."

"You're...coming with us?" Tony asks.

Sigrid nods. "We've talked about it, and we're seeing this through to the end. I'm the most experienced in magic here, even if it's not by much, and Halla's a fighter."

"Good with a dagger?" Nat asks, pulling the newly-stolen one from her own belt. Tony struggles not to rush and take it from her.

"Among other things," Halla says.

Tony looks between the four of them. It seems impossible that either he or Loki could have inspired such loyalty, but there's not a hint of doubt on anyone's face. He gives in to the urge and stands up, takes the dagger out of Nat's hands. It's the same as he remembers, the power thrumming beneath its surface. Although Loki had made it part of the bond, Enchantress' interference doesn't seem to have had any impact on the dagger's magical infusion.

It's the closest Tony's come to feeling Loki since the severance of the bond. Even the dreams hadn't been like this: there's a pull, unmistakable, lodged in his chest. It's as though his heart's a compass, pointing directly at Loki.

Which is really fucking ridiculous, but whatever. Tony's getting used to it.

"This is going to work," he says.

"I thought so," Nat says smugly. "It was too revealing, the way he connected it to you both."

Tony frowns. "He wasn't in love with me back then. He can't have been."

"It's not like it'd be new for you to be incredibly slow on the uptake," Rhodey says.

"Oh, so now I'm not prone in my sickbed you're right back to being mean? Fine, okay, I see how it is." Tony can't help but smile, some combination of Rhodey's teasing and the dagger's weight in his palm making everything seem, for a brief moment, not so hopeless after all.

There is, of course, a snag.

"What if you seduced Heimdall," Tony asks, on the wrong side of midnight, having really scraped the rest of the barrel for escape plans.

"No," says Nat.

"Wasn't talking to you," Tony says, batting his eyelashes at Rhodey. "What! He could be that secret love interest Enchantress was talking about!"

Rhodey snorts and cuffs him on the back of the head.

"Maybe Jane Foster's made some extraordinary leaps in wormhole science since we left," he sighs, settling his face against the cool wood of the table they're now sat at.

"It's worth calling the tower anyway," Rhodey says.

"Oh, yeah, I've gotta face Bruce's wrath sometime. You think he'll Hulk out over video call?"

"Only one way to find out," Nat says wryly.

When they dial the War Machine armor through to Bruce, the greeting they get is: "You need to come back."

"Uh, yeah, *we* know that," Tony responds. "What's your stake in the matter?"

"Thor's gone, Fury's right up Steve's ass—"

"Stunning visual," Tony interrupts.

"Dammit, this isn't a joke!" Bruce says. "You want to almost get yourself killed for Loki? I guess none of us can stop you. But we *need* to regroup."

Tony swallows, chastened. “It’s—not an Avengers issue,” he says. “It never was. This is about him and me. And now—” He sighs. “We’ve done what we came here to do. The ‘curse’ is gone. I want to rescue him, which was never part of the deal. So if any of you were sane, you’d be letting me go at this alone.” He’s addressing the others around Sigrid and Halla’s table as much as he’s talking to Bruce.

From somewhere to Bruce’s left, Steve’s voice says: “Tell him he’s being an idiot.”

“Hey, JARVIS, wide shot,” Tony says. “Show me the whole lot of them, if they’re gonna be eavesdropping.”

“Sorry, Tony,” Steve says when he comes into view. “But you’re being an idiot.”

“I can’t ask you to help me rescue the Avengers’ original arch-nemesis.”

“You can, because we’re a team,” Steve says stubbornly. “We can have a chat about your taste in men some other time. For now, we should focus on getting you home.”

“He’s not exactly a man,” Tony smirks. “But props for shedding that twentieth-century homophobia right out of the gate, Rogers, I’m proud of you.”

“What he means to say is *thank you*,” Rhodey says.

Steve grins. “Yeah, I’ve gotten the hang of translating Stark-speak.”

“Look,” Bruce says, “we think Thor must have gotten word about Loki’s escape-or-kidnapping. He told Steve he had urgent matters to attend to, and we all know what that means.”

“He’s on Asgard,” Tony says.

“He’ll vouch for you,” Bruce says. “If you go to Odin now, explain that there’s been a mistake.”

Tony shakes his head. “He’s made up his mind. And I get the sense that he doesn’t value either of his sons’ judgment all too much.”

“There’s not much else you *can* do,” Steve points out. “You’re stranded either way.”

Tony deflates. He’s been delaying the inevitable, and they all know it. It’s just that he’s almost entirely sure that the moment they present themselves before the All-Father, they’re getting thrown straight into a fancy Asgardian cell—if they’re not immediately sentenced to death for some high-duty treason.

“Sunrise, we’ll go turn ourselves in,” he says finally. That gives them a couple more hours, at least. “Throw ourselves on the king’s mercy. That always works out well.”

As the first flickers of light spray over the horizon, no better plan has been forthcoming. The War Machine, Rescue, and what remains of the Iron Man armor are all stashed in the attic.

Tosti and Dotta are both given the option to stay or leave: both of them seem more shaken than Halla, having been without the comfort that Sigrid had provided her. Tosti, a frail-looking blacksmith's son, chooses to stay. He promises to look after the house for as long as its occupants are away. Dotta is older, a single mother with three grown children. She says she needs to find them, after Enchantress had poisoned her mind with the lie that none of them loved her.

Finally, Tony fashions a relatively manly outfit out of one of the swaths of fabric in Sigrid's closet and tucks Loki's dagger into his belt.

Having the dagger close makes him feel better, and he doubts its effects can be put down to the placebo effect. He can stand unsupported where the day before he'd needed to lean on Rhodey, and his headache's reduced to something that feels like it just needs a few Ibuprofen.

"Well," he says, "I suppose that's all there is for it."

There's a knock at the door.

Nat raises her gun; Rhodey's eyes immediately shoot upward, drawn to the stowed-away War Machine suit. Halla and Sigrid both touch the swords at their hips.

"Friends!" It's Thor's voice. Tony doesn't think he's ever been so relieved to hear it in his life. "I mean you no harm!"

"We know, buddy," Tony says. Nat gives him a warning look—and, yes, there is a chance that Thor's led Odin right to them, Tony's not *entirely* stupid—but it's not like they hadn't been headed to their own doom anyway. He opens the door.

Thor is flanked by Heimdall and Frigga.

By this point, Tony is unable to say whether he considers this a good thing or not.

"Um," he says. "Hi."

"We know you did not aid my brother in any escape," Thor says. "You are honorable warriors, and you would never do such a thing."

Tony exchanges another look with Nat.

"Of...course not," he says. "Look, he didn't escape. Enchantress took him."

Heimdall nods. "I suspected as much. But as soon as you entered the forest, you were lost to me. My Sight could not follow." His voice loses none of its authority, even as he admits to his weakness. "Amora is dealing with more power than she could hope to understand."

"And you can't see her, either?" Tony asks Frigga.

"She is filled with hubris," Frigga replies cryptically. "Drunk on the power of toying with my son's emotions. He is—immensely powerful, more powerful than he knows. She would take that from him."

“Okay,” Tony says, “thanks.”

“I apologize, but magic cannot be shaped to fit your precise requirements.”

“Yeah? This is why I like engineering.”

“We have come to take you back to Earth,” Thor says. “That we may recover my brother as a team, and bring him back where he belongs.”

Tony bites his lip. Heimdall and Frigga probably know he’s got no intention of ever bringing Loki back here, but Thor has a tendency to think everyone’s on the same page as him. Tony’s not looking to disabuse him of that notion.

“Sounds good to me,” he says. “But—you two are really cool going behind Odin’s back?”

Heimdall and Frigga exchange a look.

“The good of the realm must come first,” Frigga says. “Amora cannot be allowed to continue in her reckless consolidation of power. She cannot be allowed to continue in her exploitation of our people. Magic can be a beautiful thing, and she has made it wretched through her insatiable selfishness.” After a pause, she adds: “And I love my son. I need him to be safe.”

Tony’s throat feels tight.

“I need you to know,” he says, “I’ll do everything in my power to get him back.”

“I know you will,” Frigga smiles. “But we are wasting time. We must return you to Midgard.”

Tony is going to pretend it didn’t happen. He’s going to spend the rest of his life pretending it didn’t happen.

It’s not like he didn’t know about the Bifrost in theory. He knew Thor was regularly traveling between Earth and his homeworld in less time than it took Tony to get from his bedroom to his workshop.

But. He was in a spaceship for *weeks*. He traversed more of the universe than any human in history, with the exception of the other humans who were in the spaceship with him. Even knowing that Loki had used the black hole to fold space around them and deposit them in an entirely different realm didn’t fix the part of his brain that can’t stop thinking about Asgard as *a very long way away*.

He throws up the moment they appear on the landing pad of the tower. It’s extremely undignified, but he also thinks it’s fair.

And then JARVIS’ proximity alert starts going crazy, and Steve bounds out with his shield held high, and Tony does something even *more* undignified and throws himself into his arms. Well, arm. Steve doesn’t stop holding the shield, even as he’s returning Tony’s hug.

Tony might be crying. It's been a rough month.

After he's showered and changed into his own clothes and drunk some coffee and taken some aspirin, Tony feels a little less like a nervous wreck. The fact that he hadn't let go of the dagger for a second, including in the shower, might count against him on that front, but he thinks he's allowed a crutch.

By the time the Avengers are gathered in the common area, he's raring to go.

He does give it a minute; he's not a monster. Sigrid and Halla are introducing themselves, and also getting acclimatized to life in a billionaire's tower on Earth. Sigrid has struck up a fast friendship with JARVIS. Halla seems personally offended by the concept of television.

Steve's running buddy is there, which is a bit of a surprise.

"Did he move in while I wasn't looking?" Tony asks.

Sam laughs. "No, man, I'm just passing through. Thought I could be of some help."

"This about the Falcon project?" Rhodey asks. He's beside Bruce on the couch; they're the ones who've been trying to explain sitcoms to Halla. *Friends* is providing a comforting hum of background noise.

"You know about that?" Sam seems surprised.

Tony raises an eyebrow. "Are you Air Force boys training birds, now?"

"Yeah, no. It's top-secret," Sam says, "but I guess SHIELD's got clearance for most everything these days."

"I thought it is a stupid idea," Rhodey shrugs. "But then I saw the footage. Sam here's got *wings*."

"You mean like..."

"Big-ass metal wings, yeah," Sam says.

"Huh," Tony says, trying to picture that. "Well, I suppose I haven't got much room to talk."

"If we're going to fight Enchantress, we'll need as many aerial players as possible," Nat points out. "Loki's proven it's difficult to fight her from ground level."

"I've got enough Iron Man suits for everyone," Tony says.

"Oh, I'm never wearing that thing again," Nat says. "Thank you, I appreciated it, but I also hated it."

"Fair enough," Tony says. "Thor and Steve, you're both too big. You'd stretch out the metal and I'd feel horribly inadequate by comparison, it'd be a whole thing. So just me and Rhodey,

then!”

“I believe you may be forgetting someone, Sir,” says JARVIS. And the elevator doors open.

Tony has to give JARVIS credit for being a dramatic son of a bitch.

“You made me a suit without *telling me?*” Pepper demands. As she strides toward him, Tony’s sure he’s about to get slapped. It’s a hell of a shock when he’s gathered into a hug instead. Pepper’s hair smells the same as it always does, a combination of her citrus shampoo and floral conditioner. The familiarity of it almost starts him off crying again, but he manages to keep a handle on himself.

“I didn’t know you were still here,” he mumbles, a lame attempt at distraction.

“Bruce called me last night,” she says. “I’m a big fan of your company, Tony, and I like running it—but I’m a bigger fan of you.” She kisses him on the cheek. “And that’s why I’m coming with you.”

Tony blanches. “The Rescue armor isn’t meant for combat. It’s—”

“Nat used it well enough,” Pepper says.

“Debatable,” says Rhodey. Nat, delightfully, sticks her tongue out at him.

“Pep,” Tony says, “the suit was meant to keep you *out* of danger. I can’t—”

“Considering how badly Enchantress beat you last time,” Pepper says, “I’d think you’d be accepting any help you can get.”

“She’s got a point,” Rhodey says.

Tony points a finger at him. “Traitor.”

“I can’t do what you do,” Pepper says. “But that doesn’t mean I have to sit idly by. And you did teach me the basics of the Iron Man suit.”

It’s true; he had. He hadn’t expected it to come back to bite him in this particular way.

Pepper continues: “There are ten of us—eleven if you want to include Loki. And one of us is the Hulk.”

“Damn right,” Bruce says, to Tony’s shock. It’s the first time he’s heard Bruce refer to his alter-ego with anything resembling positivity.

“Okay, okay, fine,” Tony says. “The armor should protect you from most magic—or, at least, that’s what Loki thinks. But there’s a weakness in the faceplate. Once she gets in there, the rest is fair game. I don’t have time to figure out how to fix that, so you’re just gonna have to make sure you keep your face protected. You understand?”

Pepper and Rhodey both nod.

Nat takes over: “The best offense against her seems to be brute force; you’d have more luck with a punch than with repulsors or bullets.” At Tony’s look, she changes track. “But you should stay back, Pepper.”

“Yes, yes, we’re all aware I’m not experienced in combat,” she says, rolling her eyes. “Can you at least trust me to make good decisions?”

“Always,” Tony says, squeezing her waist.

