**Mischief Managed**

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**Summary**

A scheming Loki lands himself a job at Stark Industries before the battle of New York ... because what good is conquering the world without a bit of fun?

**Notes**

I owe my idea of Loki to vanHinck’s awesome graphic novel “Science and Magic - The marvellous misadventures of Dr. Selvig and a dispossessed Norse God with ISSUES” posted at DeviantArt, http://vanhinck.deviantart.com/gallery/32020509.
Chapter 1

Prologue

Tony didn’t have much luck with personal assistants that year. After Pepper there were some bumbling idiots and then there was Natasha Romanov. She seemed just perfect – competent, clever and with all that totally wank-worthy hair. He wouldn’t have suspected her of being a spying little mole for quite a while, really.

Well, if it hadn’t been for that one strange incident.

It almost looked like an act of fate. Jarvis showed him the chain of events afterwards and Tony watched the drama unfold with utter fascination. The security tapes had captured a series of mishaps that seemed as choreographed as an episode from looney tunes. The whole thing reminded him of a domino course gone wild, one tile pushing over the next in a freaky pattern.

It all started with a badly balanced heap of files in the main office of Stark Industries. While Tony stared at the screen, that small trigger became Romanov’s moment of doom in seven easy steps:

Some fluke made the upper layer of the paper tower slide and topple. - A part of the avalanche landed on the wastepaper basket next to the desk. - The basket fell over and rolled towards a courier girl who hurried along with an arm full of packages. - The courier danced out of the way at the last second, scowled and gave the thing a vicious kick. - The basket gained enough momentum to shove a plugbar with its bunch of cables across the floor. - The electrical cords snared the foot of an unsuspecting assistant manager (who had the habit of prowling along the desks to harass the staff).

That was the moment when Tony and his PA came around the corner.

They were faced by a tall man who seemed to throw himself onto Romanov with wildly flailing arms. The trained assassin acted out of pure instinct. Her self control was usually flawless, but she couldn’t help but react to an attack. She used a Sanshou move, threw the guy over her shoulder and brought him down within seconds. The assistant manager stared up at her in terror and made feeble braindead noises.

Romanov stood next to the felled enemy, looking a bit sheepish, and tried to slip back into her role of sexy paper pusher. The staff applauded her from the sidelines. A young man in a suit actually shook her hand and said: “Wherever did you learn to fight in that splendid way? I have never seen the like, apart from television.”

Tony remembered him because of the old-fashioned phrasing. It had seemed odd, if not quite as peculiar as his lovely PA turning into the Terminator.

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Somehow Tony wasn’t surprised that the same young man seemed to have started the whole slapstick event. At least, the security cameras showed him meandering towards the unsteady heap of files with a distracted air, probably deep in thoughts about some bureaucratic stuff. And he didn’t touch anything, just stopped at the desk for a quick chat with his co-worker.

Tony studied the scene in slow motion, saw the kid turn and walk away, a picture of innocence. He needed a few reruns to work out what had actually happened.
Just before the heap started to topple, there was a flicker of movement and something almost invisible … A paperclip. The guy had flipped a frigging paperclip onto the files to unbalance the lot.

Tony didn’t know if he should be entertained or seriously scared. The small impact had been aimed to perfection. It had been sufficient to set the whole mess into motion, trash can soccer and all. Who could orchestrate a chain reaction like that? And make it blow up in the face of his assassin PA? It shouldn’t be possible.

A week later he had fired Romanov and hired the kid instead. Not the sanest of decisions, he had to admit, but he was just too intrigued to keep his fingers off.

Loptr Olson was a dangerous riddle with a twisted sense of humor … and besides, he had the most spectacular green eyes.
Meetings with the military had never been one of Tony’s favorite activities, even before Afghanistan. Now it reminded him of his unsavory past and he hated it with a passion. There was nothing more annoying than being crammed into a boardroom full of self important people that pushed for his newest inventions. He would have ducked out of this particular powwow entirely, but Pepper had been in full CEO-mode and practically ordered him to attend. And to be polite, even.

“They only want you as a consultant”, she’d said. “You’ve broken contracts when you dropped out of the weapons business, and they could make a lot of trouble for us. So stop whining about it and just go!”

His day didn’t get better when he walked into the entrance hall, kicked snow slush off his designer shoes and saw Justin Hammer hold court there. Who had invited that asshole? Tony had the strong urge to turn around, flip everyone the bird and drive right back to the airport.

He was stopped by his PA, who had an uncanny knack for reading his moods and put a restraining hand on his arm. Loptr tilted his head and inquired softly: “That man is an enemy of yours?”

Most people dismissed Loptr on sight when he came into a room with Tony. ‘Young and pretty’ was an excellent disguise and his PA looked like a kid fresh out of college. He seldom let that front slip, but it didn’t hold up to close scrutiny, especially if you worked together with him for most hours of the day. Loptr was full of contradictions and Tony regarded him as a fascinating puzzle. There were weird gaps in his knowledge, like how to play video games, how to use a microwave or to shop with a credit card (all necessary survival skills for dealing with Tony, which Loptr had mastered in very short time). Then there were moments such as this, when the kid straightened into the watchful posture of a warrior and regality enveloped him like invisible armor. In spite of his nerdy suit he looked disturbingly like something lethal out of D&D.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “He’s more of a pest. Like a cockroach in the bathtub. You can stand down, Prince Charming.”

Loptr threw him a look, but the uncanny vibes vaporated and he was back to his chosen role as Stark’s harmless little secretary.

The interlude had lasted long enough for Justin Hammer to reach them. “Stark”, he said with his special toothy-oily smile. “Come to grace us with your presence? I didn’t expect to see you in the Pentagon. Haven’t you gone all hippie and Make Love Not War?” He brushed invisible lint off his cuff and drawled on: “The company’s not doing so well, lately, I hear. Sad, very sad. So, you trying to make nice with the important people? What are you specialising in nowadays … save the planet stuff, wasn’t it. Like, let me think, tree hugging robots? Self-destroying garbage?”

“Yeah”, Tony murmered, “I call that project ’Justin Reloaded’. ” The prig needed a moment to get the dig, then his face turned the color of a rotten tomato, which went really well with the garbage metaphor.

Tony turned away and walked towards the conference room. On the way he was accosted by various bigwigs who wanted a piece of him. He deflected their questions without a single insult or sexual allusion. Pepper would have been proud. When he finally reached the table with his name tag on it and sat down he realized that he’d lost his PA on the way. The chair next to Tony stayed conspicuously empty.
Where had Loptr gotten to? His absence was worrying and Tony craned his neck to look around. When his assistant wandered off, the results were unpredictable.

Mostly Loptr was amazing at his job in spite of his little quirks. He had a razor sharp mind paired with a real talent for bookish stuff and high-handed people management. The downside was that Tony had to stay on his toes all the time or his inattention resulted in random outbreaks of chaos.

Tony wasn’t even sure Loptr did it on purpose. Well, not all the time. When the kid got into one of his playful moods there was a sizzling kind of energy around him that seemed to warp reality somehow. At least that was the only explanation Tony had come up with. Loptr resembled a force of nature, changeable and unpredictable as the weather. He flitted around Stark Tower like a real-life butterfly effect and left strange happenings in his wake.

There was the incident with his couch for example. About a week ago Tony had been lounging around and sent his minion for more ice in his Cuba Libre, when a coil spring had loosened with a ‘ploing’. It had jabbed him in the butt – hard – and made him jump up like a scalded cat. The thing was, Tony felt pretty sure that his ultramodern couch didn’t have springs in the first place. The bloody things seemed to have spontaneously appeared. And Loptr had looked honestly surprised for a second before he’d started snickering like a loon.

On the other hand, there had been similar pranks that just looked like coincidence, but were in fact planned and executed as carefully as a war campaign. Having that kid around was worse than herding cats. Whenever he complained about his troubles to Pepper, she only smiled sweetly and called it karma.

So, when his PA eventually sauntered into the conference room through a backdoor, Tony had every reason to be mistrustful.

“Where have you been?”, he hissed as soon as Loptr had taken the seat next to him.

His PA gave him a mildly surprised look. “Why do you ask?”, he inquired. “Did you have need of me? Has there been some disturbance?” Tony still couldn’t place his accent. Or the old-fashioned way Loptr talked whenever he didn’t make an effort to blend in.

“Not yet. And I really hope there won’t be. Because if someone is disturbed here, it’s you.”

Loptr allowed himself a small smirk and leaned back in the leather chair. “I have simply had a chat with one of the staff that runs this building. Can you imagine, the poor man spends all his working days sitting alone in a little cubicle … behind the mirrored window yonder.” Loptr pointed over his shoulder.

“Really? You don’t say.”

“Indeed, he was very bored, thrilled by my visit and kind enough to explain his machines to me. There were ‘multitrack recorders’, ‘mixing consoles’ and all those pretty blinking lights. Fascinating.”

Tony just threw him a look. It was true that his PA wasn’t very tech-savvy. But … pretty lights? Seriously?

Sometimes he was sure that Loptr only talked this way to screw with him.

Anyway, a hidden room behind a mirrored window was exactly the thing that would make Loptr take off and investigate. Tony could hope that his assistant hadn’t been up to anything else. Perhaps he’d simply indulged his paranoia. For being a harmless M.A. in comparative religion
(that’s what Loptr’s resumé had said) he could be a suspicious son of a bitch.

Tony wasn’t too surprised that the conference was being monitored. They were in the Pentagon, after all. Also, someone had to do the multimedia job in the background, feed the wallscreen vids and stuff. If Justin Hammer was going to give a presentation, they were in for all the flashy special effects anyone could stomach.

“Do I want to know why you got yourself a crash course in hightech?”, he asked.

“Well …”, Loptr tilted his head, “do you?” His smile held a clear dare. He looked at Tony with green, sparkling eyes and sprawled on his seat like a happy cat.

Tony sighed. “Not really. Just tell me nothing is going to blow up in the middle of the conference.” Damn, he sounded like the responsible adult in this conversation. Pepper would laugh her head off if she could hear him.

His assistant waved the idea away with an elegant gesture. “I’m not fond of wanton destruction. It lacks finesse”, he stated.

Yeah, that was reassuring. Tony looked at the audience around the big table and wondered if anyone of the generals, senators and what-nots had a sense of humor. Probably not. On the other hand, they had inflicted Justin Hammer on him, and just for that they deserved whatever his assistant’s bunny for brains had come up with.

Before he could pester Loptr any further, the lights dimmed and the presentation began. Hammer climbed the podium, straightened his awfully phallic tie and launched into a sales speech about the bright future of space age weaponry. God, the prick would bore him to death with his stunted intellect. Tony yawned, which earned him a few looks from the neighbouring brass. But so what, he’d been in transit for fucking hours and it was time for his late afternoon beauty nap. He did what he always did in similar meetings and let his thoughts wander off to greener pastures.

Lately, the color green played a prominent role in his fantasies. Green eyes, green silk shirts, possibly green underwear … Against his habits Tony hadn’t tried for a romp in the hay yet. His assistant could be incredibly aloof, if he wanted to be. Sure, there were the pranks and easy banter, but somehow even that didn’t invite familiarity. The fun and games seemed just another kind of smoke screen, hiding whatever Loptr truly thought. Tony was determined to tease out the real personality under all the mental armor, but he hadn’t found a good way to do that yet. Perhaps he should just go with the frontal assault.

Nothing pushed Tony’s buttons like being held at arms length. In a way Loptr had that in common with Tony’s other volatile houseguest, Bruce Banner. The same kind of ‘touch me not’ vibes. The same quick-witted, civilized front with an undertone of danger. Tony absently crumpled the glossy conference schedule into a paper ball, flipped it at Loptr’s nose and got an eyeroll in response.

The plus side of all the baggage was, whenever Loptr allowed himself to loosen up, he was sex on legs. And a bit of mischief could relax him like nothing else, which he demonstrated perfectly just now. The way he sat draped over the leather chair was indecent. One knee rested against the edge of the table, long-fingered hands lay on his thighs, invitingly close to his crotch. Tony felt his temperature rise and wondered if he should pay attention to Hammer again. Like, before his hot and bothered state started to show. – Nah.

Well, he could try to think of something less x-rated. What plopped into his mind was the weird chemical reaction that had filled Bruce’s lab with foam from floor to ceiling. That memory would never get old. Bruce had walked into the kitchen covered in a frothing mess of soap bubbles. The
effect looked like a swamp monster crossed with one of these girls in car wash videos.

He’d taken Tony’s teasing with his usual cool and then made a surprise dash for his assistant. Loptr’s green eyes had sparkled like emeralds. For once, he had looked truly young. Like an impish schoolboy with his hand in the cookie jar.

Bruce had chased the little menace all through the living quarters, brandishing bubbles and trying to foam him. Loptr had jumped over tables and ducked behind furniture, laughing. Tony had never seen the both of them so carefree. He still had to smile when he thought of his PA with glittery droplets in his hair.

Loptr had won that round by staying mostly dry and his clothes as pristine as ever. But he’d consented to help clean the lab in compensation. (Usually he didn’t touch such lowly household chores with a ten foot pole.) Since then, Bruce and Loptr had developed a strange, geekish bond over flasks and beakers.

Tony absently fanned himself with an ammunition brochure. Damn, something had to be wrong with the climate control. A look around told him that the rest of the audience had similar difficulties. There was a lot of fidgeting among the military ranks. Most of the civilians had doffed their suit jackets and Tony did the same. Justin Hammer talked on, oblivious to the fact that his potential buyers were more interested in HVAC than HEAT at the moment.

“… made from titanium and our own special superalloys. This beauty will not only blow your minds but everyone else’s within a thousand miles radius”, he enthused about a gigantic missile that screamed size queen.

To his indignation Tony felt a stirring in his own groin while watching the bastard and his weapons presentation. Okay, he’d been known to get a hard-on just from looking at blueprints. But what the computer simulation showed was a) old news and b) glorified carnage shouldn’t be that stimulating. Besides, if he suddenly got the hots for Justin Hammer, he would gladly scrub his brains out with graviton beams.

Tony squirmed on his seat. God, the man was insufferable. Hammer took a sip from his glass and preened while handwaving at the schematics on the screen. If Tony wasn’t mistaken the drink on the lectern was a 1964 Bordeaux. No simple water bottle for the amazing Mr. Hammer.

Watching him perform his sales pitch got worse by the minute. Hammer worked the crowd like a stand-up comedian in a second rate … - Okay, if Tony was being honest he probably loathed the man because Hammer reminded him of himself in the time before Afghanistan. There was the grand gestures, the cockiness, the callous warmongering. Tony winced every time his former rival cracked a joke about mass destruction and manslaughter. After another series of quips he clenched his teeth so hard it hurt. And he still sported a boner that could hammer nails into a rocket launcher.

There was definitely something wrong here.

Tony frowned, leaned back and let his eyes wander over the room. He was not the only one squirming. Wherever he looked there were Very Important Posers twitching in their seats. Then his gaze landed on Loptr. The kid played around with a pencil, twirling it through his fingers like a juggling stick, and observed the scene with a secret little smile. Now and then he doodled something onto his notepad in a foreign language that looked like chicken scratches. Tony glared at him, but was ignored.

Tony felt his cock push against the tightness of his designer trousers, tried to come up with some righteous indignation, but started to grin instead. This little trick was right up Loptr’s alley, no
matter how he’d pulled it off. And seeing all those macho military types in desperate need of a wank was totally worth his own discomfort.

Besides, he probably deserved some payback after his endless bitching about the conference. Loptr must have been close to throttling him after day one. Instead, he’d come up with a plan to make sure his whiny boss wasn’t as bored as he’d predicted. And it worked really, really well. If Tony got any more excited there would be steam coming out of his ears.

He watched the rest of the audience with growing amusement. Everybody had his legs crossed, even the dignified silver-haired types. Senator MacMason resembled a lobster on a slow boil. That guy Ross stared at the screen with grim attention, but the Montblanc pen he held in a deathgrip made suggestive thrusting movements.

The only ones unaffected seemed to be the female secretaries. Well, and general Hugh Walker. Tony raised both of his eyebrows. The man had always come over as a bullet spitting bulldozer. Now that seemed like a blatant case of overcompensation. Sweet.

Tony was so preoccupied with people-watching that he looked everywhere but the wall screen. He got the first clue about the real cause for all the testosterone when his arousal started to lessen.

So it was the screen, huh?

As an experiment, Tony stopped watching the presentation altogether. He stared at the wood of his desk for a while, never lifting his eyes above his name tag. After about five minutes, he had cooled off enough to make his brain work at its normal speed.

There was a relatively easy way in which Loptr could have pulled off that trick. It was neither drugs in the air, nor something supernatural. No, if it walked like a duck and quacked like a duck …

“It’s subliminal messages, right?”, he murmured towards Loptr. “Like that experiment with Coke ads in the Fifties.”

The kid frowned at him. “Excuse me?”, he asked in a careful, puzzled tone that implied his boss had finally lost it.

Tony wasn’t fooled by the innocent act. Now that he knew what he was looking for, there seemed to be some tell-tale flickers on the screen. The disturbances were slight and he could simply have imagined them. Subliminal stimuli only took milliseconds, after all. Even his overdeveloped brain couldn’t quite keep up with that. But yep, his libido took notice right away.

Tony shook his head in admiration. “You charmed the guy in the multimedia booth and smuggled porn into Hammer’s weapons presentation”, he said and rocked on the back legs of his chair. “God, this is great. You’re the best assistant ever. I would give you a hug, but that would probably send the wrong message to all the horny people in here.”

Loptr gave up the charade. “I thought you might appreciate it”, he said with an incline of his head and a sly smile that should have been illegal.

“Yeah, it’s like my birthday come early. Bonus points for the most creative party gift.” Tony hummed in delight. “Remind me to give you a raise when we come home.”

Freaky sexual urges were fine now that he knew the cause. He fixed his eyes on the screen again, ready to enjoy the show. Hammer was talking about robot drones shooting their stuff at 5,800 ft/s and got his audience all flushed. The only unembarrassed person at the conference table was one
Mr. Stark, who had the time of his life. He spread his legs a bit wider and settled in for the ride. Invisible porn was a new experience even for him.

After a while Hammer seemed to notice that something was wrong. Well, it was hard to ignore the fact that nobody listened to him anymore. He glared at Tony as if this was his fault. Then he lost his thread several times in a row. It was great.

When a megatonne fireworks display on the screen just made his audience look even more blank, he tried to save the situation by jumping straight to the end of the show. Tony did an inner victory dance. Checkmate after just twenty-four minutes … that must have been the shortest presentation in Pentagon history. While Hammer fired off his grand finale, Tony entertained himself with a fantasy about the smarmy git bent over his lectern, so Tony could take potshots at his bouncy ass with a repulsor. Huh, who would have guessed? That mental image really did it for him.

Hammer tried for an orderly retreat, but it all went down the drain when one of his theatrical gestures toppled the bottle of Bordeaux. It splashed right over Hammer’s designer suit and left a big wet stain in the area of his crotch.

The scene was a fine example of what Tony called the Loptr Effect. His rival looked like he should invest in adult diapers instead of bazookas. “Here’s a thought”, Tony murmured, “make nappies, not war.”

Someone in the room snickered.

The sound was contagious. The tension had been sky-rocketing for a while and everyone needed an outlet. Military stonefaces cracked and senators started to giggle like teenagers. Hammer froze at his lectern, caught between fight or flight. His mouth opened and shut like a stranded fish … well, leech. Then he sidled away and hastened to the bathroom in disgrace.

Tony looked at the wall screen where the last promotion vid still ran. “That was truly awesome”, he said to his assistant and newest BFF. “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

(He should have known that would go pearshaped. His closer relationships always did crash and burn in the end. They usually didn’t take half of New York with them, but hindsight was 20/20.)

“Let’s blow this joint and get real friendly”, Tony said and fluttered his eyelashes.
Tony stood in front of the man-sized passenger window of his jet and watched the city of Washington drop away. Powerful engines hummed under his feet as the buildings dwindled to the size of lego bricks. The world below spread out like his personal playground. Tony loosened his tie and let it drop to the floor with a satisfied sigh. The cuff links followed and landed on the thick carpet without a sound. Some minion would come by later and pick them up for him. “Hey, Michael, how long’s the flight going to be?”, he asked into the air.

“Fiftytwo minutes according to schedule, but there’s heavy traffic above the airport, so we’ll probably have to wait”, the pilot answered from the cockpit. “Sorry, Sir. Should I send the cabin crew in?”

“No, that’s fine. I’m sure we can entertain ourself.”

Who needed poledancing stewardesses if they had a delicious mystery like Loptr to unwrap? Tony didn’t even care about waiting in line above LaGuardia. Normally he would have kicked up a fuss, but now the extra minutes were more than welcome.

The plane delved into a landscape of fluffy clouds that looked like spun sugar. Nice. To top it off, there was a spectacular sunset going on. In front of his panoramic window Tony saw a red and gold landscape floating by, his own personal color scheme. It was a truly romantic moment, made for a suave bit of seduction.

“Hey, you wanna join the mile high club?”, he said and turned around. So? Romance just wasn't his thing.

Loptr hadn’t bothered with the window. The kid lounged in one of the cushy seats with a blasé expression as if he’d seen it all and found it wanting. Tony’s proposition didn’t even make him blink. “I do not know that turn of phrase, but I am ready to venture a guess”, his PA said. “The answer is no.”

Tony huffed and walked towards the bar. “You are no fun.” He got some bottles out and started mixing like a pro. This time he even managed to twirl the cocktail shaker in the air without splashing cranberry juice all over the ceiling. “Anyway, I’m sure you’ll fancy a Sunset Strip”, he proclaimed. “Because it’s sunset outside. And I’d like us to strip.”

His PA snorted.

Not the response he’d aimed for, but at least it was a step up from cool desinterest. Tony ordered some mood music and the computer came up with exactly the right thing in his opinion. It started blasting ‘Pour some sugar on me’ over the speakers at full heavy metal volume. Tony rocked to the rhythm for a while, ignoring his PA for the simple joy of moshing around. Just what he needed to shake the stress of the day away.

When the song was over and something equally wild and sexy started playing, Tony sashayed over to his assistant and handed him a huge glass of colorful liquid.

“Are you trying to get me intoxicated?”, Loptr asked with amusement. “It won’t work, you know.”
“Really?”, Tony asked. “You seem quite sure of that.”

“Indeed, I am.”

Tony stored that bit of information away in a growing mental file. He only had scraps and pieces until now, but eventually they would click and form a full picture. His PA was immune to hash cookies, as well, which Tony knew because he’d stolen some of Banner’s stuff and experimented in the name of science.

Sadly, Loptr hadn’t reacted at all. Tony would have loved to see him loose that tight control for once and do a duck impersonation or something.

His best guess was enhanced biology, because Rogers seemed to have the same kind of super-metabolism, but that didn’t fit most of the other weirdness his PA got up to. Well, the mystery would solve itself some day.

The kid took a cautious sip, looked at the drink with surprise and downed most of it in one go. Tony smiled. He knew Loptr had a sweet tooth. If Tony left swiss chocolate stashed anywhere in the tower, it seemed to vanish into thin air with amazing speed. (Even from his wall safe. And from the inside of the copy machine in the invoicing department. – They had something of a competition going by now.)

“You want a refill?”, Tony offered like a good host. His PA nodded and handed him the glass without hesitation. He had the air of someone used to being served. Tony trotted over to the bar obediently and said: “So, no drunken debauchery? Pity. But you can’t blame a guy for trying. Especially as you were the one who got me horny in the first place.” He took a swig out of his own glass. The mixture in it was less sugary and more flammable.

Loptr gave an elegant shrug. “Perhaps you shouldn’t read too much into it. I was just taking you for a ride”, he said. “That is the correct expression, isn’t it?”

It could have been flirting or just the opposite. Tony had no bloody idea. His PA was a master of mixed signals and it drove him crazy. He tried a different tactic. “Oh, come on. You can’t get me all twitchy and then leave me hanging. That’s just … ungentlemanly.”

“Are you appealing to my manners now?”, Loptr asked with amusement. “You must be quite desperate indeed.”

“Whatsoever works, Lancelot.” Tony leaned against the bar and studied his young assistant. Loptr rested his chin on his hand and stared back in clear challenge.

“Perhaps I enjoyed to see you in the throes of helpless arousal. That does not mean I wish to sample the wares”, Loptr said and waved Tony’s proposal away like it was totally beneath him, the bastard.

Tony narrowed his eyes. Sometimes Loptr could be an arrogant son of a bitch. Well, he wouldn’t be yanked around by his own secretary. The little coquette would go down fast and hard.

“Don’t be that way, cupcake”, Tony said sweetly and strolled towards his PA. He had refilled the glas, put a cherry on a stick in and brought it over. When he stood close enough to Loptr’s seat he stealthily pressed his knee against the recline button.

The result was pretty awesome. The seat folded down abruptly, the kid gave a surprised yelp and flailed around to keep his balance. He almost smacked himself in the head with his own elbow. Hah, not looking so high and mighty now.
His PA lay outstretched on the impromptu bed and gave him a death glare. “Oh, very polished”, he said. “Whoever could resist such a graceful invitation.”

Tony sat down on the edge of the seat, put the glass onto a side table and patted Loptr’s calf. “I can order us a string orchestra when we get home.”

He leaned over his prone assistant and allowed himself a wolfish smile. Being on top for once was nice. He could seldom enjoy that position for long where Loptr was concerned. His assistant lay spread out like a buffet and Tony couldn’t wait to nibble at that delicious body.

But it looked like he’d crossed an invisible line, because his PA narrowed his eyes. There was real anger flickering through them. “I will not be treated like prey”, he hissed and sat up abruptly. His mouth was pressed into a thin line and suddenly he looked dangerous as fuck.

“Whoa”, Tony said and backed off. “No need to gut me with your fingernails, darling.” The look on his PA’s face was disturbing, but at least it was an honest feeling. You didn’t get those off Loptr very often and only when you pushed. “This was supposed to be fun, you know.”

Why did all of his assistants show homicidal tendencies after a few weeks of dealing with him? A man’s self image could get bruised by that.

“Where I come from, this is an insult”, Loptr snapped.

“Your folk gets insulted by sex? Seriously?” Tony crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. Damn, his assistant looked even more edible when he had that lethal vibe going.

Loptr sat rigidly on the edge of the seat. “I may be your inferior in rank but I will not act as your sansorðinn”, he proclaimed. Tony had already noticed that his PA sounded more foreign whenever he was upset, even if his face didn’t show anything. The haughty mask was firmly back in place. “Do you expect me to yield like a woman? Take your pleasure elsewhere. I am not interested in the slightest.”

“Riiight”, Tony said. The kid better didn’t repeat his ‘like a woman’ comment where Pepper was around. Apart from that, Tony wasn’t ready to take the rejection at face value. Whatever sansorðinn meant, it sounded like some kind of cultural taboo and Tony was of the firm belief that stupid sex morals were the root of all evil and should be ignored. “So you’ve got a hang-up about positions. Not a problem. I can work around that just fine”, he offered. His own preferences were flexible enough.

Loptr blinked.

“Or is it the whole male-on-male thing in general?”, Tony went on without pause. “No? Didn’t think it was. Because you have deliberately been driving me mad. Stringing me along, behaving like a bloody flirt, getting me hard as a rock in a Pentagon meeting.” He raised an eyebrow and looked down on his assistant.

Loptr gave a noncomittal shrug.

“And let me guess, that was mostly a game of one-upmanship to get under my skin”, Tony concluded.

His PA was so competitive it hurt. Of course he would use sexual games to get one over on his employer. Tony snitched Loptr’s cocktail glass and took a long, thoughtful sip. The mixture was still too sugary for his taste and made him grimace. “God, how can anyone like this stuff? It needs an olive or two”, he muttered and jumped back to the topic at hand. “So anyway, are you
interested or not? I have no idea what’s allowed or banned wherever you dropped in from, but then, I’ve never cared what other people think. In my opinion, if you see something you want, you go for it.”

"I have noticed”, Loptr said drily. He still had that ruffled feathers look going but some of his usual levity had returned.

Tony grinned at him. “Rules are there to be broken, that’s my motto. Hmm, but I guess you care too much about respectability and stuff. Never setting a foot wrong, that’s you. Always prim and proper to a fault”, he teased. “You know what? Be adventurous for a change.”

Loptr flipped him the bird. That was a part of modern culture he’d picked up amazingly fast.

“And who talked about ‘yielding’ anyway?”, Tony started a new angle of attack. He leaned closer until they were almost at kissing distance and lowered his voice. “You can sit there all regal and imposing while I suck you off. My technique is spectacular, scout’s honor. Years and years of practise. And everybody tells me I can run my mouth better than anyone. You wouldn’t want to miss out on this opportunity, honey.”

Tony slowly went down on his knees and looked up through his eyelashes. He could do cute so well even puppy dogs would be impressed.

Loptr’s eyes turned speculative. “You would … serve me that way?”

“You have no idea. Wanna bet I can make you scream my name?”

“A wager? I’m partial to those.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed.”

Loptr liked to challenge Bruce to bets that were plain weird, but always made life interesting. There had been that episode where they had tested how often they could sneak into Tony’s bathroom and exchange stuff without him noticing. It had taken him a while (because Jarvis had sided with the two of them and not said a word, the traitor.) The plot had gotten obvious when he’d found himself smelling like a flower shop and looking like a sun lamp accident ... because someone had put self tanning cream into his bottle of skin lotion.

As far as Tony could see, Loptr won the bets almost every time. He probably manipulated the outcome somehow, i.e. the little fraud cheated. If he let Bruce have a victory now and then that was only to keep him interested. Tony had pointed this out to Bruce but the only reaction had been a shrug and a tolerant: “So? Winning means a lot to him. It’s no skin off my nose.”

Sometimes Bruce was just too laid back to be healthy.

“If you win, I’ll give you … this jet”, Tony suggested. “Pilot, cabin crew and all.” An expensive bait, but worth every dollar.

“And there I thought slavery was frowned on in your country”, Loptr said drily. “Playing with such high stakes suggests that I should worry about more than my virtue. What will I have to give away if you win?”

“Easy. One of your secrets. You’ll tell me how you pulled off that trick today.”

Loptr huffed. “Telling secrets is not in my nature.”
“Oh, don’t chicken out. What’s the danger? Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a little blowjob. You’re always in control. Surely you won’t lose your cool just because I give spectacular good head.”

“Are you taunting me?”

Tony grinned. “It seems to work.”

“Fine”, Loptr snapped, righted the seat and leaned back in a posture that would have done Ceasar proud. He spread his legs in invitation and looked down at Tony with eyes of green fire. One thing was for sure, he didn’t do anything by half. “Well? Go ahead”, he said imperiously.

Tony lifted an eyebrow at that bit of bossiness and then rose to the challenge. Driving Loptr over the edge would be a real pleasure. He crossed his hands behind his back and opened the fly with his teeth. Slowly he pulled the zipper down one little tooth after the other, nustling his mouth in Loptr’s crotch. He kept his eyes on his assistant all the while and had the satisfaction to see him breath a little faster.

Loptr’s undies were not green like in Tony’s fantasies. In fact, he didn’t wear any at all. Tony’s mouth went dry when he suddenly had a smooth, bare cock right in front of him. It looked as delicious as the rest of his PA. The rosy color reminded him of marzipan pastry. He pressed his mouth to its lengh, kissing and nibbling a bit. The skin was colder than he had expected, which was a nice contrast to his own overheated lips. ‘Body temperature way below normal’, Tony added to his List of Weird.

The cock showed definite interest when Tony licked along its length and got aquainted with every inch. It became more and more flushed under the treatment. Hmm, still felt a bit like licking an icicle, though. Tony pictured himself getting stuck with his tongue and had to surpress a snort, because laughing would have killed the mood.

He concentrated on the tip for a while, swirled his tongue around and tried a trick he’d learned in the Kabukicho district of Tokyo from a girl dressed as Sailor Moon. Honestly, the japanese did kink like no-one else. Personally he didn’t believe in chi points, but that special tongue flick worked every time.

Loptr made a noise deep in his throat. He threw his head back and closed his eyes. His mouth was a thin line of concentration. Good.

Tony got a bit more aggressive and started sucking for real. He took most of Loptr’s cock in his mouth, gave it a healthy massage and then suddenly swallowed it down whole. Loptr’s eyes flew open. The green rimmed pupils were blown and dilated. Hah, so he hadn’t lost his touch. Practise made perfect.

Tony allowed himself a predatory grin and went slower again. He wondered how long he could keep Loptr at the edge. A few more minutes at least. He drew back all the way and earned himself an annoyed growl. “Now, don’t be impatient. Good things come to those who wait”, he quipped and blew cool air onto the flushed glans.

Loptr gave him a look that should have killed him on the spot. With a wink Tony bowed down and went to work again, licking the straining cock like a lollipop. Mmm, he could do that all day. Pity that it would soon be over. Loptr was digging his fingers into the armrests and moaning. He was coiled like a spring, all the sharp lines of his face pronounced in painful bliss. A fine sheen of sweat glistened on his skin. The dimmed cabin lights caressed his body and made him look almost unearthly.
Tony concentrated on his work to get the timing exactly right. Fortunately he was quite good at judging how far gone a guy was. When it was clear that Loptr couldn’t keep it together for much longer, he started a steady, forceful rhythm that would make his PA see stars. He sucked for all he was worth, waited until the last second before Loptr came like a geyser … and bit down. Hard.

“Stark!”, his assistant bellowed in fury. The orgasm overtook him in spite of the pain. Or perhaps the teeth marks helped to push him over the edge. He seemed just the type to like things a little spicy. Tony watched him with a smug grin on his face.

“I won”, he said with relish while he zipped his assistant up again.

“You worthless wretched … What did you just say?”, Loptr sputtered. His razor sharp intellect still had to be somewhat blunted. Normally Tony wouldn’t have to spell it out.

“You screamed my name. That means I won the bet and you have to pay up.”

Loptr stared at him. “Or I could gouge out your eyes and use them as cocktail decorations”, he stated. “On those tiny spits you are so fond of.”

“Don’t be a sore loser”, Tony tsked.

“I didn’t loose . You cheated.”

“Did not.”

“Did so.”

“Did not.”

Loptr just raised an eyebrow.


There was a sparkle of something in Loptr’s eyes. “That might be true.”

Tony got up from his kneeling position, brushed his trousers off and snagged the cherry off Loptr’s glass. While he munched on it, he said: “So, out with it. How did you manage to do whatever you did in the Pentagon? Because it was pure genius, and that’s coming from me.”

His assistant cocked his head and regarded at him with a smirk. Then he leaned forward on his seat in a conspirational way and breathed: “Magic.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, sure.” He crossed his arms. “Thanks for that bit of nothing. If you don’t want to pay up, you shouldn’t agree to bets that …”

He stopped in midsentence and narrowed his eyes. His assistant looked smug like he’d just pulled one over on Tony. After several weeks of basically living together he knew that expression far too well.

“Okay, wait a minute”, Tony said slowly. “You actually meant that. About the magic.”

Loptr’s smile froze for just a second. Then he gave Tony a tolerant smile and said lightly: “If that’s what you want to believe. It sounds far from feasible, but everybody knows that your brain works in excentric ways.”

Tony just grinned. “Nice backpaddeling. You got a way with words, cupcake. But sorry, I’m ready
to believe in all kinds of weird shit. And magic explains so, so much of what’s been happening in my home lately. Besides, it would just be like you to give me the truth and then make me shrug it off as a joke. Two birds with one stone: keep the bargain and keep your secret.”

Loptr tapped his fingers on the armrest and frowned. “Sometimes you can be very annoying”, he stated.

“Yeah, so everyone says. Personally, I think you should thank me for the opportunity. This is your chance to show off. I bet you’ve been dying to strut your stuff since the day I hired you. Admit it, doing magic is half the fun if you have no audience to impress. Here I am, all eyes and ears. Let it rip. Amaze me.”

Loptr pinched the bridge of his nose like he was developing a headache. “I could turn you into a frog”, he suggested. “That seems to be a popular tradition here.”


His PW (= personal wizard) gave a sigh and said: “Very well. It’s rare that I get bested in my gambles, but if I do, I pay the price. The games would lose all attraction, otherwise.”

He stretched out one fine-fingered hand and murmered a phrase that involved a lot of consonants. A shimmer of blue light grew in his palm and pulsed like a heartbeat. Tony leaned forward and watched with intense concentration.

He hadn’t really believed anything would happen. To discover against all odds that magic actually existed was … disturbing. And breathtaking.

