The Gods of All Things

by fullofleaves

Summary

Having successfully removed themselves from Asgard, Tony and Loki are now faced with a whole new challenge: trying to navigate life within the boundaries of a normal(ish) relationship on Earth. It's not made any easier by the fact that uninvited Avengers keep showing up for superhero shenanigans, or that maybe things aren't quite as perfect as Tony keeps pretending they are. And it's really not made any easier by some dumb a-hole named Aldrich Killian trying to rule the world, followed by some dumber a-hole named Malekith trying to destroy it. (What is it with these damn villains always getting all up in the world's business anyway?)

Notes

Welcome, friends, to part three of Tony and Loki Make Questionable Life Choices! If you've already read parts one and two, I humbly thank you for returning to the story even though I think we all know by now I have no idea what I'm doing! If you're just starting, here's a quick recap!

Previously on Distance, Space, and Time: Tony (with help from Thor) sprung Loki from SHeILD prison aboard the helicarrier during events of the Avengers, and they inevitably developed pants-feelings for each other and had a brief but probably meaningful relationship
until Loki fucked it up and unleashed an alien invasion over New York. As a result, his
dumb ass was dragged back to Asgard and imprisoned. Then Tony, having determined
there's a terrible shortage of hot magic alien boyfriends on Earth and Loki was, in fact,
irreplaceable, went to Asgard to get him back. Poor choices due to incorrect assumptions
were made, and they ended up on Jotunheim after science mishap number one. Luckily, it
was Thanksgiving weekend, and Loki's lie that they were married saved Tony from being
eaten by turning the whole situation into a charming holiday movie trope. Unluckily, science
mishap number two then took place and Loki had no choice but to transform Tony into a
frost giant to save his life. A bunch of other stuff of dubious importance then happened
before they were transported back to Asgard, where they were given a chance to complain
their way to freedom via the Bifrost.

Now they're back on Earth and ready to attempt Officially Moving In Together while not
accidentally turning their fledgling relationship into a raging dumpster fire. I hope you enjoy!
Abandoned by an Asgardian Space Beam

The worst part isn’t being abandoned by an Asgardian space beam in the middle of the New Mexico desert.

The worst part isn’t having to walk across said desert for six hours before finally making it out of the Bifrost’s extensive residual magic radius.

The worst part isn’t the nauseating, whole-body-enveloping feeling of general awfulness that comes with Loki’s teleportation once you’re out of that no-fly zone.

The worst part isn’t even being exhausted and cold and filthy and thirsty beyond belief and actually feeling like you’re teetering on the brink of insanity in your desperate need to have a hot shower and gulp down approximately thirty gallons of water.

No, the worst part – the worst part – is surviving all that and finally getting home and finally trudging up the driveway and finally standing on your front doorstep... only to realize that not only are your keys not in your pants, but you have no idea which pants they might be in. Or which planet those pants might currently be on.

“Is something wrong?” Loki’s voice floats up from behind as Tony stands with his forehead against the door and his finger pressing the intercom buzzer.

“Nope,” Tony replies in his raspy, dehydrated voice. “Just, um... I think the house keys might be on Jotunheim? Because I’m pretty sure I put them in my pocket when we were about to go through the portal, and then, you know, all that stuff happened...”

“I thought you pressed numbers to open the door.”

Straightening up and turning around, Tony looks back at Loki. “Not on this door. This isn’t some average suburban house in Phoenix. This is my top secret lair where I do all my plotting and inventing and other very important superhero stuff. And because I apparently like outsmarting myself with my own security system, it needs a number code and a computerized key.”

“Oh,” says Loki, and he glances away, in one of those gestures of his that Tony’s come to read as ‘I don’t know what human nonsense you’re talking about, but I have no intention of admitting that’. “In Asgard, doors are locked and opened by specific touch. If someone has permission to open the door, it will open for them, reading their energy.”

“Yeah, we have something similar on Earth, too, only ours read fingerprints or eyeballs. You might remember a little incident you were involved in with that poor bastard in Germany. And the thing is, I’d really rather just have somebody steal my keys than try to remove important parts of my body if they’re that determined to break in. There are a couple biometric security systems inside the house, but outside? No. Thanks to you and Dan Brown.”

Loki nods. “That’s probably wise. Are there any large pieces of furniture or architectural impediments directly on the other side of the door I should know about that would interfere with shifting inside?”

“Oh.” Leaning back against the door again, Tony gives the buzzer one more long push, hoping like hell that Bruce is home and is about to appear at any second to let them in. “Okay, yes, that would be a logical solution to the problem. There should be nothing in our way. However,” he quickly adds when Loki makes a move forward, “can you just... Let’s wait a sec. My bones are still
wiggling from our last jaunt. Lemme have a minute for all my molecules to reassemble before you force them through another quantum rift in the fabric of reality."

That very reasonable request doesn’t stop Loki from continuing to walk right up to the door with a look on his face like ‘suck it up, you pathetic mortal; it’s only magical teleportation.’ So Tony squeezes his eyes shut and takes in a deep breath to brace himself against the impending discomfort. Maybe it’s better this way? Maybe it’s better to get everything over with all at once instead of drawing out unpleasant feelings and the nagging worry that some of his innards didn’t settle back into the right place?

But seconds pass and nothing happens. Tony opens his eyes to the sight of no Loki, and the sound of the deadbolt turning in the door at his back. He moves out of the way as the door swings open, and there’s Loki, showing off an annoying little smirk.

“Or, yeah,” Tony says, “you could shift without me and unlock the door from the inside. That would, in hindsight, be the more sensible plan of action.”

The lights snap on in the front foyer all the way into the living room when Tony steps inside, illuminating the greatest sight he’s seen in months. That floor, those walls, those windows... He’s home. And he’d fall down to his hands and knees to hug the house right then and there if not for the very real possibility that his sunburned, dust-caked, and completely exhausted body would refuse to get back up again.

“Jarvis, I’m home.”

“Wellcome back, sir,” Jarvis’ voice echoes through the hallway. “I would have opened the door for you, but seeing as you deactivated the necessary security settings...”