“We can’t all go for her at once,” Sam points out. “Assuming we all agree that the Hulk’s got the most powerful punches, the rest of us should focus on creating openings for him.”

Steve smiles at him approvingly; he’s always been a fan of tactical planning.

“The might of Mjolnir will be effective against our foe,” Thor announces, sounding a little put out that he doesn’t get to be the centerpiece of the plan.

“Sure it will,” Tony says. “And you should throw that thing around to your heart’s content. If she somehow takes out the Hulk, we’ll tap you in.”

Thor nods, mollified.

“What about me and Halla?” Sigrid asks.

“Shields,” Tony says. “We don’t know what state Loki’s going to be in when we find him, whether he’ll be able to help at all. You’ve got to be in charge of protecting us.”

“I’m not sure I know how...”

“You’ve read about it, right?” Tony says.

Sigrid nods.

“Well, now’s the time to put all that theory into practice. Halla, Steve, Nat: you’ll be on ground level. If she’s picked up any new minions, you’ll have to incapacitate them without hurting them too badly. And—if Loki’s hurt, you’ll help me keep him safe.”

“That’s all well and good for once we’re there,” Nat says, “but how are we supposed to get there? I have to think Odin would notice all ten of us using the Bifrost.”

Tony pulls the dagger out of the waistband of his jeans.

“I think I’ve been underestimating what this little sucker can do,” he says. “You remember how yesterday I could barely walk?”

Nat nods consideringly.

“When Loki gave it to me, I knew it could power Sparkle Motion—rest in peace, sweet spaceship prince—indeinitely. I knew it would get us where we needed to go. I reckon that’s still true, even without the vessel.”

“Like a portkey,” Steve says.

“We’re very glad you’re catching up on pop culture, but not everything is *Harry Potter*,” Tony says. “Although, yes, kind of like a portkey. Look, I don’t know for sure it’ll work that way, but between the—spell we’re doing to locate Loki, and the spell he did on the dagger, and the fact that magic is absolute bullshit that just does what you want it to at any given moment...I think it’s a decent bet.”

“And what spell to locate Loki would that be, exactly?” Rhodey asks, smiling slyly.

“Oh, fuck off,” Tony says. “You guys in, or not?”

He receives nine answers to the affirmative. The dagger seems to thrill in his hand.

Chapter End Notes

while it is true that this is the first chapter in which loki does not appear, it is also true that this chapter features the triumphant return of the real otp of this fic: steve/his shield. dude just loves that hunk of metal

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

The rescue operation gets underway.

Chapter Notes

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

Tony closes his eyes and tries to focus. He can feel Sigrid's hands wrapped around his, her thumbs tracing circles into his palms. Whether that's part of the spell or some attempt at comfort, he doesn't know.

They're in the workshop, in deference to Sigrid's insistence that the spell should take place wherever Tony feels most comfortable. All along the walls, the blank eyes of dozens of Iron Man suits watch over them.

"You remember what Loki told me," Sigrid says. "You need to picture him. Allow him to become your focus. Think of the moment you fell in love with him."

"I don't *know* the moment I fell in love with him," Tony grits out, frustrated. Even so, he can feel the beginnings of something building. The connection between his and Sigrid's hands feels warm with something resembling static electricity.

"It's okay," Sigrid reminds him, "we're not holding the dagger yet. We're just trying to establish a connection. There's still time."

Tony feels extremely conscious of the number of eyes on him, including but not limited to Loki's brother. He clenches his eyes until it's painful, trying to think of anything that isn't the state Loki's currently in: trapped, tortured, alone. Instead, he thinks back to the moment Enchantress had established the bond between them, figuring he may as well start at the beginning. He'd been confused, scared, and Loki had used magic to warm him up, to get him out of the confinement of the dead Iron Man suit. Loki had been angry with him, that much had been obvious even before Tony had understood what the mental link *was*, but he'd still taken steps to make Tony feel safe.

He swallows. The sound and sensation of doing so seem far away. He recognizes what's happening: his experiences with magic on the spaceship and since have mostly involved inhabiting a detached sort of mindspace. He forces himself to lean into the disconnection, rather than resisting it.

And he moves on, flipping through the mental Rolodex of Loki memories.

He thinks of Loki hanging around in the corner of the lab like a particularly irritable bat, snapping at them and then turning around and summoning comfort food and coffee to keep them fed and alert. He thinks of the quickfire bursts of humor Loki favors, keeping his intended audience off-guard. Casting his mind back, he tries to pinpoint the moment they'd first touched with the bond intensifying the feeling of it, the way comfort and warmth had ricocheted through them both, drawing them closer together.

Loki had been defensive of him from the start, he realizes, sensitive to Tony's shifts into panic. He'd snapped at Bruce when the topic of a medical check-up had come up; he'd been the one to pull Tony out of his own head during that second morning's panic attack, his fingers trailing down Tony's arm. He'd slept beside Tony every night, even when his own feelings must have made it torturous to do so.

Aware that his heart is banging a harsh rhythm against his ribcage, Tony pulls to mind the image of Loki and his ridiculous bed-head, alongside the many times he'd watched Loki sleeping or feigning sleep, his face lax and his emotions blurrier, less sharp-edged, than they were when he was awake.

Faintly, Sigrid's voice enters his mind: *You're doing well. Keep going.*

He replies: *You should get the dagger.*

"James, can you bring it? And stay with him," he hears Sigrid say, though the words are echoey and distant. Even so, he can hear the strain in them. Sigrid has the more difficult job here, the one of channeling Tony's emotions into usable magic.

The weight of the dagger and Rhodey's hand, when they come, are both extraordinary in their effect. Tony can feel—it's like when Loki had been showing him magic on the spaceship, the power of it surging *through* him. By now, he understands: Loki had spent hours working on the dagger, playing with all the power he'd had before hiding his emotions from Tony had made magic like this an impossibility for him.

He recalls the moment Loki had presented it to him, how he'd been struck by the simple beauty of it: that kaleidoscopic oil slick of colors in the hilt's jewel that he didn't yet know represented both of their minds—*souls*, Halla's word comes back to him—

Loki had been proud, and he'd been pleased by Tony's appreciation, had wanted to bask in it but hadn't been able to *let* himself—

And that's—that's new information, Tony never knew that—

Because Loki's taking the reins on this one, and he's jolting them forward to the moment on the balcony, balmy-warm air and Tony saying he forgives everything that's in his power to forgive, accepting Loki for what he is the way no one had before, and—

And you lashed out, Tony thinks.

Touched you, Loki thinks right back at him, like it's a revelation. *You liked it when I touched you.*

Tony thinks he would laugh if he could feel his mouth. As if Loki hadn't known the effect his touches had caused, the way Tony's body had responded to the violence and the tenderness and everything in between. *Yeah*, he responds. *I really did. Every time.*

It's a jumble: moments from Tony's memory, moments from Loki's. Tony sees himself through Loki's eyes, the way his fragile mortal form seems to hold overmuch relative to its condition. He hesitates to call what he's seeing an aura, but that's the closest word in English he's got to describe it. It's like the colors on the dagger, shifting in and out of focus, making him more beautiful in Loki's view than he has any right to be.

It's too much. He can feel himself pulling back, trying to escape the intensity of Loki's perception of him. But—it's as though there are invisible arms pushing him back.

You need to do this. It's Rhodey's voice. *I know it's hard for you, but it's the only way to get him back.*

You're in my head, Tony thinks, stupidly.

We all are, Rhodey responds. *Don't worry about us. Go back to Loki.*

In the vast confusion of whatever mystical mindscape they've entered, Loki is waiting for him. He's indistinct, his words not nearly as loud as Sigrid or Rhodey's. It just means Tony has to listen more carefully, so he does.

I never expected—this magic should be beyond you.

Always underestimating us Midgardians, Tony thinks, chiding. *You could help.*

I am helping, Loki responds testily. *You're just being unusually dense.*

Tony takes that one on the proverbial chin. *You're supposed to think of the moment you fell in love with me*, he manages to think. It still feels shockingly presumptuous to postulate, even with all the evidence at his disposal.

It takes a second, but Loki does it. There are words, but they're accompanied by ghosts of the physical senses: Tony understands they're back on the spaceship, can feel the vibration of it beneath him. His own face is sliding in and out of focus. Loki's trying to hold onto it, but it's taking a lot out of him.

I was harnessing the power of the—what do you humans call it? Ah, yes, the black hole. I would have been able to get us safely to Asgard, Sight unseen, had it not been for—

I told you I trusted you, Tony thinks, remembering.

Will you allow me to assist the spell or not? Yes, you said you trusted me. And I knew it was true. It shouldn't have been, but it was. We were already in motion; it was too late to stop. And yet I knew I had to hide from you what I felt—what I could no longer deny to myself. I had thought it fun to—flirt, to indulge myself in petty fancies and to admire your mind while I was forced to reside within it. Never had I thought to protect myself from falling in love with a human.

Jesus. Tony knows Loki's form, here inside the phantasmagoria of the spell, is incorporeal, but he still wants to somehow reach out and hold him close. He's even struggling to hold Loki's dismissal of his entire species against him.

We crashed because you realized you loved me?

And so you see, Loki thinks wryly, I am worthy of neither your love nor your trust.

Tony doesn't even need to think on this. Making a split-second bad decision is nothing; he's led a life full of them. Loki had realized he had feelings he hadn't accounted for and he'd panicked, made a bad call. It was the most understandably human reaction it was possible to have, in Tony's opinion.

It's not about being worthy, he thinks, and fancies he can feel Thor's outrage. It's easy to trust someone like Rhodey, or like Cap. With you, it's hard. Putting trust in you isn't about logic. It's not about weighing up all the variables and coming to a scientific conclusion. It's the opposite. It's knowing you, inside and out, and still believing that you won't hurt me. Beyond logic, beyond facts. It's about—caring about you. And believing that you care about me, too.

Loki's still there, but he's stunned into mental silence.

Besides, Tony thinks, trying to steer away from the mushiness even though he knows that's the point of all this, you know I love a challenge.

Do you? Loki's even quieter than before, slipping away. He can't hold on forever, after all.

Yeah, Tony thinks firmly. I do.

He doesn't receive a response from Loki, but he hadn't expected one: instead, he feels Sigrid's encouragement to keep going.

So Tony picks up where Loki had left off: the spaceship crashing. Waking up to Loki holding him, to Loki's clear panic over his injury. The confrontation with Odin, and Loki's desperation to keep touching him, to assuage his pain. And Tony's desperation, once he'd learned of the consequences of Loki's reappearance on Asgard. His realization that Loki's death was unacceptable to him.

That's probably it, he thinks. If there is an *it*, a single moment where his feelings were incontrovertibly altered, where his idiot heart said *this one* about an occasionally homicidal alien—it's that moment in the throne room, realizing Loki might soon be gone.

The spell seems to agree.

He opens his eyes.

It's a daisy chain of Avengers, with Sigrid and Tony at the center. Rhodey's hand is on one of Tony's wrists and Pepper's is on the other; Halla is pressed to Sigrid's side. From there, Bruce is holding on to Rhodey; Thor has a supportive hand on Bruce's elbow; Steve's holding on to Thor's forearm, and Sam and Steve are holding hands. Nat's got her fingers interlocked with Halla's.

Tony's throat is already thick with all the emotions he's just had to pour out; the sight of his team like this is enough to tip him into a hysterical half-sob, half-laugh.

"You think we did it?" he asks. His voice is rough, as though it's gone days without use.

The dagger, balanced between him and Sigrd, is pulsing with energy. It's only touching his hand, but the feeling spreads all the way up to his upper arm, tingly and warm. It's a facsimile of the way touching Loki had felt when they were mind-melded.

"I think we did," Sigrd smiles.

"Alright!" Tony says. "Go team! Now, I don't want to rush anyone, but we need to suit up real quick. This thing feels like it's about to take off without us."

It's no joke getting into a position where all ten of them can touch the dagger at the same time, especially with three rather bulky metal suits to consider, but they manage it. Sigrd's the last one to put their hand on the pile, and it's with her touch that the magic of the vessel is triggered.

The feeling of it is less terrible than it had been when taking the Bifrost Expressway, but Tony still stumbles to his knees when they land. He doesn't throw up, which might be a sheer willpower thing: he's in a brand new Iron Man suit, after all, and there's no filtration system for *that*.

"Everyone okay?" he asks, looking around.

They're in a frozen wasteland, oddly reminiscent of the place where that first battle with Enchantress had taken place. Tony knows it's not Canada, though. In fact, he's pretty sure he knows exactly where they are.

"Jotunheim," he and Thor both say as one.

"Yeah, nobody told me it was gonna be *fucking freezing*," Sam says. He's got goggles on, but he's also wearing a t-shirt. Tony makes an apologetic face before he remembers it won't be seen.

"Sorry," he says. "Not ideal weather conditions."

Bruce, shivering, says: "I think I'm gonna Hulk out now, if that's okay with everyone."

"I guess we're not exactly going for stealthy..." Tony starts to say, but Thor talks over him.

"If we are discovered by the Frost Giants, they will not look kindly upon us. It would be wiser to remain hidden until we have discovered Enchantress' hiding place."

"You know, I kinda thought we'd land slap bang in the middle of her lair," Tony says, continuing to peer at their uniformly bleak surroundings. "But I don't see her anywhere. Who's got the dagger?"

Sigrid holds it up, but says: “You don’t need it. If you concentrate, you should be able to feel where he is.”