Here was a whole universe that he hadn’t explored yet, an unknown world of information that differed sharply from the science he had mastered. He wanted to learn everything about it. He could hardly wait to start.

Loptr threw the sparkle of light into the air where it hovered like a glowing star, the seed of something foreign and amazing. His hands made a complicated gesture, writing symbols into thin air. Tendrils of silver coiled and twisted, stretched across the ceiling and filled the room with branches of cold fire. Strange greenery grew lightning fast in every direction, until Tony and Loptr were surrounded by a dome of vegetation. The walls of the plane seemed to fall away and the blackness of space glared through the branches into eternity. When the spell was finished, Tony stood inside an enormous tree, its leaves sparkling like a million galaxies far, far away. He was almost sure that they were galaxies caught in a living astrodome. Slowly he turned around his axis and drank the sight in with childlike wonder. It resembled the holograms Jarvis enveloped him in when he needed data. But then again, not.

“God, this is incredible. Like some weird, amazing dreamscape. Fairyland for astrophysicists. Have you come up with that design by yourself?” He turned towards Loptr and looked at him with a smile that didn't hold any of his usual flippancy. “I’ve never seen anything so beautiful in all my life”, he said honestly.

Loptr shrugged his words off and refused to meet his eyes. “It is a simple illusion and hardly worth such praise”, he said. But he looked pleased by Tony’s open admiration, even if he didn’t want to admit it. With a snap of his fingers the tree vanished and they were back inside the mundane cabin of the plane.

Tony made a noise of disappointment. He wanted to ask for an encore, but was interrupted by the pilot. Had it really been an hour already? Well, time flies when you have fun. “The tower has
cleared us for landing, Sir, and we will start the descent in two minutes. The weather is rough, so I
would advise you to use the seatbelts. Please.”

“You know I hate the seatbelts”, Tony grumbled.

“Thank you for your cooperation”, the pilot said, unimpressed.

Well, Tony could bug Loptr about the magic later. How it worked, who had taught him. Was there
actually a place like Hogwarts where you could study that kind of stuff? Could other people do
sparkly trees? And even if Loptr didn’t tell him – which was almost a given – he had all kinds of
fascinating data now. Surely Jarvis had recorded the event with every sensor and scanner in his
repertoire. His butler was nosy that way.

Tony could hardly wait to get home and start swapping ideas with Jarvis. Odds were good that
with a little scientific prodding they could figure out just what made Loptr tick.

Chapter End Notes

So I’ve started to put recs under my fics since the "Off the Wagon"-series. If you like
kinky stuff here’s some suggestions. The list for today contains Draco-centric Harry
Potter stories:

“Rituals and Traditions” by Amanuensis;
http://www.amanuensis1.com/ritualsandtraditions.html

“Harry Potter and the Inconvenient Condition” by Mirabella;
http://mirabellafic.dreamwidth.org/19848.html#cutid1

„To the Victor“ by Simmysim; http://merry-smutmas.livejournal.com/79939.html

“The Fields of St. Herve” + “Something borrowed-Series” by Arsenic;
http://www mediageek.ca/arsenicjade/hp.html

“Once upon a fantasy” by Jennavere; http://archive.skyehawke.com/story.php?
no=10160

"Ninth rehearsal for the main event" + "Light as iron, singed as pearl" by Snegurocha
(AO3)
Using Loptr as a guinea pig was a bit tricky. They had to nudge him into doing magic, but in a roundabout way so he wouldn’t notice. If he got suspicious he’d either stop … or far more unpleasant things might happen. His PW had a temper and probably wouldn’t react well to the fact that they were prying out his secrets.

Their biggest success until now had been the week Loptr spent in the accounting department.

Tony had sent him to check on a supposed paycheck fraud. For the time of the investigation his assistant had to share the office of Chuck Mahony, which was just big enough to squeeze in a second person (if you moved the potted rubber plant out of the way). According to the intranet rumor mill Chuck was a likeable guy, but drove his co-workers crazy with his love for really bad country music.

Loptr had held on to his temper for a whole six days. Then, in the middle of a rendition of ‘Stand by your man’ by a singer called Feisty Dolly the radio had exploded in a shower of sparks.

The energy readings had been amazing. For microseconds the air around Loptr had been charged with an ion storm of strange particles. Tony was still drooling over the raw power behind that little trick.

Loptr hadn’t found any evidence of embezzlement, of course. But his special mixture of charm and intimidation had boosted the department efficiency by 4.3%. The only drawback of the whole scheme had been the damn secretarial work. Tony had been forced to take his own phone calls for a whole week. He hadn’t even realized how pushy SHIELD was getting until then. Obviously his assistant had been … well, shielding him from being bugged by Fury and his minions. The director was still on about that stupid Avengers idea and didn’t want to take no for an answer. Seriously, did Tony look like a team guy? He was quite happy doing the hero stuff single-handedly, thank you very much.

Successful experiment # 2 starred his wizard assistant and the shower.

They’d waited for Loptr to wash his hair in the employee apartment (which looked sizzling hot, in Tony’s opinion), and right in the middle Jarvis had dropped the water temperature to freezing point. The kid had given a surprised shriek, twisted in a delightfully sexy way and then made a warding gesture that had forced the drops to rain everywhere but at him. The effect had looked like some kind of invisible force field, only more spectacular. The water spray had come to a halt, drops were hovering in mid air or even levitating upwards against all laws of gravitation. By the time the kid stepped out of the shower with a thunderous expression, his body had been miraculously dry and there had been no hint of shampoo left anywhere.

Jarvis had apologized to Loptr about the maintainance malfunction … and left him with the impression that the whole thing had been a prank by Bruce. The excuse was believable enough, because the two of them still took every opportunity to trip each other up. Loptr had a one-track-mind when in revenge mode, so he didn’t even think about other possible reasons for the bathroom glitch. The distraction worked great. When Bruce left his lab that night and fell into bed, he landed on a big, wet sucker fish. He shrieked like a teenage girl.
Tony would have felt guilty if he could have stopped sniggering long enough.

Now he watched the shower scene again in slow motion – partly for information but also because Loptr’s butt bounced delightfully when he did that scalded cat jump on screen. Playing voyeur was a great way to pass the time. Tony leaned back on his chair and played around with a screwdriver, trying to balance it on a fingertip. They had the next experiment all set up, but had to wait for the kid to walk into it.

“So, any new ideas for our test series? We could try and make him disapparate Potter-style. Do you think we can get the kid stuck in a broom closet?”, Tony asked.

“That does seem a bit obvious, Sir”, Jarvis replied.

“True. Would be fun, though. Hey, have you noticed that he doesn’t just shove the water away with his hands? He also does that little flourish with his index and middle finger. Looks kind of deliberate. Could mean something … or not.” He put the shower scene on rerun and stared at it a bit longer. “Okay, give me a visual of the lines he’s drawing with his fingertips. In slow motion.”

As soon as Jarvis complied, a series of strange signs appeared in the air. His AI had also calculated the power output and made the symbols pulse with bright silver light. Tony squinted at them, a look of surprise on his face.

“Huh. Who would have thought? That actually resembles writing”, he said and studied the shapes. “You got anything in your database that looks similar?”

“In fact I do”; Jarvis said. “The symbols bear a striking resemblance to old nordic runes. This could be the long awaited breakthrough in our research, Sir.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Loptr Olson is a nordic name. He claims to come from Iceland, doesn’t he? Seems to fit. Hey, didn’t the vikings use runes for magic?”

“So it says in the old saga texts. These symbols look slightly different from the spells found on bones and rune stones. But to make an educated guess, Mr Olson used a variation on ‘algiz’ for defence and shelter, ‘raidho’ for changed paths and travel, ‘nauthiz’ for willpower and innovation and ‘ehwaz’ written in reverse for being entrapped in a bad situation.”

“In other words: ‘Damn, I’m trapped in this shitty shower and need a cunning way to save myself by making the water flow another way.’” Tony looked at the glowing symbols with fascination. They interweaved and formed a complicated pattern that could have hung in any New York gallery as a piece of calligraphic art. “Okay, check the other times the kid used magic. Were runes involved? That would make everything so much easier. We know that Loptr manipulates energy and now we have a clue of how he goes about it. Could be a bit like using computer code for application instructions. We can build up a dictionary to … Ah, there he comes.“

Loptr appeared on the screen that monitored a hallway in the celebrity guest floor, which was meant for visiting Hollywood actresses and such. It was more cluttered with decoration then most other parts of Stark Tower. Flower pots and furniture was strewn about. Which made it a real bother when the ceiling lamp died with a hiss and the whole hallway was plunged into darkness.

Loptr grumbled something under his breath and tried to find his way to the door. He stubbed his toe on a table leg, toppled a porcelain statue onto the floor and cursed. Tony could watch the whole thing comfortably from his workshop because of the night vision lenses that he’d installed in the ceiling cameras.
Loptr groped for the statue on the floor and found it only a little chipped. He put it back where it belonged with an annoyed look on his face. A complicated gesture with his right hand had Tony leaning forward in anticipation. There was a shimmer of brilliant light that radiated out from Loptr’s palm for a second, but then he frowned and the glow died.

“Hey, you were doing great there”, Tony murmured. “Why did you stop?”

Loptr sat down on the floor crosslegged, leaned his back against the wall and shut his eyes. Nothing else happened for quite a while. The minutes slipped by, the view started to get boring and still Loptr refused to perform. After a quarter of an hour he pulled a dagger out of his sleeve (no magical energy there, looked like he routinely carried a concealed blade to work) and flipped it to pass the time. He didn’t miss once, even in pitch black darkness.

“Uh, do you think he’s on to us?”, Tony asked.

“Perfectly possible”, Jarvis said.

“That knife makes me kind of nervous.”

Eventually Loptr put the dagger back into his sleeve and said to the ceiling: “Jarvis, if you would kindly send somebody here to repair the lighting? I would hate to further destroy this room.” He smiled thinly. “And I’ve suddenly remembered that I’ve got an urgent meeting with Mr. Stark.”

“Of course, Mr. Olson. I’ll see to it right away”, Jarvis’ voice could be heard on the guest floor, polite and helpful as ever.

In the workshop he added just for Tony’s benefit: “I don’t know if your PA is on to us. But he’s certainly on to you, Sir.”

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When Loptr prowled into the workshop ten minutes later, he radiated contained fury. Tony couldn’t help but admire his predatory elegance, even if his hand crept towards a blowtorch all by itself. Some people claimed he didn’t have a sense of self preservation, but skydiving in a metal can at supersonic speed was one thing … facing Loptr in a snit was quite another.

“Hi”, he said brightly. “You wanted a chat?” It was worth a try, even if ‘harmless and innocent’ rarely worked on people who spend any length of time with him. “Something wrong, cupcake?”

His PA gave him a look that should have deep-frozen him on the spot. “Do not treat me like an imbecile.”

Tony raised his hands in a placating gesture. He left the blowtorch where it was, even if it took an effort. “I wouldn’t ever. You’re the brightest guy I know. Except for myself. Well, and maybe Bruce.” He gave up on his act, leaned forward and shrugged. “So, this is about the fact that I’m a nosy sonofabitch? You knew that already when you got yourself hired by me. In fact, you used it to catch my attention in the first place. Give me a mystery and I can’t resist poking at it. So, don’t act all miffed now.”

Loptr crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “I won’t tolerate being spied on. More powerful people than you have tried and regretted it.”

Yeah, Tony was totally ready to believe that.

“If you want to know something about me, ask.”
Tony raised his eyebrows. “And you’ll answer? Come on, don’t try to sell me that. If it’s about your magic or your past you get more uptight than a clam.” Which was an understatement. Tony had tried to dig into his assistant’s personal history and had gotten exactly nowhere. He wasn’t even sure if the name Loptr Olson was genuine. Jarvis had suggested that his PA had named himself after the nordic God of Mischief, which sounded plausible.

Of course, there was still the possibility that the kid was the nordic God of Mischief, but Tony refused to go there. His life was weird enough without throwing mythology into the mix. Besides, did it really matter if he housed a wizard or a god? Either way he was tangling with forces he had no way to understand – yet –, and was determined to bluster his way through without getting intimidated by his fucking secretary.

Loptr threw Tony a cool look. “Perhaps you should bargain for my knowledge, instead of stealing it like a thief in the night”, he said. “Why should I give out such valuable information without recompense?”

“You want money? Sure. Hey, I can make you the highest paid office worker in the US.” Tony leaned back on his coil sprung office chair and bounced. “Jarvis? Get out my checkbook.”

Loptr rolled his eyes. “That’s not what I meant. I’m not interested in your wealth. Offer me something of actual worth.”

Tony cocked his head and regarded his PA thoughtfully. He was almost sure that Loptr was aiming for something specific, but he had no idea what it could be. Or if he was ready to pay the price. The sly sparkle in Loptr’s eyes made him cautious. He didn’t want to be caught in a devil’s bargain. Even if his brain did a little victory dance at the thought of what he could discover with Loptr’s help and cooperation, there were limits to what he would agree to. He decided to try a little fishing.

“You want me to make it worth your while, hm? Well, we both know you’re more interested in my research then you let on. You’re a nerd at heart and this is a unique opportunity. So my offer is this: Let’s trade information. If you perform some magic tricks for me, I’ll share the results.” He put on his most charming smile and went into salesman-mode. “I’m the only one around with the brains and the resources to turn your magic into hard science. Look at the stuff I’ve got here in my workshop. That’s top-notch equipment you won’t find anywhere on the market. With a little more input from you, Mr. Houdini, I can work out an explanation for the weird energy you throw around. Then you can use my research to boost your performance. Become the first tech-mage in history. ‘Knowledge is power’ and all that.” He winked. “And I’m quite aware that power gets you off.”

He meant that in a literal sense. Their little tryst on the flight from Washington hadn’t stayed a one-time-thing. Loptr had graciously allowed him several repeat performances. On his knees and with his hands bound behind his back. Payback for using his teeth that one time.

Not that Tony objected to a bit of powerplay, as long as each of them remembered their place outside of the bedroom. And the kitchen. And the broom closet...

“I could even raise the stakes and offer you a chance to fuck your boss over his office desk. Tempting, isn’t it? Just imagine me as easy prey. Naked. Blindfolded.” He raised an eyebrow. "Quite, quite helpless.”

That got a surprised laugh out of Loptr. “I do admit to a certain curiosity. About both offers”, he said with a crooked smile. He took a step closer and leaned into Tony’s personal space. “But if I agree to work with you – if I let you examine my abilities with your fancy machines –, then you
will share the results with nobody but me. You will not tell or show a living soul what you found out. This is my one and only condition and it’s not negotiable.”

Tony frowned. “Any specific reason why you want that? I don’t usually go around advertising my breakthroughs … well, not until I’ve marketed them …, but this could become the discovery of the century. I mean, we’re talking about the Science of Magic. Something big like that shouldn’t be kept under wraps.”

Loptr shrugged. “Then our agreement is off the table. My abilities make me unique and I do not wish to become a lab specimen for either the military or SHIELD.”

“You think that’s a real concern?”

“Of course it is.” The kid gave him an incredulous look. “Director Fury believes he is a law unto himself. I’ve had to deal with him often enough to recognize the signs. He is not exactly subtle. Are you aware that he sent his pet assassin to intimidate your houseguest? The way Bruce tells it, he went out for a meal at his favorite indian restaurant and Miss Romanova waited for him at his table. She offered to recruit him or else. Bruce hasn’t left the tower since. He is holed up in his lab and hardly ever comes out. You really haven’t noticed?”

Tony shook his head, a little shocked by the news. Fury regularly drove him up the walls with that superhero team fantasy of his, but Tony hadn’t expected SHIELD to get quite that pushy.

Loptr brushed a hand through his hair, exasperated by Tony’s lack of people skills. “When Bruce came back from that lovely tête-à-tête he almost lost his temper”, he went on. “It seemed a good idea to distract him, so I proposed some mild revenge plans against Fury and his minions. Bruce eventually joined me in brainstorming. He showed a lot of talent. If the director ever sets foot in the tower he will have an interesting time of it.”

“Really? Sounds like a youtube moment. You’ve got my blessing.” Tony leaned forward towards his PA. “But seriously, where do you get the idea that I would sell you out to Fury of all people? He’s annoying as fuck and tries to steal my tech all the bloody time. I got Jarvis to hack his systems just to be on the safe side. There’s no way I would hand SHIELD any information. If you believe that I’d tell them about our joint research you’ve got a real paranoia problem.”

Loptr shrugged. “Alliances can change. I won’t take any chances if I don’t have to.” He cocked his head. “Swear to me that whatever you learn about my magic will stay with you and Jarvis. You may use it for your own devices but not give it away to anyone else. I want your solemn oath.” He held out his hand, apparently to seal their agreement the old-fashioned way.

Tony took it. His assistant could be such a drama queen. “Fine. I won’t tell. Scout’s honor.”

As soon as the words had left his mouth, a shimmering coil of light wrapped itself around both their hands. Runes glittered along its length like embroidery. Golden sparks floated through the air.

“What the fuck?”, Tony said.

The translucent rope didn’t look strong, but when he tugged at it, the thing didn’t budge. It held him in place with unnatural force. His movements made rainbow colors run along the ribbon’s edge, which actually looked quite pretty. For a bloody trap. If you liked special effects with 80’s discoball colors and glitter.

Loptr watched him struggle and smirked in that infuriating way of his. “I believe you’re familiar with the concept of an Unbreakable Vow?”, he said finally.
Tony groaned.

“As long as you keep your word this is quite harmless”, his PA added sweetly. Yeah, that was reassuring.

Loptr snapped his fingers and the rope vanished obediently. It dissolved into a cloud of firefly sparks and fizzled out. Tony’s wrist tingled where the magic had touched his skin. He took a deep breath and told himself not to try and strangle the kid. He’d probably need his armor for that anyway. “Let me guess. If I violate the terms and tell somebody I’ll keel over dead.”

Loptr smirked. “I doubt the magic would be as kind as that. Your end will be quite messy.”

“Oh, great”, Tony said.

Should have known better then to enter into a pact with a trickster. It rarely turned out well for the guys in the folk tales. He really hoped whatever he got out of the deal would be worth the prize.

Chapter End Notes

Recs for Avenger fics at AO3 (no kink this time, just some awesome adventure stories)

Valtyr: Tomorrow belongs to me
Startrekfanwriter: Blue -Series
PlotDotOh: Valhalla Blues
Merriman: A Routine Operation
Cluegirl: Scatterlings and Orphans
Melonbutterfly: Say Goodbye to Yesterday
DemonQueen666: Folkin’ Around -Series
Copperbadge: Better to reign in hell
MarbleGlove: Tony’s new assistant (… with special thanks, because that’s where the inspiration for my story came from.)
Just two days later Tony walked into his office and found Loptr sitting in the executive chair with his feet on the desk. He blinked at the scene. “Got lost on your way to the minion’s corner, office boy?”, he said.

His PA cocked his head and looked him up and down. Then he held his right hand up and drew a red-and-gold silk scarf out of thin air with the flamboyant gesture of a stage magician. It had the same coloring as the Iron Man suit. “I believe you proposed a blindfold?”, he said.

“Right”, Tony drawled. “Got into that fantasy pretty quickly, I see.”

At least, Loptr had dressed up for the performance. He wore an otherworldly outfit made of hard, protective leather and green silk. The combination of flaring medieval sleeves, a close-fitted jerkin and heavy arm guards made him look both ethereal and threatening. Everything was embroidered with intricate designs in silver thread and obviously hand-sewn. The needlework must have taken weeks, especially with all the tough leather. No way was this a costume. Besides, the garments looked far too well worn.

So that was Loptr Olson when he ditched the yuppie-disguise.

The whole outfit screamed Warrior Prince in a slightly over the top way, but the kid pulled it off without effort. He sat behind the desk with a smirk and oozed confident power. The look went right to Tony’s libido. It would have gotten anyone with an armor kink weak in the knees and Tony could have led the fan club, as proven by his own suit designs.

“That’s the newest fashion in Iceland, is it?”, Tony drawled.

The smirk got more pronounced. “Come here”, Loptr said and beckoned with a finger. He pointed to a place directly in front of the desk.

Tony rolled his eyes but obeyed. They had a bargain and besides, this promised to be fun. He strolled forwards until the desk touched his upper thighs. His cook pressed lightly against the table edge. The wooden surface had ideal proportions for him to bend over (which was no coincidence. Tony liked to be prepared whenever a kink opportunity struck.)

“You asked me for further demonstrations of my magic”, Loptr said in a silky voice. “But you didn’t specify in which way this should be done. How … trustful of you. I believe that I have found a fitting method to share my secrets.” His eyes sparkled in a mixture of amusement and challenge. “Let me start with lesson number one: Vanishment.”

He made a sharp gesture with his left hand and Tony felt a tingle all over his body. The sensation had a sizzling electrical undercurrent like being caught in the middle of a lightning storm. Tony’s hair stood on edge and a shiver ran down his spine. Cool air rushed in and touched his over-sensitive skin in intimate places.

When he looked down at himself, his clothes had disappeared into the twilight zone.


The question was unnecessary – damn sure his AI was monitoring and collecting every scrap of data he could get –, but it served as a subtle hint in Loptr’s direction. The kid better didn’t get
overenthusiastic, because they had a chaperone. Tony liked his bed partners pushy and inventive, but power could go to anyone’s head. That was why Jarvis regularly served as his safeguard in tricky sexual situations. (Last New Year’s Eve came to mind. Pity he only remembered the scene through a drunken haze. Some buxom tabloid chick had stuffed a fireworks rocket up Tony’s ass and tried to post pictures on her blog. As far as he could recall, Jarvis had doused her in fire extinguisher chemicals and given her a safety lecture while the monoammonium phosphate ate through her underwear.)

“Of course, Sir. Recording your sexual encounters is one of my main purposes in life”, his butler said from the ceiling. Good. As long as Jarvis gave him sass that meant he didn’t read the situation as a threat.

Loptr’s eyes wandered over his naked body in possessive delight and Tony’s cock gave a twitch against the table edge. What else could Loptr do with those special talents of his? There were all kinds of possibilities. His brain started to throw dirty pictures at him that included wands and broomsticks.

Loptr sprawled on the executive chair and seemed to ponder what to do next, making him wait. The kid cast a lazy look around the office and his smile turned wicked. “Lesson number two”, he said and let his fingers dance through the air in a rune pattern. “The moving of objects.”

He aimed his mojo at the refreshment corner, or rather at the microwave and Tony’s customized coffee machine. At Loptr’s silent command the electrical cords unplugged themselves, tore free from the wall socket and rose into the air, undulating like a pair of eels in an invisible ocean. The male connectors looked eerily like small heads. They swung around searchingly and with a predatory air, until they zeroed in on Tony.

The cords zoomed towards him, tails swinging. Tony refused to flinch even if the effect was kind of nerve wracking. He wouldn’t give that arrogant little scamp the satisfaction of getting a rise out of him. “Gotta hand it to you, that’s more creepy than Sigfried and Roy”, he said. “So, how does it work apart from wiggling your fingers? You gonna give us some details so Jarvis can get the science part running?” The cable of the coffee machine wrapped itself around his left wrist. It felt weirdly alive, crept over his skin with sinous movements and coiled up towards his elbow. Man-eating plants came to mind.

“Cross your arms behind your back, please”, Loptr ordered. “And no, I will not give you further information. Why should I? You merely asked for a demonstration of my powers, which you are getting in abundance. Explanations were not part of our bargain.”

“You wanna go for loopholes? Really?” Tony took a step back from the table, hands very much uncrossed. He stood at ease in all his naked glory. “You know, I’ve never actually said when I’d show you my research results. There might be a free slot in my schedule on the first of april, like 2041?” His smile showed teeth.

“Fine. Let’s do the haggling afterwards”, Loptr conceded. The kid’s eyes had lost their jaded look and sparkled like emeralds. He always delighted in those little games. “Of course, if you wish to discuss theory right now, I could explain runic lore to you instead of … other things.”

“No, no, I’m a practical guy. Always open for the hands-on-approach.”

Loptr smiled and the electrical cord around Tony's wrist tightened. Fine, he could get a hint. With a deliberate gesture Tony brought his arms behind his back and held on to his elbows so the cable could do its job and wrap him up good and firm.
The pull to his shoulders made him stand at military attention, which was not a bad posture in terms of sexiness, (especially if you had the physique that resulted from frolicking around in a ton of metal): back straight, chin up and cock twitching just at Loptr’s eye-level.

His assistant seemed to appreciate the view. His sharp eyes got a bit glassy and he wetted his lips. There even was a hint of color on those pale cheekbones. A strand of raven black hair had fallen into his face. In his medieval outfit he looked tempting as hell, like a debauched elven warrior, so impossibly beautiful it almost hurt to look at him …

“I think I’ve seen a strapping lad just like you on a codpiece-ripper by Elizabeth Rose. Seriously, anyone ever tell you how much you resemble a romance cover?” Tony might have gotten the submissive part in this bit of roleplay, but the bargain didn’t include gagging him, so he could still run his mouth and be as annoying as ever. “Let's see, maybe I’ll even remember the title. Something classy. My Bonny Stallion? Prince of Come-A-Lot? Nooo, I guess it was that famous Iceland Epic: Geysir Guys Do It Wet …”

His eyes flew open and he shut up abruptly when a line of fire danced across his ass. Damn, he’d forgotten about the microwave cable. No idea what Loptr had wanted to use it for originally, but it worked pretty nicely to smack him into silence. A line of intense heat ran across his undercurves. Note to self: Don’t piss off a sorcerer while naked and cuffed.

Loptr rose from his chair and prowled around the desk with a predatory air. His leather armor made him look mouthwatering dangerous, and since when was the kid this tall anyway? He leaned against Tony from behind, pressed himself against the bare skin of his back, and sparks of power sizzled between them. Loptr brought his mouth close to Tony’s ear and breathed: “You have no idea what you are playing with.”

Tony swallowed and his voice came out hoarse. “Yeah, noticed that a while ago. But figuring you out is half the fun, right? So surprise me, Mr. Olson.”

“It will be my pleasure”, his assistant growled and ran a possessive hand over his hips. He traced the glowing line on Tony’s buttocks with a fingertip that felt like ice against the burning skin. The intense sensation made his whole body come alive. Loptr’s thumb rubbed over the small hollow at the end of his spine where the cleft started and Tony arched into the touch. A fountain pen rolled over the desk towards them. It was part of the Visconti Steel Edition, sleek and elegant. “Lesson number three”, Loptr whispered. “Reshaping.”

The cap slithered off and started to grow rapidly. It shimmered like quicksilver or a special effect from Terminator. The metal stretched, twisted and warped, until it had the size of a very generous butt plug. Tony watched wide-eyed as his assistant took the thing between his fingers and bent the metal rim into a flared base without any sign of effort. Now, that was just unfair. Georganos, smart, magical and with superhuman strength? Some people had all the luck.

If one could call Loptr ‘people’, which he started to doubt. His assistant needed a category all by himself.

“Now would be the moment to bend over your desk”, Loptr suggested. He put a hand between Tony’s shoulderblades to help him along and Tony had no choice but to obey. The cool fingers looked delicate but held all the inexorable force of a hydraulic press.

With a huff he gave up on his token resistance and stretched out over the table. Normally he would have gripped the edge on the other side, but the cable around his forearms still had him trussed up good and firm. The position brought his bottom up, and Loptr petted the offered curves, all the while holding him down with one single hand. The blindfold wrapped itself around Tony’s head,
enclosing him in darkness and muffling the other senses.

He felt the metal tip of the butt plug tease his hole and did his best to relax. His helpless position spiced up the experience, but made it a little difficult to loosen up and just enjoy. Loptr nudged his legs apart and Tony went with it, until he stood spread eagled and his opening offered an easy target. In reward the plug dipped deeper and Loptr started to open him up with surprising care and patience. Slick metal slithered in and out in an accelerating rhythm. There was a great amount of lube involved, whereever Loptr had magicked the stuff up from. Hopefully it wasn’t eye of newt or other squishy wizardy things.

The first nudge against Tony’s prostate felt like an electric shock and almost made him levitate off the table. Loptr laughed, pleased with himself. He repeated the movement with a little more force and a lot of precision. The plug hit exactly the same spot three times in a row. Tony vision went all sparkly and he twitched and writhed across his desk.

“Well, well … You like that, Mr Stark?”, his assistant asked.

Tony knew when he was being patronized, but at the moment he didn’t give a damn. “Yeah, I fucking like it. My sexy hip roll should be a clue. Go on. Don’t stop.”

„Now, that was an unwise thing to say“, Loptr chided and stopped. The bloody bastard. “Really, you should know better than to talk to me that way.”

Tony groaned. True. Loptr always did exactly the opposite of what you wanted, that was kind of a natural law. You had to coax him into things instead of giving orders, but damn. „Not up to my ususual speed of thought here“, he ground out. “Could you make an exeption and just be nice and you know … helpful for a change?”

“Perhaps”, his assistant mused. “It's not out of the realm of possibilities.” He gave the base of the plug a playful flick with his finger - hopefully the beginning of another so called lesson -, but no other stimulation seemed to follow. Time went by and Tony was close to bitching again, until he became aware that the sensations inside him were changing. It happened so gradually that he had to concentrate to notice anything at all. The pressure against his prostate got a little more forceful by the second. His hole throbbed as it got stretched wider. The strain increased, slowly but inexorably, and his ring muscles started to protest as they tried to adjust.

“Is that steel pen thing actually growing? Holy hell, that’s not what I meant with ‘don’t stop’. - Uh, you are going to stop at some point, right? I’m flexible down there, lots of practise, but there are limits.” The plug had been quite big to begin with. Tony’s genius brain was good at exponential functions and the picture it came up with was not reassuring.

“Well, we both like to test limits, don’t we?” Loptr said sweetly. “It is one of the qualities we have in common. Let us see how much you can take.”

Tony should probably be terrified by that little taunt, but yeah, the thought wasn’t exactly off-turning. His cock seemed to love the idea, even if his ass was harder to convince. His hole fluttered and twitched around the intruder. The plug grew another quarter of an inch and sent a tingling, burning sensation through Tony’s rear that made it quiver all over.

“Lovely”, Loptr said, because he had a front row view. There was a scratching sound, then one palm cupped Tony’s left buttock to hold it still. The tip of the fountain pen pressed against his skin and started to move in deliberate patterns.

“Are you writing on my ass? In runes?”, Tony asked incredulously. “And there I thought you
couldn’t get anymore weird about sex. Tell me that’s not a spell.”

“It could be”, Loptr said, all innocence. “Who knows?”

Tony seriously considered getting up and ending the game. It would be a pity, but there were risks he wouldn’t take even for the chance of mindblowing orgasmic delights. Luckily, his assistant had become quite good at reading his moods and stopped in the middle of an upward stroke. “If you really want to know, I am signing my name”, he huffed. “Jarvis, would you please reassure Mr Stark that I have no intention to perform black magic on his rear, but am merely being possessive?”

“It’s true, Sir.”

“Splendid”, Loptr said. "I thought about adding the words ‘Property of …’ but that seemed a bit gauche.”

Tony rolled his eyes and settled down again. “Yeah, absolutely. Let’s not add that. And by the way, if lesson number four is ‘indelible ink’, I’m gonna kick your kneecaps out.”

The fountain pen scratched over his skin, while the feeling inside his private places increased and his prostrate sent waves of pleasure-pain through his body. Loptr took his damn time marking him. How long could a name be? There were probably some fancy titles thrown in.

At last Loptr stopped writing with a flourish. He put the fountain pen away, then leaned down and blew a waft of cool air on the ink lines to make them dry. His lips ghosted over the skin in an almost-caress. Tony’s ass broke out into goosebumps and his hips started humping the table edge all by themselves. His neglected cock was metal hard and felt about as huge as the damn plug he was impaled on.

“Lesson number four …”, Loptr teased. “Whatever shall we pick? I could read your future from the pattern of your birthmarks.” He stroked a fingertip along Tony’s back in maddening path. “Do you wish to be introduced to the dark and mystic powers of divination?”

Even with mush for brains Tony didn’t fall for that. Loptr sounded like one of those fake gipsy women in carny tents. “You know what? I don’t give a damn as long as my future holds a tall dark stranger who stops playing around and finally brings me off!”

Loptr chuckled. “You do seem desperate for my attentions. Perhaps I should make you beg.” His voice stayed silky and controlled, but his hands took Tony by the hips and their grip was so urgent that Tony grinned. Not quite as blasé about the whole thing as he wanted to appear, hm? Tony hardly had time to brace himself before the plug vanished and Loptr rammed his cock in.

“Yeah, that’s it, babe”, he encouraged. “Make me scream, sugarbunny.”

“Shut up, Stark”, Loptr hissed and started fucking him with the ferocity of a predator in heat.

Well, all that prepping had been good for something. Tony was loose enough to get pounded without mercy and love every second. Loptr probably had a lot of Tony-related frustration to work off. (His PA’s usually did.) The forceful thrusts lifted Tony’s hips off the table, shoved his ass into the air and made him see fireworks. His tightly bound hands clenched all by themselves, the bondage brought his chest out and his nipples rubbed over the table top with every rhythmic movement. There was so much stimulation everywhere that his brain almost exploded from the overload.

Loptr growled, pulled him up by the scruff of the neck and took him standing. One freakishly strong arm held him in place and Tony pushed back with enthusiasm. The blindfold was still on,
but Tony could picture the scene just perfectly. Pale, elegant fingers enveloped his cock and worked it to completion with deft movements. After just a short couple of strokes Tony came so hard it was embarrassing.

He managed to take Loptr over the edge with him, which meant he could call it a win. Or at least a draw.

“Holy cow”, he rasped and propped himself up against the table, because his legs felt like pulp. “Sweet mother of mercy, you’re something else.”

“Indeed”, Loptr said. Then he vanished the blindfold, freed Tony’s wrists and cleaned the mess they’d made with a wave of his hand. He didn’t even breath hard, the bastard. How did he get himself back under control that fast? Damn superhumans.

Loptr gave his naked rump a little pet. “Your stamina leaves something to desired, but all the same, you fulfilled your part of our bargain. If you have questions about the workings of magic, you may come to my quarters at any time. Whenever you are ready, Stark ...” He turned around and flounced out of the office. The door clicked shut behind him.

Tony gave a breathless laugh. “I don’t believe that arrogant son of a bitch. And he left my damn clothes in the twilight zone.” Perhaps he should be peeved about that, but his libido was still off in sugarcandyland and he couldn’t stop grinning. “Jarvis, do I have a spare suit in my office? Or am I going to moon the staff on my way back?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time, Sir”, his AI observed.

“True.”

“The chrome cupboard should hold a full set of clothes. Second drawer on the left.”

“Thanks. You’re a real lifesaver.” His brain was slowly getting back online. Before he got out the business attire, he cast a look at the mirror and studied the foreign writing on his ass. There were several lines of text. “Okay, what signature did he use when he got ‘possessive’? I bet it isn’t Loptr Olson from Iceland, M.A. in Comparative Religion.”

“A translation would read: Prince Loki, God of trickery, Son of no realm.”

Tony thought about that. Then he got dressed and poured himself a drink. A large one. “A God has autographed my butt. Stuff like that only ever happens to me.”

“Agreed, Sir.”

“Does that name sound like a shitload of issues to you? I mean, honestly: Son of no realm?” Tony chugged the bourbon and felt it burn down his throat. "In the tales Loki is the one who gets into a feud with about everyone and starts armageddon, right? Well, no surprise there. I can see the kid do precisely that if handled wrongly. His snit fits are something to see. Any ideas why a Trickster God would get himself hired by SI and shuffle paperwork? Shit, I really hope it’s not about weapons.” He grimaced. “Who am I kidding? With me and my karma it’s always about weapons.”

"His affection for you seems quite genuine, Sir. Perhaps he was simply bored – an immortal lifespan must be hard to bear for an inquisitive mind like his – and you looked like something new and exciting.”
“You are an optimist, Jarvis. And was that a polite way of calling me his sextoy?” He stared at his empty glass and felt a dash of hysteria bubble up. “I’m Leda, he’s the swan? Sounds doubtful to me. Can you see some classical painter putting this into a gold frame?” He pointed towards his well-used ass. “Not exactly swooning virgin material. How do male swans do it anyway? I bet the paintings never show. Scratch that, I don’t want to know.”

“I already assumed that was a rhetorical question, Sir”, Jarvis said drily. At least his AI stayed unimpressed by the situation.