“You kept letting in S.H.I.E.L.D. agents,” Tony mutters as he resets the lock. “We’ll talk about reinstating your door privileges once you learn to tell the difference between people who are allowed in – namely me – and people who aren’t allowed in. Namely everybody who isn’t me. Especially Fury and Coulson, no matter what programming they override.”

“Duly noted.”

“Oh, and this is Loki,” he says. Heading in towards the living room, he gestures for Loki to follow. “Let’s add Loki to the list of people who are allowed inside.”

“Welcome, Mr. Loki.”

“Loki, this is... uh...” Pausing, he racks his brain for a simple and concise explanation for a disembodied butler voice, and comes up empty-handed. “Yeah, I’ll explain tomorrow when we’re not tired and filthy. I think tonight all I want to do is have a shower and then collapse into bed. Sound okay to you?”

“Very much so,” Loki replies, eyes scanning the surroundings as he follows behind Tony. His movements are slow, bordering on cautious. Like a cat surveying its way through a foreign space. Which, Tony has to remind himself, is more or less the truth. Weird as it seems to think about, Loki must be feeling as alone and out of place here as Tony felt on Asgard. A place he’s never seen before, a place where he doesn’t know what to expect or how he’ll fit in, and yet it’s his home now. He’s just expected to deal with all that uncertainty. Deal with it, accept it, and live with it.

Tony reaches out to place a reassuring hand on Loki’s back, in case that helps. “Come on. I’ll give you a full tour in the morning, but right now, let’s have a good, close look at the master en suite. I
think you’ll enjoy its top-of-the-line shower feature.”

He leads the way through the house to the bedroom with cat-like Loki at his side, seeming maybe a little more at ease, but not much. Well, that’ll take time. Something to work on. “Hey, J?” he asks as he walks. “Is Bruce still here?”

“I’m sorry, sir. Dr. Banner is away for the weekend and will be back on Monday.”

Is it selfish to be happy Bruce isn’t around? No, Tony quickly decides. After everything he and Loki have been through, they have to deserve a bit of time to themselves. “Thanks. And, um... what day is it today?”

“Friday.”

“Spectacular.” He and Loki have three nights to themselves. So he won’t feel so bad about wasting tonight if he passes out in the next fifteen minutes.

“You do have several thousand accumulated emails and voicemails that Dr. Banner did not feel comfortable reading or listening to on your behalf. Would you like to-”

“Nope,” says Tony. “Delete everything more than one day old.”

“You have seventeen remaining emails and one voicemail.”

“Great. Now delete those too and we’ll be all caught up. Night, J. I’m on Do Not Disturb until morning. And by morning I mean noon.” He shuts the bedroom door and looks over at Loki. “Shower?”

“Is that a... ghost?” Loki asks.

“Funny you should ask, but no,” says Tony. “To way oversimplify, he’s a computer. I’ll get you all caught up once I can think straight. I need some water. Do you need water? My mouth is so dry I’ve forgotten the taste of saliva. Everything tastes like dirt right now. I’m going to turn on the shower and stick my head under the spray for several minutes.”

He flicks on the bathroom light, but stops right there in the doorway once he catches sight of himself in the bank of mirrors. He might as well be staring at some stereotype of a Great Depression hobo: about two weeks’ worth of overgrown beard, hair so stiff with sweat and dirt it sticks straight up from his forehead where he kept raking it back, skin on his nose and cheeks reddened by the sun, and a considerable coating of gray-brown dust like a mask on his face, concentrated in all the fine lines around his eyes to accentuate every crease. And that’s without taking into account the absurd Asgardian clothes.

“What?” Loki asks, prodding him in the back as a gesture of non-verbal shorthand for ‘stop standing in the doorway and blocking the way to the shower’.

He leans back to let his body rest against Loki’s. “I look incredibly sexy right now, don’t I?”

“Always,” Loki answers with a smirk.

“Okay good,” says Tony. “Because you’re the one who has to deal with me looking like this. I, on the other hand, get to look at you. And you look suspiciously like you used a magic forcefield to ward off any sun, dirt, or wind damage.”

“Ridiculous,” Loki says, running a hand over his perfectly smooth and shining hair as he slides past
Tony into the bathroom and over to the shower door. “That would be a highly impractical use of magical energy.” He turns on the taps. “Now come over here so I can wash you.”

“You totally used magic, you vain fucker,” Tony mutters. But he mutters it as he goes, because only an idiot would turn down a Loki-assisted washing.

He peels off his clothes, kicking them over against the wall for Future Tony to deal with in the morning or in a few days or maybe never. The hot water, when it hits his skin, feels just as good as he’d been anticipating. It’s impossible to hold back a moan of pure contentment. He stands directly under the shower’s spray with his face upturned, letting it wash away all the collected grime, then opens his mouth to rinse out the coating of grit.

“Aw shit, I forgot how awful tap water tastes,” he says between mouthfuls, half of which he spits out. “Like dogs have been swimming in a chlorine-treated lake with undertones of isopropanol.”

Behind him, the shower door clicks shut, and then the very welcome presence of Loki’s naked body presses up against his back. “Then why do you keep drinking it?”

“Because I’m way too lazy and wet to get a cup of filtered stuff from the sink.” Again, he opens his mouth, drinking as much as he can bear. “Oh, this is the worst. This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me. Community tap water. I’m probably going to get some kind of deadly water parasite.”

“Oh, probably,” Loki agrees. “Now close your mouth for a moment so I can wash your face.”

Tony takes one last gulp before complying, closing both eyes and mouth and letting the water rain down on his skin. At his back, he can feel Loki’s movement, reaching down to grab a bottle from the tiled shelf. Seconds later, hands are on his face, smoothing something slippery and floral-scented in circular motions over his cheeks and up to the bridge of his nose.

“Uh. Is that...?” Conditioner. It’s hair conditioner.

“Is it what?” asks Loki.

“Nothing,” Tony says, letting himself sag backwards against Loki for support. Loki’s fingers gently rub at his eyelids. Why ruin a perfectly good moment by pointing out something as insignificant as correct Earth shower product usage? “Everything’s fine. Actually, everything’s great. Really great. Isn’t it?”