Tony closes his eyes, feeling silly. Still, no sooner has he shut them than his mind’s eye is filled with the image of an icy cave, along with the helpful knowledge that it’s only a few miles to the west. The blizzard is so thick that they won’t be able to see it until they’re practically on top of it, but he can feel it. Despite the weather conditions, sweat starts to prickle all over his skin.

“West,” he says, opening his eyes back up. “She’s close.”

“What else did you see?” Sigrid asks.

“It was too dark,” Tony says. “I couldn’t see her or Loki. I just know they’re there.”

“Both of them?”

He nods, the neck joints of the Iron Man suit whirring with the movement. “You still got that ring?”

Sigrid pats the small leather pouch at her waist. “Right here.”

“And Nat, your hair tie?”

“I’ve got it.”

She’s in the Black Widow suit; even with its relative lack of protection, she looks far more comfortable in it than she ever had in the Rescue armor.

“Would you mind giving it to Halla for now?” he asks. “Once we get there, I want both of them hidden.”

Steve smiles at him, clearly approving.

“Okay,” Tony says. “Okay. Fliers, grab a non-flier. I’ll take Sigrid—Rhodey, you grab Bruce. Sam goes with Steve; Pepper with Nat; Thor with Halla. That sound good to everyone?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Steve says.

With a press of a button, Sam’s wings flip outward. He hooks his arms under Steve’s and gets them both airborne—no small feat considering Steve’s weight. Tony lets out a quiet whistle at the sight, and Sam laughs.

“Race you there?” he suggests.

“Oh, so it’s like that?” Tony asks. His voice is shaky with adrenaline and worry, but he still manages to get the humor across. It’s a talent of his. While Sam laughs, he holds out his arms for Sigrid. She hops lightly into them.

Beside him, Pepper and Rhodey do the same with their passengers. Thor just gets a grip on Halla's forearm, beginning to swing his hammer with his free arm.

"But seriously," Tony says, "I'm the only one who knows where we're going. I'll lead the way."

She's waiting for them. The mouth of the cave is huge, three times her height, but it's too shadowy for Tony to see where Loki could be. He stops flying forward and hovers, waiting for Amora to make the first move.

Sigrid and Halla are both invisible by now, but Tony makes sure to shift Sigrid carefully against his hip so it doesn't look as though he's carrying anyone. He casts a glance at where Bruce is still tucked against the chest of the War Machine armor. Luckily, he hasn't decided to go green yet.

"It is remarkable," Enchantress says, addressing Tony. "I had thought your weak mind would be reduced to sludge. And that you would not be so foolish as to attempt to face me again—with a new band of misfits, too."

"Yeah, well, underestimating my mind doesn't tend to work out too well for people," Tony says, letting bravado take over. He's used to this part. "Where's Loki?"

Enchantress laughs. "You know, he's very warm-blooded for a Frost Giant. It's so hard for him to fight when all his magic's being used to keep himself alive."

Not all of it, Tony thinks. But letting Enchantress know that Loki had managed to reach out to him across however many realms there are between Jotunheim and Midgard won't be helpful. It's better if she underestimates him.

Tony tries to focus on the pull he can feel toward Loki. He's definitely in the cave, but there's something—weird about it, some kind of wall between him and Enchantress.

"Ice," Tony croaks. "You've trapped him in ice. What kind of *supervillain shit*—"

Enchantress just smiles and, faster than a blink, launches herself into the air and flies to within a foot of Tony and Sigrid.

"No Loki to shield you now," she says. Reaching out, she traces a nail around the circumference of the arc reactor. "I suppose I really will have to kill you. It's a pity. It would've dragged out the torment if I'd allowed you to live—you would have found somebody else to fall in love with, and I could have shown Loki in such *vivid* detail—"

Tony punches her.

It's not the wisest move—but it does get her to stop talking, so he can't bring himself to regret it.

As he does so, he feels Sigrid shift against his side—her arms coming up, perhaps? Whatever she does, the end result is a clumsy, half-visible shield. Enchantress' head whips around,

looking fruitlessly for the source of it. Her nose and lip are bleeding: a punch from the Iron Man suit is no joke.

While he'd very much like to continue inflicting as much pain on Enchantress as he possibly can, he knows that's not the best course of action to keep Loki or Sigrid safe. He flies backward, leaving the way clear for the other Avengers to take over. When Enchantress tries to follow, she's blocked by Rhodey and a Bruce who is very rapidly turning green.

"Oh," Enchantress says. "This one."

"Hulk?" Rhodey says, the smile in his voice audible even through War Machine's modulator. "Go ahead and smash."

"Don't lie, you've been wanting to say that for months," Tony says, watching with some amusement as the weight of the Hulk forces Enchantress all the way to the ground. Their landing cracks the ice, but the Hulk doesn't let up. He's better than Bruce ever gives him credit for: *very* defensive of his teammates.

"YOU! HURT! METAL! MAN!" the Hulk is yelling between punches. Enchantress is managing to dodge a few of them, but even one direct hit from the Hulk is sure to take its toll, even on a semi-immortal.

Tony sets Sigrid down, far enough away that he's secure in the knowledge that she won't get caught in any crossfire.

"Got eyes on Halla?" he asks.

"I see her," Sigrid says, briefly removing her ring. "She's fine. I'm coming with you."

Tony hesitates before he nods and picks her up once more. When he looks back over, Enchantress' hands are wriggling out from under the huge green fist. One of them jerks oddly, as though stepped on by an invisible foot.

"Pep, Rhodey, sonic disruptors!" Tony yells as he flies past them, toward the mouth of the cave. A look back over his shoulder confirms that the team is working beautifully in tandem: even when Enchantress manages to shoot spells out in wild directions, they stay on top of her. Pepper's up high enough that he doesn't have to worry about her, and she's deploying everything she can to keep their enemy distracted. Sam's using his wings to shield Nat, who's shooting her nasty bolts of electricity in Enchantress' direction. Some of them are hitting the Hulk, but he doesn't seem to mind. Cap and Thor are working on keeping Enchantress restrained from the sides: Enchantress is doing a decent job of dodging Mjolnir, but Steve's shield takes her by surprise.

Amora's shrieks of displeasure get softer as Tony flies further into the cave, touching down when the icy ceiling drops suddenly. It's a deep cave, and soon enough he can barely hear the battle outside at all. It's disconcerting, although Sigrid sticks close by.

After a few more minutes of walking, they reach the end of the tunnel. It's just what he'd expected, but the anticipation doesn't make the sight of it any less difficult to bear. Loki is

suspended in a thick sheet of ice, hands up as if to defend himself. His eyes are open, but they're unseeing. He looks dead.

In a moment of idiocy, Tony's shedding the armor, rushing to place his hands on the freezing surface of the ice.

"He's alive," Sigrid says, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You know he's alive, Tony."

"He looks—"

"I know what it looks like. But you heard what Enchantress said: she wants to drag this torture out for decades, or even centuries. He's keeping himself alive with his magic; you get him out with yours."

"With my—?"

Sigrid waves a hand at the Iron Man suit. "Come *on*," she says. "It seemed like they were winning when she left, but Enchantress is a slippery one. We can't waste time."

Tony squares his shoulders and gets back into the armor. Once he's tucked up inside, JARVIS is kind enough to turn up the in-suit heating without being asked. It only makes him feel worse: him being warm while Loki stays trapped, freezing half to death.

Considering the icy conundrum before him, Tony quickly runs through his options before he settles on the lasers. The operation is tricky: he goes as close to Loki as he dares whilst ensuring that he doesn't hit him with the potentially deadly weapon. The ice sizzles and melts easily enough, although it's deep and Tony can't get behind Loki's body.

Once he's gouged a trail around Loki, he presses the gauntlets against what remains of the barrier.

"Okay, JARV, let's try a high-frequency vibration. Nothing that'll hurt him."

"Of course, Sir," says JARVIS.

It takes longer than Tony's comfortable with, but the ice begins to crack by degrees. At first it's just fissures around the edges, but then the fractures begin to deepen, congregating around the heat source that is Loki's body. Tony makes an incoherent noise of relief when enough chunks come loose that he and Sigrid can pull Loki out, mindful of the sharp edges of ice left behind.

They lay him out on the cave floor. Nothing happens.

"If I have to give him mouth-to-mouth," Tony says shakily, "we're officially in goddamn fairytale territory."

Sigrid, whose hands are bare, checks his pulse points one by one.

"Weak, but his heart's still beating." She holds the back of her hand up to his lips. "He's still breathing. Just give him a minute."

Tony sheds the Iron Man suit again, because he can't stand to go another second without touching Loki. If he can use whatever meager body heat he has to warm him up, maybe...

He gets Loki's head into his lap, brushes the dark strands of frozen hair away from his blue-tinged face.

"Hey, JARVIS," he says, "would you mind doing your best impression of a radiator for me?"

The Iron Man suit moves of its own accord, opening up and folding down so its interior heating systems can face outward. Warm air blows over Loki, whose eyes—at the very least—are no longer staring blankly. His pupils begin to contract.

Sigrid takes Loki's hands in her own, rubbing them together. Her eyes are closed and her lips are moving silently; not relying purely on kinetic energy, then, but on a combination of that and magic.

When Loki finally blinks, Tony's breath gets knocked out of him. It takes him a few seconds to remember how to speak. This had all been easier in the unreal environment of the love spell, less embarrassing. Plus, his teeth have begun to chatter despite JARVIS' best efforts.

"Loki," he says. Loki's eyes flick in his direction, but they're still just barely alert. Tony doesn't know if Loki's actually seeing him. "You're fine, we've got you."

He'd forgotten that saying shit like that is just tempting fate. The moment he finishes the sentence, there comes the sound of a loud and not very encouraging crash, coming from the mouth of the cave.

And so the first thing Loki ends up saying is: "You idiot."

Chapter End Notes

team work makes the dream work (literally)

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

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

“JARVIS,” Tony says, quiet, “scan for lifeforms.”

It’s too much to hope that whoever—or whatever—has just entered the cave is friendly. JARVIS’ scan is just going to tell him what Sigrid and Loki already know, if the way they’ve both gone rigid is any indication.

JARVIS hesitates before he answers.

“Two creatures of indeterminate species, Sir.”

Sigrid squeaks in horror.

And Loki puts a voice to her fears. “Frost Giants,” he says. He sounds almost resigned about it, as though he’d been expecting the intrusion and just wants it over with. Tony’s grip on Loki’s shoulders, meanwhile, tightens defensively.

“The ones you tried to massacre?”

“Well, not *specifically*,” Loki says. His skin is fading from blue back to its more familiar coloring. This seems counterproductive, but Tony’s not going to bring it up—not when he’s only just gotten Loki *back*. It’s disconcerting, being this close to him and not being able to tell how he feels. Loki’s face is giving away nothing, as blank as the ice he’d been trapped in.

“Fuck, shit,” Tony mutters. “Sigrid, ring. Now!”

She tosses it over to him, and Tony places it forcibly on Loki’s finger. The effect is unnerving; Tony can still feel Loki half-sprawled on top of him, but he can no longer hear his breathing, nor see any part of him. Panic, left over from the sight of Loki suspended and unconscious, rears its head once more.

“Stay still,” he tells Loki. “Don’t try anything. I mean it. No magic until you’re not half-dead. Sigrid, you think you can manage a shield?”

“Against Frost Giants?” Sigrid looks terrified. Her teeth are chattering, and Tony’s not sure it’s entirely to do with the cold.

“They’re the same as anything else,” Tony says. “Can’t be worse than Enchantress, anyway.”

With shaking hands, Sigrid conjures a thick-looking barrier in front of them. Everything on the other side appears blurry and indistinct: it’s not ideal, but Tony’s not in any place to criticize. He gets to his feet, careful of Loki’s prone form, and murmurs to JARVIS to fit the suit back around him. It might read as a form of aggression to whoever’s coming toward them, but Tony would rather be aggressive than defenseless.

The noises get louder. It's as though the cave is being demolished from the inside out. Tony can hear the crunching of rocks and the smashing of ice.

"I won't let anything happen to you," Tony says to Sigrid, placing a metal hand on her arm. "Either of you."

With a final, reverberating crash, the Frost Giants are upon them. They more than live up to the name: they're practically crawling through the cave, and yet still their bodies are tearing the entire structure apart. Sigrid's shield prevents the rocks from falling on them, but it's a close thing.

Tony's throat contracts. He doesn't know what to say: he'd been prepared for something like Loki, maybe bigger and with the blue skin he's caught glimpses of on occasion. Too late, he remembers Loki showing him a memory of a Frost Giant on the spaceship; Tony had all but dismissed it as a product of Loki's prejudice against his own kind. But these towering creatures, he has to admit, are more like fantasy monsters than anything he's encountered thus far. There's a moment where instinctual fear takes hold of his senses.

But if he refuses to see the Frost Giants as intelligent beings, he's no better than an Asgardian. He takes a deep breath.

"Hey, there. How can I help you?"

Now that he's looking closer, he can perceive a couple of differences between the two figures. One of them has horns protruding from his forehead, almost goat-like in appearance. The other's face is covered in smaller outcroppings of bone, each sharpened to a fine point. It's as though they were designed with violence in mind, from the cut of their visible muscles to the dark, heavy-set eyes. Of course, neither are in full focus, each reduced to a blurry, looming monstrosity by Sigrid's forcefield.

"You intrude upon our lands," says the goat-like one, "and then presume to speak to us so? What manner of creature are you?"