Tony let himself fall onto a bar stool and winced when his backside hit the leather. “He could have all kinds of motives. Weapons. Boredom. Tech. Even some stupid bet with his immortal buddies. Wouldn’t surprise me, the way he’s always plotting wacky stuff with Bruce.”

“You knew Mr Olson had his own agenda when you hired him as your PA. Basically, nothing much has changed.”

“Yeah, true.” Tony sighed. “So maybe that was stupid of me. But I mean: sorcery. Norse gods in disguise. Who would have guessed? A least the guy has a pretty great way of sharing information.”

Tony stretched his stiff shoulders and grinned. His whole body felt pleasently sore. "And the chance to work together with him, to fuse science and magic, is worth a lot of risks. Just imagine the possibilities ..."

“As long as you act with a minimum of caution, Sir.”

"Duly noted." Tony looked up towards the ceiling camera and raised his empty glass in a toast. “I may be crazy sometimes, but I’m not naive. Being vulnerable to his brand of weird is not on my agenda. I like the Loptr Olson-personality, I really do, he’s a lot of fun, but all those powers he shows off make me nervous as hell. So let’s find out how they work and come up with some nasty counter measures."

"I'm already working on it, Sir."

"Yeah, that's what I guessed." Tony's grin got predatory. "I have every trust in you. Not to mention my personal Einstein-level brilliance. If Loptr pulls another stunt like the ‘unbreakable vow’ we're gonna kick his princely ass into the next dimension.”
Chapter 6

Tony walked from his workshop towards the common room without taking his eyes from his tablet. He played around with equations, but the math just didn’t work out. The strange energy-particle-mixture Jarvis detected every time the kid drew power out of thin air suggested that magic had a basis in hard physics. Which was good, because in that case Tony could get a grip on it. Theoretically. The calculations necessary still made his brain go “sploing”.

Well, at least he’d come up with a better explanation for Vanishment and Reshaping than ‘because Loptr wanted it to happen’. He was almost sure that they were dealing with an unknown universal force, like gravitation or electromagnetism. Some all-encompassing part of physics that hadn’t been discovered yet. Funny to think that scientists everywhere were tearing their hair out about a unified field theory, when all the time there’d been a fifth element around that nobody even guessed at.

Tony almost ran into a concrete pillar – had that always been there? – and swerved around it at the last second. His feet moved on autopilot while his eyes were glued to the screen.

The freakish part was that the energy / particles Loptr manipulated to get his wishes fulfilled didn’t seem to exist without a magician around. They just blinked into existence whenever the kid needed them. Tony hoped that it didn’t have to do with Prince Loki’s so called divinity. Because he absolutly refused to believe that his PA was a real-life god, no matter what strange stuff he could do with reality.

Besides, there were human mages around, right? Or at least there were mutants who claimed to have magical powers. Until recently Tony had thought they suffered from delusions of grandeur, but well … If a loonie who called himself ‘Chondu the Mystic’ could do it, so could Tony with a bit of tinkering. There had to be a way to copy the stuff Loptr did with the right kind of engineering.

Perhaps being a wizard simply meant that you’d been born with a sixth sense other people lacked. Namely the ability to see or feel that universal force. Just like birds could feel magnetical fields and bees could see ultra-violet light, where humans didn’t notice anything at all. That extra ability made it possible for magicians to use the ISF (Incredible Stark Force … hey, so what? It needed a name.) The point was, to make use of something, you had to know it was there in the first place. And now Tony knew about it, too, so it was just a matter of time before he’d find a way to harness and manipulate that energy himself.

But for all his genius Tony was basically an engineer and ex-weapons designer, not a specialist in weird physics. He growled at the tablet in his hand. The numbers hinted at Schrodinger’s Cat stuff, which always gave him a headache. A force that was there but not there? Particles that could be called into being just by noticing them? That looked suspiciously like quantum. He hated bloody quantum.

The most frustrating part was that he had an expert available but couldn’t use him. Bruce would have been just perfect for a sciency jam session. The guy knew everything about fringe physics, radiation and energy. In fact, Tony suspected that Bruce had stumbled upon the ISF by accident when he’d managed to transform himself into a green giant for the first time. Gaining and shedding about a ton in body mass without side effects certainly looked more like magic than science. In other words, they even had a chance to help Bruce with his anger problem, if Tony worked out the rules of Reshaping.
But thanks to the “unbreakable vow”, he couldn’t even hint at the M-word in front of Bruce. The universe would grow teeth and eat him for a snack. Tony had been known to take crazy risks now and then, but he didn’t cherish the idea of an agonizing death. Perhaps Loptr would lift the spell if he asked prettily enough? Like, bound to the bed with a cherry on top?

Appealing, but no. Loptr was much too paranoid for that. With a frown Tony groped for the door handle. Perhaps he could convince his Princelyness to change the spell just a tiny bit, make an exception for Bruce. The two of them still acted like best buddies forever. (Their current betting game had to do with constructing playing-card towers. The bloody things were everywhere and had reached absurd heights and complexity.) An approach that included Bruce could work. Well, at least if Loptr believed that it had been his own idea ....

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Tony opened the door to the common room and took a look around. His PA did his job like a good little underling and was answering a video call on the tower’s phone system. Bruce had chosen an arm chair that was safely out of view from the screen. He seemed to listen to the call with interest. Now and then he snickered silently into his cup of herbal tea. Tony raised his eyebrows at the picture. He flopped onto a couch and listened in as well. What was his wayward PA up to this time?

His view was a bit hampered by a playing-card version of the Manhattan Municipal Building that sat on the coffee table. Tony craned his neck, took a closer look at his assistant and blinked. Loptr had little resemblance with his usual professional self. What came to mind was ‘brainless bed bunny’: vapid smile, lots of hair gel, a green silk tie that hung loose over strategically opened buttons. His voice sounded a bit higher than usual and had acquired a grating accent.

“Uh, sorry, I didn’t quite get the date. Could you repeat? My mistake, don’t get upset, Sir, I’m doing my best here, honest to God, but ...” Long lashes fluttered over green eyes. And he actually chewed bubble gum while talking with the director of SHIELD. For a Norse god he could do bimbo really well. “Mr. Stark’s organizer is so difficult to handle sometimes, you have no idea. And all day people are like: do this, do that. Sorry, I know, you’re a busy man. No reason to shout, Director. What was the date again?”

Tony grinned from ear to ear. He had to admit that some of his former assistants had been the bedbunny type. Fury could hardly be blamed for buying the show. The kid looked edible in his slightly rumpled suit and acted like a total waste of space.

“Oh, sorry, did I put you in the waiting line there for a sec? Huh, I wondered why I couldn’t see you anymore. The vid phone system has all these buttons. I’ve been asking Mr Stark to get me something simpler, but he’s always so very busy, doing important stuff all the time, someday he’ll end up with job burnout for sure, I told him. Of course he didn’t listen to me, he never does. Hey, perhaps you could try to convi...?” Loptr raised an eyebrow at the screen and tsked. With his usual drawl he said: “It seems that Mr Fury hung up on me. How terribly rude.”

Bruce smiled into his tea cup. Tony just shook his head and laughed. “The guy really bugs you, right? I almost feel sorry for Director Fury, and believe me, that’s a first.”

Loptr sniffed. “That man has insulted me for weeks. His obscenities would call for a duel in more civilized places.” He straightened his tie and closed the shirt buttons. A predatory look flashed over his face. “In fact, the director can count himself lucky that I demand no harsher reparations.”

“Well, I do like the way you handle him”, Tony said. “What do you think, Bruce? Any demands for extra reparations on your part? Is SHIELD still bothering you?”
Bruce shrugged. “No more than usual”, he said in his mild way.

Tony studied him for a moment. In spite of his words he looked exhausted and worried. In fact, he reminded Tony of their first meeting almost a year ago. Back then Bruce had given off the vibes of a man on the run. He’d lost that hunted edge in the following months, but now it was back in full force. The dark smudges under his eyes hinted at restless nights without sleep. Not a good state for the Hulk to be in.

Tony made a snap decision. To hell with caution, he wanted Bruce protected and yeah, he wanted Loptr to help and take that nasty magical muzzle off him. Both aims could probably be achieved in one go … and all it took was a teensy-weensy breach of national security. The information he’d recently dug up should convince even Loptr that it was high time to get Bruce into their brotherhood of wizards. “Really? It’s just that I did a little hacking in SHIELD’s files. And you know what? I didn’t like what I found.”

That got Loptr’s attention alright. “Oh?”, he asked and raised his eyebrows.

“Big surprise, SHIELD doing nasty stuff”, Tony quipped. “It’s not as if I expected anything else. But this one hits too close to home for my taste. Let me show you.” He took up his tablet, which lay on the coffee table next to the 2 yards high tower of cards. The small draft when he moved his hand made the whole building shiver from base to steeple, but it held. Nice bit of engineering.

Tony’s fingers danced across the screen and a shimmering hologram appeared in the air. A detailed construction plan in black-and-white unfolded in all three dimensions until it filled most of the space above the table. Tony spun it around with a flick of his thumb. A list of rare and expensive materials accompanied the design.

“What is that?”, Bruce asked, leaned forward and studied the plan. He bit his lip in an unusual show of nerves.

Tony snorted. “What does it look like? A cage. Made out of a new type of glass fibre and titanium alloy. Strong enough to keep the Hulk imprisoned for as long as they like. SHIELD can ship him around and only let him loose to do their dirty work.”

Loptr stood up from his office chair, took a close look at the display and scowled at it. “Does Fury believe he can snatch Bruce from us without repercussions? The director is overstepping his boundaries.” His voice held princely contempt and a good dose of ‘Smite The Unbelievers’.

Tony grinned. His PA was a possessive bastard. Never take a toy from a God or he’ll kick your ass out of the sandbox.

“Perhaps we should teach Fury a little lesson”, Tony proposed innocently. “You know, some sort of prank. That’s your speciality, isn’t it? If SHIELD actually thinks that they can get away with this shit, they clearly need a warning shot.”

Bruce didn’t look convinced. “I doubt anything could impress Fury enough to get him off my back.”

“Not permanently, no.” Tony shrugged. “But if we make SHIELD more cautious, slow them down for a while, we can come up with better protection in the meantime. Hey, we could form our own superhero team! Kind of like Fury wanted, just without government goons on top. Don’t mess with the Mighty Threesome!”

Loptr rolled his eyes, but a little smile crooked his lips. “It should not prove difficult to impress
“Yeah, not if you decide to get involved and use some of your ... special talents.” Tony earned himself a narrow-eyed look for that remark. Message received. But would Loptr actually go for it and include Bruce in their magic circle? Tony kept his fingers crossed.

Loptr cocked his head, looking thoughtful. “A short while ago Bruce himself came up with a plan that should fit this situation very well. I admit that I would love to see the director and his uncouth mouth put to shame in such a fashion.” He turned towards the scientist with the smile of a fox in the henhouse. “Say, my clever friend, do you still remember your truly beautiful idea about the elevator?”

Bruce snorted. “Yeah, but that was just a bit of brainstorming. A silly revenge fantasy after Fury sent his Russian spy to threaten me. By the way, it wouldn’t work unless Fury barges into Stark Tower and uses one of the elevators here. We can’t pull that idea off at SHIELD headquarters. It’s just not possible.”

“Oh, I think I could make it work”, Loptr purred. “As Stark said, I’ve got certain talents.”

Yes!, Tony thought and said: “Elevator? What elevator? Bruce, I’m wounded that you plan stuff like that without me. We can’t be a superhero team without a bit of team spirit. Here’s rule No 1: no scheming against Fury, unless I’m part of it. Explain to me why we can’t use the elevators at SHIELD for yeah, whatever.”

Bruce gave him a bemused look, but he let himself be steamrolled (like people usually did when Tony started talking). Carefully he explained: “We can’t use a SHIELD elevator because we have no way to get the helium inside. At least, not without anybody noticing. And if you call us the Mighty Threesome in front of Miss Potts, I’m out.”

“Helium, really?” Tony raised his eyebrows. “Sounds like fun. Tell me more.”

Rumours were that Director Fury lived in his office. According to the junior agents he never left the depths of the base unless there was a national emergency, e.g. rains of radioactive cows. Which was stupid. Of course he had a place aboveground, even if he didn’t use it all that often. After a shitty day like this, with fuckloads of bureaucratic crap, he couldn’t wait to get out.

He stabbed the elevator button repeatedly and with a lot of force. Punching the clueless punk who answered Tony Stark’s video calls would have felt even better. He didn’t have patience for morons and bimbos. Hell, couldn’t Stark keep it in his pants at least during office hours? If he had to deal with Pretty Boy just one more time he would send Coulson over to strangle the little fucker.

The elevator door opened and most of the agents inside scattered as soon as they saw him. Fury smiled grimly under his eyepatch. He’d never be chosen for boss of the year, but that was okay. In his opinion, a dose of healthy fear was the best way to boost work efficiency.

A single one of the agents approached him, looking nervous and fumbling around with his tie. “Excuse me, Director”, he said and cleared his throat.

“Yeah?” Fury rammed his boot into the closing elevator door to keep it in place.
“My team is still waiting for your decision on ‘project greenbox’, Sir.” The agent swallowed as he saw Fury’s darkening looks. “I’m aware that the first tests didn’t turn out the way we hoped, but this time our experts in materials analysis are confident that …”

Fury growled. “I don’t pay you lot to be ‘confident’. I want you to be fucking sure! How hard can it be to build a simple cage? Stop guessing around, agent Snyder, and give me results, not scientific mumbo-jumbo. You’re wasting my bloody time!” His voice had got louder all the time and he could probably be heard on the next three floors.

“Yes, Sir. Understood, Sir.” The man managed a shaky salute and marched off in a hurry.

Fury took his foot out of the sliding door and entered the cabin. Fuck, he was surrounded by morons.

One good thing about his reputation was that he always had the elevators for himself. The door closed and the cabin started to rise. He could feel the slight pressure of the upwards movement. The muscles in his neck were stiff as hell from his deskjob. He rolled his head to loosen the tendons and noticed something moving out of the corner of his eye. Fury whirled around. There was a strange kind of … heat flicker close to the ceiling. Like layers of air swirling over the Mojave Desert. What the fuck?

He hated weird phenomena. They always meant trouble.

Fury moved back against the wall, drew his weapon and hit the button for the next floor. The damned tech didn’t react. The cabin showed no sign of stopping, but the sound of the machinery changed slightly. Fury counted the seconds and the ‘whoosh’ of building levels. Yeah, he’d guessed right: The elevator had slowed down and was moving at a snail’s pace now. A full minute went by and nothing happened. He stayed tense and waited for the other shoe to drop.

The strange blur effect in the air vanished, but that didn’t make him any happier. The elevator needed 3.51 minutes to reach the main level of the base. At last the door opened and Fury stepped out. Everything seemed normal.

Fury scowled. It was just one of those days. Best to tell Coulson about the fluke, so he’d check it out with his usual efficiency. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and barked: “Agent Coulson!”

His voice didn’t come out as expected. The deep, imposing bass notes that made everyone stand at attention were gone. Now he sounded like a smurf. Squeaky and high-pitched. Like a fucking kindergartener on drugs. The agents in the hall turned around and stared. The whole level went quiet.

“Don’t you lot have work to do?!”, Fury growled. Or squawked.

“I believe you called, Sir?”, Coulson said behind him. He sounded deadpan as ever, the bloody over-achiever. But when Fury turned around, even his most unflappable agent fought a smile.

Fury threw him a murderous look and whisper-squeaked: “What the fuck is going on?”

“I don’t know, Sir. Not yet. But at first guess I’d say that you’ve been dosed with a non-lethal quantity of helium.”

Fury nodded sharply. He resisted the urge to bark out another question and fumed instead.

“Perhaps this will clarify matters?” Coulson picked a sheet of paper from the back of Fury’s leather coat. Someone must have pinned it there while he’d been stuck in the elevator, which seemed
impossible.

In a fancy computer font it said: ‘Hey, message to top dog. Leave Bruce alone, or it’s the Cone of Shame for you next.’ Fury stared at it blankly.

“I believe that’s a Disney referance”, Coulson said. His lips twitched. “From the movie ‘Up’. – I’ve got nephews”.

Fury managed to growl even in high pitch. “Tony fucking Stark”, he chirped. “I just bloody know it. He’s the only one who’d attack SHIELD like some oversmart five-year-old. How did he find out about our fallback plan for the Hulk? His blasted AI must have hacked us. I’m going to gut that smug little prick.”

And yeah, if the voice effect didn’t wear off soon, he’d do it with a dull spork.

“Well, Sir, perhaps you should wait just a little bit. At least until we know how Stark broke through our security … again”, Coulson said.

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“I bet he doesn’t look for maaaagic”, Tony said (and yes, there was a certain level of smugness involved). He sipped his celebratory drink and grinned at his two partners in crime, who shared the couch in a bro way.

Bruce snorted. “Well, I certainly didn’t in all those weeks. Not even after I got a breakfast egg with a live chick inside. Almost gave me a heart attack when a chirping featherball flapped into my face.” He raised his eyebrows at Loptr, who shrugged with his trademark smirk.

Tony took another sip of his Cosmopolitan and enjoyed the banter. Who would have guessed that group work could be such fun? He’d never been a team player before, but perhaps he’d simply lacked the right people to team up with. Their shared expertise had made it deliciously easy to pull one over on SHIELD.

Bruce had calculated the oxygen-helium balance, Tony had done the hacking, and Loptr had used a technique called Scrying to mind-walk along the data paths. Piggybacking on Jarvis, he could slip through SHIELD security, watch Fury and teleport the gas right into his elevator. A perfect fusion of magic and tech. They’d worked in beautiful, beautiful scientific harmony and the result had surpassed Tony’s sweetest dreams.

Tony closed his eyes and envisioned a wonderful future. Who knew what else their team could come up with?

The three of them were totally made for each other.
“Have you seen Loptr lately?”, Bruce asked. He leaned half in and half out of the door to Tony’s workshop, as if he didn’t quite dare to cross the threshold and invite himself. So typically Bruce.

Tony passed Dummy a screwdriver, shrugged and adjusted a cable on his Mark VII armor. Since the new, exciting discovery of magic he’d neglected the rest of his work, like the suits and SI stuff. He had a lot to catch up on and no idea what his assistant was doing in the meantime. Could be about anything.

Bruce took a step further in. “It’s just that we talked about going sightseeing, now that I can leave the tower without stumbling over SHIELD agents. I wanted to show him the New York Hall of Science. Thought he might like that.” He adjusted his glasses. “We already had a bet going about the winner at Rocket Park Mini Golf. He’s never played before.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “You know that Loptr can do telekinesis, right? You have no hope of scoring at that one, buddy.”

“Sure, but it’s always fun to see him cheat in creative ways. Just think of what he might do with a golf ball.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, I’m almost tempted to join in. But sorry, right now I’m up to my chin in work. No idea where Loptr could be. Have you tried the landing pad? He likes to hang out there.”

“I know, that’s about the first place I looked. Perhaps he’s gone out on his own. No reason why he shouldn’t take a stroll around the city without me … It’s just that I haven’t seen him for three days.”

Tony looked up from his cables and frowned. “Really? That’s unusual. Jarvis, could you locate Loptr for me?”

“Of course, Sir. I’m checking the security system of the tower … no result … extending the search to all of New York city …” Jarvis fell silent for about two minutes, which was a crazily long time for him to complete a task. “I’m sorry, but Mr. Olson doesn’t appear on any of the digital images I have access to.”

“He doesn’t?” Tony raised his eyebrows. A complete search by Jarvis meant not only the information of every traffic and security camera in town, he could also hack all the StarkPhones currently in use and look for relevant data. Okay, that wasn’t exactly legal, but extremely helpful. “What’s the last location he was spotted at?”

“Central Park, shortly before closing time, on Friday night. He went into the park but apparently didn’t come out. There has been no sign of him anywhere in New York for 59 hours.”

“Shit.” That didn’t sound good at all. Tony and Bruce exchanged a worried look. “Start searching the rest of the US and give me regular updates. Honestly, I don’t know what freaks me out more: the thought that something happened to him or that he happened to someone out there.”
Tony got his answer the next day, just when he took a restorative drink out of his cabinet. He turned around with a full glass and Phil Coulson stood in the middle of his private suite, cool as a cucumber.

“Ha, snooping agent on the loose! Full alert, Jarvis. Shoot at will.”

Coulson looked at him mildly. “I’ve daringly used your elevator, Stark. Trust me, I won’t be put off by a harmless threat of gunfire.”

Well, that was more humour than Tony expected from SHIELD. Tony raised his glass in a silent toast. “What do you want?”

“Haven’t you wondered where your PA has vanished to?”, Coulson asked with that smiling poker face of his.

Tony narrowed his eyes. If SHIELD had something to do with Loptr’s disappearance, he’d take their whole organisation down and shred it. “Mr. Olson is an employee, not my slave. He’s entitled to some free time now and then. Why, did something happen that you want to inform me about?”

“Actually, yes. Just in case you’re interested, I have a video file here.” He held out a data stick.

Tony took it gingerly, as if it might bite him. He loaded the vid up and put it onto the huge screen opposite the bar that he mostly used for porn.

The recording showed a lab with heaps of really nice equipment. It was almost deserted, which wasn’t surprising, as the file was time-stamped 3:18 a.m. Most of the computer stuff on view was turned off and the room was dark, apart from an eerie blue light that shone off a cube in a metal device. No scientists around, just three bored-looking guards.

And suddenly a fourth figure appeared, stepping out of thin air. Loptr’s entrance looked like a special effect. Tony had seen his PA in battle-mage armor once before (an image he wouldn’t soon forget) but he almost didn’t recognize him anyway. The kid was an apparition in leather and silk, long hair whipping around in a ghostly wind, a cloak swirling behind him like ravens’ wings. There was an unholy fire in his eyes and his mouth was twisted into a cold smile. For the first time since Tony had known Loptr, he looked truly alien. Larger than life and impossibly beautiful, like a dark god of legend. It took Tony’s breath away and his heart beat faster in atavistic fear. His former assistant looked gorgeous in a terrifying way.

The guards didn’t have the flicker of a chance. When Loptr attacked, his movements were impossibly fast. His weapon of choice was a glowing staff with a razor sharp bayonet. He mowed the men down with blood chilling ease. Magic flared up, blood splattered the walls. Five seconds tops and everything was over. And then the bastard lifted his eyes to the nearest camera to give a wink and a wave.

His eyes seemed to bore directly into Tony’s. The cocky little smile was all too familiar. For a fleeting moment his PA almost looked like himself again. Playing games as always.

A second later Loptr turned around and stepped up to the cube. The blue light painted strange patterns on his face. He cocked his head and stared at it, seeming to hesitate. Then he curled his hand around his prize and ripped it out the machinery. With an elegant wave of his staff he opened a doorway into nothingness and vanished.

The recording stopped.

“Well, damn”, Tony said.
Coulson studied him. “You don’t look very surprised, Mr. Stark.”

“About my PA going rogue? Not surprised, just … disappointed.” He made a face and downed his drink. Why had he gotten his hopes up about Loptr's motives? He’d known from the start that his new PA was anything but trustworthy. Perhaps he’d hoped that the God of Trickery would put his plans aside for the sake of l…lust. But obviously that had been too much to ask for.

Perhaps the God of Mischief had become fond of him, but that hadn't stopped him from following his own agenda. Really, Tony should have expected it to end this way. “Story of my life. Getting betrayed by people close to me has become something of a habit lately.”

Huh, that had come out more bitter than he’d intended.

But the last two years had been hellish and he was dead tired of being used as a pawn. Dear uncle Obie had tried to murder him for business reasons and then there’d been SHIELD lackey ‘Natalie Rushman’. Loptr was the third person in a row who'd played friendly just to use him. And people wondered why he had trust issues.

The fact that Loptr had wormed his way into Tony’s life to get at Fury and steal one of his tech toys added insult to injury.

In hindsight the plot seemed obvious. Loptr had even told him about it, more or less. He’d come right out and asked Tony for a way to spy on headquarters, the bastard. The whole elevator scheme had been nothing but a method to plan his heist. Tony had handed him the opportunity on a silver platter. Scrying. Hah. Loptr had used him as his personal hacker and Jarvis as a high powered break-in tool.

It had seemed like a bit of harmless fun when Tony had maneuvered his way through firewalls and laid the data paths that Loptr needed. Now he started to wonder how long his PA had subtly manipulated him in that direction. Was all of the animosity Tony felt against SHIELD truly his own? Sure, he’d never liked the agency much, but would he have gone on the offensive and pissed Fury off without Loptr’s prodding? Probably not.

What had Loptr said some weeks ago? ‘Alliances can change.’ Yeah, no shit. The son of a bitch had planned his betrayal even then.

His thoughts must have shown on his face because Coulson watched him with interest. Damn. Showing his insecurities was not a good idea. He didn’t want to leave himself open while being interrogated – no matter how subtly and politely – by a SHIELD agent.

Coulson pointed towards the bourbon. “A 1989 Heavenhill? Hard to acquire.”

“You want one?”

“Please.”

Tony filled up a second glass and slid it over the counter. Playing host relaxed him and eased the atmosphere. Which was probably the reason why Coulson had asked for a drink in the first place. The agent took a sip and said conversationally: “Are you telling me, Mr Stark, that you had no idea what your PA was up to? I find that hard to believe.”

Tony snorted. “Well, I had no idea what Rushman was up to, either. Screwing me over is drop-dead easy, apparently. Give your pretty little mole my greetings by the way.”

Coulson ignored the dig against Romanova and just went on: “We would like to believe that you
aren’t involved … in fact, we find it likely. Stealing technology is not your style, Mr Stark. But perhaps you can see our problem here. Just a few days ago you used your hacking skills to threaten the director, and now your PA teleports into a high security lab and walks off with something that could easily become a weapon of mass destruction. It’s difficult not to see a link there.”

Tony pressed his lips together. “A weapon, huh?”

Of all the possible reasons for Loptr to hang around, it came down to the same shit as always. So much for Jarvis’ optimism.

“If the cube falls into the wrong hands, the destruction could be enormous”, Coulson said.

Tony sighed. He doubted that Loptr would go for mass slaughter – too crude for the finicky trickster – but he could be wrong. No way to know until it actually happened. Anyway, Loptr’s motives didn’t matter anymore. The kid had made his choice. He’d flipped Bruce and Tony the bird and scammed. Playtime was over.

“Okay, Coulson, you have my cooperation. I’m even ready to listen to Fury’s spiel about a super hero team.” He rubbed his temples. “Let’s hope we won’t need that to fight my wayward employee, because I honestly don’t know who would come out on top. If the kid really went over to the dark side, all bets are off. Perhaps we’re lucky and he simply made a run for it.”

Coulson raised his eyebrows. “It seems you’ve withheld quite a lot of vital information, Mr Stark.”

Tony grimaced. “Look, there’s stuff I can’t talk about. I mean, I literally can’t” He waited until Coulson narrowed his eyes thoughtfully and nodded. Message received. “Okay, here’s the deal. I’ll help as much as I can, but you’ll have to trust me and Bruce to do the right thing, because we won’t discuss any of the details. We’ve been looking into the … Loptr phenomenon for a while now and have come up with ideas about countermeasures. But we’ll need time for research and testing. And yeah, a bit more intel would be helpful. Starting with that thing my PA stole. What exactly can he do with a glowing blue dice?”

“It’s called the Tesseract. I’ve already put all information available on the data stick.”

“You’ve already …” Tony blinked. “What about the cloak and dagger stuff you usually go for? You’d planned to hand me that info all along?”

Coulson shrugged. “Otherwise you would just hack our files to find out what you need, and we can’t afford those games right now. Time is of the essence. I’ll see to it that you and Dr Banner are left alone so you can concentrate on your work. Report to me whenever you can.”

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The next weeks were a time of intense work. Bruce and Tony tackled the theory of magic with grim determination. They didn’t talk about Loptr, at least if they could avoid it. After watching the SHIELD vid of the theft and slaughter, Bruce tended to get green around the edges whenever the topic came up.

In addition to their research, Tony took part in some so-called ‘Avengers missions’. They were mostly a team building exercise with easy targets. Taking down a dude who shot living squid at them wasn’t exactly a challenge.

Loptr had made him see the advantages of group work just in time to become the main target. Kind of ironic. Even if Tony’s new team left a lot to be desired.
He could work with Clint Barton well enough. The archer acted like a professional and had a quirky sense of humour that Tony appreciated. Romanova and Rogers were a different story. He wouldn’t trust the Russian as far as he could throw her. With his suit on. And no, he wouldn’t let some pumped-up soldier on steroids order him around.

Besides, the team could need a Hulk or two in his opinion. Calling them a group of super heroes was just laughable. He was used to working with a sorcerer who had more power in his fingertips than Rogers in his whole oversized body. Add a circus performer who could shoot arrows really well and a spy with the skills of a pole dancer. If that was the best SHIELD could come up with, they were screwed.

Perhaps Fury should recruit the guys they were currently fighting. They sure gave his SHIELD lackeys a run for their money.

Tony studied the chaotic scene from a roof top and twiddled his thumbs, because he’d been put on the bench for this mission. The Chinese mafia had gotten their hands on a weapon that could reduce metal to slush in seconds. They’d liquefied bank vaults, money transporters and high security prisons. Now they were blackmailing the government of Michigan and threatened to make the Mackinac bridge collapse at rush hour. SHIELD had discovered their hideout in a closed-down market hall next to a church square (very quaint) and sent the team over.

Rogers had ordered him to stay out of it. The iron man suit was a liability, he’d said.

Well, vibranium was a type of metal, too. Tony didn’t quite see why Rogers was allowed to leave his shield behind and still fight, while the only true superhero of the team had to stay on the sidelines. He could have flown rings around the mafia guys. The weapon couldn’t touch his armor if he was too fast for the enemy to aim. But who was he to question the wisdom of Captain America? Let the three of them get wiped for all he cared.

“Hey, Jarv, any strategical input?”, Tony asked.

“All of the Avengers are holding their own quite well”, Jarvis answered. “Mr Rogers and Barton are deliberately drawing enemy fire while Miss Romanova has successfully infiltrated the building and is searching for the weapon. Their team coordination and level of competence are truly admirable.”

Yeah, not what Tony wanted to hear. Sometime his AI could be a contrary bitch.

But he had to admit that Rogers was formidable even without the shield. His bulging muscles didn’t make him slow or clumsy like they should have. He zigzagged towards the building with light steps and incredible reflexes. Around him streetlamps liquefied and crashed down like toppled trees. A maintenance scaffold five storeys high toppled over. He avoided the obstacles easily, just like the gun fire from the bad guys. The sculptured body under the costume brought Olympic athletes to mind. An impressive sight, Tony had to admit. Yummy.

He drifted into a daydream about pouring melted chocolate all over those abs, when the impossible happened.

The church tower in the middle of the square started to crumble from the top up. Copper plates melted and masonry tumbled down. Rogers looked up just in time to avoid being impaled by the weathercock’s pole. He jumped to the side, just to be hit by a spray of machine gun fire. Red exploded over his chest. He went down.

“Fuck!”, Tony hissed over the comm. “Rogers, I’m gonna engage right now.”
“I’ll heal. Stay where you are”, his team leader ordered. He dragged himself behind a street tree and got pelted by bullets all the way.

“The hell I will!”, Tony snarled and jumped off the roof. He zoomed towards the enemy building, throwing in some loops and twirls to make it harder for the mystery weapon to pick him off. Explosive arrows shattered the windows in front of him, probably because Barton tried to cover him while he covered Rogers.

Just when he readied the repulsors to smash through some walls, Romanova’s voice sounded over the comm. “Cease fire. We’re coming out.”

“We?”, Tony mumbled. “Who’s we?”

He’d give the spy ten seconds to do her thing, then he’d proceed with his own battle plan. Six … seven … eight …

Romanova sprinted out of the building with a girl that looked like a porcelain doll gone goth. The clothes were all black, the face powdered white, and she had a Chinese hairdo held up with those chopstick things. The hair had been dyed a riot of colours. Electric blue clashed with jade green and punky pink. Well, there was a look you didn’t see every day.

The two women had hardly reached the street when the whole mafia lair behind them went up in a series of explosions. Tony acted almost without thinking, knocked china girl over and shielded her with his body. He knelted over her, the proverbial knight in shining armor, and felt quite pleased with himself and the situation. She looked up at him with big almond eyes. A piercing jewel formed like a cobra sat between her eyebrows.

The intimate moment ended when Romanova kicked him in the chin. “Don’t act like an idiot. We are well out of the blast range”, she said.

Tony shrugged, lifted his visor and winked at the girl. “Hi there”, he said. She broke into a radiant smile. Her eye teeth were filed to sharp points.

Romanova snorted. “Don’t encourage her. She’s a fan.”

“Really? Well, she’s got taste.” He sent the girl a flirty look. Wouldn’t do to neglect his reputation. “What’s your name, Lady in Black?”

She giggled and breathed: “Chuntao. Can I get an autograph?”

“Sure. Where do you want it? The calf has always been a favourite spot of mine.”

“Cut it out, Stark. She’s underage”, Romanova the spoilsport chimed in.

When a Russian assassin looked daggers at you, it was time to back off, Tony decided. He hadn’t even been serious. Flirting with attractive people just happened by rote.

To be honest, he hadn’t tried to get laid for several weeks now. Which was a depressing thought. It was all Loptr’s fault, of course. In comparison to a kinky God his usual bed mates just looked a bit mundane. That even covered goth girls with promising piercings. He put on his most charming smile. “Well, call me on your eighteenth birthday, then”, he said to the teenager.

“Definitely, Mr Stark.” She fluttered her eyelashes and gave him a pointy-toothed grin as he stood up.
Romanova snorted. “The only reason you’re not covered in dripping metal goo right now is that Chuntao’s got a crush on you. She is the weapon we were after.”

“The triads bought her as a child because of her abilities”, Tony ended the story of his latest Avengers adventure. “But she defected when she saw me join the fight.”

“So you won because a deadly weapon fangirled on you?” Bruce peered at him from across his equations. “You’re probably the only superhero who can claim that”, he said with a headshake and a lopsided smile.

“I’m just that awesome”, Tony agreed.

“No doubt.”

“Brain and good looks, a foolproof combination.”

“Well, did your superbrain come up with a solution for computerized rune casting by now? Or are you still stuck?” Bruce raised a challenging eyebrow. “As I recall you promised to deliver by the end of the week.”

“Oh, that’s what I came to talk with you about”, Tony said.

“So, still stuck.”

Tony grinned. It was always fun to surprise Bruce, especially as it happened so rarely. Often enough the good doctor was two steps ahead of him. He could do things with science that even Tony struggled to keep up with. “On the contrary. I’ve had an idea. An epiphany, you might say.”

“Oh, really?” Bruce leaned back on his office chair.

“Perhaps we’ve been tackling the problem from the wrong angle all along. We’ve been trying to find out how magic works and duplicate it, right?”

“Yes …?”

“But to be realistic, we haven’t come very far. We know a little more about runes, ISF-particles and Tesseract energy, but so what? I mean, sure, that’s all very fascinating and exciting and I’d love to unravel the secrets of the universe with you. Sadly we don’t have the time. We’re still waiting for the other shoe to drop. If he-who-shan’t-be-named reappears and tries to pull another stunt, we have to be ready to stop him.”

“I know all that”, Bruce said with a little frown.

His science buddy was more prickly than usual lately. Before Bruce could fixate on the Loptr part and turn greenish, Tony came to the point. “What I’m saying is: We don’t have to actually understand how magic is performed. Not in detail. We just need a way to switch it off.”

“Oh”, Bruce said and his face cleared. “That should be a lot easier.”

“Exactly. It’s like the difference between building a quantum computer and going at it with a sledgehammer. You don’t have to understand a system to pull the plug. Even an idiot who wouldn’t know the front end of a laser printer can make it go ‘sploing’ by ripping out the cables. Creating stuff is difficult, destroying is easy. I should know.”
Bruce drummed his fingers on a chunk of papers that covered his lab desk (yeah, the guy had lived in Stark Tower for months and still used paper). Most of the sheets were covered in numbers and symbols that were above Tony’s level of expertise. “Do you have a specific idea how to ‘pull the plug’ on a magician?”

“Not yet. I’ve hoped for input from you, actually.”

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment. Let me think about it.” Bruce took the glasses off, rubbed the bridge of his nose and stared at the wall.

Tony tried not to interrupt, even if it was hard. He’d never been good at waiting, but you couldn’t expect instant enlightenment. After a while he started to doodle flying cars on Bruce’s science papers.