“I think so,” Loki murmurs close to his ear.

Yeah. It’s pretty great. He’s home. He’s home with Loki. He’s in the shower, with Loki, and Loki’s hands are moving from his face to his ears to his neck to his shoulders to his chest, skillfully caressing away all the dirt and sweat and aches and pains left behind from their long walk across the desert from the Bifrost site. What could be better than this? Nothing.

Okay, maybe if the tap water didn’t taste like dogs.

“Turn around,” Loki instructs, and Tony does.

Actually, this might be better, because now Tony can drop his forehead down onto Loki’s shoulder and wrap his arms around Loki’s waist. And Loki’s hands can travel up and down his back in stripes and swirls, then up to his hair to massage his scalp with a soothing scratch of fingernails and another dollop of floral scent. He keeps his eyes closed, savoring the sensation of Loki’s touch skirting down to his hips. And the tingle of magic soaking through his skin to infiltrate the layer of
“Why are you not grabbing my butt?” he mumbles into Loki’s collar bone.

Loki’s hands quickly move into position with a gentle squeeze. “Better?”

“Yes. Though now I’m wondering why I’m not grabbing your butt. Obviously I’m too tired to think clearly.” He releases his hold on Loki’s waist to go for the ass. “There we go.”

“And now we stand here like this until you fall asleep leaning against me?”

“There are worse ways to spend a Friday night.”

“I can think of better ways as well,” Loki says. “However, on account of how you are still recovering from your Jotun transformation and a very long walk across the desert...”

Tony groans as Loki turns off the shower spray. “I’m up for anything that doesn’t involve moving or having to make decisions.”

“You’re up for sleeping,” Loki tells him.

Okay then. “I’ll still fall asleep holding onto your butt, though,” Tony says as Loki herds him out of the shower and wraps him in a towel.

He’d forgotten how comfortable his bed is. The plush mattress. The down pillows. The six hundred thread count bamboo rayon sheets he spite-bought from Amazon because Pepper, with her inexplicable and illogical bias towards Egyptian cotton, refused to buy them at the bedding store. And now the addition of a nice Loki tucking him under the duvet really ties the whole scene together with a big, pleasant bow. “C’mere,” he mutters, rolling onto his back and holding out his arm in an invitation to cuddle. He’s rewarded with Loki’s head on his shoulder, in exactly the right position for a damp hairline kiss that lets him inhale the scent of generic flowers. He tightens his hold around Loki’s back as a welcome arm slithers around his middle.

“But what if...” he says, though a wide yawn cuts him off. “What if I just lie here and let you do all the work?”

“What if you went to sleep and woke up rested and refreshed in the morning, and we could do whatever we wanted then?”

“That sounds like quitter talk.”

Loki shifts to make some small measure of eye contact. “I can’t tell if you’re serious or joking.”

“I’m joking.” He yawns again. “Sort of. But I wouldn’t say no if you, uh, wanted to thank me for rescuing you from Asgard in some kind of... manual manner.”

“That has to be another joke.”

“It was slightly less of a joke than the first suggestion.”

Luck is not on Tony’s side. “We’re finally free of Asgard,” Loki says, “and are together, at last, after all that time spent celibate on Jotunheim. And you want to spoil what could be a very nice reunion with a quick hand job in the dark? During which I’m sure you’d fall asleep?”

“Well, um...” Loki may have a point. It may not be a point that Tony likes, but it’s probably right. “So we go back to Plan A, with me lying here and you doing all the work?”
Slowly but precisely, with all his snake-like elegance, Loki lifts his head and slides up alongside Tony’s body. Until his face hovers over Tony’s, blurred by the night’s shadows, and he exhales a low, thoughtful hum. “Tony Stark,” he whispers, leaning in close so the name on his lips brushes Tony’s ear, “I have very specific plans for you tomorrow. Plans that will require every last bit of your mortal stamina. Therefore, I suggest you rest well now so as not to disappoint me later.”

Tony can’t stop the shiver that ripples through his body from his spine to his toes with a very prominent stop in between. Not that he’d want to stop it. After, as Loki put it, all that time spent celibate on Jotunheim, it’s starting to stir up a very welcome spark of all the desirous feelings he’s been missing out on.

“Okay I’m suddenly much more awake now,” he murmurs.

“No, you’re not,” Loki replies. “Go to sleep.”

Settling back down, Loki pulls the duvet around them like a cocoon and returns to his space curled up in the crook of Tony’s arm. So that’s that, then. It’s not a bad ending to the evening, per se. Actually, comparatively speaking after all the crap they had to deal with in recent memory, it’s a pretty damn good ending. If only patience were one of Tony’s strong suits and he could convince himself that it’s only a short, overnight, eight-hour-or-so wait before he can let everything go and plow Loki’s ass into the mattress.

Until then? Some innocent and sexually frustrating snuggling. Closing his eyes, he inhales one deep breath and slowly sighs it out again, letting the weight of it flow through his limbs and remind him of just how exhausted he is. His back aches and his legs ache and after a minute of lying there he feels so heavy the thought of never getting out of bed again sounds incredibly appealing. Already, his mind is growing foggy as it drifts towards sleep.

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Whatever Tony was dreaming about was probably nice. Not that he’d remember or anything, because he’s shaken awake in the middle of the goddamn night by a hand on his shoulder and hissing words in his ear.

“Tony. Tony, wake up.”

It takes a second to pull together enough coherence to realize that’s it’s Loki’s hand and Loki’s voice. Because, yes, he’s home, in his own bed. With Loki. Who is, for some dumb reason, disturbing a perfectly good night’s sleep and the replenishment of stamina that goes with it.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m awake,” he says through a yawn, pushing Loki’s hand away. “What’s going on? If you woke me up for anything less than the outbreak of nuclear war...”

“Somebody’s here.”

And just like that, Tony’s brain jumps from still groggily half asleep to wide awake in the span of half a breath. He snaps up into a sitting position. “What do you mean, ‘somebody’s here’?! Jarvis? Did Bruce come back?”