"Uh," Tony says, not wanting to implicate Earth in his misdemeanors, "Iron-born. Didn't realize I was intruding, sorry. I'll just be going, if it's all the same to—"

"The girl. She is of Asgard."

Shit. "She's just on her way out, too," Tony says. "It's an honest mistake, we never meant—"

"And the ones outside? You would have us believe they, too, are here by *mistake*?"

Tony feels sick, even as he doesn't believe the entire contingent of Avengers could have been overpowered by these two. Not the *Hulk*.

"You saw the woman in green? She's the one you're after," Tony says. "The rest of us were just trying to get back something she stole."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

They must have noticed the shield by now, but neither seems concerned by it. The tone of the one speaking, if anything, drips with arrogance and condescension. If Tony didn't already feel small by physical standards...

Tony indicates Sigrid with a nod of his head.

"She took my friend. I was getting her back." In the silence that follows, he desperately babbles: "Maybe you've heard of her—Enchantress? Amora? The Asgardian sorceress. She's probably still out there, you can arrest her or—"

"We already knew of the witch's presence on our lands."

Tony's heart sinks.

"What'd she tell you?" he asks flatly.

"That she had apprehended the one who sought to lay waste to our people. That she had Loki in her clutches."

The second Frost Giant finally speaks: "She promised she'd figure out a way to kill him." He grins. "Make it *painful*."

"I don't know anything about that," Tony manages to say. The strain doesn't come across through the Iron Man suit, thank god. But neither of the Frost Giants are looking at him anymore: their eyes are fixed on Sigrid. Sigrid, who's openly doing magic. "No!" Tony says quickly. "It's not her, it's—"

"Norns, this was a stupid plan," says Loki, which means—

The bastard's gone and taken the ring off. Tony bangs the palm of the armor's hand against the helmet.

"You couldn't stay hidden for *five fucking minutes*?" he demands.

"Look," Loki addresses the Frost Giants, "I understand your desire to see me dead, believe me I do. You've got more reason than most. But I'm afraid I can't allow it. You see, I've got things to do. Reasons to live." His eyes flash toward Tony, who's not done being angry yet.

With some admiration, however, he does notice that Loki looks perfectly fine. He's—to all appearances—on his feet, with a self-deprecating smile curving parallel to his jaw. None of the emaciation from his imprisonment is evident.

Tony knows it's an illusion. He just wonders how long Loki will be able to keep it up.

"If you kill a son of Odin without the permission of the king, I can guarantee you he'll be most upset," Loki continues. "Not that I'm dead, mind you, but that he didn't get to do it himself. Regardless, I promise it will not end well for you."

"You think your words will get you out of this," the first Frost Giant says.

“Well,” Loki replies, “they’ve done it often enough before.”

“And *you*,” the giant continues, fixing his eyes on Tony, “*you* believe that your girlfriend’s shield will protect you.”

“Wow, you’re really misreading this situation,” Tony mutters.

“It matters not,” says the Frost Giant, and he draws his head back—clearly meaning to headbutt the magical barrier into submission—

Tony’s halfway through saying, “*Shit*,” when Loki casts off his illusion and grabs both Tony and Sigrid. Just in time, Tony braces himself for the feeling of teleportation, which does not get any better on the third go-around.

The three of them sprawl onto their hands and knees in the snow, instantly assaulted by a cacophony of noise. Evidently, the two Frost Giants in the cave weren’t the only ones who’d been summoned. The Avengers and friends are holding their own against at least ten of them, with Enchantress somehow out from under the Hulk. She’s hovering outside of the scope of the battle, in a bubble of protection that gives her the appearance of an absurd, mirrorverse Glinda the Good Witch.

“This is the best I could do,” Loki pants. His eyes are glassy.

Tony reaches out for him. “No, it’s good,” he says. “We couldn’t have left them anyway.”

They’re just outside the mouth of the half-destroyed cave; Enchantress has yet to spot them, but it’s only a matter of time before she does.

“I fear I can be of little use to you,” Loki says. “I am not—”

“Hey,” Tony says, “this whole thing’s about getting you home safe, alright? You don’t have to do anything. Except maybe keep the damn invisibility ring on, this time.”

Loki shakes his head. “That is not what I meant. I will not hide from Amora—to do so would be cowardice.”

Tony makes an incoherent noise of irritation. “Sigrid, you got any stupid-ass hang-ups about being invisible?”

“No,” she says, taking the ring back when Loki hands it to her. “What do you need me to do?”

“Keep Halla safe,” Tony says. “You don’t have to worry about anything else.”

Sigrid’s brow creases, but she nods and fits the ring back onto her finger. As she fades from sight, Loki says: “That was foolish. She could have been of more use to us. Her shield in the cave was...impressive, for one untrained.”

Tony shrugs exaggeratedly enough that Loki can watch the Iron Man suit make the movement. “I’d be a hypocrite if I told her to do anything other than protect the person who

matters to her. Now stay the fuck behind me.”

Loki’s eyes flash with something indecipherable—Tony really needs to get used to not being able to read his mind, it’s a problem—but he gets to his feet and does as he’s told. The battle is far enough away that there’s still the choice to make: join the fray, or squirrel Loki away somewhere safe?

“We will not hide,” Loki says, intuiting Tony’s line of thought. “Your friends fight bravely—it would not be right to leave them.”

Tony’s eyes automatically seek out Pepper. She’s sticking close to Rhodey, with his firepower making up for her lack thereof. She’s using the repulsors the way Tony had taught her, and deploying enough flares and sonic disruption that the Frost Giant she and Rhodey have got between them seems disoriented, stumbling and missing whenever he tries to hit.

“I know,” he says. “You gonna be able to fight?”

There’s a stubborn twist to Loki’s mouth when he says, “I will do what I must. None of you would be here if not for me, and I will not allow any of my allies to be hurt in my name. Not again.”

Before Loki’s even finished speaking, Tony’s yanking his helmet off and turning to face him. The freezing wind whips against his face, but he doesn’t care. Nothing matters more, in this moment, than for Loki to see the way Tony feels: to see what must be written across his face, all the love and the admiration and the fear of seeing him hurt. It is, Tony realizes, an expression mirrored by its intended recipient.

When Tony’s in the suit their heights are about equal, which makes it satisfyingly easy to grab Loki by the waist and kiss him.

Loki makes a startled noise against Tony’s mouth, followed immediately by a contented hum. It figures that not even kissing would be enough to shut Loki up, Tony thinks, but he redoubles his efforts all the same, tries to fill the embrace with everything he’s been too stupid and too scared to say. He feels Loki’s hands coming up to cradle his face, feels the sweet sting of magic caressing his skin.

Pulling away very slightly, Loki murmurs, “Please know that this need only be a temporary measure,” against Tony’s jaw.

“What—”

It’s nothing like when Enchantress had first cursed them, and nothing like when she’d ripped the curse away: this time, Tony’s mind is crying out for Loki’s—has been crying out for him ever since the moment Enchantress severed the bond. There’s no pain; no loss of consciousness. Tony just feels Loki’s mind slotting back into its rightful place.

“NO!” screams Enchantress, alerted to their presence either by the intangible feel of the magic or by the fact that Loki has started to quite literally glow. Before she can make a move, though, Tony’s hands are rising, nudged by the knowledge of Loki’s intent. The few days

apart have done nothing to destroy the effortless synchronicity of their thought processes. If anything, the fact that the mind-melding spell has originated from Loki seems to have smoothed out what creases there had been before. The shield that bursts forth seems almost to emerge from his repulsors, and Tony can feel its strength in his bones. Enchantress isn't getting through unless they let her.

When he glances to his right, Loki's dropped to his knees from the effort, but he's smiling.

Enchantress' own protective bubble cracks like an egg as she dives through the air, landing before them with a shriek of pure rage.

"You underestimated me," Loki says calmly. "By itself, not an irreversible mistake, I will admit. But your true downfall is that you underestimated *him*."

Tony's skin feels like it's crackling with power: some combination of what had innately belonged to him, brought to the surface by Loki, and borrowed power from the sorcerer himself. And all the while, better than any of that, is the feeling of Loki's ridiculous jumble of emotions right there in the corner of his brain, all his love and anger and confidence and fear shared between the two of them.

Amora's face is twisted up with rage, but her voice, when she speaks, is as steady as it ever was.

"How far you have fallen, my prince," she says. "So desperate for love that you would accept it from a *human*. So blinded by his affections that you believe him to be my equal in strength." She laughs, although there's no humor in the sound. "He is like the rest of his species: fickle, overemotional. He will grow tired of you soon enough. Like all from his wretched planet, his love is fleeting."

"You're wrong," Tony says, combating the slight waver in Loki's conviction. There's no need to say anything else; he's willing to leave the speeches to Enchantress. His priority is making sure Loki feels the full truth of those two words. Which he does.

With a thought, he—or Loki, through him, or both of them together—summons the Iron Man helmet back to cover his head.

You trust me? Tony asks.

You even have to ask?

Tony grins. He keeps one hand outstretched, ensuring Loki's covered by the magical shield. But, at the same time, he engages the thrusters and flings himself outside of the protection, twisting in midair until the boots of the Iron Man suit slam into Enchantress' abdomen. He hears—or perhaps senses—it when at least two of her ribs crack. Enchantress is howling in agony as the momentum pushes them both down: she to the ground, and Tony to one knee, the other foot pressed down against her chest.

"I wouldn't try to get up," he says.

Her hands scrabble ineffectually at his calf, and he can feel the way she's trying to tap into magic that just won't work against him: not this time. Tony's got his armor wrapped around his body, and Loki's protection coursing through his soul. There isn't a spell in the world that Enchantress could wield against him right now.

"Hey, Loki," he says, "that spell you do, with the ropes?"

"Oh, of course," Loki replies, barely containing his glee. He's managed to get to his feet, but it's still through Tony that he performs the spell—using his left hand, since the right one's still occupied. Keeping Loki shielded is a priority until every potential threat in the surrounding area is neutralized, and they've still got twelve to go.

Tony binds Enchantress' hands and feet, and—for good measure—sticks some kind of magical duct tape over her mouth. Then he drags her to the opening of the cave and props her up against the collapsed entrance. She struggles all the while, making no progress against the strength of her bindings.

"God, I have never been so happy to see someone tied up," Tony says when he's secure in the fact that she's not going to escape on them any time soon.

Loki smirks at him. "And here I thought I made a pretty picture in my shackles."

"Oh, we're flirting again?" Tony says, mouth twitching into an answering smile. "See, there was this whole thing where I was getting mixed messages, you weren't talking to me—"

"I apologized for that."

"Not sure you did, actually," Tony says lightly. "Which, no, it's fine, you don't have to apologize to me. Clean slate, from here on out. How's that sound?"

Loki's face goes heartbreakingly open for a moment. "I don't believe I've ever had a clean slate," he says. "From the moment I was born, my transgressions were as inevitable as the tide."

"Yeah? Well, I've never much believed in destiny," Tony says, and slips back under his magic shield so he can kiss his soulmate.

By the time they rejoin the others outside, the Hulk is using one unconscious Frost Giant to batter another. It's an incredible, terrifying sight. Nat's somehow got herself on top of one's shoulders, blasting her stingers directly into its ear. Elsewhere, Sam and Steve are throwing the shield between them, attacking two giants with it from above and below.

Thor, of course, is fighting like it's what he was born to do. His hammer weaves through the battlefield like it's got a mind of its own, and the sky above crackles with lightning.

Loki nudges him. "Assemble?" he says slyly.

"If you wanted to sign up to be an Avenger, you only needed to ask," Tony responds, but without further ado he wraps an arm around Loki's waist and launches them both into the air.

He flies in the direction of Rhodey and Pepper, who seem to have taken out a couple of giants already if the pile of unconscious bodies beneath them is any indication.

“Was wondering when you guys were gonna stop making out and join us,” Rhodey says.

“Jealousy doesn’t become you, dear,” Tony replies, reveling in the answering robotic laugh. “What’s the best approach to attack?”

“I’ve been going with firing at ‘em ‘til they fall down. Feel free to innovate a better technique.”

“Nah, that sounds good to me,” Tony says. Then, to Loki: “Give me a boost?”

Loki does: when Tony unleashes his unibeam at the Frost Giant beneath them, it topples instantly. Tony hopes it’s still breathing: it’s not like he started out today with the intention of killing members of a species he’s never met before.

The two he remembers from the cave are on the edges of the fray by now, attacked by invisible assailants. Bolts of multicolored light are joined by more tangible weaponry: the synthesis of Sigrid and Halla’s offensive techniques. With Loki’s help, Tony blasts them both in the face—then, when that has little effect, goes for their legs. The Frost Giants are so big that once they fall down they’re essentially out for the count.

“Sigrid!” he shouts. “If you can hear me, we need to start rounding people up! I think we can use the dagger to get home.”

You have rather too much faith in my abilities, Loki thinks.

No, I have exactly the right amount of faith in our abilities, Tony responds, flitting over to help Nat with her giant. *We already used it for trans-dimensional travel once, what’s another trip?*

I believe you have received the wrong impression about the ease with which magic is performed.

Tony doesn’t respond to that, since Loki knows exactly who his teacher was. Any misconceptions Tony has about magic are down to him.

“Did I hear something about leaving?” Nat pants as the Frost Giant collapses beneath her. Tony snags her in his free arm before she has to endure the full drop. “Because I’d be in favor of that.”

There are only two giants left, facing off against Thor and the Hulk. The Hulk, Tony realizes, might be their biggest problem. He’s not going to want to touch a puny dagger when there are still enemies to smash.