Just when he’d finished a topless helicopter Ferrari, Bruce came out of his trance. “Hm, perhaps I’ve got something. I’ll run it by you and see what you say. Magic relies on an effect similar to quantum waves, right? You’ve confirmed that by testing … strange stuff with your PA. In ways I really don’t want to talk about.”

Tony zipped his lips. “So not talking.”

“Anyway, SHIELD got similar results with the Tesseract. Quantum wave formations. So, my idea is this: What if we try to use the interference effect? Jarvis has recorded enough of Loptr’s tricks to detect magic the moment it occurs. We could measure the energy waves and simply flatten them into non-existence.”

Tony’s eyebrows went up to his hairline. “You mean like those noise-cancelling headphones?”

“Exactly. Noises can be turned into silence by sending out the opposing wavelengths. The sound simply vanishes. We can use the same general idea. If Jarvis can measure magic – the stuff you’ve dubbed ISF energy –, that means he can also control a machine to suppress it in-progress.”

Tony started to grin. “A magic interferometer. I always knew you were a genius. Let’s try it. I really want to see the face of my former PA when he wiggles his fingers and nothing happens.”

Of course it wasn’t quite so easy. Things never were.

Five days later Loptr made his grand entrance onto the world scene and Tony and Bruce weren’t anywhere near ready. SHIELD had traced his whereabouts in Cairo and sent the Avengers over to nail him down.

Fury’s minions used a quinjet, while Tony flew on his own. He loved the feeling of soaring across the sky, even if there wasn’t much to see, just miles and miles of endless ocean. A clear blue sky spread out in front of him, speckled with cotton wool clouds. Now and then a cargo ship appeared in the vastness and sailed its lonely way across the sea.

He could use the downtime before meeting Loptr again. The upcoming confrontation stirred up all kind of feelings, most of them contradictory. He was angry as hell, that hadn’t changed, but he also couldn’t stop missing the good times. Lopt had been fun. They were so alike in many ways. For a short time they’d just clicked. Or perhaps that had been nothing but a clever illusion.

“You know, J., I could almost admire the way he screwed me over. It’s not like he pretended to be anything but a cheat. That’s the way we started out. We played those games right from the
beginning, and it would be a bit hypocritical to complain now, just because he won the final round.” Tony put on more speed to work some of his nervous energy off. He swerved around a flock of birds and started playing tack with the clouds, zigzagging around them in random patterns.

“Hey”, Hawkey complained from the quinjet. “Could you not do that? Seriously, you got a bee in your bum, or what? If you make me crash the jet just because you can’t fly straight, I’m gonna haunt you from my watery grave.”

Tony didn’t answer, but stopped fooling around. He returned to his conversation with Jarvis just where he’d left off. “The thing is, I always knew that Loptr had his own agenda. That was part of the attraction. To outsmart each other. Which means I can’t really blame him for taking our games and gambles up another level. Okay, so the kid used me to steal the Tesseract. Bully for him. Perhaps he sees the heist in SHIELD headquarters as just another win in our competition. Something we’ll laugh about later.”

“That’s a way to look at it, Sir.”

“You don’t agree?”

“I think that killing three people in cold blood is a bit more than a prank.”

“Point”, Tony said. Sometime he was glad that he had Jarvis to remind him of little facts like that. Because he’d more or less forgotten about the guards.

He didn’t like the callous part of himself that shrugged off the death of several SHIELD agents like they meant nothing. It reminded him uncomfortably of Obie, who had been his mentor in the weapon’s business for years and encouraged those darker impulses. Tony had been raised to be a killer by proxy, and sometimes it showed, even after Afghanistan. One thing was for sure: He never wanted to become a soulless bastard like his uncle.

Tony wondered where Loptr had learned to see people as pawns. And if that world view could be shaken up. It had certainly worked with him. Nowadays Tony did his best to care, because hubris never led anywhere good. But it had needed a car battery in his chest and someone like Yinsen to make him see the light. And he didn’t wish a wake-up call like that on anyone, not even his backstabbing, double crossing, bitchy douche of a PA.

Yeah, still angry as fuck.

He got roused out of his thoughts by Jarvis, just as the coast of Egypt became visible in the far distance. “Sir, there’s a live broadcast on all main media that you should probably see.”

“Let me guess ... Mr Olson has made an appearance?” It had only been a matter of time. Someone like Loptr couldn’t stay inconspicuous for long. “What scam did he pull off this time? Hit me with it, J.”

His visor lit up and gave him a perfect view of the scene. In front of the pyramids of Giza, on top of the fucking sphinx stood his employee in all his otherworldly glory: dramatic cape, battle armor, sceptre staff and a horned helmet that would have made the Egyptian pantheon envious.

“Seriously?”, Tony murmured. “He’s going for the ancient God look? I just knew I shouldn’t have watched that X-man movie with him. Or Stargate. Or the Mummy. Hey, didn’t the Egyptians have a goddess that looked like a cow? I mean, those horns are a bit … Do you think Loptr would mind if I called him ‘cowgirl’ from now on?”

“Actually, yes”, Jarvis said drily.
What’s he doing now? – Whoa, that’s creepy.”

Hundreds of people had amassed at the feet of the sphinx. Probably a mix of locals and the tourist hordes who’d been waiting for the famous sound and light show. Then Loptr shouted something, raised his staff, and the whole crowd dropped to their knees in unison. They looked like puppets with their strings torn.

The camera zoomed nearer and sound cut in. Loptr talked about glory, fate and conquering the planet.

“… truth of humanity that you crave subjugation. You were made to be ruled. In the end, you will always kneel”, he intoned. (Tony had some really inappropriate thoughts at that image. Because, let’s face it, he’d liked the kneeling part of their arrangement.)

But when Loptr went on and on, Tony started to frown. Jeez, who wrote that script? Loptr had always been good at composing PR-speeches, that had been part of his job as Tony’s assistant. Now he sounded like a cheesy villain. Or a megalomaniac on drugs.

“Hey, Stark, do you see what we see?”, Barton asked through the com. “It’s all over the net already. Looks to me like your secretary is aiming for a promotion.”

“And he's armed with a weapon that has the same unearthly glow as the Tesseract”, Rogers stated. “Which makes him a supervillain in my book. I've defended humanity against a similar nightmare before I drowned in the arctic. I really don’t understand how you could work with a man like that, Stark.”

Tony rolled his eyes. He was seriously fed up with Captain America getting judgemental on him. Flipping him the bird would have unbalanced his flight, unfortunately. “Don’t get your star-spangled boxers in a twist. I know Loptr. He doesn’t want to rule the world.”

“Yeah, right”, Barton fired back. “Deep down he’s a real fluffy honey bunny. Spoken like a man in lust. Don’t be a romantic idiot, Stark. You think you dig the guy because the two of you fucked?”

He heard a muffled sound in the background. Hopefully Captain America fainting from shock. Hot gay sex probably hadn’t been a thing in the Fifties. How did Barton know about his love life anyway? Damn secret agents.

“Actually I ‘dig’ him because he used to kick my ass in World of Warcraft. You should try that for profiling at SHIELD”, Tony said. “My PA may be a sly, cocksure, over-ambitious son of a bitch who loves to thwart his enemies, but actual ruling? No way. Being the responsible leader just bores him to tears. Trust me on that one. Olson is a real pain to fight against and brilliant at tactics, but he so doesn’t want to be in charge of a whole planet.”

That answer actually gave Barton pause. He hummed in thought. “Ookay, let’s pretend you’re right. You got a clever explanation for what he’s doing in front of the pyramids right now?”

“Yeah. He’s putting on a show. Don’t ask me why, I haven’t the slightest. But seriously, that performance is so over the top even I would be embarrassed. And I’ve done stage appearances with glitter and dancing girls. I know posturing when I see it.”

For the first time Romanova took part in the conversation. “It could be a trap to lure us near. He must know we are coming”, she suggested.

Tony still didn’t like her, but he’d learned to trust her instincts. It had saved his hide a couple of times. “True. Perhaps we should split up. – I call dips on going in first. Mr. Olson and I have a few
things to discuss and I doubt he’ll kill me on sight. If no trap happens, you three can join in.”

“Agreed”, Rogers said. Which made it the official Avengers course of action.

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It had sounded like a good plan.

What they didn’t count on, when they arrived at Giza, was the blond giant who dropped out of the sky with a frigging *hammer*.

A maelstrom of black clouds surrounded the apparition. Thunder roared. Lightning crackled down onto the pyramids. It looked like the apocalypse. Before their eyes, Blondie grabbed Loptr by the scruff of the neck like a naughty kitten and snatched him away.

Of course, Tony gave chase.

There was a scuffle and some flattened palm trees. Tony wasn’t sure why he fought with such vehemence, but well … jealousy was a good option. The snatching part had looked disturbingly intimate. Like a lovers’ spat. Sparks had (literally) flown.

Of course, by the time Thor stopped bellowing insults and introduced himself, Loptr had taken to his heels and was long gone.

Well, with any luck the trickster would stay away and out of trouble. At least for a while.

But Tony really didn’t count on it.

Chapter End Notes

… to continue my recs collection, here’s my personal Top10 list of crossover stories:

Astolat: "Old Country" (HP / Supernatural) & "Looking Glass Country" (Smallville / DC Comics); posted at AO3

Goddamnhella: “Winterheart” (Avengers / Beauty and the Beast); AO3

Tasha: "Cat’s Eyes" (Highlander / Stargate);
http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/~tasha27/Tashas_fic/Sg-1/cats_eye.html

Wombat: "Rapture" (Highlander / X-Files);

Te: "High Corn Drifter" (BTVS / Smallville); http://teland.com/corn.html

Icarus: "Collisions" (Supernatural / Stargate Atlantis);
https://www.fanfiction.net/s/6018114/1/Collisions

Rageprufrog: "Summer House" (Stargate Atlantis / Eureka); AO3

Marinarusalka: "Sword and Serpent - Series" (Hercules / Xena); A03

MilkshakeB: "Nativity" (Brimstone / Dogma); AO3
Vathara: "Upon a Fiery Steed" (Stargate / Gundam Wing); https://www.fanfiction.net/s/1792282/1 & "Spin Cycle" (Stargate / Rurouni Kenshin); https://www.fanfiction.net/s/1941214/1/
Hippiesque group living was a new experience for Tony. He wasn’t quite sure what he thought of the sudden influx of people who shared his home. Sometimes it was nice to have someone to talk to at every hour of the day. Sometimes it made the tower feel cramped and claustrophobic. Which was kind of ridiculous, because he still had 10,000 square feet of penthouse space for himself.

Well, he only had himself to blame for the sudden invasion. That’s what happened when you tackled SHIELD without a plan. The whole thing had gone like this: Fury had offered Thor to move into the agency’s headquarters during the hunt for his brother. Tony had objected strongly and loudly. SHIELD had more than enough leverage in his opinion, especially regarding the Avengers. The team had been hand-picked by the director and Tony was the only one who worked independently and didn’t live in Fury’s pocket. And now the director wanted to get his claws into Thor as well? No way.

He hadn’t expected Fury to turn around and say: “If that bothers you so fucking much, Stark, why don’t you take the lot of them in? I’ve got enough headaches already. Rumour has it your house is big enough.” Coulson had stood in the background and smiled serenely.

Now Tony had a supersoldier doing scrambled eggs in his kitchen and a paranoid archer crawling through his air vents. His life had reached a new level of weird.

The scene in front of him was a perfect example. Tony stepped into the common room on the way to the coffee machine and raised his eyebrows. At his bar counter sat a God of Thunder and an annoying SHIELD agent, doing a board game. The playing pieces looked like little Viking warriors.

Well, Coulson’s presence wasn’t that much of a surprise. Somehow the guy had ended up as their ‘handler’.

Tony didn’t like being handled.

“Hi there, SuperNanny”, he said.

“Tony”, the agent greeted back.

Coulson insisted on everyone using first names as ‘a courtesy gesture to our new friend Thor and his cultural background’. Tony was pretty sure that it was actually part of a secret teambuilding campaign.

“Thor is teaching me how to play Hnefatafl. Perhaps you would like to join in?” Coulson made the invitation sound like a polite kind of order.

“It is indeed a glorious pastime, full of war spirit and cunning!”, Thor exclaimed and beamed at him.

Tony hadn’t done a board game since the age of six. What was the fun of moving wooden pieces around? A real game needed explosions and high speed car chases in his opinion. But he found himself sitting down next to the blond giant anyway, because you just couldn’t resist Thor’s enthusiasm.
Thor had that effect on everyone. You were drawn into his orbit no matter what. The God was like a force of nature … much like his brother, just in a different way. Tony had even seen Natasha smile at one of Thor’s outrageous compliments. The God’s attention felt like the sun coming out behind the clouds, and his moods were as easy to read as the weather.

In comparison, Loptr was a whirlwind of chaos that took you on a merry dance, cut a swath of destruction through your life and left you impaled on a picket fence.

For an unearthly being of godlike powers, Thor was pretty uncomplicated. Cheerful and honorable. A real asset to the team. He eased the tension between the four of them, simply because he didn’t notice any of the animosities. Tony and Steve could literally be at each other’s throats and he would still waltz into the room with a ‘Hail, my noble friends. Let me join in your merrymaking!’ – And he would mean every word. Unbelievable.

Thor wasn’t dense, he was just so good-natured that the taunts, barbs and insults just went by him. It was disarming. It took the wind right out of your sails. You couldn’t make him think badly of anybody. Not even his brother. Especially not his brother.

Thor was always ready to talk about Loki to anyone who was even slightly sympathetic. In other words, Tony. (The topic hadn’t gone over well with Bruce and almost led to a punched in concrete wall.)

Perhaps Tony’s greater tolerance was just a matter of thinking with his dick. A moth-to-the-flame thing, a mix of sexual attraction and his addiction to danger. But Tony still clung to his theory that Loki was playing a different game then everyone believed. He wouldn’t rule out that Loki really had gone over to the dark side, but experience showed that his actions were mostly smokescreens and mirrors and never what they seemed at first sight.

Anyway, it was always good to know your enemies – if Loki was the enemy – so Tony listened with interest to everything Thor had to say about his brother.

Aaand just as expected Thor switched the topic to Loki within the very next sentence. “My brother would have been much better at teaching you this game”, he said with a sigh.

“Oh, really?”, Tony prompted.

“Indeed. I have not been able to best him for centuries. Hnefatafl is a game of strategy in which you have to outwit an enemy of superior strength and avoid capture. As you can imagine, this suited Loki very much. He soon became a master known across the realms. At his coming of age our mother gifted him with a Hnefatafl board woven from yarn like a small tapestry, so he could take it along on all his travels. – Say, have I told you of the time when Loki and I broke into her weaving chamber as children?”

“Nope”, Tony said with a tolerant smile. “Sounds like fun. Do tell.”

Most of the memories Thor came up with were painfully nostalgic. They recalled days of innocent childhood, when he and his brother had been inseparable. Looked like this one wouldn’t be an exception. Thor wetted his throat with a mighty swallow of the microbrew beer he favored and went into full blown saga mode. “So listen, my friends, to the wondrous tale I have to share. Follow me into the mighty halls of the Allfather’s palace, which we roamed freely in our golden days of youth, from Idun’s orchard to the throne room of Odin.”

Thor could talk like a book. He called it the ‘skaldic art’. Obviously it was a skill that was expected of an Asgardian prince. Interesting curriculum: 1) poetry, 2) bashing people’s skulls in
with a hammer.

“Few places were forbidden to us”, Thor went on, “but we were banned from the chamber where mother and her maids worked. Weaving the tapestries is a delicate art, intertwined with fate and prophecy. Mother didn’t want us children to disturb her. Of course, my brother has always been drawn to secrets like a cat to cream. He persuaded me that we should make it our goal to enter the room in the dead of night and look at the wonders that were hidden there.

When everyone gathered in the great hall for feasting, Loki sought out the guard who usually stood watch at mother’s chambers. He drew him into guileless conversation and showed him a spotted toad he’d caught in the garden, like children might do. With a clumsy move, he let the animal hop through his fingers and escape into the feast hall. As the guard chased it between the tables and benches and caused much hilarity, Loki sprinkled a sleeping draught into the man’s drink.”

“In other words, he was a sly little hellion even then”, Tony snorted. The mental image of child Loki with a look of wide-eyed innocence and a toad in his hands was almost too cute to bear.

Thor nodded with a rueful smile. “Very true, my friend. Some hours later, when the clock struck midnight and the guard snored in front of the door, we chanced our luck. Loki stole the key from the man’s belt and we tiptoed into the weaving room. The tapestries stood on their looms, bathed in silver moonlight. They were a wonder to see and well worth the risk. Mesmerized by the swirls of colours, my brother stretched out his hand to touch the cloth. Alas, his fingertips had hardly reached their goal, when the whole weaving started to come alive and change before our eyes. Intricate patterns unraveled and formed anew. Threads twisted into nots and tangles. Strange shapes grew across the fabric. Loki stepped back with a cry of dismay, but it was already too late. – We didn’t know it then, but the forces of chaos and chance he carries with him had changed destiny forever.”

Thor looked up at his listeners who sat entranced by the strange tale. “You must understand that the eternal lands of Asgard have always thrived on their stability. Our world is much different from yours, where everything changes within the blink of an eye. My Jane has taught me to appreciate the Midgard way, but it still bewilders me sometimes.”


The God of Thunder and modern machinery just didn’t mix.

“Indeed”, Thor nodded ruefully. “Loki must have been much better suited to a life in your city of gadgets and wonders. The mortal realm seems to be in a state of constant unrest, never staying the same for even a day. In Asgard change comes ever so slowly, measured in centuries and millenia. We have had the same ruler and law for as long as I can remember.”

Tony had read up about Asgard. The weird mythological stuff on the internet (apparently folklore said that Loki had given birth to a wolf, after eating the heart of an enemy) as well as the more solid information SHIELD had collected. It all sounded quite medieval, and not exactly in a good way. Warrior ethics, knightly heroics, a stagnant monarchy with an absolute ruler who could hand out horrendous punishments if he pleased ... “I’m trying to imagine Loki in an eternal, never-changing Kingdom of Jocks. The mind boggles.”

Thor sighed and nodded. “My brother has been different from the start. I should have seen it that day in the tapestry chamber, but perhaps I was too young or wilfully blind. When my parents brought him to Asgard, they planted the seeds of chaos in the heart of our realm, and no one knows what the future will hold.”
“Change isn’t always a bad thing, you know. Sounds to me like your world could need a little
shaking up”, Tony said.

“Spoken like a true Midgardian. But perhaps you are right. Customs and traditions must not always
be wise, even if they have descended from our ancestors. Mother called me back to the tapestry
chamber long after our foolhardy adventure. She showed me one of the patterns Loki changed and
revealed that it held the destiny of Lady Sif. Her threads had been twisted in astounding ways.
Instead of accepting the women’s lot in life, Sif became a shield maiden and fierce warrior,
something unheard of in Asgard before. I cannot regret that, as she has been a most loyal friend and
saved my life more times than I can count.”

“Wow”, Tony said. “Loki can meddle with fate? Just by being in the vicinity?”

“Not in any way he can control, or so I believe. It is more that fate meddles with him. But let us
return to our tale and the moment my brother discovered what he had done.”

“Sure”, Tony said. Thor wasn’t much for philosophical discussions, but the guy loved a good
story.

“Imagine Loki’s cry of dismay that echoed through the chamber”, Thor went on. “It cut through
the silence and awakened the guard. We could hear the warrior rousing in front of the door, the
clinking of his armor, the scraping of his sword’s scabbard against the ground. Soon our misdeed
would be discovered and brought before the king. In his fear of punishment my brother drew upon
the power of change that is his very nature. He worked a sorcerer’s magic for the first time in his
life, transformed himself into a tiny mouse and fled through a crack in the walls. I was the only one
who got caught. So it was me who received the whipping that my father ordered, according to
royal law.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “And let me guess: You didn’t blab on your brother. Who managed to
weasel out of it as always and didn’t say a word in your defense.”

Thor laughed. “You know my brother very well.”

“I like to think so”, Tony said.

Chapter End Notes

My wife and I just became the happy mothers of a little baby boy ... who is a delight
but a REAL lot of work. So my next posts will probably take some time and be shorter
than usual.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Wow, I managed another update. Go, me.
Thanks for all the lovely comments!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bruce seldom joined the Avengers in his free time. The others made him uneasy, and well … he made them outright nervous. Clint got taut as a bowstring whenever he entered the room and even the Captain looked twitchy. They seemed to expect a hulk-out every minute. Tony found that damn annoying, because Bruce was a lamb, really. But he couldn’t do much about it, apart from rolling his eyes and making peevish comments.

He joined Bruce in the lab whenever he could. To tell the truth, it was nice to hole up there for a while and pretend that nothing much had changed. Time with Bruce was always soothing, even if they were trying to pull impossible physics out of their sleeves to stop a trickster god from running riot.

“Hey, big guy”, Tony said when he entered the lab, “do you think the unbreakable vow fizzles out when it stops being useful? Because Thor and Coulson are just having a heart to heart about magic in the common room. In other words, SHIELD will know everything about it by the end of the day. So it would be pretty senseless to kill me for talking about Loki’s trickster talents, right?”

“I doubt that a magical spell understands that distinction. But by all means, try it out.”

Tony grimaced. “Okay, perhaps not.”

Bruce looked at him over his glasses. “So your sense of self-preservation is better than rumour has it. Jarvis, do you want to tell him the good news?”

“Indeed, I do”, Jarvis said with a hint of smugness. “We got the magic-dampeners calibrated at last. The mathematical model needed some fine-tuning, but now it works perfectly in every simulation. It won’t be necessary to risk a gruesome death, Sir.”

Bruce smiled up at the ceiling camera. “And I have to say, it’s a pleasure to work with a colleague who’s not only competent but doesn’t even need his ego stroked. Hard to find in an academic environment.” He turned back to Tony. “Anyway, the Greenbox is ready for the first test. If you’ve got time we can try it out right now.”

“Really?” Tony broke into a broad grin. “That’s an awfully nice surprise. I thought it would take another week at least. Ooookay, now we just have to find a way to make you angry enough.”

It was one of the little ironies in their cooperation with SHIELD, that Tony had borrowed the Hulk cage from Fury and installed it on his lab floor. Their plan was to put Bruce into the Greenbox and try to set him off. If the Hulk really was a magical creature, subjected to the laws of Reshaping, they should be able to prevent the change. Bruce should stay Bruce, no matter how provoked.

Spell dampeners were installed all around the cage to prevent any kind of sorcery from happening.
It was Jarvis’ job to modulate their frequencies precisely enough to cancel the wavelengths out. Tony had dubbed their current prototype JINX (Jarvis Interferometer Number Ten) and hoped it would be enough to kick Loki’s ass.

He hopped onto a lab table and dangled his legs. “We could get you boozed up and make you watch candid home videos of Loptr’s time with us. That should do it.”

Bruce grimaced. “Yeah, it should.”

“Like when you tried to teach him how to meditate. Man, you were patient. Those ‘Ommm’-sounds drove me crazy.” Tony leaned back on his arms and looked up at the ceiling in reminiscence. “But hey, you actually got the God of Dirty Tricks to kneel on a cushion and reflect upon the harmony of the universe. That’s a picture I cherish. Pity the lessons didn’t take. We’d all be a lot happier now, including him, I guess. Asgard could really use some anger management classes.”

“Which brings us back to the topic”, Bruce murmured. “Getting me angry.”

“Sure. Did you know that Loptr once sneaked into your room to rub catnip all over your clothes? Jarvis, put that vidstream into the mix.”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose. “So that’s why I had alley cats humping my trouser legs at every corner. I did wonder”, he muttered with a brittle smile. Perhaps it was cruel to remind him of better times, but it should get the Big Guy into the right mood.

“I always knew you were a pussy magnet”, Tony said. “Sorry, bad pun, couldn’t resist. Loptr was sure you’d come home with a cute little kitten in need of rescuing. He found the idea hilarious. Kept picturing a furball that scratched up my designer furniture and chased the robots.” He let his voice drop into an exaggerated drawl to do a Loptr imitation and quoted: “I merely wanted to provide him with some company. Our dear Bruce seems to have a weakness for strays of questionable parentage.”

“That’s what he said?” Bruce shook his head. “He could sound so damn sincere, couldn’t he? Like he actually cared. Too bad it was all just a con. – Give me that booze you mentioned.”

“Coming right up.” Tony got out the bottle he’d ordered for this special event. It held a mixture of whiskey and vodka with the telling name Cold War. Then he put Bruce into the Greenbox, which was furnished with a chair, a table and a flatscreen.

Bruce drank his way through the bottle with grim determination, watching the Loptr show. After he’d downed half of the stuff he started swaying on his chair. He slurred something about ‘they always leave’ and ‘who wants to be friends with a freak like me anyway’. Looked like the bottle would sooner put him into a stupor than allow him to work up some real, righteous anger. Who would have guessed? The Hulk was a maudlin drunk.

Perhaps Pepper had a point when she claimed that booze wasn’t the solution to every problem.

But Tony had a plan B in store. His buddy the rage monster didn’t know it yet, but he’d prepared a little surprise to make sure their experiment worked. He opened the door of the Greenbox, said “Don’t mind me” and threw a jelly jar at the wall.

The can smashed into a thousand pieces. Bruce stared first at the glass shards and then at Tony in drunken bewilderment. Before he could figure it out, Tony gave a wave over his shoulder and made a hasty retreat.
A minute later Bruce twitched on his chair and started to flail around wildly. “Stark!”, he slurred. “You miserable bastard.”

“Hey, it’s a small sacrifice for science”, Tony said through the mic.

A high-pitched buzzing came from inside the cage. It was the unmistakeable sound of a mosquito swarm looking for prey. A cloud of starved insects descended on Bruce and enveloped him from head to toe. The nerve-wrecking whine made even Tony want to scratch himself. There was nothing that made the blood boil quite like that maddening sound. Well, perhaps the moment when the bites started to itch like hell.

Bruce tried to fight the little pests off, but there were just too many of them. They followed him around like a column of man-eating smoke and crawled all over his skin. He stumbled around drunkenly for a while, then he took Tony’s flatscreen and used it as a flyswatter. “Ha!”, he growled when he managed to squash a bunch of mosquitoes against the glass wall. The flatscreen made a crunching sound. Tony winced.

“Jarvis, any ISF-waves around?”

“Plenty, Sir. I’ve activated the JINX interferometers. Analysing data to calculate countermeasures. Wavelengths are computing as successful. Reducing my other functions to save processing power.” Jarvis sounded more machinelike than normal, which meant that he was reaching his limits and didn’t have bytes to spare. That hadn’t happened in quite a while. Jarvis could do billions of calculations per second, but deflecting magic seemed challenging even to him. Okay, that wouldn’t do in a fight. The JINX definitely needed some downsizing, if they wanted to use it for real instead of just in a laboratory setting.

But in all other ways the plan worked beautifully. Bruce was in full smashing mode and not changing colour at all. Well, apart from the unhealthy red of his face.

Tony started the ventilation inside the cage. The mosquitoes got sucked into the air vents. (Hey, perhaps Clint was holed up somewhere in there. Would do him right.) He didn’t open the Greenbox, though. That had to wait until Bruce stopped looking quite so murderous.

“ISF-levels are going down rapidly, Sir”, Jarvis reported.

“Great. Think I can let him out in a minute without getting smashed?”

“Not by the Hulk, Sir, but your colleague Dr. Banner might feel an urge to break your nose”, his faithful AI commented.

Indeed, when Bruce stumbled out of the cage – covered in red pustules and quite sobered up – the first thing he said was: “I really should punch you.”

Tony held up a big tube of itching cream and dangled it between his fingers. “Look, peace offering.”

Bruce grabbed the stuff, which Tony took as a sign of friendship and forgiveness.

After Bruce had smeared a thick layer onto every piece of skin reachable without stripping, Tony said: “Besides, it’s my turn in the Greenbox next. I’m gonna talk magic theory with Fury. You are welcome to watch. If the Jinx doesn’t work for me, you’ll definitely have the last laugh.”

Bruce stopped scratching his inner elbow and looked at him in alarm. “You want to break the unbreakable vow? Right now?”
“No better time than the present. I told Fury he’d get my full cooperation and this is it. The scientists at SHIELD want our test results to work on countermeasures of their own. If I do the talk inside the Hulk cage, I should be protected. Jarvis can ward off whatever nasty stuff the spell is supposed to do. Probably.”

Bruce frowned and searched for the glasses in his shirt pocket. “Okay, that might work as long as you’re inside the Greenbox. But what about afterwards? The spell could detect the breach of contract as soon as you step out. You’d crumble up dead at my feet.” He put the glasses on, scratching his swollen nose. “Even if I hate you right now, I’d rather avoid that.”

Tony shrugged. “Unlikely. The magic can’t get at me inside the cage, so how should it know what I’ve done in there? Anyway, I’m ready to take the risk. Loptr wouldn’t be half as dangerous today if I hadn’t swallowed his bait and made him my PA. I taught him all he needed to know, about technology, about SHIELD. It’s my bloody responsibility to stop him, before he does anything truly unforgivable.”

“But …”

Tony walked into the cage and sat down on the chair. “I’ve made up my mind, okay? You know I’m stupidly stubborn. So stop protesting and just wish me luck.” He took a deep breath and looked up towards the ceiling. “Jarvis, put me through to director Fury. And do your best to keep me alive while I talk.”

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As it turned out, all the drama about the unbreakable vow had been pointless. Because – hey, surprise – it didn’t actually exist.

There wasn’t the slightest hint of ISF-waves while Tony spilled the beans. No magical threat, not even a warning tingle. Jarvis couldn’t detect any sign of a spell, not during the talk with Fury or afterwards. Which left only one conclusion:

That little fraud Loptr had gotten him all worked up over nothing. He’d kept Tony from talking for weeks just by dazzling him with some glitzy special effects. And Tony had totally fallen for it. Duped by a handshake and rainbow-coloured ribbons. Loptr must have laughed his ass off.

On the other hand, he hadn’t actually put Tony’s life in danger. That was nice to know. Loptr had protected his secrets, but not gone far enough to curse Tony with a violent demise. Strange how much that meant to Tony. It left him feeling all warm and fuzzy inside.

Which didn’t mean that Loptr had stopped being a traitorous bastard who could kill without mercy, he reminded himself. It wasn’t exactly a sign of undying love if someone refrained from slaughtering you. Not romantic at all. And it wouldn’t do to sugercoat the actions of his former fuckbuddy. Especially after what Fury had told him inside the Greenbox.

Apparently Loki had taken a new step in his plans for world dominion. He’d shanghaied himself a weapon designer.

That was a truly frightening thought. The power of the Tesseract coupled with earth weaponry could mean destruction on a whole new scale. And it was all Tony’s fault. Because he’d been stupid enough to show Loptr how magic and high tech could be merged. Their prank on Fury had been a very successful test run. Now it looked like Loptr was planning to go even further in that direction.
There was just one silver lining: The kidnapped guy happened to be Justin Hammer. Who was a nitwit and deserved a little terrorizing.

Tony almost felt insulted that Loptr had replaced him with that clueless asshole. But then, dear Justin was the perfect choice for a nefarious plot because he a) didn’t have a spine and b) could be bribed, cajoled or threatened into building absolutely anything his captor wanted. Weapons of mass destruction? Sure, no problem. A doomsday machine? Fine, who needs cities anyway.

At least Loptr would hate every minute of working with that whiny little worm. Perhaps Tony should feel guilty about Hammer’s fate, because it was due to him that the guy had caught Loptr’s attention in the first place (and in quite a memorable way.) But really, the two of them deserved one another. Tony could just imagine the clash of douchebaggery.

Hammer and his hipster routine could drive anyone up the walls. Having him as a henchman would be hell on earth. Served Loptr right.

But he still asked Jarvis to keep a lookout for the kidnapping victim, because he was a nice, upstanding person who knew his civic duty. To his surprise he got an actual result just a few days later.

The Avengers were in the middle of their poker night – another team building idea by Coulson – when Jarvis’ voice rang through the common room and stopped all activity short. “Sir, I have spotted Mr Hammer”, he reported.

Clint dropped the poker chips he’d been juggling with onto the table. “Hey, quick work. Not that I actually want to rescue the guy.”

“You sure, J.?” Tony asked. He didn’t mind the interruption of the game. For most of the evening, he’d been losing badly.

Being fleeced by Natasha was okay, nobody could match her poker face. What really bugged him was the fact that he couldn’t beat Steve. The guy always looked like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth, all wholesome and honest, even while he put you over a barrel. Tony started to suspect that there was a lot more to Captain America than he’d first thought.

“It’s a 100 % match, Sir. He’s currently being filmed by the security camera of a general store in Detroit.”

Tony put down his cards and frowned. “Really? Shouldn’t the guy be in hiding or manacled to a work station somewhere?”

“Indeed. Mr Hammer’s body language is indicating a high level of anxiety. I doubt that this is an ordinary shopping trip. He seems to be acting on orders, very much against his will.”

“Right. What exactly is he doing?”, Tony asked, imagining all kinds of dark deeds.

“He’s waiting in line at the cashier to buy a length of sturdy rope”, Jarvis reported. “As well as one of your merchandising products: the extra-large Iron Man box of chocolates.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose up to his hairline.

Clint snorted. “A box of chocolates? Very suave. Someone wants your attention. That’s like Loki jumping up and down, shouting: ‘Come and catch me.’”

Natasha nodded. “It does sounds like an invitation.”
“Or it's a trap again”, Steve said with a frown. “I’m not sure if we should fall for it.”

Tony shrugged. “Yeah, but do we have another choice? If there’s a chance to get our hands on Loki, we must take it. Or he’ll just vanish into thin air and leave us guessing again. Just like in Egypt.”

Steve crossed his arms and frowned. “I still don’t like it. Phil? You’re our handler. What’s your opinion?”

Coulson looked up from behind his obscenely huge pile of poker chips. “You’re right of course, it looks like a trap. A very transparent one as that. But still, I have to agree with Tony –”

“Yay”, Tony said and bumped his fist into the air. “That’s a first.”

“… because we really have little choice”, Coulson finished his sentence. He ignored Tony’s interruption with the ease of long practice.

Tony grinned. “You heard the man. Suit up, everyone.”

He felt all jittery at the thought of the upcoming confrontation. The danger only added to the thrill. His ex-lover was still a master of mixed signals. Nobody could do playful, sexy menace just like the God of Mischief. Was Loptr gunning for him or actually flirting? Tony had no fucking idea.

But he was going to find out, if it was the last thing he did.

Chapter End Notes

Remember my little fantasy in chapter 3, where Tony imagines his tongue getting glued to Loki’s ice cold skin? Turns out, there's an artist who drew that scene ... and lots of other weird and sexy stuff. Check out the hilariously bizarre LightOnLight and her picture “Stuck”: http://lightonlight.tumblr.com/image/72097553099
Chapter 10

Tony hovered over a conglomerate of buildings in Detroit which all belonged to Hammer Industries. The complex covered a whole city quarter. It was almost a town of its own. This was where dear Justin had been heading after his shopping trip, at least until Jarvis had suddenly lost his trail (which was suspicious in itself).

Looked like Loki had been hiding in plain sight the whole time. He’d kidnapped Hammer and then put him to work in one of the guy’s own enterprises. Where better to build a Tesseract superweapon than in an actual weapons factory?

The problem was how to find the two of them in this industrial maze. There was a bloody big pile of manufacturing plants, warehouses, hangars and offices to choose from. “Suggestions, anyone?”, Tony asked.

“If we are looking for the Tesseract, my guess would be the factory at 35th street”, Natasha said through the comm. “According to the building plans it’s the most secure of them all and could withstand even a nuclear attack.”

“In other words, it'll be a bitch to break into”, Tony guessed.

“And while we are occupied there”, Steve said, “Loki will have all the time in the world to do whatever he plans to do.”

Tony frowned down at the assemblage of buildings that spread out underneath him. His bird eye view made the streets and rooftops look like a google map. Pity he couldn’t just type in ‘Loki’ and get a search result. A little arrow pointing towards his target would have been nice.

“So hey, let’s just flip a coin or something”, Clint said.

“Not a very efficient search procedure”, Coulson answered wryly. “Jarvis, where exactly did Hammer vanish from sight?”

“At the corner of 38th street and … Ah, this looks promising.”

“What is it J.?””, Tony asked.

“I believe that I’ve found the clue you were looking for. Let me show you”, his AI said. The view on Tony’s visor switched to a satellite image, probably from a weather forecast GEO camera. Jarvis zoomed in, got closer and closer with dizzying speed, until a specific rooftop came into sight. The focus narrowed on a corner with an access hatch, and Tony burst out laughing.