“No, sir,” Jarvis replies. “Director Fury arrived approximately five minutes ago.”

“Director Ffff...” Tony says, and almost swears, but in all honesty ‘Fury’ would be worse than any other four-letter word in his vocabulary. “Why?!” he demands instead. “How did he even get in?!”

“He has a key.”
Of course. That’s probably Bruce’s fault, in conjunction with the situation of S.H.I.E.L.D. inserting themselves into the portal business. “And why didn’t you tell me he was here?!”

“You gave specific instruction not to disturb you.”

“I meant for unimportant crap like phone calls or Coulson ringing the doorbell! Uninvited intruders? I need to know about that!” Throwing back the covers, Tony tries to slide out of bed, only to be stopped by Loki’s arm wrapping protectively around his ribcage and keeping him in place.

“No, don’t go,” Loki whispers to him. “It could be a trap.”

Fair enough. Tony nods. “Jarvis, what’s Fury doing, exactly?”

“Director Fury is standing at your kitchen island, and appears to be eating one of Doctor Banner’s yogurt cups.”

“That doesn’t rule out a trap,” Tony growls. “Anybody else in the house or on the property?”

“No, sir.”

He looks to Loki for confirmation, and Loki shakes his head in the negative.

That still doesn’t rule out a trap. “I, is he armed?”

“I’ve scanned two small handguns.”

“Has he said anything to you?”

“No.”

“I better go see about this,” he says to Loki, moving the restraining-bar arm aside. “You stay in here. If everything goes south? You shift away and get yourself out. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. If Fury’s after anybody, it’ll be you, so...”

“Tony,” Loki murmurs.

“I’ll deal with this. Just stay in here.”

In the dark of the room, he somehow manages to find a pair of sweatpants and a house robe to throw on. He closes the bedroom door behind him before setting out for the kitchen. There, as promised, Fury stands at the island. One empty yogurt cup, the green kind that Pepper always used to buy, lies on its side. Fury’s spoon scrapes in a spiral motion to finish off a second one as Tony stops in the archway to watch.

“Wow. Nick Fury. What brings you here at...” He glances over at the clock on the microwave. “...3:52 in the morning?”

Without even looking up, Fury finishes off his last spoonful of yogurt. “I was in the neighborhood.”

“I hope S.H.I.E.L.D.’s paying you a shift premium for having to work so early.”

“I’m always on the clock.”

“I figured,” says Tony. “Do you ever sleep? I’m kind of having a hard time imagining you wearing pajamas or lying down in a bed. Are you like one of those hardened assassins that only ever takes light naps while fully dressed and sitting in an armchair?”
“I’m sure I get less sleep than you do,” Fury says, looking up and giving Tony’s bedroom attire the once-over.

“I need my beauty rest. It’s one of the drawbacks to being so terribly handsome.”

Fury wiggles his empty yogurt cup as Tony takes a seat on the other side of the island. “Want me to get you one?”

“No thanks,” says Tony. “I, uh…” He pauses. But he might as well let the massive, elephant-sized cat out of the bag and start steering the conversation over in the direction he knows Fury wants to go. Casually drop the name everybody’s waiting to hear. “Loki’s mom gave us some magical elvish lembas bread that we ate earlier. I’m still not hungry.”

“Hm.” Fury nods like that was a normal thing that could’ve come up in any conversation. And he says, just as casually, “Would Loki like a yogurt?”

“Nah. He’s pretty picky about food. Only eats raw meat and mushrooms and that kind of thing.”

Again: “Hm.”

Fury sure milks that yogurt cup for all he can get out of it, scraping his spoon around the inside for the final dregs before moving over to the sink and very thoroughly washing it out. Then he washes the other one. Then he places them both in the recycling bin. Then he stretches his arms above his head and from side to side while making a rhythmic hissing noise between his teeth, and if his goal is to annoy Tony by wasting all this time that could better be spent asleep, he’s succeeding.

“Okay, I give up,” Tony says, rubbing his eyes. “In the interest of getting back to bed as soon as possible, I’m going to ask you outright. Why are you here? I assume it’s because of Loki, but I’d really like to know specifically what you hope to accomplish right now.”

Returning to his place at the island, Fury gives Tony one of those crooked half-smiles. “That’s very astute of you. I am here because of Loki.”

“Shocker. Never would have guessed. But I’ll tell you now, if you’re expecting me to hand him over so you can take him back to S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters for alien autopsy the sequel, we’re going to have a problem. A problem that will not resolve in your favor. I’ve just spent the last couple months dealing with all kinds of obstacles from Asgard and Jotunheim, and no offense, but you’re child’s play in comparison.”

“It’s nothing like that,” says Fury. “Loki’s free to stay with you for now. On one small condition.”

“The condition better be something along the lines of me giving you a dollar or a friendly handshake.”

“You’ve just returned from an alien planet. Since nobody knows what you may have been exposed to, I think it’s wise to keep you under quarantine for the next few days. At least until Banner returns and has a chance to give you a full examination.”

Tony blinks. “Wait, so my punishment is not having to leave the house or do anything?”

“It’s not a punishment. But yes. I’m asking you and Loki both to stay here. That’s all. I’ll send Romanov over around noon or so to.”

“Uh, hang on, Romanov? That’s starting to sound like a new condition I don’t like as much.”
“to brief you on a few important developments that’ve come up in your absence, and to help you arrange any food or supplies you might need for the next few days.”

Well, as far as interactions with Natasha Romanov go, that doesn’t sound too unbearable. But still. “Can’t you send somebody better? Like, I don’t know, generic button-pusher number six? Somebody who doesn’t actively hate both me and my boyfriend?”

“I’ll see what I can do. Until then? And until further notice? You stay in this house. As long as you play nice, you get to keep custody of your weird-ass, Shelley Duvall-looking alien boyfriend.”

“He does not look like Shelley Duvall,” Tony growls.

With that same crooked smile, Fury saunters away to show himself out. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Yay, can’t wait,” Tony says to Fury’s back. He covers up a yawn with both hands before rubbing his face and standing up from the stool. “Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir?”