“Who wants to try calming the Hulk down?” he yells.

Nat says: “He likes the Iron Man suits. If Pep or Rhodes make it into a game, he’ll follow them.”

Tony tells JARVIS to turn on comms. “Rhodey, Pepper, you hear that? I need you to draw the Hulk away from the giant so we can try and get Bruce back.”

“Sure thing,” Rhodey replies, swinging around so he’s in the Hulk’s eyeline. It’s the kind of thing that could backfire if the Hulk’s in a particularly bad mood, but Rhodey doesn’t get plucked out of the sky. Once the Hulk’s attention is diverted, Sam swoops in to engage the Frost Giant. Steve helps, and a few good hits with the shield to the creature’s forehead send it tumbling to the ground.

Tony does a mental headcount. Once the Hulk is down, they’ll be good to go. The only issue is—

When he turns around, there’s no big green to be seen. Instead, Bruce is draped limply over War Machine’s arms. Tony’s jaw drops.

“How’d you do that?” he demands, flying toward them.

“I just talked to him,” Rhodey says. “We good to go?”

“Thor!” Loki calls. “Stop your ridiculous showboating and come with us!”

Tony raises his eyebrows, knowing that Loki can feel the gesture even if he can’t see it.

“What?” Loki says, unrepentant. “We would have been here all day if we’d allowed him to go on. I’m sure more Frost Giants are already on their way.”

“Good point,” Tony says. “Gang, we need to get out of here sharpish.”

Sigrid’s there when he touches down, ring removed and dagger already in hand. “It hasn’t retained the power from before,” she points out.

“Yeah, we’ve just got to recharge it,” Tony says. “Loki, you take it.”

Loki, with a look of childish insolence, grabs the dagger by its blade and lets his blood run over it. Tony allows it without comment; if blood magic is what it takes to get them out of here, he’s willing to make his peace with it. Better a cut on Loki’s hand than a death sentence enacted by the Frost Giants.

Thor touches down right as the dagger begins to shimmer with power. Loki’s brow is creased and his head’s a turbulent storm of effort, but he’s still able to draw on what Tony’s offering him through the bond. This will get them home, Tony’s sure of it.

“Once more unto the breach,” he says, putting out his hand.

The rest of the Avengers follow suit—even Bruce, who’s barely awake. With all eleven hands stacked on top of the glowing blade, Tony feels the now almost familiar sensation of hurtling through space. There’s a big difference this time, though: Loki’s right there with him.

For good, he hopes.

It's Tony's bedroom—or, more accurately, the guest room he and Loki had been sharing in the tower—that they land in.

“You think ‘home’ and we end up in my bed, huh?” Tony grins. He barely even feels sick: there's something to be said for teleportation when you've got an experienced magic-user in your head smoothing the whole process along. He starts peeling the armor off, already feeling the ache in his muscles that's sure to haunt him for days to come.

“That must have been your influence in the spell,” Loki says haughtily. It's impressive that he pulls it off, since now they're back Tony can see exactly how wrecked he looks. His clothes are torn and singed, his normally pale skin is almost pure white, and his eyes are still glazed, ringed in deep shadow.

Around them, the other Avengers groan as they lift themselves into sitting positions.

“Did we really just do that?” Sigrd asks. There's still frost in her hair, but her eyes are alight with something Tony recognizes from all the superheroes he's ever known: that indescribable elation after a battle done right.

“Yeah,” Tony smiles at her. “We really did.”

It's Loki who breaks the satisfied silence that follows, first in Tony's head and then aloud.

You heroes and your self-congratulating, he thinks, though Tony can tell it's all talk. Loki's relief and pride are on full display to him, in mind-meld technicolor.

“Thor, you must return to Asgard and tell Odin of Enchantress' capture,” Loki says. “Whether he wishes to venture to Jotunheim and retrieve her is up to him, but those bindings will not last forever.”

Thor nods gravely. “It will be done.” He hesitates before he adds: “You fought well today, brother.”

It's not that Tony can force Loki to do anything through the bond, but he can jump in and try to get Loki to reconsider before he says something he'll regret. He utilizes that power now.

After a significant pause, Loki says: “And you as well.”

Tony thinks the lump that rises in his throat is mostly down to Loki, but he's not about to call him out on it. He just waves when Thor levers himself to his feet and heads toward the door, presumably up to the helipad where Heimdall can give him a lift.

“God,” he says, “I'm about ready to sleep for a week. Who's with me?”

“I don't think we'll all fit in the bed,” Rhodey responds.

“That's quitter talk,” Tony says. Only Nat, Sigrd and Pepper had actually landed *on* the bed: the rest of them are sprawled out around it. “Pretty sure I could design a bed we'll all fit in. Could be good for team morale.”

From somewhere near the closet, he hears Sam's voice. "This is *not* what I thought being an Avenger was gonna be like."

And Steve's laughing response: "Get used to it."

Chapter End Notes

that's the final action scene you're getting, so bask in it. our next couple chapters are going to be pure 'characters talking about their feelings' and 'sex, maybe?'

(and then we'll be done)

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

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

The life of a superhero being what it is, Tony doesn't actually get to sleep for a full three hours after the fight.

His most pressing concern is Loki. Underneath the steady waves of relief he can feel emanating from Loki's mind, there's still the fact that he's almost drained of magic and freezing cold to deal with.

While the others are good-naturedly arguing over what food to order, Tony grabs Loki by the hand and pulls him toward the en suite bathroom, a caretaking instinct he hadn't known he possessed stealing over him. After the amount they've touched over the past month, Tony's grown accustomed to the typical warmth of Loki's skin—has started privately thinking of him as more ectothermic than human in terms of temperature regulation. Which means they need to raise the heat of his surroundings way up so he can get back to normal.

He turns on the shower, spins the heat dial all the way round. Within seconds, steam is swirling through the room, fogging up the shower door and mirror.

"You need not be concerned," Loki says, something uncertain threaded through his tone. "My heritage has given me the ability to deal with the cold, if nothing else."

"Sure," Tony agrees, "but you don't *like* it."

Loki blinks. "No. I don't."

"Then stop arguing with me and get in the shower. Unless you're, um—"

"Shy?" Loki grins. "Should I have reason to be?"

He's stripping off as he speaks, discarding what remains of his ruined Asgardian garments. Tony watches his face while he does. He notes the rising of spots of color into his cheeks with relief.

"I can't join you in there unless I want my skin to melt off," he says lightly.

"Some other time, then?" Loki remarks over his shoulder as he moves behind the sliding glass door, steam obscuring most of his body from view. He sounds flippant, but Tony can feel the anxiety behind his words.

"A lot of other times, I hope," Tony says. "There's a towel on the door, and—well, we've got the telepathy if you need anything. I'm just gonna make sure everyone else is okay."

"A hero's work is never done." Already, there's less tension in Loki's voice; the heat is doing its job.

“Not by a long shot.”

While Loki’s showering, Tony gets a room set up for Sigrid and Halla across the common area on the same floor. Both women seem merrily exhausted by the day’s exertion, with Sigrid in particular thrilling in the revelation of her own power.

She leaps giddily onto the bed, sending pillows flying.

“Everything is so *soft* here,” she remarks. “The floors, the beds—”

“The people,” Tony suggests.

Sigrid smiles up at him. “I know of one or two who are made of iron,” she says.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony notices Halla investigating the television on the wall, her fingers prodding at the blank screen.

“You’ll stay?” he asks.

Sigrid and Halla exchange a glance.

“For a while, I think,” Sigrid says. “It’s hard to believe that a few weeks ago I thought I’d never leave Asgard. And now I’m here—I just want a chance to explore.”

“You’re welcome for as long as you want,” Tony responds. “Perk of being an Avenger.”

“We don’t really know what that means,” says Halla.

Sigrid counters: “No, I think we do.”

SHIELD arrives twenty minutes after the pizza delivery guy, which probably says something damning about super-secret spy agencies. When the announcement comes, Loki’s out of the shower and curled into Tony’s side on the couch. He’s dressed in Tony’s clothes, too, having been too weak to manage his usual trick of conjuring whatever he wants to wear. The sweatpants only reach his mid-calf and the MIT hoodie has holes in the cuffs that he’s hooked his thumbs into; it’s sort of ridiculously cute, in Tony’s opinion. He looks serene, with his eyes half-shut and head resting on Tony’s shoulder. They still haven’t really talked, but it’s all too easy to seek contact from each other—the bond is once again enhancing the comfort of touch, and after the interminable agony of being separated Tony’s allowing himself to indulge.

On the table in the center of the room is a towering pile of pizza boxes: Steve’s already had two larges to himself, and Bruce isn’t far behind.

JARVIS cuts in.

“I am willing to detain them in the lobby for as long as is deemed necessary, but it will perhaps benefit you to know that Nick Fury and six agents are requesting to speak to Captain

Rogers right away.”

“Six agents?” Tony asks incredulously. “What does he think Cap’s got up his sleeve?”

“That’s my fault,” Steve says. “I was—a little short with him, while you were away. He kept trying to get me to talk, and I didn’t like lying. I might have been a little rude, in the end.”

“You?” Tony says. “Never.”

Steve smiles grimly. “I know I’ve got a bit of a temper. You don’t have to rub it in.”

“Hey, your temper’s my favorite thing about you,” Tony says. Though it pains him to dislodge Loki from his side, he gets to his feet. “I’ll come with you. Fury will be happy once he knows I’m back under his purview.”

“*Happy* might be stating it a little strongly,” Nat says, “but I’ll go, too. I’m sure he’s got some choice words for me.”

“I suppose I’ll stay behind,” Loki says, half-joking. It’s very hard to see him as threatening in his current state, but Tony has no doubt it’ll ratchet up tensions if anyone from SHIELD catches a glimpse of him.

“You can still keep tabs,” Tony says, tapping his own forehead, “or you can get some sleep. Up to you.”

Loki gets to his feet and, so quickly it’s impossible to react, kisses the very corner of Tony’s lips. “I will attempt to rest,” he says. “Do try to think quietly.”

“You won’t even notice I’m up there,” Tony responds.

Behind him, he hears Sam mutter: “Do we have to stay here and watch this?”

Tony flips him off blindly, and pulls Loki into a better, longer kiss, delighting in his audience’s exaggerated noises of disgust. Loki’s the same, his amused indulgence leaving a pleasant aftertaste in Tony’s mind even after they’ve drawn apart.

In the lobby of Avengers Tower, Nick Fury is waiting with all the patience of a caged tiger. He’s pacing the length of the space, shooting frequent demanding looks at the receptionists, all of whom are doing their job admirably and ignoring him.

Tony doesn’t recognize any of the agents behind him except one: Clint. His face is impassive, and Tony can’t decide whether he’s shared the truth behind the Avengers’ sudden evasions and obfuscation or not. If he has, Fury has more than enough ammunition to blackmail them into doing just about any of his dirty work, a prospect that sits uneasily at the forefront of Tony’s mind.

Barton only knows what he was here to see, Loki helpfully reminds him. If you tell him I have been imprisoned on Asgard, he will have few options by way of retribution.

Let's save the lying until they've shown their hand, Tony responds. He sticks his hands in his pockets and raises an eyebrow.

“Director,” he says. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“You mind telling me what in the hell you’ve been up to, Stark?” Fury asks.

“Look, it’s a long story, and I’m pretty close to dead on my feet—”

“Let me tell you what I know,” Fury barrels on. “That goddamn rainbow space magic has been lighting up your rooftop, and the good people of this city are getting mighty twitchy about it.”

“Thor had some business to attend to,” Tony says blandly.

“Cut the crap, Stark,” Clint says. “If you don’t tell him, I will.”

“That’s the other thing I’m wondering,” says Fury, “is how you’ve got so many of my best agents covering for your ass, Stark. We both know it’s not your charming personality.”

“I paid them all off,” Tony says. “But it doesn’t matter, because I’m not lying. Thor’s back on Asgard right now, telling them all about the evil sorceress we just defeated. Because—and I hate to remind you of this, Nick—*I don’t work for you*. You might have jurisdiction over the Avengers as an entity, though even that seems tenuous considering the public has no idea about SHIELD’s involvement, but Iron Man? Doesn’t answer to you.”

“You’re treading on dangerous ground,” Fury says. “If your independence is the hill you’re willing to die on, I can encourage the senate to reconsider its stance on Iron Man’s autonomy.”

“Director Fury—” Steve says, sounding shocked.

Tony interrupts: “Look, there don’t have to be any hard feelings here. I’m not crazy about you threatening Rhodey’s job, or anything else shady you’ve done, but I’m up for letting bygones be. If you are.”

“Agent Romanoff,” Fury says, not even deigning that with a response, “I expect a report on your activities over the last month by the end of the day. If not, I will consider it a resignation.”

To her credit, Nat doesn’t hesitate. “Thank you, Sir.”

Tony doesn’t know what to make of that. But he also recognizes that SHIELD are the ones to whom Nat feels like she owes her allegiance. And even if she changes her mind, they’re the entity who has the most dirt on her.

Steve, too, seems to realize this. “You can’t ask her to do that,” he says. “It wasn’t a SHIELD mission.”

“Thank you for your input, Captain,” Fury says coldly. Steve must have been pretty rude to fall out of favor so quick, Tony thinks. “That will be all.”

“You need to talk to Clint,” Tony says to Nat once they’re back upstairs. “It’s a miracle he hasn’t said anything already.”