“You must be kidding me”, he said.

“Gonna share the joke, Stark?”, Clint groused from the quinjet. “I know you still carry a torch for your fling, but there’s some people here who actually worry about his sense of humour.”

“He left me a trail to follow. It leads down a fire escape into the building. And it’s made out of chocolates”, Tony grinned. One thing hadn’t changed about his former PA: He still knew how to charm Tony’s socks off.

“Sweet.”
“Yeah, isn’t it? I feel like Hansel and Gretel with the breadcrumbs.”

Clint snorted. “Nice comparison. They got duped by a wicked witch and almost eaten alive, right? And hey, we all know Loki finds you … yummy.”

Thor had been silent for most of the trip, but now there was a grumble like thunder in the distance. Uh oh, Tony thought. He’d wondered for a while if and when big brother would clue in. Clint’s jokes weren’t exactly subtle. Even if most of the innuendo about Tony’s ‘fling’ went right over Thor’s head, because he didn’t get modern slang. What was the Asgardian stance on metrosexuality again?

“Are you suggesting that my brother is …”

There was an ominous pause. Tony imagined sparks flying inside the quinjet. An angry thunder god could be hell on the electronic systems. He was so glad that he was out here in the air.

“… wooing the Man of Iron?”, Thor demanded.

Tony bit his lip before a hysterical laugh could come out. Wooing? If that was the way Thor wanted to put it.

“Uh, yeah”, Clint said cautiously. “Well, kind of. I mean, chocolates. Next they’ll pick out china patterns.” Even he was smart enough to avoid the words ‘fucking like rabbits’ with the God of Thunder near.

Thor stayed silent for a moment. Then he heaved a big sigh and managed to misinterpret the situation even further. “Courting you like a maiden must be one of his jests, Man of Iron. I apologize for this insult. Sometimes Loki’s pranks can be quite crude. Once he bespelled Fandral – our most dashing hero of the Warriors Three – to wear a lady’s nightgown at court. If you demand satisfaction for this slight, it is my duty as his nearest relative to offer you either holmgang or weregild.”

Tony blinked. Okay, so flirting with a man was reason for a duel in Asgard. Why wasn’t he surprised? That actually explained a lot about Loki. His obsession with being the guy on top and not the ‘maiden’, for example. Well, Tony had never made a secret of his everything-goes-approach to sex and he didn’t plan to be backed into a closet now. “Uh, I really appreciate the offer, Thor. But satisfaction won’t be necessary. I mean, I’m more than satisfied already. Trust me, when your brother gets into … well … wooing mode, that doesn’t offend me. At all. He’s spectacularly good at it.”

Clint made a gagging sound in the background and mumbled something about ‘too much information’.

“Truly?”, Thor sounded surprised and a bit confused, but not in a bad way.

“Yeah, no reason to fight it out.”

The relief in Thor’s voice was evident and the sky above them cleared. “That are glad tidings indeed. I would have been loath to cross arms with you in earnest, my friend. Many on Asgard would look at you askance, but I have come to know your valor. Though I will readily admit that the mores of Midgard still seem strange to me in many ways.” He cleared his throat with a rumbling noise. “Very well, if a courting between equals sees the both of you happy … I would be honoured to have you not only as my shield brother, but as my brother-in-law as well.”

“Woah, don’t plan the wedding, yet”, Tony protested. He could already see himself hauled to an
altar in Vergas. When Thor set his mind on something he was very hard to stop. “Your brother’s not my favourite person at the moment, remember? We’re actually here to hunt him down before he takes over my planet. Not to mention the fact that he stabbed me in the back and eloped. Chocolates or no chocolates. So let’s do the hunting first and talk about feelings later, okay?” Tony landed on the roof with a metallic clang and pried open the fire escape.

“As you wish. Lead the way and we will follow”, Thor declared.

“Yeah, in a safe distance”, Barton murmured. “Just in case romance is dead.”

The building turned out to be mostly storage. It was a sprawling compound stuffed to the brim with all kinds of machinery. The candy trail led Tony through a maze of rooms full of packing crates and containers. Huge industrial halls held gun turrets, airplane engines and similar unwieldy stuff. Everything was lifeless and deserted, which made the atmosphere a bit spooky. Tony kept waiting for a nasty surprise, but nothing happened.

He picked up a chocolate that looked especially tempting in its green and silver wrapping and munched on it. Hmm, the filling was absinthe flavoured. Weird but good, and it didn’t even turn him into a mole-rat or something. The trail led towards a container which had been forcefully opened. The content spilled out onto the floor.

Tony stared for a moment and then whistled. “Nice. Looks like my secretary really wants his job back.” Cautiously, he bent down and picked up a small cylindrical canister. He twirled it in front of his helmet camera, so Jarvis could get a good look from all sides.

Coulson cut in with his handler voice. “A full report, please.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but complied. “Hammer Industries is selling nerve gas grenades. There’s a container load right in front of me. Fuck, I’m not proud about my past, but at least I’ve never ignored the Geneva convention. That takes a special kind of coldblooded greed.” He held the canister up. “Looks like Loptr got sick of his co-worker pretty fast. He just served us Justin’s head on a platter.”

His eyes wandered over the merchandise and caught on a shape that didn’t fit in with the rest. Something thin and smooth gleamed in the fluorescent lights. When Tony looked closer, he saw a fountain pen half buried in the heap of grenades. Tony raised an eyebrow. He recognized the brand. The pen belonged to the Visconti Steel Edition that he’d come to know quite intimately.

Loptr was definitely flirting.

And he had ‘signed’ his work for Tony to make the evidence against Hammer a personal gift. It actually mellowed him a bit towards the trickster. He reached for the pen, even though the chance was high that something magical would happen as soon as he touched it. Well, he’d always been a risk-taker and too curious for his own good.

Loptr didn’t disappoint. The pen vanished in a cloud of smoke. Tendrils swirled up, grey fumes billowed, thickened and started to shape themselves into a human form. A whirlwind of colours spun around and around, getting more substantial with every turn … until a tall, handsome and well-known figure stood before Tony.

Loptr had dressed up for the occasion. Disappointingly, he hadn’t gone for the genie in a bottle-look. Tony would have loved to see the God in harem pants and a skimpy vest. But Asgardian
royal fashion wasn’t hard on the eye either. Loki wore a tunic of dark green cloth, emblazoned with a silver tree. The wide belt and the armguards had inlays of pale moonstone. High boots flared out over a pair of skintight leather pants. But the image was translucent, ghostlike. It looked more like a hologram than a real person. Tony tried to touch it, of course, and his fingers went right through. Nothing. Nada. There wasn’t even a force field buzz or anything.

“How delightful to see you here. I knew you would get my message”, Loptr said.

“Wasn’t too hard to figure out”, Tony shrugged.

The hologram didn’t deign to answer. Perhaps it was just a recording? The magical equivalent of a video message? On the other hand, it looked right in Tony’s direction and followed him with its eyes. Magic was weird.

“Hey, team” Tony said under his breath, “Are you all getting that? Loptr has made contact. Kind of.”

“I’m right above you in the rafters”, Clint reassured him. “Audio is good. Everyone’s listening with baited breath.”

The Loptr spectre had frozen like a movie still or a DVD on hold, until it had Tony’s full attention again. Then it came back to life, including the haughty attitude that was Loptr’s trademark. “As you have probably guessed, I don’t need Mr Hammer’s services anymore and have grown extremely tired of his company”, Loptr declared. “In hindsight, I should have spared myself the displeasure and kept on working with you instead. But alas, breaking your resistance and taking over your mind by force seemed a loathsome idea.”

“Well, isn’t that reassuring”, Tony murmered.

Loptr cocked his head as if he’d heard the interruption, but went right on with his speech. “Mr Hammer needed much less convincing. Truly, I had expected at least some resistance to my plans, but not so. He was more than eager to serve me, once I promised him all the ridiculous rewards he asked for, including the arch reactor that keeps your heart beating.” Loptr’s smile turned dagger-sharp. “Be assured that I would rather see his own heart roasted and served on a spit with a garnish of basil leafs. Which is the reason for this gift.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. Whatever he thought of Loki, it seemed that the God still had his back. At least in some ways.

Loki waved his hand in an elegant gesture. “I endured Mr Hammer’s prattle and flattery far longer than anyone should have to and I am eager to be rid of him. So I ordered him to print out all the dirty secrets he keeps hidden on his company mainframe, for your convenience. You simply have to find the caches first.” Loptr gave him his most mischievous grin, eyes sparkling like green gems. Despite better judgement Tony felt a little flutter in his (mechanical) heart. “You may share this treat with SHIELD if you wish to. Give the director my regards when you inform him of the nuclear arms deal with North Korea. – The first clue to follow is a kenning: ‘Seek for the skybound children of Jörmungandr.’ Have fun.”

The hologram winked at Tony and vanished into thin air.

Tony shook his head. “Right, he’s sending me on a scavenger hunt. Wanna bet Loptr himself is long, long gone?”

“Very likely”, Coulson agreed.
“But taking down Hammer Industries is a nice compensation. At least we won’t have to return home empty handed. Who knows, we could even find some hints about what kind of tech they cooked up together. So, what’s a kenning and a jomun-thingy? I could need some help here. Jarvis? Thor?”

“A kenning is a poetic metaphor that has to be solved like a riddle. The Vikings were very fond of them”, Jarvis supplied.

“Indeed”, Thor boomed through the comlink. “My brother has always liked to embellish his speech in this manner. It is one of the reasons why people named him silver-tongue. Jörmungandr is a serpent that is said to inhabit the oceans of your realm. It wraps its mighty tail around the world, causing floods and earthquakes.”

“Really? I always thought that was tectonics. But then, I wouldn’t have guessed that thunder is caused by a guy swinging a war hammer. Anyway, does that mean Loki wants me to look for a bunch of flying snakes?”

“That seems to be the meaning of his kenning”, Thor agreed. “I would not know how to find such a thing in this building, though.”

“Yeah, can’t say I have a clue, either”, Tony admitted. “Sounds more like a case for Newt Scamander in my opinion: Asgardian beasts and where to find them. Next we’ll go hunting for Wrackspurts. Or, hey, wait a minute … I passed a couple of attack helicopters on my way. Viper class. Hah.”

He rubbed his hands and started trotting back towards the hangar. Flying snakes, indeed.

The scavenger hunt went on for a while. Tony retrieved a list of blackmailed senators and generals from a helicopter seat and was sent on to the next cache. And the next. And the next. The riddles included an easter egg search (to collect the written clues inside), counting stair steps (which translated into GPS-coordinates) and finding keywords in the song “Iron Man” by Black Sabbath (gosh, those were some disturbing lyrics). It reminded Tony of all the light-hearted pranks he’d been used to by his magical assistant before the shit hit the fan.

The Avengers were all over the place by now, securing the building and looking for Justin Hammer, but Tony let them join the game via helmet camera. Soon, the team went at it almost as enthusiastically as Tony himself. It was Steve – resident expert on old-fashioned stuff – who noticed that a flickering ceiling light gave them information in morse code. Natasha turned out to be exceptionally good at rebus riddles.

The team couldn’t help but be charmed by the playfulness of it all. It felt like a holiday compared to their usual missions. Loki had granted them a time-out and put a lot of effort into giving them a good time. Even Coulson unbend enough to join in a game of charades that Holographic Loki put on for them. The agent’s good mood was probably due to the paperwork on the North Korea-deal that Tony had found in a broom closet. It had mellowed the agent considerably. He even made a remark about recruiting Loki instead of hunting him down.

Perhaps Loki wanted to get back into SHIELD’S good graces by throwing his captive to the wolfs, Tony mused. At the moment Justin Hammer filled the role of villain much better than the trickster god and was a more valuable catch. All Loki was actually guilty of were a few dead guards and a clever heist. In Fury’s book, that was hardly worth a slap on the wrist.

Hammer, on the other hand, looked more and more like a wannabe Obie. Including the part where he wanted Tony’s heart on a platter. Tony still remembered how it felt to have the arc reactor
ripped out of his chest. The blinding pain. The terrifying helplessness when he was gutted like a fish. But Obie had been a worthy opponent at least, not a whiny little twerp. Seriously, he’d rather have the world ruled by Loki than destroyed by a hipster phony who sold nukes to crazy dictators.

Tony picked his way through a row of Humvees and looked at the treasure map he held in his hands. It was made out of actual parchment and showed the storage area converted into pirate islands, shipwrecks, shoals and passageways. His target was marked with a big X and Tony expected at least a wooden chest filled with gold galleons for his troubles.

What he actually got was much better.

“Hey guys, you’ll never guess what Loptr left me as the final prize”, he said happily into the comlink. “I feel so loved. Come over here and take a look.”

The map had led him towards a battle tank which towered over most of the equipment in the storage area. The massive machine looked as if it could spring to life any second and squash everything in its path. Its main gun rose at least ten feet from the ground. And Justin Hammer dangled from the cannon’s end.

The guy had been trussed up like a turkey and his clothes were conspicuously missing. Well, apart from the socks. Also, he’d been gagged with his own tie. The thing had a droll pattern of little machine guns, and in Tony’s opinion, Hammer deserved what he got for that fashion statement alone.

He entertained himself with taking pictures from every angle until the rest of the Avengers arrived. His former rival glared at him petulantly and made whining noises.

Steve came walking in just when he’d switched to video. “Tony!”, he chided.

“What? This is a piece of art. It should be shared with the public. See all those diamond patterns and the knots in sensitive places? That’s really impressive. Kinbaku bondage pics are highly prized in galleries, I’ll let you know”, Tony insisted.

By now the others had trickled in as well. Natasha cocked her head and viewed the bundle with a professional air. “I once had a stray cat for some months”, she said. “It always brought me the rats it had played to death as a sign of love.”

Tony grinned. “Yeah, Loki is a bit like that, isn’t he? Although I wouldn’t use the L-word.”

Clint shook his head. “Normal people just say it with flowers, you know.”

“Really. And what would you know about normal?”, Tony shot back.

Steve watched them with a frown. “We should get him down. That’s no way to treat a prisoner, no matter what he’s guilty of.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Sometimes you’re just too nice to be true, Cap. But by all means, let’s get him down.” He raised his armoured hand and cut the rope with a well-placed shot. Hammer dropped to the floor. He landed in a heap with a loud crash and a yowl. “Oops”, Tony said.

Steve just sighed.

Natasha strode towards the prone weapons dealer with a determined air. “I’m going to interrogate him. We have to know what Loki made him build. I admit this has been fun, but let’s not forget why we are here.” She reached for the gag.
“Oh no”, Tony groaned. “No, no, no. Let’s keep the tie in place, pretty please? If that smarmy asshole starts talking, I’ll probably strangle him with it.”

His moment of drama was interrupted by Jarvis. “Sir, you have an urgent call from Dr. Banner.”

“Huh? Not a good time. Very busy here. There’s life experiences that should be cherished undisturbed.”

“It concerns all of the Avengers.” Jarvis ignored him as usual. “I’ll put Dr. Banner on speaker now.”

“Oookay”, Tony said and frowned. If he thought about it, Bruce had never rung him up before. He usually waited until Tony was back in the tower, because he “didn’t want to intrude”. The whole Avengers stuff had him acting even more self-conscious and reserved than usual. To actually address the whole group was something of a radical step for him.

The speaker in Tony’s helmet crackled and a second later the unnaturally calm voice of Bruce rang through the air. “Do you all hear me? Good. We have a situation here. You have to come back immediately.”


Bruce hesitated for a second before he delivered his blow. “You were drawn off to Detroit for a reason. Loptr is here. And … he’s set up a magical device right on your rooftop.”

Tony stared at the hole in the sky that let an army through. He’d expected a lot of things since Loptr became the enemy, but an alien invasion wasn’t one of them.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Fooled not once, but twice. He had been a moron to get his hopes up. So much for a reconciliation.

Clint watched him with unusual pity. “I have to hand it to your ex. That was the most creative diversion I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, bully for him”, Tony said. “Let’s go shoot him to pieces.”
For the next hours Tony was too busy fighting to feel anything at all. Which was something of a blessing.

He couldn’t afford to nurse a broken heart just now. The anger and guilt that lurked in the dark corners of his mind were ruthlessly shoved down. Yes, he’d been his lover’s pawn and had unknowingly paved the way for the invaders. He had introduced Loptr to earth technology and made his team dismiss the God’s plans for world domination. But he could blame himself for all that later, after the Avengers had hopefully saved New York. Or what was left of it.

Whole city blocks lay in smoking ruins. The streets of Manhattan were covered with debris, twisted steel and broken glass. And blood. Let’s not forget the blood.

There were scenes that burned themselves into his memory, snapshots of despair and destruction. A giant snakelike monstrosity smashed its tail into a hospital building and left a gaping wound in the wall. You could see right into the maternity ward. Bodies of all sizes lay crushed under the concrete.

A woman tried to claw her way out of a burning car, weeping and screaming.

A family build a barricade in a side street to defend their home and was mowed down by the single sweep of an energy weapon.

Corpses drifted in the river, next to the exploded remains of an Ellis Island ferry.

An elderly man attacked one of the aliens with swinging shopping bags. It would have looked funny, but he died with a blade rammed through his gut.

Thor called up to Tony in the middle of the carnage and cheered him on, booming something about “glorious battle and grand adventure”. Tony could have retched.

He counted that among the worst moments of the day. Because he liked Thor, and his attitude told him more about Asgard than he had ever wanted to know. The god went into battle as if it was a game of paintball. Hi Ho, let’s go kill somebody and become heroes in the afterlife. Until that moment Tony hadn’t understood what ‘warrior culture’ really meant. It had sounded quaint and somehow romantic like those old Errol Flynn movies. But if there was one conviction that Tony had taken home from his purgatorial trip to Afghanistan it was this:

War wasn’t glorious.

You had to care about people and their pain, otherwise you stopped being human.

Every life lost was a heart-wrenching waste.

He doubted that Thor with his crown prince armor and swaggering bravado would understand that at all. Not to talk about his brother. They were high nobility in the purest, most medieval sense of the word. Their world view didn’t include the lowly concerns of common people. Tony could relate, he’d been raised much the same as the heir of Stark Industries, but he’d trained himself out of that kind of callousness. He wondered if Loki would even understand what he was so upset about. Why should a so-called God care about collateral damage?

With a bitter taste in his mouth Tony swerved around Chitauri aircraft and towards the energy
beam that held the portal to another dimension open. More enemies streamed in towards the rift. As long as the gateway stayed open, earth defences didn’t stand a chance. The Avengers could fight for all they were worth, but they would be overwhelmed eventually.

He could see Bruce on the rooftop of Stark Tower, in the middle of a bunch of SHIELD scientists, who frantically tried to shut the Tesseract machine down. A dome of blue energy prevented anyone from touching the device.

Which meant that they still hadn’t managed to break through Loki’s shield. Damn.

“Hey Bruce, any idea why the JINX doesn’t work? It destroys the magic around you just fine, or you’d be green and in smashing mode by now.”

“Have you seen the power-output of that cube?” Bruce sounded more angry and frustrated than Tony had ever heard him, at least in human form.

The fact that Loki had installed the machine on Stark Tower of all places should have made the JINX-countermeasures easier, but obviously that didn’t help at all.

“The energy levels are like nothing SHIELD even hinted at when they gave us their research data”, Bruce growled. “They make everything we have on earth look laughable. To shut the Tesseract down with our tech is like stopping a tsunami with a bucket and a mop. And the bloody frequencies change all the time as if the cube knows what we’re trying to do. Jarvis says it’s like fighting another hyper-intelligent AI. He’s throwing all of his processing power into the JINX.”

“No wonder I haven’t heard of him for a while. I was getting worried.” That was an understatement. He wasn’t used to fighting without Jarvis’ input. It made the suit less efficient and besides, Tony relied on their banter to keep a cool head in battle.

“Yeah, sorry, he’s a bit too busy for multitasking”, Bruce said. “He has managed to take Loki’s shield down for microseconds, but never long enough for us to actually do anything. We were hoping that we’d get the chance to shoot an explosive at the device. The Tesseract probably can’t be stopped that way, but the rest of the machine is HammerTech. Blowing it up shouldn’t be hard. Any practical ideas?”

“You mean conventional weapons are too slow to get through? Okay, thinking on the problem. Just give me a sec”, Tony said and ducked out of the way of an alien attack squad on flying motorcycles. The firefight was intense, but short. It involved a lot of aerial acrobatics. At the end, Tony was the only one left in the sky. (He still wanted one of those motorcycles, though.) “Do you remember the Chinese girl I told you about? Fan of mine? Chun-something?”

“Chuntao”, Bruce supplied. He always had a better memory for people stuff.

“Yeah, her. She can melt metal with a thought, so that’s way faster and just as destructive as explosives. Microseconds should be enough. Tell your new SHIELD buddies to find her. I’d call Fury myself, but I’m a little occupied and can’t hack his waiting queue just now.”

“God, that might actually work. It’s high time that something does.” Bruce cut the call and Tony could see him talking excitedly to one of the agents. Funny how an alien invasion brought everyone together, even SHIELD and the Hulk.

Tony went back into the fray, shooting enemies right and left, trying to keep the destruction to a minimum. He saw glimpses of the others, Natasha’s flaming hair in a street fight, Steve swinging his shield towards a Chitauri soldier. The Avengers were spread too thin to make teamwork
practical, but Tony lent a hand whenever he could.

He was just rescuing Clint from a crumbling balcony fifty feet above ground, when Coulson’s voice rang over the comm. He sounded unusually grim. “We have a new problem. There’s a nuke heading our way. Do you copy?”

“You must be joking”, Tony said.

“Sorry, not my kind of humour. We need to redirect the missile, away from the city. Can you take care of that?”

“You never ask for anything simple, do you.” Tony closed his eyes for a moment. So this was it. A suicide mission. His grand finale. “Yeah, I can do that”, he said.

The entrance to the wormhole was a lot farther away than it looked, distorting space and twisting the view in his visor. The distance seemed to get longer with every minute he flew towards it.

Which meant that he had more time to think about his decision than he would have liked. He knew what would happen when he reached the other side. The nuclear explosion would either tear him to bits, if he stayed close enough, or the electromagnetic pulse would shut his suit down, condemning him to drift in an alien space until he suffocated. Buried alive inside a formfitting metal coffin. He preferred the quick and dirty option.

He’d always said he wasn’t the hero type, and he stood by that. Perhaps Steve would have gone out with a song and a dance, but that wasn’t him. Self-sacrifice didn’t come naturally. Granted, this was a fitting end for the Merchant of Death, and the lifes he saved would probably balance out the many thousands he had on his conscience. That should have made it easier, but it really didn’t. The simple truth was, he didn’t want to die. Not at the age of forty. There was still so much he could do.

He hadn’t even invented the sonic screwdriver, yet.

Tony had almost reached the wormhole portal when a well-known voice reverberated through his brain. Loki sounded a curious mixture of outraged and terrified. “What are you doing?! Are you out of your mind? You will die in the Void!”

Well, well, at least he would have company in his last minutes. Looked like the God wasn’t so happy about his plans, now that they threatened to smear Tony’s atoms across the universe. Loki’s feelings came through plain as day, with a breath-taking intensity. Time slowed down to a trickle as their thoughts met and merged. Tony would have been flattered by what he found there – a fascination and craving that came as close to love as Loki seemed capable of – if the timing had been different.

“Wow, you actually care”, Tony noted. Wasn’t that just peachy. The one person who’d finally managed to kill him was having second thoughts. Just a tiny bit too late. “And hey, you can walk all over my mind. I’d be pissed about that if it still mattered. Can you brainfuck just anyone or am I special?”

“That is hardly your most urgent problem right now.”

“True. But not the answer to my question. How did you get inside my thoughts, you prick?”

Interesting fact: a Vulcan mind meld wasn’t all lovey-dovey when you hated the guy who entered your brain. Theirs felt more like a hot battle zone and Tony’s anger was sharp enough to flay Loki
alive any minute now. His patience for Loki’s usual word games and deflections was exactly zero. Which the God seemed to know, because he came to the point remarkably quickly.

“Very well. The answer is, you gave me your body to share, which makes reaching your soul easy. Sex magic is the strongest in existence. So yes, you are special. You carry my mark. I assume that you remember the moment when I wrote my true name onto your skin ...”

“Bloody hell. So it really was a spell.”

Loki tsked. The sound was even more annoying when in reverberated in the inside of your skull. “Ah, but that depends on the definition. It created a bond, that was all. I never planned to use it, unless in the most dire of circumstance. Keeping you from killing yourself counts as such, I’d say.” His mindvoice turned sulky. “In other words, it is your own fault that I resort to ‘a brainfuck’ as you so elegantly call it. You forced my hand. Do you think this is a pleasant experience for me? It’s a degree of intimacy I abhor.”

No doubt about that. Loki couldn’t play his usual games of misdirection and obfuscation when they read each other’s thoughts. For once, the God of Trickery couldn’t lie.

“And of course I care, you stupid mortal”, Loki snapped. “Didn’t my parting gift make that plain enough? I don’t arrange an enemy’s downfall for just anyone. It did cost me a lot of time and effort. Don’t pretend my present didn’t meet your tastes.”

“Yeah, somehow that was overshadowed by the alien invasion less than an hour later.”

“I had no choice about that.”

“THERE’S ALWAYS A CHOICE, YOU ASSHOLE!!”, Tony screamed into his mind and had the satisfaction to feel Loki reel back in shock at his bitterness.

The God collected himself quickly. “What would you know about it, mortal?”, he replied haughtily. “There are forces in this universe that you can barely understand. I fell into the hands of a creature even Odin fears. Thanos is the very essence of madness and destruction. Of course I complied to his wishes. It was the only way to escape his hospitality. I’m not fond of being tortured.”

That revelation gave Tony pause, because yeah, he knew what enough pain could accomplish. When the Ten Rings had pressured Tony to do their dirty work, he’d almost caved as well. He was highly aware that it had been a close call. A few more weeks of that special hell could have turned him into their willing tool. If Loki had been forced into his role of world invader that changed a lot. It made him the victim, not the villain. Who knew what Loki had gone through? Tony tried to control his rage and give his ex-lover the benefit of the doubt. “You were tortured?”, he asked with a hint of sympathy.

“Well, no”, Loki said. “Of course not. I’m the God of Trickery. I talked my way out of it and struck a deal instead.”

Smugness radiated out of every syllable. Tony felt quite speechless for a moment. So much for his attempt at being understanding. “Let me get this straight: You offered him my planet? To save your skin??”

“Mostly I offered him the Tesseract. Your realm is quite insignificant in comparison”, Loki stated. That didn’t help Tony’s temper any.
“Wait. No. Calm down”, the trickster yelped. Tony felt him twitching under the onslaught of his feelings, which was damn satisfying, really. His anger spiked and Loki’s mind squirmed and spasmed as if prodded with a life wire. “Listen, you have no idea what being captured by Thanos means. He is beyond everything your mortal mind can grasp! I had no choice but to … Be reasonable, will you? Fine, alright, I understand why you are upset. Let me make you an offer: I will allow you into my memories, so you can see for yourself.”

“You really think that will change my opinion? Really?”

“I am certain of it”, Loki said with an undertone of desperation, and then he pushed his experiences into Tony’s mind.

Memories assaulted Tony and drove into his brain like a battering ram. They were so incredibly vivid that he lost every sense of self. For an endless moment, he was submerged and drowned in a God’s traumatic flashback. There was nothing but the black landscape of a burned-out asteroid and the throne that hovered over it.

In hindsight, Tony could have gone without the experience.

The titan was just as terrifying in his madness as Loki had predicted, a force of destruction that could wipe out whole civilizations. The memory filled Loki with ice-cold dread. It peeled all the arrogance away and had the Asgardian on the run like a scared rabbit. Seen like that, it had been quite a feat to keep his wits and outmaneuver his foe.

Tony suspected that it had only worked because Loki had conned people for millenia and could do it by rote. Scheming simply came natural to him. Even in a state of panic. He had convinced Thanos that he would be a willing minion, if he got a reward big enough. His price had been the absolute reign over Midgard.

Greed was something the titan could understand. So Loki had played the power-hungry villain (and in truth, that hadn’t been all that far out of character), but he had no intention of keeping his promises to Thanos. The plan had been to fake an invasion and then his own death. Loki figured that if he made a convincing effort to conquer earth and got killed in battle, there was no reason why his master should come looking for him. He’d been waiting for the right opportunity to die convincingly and sneak away.

Until he’d seen Tony fly towards the Void. Which had made his plans collapse like one of those card houses he used to build with Bruce. Before, it had all seemed like a game of Hnefatafl to him, with Midgard as the board. He’d been playing at war, placing people and Chitauri where he needed them, thinking in terms of moves and countermoves. But Tony had become a playing piece that he wasn’t willing to sacrifice.

“I kept telling the others that you weren’t the world-ruling type”, Tony said. “Nice to know that I was right about that at least. The whole thing really was just a scam.”

Loki relaxed in his mind. “I was sure that you would understand. Thanos watches me and my actions from afar. The Tesseract pulls his attention towards Midgard, and your planet sends out a wealth of information all the time, through satellites, television and wireless internet. I had to make sure that all your media would show me acting in the way Thanos wants me to act. Granted, my performance in Egypt was anything but subtle.”

A spark of humour made Loki’s thoughts light up. The effect was dazzling like the multi-faceted glitter of a chandelier.
“Admit it, you enjoyed that merry farce. I had to make an entrance with pomp and fanfare, to imitate the way a conqueror should look like in Thanos’ opinion. For all his power, he is just as simple in his worldview as my so-called brother. No finesse at all.”

“Ah, and now you expect us to have a good laugh about that. Because, as you said, I understand”, Tony nodded. “That megalomaniac speech on the Sphinx? Was kind of funny. I was highly entertained. Just like in Detroit with the whole hide and seek game. But you know what, cupcake?”

Tony concentrated on his surroundings for a moment, because he needed to swerve out of the way of a giant moray eel-thing that slithered through the portal. “No matter how charming you can be, you still sold us out to save your neck.”

Loki went very still in his mind.

“Here’s a funny coincidence”, Tony mused. “I had to make a similar decision just now when Coulson called: Me or the 9 million people of New York. Pain and death for my genius self or for a bunch of strangers that I happen to share a city with. Housewives. Taxi drivers. Hobos. Unsignificant people that I will probably never meet. And I may be a self-serving bastard most of the time, but there are limits. Like watching countless others go down in flames to spare myself. It’s called a conscience. Don’t know if you’ve heard about that. – Well, it was nice chatting with you, but I have a nuke to deliver. Get out of my head, loverboy.”

There was a moment of speechless surprise, then wounded pride flared up. “I’ve bared my very soul to you, and you dare to –”

“Throw you out? Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m doing. I’m in this mess because of you. In about ten minutes I will be very, very dead, sacrificed on the altar of your ego. So let’s not play soulmates here. Go. Scram.”

At least their chat had filled the time. Without really noticing, Tony had reached his destination. The wormhole yawned open directly before him like a monstrous gorge. He could see the black vastness that awaited him on the other side. As well as the alien fleet. It was fucking enormous.

In perfect timing, Bruce called. “Tony, your suit readings are getting strange that close to the dimensional rift. Can you still hear me?”

“Yeah, you sound a bit scratchy, like an old vinyl record, but other than that …”

“Chuntao just arrive. She’s in the elevator and on her way up to the roof. If your plan works, we can close the wormhole very soon. You have to be done by then, okay? Just fly the nuke through the portal and come back immediately, or you’ll be cut off from earth with no way to return.”

“I’m aware of that. Thanks, buddy”, Tony said. He took a deep breath. “But we both know that I can only do real damage when I’m in the middle of the fleet, not somewhere on the fringe.”

Coulson had been totally aware that it was a suicide mission. But Bruce was a scientist, not a fighter. No wonder he hadn’t grasped the implications. Tony just hoped that his friend would keep lodging in Stark Tower and stay safe even after he was gone. Leaving Bruce behind was one of his biggest regrets.

“What? Tony, don’t be stupid. The fleet stops being a problem as soon as we shut Loki’s machine down. They won’t be able to get at earth anymore. Bombing them is just a bonus. It’s not worth your life!”

“Yes, it is”, Tony countered. “They’ll still be out here, waiting for another chance. And holding a
Bruce started to argue, but that was the moment when Tony reached the portal and went through. Communication with Earth cut off abruptly. For a moment there was nothing but silence and the feeling of … wrongness … that this space exuded. Blackness whirled and billowed like it was somehow alive. Strange ships filled the void for as far away as Tony could see. There were hundreds or even thousands of them. They had an organic look that reminded him uncomfortably of the Alien films.

Tony couldn’t work out how big the vessels actually were because the dimensions didn’t make sense. The Void seemed to warp his perceptions even worse than the wormhole portal, and all his instincts screamed at him that he didn’t belong here. He tore his eyes away and concentrated on his suit’s readings. If he looked at the scene outside too long it would start scrambling his brain.

Loki had fallen silent, but Tony could still feel him at the edge of his awareness. The Void aroused an atavistic fear in him that almost drowned all coherent thought. His feelings bled all over the place. Tony was surprised that he still clung on instead of just cutting the mental connection. His ex was stubborn, Tony had to give him that.

"Please", Loki said.

Tony raised his eyebrows. Never thought he’d hear the God of Trickery ask politely. “Huh? What was that? Must have been an auditory hallucination. Was there something you wanted, your highness?"

“Please, Stark, just cast your weapon in their direction and leave. I beg you. There is still time to return, but not much. I can see SHIELD at work on your rooftop from my vantage point. They are close to success. You will be lost … forever … your soul will dissolve and vanish in the Void … I do not want you to die!” The last part came out as a silent shout. There was little left of Loki’s usual control and wow, was that a hint of true contrition?

Unimpressed, Tony made a beeline towards the fleet. “Should have thought of that earlier, Mr. ‘You-were-made-to-be-ruled’. I’ve got a mission here. Which is thwarting you and your toy army. And trust me, you are the absolutely last person who can convince me otherwise. You’ve screwed me over too many times, even when you actually screwed me. So, I’m done listening.” Tactical data flickered over his visor as he searched for the best route of attack. “Looks like you’ll have to watch me blow myself up and live with it. Sorry, not sorry.”

Loki’s mind flickered as he frantically searched for a way out of their stalemate. “I will strike a bargain with you. It will be worth your while”, he offered in desperation.

"Ah, like you did with Thanos?”, Tony sniped back. “You never keep your deals. Why should this time be different?”

“Because you can read my thoughts, you obstinate mortal!”, Loki yelled, at the end of his tether. His feelings wavered wildly between fear and anger, with a nice amount of guilt mixed in. “And shouldn’t you be glad that I won’t keep my deal with the titan? I was quite ready to leave Midgard to him when I first came here. Because truly, I had no reason to care for your planet and its people. But I care now.” Loki took several calming breaths. He made an effort to collect himself and regain his composure. More quietly he went on: “Stark, you must have noticed that my tactics for the invasion were sloppy at best. For an expert at warfare such as yourself it must have been obvious. I simply couldn’t bring myself to make an effort. And it’s all your fault. In the time as your PA
you’ve addled my brain with useless sentiment. I’ve become … attached to you. So listen to my proposal at least: If I give you a way to disable the Chitauri’s technology and defeat them with one single strike, will you turn back towards the portal and depart? At once?”

Tony stopped in mid-flight. Okay, that deal actually sounded too good to ignore. “Fine, I’ll listen.”

There was a palpable wave of relief from Loki. “The Chitauri are a cyborg race. Their bio-mechanisms are all connected to their mothership. It gives them the advantages of a hive-mind, but makes them quite vulnerable. I will show you which vessel to aim for. In exchange, you will stay alive and return safe and sound. Swear to me that you will not throw your life away.”

Tony contemplated the offer for a moment. “Only if you promise me the same thing”, he decided.

Confusion radiated out from Loki “What do you mean?”

“You’ll stay alive as well. No faking your death. When I return, I expect you to wait for me and hand yourself over. That’s not negotiable.”

Loki didn’t answer.

“Well? Time is running out. I can still go through with my original plan, you know. Blow myself up with the fleet. I like the idea of a binding oath, by the way. Reminds me of the whole ‘unbreakable vow’- scam. So pick something to swear on that you actually care about, hm?”

Loki swallowed. “Have I ever told you that you can be incredibly annoying?”

“I believe you did, yes.”

“Very well”, Loki said. The feeling of defeat was unmistakeable. It was far more convincing than any words, which could be twisted or taken back later. Tony couldn’t hold back a sharp victory grin, because the trickster had no way of faking this time. Not being able to lie must be a real pain.