“As soon as that front door hits Fury’s ass on the way out, this house is on full lockdown. Key or not, nobody comes in without my approval. Anybody that shows up effective this second onward can wait for me to get out of bed and personally unlock the door.”

“Acknowledged. Are you still not to be disturbed until ten?”

“I thought I said noon.”

“Noon it is.”

“Super. Night, J. And if anybody else mysteriously appears in the kitchen? Or in any other room? Tell me. Or I’ll replace you with the voice of Stephen Hawking.”

“Of course, sir.”

As expected, Loki isn’t sleeping when Tony climbs back into bed. Also as expected, he asks, “What was that?”

“Ugh, the usual,” Tony growls as he tries to return to his previous and very comfortable sleeping position. “Actually, wait,” he corrects himself. “Not the usual. I was expecting some ridiculous demands, probably something to do with us having to go to a S.H.I.E.L.D. facility and them putting a tracking tag on you and installing permanent surveillance in the house.”

“But?”

“But all Fury wanted was to tell me I have to stay inside until Bruce gets back, and that Natasha or somebody is coming over at some point to... uh... something. Tell me about all the fun times I missed while we were out being frost giants, I guess. Anyway, bottom line is, they’re not interfering with anything and we can allegedly go about our daily lives. For now.”

“For now,” Loki repeats. The words sound significantly more ominous when he says them.

“Yeah. This is probably a false peace offering to let us get comfortable before they jump in with their usual shenanigans, but I’ll take whatever I can get right now. I’m too tired to haggle.” Swallowing a yawn, he turns to bury his face in Loki’s hair as the familiar feeling of sleep-deprived dizziness washes through his brain.
“I’ll stay up the rest of the night to keep watch in case one of them reappears,” Loki says, his voice quiet but colored with an undertone of menace. “I don’t trust them.”

“Nobody trusts them,” says Tony. “I’m pretty sure the L in S.H.I.E.L.D. stands for Lying. But Jarvis has it covered. So you can go back to sleep.”

“I’d rather stay awake.”

“I’d rather you sleep.”

“What?”

Tony smiles. “Uh, something about specific plans? Terrible, filthy, degenerate, obscene plans? I hope? And stamina needed to go with them?”

Loki holds his breath for a minute, then exhales with a hum. “I suppose that is a good argument, yes.”

“Of course it is,” Tony mumbles. “Now go to sleep, because I really want to have my evil way with you in a few hours. At least five times. Probably more. All day. Got it?”

Loki replies with a feathery kiss landing somewhere in the vicinity of Tony’s ear. Which Tony will happily accept as a wordless agreement. Settling down into the mattress, he wraps both arms around Loki as best he can and closes his eyes.

S.H.I.E.L.D. is already starting to feel like a distant, unimportant memory as the hazy waves of sleep float back in.

“Hey, Loki?” he whispers while he still has the capacity for speech.

“Hm?” Loki grunts.

“Welcome home.”
Waking up to their first official day at home, it's pretty much a given that stuff is going to go wrong. Missing products, missing time, missing information... Tony isn't exactly thrilled with any of those. Why does life have to keep getting in the way when all he wants to do is be a selfish hermit with Loki?

Waking up is nice when you’re not in a strange Asgardian detention room. Or on Jotunheim. It’s nice when the late morning California sunshine is streaming in through the windows, and the sky outside is brilliant blue, and Loki is sprawled out like a starfish, still sleeping away and taking up almost the entire bed. One arm is in its usual spot draped across Tony’s waist, and one leg lies across Tony’s knees like a proprietary mark.

Smiling, Tony shifts his position just as much as is needed to press a soft kiss to Loki’s forehead. Loki blinks himself slowly awake and into that beautifully pure moment halfway between confusion and recognition, where his eyes lose their hold on the dream world and shift focus into reality. He looks so perfect right then. He always does, in the innocence of sleepy mornings, with his gently parted lips and dishevelled hair flopping across the pillow in loose, black curls. Like a sinful angel.

Tony leans in for another kiss. And sticks out his tongue, and pokes Loki in the eye.

“Augh!” Immediately jerking back, both of Loki’s arms fly up as a shield between the two of them. “What are you doing?!”

“Sorry,” Tony says with a stupid grin. “You looked so peaceful and beautiful. I had to ruin it.”

“By licking my eye?!?”

“Yes.”

It takes exactly no time at all for Loki to grab Tony’s wrists, push him over, and pin him to the bed. Tony doesn’t even bother fighting, partly because Loki is way stronger and there’s no way in hell he could win in this kind of impromptu wrestling match, but more because being held down on the bed by Loki isn’t something he’d ever object to.

“How would you like it if I woke you up by licking you in odd places?” Loki asked.

“Uh, well, if you want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, I would be okay with
that. Very okay. In fact, I would go so far as to say you should probably do it every morning. You know. For revenge.”

“Is that so.”

Tony nods. “It is so. You should absolutely get back at me with a lot of disciplinary licking. All over. I need to be taught a lesson.”

“Hm,” Loki says, unreadably cool. “Open your mouth.”

That’s not the kind of thing Tony has to be asked twice. He drops his mouth open while trying to look back at Loki with his best suggestive smoulder.

“You look absurd,” Loki murmurs while leaning down. He stops just short of touching his lips to Tony’s, letting the incomplete kiss hang in the air as he sticks out his tongue and, using just the point with a feather-light touch, licks a stripe down the roof of Tony’s mouth.

Then it’s Tony’s turn to jerk his head back, complete with some kind of dumb-sounding noise partway between a groan and a yelp. “What the hell?!” he says as Loki just laughs. “Ugh, trust you to find the one way to unpleasantly lick somebody…” He has to rub his tongue hard over the roof of his mouth to get rid of the creepy, tickly feeling.

“Are you certain there’s only one way?” Loki asks, patented evil asshole smirk firmly in place.

“As far as I know. But I guess my scientific data set on the subject isn’t as complete as it could be, so we should probably explore this field of research a little further.”