Nat nods. “I will. But you should know,” she says, “I’m not going to write that report. I could make up something convincing, but that’s not the point. I don’t want to be in SHIELD’s pocket anymore.”

Tony can feel his eyes going wide.

“I doubt they’ll let me go in peace,” Nat says. “There are things I’ve done—it’s hard to know whether the people we’re trying to protect will accept brainwashing as an excuse. I might have to give up being an Avenger.”

But there’s a smile on her face, Tony realizes. This is what she wants.

“There isn’t anyone on the team with an unimpeachable record,” he says. “Not even Cap—I’m pretty sure my dad told me some stories about the laws he broke during the war. Point is: we’ll stand by you. You’re not off the team unless you want to be. And whatever SHIELD tries to throw at you, we’ll deal with it. Pretty sure I’ve got more money than them, anyway.”

“You’d be surprised,” Nat says dryly. “I—thank you.”

There’s no hint of deception to it, Tony thinks—possibly naively, but he’s willing to take that chance. He takes her hand in his, squeezes gently.

“No worries,” he says. “Besides, if Loki’s sticking around we’ve got a much harder sell on our hands than you.”

Loki’s not asleep when he returns to the room. He’s sat in the center of the bed, knees folded in to his chest. His head’s bowed.

“Meditating?” Tony asks.

“Mm,” Loki responds vaguely. “Amora weakened me, but magic cannot be destroyed. I merely need to nurture it.”

“Can you take a break?”

Loki unfolds, looking up Tony with an uncertain expression. “Depends what for,” he says.

“I hate to say it,” Tony says, climbing into the bed himself and propping himself up against the headboard, “but we should probably talk.”

“I have heard it said that humans waste an extortionate amount of their short lifetimes on saying things aloud that need not be voiced,” Loki says. “I am willing to indulge that need,

but do make it quick.”

“As if you don’t love the sound of your own voice more than any human I’ve ever met,” Tony mutters, but he opens his arms in a way that’s clearly an invitation. Loki accepts. His touch is like a balm, soothing and cool—his temperature may be on its way up, but the cold of Jotunheim lingers.

“Let’s start with unpacking Enchantress’ plan for a minute,” Tony says. “I want the real story. Why’d she want revenge that badly? And in such a specific way?”

Loki looks even shiftier than he usually does.

“After I found out what she had done to my brother, I was angry,” he says. “I behaved impulsively.”

“God, that’s just so hard to believe,” Tony responds sarcastically.

“I enchanted her to fall in love with an ass.”

Tony lets out a surprised bark of laughter, nearly dislodging Loki with the force of it.

“Holy shit, that’s incredible,” he wheezes. “So Shakespearean.”

“It was a temporary affliction,” Loki continues. “How boring it would be, to permanently alter someone’s sense of self.”

“Uh-huh, sure,” Tony nods, still stifling giggles. It’s probably not *that* funny, but he also hasn’t slept in a while. “What did she do with the donkey?”

“Nothing coarse,” Loki assures him. “She merely doted on him, for little over a month, and paraded him around in public as her true love.”

Tony cracks up laughing again. Then he realizes.

“Hang on,” he says. “If that was what she was trying to get revenge for—that makes *me* the ass. She was looking for the closest equivalent to a donkey and she chose *me*?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’ll do wonders for the ego,” Tony mutters. “Hey, was it because I’m a human or because of Asgard’s not-so-secret homophobia?”

“Your species is far more shameful than your gender,” Loki responds.

“Cool. Thanks.”

“Only…” Loki seems hesitant to continue, but he does. “She must have known that I would fall in love with you without undue influence. That was what made her curse worse than mine.”

Tony turns his face into Loki's hair, giving him an excuse not to have to suffer through eye contact while he says his piece. "How could she have known that?" he asks.

"No sorcerer in the history of Asgard has ever approached Amora's power when it comes to matters of the heart," Loki explains. "To have me fall in love with someone—or *something*—without my consent would have seemed pedestrian to one of her stature. Not worth the effort. But to trap me in a situation where she knew feelings would bloom of their own accord..."

"Diabolical," Tony says, trying not to smile. "This must be terrible for you."

To underline his words, he traces his fingers under Loki's jaw and draws him into a soft kiss, half-parted mouths and a drowsy exchange of sparks through the bond.

When he pulls back, Loki rolls his eyes. "Perhaps she did not count on you returning my affections. Or perhaps she really did believe we would lose our minds and kill each other. The workings of a psyche such as hers are—mysterious, to put it generously."

"It's so convoluted," Tony says gleefully. "You don't get this shit with humans, you know. With them, you already hope for some elaborate, dramatic motivation. And then it's always just *I wanted money* or *I want revenge on the world and/or Tony Stark specifically for wronging me*. Plus, they're always just trying to kill you. Boring."

"I feel so honored to entertain you," Loki says.

"Mm, you should," Tony says, folding himself into Loki's embrace and dragging them both down to a horizontal position. "There's probably more stuff to say. I'll think of it in the morning."

It strikes him that the way Loki touches him is still cautious, even with Tony essentially wrapped around him like a boa constrictor.

"Hey," he says, "I love you, too. Don't know if I said it yet."

The way Loki feels in response to that is almost overwhelming, the multi-faceted compendium of his emotions rising to such a crescendo of relief and devotion that Tony has to shut his eyes, just to try and keep it all in.

There isn't a verbal response; there doesn't have to be. And eventually, floating on the waves of those shimmering emotions, Tony drifts to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

tony and loki's first kiss was because they were in mortal peril and their second was because they wanted to annoy their friends. i don't often think i've nailed characterisation, but on this count i'm absolutely certain i got it right

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

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

The next morning, Loki conjures him waffles in bed.

“Your magic’s feeling better, then?” Tony asks, respectfully not putting in a request for whipped cream. It’s a stack of three, syrup drizzled criss-cross, better quality than IHOP but otherwise mysterious in origin. Loki’s provided a fork, resting on the edge of the plate. Tony ignores it and tucks in with his fingers. He’s starving: the pizza last night feels like a long time ago, and he’d only had a couple slices besides.

“Summoning nourishment is no great challenge,” Loki replies. His voice is still half-slurred with sleep, diminishing the haughtiness of his words somewhat, and he’s got his hands wrapped tight around a coffee mug. Tony steals a sip. Loki hits him in the thigh. It’s all rather sickening, honestly, and Tony can’t keep a dopey smile off his face. “It will be some time before I am returned to my former strength,” Loki adds, though he, too, is smiling.

“It’s weird how modest you are,” Tony comments. “Say something about how we’re all ungrateful peons who should feel lucky to breathe the same air as you. Get me back on kilter.”

“You would know it for a lie,” Loki points out.

“Right,” Tony says. “Gotta say, I’m glad to be your personal lie detector again.”

“I meant what I said.”

Tony frowns.

“The Curse of Knowledge—”

“Stop calling it that,” Tony says, drawing back. “You know it’s not that.”

“This connection need not be permanent,” Loki continues. “It was—tactically sound to re-establish what Amora had so crudely ripped apart, during the battle. Now that we’re free to do as we wish...” He trails off, knuckles white around his mug.

“Okay,” Tony says, more calm than he feels. “And what if what I wish is to keep you? All of you.”

Loki hunches forward, masking his face from view. “You know not what you ask,” he says miserably. “You think that because you have teased some semblance of happiness from me, that it will be forever so. But—I am broken. My mind is beyond repair, and I would not subject my beloved to it.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tony says, a little exasperated. “Loki, it’s not some big revelation to me that you’re depressed. Wait. Is that word translating for you?”

“Well enough.” Loki pauses. “And Banner used it to describe you.”

“Yeah, we match,” Tony says, which is probably progress he should mention to Bruce at some point. The first step is admitting you have a problem and all that. “But the point is that I know I haven’t cured you by making out with you. I may be internationally renowned for my arrogance, but that’s pushing it.”

“I do not think you arrogant,” Loki says mildly. “But then, I grew up alongside Thor.”

Tony snorts into his waffle, which seems to have been enchanted not to go cold. Sleeping with a magical alien is *awesome*.

“Hey,” he says, trying a different tack, “is my mind a walk in the park? With the panic attacks and the anxiety and the constant smart-ass comments?”

Loki turns to look at him searchingly. It’s one of those rare moments during which Loki’s expression shows what’s in his mind: the apprehension, the fragile hope. Tony reaches out, tracing the line of his clenched jaw.

“Your mind is you,” Loki says after a long minute of silence. “I would not have it any other way.”

Tony smiles at him, knowing he probably looks sappy as hell but not caring all that much. It’s a hell of a drug, having someone love him for *him*. “Point made. Look, I’m not saying either of us has to commit to being this way forever. But for now, it works.”

“As time passes, it may grow harder to sever the bond,” Loki warns. “Magic like this is unpredictable, and it can grow in tandem with its host.”

Tony steals Loki’s coffee again while he contemplates this. It’s a lot of emotional honesty for this early in the morning, if he’s honest.

“Lucky for me, I’m bonded to someone who’s famous for being good at magic,” he says. “We’ll work it out. As long as there’s no more bleeding from the eyeballs, right?”

“No,” Loki says. “Besides, if you would permit it, I believe I can alter the spell further. Give us more control.”

“Oh, like having the power to hide being in love with someone from them?” Tony suggests. “Yeah, that seems useful.”

Loki rolls his eyes and steals his coffee back. It’s down to the dregs, now, so Tony surrenders without a fight.

“Loki,” Tony says, “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but we’ve been together for roughly twenty-four hours, and I’m just not sure we’ve got to have all the answers already. We haven’t even had sex yet.”

Loki raises his eyebrows.

“Not an offer,” Tony says. “My mouth tastes like a rat died in it. We can have sex when I’ve showered and brushed my teeth.”

“Romantic.”

Tony smiles. “You knew what you were getting into.”

Tony’s interrupted midway through his shower by JARVIS, who at least has the decency to sound apologetic when he says that Thor has returned and requested Tony’s presence in the common area.

“There goes my nice, lazy morning,” Tony mutters, rinsing off his hair and grabbing a towel. “Get some more coffee going for me, would you?”

“Certainly, Sir,” JARVIS responds.

When he emerges from the bathroom, Tony fixes Loki with an assessing look. There’s bedhead, and darkly circled eyes, and that MIT sweater in all its frayed glory. He’s also wearing the blanket like a cape.

“Do you want to conjure today’s outfit, or will more Stark fashion suit you?” Tony asks, heading over to the closet and fishing around for jeans and a t-shirt.

Loki raises an eyebrow. “I wasn’t exactly planning on getting dressed.”

“Change of plans: your brother’s here.”

“JARVIS told me,” Loki says. “I simply see no reason to drop everything and come running when my ‘brother’ calls.”

“You’re such a dick,” Tony grins. He starts getting dressed unselfconsciously, keeping his eyes on Loki over his shoulder. “Come on, I’d just rather get a jump on it if he’s about to tell us that Enchantress escaped and is even more hell-bent on revenge than before. It’s always good to know these things in advance of them biting you in the ass, trust me.”

“In that case,” Loki says, “more of your clothing will suffice.”

“Coming right up,” Tony says. He thinks he’ll put Loki in a slogan tee, today: it’ll be funny, and as a bonus it’ll probably be too small to cover his entire torso.

Thor is in his full armor and cape, holding what looks like a scroll. Tony takes one look at him and strides to where the coffeemaker is buzzing merrily away, filling a couple of mugs.

Only when he’s claimed one for himself and passed the other to Loki does he face up to their guest.

“This seems formal,” he says. “I would’ve worn a suit, but I was hoping for a lie-in today, and I really couldn’t be bothered.”

He's in a twenty-year-old Metallica tee; Loki's wearing a t-shirt that had honestly delighted him, sporting the words 'FIRST COFFEE, THEN THE WORLD.' There's a coffee stain on it. Tony is nothing if not predictable.

“Do not trouble yourself on my account, Anthony,” Thor says, adding to the odd formality of the moment. At least Loki’s mind is amused enough that Tony doubts there’s anything to worry about. “I come with good tidings.”

“Wow, my favorite tidings,” Tony says. “Go ahead, big guy.”

“I hold in my hands a pardon,” Thor says. “The crimes you committed on Asgard, while numerous, are no longer punishable.”

“*Me?*” Tony asks. “What did I do?”

Loki cuts in with a concerning amount of glee: “Unlawful entry, destruction of property, aiding and abetting a fugitive, treason—”

“Okay, fine, I get it. What about Loki?”

“Father is wiser than you give him credit for, brother,” Thor says obliquely. “He observed the change you have undergone, the one Stark has brought about in you. It gave him hope.”

Tony thinks about objecting to this, because he’d rather not be seen as the one thing between Loki and mass murder, but doing so would probably be counterproductive. He’s more than happy to buy into the Hallmark ‘redemptive power of love’ thing if it keeps Loki off the executioner’s block.

“Those are Mother’s words, not Father’s,” Loki says.

“Perhaps,” Thor says. “In any case, you have shown that you can care about someone other than yourself. You have displayed an ability to be valiant, and to atone for your mistakes. Do you deny it?”

“Not if it gets me out of trouble,” Loki mutters. Tony laughs.

“This is no laughing matter,” Thor says. “A condition of the pardon is that you admit to your wrongdoings and pledge loyalty to your king.”

I apologize, Loki thinks. Brace yourself.