“I’m waiting”, he purred.

Loki sighed. “On my mother’s life, I so swear.”

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The EMP still managed to fry Tony’s armor. Which was just typical. Fate was a bitch and had it in for him. He made it through the portal just in time, but in free fall. Earth came closer with enormous speed and Tony didn’t even need to calculate velocities. It was clear enough that he would end up as a broken heap on the ground. Well, unless something weird and exiting happened to save him in the very last second. He wouldn’t count that out. Close shaves had become something of his speciality.

Loki would have made a perfect deus ex machina. But the trickster had other problems at the moment. He’d been so occupied by their little talk that he’d become careless. Which meant that Bruce had spotted him.

Falling from the sky, Tony had a nice, unobstructed view of how their reunion went. Bruce stepped out of the JINX zone and turned green in seconds. Before Loki knew what hit him (hah, awesome pun), the giant grabbed his former best buddy and worked off the weeks of betrayal, heartbreak and bloodshed in the typical Hulk way. The telepathic connection broke at the first dizzying punch to the face.
Well, Loki certainly deserved a lengthy smashing, but it meant that Tony was on his own. He tried to make his armor respond again. No luck there. Not even a twitch from the repulsor units. He wondered if Loki would keep his promise anyway. Their bargain hadn’t been very clear on that point. Would it still count if Tony did his best to stay alive but didn’t manage?

A raging Bruce was the perfect opportunity to ‘die in battle’ as the trickster had originally planned. He could leave a fake body behind, mangled and broken, and slip away. It would probably get him off the hook with Thanos. Loki was very hard to kill, but Death by Hulk was a convincing way to go. If the trickster wanted an easy way out, here was his chance.

“Don’t”, Tony thought fervently, in case Loki could still hear him. “Just don’t. You know what that would do to Bruce.”

To make him wake up next to the shredded corpse of Loptr … the idea was nightmarish. It would be enough to destroy Bruce. Drive him back to the slums of Calcutta for good. He would never be able to forgive himself for slaughtering his friend. Even if said friend was a lying, backstabbing, self-serving prick.

Tony felt a flicker of awareness at the other end of their connection, but perhaps he was just imagining things. The ground came closer very fast. He started counting seconds in his head. His life expectancy dwindled to twenty, nineteen, eighteen, seventeen. He clenched his teeth and closed his eyes, bracing for impact.

The crash landing didn’t happen. He bounced off something soft and springy that worked just like the safety nets used by firefighters. (At the MIT he’d jumped out of his dorm window as a dare, so he knew what he was talking about.) When he opened his eyes he hovered ten feet over the ground, held by a force field that resembled a giant soap bubble.

Rune symbols flickered across the layers of energy. Colors swirled over the surface and shimmered with every movement he made. The effect was mesmerizing and magical, just like the fallen God who’d created it. Even the Hulk got distracted, grunted “Pretty toy!” and left Loki sprawled in the dirt to poke at the bubble.

The trickster groaned. Their eyes met.

"Huh, you saved my life instead of hightailing it. Brownie points for you”, Tony said. Loki twitched his fingers to lower Tony to the ground, which seemed to take every bit of energy he had left.

He looked like hell, and in Tony’s opinion that suited him nicely. The warrior prince outfit had been torn to shreds and the body parts that showed through were a single Bruce-bruise. “Ripped leather is definitely your style, by the way. Very ‘Shades of Gray’. Fetching.”

“Sometimes I really hate you, Stark”, Loki croaked. He tried to stand up, to save what was left of his dignity, but that didn’t work out too well. His face turned white as a sheet, his eyes became glassy, and then the so-called God sagged into a dead faint.

“Yeah, the feeling is mutual”, Tony murmured.

He studied his unconscious frenemy. Without his usual air of arrogance Loki looked incredibly young. How did Asgardian ageing work again? Thor used to talk about his kid brother like he’d hardly reached adolescence. Perhaps that was truer than one might think.

Tony had done a lot of stupid, unforgiveable things in his spoiled youth. Against all odds, he’d
managed to become a decent person anyway. It had taken a harsh wake-up-call, but nobody was unredeemable, right? The way Loptr bled all over the pavement right now, he was seriously reconsidering his life choices as well.

They were so alike in many ways that Tony had a pretty good idea how to get under Loptr’s skin and make the lesson stick. He shook his head and sighed. “Damn. Never thought I’d end up as parole officer for juvenile delinquents. At least life won’t get boring.” He unclipped his StarkPhone and stared at it for a while. “Now I’ll just have to convince Fury not to lock him up and throw away the key.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony stepped into the interrogation room. It had been five days since the Chitauri’s downfall, and Loki had been kept heavily sedated while they argued about his fate. One of the options was to simply keep him under, leave him in an artificial coma indefinitely. Fury was all for it, but Tony doubted that would work. They had an immortal magician with god-like powers on their hands. Drugging him just wouldn’t cut it for long. In his opinion, it would be much better to have an asset like Loki on their side than a) as a vegetable or b) angry enough to go down the Armageddon road. If there was one thing the old Viking tales agreed on, it was the fact that Loki couldn’t be kept under control even by extreme measures. He just got more dangerous with every attempt.

So Fury had reluctantly agreed to let Tony handle it. After all, he’d convinced Loki to destroy his own invasion army and turn himself in. That was quite a promising first step.

Loki was up and awake when Tony walked into the room. Instead of his shredded leather attire he’d been given jeans and a second-hand shirt. (Someone had a special sense of humour, because the shirt pictured Mickey Mouse as the magician’s apprentice, getting whacked by a broom.) Amazingly enough, Loki still managed to give off an aura of regality. Tony was fairly sure that prisoners of SHIELD normally didn’t look like they owned the place, but his former employee sat on his cheap office chair as if it was the throne of all creation.

Well, Tony wouldn’t play that game. He put on his blandest business smile and said: ”Mr Olson. I usually don’t bail out ex-employees who got themselves thrown into jail. But it’s been pointed out that you’re still on my payroll as my round-the-clock PA and therefore my responsibility. So let’s discuss your work performance so far.” He sat down, put his sunglasses aside and steepled his hands.

The first few minutes of their reunion were important. He had to avoid a drawn-out power struggle and keep the upper hand from the beginning or the whole arrangement wouldn’t work. So he’d decided to treat the God like any other wayward employee. That would at least deflate his ego. Apart from that, it was always fun to throw Loki a curveball and see how he reacted.

Tony opened a document folder and looked at it critically. “I have to say, your conduct was deplorable, Mr. Olson. Instead of acting in the best interest of Stark Industries, you secretly worked for a second employer – namely Thanos, the mad titan – which was a gross breach of contract. In addition, you have racked up 3843 hours of unscheduled vacation. That’s a new record, I’d say.” He leaned back on his chair and his smile showed teeth. “If you keep to office hours, instead of our former 24/7 arrangement, you should be able to work that off in about a year. You can start as soon as our discussion here is over.” He shut the folder and put it back into the briefcase. “I’ll expect you to act as a model employee and do everything I bloody well tell you to, because I’m actually your boss and not your fuck buddy. Let’s not mix that up again anytime soon. So, here’s your new contract. You won’t like most of it. Sign on the dotted line, please.”

He shoved several pages of small print over. Loki had lost the princelier-than-thou face during his speech and stared at him. Tony liked the unguarded look much better. In his experience, Loki was maneuverable as long as you kept him off balance.

Showing gratitude was part of the same strategy, but not a hardship, either. Loptr had given up a lot for him and under all that pride and bluster lay centuries of rejection. If Tony could reach him
by soothing those feelings, he was more than ready to try. He put a lengthy box on top of the contract. "And this is for saving my life. Jarvis told me what kind of gift might be considered traditional. He dug out some Viking tales about a foldable ship and a spear that finds its target and returns by itself. I'm not a magician or a dwarf smith, but stuff like that, I can do. So here. Go ahead and unwrap."

"I'm your prisoner and you brought me a present?", Loki asked with a surprised laugh. He opened the box and pulled out a sleek, elegant dagger that Tony had forged with his own hands. The blade had the rune ‘thurisaz’ (conflict/change) written on one side and ‘gebo’ (gift/goodwill) on the other. It was collapsible like his briefcase armor. In miniaturized form the dagger was especially easy to carry and conceal. Designing it had been a challenge and Tony was quite proud of the result. Loptr looked at it in wonder.

"Yeah, seemed the right thing to do. See the small button on the hilt? It activates a guiding system similar to intelligent missiles. For the target-finding, to resemble that famous spear of Odin. Also, you can call the dagger back to your hand with help of a personal ID. That's what the other stuff in the gift box is for. Just in case you were wondering."

Loptr raised his eyebrows as he pulled out a ring. It had been forged to fit his hand and looked simple but elegant. He cocked his head and twirled it between his fingers. "You want me to put this on?"

Tony shrugged. "As I said, it's to call the dagger back. No other significance. A ring seemed the most practical design, that's all. Doesn't mean anything."

"I see", Loki said. "Very well." He held Tony's eye when he solemnly pushed the ring over his finger. His expression left no doubt that he didn't buy Tony's unconcerned act, and okay … perhaps the gesture was slightly symbolic. The God wasn't the only one who could act possessive. If Tony had to wear his frigging magical signature, he wanted to put a sign of ownership on Loki as well. Not exactly a romantic motivation, but their relationship had always been more of a cockfight than a love affair. Loki looked at his hand and rubbed at the silver band. "In Asgard there is a tradition called baugr gefa. It means that a liege lord gives rings to the men who served him well in battle."

"Sure, it that's the way you want to see it", Tony said. "Works fine with me."

Loki’s mouth twitched. "I take it you haven’t cleared this with Fury. Honestly, Stark, we are in an interrogation cell and you give me a weapon?"

Tony shrugged. "If you wanted to go berserk and attack SHIELD minions, a dagger would hardly make you more dangerous than you already are."

"True."

"I assume that you don’t plan a dramatic escape, or you wouldn’t still be here. Now read the contract, will you?"

Loki nodded and pulled the folder over.

Tony leaned back and watched his PA closely, while Loki faced the terms of his probation for the first time. It started out as a standard job contract, but got rather unusual later on. When Loki reached the safety measures that Tony had included, his face went tight. "You expect me to agree to this? To sign my freedom away? Why in Hel's name would I …"
Tony interrupted him in mid-snit, because he’d expected this reaction and had little patience for Loki’s dramatics just now. The God had been frolicking around and messing with people for millennia. A single year to make amends wasn’t too much to ask, for heaven’s sake. “Well, for one, because you owe me. Big time. Not to mention the rest of New York.” He crossed his arms and gave Loki a sharp smile. “Apart from that, you have nowhere else to go and will need our help when Thanos comes gunning for you. Just a guess here, but I think he’ll be pretty pissed. You can keep running till the end of time or make a stand.” Tony cocked his head and studied Loki. "Work for me again, this time for real, and you won’t have to face him alone. I’m known to be pretty protective of my employees. Remember how awesome we were as a team? Perhaps we can even rope Bruce in when he’s stopped hating your guts. I bet together we can take care of the Thanos problem for good.”

Loki made a disparaging noise. “Others have tried, who weren’t mere mortals from a backwater realm”, he said, but well, that wasn’t a ‘no’. He played with the dagger in his hand and stared at the contract. It didn’t leave him any loopholes.

Even the rest of the Avengers had been forced to admit that Loki couldn’t stab them in the back under these conditions. In Tony’s humble opinion, the contract was a work of genius. He had hammered out most of the terms with Coulson, but for the more creative parts he’d gotten extra help. There was one person in SHIELD who always came through when you needed out-of-the-box thinking and some truly quirky ideas ...

(4 days ago)

Tony knocked on the office door of Darcy Lewis with a Chocolate Sprinkled Caramel Frappuccino as his bribe. The coffee at SHIELD was a crime against humanity and Darcy’s brain worked best on a sugar rush, so two birds with one stone.

He stepped into her office, which she’d managed to make cosy against all odds. It had the size of a shoebox and was filled with interesting clutter. The in-tray on her desk held a rubik’s cube, purple lip stick, a glow-in-the-dark jojo and a small potted venus flytrap. Her office lamp was covered with glittery stickers. A picture frame displayed a Rhianna concert shirt (with impressive bust size) that had been signed by the Dalai Lama. The newest addition to the décor was a popcorn machine under the desk.

Darcy looked up from the computer screen and followed the way Tony’s eyes went. “What? Comes in handy with all the drama around here. Working for SHIELD is like constant movie night. You have no idea.”

“I might have. Against all odds, I find myself working for them, too. Ready to swap some popcorn for this outstanding Frappuccino?”


Tony enjoyed the view. He’d told the barista to add a drinking straw and now this foresight paid off. When Darcy Lewis sucked through a straw, eyes closed in bliss, red lips pumping, the heat went up in a thirty feet radius.

He looked around for something to sit on. The office didn’t leave much room for guests. A folded garden chair leaned against a wall, so he went for it.
“Mind the turtle”, Darcy said and dove to the floor to save the animal he’d almost stepped on. It was small enough to fit on the palm of her hand and easily overlooked. “Fred is evidence from a case and I’m doing the pet sitting. Looks like he broke out of his box again. No idea how he can move so fast.”

Tony studied the turtle. It stared at him with a wrinkly face and ancient eyes.

“He’s waltzing all over the place. Yesterday I found him inside the snacks drawer of my file cabinet. I think he can teleport.” She put the turtle into a cat box that stood in the corner, closed the lid and then handed Tony a paper bag full of popcorn.

Tony mouthed ‘Fred the Teleporting Turtle’ to himself. It figured that Darcy Lewis had the weirdest pet in existence. He sat down and munched. Cinnamon flavoured. Nice.

“So, what can I do for you?”, Darcy asked. “You only show your face here when you want something.”

“Brainstorm. Any idea how to rope a notorious liar into working for us without nasty surprises?”

“Ah, Loki”, she said knowingly. News had gotten around, obviously. Not surprising, because Darcy was the queen of gossip intel. “Sure that you don’t want to shove him back to Asgard? Make him their problem instead of ours?”

Tony sighed. “Has Thor told you about the Asgardian legal system? Because, you know, there isn’t one. Just an absolute ruler who hands out punishments at whim. I highly doubt that ever did anything for Loki, apart from making him rebellious, bitter and more fucking dangerous. Can you imagine what they would have to come up with to even scratch at his pain threshold? Just, ugh. So I wanna try something a bit more civilised.” He shrugged. “Everyone deserves human rights and a second chance. That should be the official Avengers motto. I mean, look at our merry band of ex-murderers. Loki fits right in. And from a more cynical point of view, we desperately need him. There’s a mad superpowered immortal out there who gets off on genocide and destroys planets as a pastime. It’s very likely that we’ll have to defend earth against him soon, because he wants the Tesseract and didn’t manage to collect on the first try. Loki is powerful, cunning, and a trained war strategist. When the next alien attack comes, I want him on the team.”

Darcy looked at him wide-eyed. “The next attack, huh? Now I want to crawl under the bed and hug my turtle. Too much information, dude. Okay, we need Loki. I’m all convinced.”

Tony raised his popcorn bag in a salute. “So, any ideas how to keep him on a tight leash? I’ve managed to bring him in, but if I give him any leeway at all in the near future, he’s going to screw me over and run, I just know it.”

“Uh … let me think.”

Tony leaned back and entertained himself by flipping pieces of popcorn into his mouth. Some of them even landed where they should. Darcy joined in by blowing her Frappucino into a bubbly froth and making obscene noises with the straw. She was his kind of girl.

After a while Darcy said: “Okay, so you can read his mind if he lets you, right?”

“Yeaaah. Not that I’m keen on repeating the experience. I like to be alone in my brain. Sharing headspace with him feels like … one of those hug parties where you’re supposed to strip and cuddle with perfect strangers, which is awkward beyond belief and even worse if you have to do it with your ex.”
“Has anyone ever told you that you lead a weird, weird life, Tony?”

“Jarvis. Almost daily.”

Darcy nodded seriously. “Anyway, if you want to make sure that he doesn’t go rogue, that’s the obvious way. Just make him say something like ‘I’m an obedient little minion and not planning anything sinister’ every day at breakfast. You’ll know if he really means it, or if he’s lying.”

Tony hummed. “I think the wording needs some editing. At least the minion part. Or he’ll rip out my throat right here at SHIELD. But other than that … Not bad, actually.”

His head filled with phrases to use. Tony started to grin. Perhaps telepathy could be tolerable if done the right way.

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Loki didn’t look like he appreciated the edited version. More like he’d bitten into a lemon.

Point 16 of the contract – the words he was supposed to recite every day – now read: “I plan to make amends for the damage I’ve done and mean no harm to Midgard and its citizens. To prove this, I will obey the conditions of my parole to the best of my abilities.” Not nearly as humiliating as Tony could have made it.

Loki opened his mouth, but Tony folded his arms and cut him off. “You once told me that if you loose a gamble, you pay the prize. Well, this is it. I’ve won fair and square and I’m letting you off lightly. So don’t you dare get bitchy at me now.”

He stared Loki down until the God nodded reluctantly.

“Besides, if I didn’t take precautions against being double-crossed, you’d scoff at me for being an easily duped moron. Speaking of which, do you have a problem with point 17?”

“Ah, the ankle tracker. Lovely.” There was a sly sparkle in Loki’s eyes and he smiled provocatively. “Not as such. I assume this is a ‘White Collar’ fantasy. You made us watch the series often enough and as I recall, you felt quite inspired by it afterwards. Shall I act the captured bad boy with you as my handler?”

Tony snorted. “If you want to play it that way, be my guest.”

“What concerns me far more is that the contract calls it an anti-magical device.” Loki narrowed his eyes. “I will not be shackled to something that makes me a pathetic creature, helpless in the face of danger.”

“Like the rest of us muggles, you mean? Here, have a look at it before you work yourself into a snit.” Tony got the device out of his suitcase and put it on the table. Basically it looked and worked like any normal ankle tracker used in law enforcement. With its help, Loptr could be confined to a limited area, and Jarvis would be able to pick up his signal anywhere on the planet. Which made running off a real challenge. To be on the safe side, Tony had also included a downscaled version of the JINX. “Jarvis, activate”, he said and the ankle tracker powered up with a humming noise.

Loki looked apprehensive for a moment, but soon his usual smugness returned. “You are aware that this will hardly stop me from doing anything I want? Calling it ‘anti-magical’ is quiet boastful for the little power it actually has.”

“Yeah, that’s fine by me”, Tony shrugged. “Taking away your powers wasn’t the aim, anyway.
Magic is a core part of who you are and I’m not that cruel. Instead, the JINX will throw off your spell work. Jarvis is going to interfere with whatever you’re trying to do, so using magic will become a serious nuisance. Kind of like doing my engineering stuff with a glitchy 98 Microsoft computer. Nerve wracking. Unreliable.” Tony grinned. “You’ll never know in advance what works and what doesn’t, and some spells won’t just fizzle out but have unexpected and unpleasant results. In other words, you’d better restrain yourself and avoid more complicated magic. Quit the whole WizardGod stuff on your own.”

While the explanation went on, Loki started looking more and more mutinous. “You know nothing of my magic, Stark”, he sneered. “What I’ve shown you so far were mere cantrips. Do you really expect me to tie my own hands? Bend to your will like an obedient serf? I could find a way around the obstacles you invented, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, no doubt, so please don’t. It’s not supposed to be a challenge. Also, Jarvis will know whenever you try anything. He’ll interfere first and report to me second, to be on the safe side. You’ve sweet-talked him before and he won’t risk that again. By the way, he’s still miffed about the fact that you used him as a power-tool for stealing the Tesseract.” Tony smiled thinly. “So am I. But Jarvis is actually running the building you’ll live in and he can be quite ingenious in his revenges. Expect cold showers and burned toast while you’re grounded.”

Loki crossed his arms over the Disney shirt. “Grounded is such a nice euphemism. I suppose it means you’ll keep me locked up in your tower like a dangerous beast. Is that what you plan, if I sign my life away to you?”

Tony took a deep breath. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, we are talking about a year of slightly restricted freedom and an ankle tracker, which is really, really harmless for the amount of damage you did. Could you stop being such a drama queen about everything I –”

Before their talk could deteriorate any further, they were interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Hi, everyone still alive in there?”, Darcy asked brightly from the other side. “Because I’m supposed to come in and collect the contract for Coulson to make triplicates. And gory battlegrounds are so not my scene.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “We’ve managed to control ourselves. No one’s bleeding out on the floor. Still discussing the contract, though. Mr Olson hasn’t signed.”

Darcy came in and grinned. She’d put her hair up into pigtails and looked more like a twelve-year-old than a secret agent. “Well, you can’t fault him for that. Who would want to be in your custody? That’s a scary thought, Tony.”

“Thanks. You’re really helping me sell it to him”, Tony said and made introductions. “Loptr Olson, wayward employee, meet Darcy Lewis, data analyst. You should like her. She tasered Thor.”

Loptr forgot his recent snit and leaned forward, eyes sparkling with interest. “Really?”

“Well, he startled me. But we became friends afterwards. Sorry to disappoint. Okay … Tony said that you’ll need a make-over before he can take you out of SHIELD. Good point, or half of New York will try to Lynch you. So I brought some things from the drug store.” She sat a hemp bag with the slogan ‘Proud to be dopey’ on the institutional desk and started unpacking. It took quite a while. There was instant hair dye in lots of colours, scissors, brushes, contact lenses and a huge variety of female styling stuff that Tony hadn’t even known existed.

She walked around Loki and studied him critically from all sides. “Hmm, I think a Grunge look
should suit you. Or something a bit punky.”

“Fine by me, as long as he isn’t recognizable anymore”, Tony said. “And by the way, Mr. Grumpy and Paranoid, that should answer your question. Do I plan to imprison you? Nope. If I wanted you in jail, I would just leave you here at SHIELD.”

Loki gave him a haughty look. “Be that as it may. You are still being unreasonable in your demands. This tawdry masquerade is the best example. Instead of your crude Midgardian methods to disguise me I could simply use a glamour. I am, after all, the God of Trickery and famous for my shape shifting. If you didn’t insist on interfering with my magic, there would be no risk of discovery.”

Tony laughed. “Nice try. Not up to your usual levels of persuasion, though.”

Thwarted, Loki turned to Darcy and glared at her. She probably looked like an easier outlet for his temper. “I hope you know what you are doing, mortal. If you make me the target of mockery, I will throw you through the wall.”

“Wow, chill”, Darcy said, not in the least intimidated. She grabbed the scissors. “I’ll have you know that even Natasha Romanova took my advice about nail polish. Besides, with your looks, you’ll be stunning no matter what I do.”

That piece of flattery was a bit obvious, in Tony’s opinion, but Loki went for it. Mollified, he leaned back on his chair and let Darcy start on her styling job. While she cut his hair, he asked in a disinterested voice: “So, what do you plan for me, if I sign your contract, Stark? I believe your judiciary system doesn’t leave many options apart from putting someone in jail.”

“Actually, it does, even if we aren’t big on torture like your advanced planet. There’s the social worker approach. Rehabilitation. I plan to sentence you to 3843 hours of community service. Granted, destroying half of New York isn’t exactly graffiti spraying, but … “ Tony frowned in thought. “Huh, perhaps in your scale of thinking, it is. To use commoners as cannon fodder must be a minor offence, the way you were raised. I mean, you are a real live prince. Just like in one of those fairy tales. Beauty and the Beast comes to mind. Aristocrats play at war when they are bored, that’s kind of traditional. Or it was, until we had a revolution and put a stop to kings. Why should you care about the average Joe?” He drummed his fingers on the desk.

“Is this deep analysis of my upbringing leading somewhere?”, Loki asked and cocked his head to the side so Darcy could go on with her grooming.

It was an impersonal gesture, the way you would treat a minor servant. Loki seemed to have forgotten that she was even there, which proved Tony’s point. Of course Loki didn’t feel guilty about the slaughter, because he was the son of a God-king and normal people weren’t his concern. They could be useful, like furniture, but he didn’t see them as real. Tony had to start with changing that attitude, or Loki would never truly understand what he had done.

“Just fine tuning my plans where to put you to work. To answer your question, you’ll be cleaning up your mess. In the streets of Manhattan. That’s what I’ve been doing, by the way, together with the rest of the Avengers, so don’t even start about getting your hands dirty.” Tony’s eyes turned sharp and his mouth formed a grim line. “Digging people out of collapsed buildings is not a fun experience. We’ve mostly pulled out corpses those last three days.”

Darcy put the hair dye aside and handed Loki a pair of grey contact lenses. “Survival rates drop drastically after 48 hours, right? At least, that’s true about earthquakes. And Manhattan sure looks like it was hit by a major one.”
“Yeah, those flying snakes just smashed through everything in their way. The whole city reeks like a slaughterhouse. There could be survivors under the rubble even now, but time is ticking away.”

He turned to Loki again. “So let’s stop the dancing around. Just swallow your pride for once and sign the bloody contract. It’s the best offer you’ll get and I’m losing patience. If you don’t like the conditions, try to haggle out the details with Fury instead.”

Loki grimaced. “I’d rather not.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Loki took his sweet time to put the contact lenses in. Granted, he’d never seen how they were used, so perhaps he wasn’t just drawing it out to be contrary. After what felt like eternity he took the pen that waited on the desk and signed with a long-suffering sigh.

The runes were the same he’d once put on Tony, so it actually was his name and not just doodles or a variety on ‘fuck you sideways’.

“Perfect timing”, Darcy said. “I’m all done here.”

Tony took the contract before Loki could reconsider. Then he admired Darcy’s work. There wasn’t much left of the Asgardian God.

Loki looked like the wannabe lead guitarist of a garage band. His hair had been bleached a striking white-blond, dark roots showing, and styled into a spiky mess. The lack of colour matched his winter pale skin and made the sharp cheekbones stand out. Metallic eye shadow and lipstick disguised his features nicely. The effect looked stunning, in a shabby glamour kind of way.

Tony whistled. “Huh. Never knew I had a thing for Billy Idol”, he said. “Okay, let’s join you up with a rescue team. Time for your chores, chop, chop.”

Chapter End Notes

Here’s my new favorite AO3-stories in the Avengers and Thor universe:

1) plumadesatada: The Affairs of Wizards; Real Men (wear tutus); Abyss
2) Melannen: Safeword
3) melonbutterfly: The Avengers Meeting
4) torakowalski: Learn How To Tell You Goodbye; Can't Put A Number On Love
5) galaxysoup: Few So Generous
6) proantagonist: Bargaining
7) scifigrl47: Weighing of the Heart
8) Arkada: Foreign Relations; Accepted
9) copperbadge: Ain’t nobody’s business if I do
10) valtyr: Some Assembly Required; Extinction
Chapter 13

After the Chitauri attack Tony had helped a lot of volunteer groups with the heavy lifting, and it was amazing how different they all had been, depending on what kind of people had come together to help. Some had an almost paramilitary vibe, especially if they were led by veterans, and moved methodically from one search grid to the next. Student teams often went to the other extreme, individualistic and chaotic. Then there were close-knitted groups of families or neighbours who concentrated on their own living area. A lot of those teams still existed now, two months later, and the city government had started to organize them in a more efficient fashion.

Groups could get themselves registered, and would be sent where they were most needed instead of combing the streets more or less randomly. They got outfitted with the necessary equipment and were offered medical and psychological help. The volunteers mostly worked in areas that were hard to access or blocked off by too much rubble for the heavy machinery to get through. No team was kept in the same area for long. The switches made it easier to stay detached. Gruesome places like the Bronxville Elementary School got alternated with areas where the number of casualties had been low and the work only consisted of moving debris.

There was one volunteer group in Jackson Heights that Tony had liked from the start. It stood out because of its vibrant team spirit and ethnic diversity, consisting of two dozen people with wildly different backgrounds. They even had a mutant as a member, which had given Tony a great idea for a cover story to explain away Loki’s superhuman strength and other eccentricities.

The leader was a head nurse from St. Barnabas Hospital (recently retired) with a motherly no-nonsense attitude. Mrs Washington looked like a well-aged Queen Latifah and had a whole clan of children and grandchildren that she presided over. Half of the volunteer team consisted of Washingtons.

She hadn’t been impressed by Iron Man at all, when he’d dropped in to help, and had ordered him around just like any other of her charges. There weren’t many people who’d say “Be a good boy now, dear” to a billionaire in a battle suit.

Tony was confident that she could handle a Norse God just as well. Even if she didn’t know who she actually had on her hands.

He’d spun her a tale about how he’d taken in a young mutant as a favour to Charles Xavier and offered him an internship as his personal assistant. Loptr Olson had powers similar to Wolverine – inhuman strength and accelerated healing – which made him ideal for rescue work. So Tony didn’t want to waste him on a desk job, if the kid could do more important stuff instead. He was ready to loan him out during office hours, as long as the team could use the help.

Mrs Washington had gladly accepted the offer and promised to take good care of the young man. Loptr Olson had just recently moved into town from a small settlement in Iceland, to be around more people with the X-gene, and he still felt a little lost in his new life.

“Dani will be glad to have another mutant on the team”, she said. “And trust me, nobody will mind if your young man behaves foreign or talks a bit funny. Mrs Patel over there doesn’t leave the house without a ghunghat veil over her face, and she’s been living in New York for thirty years.”

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The building complex which the team had been assigned this week looked surprisingly nice. It was
an old-fashioned brownstone that was mostly intact, apart from the upper level on the left wing. The roof had caved in and some flats had been destroyed, but that was it.

Well, the team could certainly use some light work after a week of wading through knee-high heaps of broken glass in the financial district. Tony parked his Ferrari as close as possible and took out the suitcase armour to fly the rest of the way, which was easier than trying to walk through all the rubble. He landed inside a courtyard that had been a communal garden before the attack. The scenery looked beautiful in an apocalyptic kind of way. Huge chunks of concrete had landed between the trees and reared up like pieces of modern art. Household items and furniture were scattered all over the lawn and flower beds. The team was busy picking up everything that looked like someone might care to get it back. A chipped tea pot inherited from Granny could be an incredible treasure if you’d lost everything else.

“Hi, Mr. Stark”, Dani called into the sky and waved enthusiastically. Recently, Tony had made it a habit to pick Loki up from work and feed him huge amounts of comfort food in the Ferrari, which meant he’d become a well-known figure to the team. “Could you come over and give me a hand with that mazmoom goddamn balcony railing? It didn’t look too heavy, but it’s stuck somehow.”

“Sure”, Tony said through the speakers and landed next to the young mutant. He studied the twisted piece of metal. A flower pot still clung to one end like it didn’t want to let go.

“I’d ask Loptr for help like usual”, Dani explained, “but one of the Washington girls got him busy climbing trees.”

Dani pointed at the ancient oak that was the centrepiece of the garden. It was covered in bright patches which gave the illusion that a flock of white doves had landed on it. At a closer look, they were envelopes. Someone’s collection of love letters had been blown across the courtyard and settled in between the leafs. Loptr was busy collecting them.

He moved among the branches with confident elegance and no fear of height whatsoever. The fifty feet drop beneath his feet didn’t seem to bother him. When he reached one of the main branches he strolled along it with perfect balance, just the way a normal person would use a sidewalk. Tony opened his visor and shook his head in wonder. “Wow. I get why they asked him. Not a city boy like the rest of us, is he?”

Loki stepped off the branch and let himself fall several feet to land on a tree limb further down. He looked like a woodland sprite or one of those Tolkien elves.

Well, apart from the funky hair style and the Darcy-chosen wardrobe. Today he wore skin tight jeans with holes at strategical places, which Tony whole-heartedly approved of, and a Pacman t-shirt.

Darcy had probably been tempted to go for ‘Space Invaders’, but caution had won out. To blow Loki’s cover just for of a bad pun would have been awkward.

Loki swung himself up again with graceful ease and Dani watched the acrobatics with a fond smile. “He doesn’t look much like a mutant usually. Not like me, I mean. And then there are moments like this, when he does stuff that seems just … otherworldly.”

Tony nodded. “You really like him, don’t you?”, he asked and started to pull at the balcony railing. It wasn’t much of a challenge for his armour.

“Yes. What’s not to like? At first he had a problem with me and my looks, I think. That was pretty weird for someone who’s got the X-gene himself. But he’s gotten over it after the first few days.
And he’s from Iceland so I guess he’s never seen someone with my skin colour before. Even here it isn’t exactly common to be bright blue.”

Yeah, Tony had noticed that reaction as well. Loptr had seemed really thrown by Dani’s looks. There had to be a story behind that and Tony had wondered if he should ask Thor, but he’d decided to let it go. To involve his brother would have felt too much like prying. “He’s okay with it now?”

Dani grinned and showed white, pointy teeth. “You could say that. See, there’s this guy who kept bugging me. The team is great otherwise, but Mr Couver … well, you can’t get along with everybody. Anyway, we were doing the clean-up in some big office building and Couver had the third floor all for himself. Around noon the guy storms out dripping wet and bright blue, because someone meddled with the sprinklers and filled them with printer ink.” His eyes danced at the memory. They were an ordinary hazel, but with small golden spots like fairy dust. “Have you ever gotten that stuff on your fingers and tried to wash it off? Doesn’t work. Well, that was the last we saw of Mr. Couver. He didn’t come back the next day. Nobody was too heartbroken. Of course, I don’t know for sure if it was Loptr who pulled that prank. He didn’t admit to anything. But he kind of radiated satisfaction afterwards, so I thanked him anyway.”

Tony snorted. “Oh, that was Loptr alright. I’ve become familiar with his brand of humour. He got annoyed with me once and superglued my beard to the bed cover while I was sleeping. I had to go at it with scissors to get free. My goatee never quite recovered from the mistreatment. Okay, I’ll be gone for a sec and fly this thing to the rubbish heap.” He folded the metal into a maneuverable parcel and zoomed off. Next to the courtyard entrance lay a whole pile of concrete chunks, smashed furniture and broken household machines. The team had carried the stuff out so it could be picked up by the city’s garbage vans. - Whenever one managed to come by.

When he returned, Loki was still busy frolicking through the treetops. He looked actually happy up there and Tony decided he could spare the time and let him be. Appointments could wait. Besides, chatting with Dani was always nice.

The young man, who’s actual name was Daniyal Malik, studied as a first-year at the university of New York. He was majoring in Journalism with a minor in Philosophy and determined to make the world a better place. Tony had never possessed that sort of naïve idealism, but he was ready to admire it in other people. Dani got along with everybody, no matter his exotic looks and his slight Pakistani accent, and the whole team had kind of adopted him as their mascot. He had a sunny personality that could lighten up even the darkest places, and in their line of work, that was more helpful then super-strength or instant healing.

“Do you know what Loptr did in Iceland? For a living, I mean?”, Dani asked. “It’s just that he isn’t much older than me and way more self-assured. I really wish I could project authority like he does.”

Tony frowned. “Authority? He doesn’t challenge Mrs Washington as team leader, does he?”

“Huh? No, nothing of that sort. It’s just that we had a cave-in some days ago, in the ruins of another apartment block”, Dani told him. “Sam fell into the cellar and broke his leg, and there were heaps of loose rubble threatening to slide down and bury him. Everybody was panicking, even Mrs Washington. I mean, Sam’s her nephew so she had a pretty good reason. Loptr took over and, man, he knows how to make everyone listen.” Dani shook his head in admiration. “He got the whole team calmed down, organized the rescue, and Sam got out okay. Mrs Washington was so impressed that she’s leaving Loptr in charge now whenever she doesn’t have time for the volunteer stuff.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “He’s worked himself up to second-in-command already? Figures. Well, if
nobody minds that he got himself promoted, that’s fine by me. Uh, in Iceland he did survival training for tourists, as far as I know. Wonder why he didn’t tell me about the cave-in on our way home? It sounds quite dramatic.”

Dani shrugged. “That day was pretty shitty and I bet he wasn’t too talkative afterwards. We dug out a family down in the cellars. They’d holed up seeking shelter and got buried alive. When we found what was left of them … well, the bodies lay there still hugging each other. Two adults, two kids, and they clung to each other while they suffocated. Loptr took it pretty badly.”

“He did?” Tony tried his best not to sound too surprised or hopeful. It shouldn’t be news that his intern could show some basic empathy for other people.

Dani frowned. “Perhaps you should tell him to take a time-out. He was coping okay the first few weeks, didn’t let the work get to him too much. But lately he’s been acting like it’s all his fault. Survivor’s guilt, you know. It isn’t healthy.”