“Mm.” Leaning in, Loki takes the opportunity to delicately lick the side of Tony’s neck, followed by a quick nip of the teeth. “How is that?”


“How about this?” he asks as he moves upward to Tony’s earlobe.

“Also fine. Very good. Very pleasant.”

He slips sideways to Tony’s cheek, skimming across the overgrown beard. “Here?”

“Still very good,” Tony murmurs.

“And now?” His lips graze Tony’s. And Tony’s about to answer in the positive when Loki abruptly changes course and licks the underside of his nose with a flattened, wet tongue.

“Jesus!” Tony turns his head sharply to the side as his hand flies up to wipe away the slick of saliva Loki left. “Okay, that’s just gross!”

But of course Loki, who’s rolled away onto his back to laugh, doesn’t care.

“No more retaliatory licking!”

“What about biting?”

“No retaliatory biting either.” He turns towards Loki, who’s biting at the air and making snapping sounds with his teeth. “Are you sure you’ve recovered from being a frost giant?”

“No.” (Snap snap snap.) “Have you?”
“I’m trying not to think about it. Otherwise I’ll just get mad at you for transforming me.”

“You told me you loved being a frost giant!”

“Uh, yeah, because I was a frost giant and didn’t know any better!”

Loki just keeps on laughing as if that’s funny. Which, objectively, it probably is. Or at least it’s ridiculous enough to fall within the general realm of ‘things to laugh at’. With a lopsided smile on his lips, Loki rolls over and crawls forward, slithering across the bed to close the minor gap between them, until he’s able to cuddle into his niche at Tony’s shoulder. “I prefer you this way, though,” he whispers before very gently biting at the bare skin of Tony’s chest.

“Yeah, me too,” Tony mutters in reply. “That whole thing about Jotuns never having recreational sex was really not my idea of a swell time. Oh hey, which reminds me, do you have any objections to me throwing you down on the mattress and aggressively screwing you senseless for, say, the next ten minutes or so?”

“Mm, no. That sounds reasonable.”

“Okay good.”

He may be several months out of practice, but it’s easy enough to pick up where they last left off: jumping into a smothering kiss and moving right over to fulfilling the promise of rolling on top of Loki and pinning him to the bed. And with no objections to be filed, Loki helps things along by hooking his legs around Tony’s hips. His magic hums through his skin and sinks right into Tony’s body. Welcome and warm. It always feels so much stronger in moments like this, right as the thrill of anticipation begins to spark and spread into a blaze of pleasure with every escalating kiss and caress.

Tony squeezes Loki closer, and Loki squeezes right back, leaving no room for anything but the heat of need between them. Blindly, not willing to break away from Loki’s hands on his back or Loki’s teeth against his lips, he reaches for the drawer in the bedside table and fumbles inside for an item he knows he can locate through the sense of touch alone.

“Hang on a sec,” he whispers into Loki’s mouth as he stretches to reach the far side of the drawer.

As far as he can feel, the drawer contains only Kleenex, a Chapstick, a few pens and papers, and an easy-open bottle of Tylenol.

“What are you...?” Loki asks.

“I’m trying to find the...”

It’s an even farther stretch from where they’re lying to the table on the other side of the bed, and an awkward angle to pull the drawer open and dig around through a dozen pieces of junk that aren’t what he’s looking for.

“Tony, what are you doing?” Loki hisses.

“Lube,” Tony hisses right back. “It should be right...”

But it’s not right there, and it’s once again not in the first drawer when Tony goes to double check. It’s not even there when, with a frustrated groan, he drags himself out of Loki’s arms (and legs) and sits upright to take everything out of both drawers and look properly. “Oh come on...” he mutters to himself.
The feral noise Loki makes is an excellent summary of frustration plus annoyance plus disbelief plus ‘stop wasting time’.

“Just wait here,” Tony says as he gets up from the bed, in case Loki has any sudden compelling desires to move. “Lemme check the bathroom.”

It’s a long shot, but with the way he’s feeling, Tony’s pretty sure he’d look on fucking Saturn if he thought there’d be a secret stash of Astroglide hidden between the rings. He goes through each drawer systematically from left to right, one by one, and then all the cupboards below. Even checks the basket beside the toilet holding spare Charmin rolls just in case. There has to be something somewhere.

When he returns to the bedside, Loki’s sitting up against the headboard and wearing a look that says, very loudly, ‘not amused’.

“Alright, all I could find in the bathroom was toothpaste, SPF 30 face lotion, and a tube of expired medical ointment from this time I was stung by a weird bee. So...” He looks at Loki. Silently, Loki looks away, over at the window. Exhales. Then looks down at the rumpled sheets.

“The moment’s ruined, isn’t it?”

Somehow, Loki doesn’t even need to answer that with words: just with a single gesture of his hand flopping down onto the mattress. As if a hand could be disappointed.

“Yeah, the moment’s ruined,” Tony says, crossing back over to his side of the bed and sitting down. “I mean, it was kind of ruined before, but now it’s... Yeah. Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Loki mutters.

“I know. It’s probably S.H.I.E.L.D., stealing my important personal possessions when I’m not home.”

Loki sighs, leans back, and stares up at the ceiling. “That’s not what I meant, but...” Holding out his arm, he gestures for Tony to move closer. “Come here.” And Tony complies, sinking down against Loki’s body to let that arm curve around his back. Gentle fingers trail up his spine to his neck, either scratching or caressing or sometimes both at once, leaving a wisp of magic dancing in their wake. For a minute, Tony lets his eyes fall closed, just to feel it. But it can only be for a minute. The feeling sinks a bit too deeply into his veins, delving down below the surface and concentrating inside, warm and thick.

It’s the exact kind of thing that can un-ruin a moment real quickly.

“Mm, you better stop that,” he whispers, even if he can’t quite bring his body to follow the advice of his words and pull away.

“Why?” Loki whispers back. “I have a few ideas that may be able to salvage the situation.”