“Of course. My loyalty is Asgard’s,” Loki says smoothly, and Tony tastes the bitterness of the lie. He manages to keep his face blank only thanks to Loki’s warning.

Thor casts a sideways glance at Tony. Tony nods.

And then Thor's face is splitting into a wide smile, and he's scooping his brother up into his arms. Coffee sloshes everywhere. Loki makes a sound like an angry cat.

"Father will be most pleased to hear it," Thor says. "Mother, as well."

Loki disentangles himself, and Tony wordlessly hands him what remains of his own coffee.

"I am glad for it," Loki says, "although I doubt I shall be returning to Asgard for some time. I suppose it could be said that I am beginning to understand your fascination with this insignificant planet."

Thor continues beaming. "I am glad to hear of it," he says.

"Hey, can we get a copy of that scroll?" Tony asks. If Loki's going to be added to the roster of Avengers, Tony's keen on having a document that proves he's turned over a new leaf in the eyes of the gods. It might play better on CNN.

"Certainly," Thor says. "I will have Father draw up another."

"And Enchantress?"

"Imprisoned in our most heavily-guarded of cells," Thor says. "Her collusion with the Frost Giants will ensure her sentence is long and unpleasant."

Tony doesn't ask for precise numbers, because if he hears anything over a hundred years he's going to start feeling bad for her, and that's the last thing he wants.

"Glad to hear it," he says instead.

"As am I," Loki says. "If that's everything..."

Another smile blooms on Thor's face. "Ah, of course. I will take my leave. Will there be festivities this eve?"

Thor's big on post-battle parties, which have become an Avengers tradition as a result. Tony always gets stuck with planning and clean-up. Thanks to Thor's tendency to drink half his weight in mead and trash whichever floor he's on, this is no small undertaking; Tony's been thinking of drawing up a rota, which is a sure sign that he's somehow become far too responsible for his own liking.

"Casual festivities," Tony says. "I think there was talk of Steve making lasagna."

"We'll see you then," Loki says pointedly, and Thor takes the hint.

"*Such* a dick," Tony repeats when they're alone again. He crowds into Loki's space, arms encircling his waist.

"You should not make promises you don't intend to keep," Loki responds evenly, kissing him between sentences. "It would seem we have much to celebrate."

It's just like before, with the sensations of the kiss magnified tenfold by the bond. Embarrassingly quickly, Tony's legs go weak and he lets out a muffled sound: half-moan, half-sigh. Loki's hands are restless, everywhere—flitting over Tony's hair, face, neck, and shoulders before they venture lower to ruck up his shirt.

“Should we,” Tony says, dazed. “Bedroom?”

Loki grabs Tony by the wrist and teleports them the literal twenty feet to the bedroom. With a flick of his wrist, he shuts the door behind them. “Is this acceptable to your sensibilities?”

Tony, breathless from the teleporting and the kissing, gives Loki a thumbs up.

“I confess,” Loki continues, “I am curious about the effects of the bond. For instance, when I touch you here—” He pushes Tony back onto the bed none-too-gently, tracing the involuntary gasp of Tony's lips. “—oh.”

It's such a simple touch, and yet Tony can't help but shift against the bed, impatient for more. When Loki's fingers trail down his neck, he has to bite down on his lip to halt an embarrassing noise—although it hardly matters when Loki's right there in his head, feeling everything he feels and sending it back twofold. Tony shudders.

“Pretty sure I'm gonna have the endurance of a teenager,” he says. It's like his skin has tunnel vision: he's hyperfocused on the progress of Loki's hands, to the extent where it seems he can feel the precise whorls of each of his fingerprints. “Shit,” he breathes.

“Do not worry,” Loki says. His voice, too, is unsteady. “You are lovely like this.”

It's the discomfort of being complimented, more than anything, that ensures he gets back with the program and strips Loki of his borrowed shirt, gives back as good as he's getting. He sweeps his palms up from the soft skin below Loki's navel to the column of his throat. Loki's eyes are dark, assessing.

“I wonder if you could come,” he says softly, “just from the feeling of my hands on you.”

Tony grins up at him. “Guess it depends on how good those hands are,” he says. “Impress me.”

Loki zeroes in on Tony's neck, which is either because he has impeccable instincts or because Tony is thinking about it really loudly: either way, the feeling of Loki's lips against his pulse is exquisite, the softness of his mouth counterpointed by the sharpness of his teeth. Tony's body jolts as though it's been electrocuted when Loki bites down, and in response Loki holds him in place: hands on his shoulders and legs bracketing his thighs. Tony tests the restraint, but Loki doesn't budge.

Tony's hands are still free, so he reaches out to touch as much of Loki as he can reach. His greedy hands travel down Loki's back, to the curve of his ass and beyond, to the tensed muscles of his thighs. All the while, the bond feels electrified, assaulted on both sides by sensation and that little extra kick that comes right from the spell. Tony tilts his head back and shuts his eyes, but when one of Loki's hands moves to close around his neck, he's lost.

It doesn't feel like any orgasm he's experienced before. It's a whole-body thing, ricocheting up his spine and down his limbs. He knows Loki follows him over the edge, but he's too overwhelmed to open his eyes. For a second, it's as though he's managed to get himself lost in Loki's head, seeing himself through Loki's eyes: flushed and panting with the arc reactor illuminating his bitten neck in a blue glow.

When he manages to open his eyes again, Loki looks stunned: bright spots of pink on his cheekbones, lips slick and red. Tony smiles up at him, punch-drunk.

"A+," he says, syllables running together like liquid. "No notes."

"Oh, I'm not done with you," Loki says. He undoes Tony's jeans.

"No, uh-uh, I'm forty-three years old, my dick is a one-trick pony," Tony babbles. "I know you're about a millennium older than me but you're making me feel like a decrepit cradle robber."

"You don't trust me?" Loki asks, pouting, which is foul ball as far as Tony's concerned. There's this horribly lovely sparkle in his eye. Tony would do anything for him.

"Fine, have at it," he says, stretching his arms up and behind his head, settling in to watch his boyfriend kill him through overstimulation. He had a good run, he thinks. "I trust and love you, dear, and you should feel free to touch my dick anytime."

Loki kisses him, quick and a little harsh; Tony can tell it's because he's still not used to having someone say those words to him, and just holds on for the ride. Loki bites at his lower lip, and at the same time trails his fingers down the length of Tony's softening dick. For maybe half a second, it's just as Tony had expected: overstimulation, pure and simple. And then it's like his blood goes hot and there are a million nerve endings coming alight, coming online, and he's hard again so fast there are spots in his vision.

"What the *fuck*," he moans, while Loki starts stroking him properly. "Magical Viagra? *Seriously?*"

Loki kisses his jaw. "I can make you come as many times as I like," he says. "I could keep you here all day, getting you hard for me over and over, using your body how I please. Would you like that?"

Tony almost wants to say no: it's humiliating, how much he wants Loki to see his promise through, to not let Tony up from the bed until he's gotten everything he wants.

"I'm in your head, darling one," Loki murmurs. "I know everything you want. Every desire you have. Is it not freeing, to give yourself over to my hands?"

Tony thrashes against the bed. "Fuck," he says, eloquent considering the way Loki's playing with the leaking tip of his dick, like he's more interested in studying than actually getting Tony off. It shouldn't be hot to be treated like a science experiment—although, as kinks go, Tony probably could've seen this one coming.

“You don’t have to say it,” Loki says. “Though you will, in time. I should like to see you beg, I think.”

Tony cries out when he comes, this time, his voice cracking with it. He keeps thrusting into Loki’s hand through it, even when it begins to hurt. His eyes go glassy with wetness.

“Good,” Loki says simply, though Tony’s aware that he’s just as affected. “It’s beautiful, how much you want it.”

His magic once again coaxes Tony to full arousal. It’s both worse and better: Tony feels messy and spent, but he’s also desperate for more, and more, and as much as Loki wants from him. He makes a sound that’s only halfway human, and Loki shushes him.

“After this one,” he says, “I think I’ll fuck you.”

“Please,” Tony gasps out. “Please, I want—”

“I know,” Loki smiles, dips down to kiss him briefly. “I can feel precisely how badly you want it.”

Tony closes his eyes and surrenders.

Loki makes good on his word, and they don’t leave the bed until Tony’s stomach starts growling (a biological imperative that Loki can’t twist to his own magical will, unfortunately). By then, it’s almost time for the team dinner anyway: they spend an hour cleaning up, Tony in the bathroom while Loki deals with the wreckage of the bed.

While he showers, Tony can’t stop smiling, touching his fingers to the bruises and scratches he’s acquired reverently. Some of them are from yesterday’s battle; others are more recent. He likes that they’re blurred together, that he can’t pinpoint which are which.

He keeps Loki updated on his musings through the bond, enjoying the response he gets. Loki’s proven himself to be possessive and insatiable—both things Tony could have predicted, but it’s still fun to be on the receiving end.

With a bit of mental cheek, he asks: *Still think we should get rid of this terrible curse?*

Never, Loki replies.

Chapter End Notes

the 'first coffee, then the world' t-shirt is based on a real top that i own and it does have a coffee stain right down the front

but anyway, this is the second-to-last chapter! all that's left is the epilogue, in which there will be a wedding (not tony and loki's). thank you to everyone who's stuck with this fic for this long, it's been so much fun & i love all your wonderful comments

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

an epilogue. seven years later

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

On the morning of the wedding, Tony wakes up with his head pillowed on Loki's stomach. They've slept in a T shape, with Loki horizontal and Tony vertical. It just goes to show that all the other occupants of Avengers Tower were wrong and Tony was, once again, right: his and Loki's bed is a perfectly reasonable size and not, as Bucky had put it, 'offensively large, like seriously, what the hell?'

Tony sits up, ignoring the noise of protestation from Loki. He's naked—they both are—and in the warm rays of sunlight poking through the window Loki's scars look as though they've been set ablaze. They're violently beautiful: yellow-gold lines scored down the entire right side of his body, from his temple to his toes. A souvenir from the mind stone. Thanos had managed to gain control over him again, briefly, but he hadn't counted on Tony being up there, too. Breaking the stone's thrall had left its toll on both of them; Tony's heart had almost given out, the arc reactor sparking and going dull before Loki had managed to claw himself back to consciousness. But they'd done it, and they've lived to tell the tale.

Tony kisses the yellow starburst decorating Loki's hip before he levers himself up and throws on a tank top and boxers to make the journey to the kitchen.

While the coffee's brewing, Bucky wanders in. He's been hanging around for six years and he still hasn't committed to a room, or even a floor, or to much of anything besides Nat. Tony hums in acknowledgment of his presence, tipping his head toward the coffee.

"I'll take some," Bucky says. "Didn't get much sleep last night."

"Anything I can fix?" Tony asks. "Arm troubles, or...?"

"Just thinking about it. Marriage."

Tony raises his eyebrows. "So you left Nat all alone while you contemplated whether you want to make the leap?"

"She wasn't alone," Bucky replies. "Pepper's in town, remember?"

"Oh, right," Tony says. He's still catching up with the fact that his ex-girlfriend's in a three-way relationship with a deadly ex-spy and an even deadlier ex-brainwashed ex-assassin (in his defense, it's a lot of exes to keep track of). And he'd had the gall to think that he'd

cornered the market on most interesting love life after he'd bagged Loki. "You know, I'm pretty sure it's still illegal for you to marry both of them."

"You wouldn't bribe a couple of supreme court justices for me, Stark? Thought we were friends," Bucky grins. Tony barks out a laugh; Bucky's sense of humor's a surprise every time.

"Still waiting for my investment in human-alien marriages to pay off," Tony says, although honestly neither he nor Loki has much interest in a wedding. Tony can't think of anything worse than expressing his love in front of an audience, and he's pretty sure his partner feels the same. It's not as though either of them has to worry about getting on the other's health insurance.

"Good luck with that one," Bucky says, accepting the black coffee Tony passes to him. Steve claims Bucky used to have a sweet tooth, but evidence suggests the Winter Soldier took over the tastebuds at some point.

They both sip at their coffees in tranquil silence until Loki, wrapped in a bedsheet, wanders in. He looks half-asleep, but as soon as he sees Bucky he throws a glamor up over his visible scars. Bucky pretends not to notice, the same way everyone except Thor does. Thor's always going on about wearing scars with pride, and Loki's always threatening to stab him or actually following through on stabbing him. Incidents of Loki Knife Crime around the tower have been going down with each successive year, but they're still in the double digits.

As is their routine, Loki shamelessly robs Tony of his coffee. It's at the point where Tony always makes his first cup with a dash of vanilla and Loki goes for hazelnut: each of them anticipating the other's favorite flavors.

So yeah, they're a little married, ceremony or no.

"Hey, Buck, you get a new suit yet?" Tony asks. "I really don't think it's gonna be a jeans and hoodie sorta affair."

Bucky wrinkles his nose. "The gals ganged up on me. Nat got my measurements while I was sleeping and Pep went out and bought the damn thing. There are *cufflinks*."

"You'll look gorgeous, I'm sure," Tony laughs. "Anyone dressed by Pepper does."

"The formalwear on this planet is a joke," Loki grumbles, because he always wants to be the shiniest thing in the room and most suits don't allow for that. When he and Tony go on actual dates, Loki prefers either presenting as a woman or so androgynous the waiters start looking panicked the moment he walks through the door, choosing his gender the same way most people choose their shoes. Not that Tony's complaining: Loki has excellent taste in dresses. And underwear.