Tony just nodded and bit back every comment that came to mind. Before he could think of something to change the topic, Loki dropped out of the tree and came strolling over. He had little twigs and leafs in his hair and Tony’s fingers twitched to pick them off.

“I see my chauffeur has arrived”, Loki drawled in his best upper class voice.

Dani grinned at him, pointed teeth flashing. “And he drives a Ferrari”, he nodded. “I’m so envious, you have no idea.”

Loki gave a sigh. “Alas, he never lets me take the wheel. On the other hand, the on-board catering is amazing. Just the other day, he fed me roasted moose in honey sauce. A dozen huge fillets. From a restaurant called SKÁL.”

“Really?” Dani’s eyebrows climbed up.

Tony shrugged. “Have you ever seen Loptr eat when he’s exhausted? I don’t know if your X-gene gives you a higher metabolism, but I can tell you, with him the food just vanishes. Which is our clue to leave, I’d say. There’s wild boar with huckleberries waiting.” He put his hand in the small of Loki’s back and guided him away, waving goodbye over his shoulder.

“Hey, save me a slice, mate!”, Dani called after them.

“Done!”, Loki called back. When they were out of hearing distance, he murmured: “You’re pushy. More so than usual. I take it there is a reason?”

“Never thought you’d be the type for lengthy small talk. But yeah, there is a reason. SHIELD called. We have an appointment that starts about now.” Tony pushed his visor down to check the time. “No hurry, though, I’ve got a reputation to uphold. Being punctual just wouldn’t do.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Of course not. And are you going to tell me what this appointment is about? Or can I expect a thrilling surprise?”

“Dr. Foster discovered something that they want your expertise on. It sounded pretty ominous, but, well, that’s SHIELD. Let’s hope they’re just being overdramatic. Hey, have you ever actually met the lady your brother fell for? It’s pretty funny he went for a nerd. I’d have thought his type would be more … buxom amazon with skimpy leather dress.”

“Stark, do me a favour. If you drag me back to SHIELD and expect me to go willingly, do not talk about Thor’s love life on the way.”
Tony grinned behind his visor. “Deal.”
Chapter 14

The briefing was a small affair. There weren’t many people who’d be able to understand Jane Foster’s work or give an educated opinion. The only other scientists present were Bruce and Dr. Selvig. Coulson had invited himself as a representative of SHIELD. And of course there was Darcy, who liked to act as Jane’s sidekick and had a knack for defusing explosive situations. Tony was really glad to see her, because the tension in the conference room was already giving him a headache and they were hardly past the introductions.

Loki had retreated behind cool politeness and that maddening superior smile, Jane was acting all jumpy, and Bruce radiated unease like gamma rays. This was actually the first time he faced Loki since hulking-out and bouncing him all over the pavement.

The two of them had gone to great pains to avoid each other in Stark Tower. Bruce had stayed in his lab, Loki had stayed in his living quarters, and both pretended that they were totally happy with their hermit lifestyle. At the moment they sat as far apart as the small conference table allowed and watched each other out of the corner of their eyes whenever the other wasn’t looking. Just like a pair of crushing teenagers. Tony couldn’t decide if he found that cute or annoying.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake”, he murmured under his breath, “kiss and make up already.” Darcy suppressed a giggle and Coulson gave him a warning look.

Jane was mostly oblivious. He pegged her as the type of scientist who immersed herself in her work until nothing else existed, especially not other people. Well, he could relate.

At least that meant she came to the point without unnecessary chitchat. “Okay, let’s start?”, she said. Coulson gave a short nod, which she returned, and then went on: “You’re here because my work on Einstein-Rosen bridges produced some very unusual data. I don’t want to bias your opinion in advance, so please, review the information for yourself. Perhaps you’ll come to another conclusion than me. That would be a relief, in fact.” She sent a data package around with a flick of her fingers and Tony watched it upload on his StarkPad. (The motion-sensing technology necessary for this sleight of hand was his own invention and a present to Fury. If Tony had to work for government goons, at least he didn’t want to be inconvenienced by dumb tech.)

He noticed that Darcy had been left out, which made sense. Astrophysics and higher mathematics weren’t exactly her field. Instead of a StarkPad she held the bowl of snacks that every conference table seemed to sprout and rummaged through the goodies.

Jane hesitated, looked at Loki and said: “Uh, perhaps I shouldn’t have … I’m not sure if you can …”

“If I can read numbers?”, Loki sneered. “Or use a glorified iPad? Rest assured that I’m not a complete moron.”

Jane frowned. “Okay, it’s just that Thor said Asgardians don’t meddle in our kind of science. And he melted one of my computers by accident.”

Loki snorted. “Then it’s your luck that I am neither Thor nor Asgardian, and that my work for Stark Industries made it necessary to understand earth technology.”

“Yeah, trust me, he can follow the maths perfectly fine”, Tony backed him up, even though the dig against StarkPads was just low. “In his time as my PA we worked out a way to translate his...
magical worldview into science. Just assume that he can follow your theories on a similar level as
Bruce and me.”

Jane brightened visibly. “Really? That’s great.” She beamed at Loki. “I’m terribly bad at
simplifying stuff and if I can treat you as a colleague that makes everything so much easier. Your
different background should make your views on astrophysics invaluable. A radically new
perspective often gives the best results.”

Loki blinked, surprised by her enthusiasm. Life on Asgard sure hadn’t prepared him for meeting
nerds. (And yeah, Tony had caught the slip about not being Asgardian, but that was a mystery for
later.) Anyway, Jane’s devotion to her work meant that everything else about Loki wasn’t really
relevant for her, as long as she could bounce ideas off him. She didn’t care about his past or his
issues. Perhaps this meeting would go smoother than Tony had thought.

Loki focused on his StarkPad to avoid further puzzling interaction with mortals, and Tony followed
suit. He knew about Jane’s work in general and it wasn’t difficult to see where her newest
discovery was going. Wormholes, of course. But the numbers on his StarkPad were really strange
and not at all what he’d expected.

Just when he opened his mouth to ask the obvious question, Bruce beat him to it. “I’m not sure if
I’m reading this wrong. It looks like dozens of wormholes have opened all across the globe in the
last few days, but they are … microscopic? Some of them are just detectable on a nano or quantum
level?”

Jane nodded forcefully. “Yes, exactly. That’s my conclusion as well. I’ve never seen anything
similar before. And the phenomenon seems to increase in strength. The numbers of Einstein-Rosen
bridges we detect are rising all the time. It almost looks like the space-time around earth is being,
uh, well –“

“… perforated”, Darcy prompted. “That’s what you said to me when you first saw it. Creepy, isn’t
it? Like someone is punching holes into the sky to turn our reality into confetti.”

Tony grimaced. “Let me guess who that someone is. A certain mad megalomaniac comes to mind.
Unless this could be a natural phenomenon?” He looked at Jane.

“I don’t think so”, she said. “Dr. Selvig and me have checked the numbers several times and tried
to come up with alternative explanations, but no, this doesn’t look natural at all.”

“Which means we’re already under attack”, Tony concluded. “In a very subtle and disturbing way.
Loki, any input?”

The trickster didn’t seem to hear him. His face had become as colourless as his bleached hair. He
was holding the StarkPad with a white-knuckled grip, until it crunched and broke under his fingers,
which shocked him back into reality. “My apologies. It seems I’m as clumsy as Thor after all”, he
said with a forced smile.

“So do you know what’s going on?”, Tony repeated. He had been worried before, but now he was
getting really spooked.

“Not with any certainty. I can make an educated guess, though. Our enemy is already working at
another portal.” Loki took a deep breath and visibly tried to regain his cool. Showing fear in public
wasn’t something an Asgardian prince did. He took a sip of water from his glass, to collect his
thoughts, and explained: “Imagine a fortress with a sturdy front gate. To open that door you would
need a battering ram, wielded with great force. But if the gate had been eaten through by
woodworms first, ‘perforated’ as you called it, and weakened by a thousand tiny holes, you could bring it down with the push of a fingertip."

Tony swallowed. He had no problem with a show of nerves. The creature he’d seen in Loki’s memories was fearsome enough to scare everyone silly. “Okay”, he said. “I guess the battering ram metaphor means you when you use the power of the Tesseract? And Thanos doesn’t have that anymore, so he’s found another way to push through and open a portal to our dimension.”

Loki nodded. His lips formed a thin line. “Praise the Norns he will need time and patience to achieve his goal. Especially if he wants a portal huge enough for an army, similar to the one I created. When I fell into his hands it must have seemed like an immense stroke of luck. There are not many who have the gift to open gateways and wander between worlds. It is a feat of true magic, whereas Thanos will have to rely on the weak powers of seiðrmaðr now. They would have to strain their talents to the limit to even cause those tiny pinpricks Dr. Foster detected.”

“Uh, not fluent in Asgardian here”, Darcy piped up. “Translation for thingy-mother?”

Loki snorted irritably. “A seiðrmaðr is a Man of Spells. Or a wizard, as you would call them.”

Darcy twiddled a fruit bar between her fingers. The content of the snack bowl lay spread out in front of her, organized by size and colour. She hadn’t eaten any of it, but started to build a mandala instead. It had a vague sunflower shape. “Now I’m confused. Aren’t you one of those guys, too?”

“Certainly not!”, Loki snapped. He looked offended enough to turn Darcy into a small reptile if it weren’t for the ankle tracker. Which just proved her point. Man of Spells seemed quite an accurate description.

Coulson took over before things could get out of hand. “Assume we know nothing about magic, Mr Olson. Could you please explain the difference to us? We have to know who or what we are up against.”

Loki gave a long-suffering sigh that made his opinion about ignorant mortals quite clear. Though Tony thought that he secretly enjoyed showing off his superior knowledge, especially to an agent of SHIELD. Loki liked to make an impression and he was pretty good at explaining stuff, if he could be bothered to do it.

“What you so simplistically call magic can be divided into two very different levels of competence”, he began his lecture, sounding as condescending as a certain Hogwarts professor in front of a bunch of first-years. “The runic spells I showed Tony are easy to learn and to control. You use an incantation and get a reliable outcome. Just like one of the machines you Midgardians are so fond of. If you press the button of a coffee machine, coffee will appear. With enough power you can do very impressive tricks that way: invisibility, teleportation, scrying, levitation … But in the end, those are just seiðr. Spellwork. Even women can do it. Indeed, to limit yourself to this kind of magic will get you a reputation of being unmanly. Being called a seiðrmaðr is a gross insult on Asgard, and one I have heard a lot in my past, so I would thank you to refrain from it”, he said with a sneer.


Loki inclined his head in a regal fashion. “Very well.”

“Even if I wanna add in the name of feminism and awesome women everywhere: What a load of chauvinistic bull!”
Tony laughed. “Go, you!” he said. “That’s what I’ve been telling Loki every time he gets all Asgardian on me. Okay, so if sorcery isn’t just spells, what else is there?”

Loki turned towards him and his posture became more relaxed. It was nice to see that Tony had that effect on him. Quite a compliment, especially here at SHIELD. He was a little proud that Loki let his guard down instinctively just because Tony was there. It meant that he was doing alright in his weird role as handler.

Loki turned the silver ring around his finger in an unconscious gesture while he formulated his answer. At last he said: “Real magic, the force that shapes reality, is almost incomparable to seidr. It has a mind of its own. A living soul, if you so will. You have to carry it in your blood and bones to act as its conduit. Thor has not used a spell in his life, but magic has marked him anyway and made him a God. That’s why he can cast lightning and the weather will mirror his moods. Whereas I wander worlds and bring change wherever I go, even if I may not want to, because magic has made me a conduit for transformation and chaos. I can steer those forces to a certain extend and use the vast and untamed powers behind them, but not with any kind of precision. If runic spells compare to pushing the button of a machine, real magic is rather like riding a storm.” He looked at Tony with a sly twist to his mouth. ”I'm sure you have tried that at least once in your fancy flying suit.”

Tony nodded. Of course he had tried it. One slow-going evening he’d aimed for a major storm front over the ocean and delved right in. As any self-respecting adrenalin junkie would have done. So he guessed that he knew what Loki was trying to say. The experience had been both exhilarating and terrifying. The winds had catapulted him to speeds he’d never reached before, but you couldn’t hope to fly straight in that kind of weather, just let the storm grab you and surf the currents. The hurricane had tossed him around like a rag doll until he’d learned to go with the ebb and flow. When the winds had spat him out at last, Tony had been relatively close to the destination point he’d set himself. He’d been incredibly proud of that. And the fact he’d survived the experience at all. Afterwards, Pepper had looked at him and his shredded armour, and he’d never tried to repeat the experiment. Once in a lifetime was more than enough. And Loki did something similar on a regular basis? No wonder that he came across as a little crazy.

“Yeah, I get it”, he said. “More or less. You mean tapping into the Force is less a precise science and more of a bumpy ride. Is that what landed you in Thanos’ clutches? Misjudging the magical currents and being tossed somewhere you hadn’t aimed for?”

“In a way”, Loki said. “Though I suspect that the magic read my mood and gave me what I wanted, in a twisted way. I felt rather self-destructive at that moment, which influenced the outcome, as I should have guessed. Playing with the forces of destiny while in the grip of a suicidal depression is not something to be recommended. Wild magic will read your wishes and intentions and make them happen, but that is not necessarily a privilege. The outcome is often quite different from what you aimed for. In this special case, I hoped for my powers to rescue me from the Void and they did, only to send me somewhere even worse.”

“Pity, that doesn’t sound like a helpful weapon against the next BEM attack”, Tony said flippantly to lighten the mood. “As an engineer I definitely prefer the coffee machine approach to the mystic forces of the universe. I mean, basically you have to make a wish and hope for the best? I’m not that much of an optimist.”

Loki shrugged. “It usually works for Thor. But his mind is a much simpler place. And a happier one, which may be the more important trait. On the other hand, his powers never changed the destiny of whole nations. So perhaps you should try your luck with my brand of chaos, if everything else fails.”
Tony leaned back on the hind legs of his chair, stared at the ceiling in contemplation and started to grin. “So if we do need to aim your awesome powers at Thanos, we have to get you into the right mood first? Well, I certainly know how to give you happy thoughts in a crisis. Didn’t you say something about sex magic being the strongest in exis…”

“I believe we’re getting off topic here”, Coulson said drily.

“You're such a spoilsport. Live a little, agent Agent.”

“I’m more about basic survival. Let’s return to the wormhole problem, shall we?”, Coulson said. “Dr. Selvig, I believe you did the statistics. Can you extrapolate how long it will take Thanos to succeed with his needling tactic and open a gateway for another invasion attempt?”

The scientist shrugged. He had held himself in the background so far and said nothing at all. Well, a guy who wore grey checkered shirts probably didn’t aim for the spotlight. “No, I’m sorry. We have far too little data to make predictions. Perhaps Mr. Olson can answer that question, as well?”

Loki shook his head. “My guesses would be equally vague. I have never encountered such a tactic before, so there is simply no way of saying. It might take Thanos less than a year or more than a decade … I doubt that he himself knows. He will simply wait for his chance and start the attack whenever the veil between the realms weakens and tears.”

Everyone was silent after that pronouncement. The future seemed bleak, however you looked at it.

“Okay, so nothing much has changed”, Coulson concluded. Tony had to admit that his stoicism could be refreshing sometimes. No doomsday drama when agent Agent was around. “Thanos will start a war in the foreseeable future, but we already knew that. All we can do is prepare our defences. – On that topic, is there a reason why SHIELD can’t use the Tesseract against him, now that we have it back in our possession?” Coulson turned towards Loki and eyed him appraisingly.

Huh, that actually sounded like a plan.

Coulson lifted an expressive eyebrow. “Your explanation about seiðr, wishful thinking and going with the flow was quite fascinating. But you didn’t seem to have any difficulty in wielding enormous powers for a specific goal when you ripped our space open, Mr. Olson. That didn’t look like a New Age approach of ‘asking the universe’ to me, did it? You build yourself a weapon and used it in a very straightforward way. My proposal would be that you repeat that, just in Earth’s defence this time. I’m sure that Mr Stark would be ready to assist with the engineering part.”

And he probably would, Tony thought. Even if he’d sworn that he wouldn’t create weapons of mass destruction anymore and the very idea turned his stomach.

He wasn’t sure if he should count himself lucky or not, when Loki sighed and shook his head. “It does sound simple, I agree. But only because you have no idea what the Tesseract actually is”, the trickster proclaimed. “It possesses awareness, a malevolent intelligence, and I’ve only used it under extreme duress. The Infinity Stones, which Thanos craves to collect, can force the will of the wielder onto the wild magic. But this … unnatural enslavement corrupts whoever uses it. The stones are an abomination. A force that doesn’t belong in our universe and destroys the soul. The very short time the Tesseract was in my possession has damaged me enough. I will not use it again and neither will you.”

Coulson clearly wasn’t convinced. “Our enemy was quite ready to use it, wasn’t he?”

“Indeed and neither of us wants to become a creature like him. Trust my decision on this and
convince the director to do likewise.”

The agent didn’t look happy, but he nodded slowly. “I’ll tell him your opinion”, was all he promised.

Loki looked mutinous for a moment, like he wanted to argue, but thought better of it. You had to pick your battles with Coulson, and this round was clearly over.

“Well, I guess we won’t get much further with planning our defence today”, Coulson concluded. “This was just meant as a first brainstorming session, so we could hardly expect anything more. May I suggest that you all work on the problem and keep each other informed? I’m aware that there are some animosities here, but a common enemy like Thanos should be reason enough to put the past aside and work together as a team. Or a think tank, if you like.”

Tony winced internally, because the last time Loki and Bruce had been called a team had been their short stint as the Mighty Threesome, just before everything went to hell. Bruce would hate to be reminded of that. He didn’t even manage to look at Loki, for fuck’s sake. At the moment he was staring fixedly at the table top, doing calming mantras, or counting sheep, or whatever he did when he vanished into his head.

Then Bruce stood up abruptly, muttered a polite phrase about getting himself a cup of tea and walked stiffly through the door.

Coulson sighed. “Well, it looks like this meeting is closed. Class dismissed”, he said with a hint of sarcasm.

Chairs scraped and everyone followed Bruce into the hall. Only Loki hung back, looking frustrated in a haughty, closed-off way.

Tony joined him. “What’s up, cupcake? Something on your mind?”

The God turned around and glared at him. “Don’t play obtuse. You know full well what’s on my mind.”

“Well, if you want Bruce to talk to you again, perhaps you should make the first step instead of hanging around here and hiding like a –?”

“Don’t. I am not in the mood to be called names. How dare he snub me? I may have wronged him, but I gave him satisfaction afterwards. My debt is settled. He is the only mortal I ever allowed to bodily hurt me. What more does he expect?”

His hands were clenched at his sides and he looked angry and confused. Tony could actually see his point, in a way. “Come here”, he said, took Loki’s right hand and started to massage the fingers open.

He’d always liked to make others feel good and according to his many lovers his hand rubs were spectacular enough to take your mind off everything else and make you fly. For a while he concentrated just on those long, elegant fingers and the reflex zones between. He let his thumb glide over the ring and smiled.

“Look at it from Bruce’s perspective. He’s got a right to be pissed at you for however long he wants. And you know what? Perhaps he doesn’t even avoid you out of loathing, but because he’s on a guilt trip. I mean, yeah, he let the Hulk out and smashed you up well and good. And you know how he gets after one of his episodes. ‘Woe me, I’m a monster inside. I may look human, but that’s just an illusion. Actually I’m a fugly giant with a skin problem and everyone should run screaming
when they see the real me.”"

Loptr nodded slowly. He had a peculiar look on his face. “True”, he murmured. “I can relate.”

Tony let the cryptic remark pass and started on the left hand. “Anyway, if letting him stomp you into the ground was your apology, Bruce probably didn’t get the message. You know how little he remembers after his hulk-outs. So, here’s a radical idea. Just walk up to him and apologize for the whole bloody mess. That can’t be too difficult. You’re supposed to be good with words.”

It was easy to see that Loki didn’t like that proposal. No wonder, he hadn’t managed to apologize to Tony either. The trickster was superb at twisting words and justifying his misdeeds, but a simple ‘sorry’ seemed too hard for his silver tongue. Well, Tony could live with that. Actions spoke louder than words, as far as he was concerned.

But Bruce was a different matter. He was a much more straightforward guy and had actual morals. If Loki wanted to mend fences there, he would have to put in an effort. “You know, some friendships are worth a little grovelling. I’m the prime example. Just ask Rhodey or Pepper”, he quipped.

Loki made a sound that was almost a laugh.

Tony gave his fingers a last little pat. “Come on, let’s go after him. You’ll feel better afterwards, trust me and my extensive experience.” When Loki didn’t butch, he put his hand between the trickster’s shoulder blades and guided him towards the door.

Loki let himself be pushed, which Tony took for agreement. There was no way he could have moved that deceptively slender body otherwise. At least not without his armour or other power tools.

They found Bruce in the main cafeteria. He’d picked a table in a far corner, half hidden by some meagre potted plants that were supposed to give the place atmosphere. All the chairs around him were conspicuously empty. SHIELD and Bruce may have come to an uneasy agreement, but that didn’t mean that any of the agents wanted to get chummy with the Hulk in a mood.

Loki’s presence had cleared the halls just as efficiently on the way over here. It was almost funny how everyone gave the guy in the Pacman t-shirt a wide berth. Tony was used to crowds opening up in front of him, but that had nothing on the Loki effect. One junior agent actually meeped and dropped his pile of folders when he met them round a corner.

The hum of voices in the cafeteria fell almost silent as soon as they entered. Bruce noticed, of course, and looked up from his calming cuppa. His face showed mostly resignation when he saw them.

“Have a seat”, he said politely, because Dr. Banner was a guy with manners. “Can I offer you a tea?”

Bruce always brought his own thermos bottle of herbal stuff. The steam clouds alone made you light-headed, so Tony declined. He pointed towards a small metallic object on the table. “Hey, isn’t that one of those teenage fads? I think I saw a youtube video of a guy who wanted to do tricks and knocked his own teeth out.”

“Fidget spinners can actually be quite relaxing, I’ve found.” Bruce gave him a faint smile and let the star-like shape wander over his fingers. “It’s nice to have something to fiddle with. A bit like rosary beads. I’ve added it to my collection.”
When Bruce had moved into Stark Tower, he’d brought nothing but a small suitcase and left his living quarters empty, ready to go on the run again at the drop of a hat. But bit by bit, personal belongings had crept in. Recently, Bruce had started to collect stuff that people used for meditation all over the world: prayer wheels, singing bowls, betel nuts, Magic Eye 3D books, shamanic drums... It had become something of a hobby.

Loki cocked his head. “How does this little device work? May I try it?”

Not a bad tactic to start talking, and besides, Loki seemed genuinely interested. After a moment of hesitation, Bruce did a demonstration and showed him the basics. Loki looked on in concentration, while Tony left them to it and wandered over to the food counter to fix himself something to drink. Preferably a very Irish coffee.

When he waited at the cashier (with a plastic cup of bad espresso), Loki was already handling the spinner like a pro. It danced and swirled over his hands without once losing speed. Tony added juggling to the list of things Loki was unnaturally good at.

He remembered those clever fingers, how they’d played him like a fine-tuned instrument on more than one occasion, and heaved a sigh. As long as Loki was his charge instead of his equal, starting anything just felt wrong. It smacked of abuse. Their usual powerplay had lost his charm, now that Loki was in his custody and couldn’t freely tell him to fuck off. Their new relationship was volatile enough without adding sex to the mix.

That’s what reason and common sense said. He wondered how long he would manage to listen to it instead of his dick.

He was busy ersatz-flirting with the cashier, an elderly lady with a crew cut, when a shift in the atmosphere made him look up. People had stopped eating and stared in the direction of the corner where Bruce and Loki sat. Some literally open-mouthed. Uh oh.

Tony turned around, fearing the worst. What he saw didn’t come anywhere close to what he had expected. For a moment Tony just blinked. Loki sat across from Bruce, every line of his body screaming tension, and he was... cerulean blue?

“Jarvis”, Tony murmered. “What the fuck is going on? I didn’t expect Loki to use magic at SHIELD of all places. He hasn’t tried anything since I put the ankle tracker on him. How much ISF-power are we talking about?”

“As far as I can detect there are no ISF-waves at all. Mr. Olson isn’t using a spell”, Jarvis voice came reassuringly through his earpiece.

“He’s not?” Tony frowned. “Then why the hell does he look like he stepped right out of the Avatar movie?”

It was easy to forget that Loki was actually an alien from another planet. Usually he seemed as human as your average New Yorker. Had that all been a front? Was this what Asgardians really looked like? Tony tried to imagine Thor as a shapeshifter with bright blue skin and suppressed a snicker. But on Loki it seemed somehow natural. And sexy as hell. The bleached hair made the colour even more vibrant in contrast. A pattern of swirls and stripes decorated his skin like tribal tattoos. Tony wanted to run his finger along those complex lines.

Loki’s body language suggested that he himself hated his exotic appearance, but in Tony’s eyes he looked absolutely stunning. “Really, how many layers does that guy have?”, he murmered. ”Every time I think that I got him figured out something new smacks me in the face.”
“I’ve hacked into SHIELD’s security system and am listening to their conversation, Sir”, Jarvis reported. “It seems that Mr Olson actually belongs to a race called Jotun, which he considers loathsome and monstrous. His adoption by the king of Asgard was a matter of war politics. He has revealed his true form to Dr. Banner as a gesture of comradeship and goodwill. To do so in public is new and difficult for him, as you can see. I would advise you not to disturb them.”

“Okay, fine”, Tony nodded. “I’ll stomp on my curiosity and stay over here for a bit. But holy shit, when I told Loki to apologize I didn’t expect something like this. Looks like he and Bruce really have a lot in common. Who else could claim to have a brightly coloured Other Guy under their skin.” Tony shook his head in wonder. “At least that explains why he reacted so strangely to Dani and his X-gene.”

“Indeed. He seems quite impressed by young Mr. Malik, as well as protective. I assume that he’s never come across such a bold Blue is Beautiful attitude before and it must be a great relief. Speaking of which, he just quoted a Mutant Pride slogan.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. "You mean that X-Men campaign to come out of the closet and fight prejudice? Makes sense that Dani is a supporter. Funny how that works for a closeted Jotun as well."

"It seems to have struck a chord. Mr. Olson is telling Dr. Banner ‘to embrace his difference, because self-hatred only leads to violence and destruction’.”

Tony almost choked on his espresso. “Wow, remind me to send Dani a gift basket. This I gotta hear for myself. Sorry, but I’m just too nosy to nurse my coffee and miss all the good bits.”

He strolled over to the table, where the two of them were absorbed in some deep discussion about internalized xenophobia. It got philosophical and boring pretty fast. They ignored him, so he grabbed himself a chair and poked his finger into Loki’s arm experimentally. “Huh, that really looks like a special effect. Awesome. You gonna stay blue from now on? One thing’s for sure, nobody’s gonna recognize you like this. Best undercover disguise ever.” Loki swatted his hand away and made a noise that almost sounded like a growl. The colour bleached out of his skin and a moment later the trickster looked totally human again. Or Asgardian, whatever. “Mmh, pity”, Tony said and earned himself an incredulous look.

Bruce rolled his eyes. “Sometimes you’ve got the social skills of a bulldozer, Tony.”

“Hey, not fair, that was supposed to be a compliment. I love the cobalt look. It’s fucking breathtaking.”

Loki frowned at him. “You really mean that”, he stated.

“Yeah, sure. On Dani it’s just cute, but you …? Sex on a stick. Makes me wanna lick you all over. Like a blueberry ice cream with Curacao on top.”

“You always had a strange and overactive libido, Stark”, Loki huffed. But his posture had lost its rigid self-control and there was the hint of a smile on his face.

“I’ve invited Loki to take up meditation again”, Bruce changed the topic rather desperately. (He could be something of a prude.)

“Really? As a bonding experience? Personally, I would rather go for movie night or bar hopping. But if you prefer staring at a wall together …”

“It’s just that the way he talked about sorcery reminded me of Taoism”, Bruce explained. When
Tony looked at him blankly he went on: “Laozi describes the nature of the Tao more or less like Loki does magic: Our whole life resembles riding a storm or the torrents of a river. You have to move with the currents to make your journey go smoothly. Struggling against them will only hurt you and get you nowhere. That’s why you should learn to go with the flow of life instead of clinging to pre-set wishes and goals.”

“Uh, okay?” Religion wasn’t Tony’s scene, but Loki could sure use a bit of relaxation and letting go.

Bruce took a sip of his tea and went on: “According to Laozi it’s useless to try and force your will on destiny. Instead you can learn to feel where the Tao wants to take you and comply. Give up your ego and and you’ll discover that the flow will help you and steer you right. A way to achieve that is to clear your thoughts through meditation.” Bruce shrugged. “Let’s assume that magic works similarly, then some of my exercises could actually help Loki to reach the necessary state of mind and make his sorcery less erratic. It can’t hurt to try, can it? I mean, if his emotions become more positive and stable, his powers will probably benefit. He said so himself during the meeting. Perhaps that could give him – and us – a better chance against Thanos.”

Loki didn’t look convinced, but nodded anyway. It was obvious that he would do all the awkward breathing exercises Bruce wanted, if that meant getting some bro time. Tony sighed. Soon his tower would be filled with the sound of omming again. In the name of Earth defense. Just peachy.

“Om mani padme hum”, Tony singsonged under his breath and made a face. Mantras were worse than commercial jingles. You never got them out of your head again. But if it helped to give Loki a little peace of mind, Tony was all for it. Because the only other option he could see was to send the God to about a hundred years of therapy. And well, they didn’t have that kind of time to spare.
The skyscraper looked like someone had taken a bite out of it right in the middle. A bit like the Apple logo, Tony thought, at least until you came near enough to see the signs of carnage and destruction. Above the gaping hole all windows were dark, but the rest of the building was up and working again, business as usual. That was what Tony liked about his fellow New Yorkers. Got your life trashed by an alien invasion? Shit happens. Pick up the pieces and go on.

It was an attitude he could relate to, because his own reaction to tragedy had always been to ignore it and show destiny the finger. Traumatic stuff didn’t get easier if you dwelled on it. Much better to take back control over your life. Throw yourself into work and don’t let it get to you.

The same was probably true for most people in Dani’s team, or they wouldn’t still be here four months after the invasion. You needed a personal reason to come back day after day and work your ass off as a volunteer. Nobody of them talked much about the past, that seemed to be something of an unwritten rule, but Tony had noticed the tension go up lately. The skyscraper stood at the edge of Jackson Heights and everyone was a little more on edge because of that. It hit closer to home – literally – when you dug through the destroyed daily lives of people that you might know from the bus stop or the grocery store, especially if you had lost someone yourself.

Tony took the elevator up as far as it went nowadays, and then started climbing the stairs to the evacuated 23rd floor. The state of the building got worse with every step, but a trail had been cleared through the debris so people could move about. He found most of the team in one of the half-destroyed office rooms, moving stuff around.

Mrs Washington threw a distracted look over her shoulder and waved him on towards a corridor. “Dani is working back there, in case you’re looking for him. No idea where your young man might be, but the two of them usually stick together, so Dani can probably tell you. – Wait, Julia, that’s the wrong container. All the small electronic stuff goes into the plastic bag on the left.”

She smiled at a woman that Tony would have pegged for ‘idle trophy wife’ normally. Her expansive make-up clashed violently with the grime and dirt on her sweater and the worker’s gloves on her delicate hands. People never ceased to surprise him. The catastrophe brought out the best in them in unexpected ways. It was downright frustrating for a cynic like him.

He gave the lady a thumps-up in passing and her eyes grew wide when she recognized him, which was nice for his ego. Looked like she was a tabloid reader and thus a bit a star-struck. Definitely a new recruit, if she’d never seen him around before. He dropped by often enough, to collect Loptr and also to have a chat with Dani and enjoy his unique personality.

Tony had actually arrived an hour early today, because he wanted a dosage of that. He’d had a stressful day full of fake-smiling for the press and Dani was like an antidote to all kinds of bullshit. With any luck Tony would even get the chance to swing a sledgehammer and demolish stuff. That would help his mood a lot.

When he found Dani, the young mutant stood in a room that had once held a floor-to-ceiling window. Now it gaped open and the wind made the office papers flutter. The carpet ended in a 200 feet drop. Good thing that neither of them suffered from a fear of heights.
Dani’s blue skin contrasted vividly with the dull beige of the office furniture. He greeted Tony with a pointy-toothed little smile. “You know, I got the donation receipt from reporters sans frontier”, he said. “When you asked me to pick out a charity I didn’t expect you to hand over half a million. I mean, seriously, Tony. Half a million?”

Tony shrugged. “That’s peanuts where I come from. And hey, it was a good idea to ask you, because I’d never have picked them on my own. Journalists aren’t exactly my favourite people – no offense – but I’ve had a look at what those guys do and yeah, color me impressed.” Actually, that had been his way to hand over the ‘gift basket’ he’d promised after the Mutant Pride incident.

“Agreed”, Dani said, pulled a letter out of his pocket and handed it over. “So, normal people would want that for taxes. No idea how the crazily rich handle it.”

Tony shrugged and took the receipt. “I’ve no idea either. But I’m sure my accounting department will appreciate it.”

Dani just rolled his eyes, and they talked about reporters sans frontier for twenty minutes while shoving broken furniture to the left side of the room and unbroken furniture to the right. “No pairing up with Loptr today?”, Tony asked. “Where is he, anyway? Mrs Washington was sure you’d know.”

“Yeah. He’s taking his time-out.”

“Uh, his what?”

“Well, you told him to take some hours off now and then, didn’t you? Good thing, too, because I was starting to get really worried. Not to sound like a mother hen, but have you noticed how much weight he’s lost?”, Dani said with a look of honest concern. “I thought it would get better with time, because we’re just tidying up nowadays, not digging out corpses anymore. Or at least not as frequently. But that doesn’t seem to matter much. He’s working himself into the ground. Like he’d built the whole city back up with his own bleeding hands if he could. I suggested he should see one of the counsellors, like I do myself, but he brushed me off. No surprise there, actually. It’s gotten worse here in Jackson Heights. Probably because the whole group is trying to cope with their memories and it’s bound to affect him, too. So when he told me that he’d take a break now and then, I was really relieved.”

“Okay …”, Tony said slowly. “Sounds good to me. You know what, perhaps I should leave before he comes back. He doesn’t need to know that his boss dropped in just at the moment he was ‘slagging’. It would probably embarrass him.”

“You think so?”, Dani asked with a frown. “Yeah, perhaps you’re right.”

“Of course I am. I’m me”, Tony quipped. “Just don’t mention my visit, okay? I’ll wait for Loptr in the parking lot like usual.”

He called his armor up through the window (because he wanted a quick way to sneak off, but also because Dani loved to watch his high tech suit in action. The open admiration in his eyes always made Tony preen a bit). Then he stepped through the gaping hole into nothingness and took flight.

“Jarvis, did you get that?”, he asked as soon as he was in the open air. “If Loki is off somewhere, why didn’t the ankle tracker alert us? It should make sure that he stays where he’s supposed to be. Shit, I really thought I got him nailed down.”

“I’m sorry, Sir, but the tracker shows nothing unusual. According to my data he’s still with the
Tony felt his stomach drop. “You mean he’s waltzing off on a regular basis and my tech doesn’t show a thing? Seriously, how does he pull stuff like that? I don’t fucking believe it.” He took a deep breath that sounded slightly Darth Vader-like inside his helmet. “Okay, if Loki managed to manipulate the tracker, that means he could have sabotaged the JINX as well. He could be at full power and anywhere on the fucking planet.” Tony landed next to his Ferrari and let the armor fold up. Once inside the car he banged his head repeatedly against the steering wheel. “Stupid, stupid, stupid. I was starting to trust the guy again. Looks like I never learn.”

“There is a less disastrous explanation”, Jarvis suggested.

“Yeah? I could use some good news. Hit me with it.”

“The tracker’s GPS restricts him to a circle of 800 feet, but it can’t monitor if he moves up or down. Mr Olson could simply be roaming the skyscraper. The question is why he'd do so. Perhaps he just needed some breathing space, as Mr. Malik suggested.”

Tony snorted. “Oh, come on. You really believe it’s that simple? This is Loki we’re talking about. If he does a vanishing act, that means he’s scheming.”

“You might be right. On the other hand, Mr. Malik strikes me as a good judge of character and according to him, your charge seems quite serious about making amends. He has indeed lost weight and shows signs of self-neglect, which points to remorse in my experience. In fact, he reminds me of the worrisome state you were in after Afghanistan, Sir. What about the telepathic connection? Did it give you any reason to suspect a plot?”