Something the exact opposite of ruined flutters in Tony’s stomach as Loki’s one hand continues its exploration of his back while the other moves in to scratch its way down his front, beginning at collar bone and ending a few dangerous inches below his navel. “Nope, you really need to stop,” he says. Still unable to convince his body to go along with what his voice knows is right. “Otherwise I might decide that bee-ointment doesn’t sound so bad after all.”

Loki’s breath brushes his ear. “You don’t trust me to know what I’m doing?”
“No, that’s the problem,” Tony says, forcing himself to sit up and slide away. Which is a real wrench, but it’s for the greater good. Or so he can tell himself. “You know exactly what you’re doing, and you’re way too good at it, and I literally cannot believe I’m saying this, but no. You were right last night. We’ve been through a lot of crap in the past couple months, but now that we’re finally unencumbered by Asgardian bullshit and we have some actual freedom and privacy... I want to have real, proper reunion sex. Not just some cop-out fooling around. We owe it to ourselves. It’s gotta be spectacular or nothing. Full-out, no-holds-barred, anniversary-on-Valentine’s-Day kind of deal. Champagne, chocolate, roses, and every single other embarrassingly romantic cliché I can talk S.H.I.E.L.D. into buying.”

“And that would make you happy?” Loki asks, sounding borderline skeptical.

“Seeing you in some kind of skimpy red lace negligee would make me very happy, yes.”

It’s probably only because Loki doesn’t know what that means that Tony doesn’t get his ass kicked. “If you say so,” Loki replies, pushing back the covers and slinking out of bed with a yawn and a stretch. “I’m sure I have more patience than you do anyhow.”

That is, without question, the absolute truth, and a part of Tony already regrets everything he said as he watches Loki’s bare backside saunter over to the bathroom. It’s the same treacherous part that usually disagrees with all the sensible decisions his brain tries to make. One might think that after forty-two years the two would have learned to live in harmony, but no.

Trying not to dwell on it too much, he grabs a pair of jeans and a shirt from the closet. This seems like a good time to fool his body into behaving via covering it with clothes.

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Six new emails appeared overnight, none of which looks the least bit interesting, so Tony deletes them all before closing the app. He would’ve thought that coming back to Earth technology and the internet after being away for so long would feel more exciting, but instead it’s the opposite. The main theme running through his head is more along the lines of ‘why did I waste so much time on this garbage?’

He sets his phone down and looks over at Loki. “Are you sure you don’t want anything else to eat?” he asks.

Loki, sitting on a stool at the end of the island, doesn’t even bother to look up from the dry, uncooked minute oats he’s eating directly out of the bag with a spoon. “No. This is fine.”

“And you’re sure you don’t want them cooked? Maybe with some milk and brown sugar?”

“No.”


“Yes, thank you.”

He makes his own before fixing Loki’s, exactly as he did before, per Loki’s specifications: half coffee, half milk, five heaping spoonfuls of sugar, stir while trying not to judge too much, leave the spoon in because Loki likes to slurp it like soup. He sets the mug down beside Loki’s oats before returning to his seat and picking up his phone again.

“I should probably make a grocery list. What kind of food do you want for the next couple days?”
“It doesn’t matter to me,” Loki answers with a shrug. “Whatever you like will be fine.”

“So says the man who dislikes pizza...” mutters Tony. Pulling up a memo app, he tries to remember offhand all the foods Loki actually liked during their on-the-run-from-S.H.I.E.L.D. adventure. Raw beef and fish. Mushrooms. Probably other vegetables and fruit. Eggs. Juice boxes. Rice. At least enough to get them through the next few days, after which he might be able to take Loki to the store himself and discover a few more viable dinner options. He looks up at Loki again, this time staring in concentration as if it’ll help him remember anything else.

In a subtle way, too subtle for Tony to immediately pinpoint, Loki looks different.

It’s not something he noticed before. Maybe because on Asgard his mind was too preoccupied with emergency measures, and last night was too dark, and this morning in bed his mind was stuck on... other matters. But now, he has a chance to look – really look – and to take stock of the way the light comes in and casts an auburn halo around Loki’s hair. (Which is perched up on top of his head in a messy knot, secured with a leftover rubber band found on the counter. One of those thick, blue ones that comes on asparagus.) It could be the backlight from the window, but Loki’s skin doesn’t look as deathly pale as usual. There’s a blush of pink in his complexion, and his cheeks seem less sharply gaunt and hollow. He’s gained weight. Not enough to make a difference to his shape overall, but just enough to soften, in the tiniest way, all the hard angles of his features.

He looks healthier. Better. Stronger. More natural: as if all that time on Jotunheim did him good, and his body found balance out there on his froze homeworld. Or maybe he just took better care of himself while they were there, regularly eating and not draining his strength with magic. Whatever the reason, the improvement in his appearance shows, and Tony catches himself smiling at it.

“Why are you staring at me?” Loki asks without ever looking up from his oats.

“Because you look nice and I like staring at you. Obviously. I think the more important question is: why aren’t you staring adoringly at me?”

Glancing up, Loki shifts his attention from breakfast over to Tony, and locks eyes with the sort of drilling-into-your-soul intensity that would be more appropriate to a military interrogation, or at least a sexy roleplay thereof. Without blinking, he lifts another spoonful of oats to his mouth, chews, swallows, and reaches for his coffee.

“Right, I forgot,” Tony mutters. “Because you’re a creepy weirdo. My bad. As you were.”

Loki smiles. It’s impossible to tell if that’s a ‘plotting-something’ smile, or a genuinely nice smile and Tony’s just too suspicious to see anything other than trickery. “Have you any honey?”

“For the oats? Maybe. Lemme look.”

There’s nothing in the fridge, but he does find a new-looking jar of organic, artisanal honey in the fourth cupboard he checks, alongside a tub of non-organic, non-artisanal cake frosting and a half-used pack of birthday candles. Must be stuff Bruce bought. He sets the honey down next to Loki, along with a spoon and a bowl. “Hey, random question,” he says as he pours oats into the bowl so Loki can stop eating out of the bag. Because that’s probably unsanitary to people who care about that kind of thing. “When’s your birthday?”

“What?”

“Your birthday. When is it? As your slave master and now landlord, I figure that’s probably something I should know. So I can get you a balloon.”
“What are you talking about?”