He's compromised for this particular occasion, with a pale green suit and excessive jewelry that will probably land him on a few gossip sites' guides for how to dress for a summer wedding. Tony's stuck with a more traditional black tux, but he's the best man, and there'd been very specific rules.

“Speaking of this planet,” Tony asks, “what are the odds on a world takeover attempt before the end of the ceremony?”

“According to the spider kid’s chart, we’re looking at an eleven percent chance of rain and an eighteen percent chance of Doctor Doom showing up,” Bucky says. “Can’t say I’m sure about the math, but he’s made a lot of pie charts.”

“Between mine and Sigrid’s wards, no uninvited guest shall be able to enter,” Loki says sniffily.

“I don’t know, babe, Doom’s got you before.” Rescuing Loki from Latveria had taken the better part of three hours, even though Loki had escaped within the first twenty minutes. When Tony had found him, he’d been trying to enchant the cache of Doombots to turn on their own master.

“He is a worthy adversary—I am sure you remember your own imprisonment,” Loki retorts. Tony had actually been in Latveria for a week. When Loki found *him*, he’d been trying to reprogram the Doombots to betray their leader. He’d only succeeded in making them say ‘Doom sucks’ instead of ‘All hail Doom’, but he still thinks that’s something to be proud of. “But I feel he shall be too busy attending to troubles within his own border this day.”

Tony kneads his temples. “What did you—no, wait, don’t tell me. I can’t lie to the UN about Latveria again. No, I’ve never set foot there of my own free will, and no, my boyfriend doesn’t keep magically messing with them for shits and gigs. Their sky turning bright pink was a coincidence, and that time all the trees came to life was just the sort of thing that happens on this zany planet we call home.”

Loki blinks innocently at him.

“You should try turning that creepy old castle into a bouncy one,” Bucky suggests.

“Don’t encourage him,” Tony says, but Loki’s already smiling in a way that means trouble. “I should stop letting you two hang out.”

“Steve’s already tried,” Bucky responds. “And he’s better at chastisement than you.”

“Damn,” Tony says. “He really is.”

The three of them are eating avocado on toast (a favorite of Loki’s) on the couch by the time Sigrid and Halla emerge from their room.

“Aren’t you supposed to be with the groom?” Sigrid asks.

“No,” Tony replies. “He says I’m not allowed within thirty feet of him ‘til the ceremony. I’d be offended, but forty years of pop culture do mean I’ll make at least one offensive cold feet joke and then the other groom will hit me so hard my eyes pop out of my skull.”

Sigrid stares him down. “He’s just worried you’re going to make each other cry, isn’t he?”

“They already made each other cry at the bachelor party,” Loki says.

“Lies,” Tony lies.

The bachelor party had been a restrained affair: a table booked out at a nice restaurant, no strippers and no hangovers the next morning. Tony does sort of wish he had the excuse of alcohol for how quickly the waterworks had started, but drinking wreaks havoc on the bond—something about Loki and Tony’s differing tolerances making the whole thing almost unbearable, a constant seesaw between intoxication and sobriety. That particular limitation had given him pause the first time they encountered it, and Loki had never pressured him to quit, but in the end he’s not so stupid that he doesn’t realize it’s a good thing.

Halla comes to sit beside Bucky while Sigrid fries bacon. They don’t live on Earth full-time—their situation is akin to Thor’s, with a bit of traveling back and forth—but they’re around often enough that they know their way around the tower instinctively, and have strong opinions on everything from reality TV to politics. Sigrid has taken more of a liking to the concept of democracy than just about anyone since Steve Rogers. She and Thor are not often left alone in a room together.

Halla’s still something of an enigma. She works beside Tony in his workshop, watches Bruce in his lab, goes running with Steve and Sam, and spars with Nat. In every instance it’s like she’s a sponge, absorbing everything she’s taught. It’s a little terrifying; Tony’s privately glad that the one thing she can’t seem to wrap her head around is magic.

Magic lessons in the tower are ongoing, with Sigrid and Tony as star pupils. All the army boys are hopeless except Sam, who developed an ability to talk to birds early on that Tony assumed was a practical joke for six full months.

The Avengers roster gets fuller by the day—Tony’s actually in danger of filling the living area of the tower, something he never imagined could happen. Not everyone’s a permanent resident (in fact, few of them are) but there’s always a decent number of them around. With the wedding, most everyone’s stayed over the weekend. Even Carol and Monica had returned from their mission a couple of galaxies away.

Tony settles against Loki, who’s conjured himself an outfit that’s typical of his current tastes: Earth fashion, tending toward the line between masculine and feminine, with a few Asgardian accents. Tony twists his fingers into one of the many glittering strands of metal hanging from Loki’s neck and tilts his head back for a kiss.

Tony had not been involved in planning the wedding, although he’s the one bankrolling it. There was a team-up between Pepper, Steve, and Janet, which has resulted in perhaps the most whimsical set-up imaginable. Yes, it was extravagant to book out the entirety of Central Park for the weekend, but Tony can’t think of two people who deserve it more. Plus, the Avengers are the only reason Central Park isn’t a giant burnt-out crater right now.

“Seeing all this, it doesn’t seem so bad,” Tony says, running his fingers down the white arch where, in a couple of hours, his best friends are getting married.

“A wedding?” Loki asks, although Tony doubts he needs the confirmation. It’s writ large in Tony’s train of thought, after all.

Tony shrugs. “I always think of churches. I hate churches.”

“I know,” Loki says, a smile playing on his lips. “With all their ridiculous stories.”

“*You’re* a ridiculous story,” Tony mutters, sealing their mouths together. The breeze is warm, ruffling his hair, and he’s choosing to blame it for the goosebumps on his arm. It would be ridiculous for Loki to make him feel this way after so long. “I sort of want to marry you.”

“Was that a proposal?” Loki asks, drawing back. “If so, it was truly pathetic.”

“*God*, you’re mean.”

“And *you* should take me to dinner,” Loki says, toying with the lapel of Tony’s blazer. “You should wear something pretty. Ply me with non-alcoholic champagne. Buy me a ring.”

“You and your jewelry…”

“Or we could do it the other way,” Loki continues. His face is so close, and his mind is so, so smug. “I could take you home, kill an enemy or a beast in your name. There would be a feast, and a tournament, and an opportunity for a challenger to attempt to win your hand through combat.”

“I think I’m starting to realize why Jane broke up with Thor,” Tony says.

“And at the end of it, we would be no different than we are,” Loki continues. “It is up to you. But if you do buy a ring, I prefer diamonds.”

“Sure, everyone does,” Tony says.

“Last ten minutes as a free man,” Tony says, “wanna make out?”

Rhodey steps heavily on Tony’s foot, but also kisses him on the cheek, so it’s mixed messages as always. Tony throws an arm around his shoulder.

“You know I can’t deal with the sincerity of these things.”

“You think I can?” Rhodey asks. “I rewrote my vows on the way over here. For the sixtieth time. Which I know, because JARVIS actually counted.”

“There’s still time for another draft,” Tony suggests, grinning. “No, come on, you’ll do fine. You’re gonna kick this wedding’s ass.”

“You didn’t write a toast, did you?”

“Are you kidding?” Tony asks. “That’s best man duty number one. Of course I wrote a toast. It’s an itemized list of all your most embarrassing moments, up to and including that time last

week when you mispronounced ‘specifically’ in front of your fiancé.”

“It was a *momentary lapse*,” Rhodey repeats, although his shoulders relax enough that Tony’s relatively sure he’s doing his job right. “Fine, but if you make a speech I’m showing Loki that picture of you from London. 1990.”

Tony gasps theatrically. “I thought all copies were destroyed.”

“That’s on you for never setting foot in my kitchen. It was pride of place on the refrigerator, I swear to god,” Rhodey says.

Tony doesn’t think he could stop smiling for all the money in the world. “James Rupert Rhodes, you sneaky minx. Fine. Do your worst. Loki already knows I’m irresistible to members of royal families.”

“Point.”

For a moment, Tony just studies Rhodey’s face. He’s wanted this wedding to happen for years, but if Rhodey’s having second thoughts Tony’s more than willing to change their identities and get them on the first flight to New Zealand. He’d do the same for the other groom, but Thor’s got best man duties on that side of the camp. Rhodey stares back.

There’s no doubting that Rhodey’s scared; he’s almost trembling in his suit (Tom Ford—Tony and Jan had ganged up to make that happen). But he’s also as radiant as Tony’s ever seen him. Both things shouldn’t be possible. *That’s love for you*, Tony thinks.

He gets a rush of feeling from Loki in response, something wordless and warm.

Tony takes Rhodey’s hand in his. “Seriously. You ready for this?”

“This is very close to the most terrified I’ve ever been,” Rhodey says. For someone who spent most of his adult life in an active warzone, now pilots spaceships for NASA, and has been a superhero for a decade, this is saying a lot. Tony squeezes his hand. “Top five, at least.”

“But?”

“But I know it’s right. I know I want to be with him for the rest of my life. And I know it does not fucking matter if the whole world knows I’m gay.”

“Whole world is stretching it,” Tony says. “You’re North America famous at best.”

“I hate that that actually helps,” Rhodey says. “Fuck. Are you gonna walk me down the aisle or not?”

Tony grins, signals to Janet, and the music begins.

By the time Rhodey’s finished his vows, there isn’t a dry eye in the house.

“Tough act to follow,” says Bruce. He says it through a fresh wave of tears, chuckling self-deprecatingly. Tony flashes him a thumbs up. “Right. Um, here goes.

“Before I met you, I thought you were too good to be true. Obviously there was someone who talked about you a lot, and he’s prone to exaggerating. If I’m being honest, I was excited to find out what was wrong with you. Then you showed up, and it was just like Tony said. You’re funny, and kind, and wise, and principled—and you’re easy on the eyes, too. It was...intimidating.” Bruce’s eyes crinkle up, in some halfway space between smiling and crying. “It’s taken me seven years of devoted study, but I’ve finally come up with the flaws that your best friend overlooked. Firstly, the showers. I have never, in my entire life, met someone who showers for longer than you. A conservative estimate would say that you account for seventy-five percent of the Avengers Tower water bill.”

I did know that, Tony thinks.

Shut up, thinks Loki, who is pretending not to cry through the use of magic and needs his concentration.

“You’re the best at calming me down when I’m angry,” Bruce continues, “which is bad for my job. And you don’t know how to pronounce ‘specifically’.”

“*One time*,” Rhodey groans.

“I didn’t love you when I thought you were perfect,” Bruce says. “I love you now, knowing that I should never pick you as a karaoke partner and that when we go on holiday you think speaking louder will make people understand English. I love you so much that I can’t imagine ever wanting to be without you. So, yeah. That’s it.”

Tony doesn’t know what the rules are about applauding at weddings, so he wolf-whistles instead. The officiant glares at him. The grooms laugh. From the second row, Loki gives him an affectionate eye-roll.

In short order, ‘I do’s are said and rings are exchanged. Mama Rhodes leaps out of her seat the second the kiss is over and scoops her son and son-in-law into the tightest hug Tony thinks he’s ever been witness to. She hugs him right after, warning him in a whisper that it better be his wedding she’s attending next.

“Yeah, we’ll see,” he says, mind automatically checking in with how Loki’s feeling. It’s a nice mix: the joy edged with just a hint of anxiety about the wards. Thanos isn’t enough of a distant memory that Tony can blame him for that.

Tony had expected something else, to be honest. He’d thought Loki would find Earth’s marital traditions quaint and ridiculous; he’d braced for boredom. Loki gets on with Rhodey and Bruce just fine, but Tony never expected him to cry at their wedding. It just goes to show that being privy to someone’s emotions doesn’t mean you can predict what they’ll feel next, he supposes.

“Didn’t know you were such a romantic,” Tony says, spinning Loki around the dancefloor. It’s late: the grooms have already left for their honeymoon, and some of the guests have started drifting away.

Loki looks up, to where the moon is battling with a few misty clouds. “Need I remind you that it is you who insists on watching that confounded musical every Valentine’s Day?”

“*Singin’ in the Rain* is a classic and you love it really,” Tony replies.

“I prefer *Some Like It Hot*.”

“You would,” Tony says. “Hey, wanna go home? I’m an old man, and it’s midnight.”

Loki frowns, prodding at the bond. “You’re not tired.”

“All these years in my head and you’re still hopeless with context clues,” Tony smiles, leaning forward to kiss the sharp line of Loki’s jaw. “I’m *not* tired, but I *would* like to go to bed and have disgustingly romantic sex where we stare into each other’s eyes and say we love each other about fifty times. And then maybe watch *Dirty Dancing*. That good with you?”

Loki smirks. “Your wish is my command,” he says. In the moment before they teleport, Tony feels sparks of magic dancing all over his skin, both a warning and a pleasure of themselves.

“Take me home,” he says. And in a swirl of multi-colored light, they’re gone.

Chapter End Notes

can't believe it's finished!! and just in time, too, because as of tomorrow i'm no longer working from home and can't get away with taking frequent writing breaks. still, this series isn't over unless you want it to be: i'm continuing with loki's pov, and i'd be interested in short one-shots filling in whatever blanks you guys would be interested in seeing.

thank you so much to everyone who commented or left kudos or supported this fic in some small way: i never would've finished it without you. and an extra special thank you to the person who read over the chapters every week without fail - this fic would be a mess without them.

(oh and also I've started work on a new massive lokitony project - this time with time travel. so look out for that! okay bye)

Works inspired by this one

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