“Well, no”, Tony said. “Whenever I touched his mind lately, he didn’t feel treasonous. I’d rather call him slightly depressed, but I didn’t dig any deeper. Being connected like that still gives me the creeps. Okay, perhaps there’s no reason to panic just yet. Let’s see if there’s anything inside the skyscraper that would make him sneak off. Give me a list of places to check.”

As it turned out, the office building held several government facilities, but nothing too alarming at first sight. Healthcare. Traffic regulations. Stuff like that. Then there was a criminal defense lawyer, a company producing toy drones, an online newspaper and a side branch of the University of New York. Also an over-prized wedding planner, but Tony assumed he could cross that off the list.

He was still stuck on the thought what kind of chaos Loki could create with a number of toy drones, when Jarvis said: “I’ve found a new library card in the university’s system. It seems that L. Olson has become a regular customer recently.”

Tony’s eyebrows went up. “Good work. And so not something I expected.” He drummed his fingers against the steering wheel in thought. “Okay, that sounds far more harmless than I feared. Now I’m almost disappointed, strangely enough. You mean he’s been lounging about, reading French romantic poetry or something?”

“Actually, the library belongs to the institute of physics and inorganic chemistry.”

“Oh. Not quite as harmless. Aaand we’re back to Loki scheming.” He sighed. “Can you find out what kind of books he’s been interested in? Nanotechnology? Quantum mechanics? How to build a H-bomb in five easy steps?

“Sorry, Sir. He didn’t lend out any titles and the library doesn’t have a security system that I could
use to look over his shoulder.”

“Pity. Perhaps I should install one. Or ask Natasha to do it in a sneaky way. Do you think I can get her to help without notifying SHIELD?”, Tony mused.

“Miss Romanova has grown quite fond of you, so you might have a chance to convince her. Or you could confront Mr Olson directly and ask him about his reading habits. He’s just left the building and is heading for the parking lot.”

“Ask Loki for the truth? That would certainly be a unique tactic. Who knows, it could work as a trust building exercise. I’ll take it under consid— Hello, sunshine of my life”, Tony greeted the God of Lies and put on a clueless smile. “So glad that you could join me this beautiful evening. Today’s special is baked salmon with egg-and-caviar sauce.”

Loki dropped into the passenger seat and Tony handed him the food, while he took a closer look at the trickster. Perhaps Dani was right. Loki’s cheekbones seemed more prominent and there were dark rings under his eyes. He slumped in the seat with a hollow look that Tony was sure hadn’t been there before. Even his bleached hair seemed to droop. The expression that came to mind was Grunge heroin chic. Tony knew that his people skills were questionable, but he would have noticed a change like that, if it had been visible for longer. This wasn’t ‘slightly depressed’ anymore. Something must have happened to crack Loki’s usual façade of haughty indifference and make real feelings bleed through.

Tony frowned and shoved the library topic aside for the moment. He decided to keep to their usual routine, which meant point 16 of the contract. “Okay, time for the daily brain merge”, he said lightly.

Loki sighed but didn’t argue, which was worrying enough by itself. Since the invasion Tony had asked him to recite the very same words over a hundred times and Loki made a fuss about it every single fucking day. Now the trickster only took a deep breath as Jarvis dropped the JINX, gathered his freed magic around himself and opened the link.

Tony let himself be flooded by foreign emotions. He usually shied away from the forced intimacy of this ritual. Delving too deep into Loki’s mind felt like a violation. All he routinely did was check for deceit vs. sincerity. But today he was worried enough to open himself up for the whole Vulcan experience.

Loki’s voice reverberated through his brain. “I plan to make amends for the damage I’ve done and mean no harm to Midgard and its citizens.”

Okay, the trickster still resented this part as much as ever. He only managed to swallow down his pride and actually say the words, because he had Tony’s delivery of comfort food to distract him. As long as he concentrated on the dish in his lap, he could get it over with quickly, without looking Tony in the eye.

But there was no doubt about his sincerity. In fact, he meant every word so much that it was a little overwhelming. “I will obey the conditions of my parole to the best of my abilities.”

The words were drenched in an amount of self-loathing, that yeah, Tony remembered perfectly from a certain period of his own life. It resonated through his soul and was more than a bit unsettling. He normally didn’t comment on what he sensed during the mind link and Loki liked to pretend it didn’t even happen, but today Tony reacted with an involuntary: “Uh, are you okay?”

Loki attempted one of his trademark smirks and raised his eyebrows. “Are we talking about
Tony just shrugged. “Looks like it. If my masculinity can take it, so can yours. Seriously, what’s going on? Talk to me.”

Loki’s face became shuttered. The link closed down and Tony was alone in his head again, which felt much better. “I am supposed to care about those mortals I work with, is that not your aim? Your ploy to redeem me is not very subtle, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s because it’s not a ploy. Of course I want you to care. I thought that was more than obvious. Is this about Dani in some way?”

He’d guessed a little too well, obviously, because Loki’s eyes narrowed dangerously and the tension in the car skyrocketed out of the blue. The God went from glum to paranoid and antagonistic in record time. Suddenly the air felt charged with electricity and Tony’s hair literally stood on end. “Did you know about his family history? Was this a way to set me up?”

“Huh, what?”, Tony asked, thrown by Loki’s mood swing. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. That’s the honest truth. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Loki stared at him from the passenger seat, dissecting him with his eyes. Then his anger sizzled out as suddenly as it had come and he deflated visibly. He leaned his head back against the headrest and looked wary beyond belief. “Of course it’s about Dani”, he said.

Nothing else followed for a while, but Tony was ready to wait him out.

Finally Loki murmured: “He got under my skin so much it hurts. You made him think I’m a mutant like himself and he treats me like his long lost brother. He thinks I’m ‘cool’. I’ve allowed myself to bask in that, although I should not have. It was selfish of me to lead him on. But I had no idea how much, before today.”

“Because he talked to you about his family?”, Tony prompted and started the car. In his experience, aimless driving was always a good way to handle difficult topics.

Loki stared out of the side window at the bustling street life of New York. This time he needed an even longer for his answer. ‘No. He never mentions them. It was one of the younger Washingtons, actually. Kimberly. She was near to tears because of some personal item she found in a drawer, and he made her laugh in spite of herself. Afterwards she turned to me and said: ‘Isn’t he a wonder? Half of his family was killed in Pakistan and he held the rest of them together with his joy and optimism. And now he does the same for us. I guess we’ve become his family after everyone who he’d still had left died during the invasion.’”

Tony almost drove his car off the road. “Holy shit.”

“Ah, so you weren’t lying. You really did not know.”

“Heavens, no. He always seems so full of ... life. I mean, he joked around with me from day one. That girl Kimberly thinks that’s his way to keep everyone’s spirits up? Like, a coping mechanism? Push the pain away by helping others and spreading hope. Wow. Not something I could ever do.”

“Yes. I quite agree with that sentiment.” Loki leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes. “I thought you had picked him out on purpose. To make me develop the likes of friendship and become vulnerable. A ruse to teach me a lesson about the consequences of my actions. I was furious about you pulling my strings, or what I perceived as such, but I guess it was just easier to direct my wrath at you than at myself.” His cultured voice sounded unusually rough when he
asked: “However shall I talk to him again? I may be an excellent actor, but even I cannot face him and behave as if nothing had happened.”

He looked so unlike himself and utterly miserable that Tony reached over without thinking and stroked the spiky hair. Loki leaned into his hand almost desperately, and he let his fingers glide down to massage the nape of his neck.

The gesture wasn’t sexual. They weren’t there again, not even close. Still, in a way, this careful touch seemed more intimate than anything they’d tried before. “You killed a lot of people, Loki. It was bound to happen sooner or later.”

The trickster nodded.

“I’m sorry that it’s Dani of all people. What are you going to do now?”

Loki made a broken noise deep in his throat and allowed Tony to rub soothing circles over his back. It got a little hard to concentrate on driving at the same time. “You think there is something I can do? I’m ensnared in a tangled net of my own deeds and deceptions. For now I have managed to avoid him, but I cannot do that forever. And he is far from stupid. One day he will look through this paltry disguise and recognize who I truly am. That is … not something I even want to contemplate.”

Tony sighed. “Yeah, I know the feeling. And you’re right, there’s nothing much you can do. Take it from an expert. Even when your life has returned to normal more or less, stumbling across one of your victims will always be gut-wrenching painful.”

In silent accord they stared at the streets for a while, letting the bustle of humanity distract them. The view was the usual mix of ordinary and outright crazy that Tony had come to love about New York. There were bankers in boring suits next to pierced leather guys, manic street preachers, black hipster girls and street vendors who sold questionable stuff on picnic blankets. He cruised through Greenwich Village to look for artsy people and gay couples, but found mostly tourists who snapped pictures with their cell phones. If they’d known that Tony Stark was driving by there would have been a fan riot.

He was everybody’s darling these days. Sometime it seemed like he was the only one who even remembered being named the Merchant of Death.

“How do you do it, Stark? Most days you seem quite comfortable in your own skin”, Loki said quietly as if he could still read his thoughts. “You must have worked out strategies to keep functioning after you suddenly acquired a conscience.”

Tony thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. “Well, the only other option was suicide and I’m really not the type. I may not deserve to live, but offing myself in Afghanistan after I realized that fact wouldn’t have helped anyone. Not to sound sugary, but basically I’m trying to make the world a better place with my tech. And I don’t complain whenever I get thoroughly trashed in a fight or punched in the face by some supervillain’s megatron beams.”

“I see. So you turned into a hero, not out of the goodness of your heart, but to save your self-esteem and cover up your dirty past. Altruism born out of blatant self-interest. That is a motivation I can understand.” The trickster sounded wry and a little more than himself. He even started to eat his meal again, which Tony took as a good sign.

“Works for me, anyway. Perhaps you should try it”, Tony said lightly. “How does being part of the Mighty Sevensome sound to you?”
“Like a dreadfully bad pun. Not up to your usual standards of wit, Stark. Is that the long game you’ve been playing? You want me of all people to become part of the Avengers?”

“Maybe”, Tony admitted.

“Which of course would mean being Thor’s shield-brother again. My apologies, but the answer to that is a resounding NO.”

“Okay, I get that. But on the other hand … just imagine how much it would bug Barton.” His dry delivery actually made Loki laugh.

For some reason – possibly an addiction to lethal danger – Clint couldn’t seem to stop sniping at Loki whenever the two crossed paths in the tower. To everyone’s relief that wasn’t very often, as Loki kept to himself as much as he could. Carnie humour and princely pride definitely didn’t mix. Also, Clint seemed to be under the impression that Loki wasn’t much of a threat without his magic. The name-calling focused on stuff like ‘Hey, powerless wonder, got a break from your lapdog duties?’ Tony had been waiting for the God to snap and prove Clint wrong by throwing him through a wall. To his relief, Loki had simply decided that the archer was beneath his notice and treated him with snobby contempt.

“Tempting”, the trickster admitted. “Much more tempting than an appeal to my better nature, I must say.”

“Fine then, until I can convince you, I’ll just use you as my hero-consultant. Milk you for knowledge and strategical stuff.” Tony was glad that they were back to their usual banter. They could both use a break from all the emotional intensity. Loki had a point: lengthy talks about feelings really wasn’t their thing. Time for a change of topic. “Speaking of which, do you think that Jarvis can be programmed to perform rune magic on a seiðrmaðr level? I mean, he’d just have to tap into the right ISF wave-lengths.”

“Sorry, what?”

Moments like this were always gratifying. He seldom managed to blindside Loki with his brilliance. “Well, you compared the simpler forms of magic with using a coffee machine. Got me thinking. Perhaps spell-casting can be mechanized? Or computerized, to be exact. By a very, very long shot Jarvis is comparable to a Moccamaster ... uh, don’t take that the wrong way, J.”

’I’ve learned not to be easily offended, Sir.’

”Glad to hear that. Anyway, Jarvis can recognize ISF-waves and even duplicate them. It shouldn’t be such a big step to make him manipulate them the way wizards do. And opposed to a seiðrmaðr of flesh and blood he’s used to perform about 50,000 complicated tasks at the same time. I would probably have to beef up his mainframe, but I wonder if a rune program that’s running, let’s say, a hundred times simultaneously would have the same kazoom as a hundred mages casting it.”

Loki stared at him, actually speechless for once. Finally he said: “Humans are very weird.”

Tony started to grin. “So it can probably be done, but nobody tried it yet, because wizards just don’t think about magic in computer terms?”

“That is about the gist of it, yes”, Loki admitted. He shook his head in bemusement, then smiled in a disturbingly shark-like way. Well, that was the God of Chaos that Tony knew and l...ik ed. “You want to use Jarvis for a counter-attack against Thanos? I assure you, on that front you’ll have my full and enthusiastic cooperation.”
“Great. Hoped you’d say something like that. I thought perhaps we could start with closing those pesky wormholes in Earth’s sky. Then Thanos will have to scratch his current invasion plans and start from zero.” He turned the car around and headed home towards the tower. Looked like the distraction of a joyride wasn’t needed anymore. The lure of strange and unusual science worked much better.

“Hm.” Loki frowned, a calculating look on his face. “I’m not sure if you should show your hand like that. In warfare it is always better to be underestimated, at least in my experience. Be patient, lay low and surprise your opponent at the worst possible moment.”

“Okay?”, Tony said doubtfully. “You’re the professional tactician. I’m ready to listen. No promise that I’ll follow your advice, though. Patience isn’t my thing.”

“Fair enough”, Loki nodded. “Being listened to is quite a novel experience in itself. Any Asgardian would have accused me of dishonorable tactics and a lack of warrior spirit by now. My advice is to hold back. If you manage to wipe out the wormholes, Thanos would indeed have to change his invasion plans. But that might make them more dangerous in the long run.”

“Like what? You’re thinking of something specific or just being pessimistic?”

“Well, for example he could decide to open the portal elsewhere in the solar system, out of your reach, and then let his fleet attack Midgard from all sides at once. You could hardly defend against that. Much better to let him repeat the mistake of the Chitauri and start a bottleneck fight here in your backyard. If you don’t interfere, it’s even likely that the portal will open at the very same spot, because the structure of space-time is already weakened over your tower. In other words, you can conveniently await him with all your defensive measures in place.”

“Okay, I see your point. So we should allow him to ‘perforate’ our sky without resistance, in your opinion?”

“No, just be subtle about your counter-measures. I would advise to continuously close a few of the wormholes, reduce the size of some more, and leave it at that. It would slow Thanos down and buy us time, but not alert him to the fact that Midgard has a new form of protection. Well, if your plans concerning Jarvis succeed at all. Thanos would either blame those small setbacks on the incompetence of his pet mages or a natural phenomenon. He would hardly suspect a computer with superpowers.”

“That much is true”, Tony snorted.

He wasn’t too sure about the rest of that pretty speech, though. Could he rely on Loki’s advice this time and not end up with a nasty surprise himself? It all sounded perfectly convincing, but hey, he was dealing with a guy called Silver Tongue. Even if he leaned towards trusting Loki, he hesitated to act on his feelings, because that had spectacularly backfired before. Several times.

Before he could come to a conclusion, Jarvis interrupted through the car’s speaker. “Excuse me, Sir, but there’s an Avengers alert. I’m putting Agent Coulson through.”

“Seriously?”, Tony muttered. “I’ve been looking forward to my Jacuzzi and a trashy movie. Can this day get any longer?”

“… have everybody’s attention, please. We’ve got a situation in downtown Manhattan. It’s giant robot creatures, so chances are high they are either controlled by Dr. Doom or AIM. Please, assemble with all speed and take care of them before they trample any significant tourist attractions. I’m keeping you informed of new developments. Coulson out.”
“Concise as always”, Tony murmured and parked the Ferrari at the curb, which got him a chorus of angry honks from other motorists. He turned around to Loki and dangled the car keys in front of his face. “You heard the man. Looks like you’ll get a secret wish fulfilled, because now you can drive this beauty home while I do the Iron Man thing. Treat her right, okay?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “It’s just a car, Stark. I think I can handle it.”

“Yeah, yeah, fine. Just don’t total it against a doombot or something. I did the paintwork and all the fine-tuning myself, so I’m really fond of this one.”

Famous last words. In hindsight he should have known not to jinx his Ferrari like that.

Really, what could you expect with a God of Chaos at the wheel?

Chapter End Notes

Huh, this story is getting much longer than planned, again. That always seems to happen when I write a multi-chapter. In this case it's also the fault of some of my readers :-) I liked their comments and suggestions so much that I wove new plot lines into my original draft. Special thanks to:

NightFlowerLuv, who wished for a Darcy appearance in the story.

phantomdevil235, who was so devastated by the loss of all Tony/Loki romance after the invasion that I made their interaction a bit more pre-slash again.

RenneMichaels, who likes to put Loki behind the wheel of a car to see what kind of chaos ensues.

27rayne, who suggested that even on the way to redemption Loki would still act more like an "annoying little shit" and go on scheming ... So, let’s wait and see what he’s been doing in the library.
Tony wasn’t sure if he should laugh hysterically or groan aloud when he got his first aerial view of the threat. The Dr. Doom theory went right out of the window. The guy may have questionable taste and talked about himself in the third person, but his weapon designs had a certain style. This looked more like Revenge of the Nerds.

Which left AIM and its bunch of overrated scientists, who seemed to spend all their free time watching Star Wars, because currently the Broadway was being trampled by half a dozen Imperial Walkers.

“Someone has a model-making fetish”, Tony muttered and dove down between the buildings to hover in front of the approaching machines. Up close they seemed a lot less ridiculous.

Tony had to admit that Imperial tech was bloody intimidating when you faced it for real instead of watching it on a movie screen while slurping coke. The Walkers were gigantic, ugly, four-legged monstrosities that shot laser beams from their heads. Their steps made the earth shake and they drove a mass of panicked people before them who looked like ants in comparison.

The rest of the Avengers had already arrived and tried to stop the Walkers, but they weren’t getting very far. A blueish force field flickered on and off around the machines whenever a tiny superhero attacked. Steve’s shield bounced right off and so did Clint’s explosive arrows. Even Thor’s hammer didn’t get through. The God zoomed around the Walkers throwing lightning that crackled over the robots’ armor plating and did exactly nothing.

That was the downside of being famous. The more intelligent type of villains prepared for an Avengers attack, which meant that you couldn’t just wade in and flatten the enemy anymore. “Hey, have you tried to tangle up their legs like in the movies?” Tony asked over the comm.

“Sure”, Clint said. “Doesn’t work in real life.”

“Damn.” Tony shot a repulsor beam at the first Walker’s head, but of course it bounced off.

Natasha’s cool voice came over the comm. “The force field is only triggered by obvious threats. I’ve climbed one of the machines and didn’t meet any resistance. But as soon as I touched a knee joint with the tip of my blade, the field activated and threw me off.”

“Okay, so we need to attack in a way that doesn’t look like an attack. Any suggestions?”, Tony said. He landed on a Walker’s back to test Natasha’s theory. The robot didn’t react, just as she had predicted.

Riding an Imperial war machine was kind of cool. Every kid’s dream. Apart from the crunching noises when one of it’s massive feet came down and made short work of a parked delivery van or the outdoor furniture of a coffee shop. At least the machine didn’t move quickly enough to trample people.

“We could call in Bruce and let him have a try?”, Steve suggested.

Clint snorted. “Yeah, he’s the most harmless looking weapon on the planet. Perhaps the robot won’t react to him until it’s too late.”

Bruce had stayed in the tower, as he did for most Avengers missions. He never took assignments in densely populated areas. Which was a pity, because Tony quite liked the Hulk as a teammate. In
his opinion the giant acted a lot more intelligent and careful than Bruce gave him credit for. The last time Bruce had joined them had been almost two months ago in Yosemite Park. (Chasing cloned dinosaurs through the wilderness. That one had been fun. Tony would never forget the sight of the Hulk bouncing a T-Rex against the foot of Sentinel Rock. And raptors weren’t actually scaly and grey, but covered in bright feathers. Quite pretty. Fighting them had been like shooting Big Bird, just with teeth. Who would have guessed?)

“I don’t think the big guy will show up for this one”, he said. “But if I can find the force field emitter on this thing, I’m sure I can work out a way to deactivate it. Jarvis, you’re watching via satellite, right? I’m gonna try a little experiment and need everything recorded in slow-motion and high resolution.”

“Of course, Sir. May I enquire if you plan something suicidal?”

“No at all. Should be a piece of cake.”

“You always say that, Sir.”

“Don’t be such worrywart.” Tony rolled his eyes. “I’m simply gonna provoke the robot and make it kick me off its back. Natasha survived just fine, even without a high-tech battle suit. Your job is to make a recording and pinpoint the exact spot where the force field comes from, okay?”

“I live to serve”, Jarvis said with a hint of sarcasm.

Tony ignored the snark and looked for a good place to start his non-attack. The Walker was a fine piece of engineering, he had to give AIM that. There were hardly any weaknesses to exploit. Tony knelt down and dug a fingertip into a seam where two pieces of armor plating met. With any luck the robot wouldn’t see that as a threat because Tony didn’t use any weapons or power tools. If he could get at the cables underneath, that would be great. Could solve a lot of their problems.

But as soon as Tony pressed down with notable force, something invisible slammed into him like a sledgehammer. He sailed through the air in a wide arc. The way down was long. Which gave Tony enough time to fire up the repulsors and soar away unharmed. Well, theoretically. Because when he tried to activate them, nothing happened.

“Shiiiiit”, he pressed out between his teeth when it became clear that AIM’s force field had fried all the circuits in his suit. A second later the breath was knocked out of him as he crash-landed in the middle of Broadway. The impact hurt like bloody blazes.

He lay on his back and stared up at the gigantic four-legged beasts of metal. They just went up and up, like skyscrapers that had decided to take a walk-about. The ground under him shook with every step, enough to make his teeth rattle. And he lay directly in their path. The suit was a dead weight that pinned him down and he fumbled for the emergency release. He felt like a bug that had been turned onto its back, as an enormous foot slowly descended towards him.

Tony saw his life flash before his eyes. There was a lot that he’d rather hop over, thanks. If that foot landed, they couldn’t scrap enough Tony-goo from the pavement to fill even a very small urn.

Just before the robot could squash him like an overripe tomato he was hauled out of danger. Steve heaved him up into a fireman’s carry and ran as fast as he could. Which was slower than normal, because the weight of the suit made even Mr Perfect sweat a bit. He grunted something annoyed about ‘goddamn adrenaline junkies’, which sounded funny in his old-fashioned accent. Well, no wonder he’d picked up that 21st century expression. It fitted most of the people the good Captain had to work with nowadays.
Tony dangled over his shoulder, which gave him a nice view of Steve's spectacular ass. “My hero”, he drawled. “So strong, so manly. Let me be your maiden in distress.”

“Oh, shut up”, Steve said with a hint of fondness. He sat Tony down at the side of the street and leaned him against a restaurant wall. It was one of those Italian places that were a dime a dozen and Steve handled Tony like a foldable coffee table. Then he looked down at him with his arms crossed. “Can you get out of that death trap of a superhero costume or do I have to help you?”

“As much as I’d love to be undressed by you, Cap, I think you should return to the fight. I’ll be fine.”

“There isn’t much of a fight when we can’t even scratch those buggers’ paintwork”, Steve said, but he did leave Tony to fend for himself.

It didn’t take too long to get out of the armor, and repairs were easier from the outside. The first thing on Tony's list was to get Jarvis back online. He hated to be cut off from his AI, who wasn’t just a vital source of information but also his bro in a fight. “Hey, you there yet? Talk to me. I’m sure you want to read me the riot act and this is your chance. Anyone home? Jarvis, buddy?”

“I’m glad you still have the lung capacity to be annoying, Sir”, Jarvis’ greeted him with welcome sass. His voice sounded tinny from inside the helmet. “I should probably inform you that Mr Olson has left the area allowed by the tracker.”

Tony blinked. “Wait, what? You can’t be serious. I’m out for five minutes and that’s what happens? I mean, come on. Five. Fucking. Minutes.” He needed a break from his life. Just a little breathing space before the next curveball smacked him in the face. Was that too much to ask, really? Tony massaged his forehead and imagined Loki swinging a baseball bat in his direction with a slightly manic grin. “I only let him handle the Ferrari because it’s one of the models you can remote-control in a crisis. Which means you should have been able to stop him, J. Tell me you haven’t let him elope with my car?”

“Not exactly”, Jarvis said.

Tony groaned. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You told me not to let him go ‘anywhere he wasn’t supposed to be’. Saving your life seemed to fall under those parameters. He asked for your GPS coordinates so he could join the fight and I gave them to him.”

“Of course you did”, Tony sighed. “In other words, he sweet-talked you. Again.”

“I’ve still got him monitored.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s see if I’ve got the comm back working for everyone … Hey, guys? We may be getting unexpected help. Don’t shoot him on sight.”

A crackle sounded from the helmet. Then Clint’s voice said: “Let me guess, you're talking about your sweetheart the no-maj. Figures. I bet he hates being benched. Guy thinks he can do better than us, huh?”

Tony narrowed his eyes and sniped back: “Is that jealousy I hear? He may be a squib at the moment, but he’s still stronger, faster and way smarter than you, birdbrain.”

“Ohh, defending him. How sweet.”
“I’m just worried about your health”, Tony said. Sweetly. “If you keep badmouthing him, he’s going to take that as a challenge and make you into shish kebab. Asguardians are funny about insults.”

Clint scoffed. “Come on, you insult him all the time.”

“Yeah, I’m allowed. Because he respects me.”

The archer muttered something that sounded like: “So glad that you’ve found someone who still respects you in the morn-“

Natasha cut in. “Boys, focus.”

At the same time Jarvis interrupted with a sharp and urgent: ”Look out, Sir!”

Tony reacted on instinct and threw himself to the side. A laser beam hit the pavement where he’d been standing a second ago and the asphalt started to bubble. Tony didn’t wait around to see if there was more coming and started to run in a zigzag pattern. A sizzling noise from behind told him that the Walker was still shooting in his direction. “A little help here?”, he panted.

When this whole thing was over and he hadn’t ended up as a smoking pile of ashes, he’d sue the pants off George Lucas.

Thor dropped from the sky, cape fluttering, and snatched him up. Tony heaved a sigh of relief. You could always rely on the boy scouts of the universe for a last minute rescue. Looked like this was his day to be the damsel in distress.

Being carried bridal style wasn’t better in terms of dignity than the fireman position. But at least the flight experience was new and pretty cool. They soared into the sky, pulled by a magical hammer, and the speed was literally breath-taking. Tony’s suit could break the sound barrier and was perfect in every other way, but you couldn’t feel the wind batter against your skin. This way of flying felt much more real, in spite of the impossibility that was Mjolnir. Thor made a few sharp turns and Tony whooped.

“The beast of metal is still aiming for you”, Thor boomed. “Another one has joined it and tries to catch us in a cross-fire. Does this AIM hold a grudge against you?”

“I bloody well hope so!”, Tony shouted back. “I did my best to be a pain in their collective asses. Those goons give engineering a bad name. Took their robot weapons long enough to slot me into their recognition software. Shoddy programming, if you ask me.”

“As always I have little idea what you are talking about, friend Tony. But be that as it may, their aiming is excellent.” Thor jerked to the side, then did a sudden downwards spiral to avoid the laser beams that crisscrossed the sky and tried to fry them in mid-flight. One corner of Thor’s cape was cut clean off.

“Huh, close shave”, Tony commented. He was sure that Jarvis was having a coronary by now.

Just when he started to worry a bit himself, a sleek red car came racing around the street corner and headed for the Walkers. The Ferrari handled like a dream, when the driver knew what he was doing, and Loki obviously did.

Loptr Olson owned a driver's licence, that much Tony knew, but he’d never been sure if it was blatantly fake. Well, either it was legit or Loki had developed his skills in their many games of Need for Speed. He zigzagged through the Walkers’ legs, whirled the car around and avoided
being trampled several times. The robots marched on in the middle of Broadway and more or less
ignored the pesky little thing that wove around between their feet. Still, there were twenty-four legs
to avoid, so Loki needed really good reflexes. It looked like a deadly kind of dance.

The trickster worked his way up to the front of the row and came to a stop with smoking tyres,
facing the Walkers in a hundred feet distance. Tony had pulled a few stunts with this particular car
himself, but that was a smooth bit of driving. “Over-achiever”, he muttered.

Then Loki jumped out of the driver seat, bright blue from head to foot.

Thor’s grip loosened for a second and he made a small noise between surprise and dismay. “Hey!”,
Tony complained. “If you drop me to my squishy death just because your brother has embraced his
inner Smurth, I’ll be really pissed.”

Loki took a wide-legged stance in front of the approaching metal beasts and raised his hands.
Typical wizard position, in spite of the fact that the trickster wasn't supposed to have any magic. Of
course that didn't stop him. Tony wasn't even surprised anymore.

A thick layer of ice formed on the street and grew exponentially. It covered the short distance
between Loki and the Walkers within seconds.

Tony watched from above as the first of the machines started to stumble. The Walker’s long legs
were a real disadvantage now. It tried to regain its balance, but its feet didn’t obey. They seemed to
go everywhere in a desperate scrabble. The massive robot did a kind of pirouette and landed on its
ass. Tony had once seen a flock of geese aim for an ice-covered pond, just to topple over with
indignant squawks and honks the moment they touched down. The amount of slapstick had been
about the same. He snickered.

Tony had wondered if the Loptr Effect still worked, now that the God didn’t have access to the
santhordinn parts of his magic. Obviously it did. Loki’s brand of chaos was quite unmistakeable.

“How do I even bother with the JINX?”, Tony sighed. „Guy’s a squip and still turning Broadway
into winter wonderland. I guess if you happen to be a Jotun, you can create ice without the use of
conventional magic?”

“It’s a natural ability, yes”, Thor said gruffly.

“Nice to know. I bet he’s been practising like crazy since he found out. Should I be worried that he
can take out a small Imperial army with just a hand wave in spite of his ankle tracker?”

Thor snorted. “In truth, I should be the one to worry most. My brother isn’t murderously angry at
you.”

The second robot careened into the first from behind and made it go splat. The others followed in
an avalanche of metal. What had been a troupe of fearsome war machines turned into a heap of
tangled limbs. Feet, necks and other body parts stuck out everywhere. Just like that scene from the
Jungle Book where the elephant patrol ended up in an undignified sprawl. Tony would have loved
to take pictures and post them on AIM’s intranet.

The last Walker of the bunch slammed into the others from behind and shoved them forward,
robot beasts bouncing off each other like curling stones. Tony’s grin froze when he saw that they
were headed directly for his Ferrari.

The car looked like a toy in comparison. No doubt it would end up as scrap metal. Tony tensed in
anticipation of the crash, covered his eyes and peeked between his fingers. But the expected
crunching noise didn’t come. The whole robot mass slid to a stop just twenty feet from his precious baby.

“Wow, that was a bit of luck there”, Tony said.

The words had hardly left his mouth, when the Walker in front of his car tried to stand up and its front legs did a split move instead. It toppled over in what looked like slow-motion. The neck swung around and the head smashed into Tony’s Ferrari with the force of a battering ram.

Loki looked up at him with wide-eyed innocence and mouthed: “Ooops.”

Tony sputtered.

“On the other hand”, Thor said, “you forced my brother to pay for his misdeeds, which he seldom had to do before, so he may be somewhat annoyed with you as well.”

“That little … I’m gonna strangle him with the fucking motor belt.” There was no doubt that Loki had gotten his Ferrari trashed deliberately. Or at least, his chaos magic had.

On the other hand, that whole stunt had saved Tony’s life, so he couldn’t even bitch about it too much. The God had waltzed in and saved the day like a true picture book hero, with the car thing as a mishap on the side. Tony would probably have to thank him. Damn.

Nobody could make retaliation into an art form just like the God of Mischief. Looked like Thor had it right. Tony had been raking Loki over the coals since the invasion and the trickster had actually let him, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t go for a bit of revenge.

Tony kept fuming for a while, then he had to laugh. “God, he’s such a creative asshole. Looks like he’s got the robot situation handled at the moment. Let’s join the others and watch the rest of the show?”

“Very well”, Thor said and landed on the sidewalk, where the Avengers had gathered in front of a musical theatre. They didn’t have popcorn, but Natasha handed around some weird Russian candies. She had a surprisingly sweet tooth and Tony had to admit that soybean chocolate tasted better than it sounded.

“Okay, okay”, Clint grumbled as a greeting, “perhaps the guy’s not as useless as he looks.”

Tony shrugged. “Told you so. Hey, anyone got a spare comm for me? I’ve got a frantic AI to appease. Jarvis hates it when I nearly get myself killed and he can’t bitch about it.”

Steve handed him one. As the leader of the group he usually came prepared.

As soon as Tony’d gotten the earpiece in Jarvis said: “I heard that, Sir.”

Tony grinned. “Yeah, fine, consider me chastened. Changing the topic now. Can you tell me about that new superpower Loki suddenly sprouted? That came a bit out of the … mmh … blue.”

“I’ve been searching through all available information about Jotuns, including SHIELD’s data bases, but there isn’t much. Mostly myths and folklore. From what I could gather I strongly suspect …”

“Oh, wait a moment. Things are happening here.”

The first Walker was trying to untangle its head from the car wreck and Loki used the opportunity
to run towards it at full speed, before it could aim its laser beams again. He had to throw himself sideways once, when a car fender tore loose and whirled in his direction like a battle axe, but stayed otherwise unharmed. When he’d finally reached the metal beast he pressed a hand against its neck.

The giant robot literally froze. You could hear the machine parts power down. White fern frost crept up its body and all movement stopped. Even better, the effect was contagious. At all the points where the Walkers touched, the layer of rime swept over them and shut them off one after the other. About five minutes later, AIM’s deadly StarWars collection lay on the ground in a harmless heap and the robots didn’t so much as twitch anymore.

Tony stared at them open-mouthed. “Did he just short-circuit the whole bunch with just one touch?”

“It seems that way”, Jarvis said. “Which would explain what he was looking for in the library. It holds a rather large collection of books about thermodynamics and low temperature physics. Mr Olson probably read up on all the ways extreme cold can be used in a technological environment. Like creating a strong electrostatic discharge to shut down a computer system.”

“Figures. That’s Loki in a nutshell. I bet Jotuns don’t use their abilities as anti-high tech weapons usually.”

“I recommend that you make the Iron Man suits more temperature resistant. As well as my mainframe, Sir.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, good idea. Don’t want us to end up like my Ferrari one day. Huh, what’s Loki doing now? Isn’t that a bit of overkill?”

The trickster had climbed onto the first Walker’s shoulder and pulled out the dagger Tony had forged for him. He ripped off a square of metal plating with his bare hands, exposed the cables underneath, and lifted the blade. With a swift, practised movement he cut the beast’s throat, just the way a hunter would kill a dear or elk. The whole act looked strangely ritualistic. Perhaps it was an Asgardian thing.

Then he jumped off the Walker and came strolling over to Tony and the rest of the Avengers. “First kill”, he said, as if that was an explanation. He cleaned the knife with great care and put it away again.

“Uh, as long as you don’t dig out the heart and eat it. I heard that’s still done in parts of the wild west”, Tony said.

Loki grimaced. “Really? Humans are strange.”

“You’re one to talk”, Tony snorted. He wondered if he should be a responsible handler and mention the fact that Loki had gone AWOL. But no, that just wasn’t him. Instead he said, “By the way, Jarvis is sending over Happy with the limousine. For some reason my car has gone missing, presumed dead”, and threw Loki a significant look.

The Trickster shrugged in a ‘who me?’-way.

That was much better. Tony wouldn’t say thanks and Loki wouldn’t say sorry, but both was vaguely implied. It was kind of scary that they could have whole conversations in a short piece of banter now. Just like an old couple, at least in a slightly dysfunctional relationship. Tony could easily picture Loki in the role of ‘hysterical wife‘ throwing dishes and tantrums.
“So, I guess the non-flyers of our merry band should drive home with us. Steve, Clint, Tasha, you up for a ride?”, Tony added, still looking at Loki. The trickster winced and Tony tallied up some points for himself. He imagined four Avengers and one Loki in a small enclosed space. That would become … interesting.

But in his opinion it was high time that they all started speaking to each other, (even if it involved some yelling and possibly death threats). Loki couldn’t hide in his room forever. The trickster had decided to come out and play, fine, then he could cope with the team bonding experience. Tony had in the past, if only under duress. In hindsight, it hadn’t been such a bad thing.

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