“Your... birthday? The day on which you were born?”

Now Loki’s voluntarily staring at him, but in a confused and concerned rather than adoring way. “How should I know that?”

“You don’t have that on Asgard,” Tony says, a statement in place of a question, as he returns to his seat and leans over with his elbows on the counter. “You don’t celebrate birthdays.”

That earns him a blank look.

“So on Earth we celebrate birthdays. The anniversary of the day you were born. For me, for example, that’s May 29th, so I invite a bunch of people over and we have a party and drink too much and make bad life choices, probably to stave off the crippling existential anxiety over growing older under the ever-looming doom of our own mortality. You really don’t have that on Asgard?”

“Every year?” Loki asks. The tone in his voice alone gives a full answer there, as well as providing enough unspoken information that Tony doesn’t even need to bother asking the next obvious question in line.

“I guess it would be overkill for immortal space gods to celebrate every single year,” Tony agrees. “You guys should do decades or centuries or something.”

“We celebrate events,” says Loki. “Accomplishments. Victories.”

“Don’t worry, we do that too. A lot. Probably too much. Humans celebrate everything. Somebody Pepper knows had a party one time in honor of her dog getting spayed. But anyway,” he says, getting to the point, “this could solve a problem I’ve been thinking about. I need to get you on S.H.I.E.L.D.’s good side. Or at least the side where they don’t murder, arrest, or otherwise inconvenience you. I was considering having a welcome party so all the goons could show up and we could pretend to be friends and I could leverage their feelings of mandatory politeness into grudgingly accepting you, but a birthday party would work way better. People feel more socially obligated to attend those, and also to be nice to the birthday boy. Perfect. I’m going to schedule that in for tomorrow.” Picking up his phone again, he opens the calendar. “And for the record, your birthday is now... April seventh?! Jarvis?!”

“Yes, sir?” Jarvis answers, calm as ever.

“That can’t be right. Is that right?!”

“It is correct. Today is Saturday, April sixth.”

The first word that comes to Tony’s mind is, “No.” And then variations: “Nuh-uh. Nope. No way. Because that would mean we were on Jotunheim for four months, and it definitely didn’t feel like that long.” He turns to Loki. “Right? There’s no way we were on Jotunheim for four months!”

Occupied by stirring half a jar of honey into his oat bowl, Loki looks totally unconcerned. “I don’t know.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. I was keeping track of the days. I counted just under three months after we left Asgard on November twenty-third. How can it be April? Unless days on Jotunheim are seriously that much longer?!”

“Days on Asgard and Midgard are very close to the same length,” says Loki. He stirs, tastes his
dough-like mixture, and adds more honey. “But yes, I believe days on Jotunheim are longer.”

“So we lost an entire month,” Tony grumbles, swiping back through the month of his calendar. Staring at the missing days doesn’t particularly help. How could he not notice something like that? All that time spent as a Jotun, and the passage of time felt more or less normal. He should have picked up on an extra eight hours per day. “Frost giants really are stupid.”

Loki, lifting a honey-dripping spoon to his mouth, just says, “I told you.”

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Tony would have thought Loki would be done eating by the time Natasha shows up uninvited, but as luck would have it, he seriously underestimated Loki’s stomach’s capacity for improperly prepared breakfast foods.

“Sir,” Jarvis announces as Tony alternates between staring and Loki some more and reading a week-old newspaper he found in the recycling bin. “Agent Romanov’s car just pulled into the driveway.”

“Thanks, J. Is anyone with her?”

“It appears that Miss Potts is in the passenger seat.”

For a brief flash of time, Tony’s hand lurches to a stop on its way to turning the page. “...Are you sure?” he has to ask.

“Yes. I believe she also has her key with her. Shall I disable the lockdown so she can let herself in?”

“No. Absolutely not.” Getting up from his stool, Tony drains the last cold ounce of his coffee before heading towards the foyer. “Lockdown is still in effect. I’ll handle this. Loki? Stay here.”

In response, Loki makes a vague ‘hnn’ sound, indicating how his plan to do exactly that is already well underway.

The two visitors are just stepping out of the car when Tony opens the front door, and are clearly in the middle of a conversation and laughing about something unknown in a way that grates under his skin. Natasha, as expected. Pepper, as feared. Both of them are dressed in casual weekend wear, which looks out of place on Natasha. Tony was expecting the more severe S.H.I.E.L.D. uniform for this official business. Both of them are holding Starbucks cups.

“Welcome back,” Natasha says in an annoyingly conversational tone as she walks right past him and into the house.

“Thanks,” Tony answers, according to the rules of what would be considered the textbook definition of ‘grudging’. “Fury told me you were coming.”

Pepper, though, slows to a standstill just outside the doorway. “Wow, you look...”

And Tony has to resist the urge to run his hands over the unshaven bramble-mess on his face. “What?”

“That is... definitely a new look for you.”

“Yeah well, I haven’t exactly had time to track down a barber in the twenty-four hours since I’ve been back on Earth.” Then to change the subject: “Fury didn’t tell me you’d be coming.”
“It was my idea,” Natasha calls from the inside. “We already had breakfast and shopping plans for this morning, so when Fury texted to ask me to bring somebody to check up on you, I told him I’d bring Pepper. He thought that sounded like a good idea.”

“You and... Romanov?” Tony asks, raising his eyebrows in Pepper’s direction. “Breakfast?”

Smiling out a fake ray of sunshine politeness, Pepper shows herself in. “Mm-hmm. Remember, I do have friends? And a life? And plans?”

“That doesn’t sound like you, but sure,” mumbles Tony. He shuts the door and follows the two of them into the living room, where both waste no time in making themselves at home on the couch. He opts to take a stand – literally – on the other side of the coffee table. Facing them, arms crossed.

“You don’t want to sit?” asks Natasha.

Tony shakes his head. “Nah, I’m good. I’d rather be interrogated over here.”

“Stark, we’re not here to interrogate you,” she tells him.

“Then what? Why come at all?”

“To check in. Fury let me know that he asked you to stay in the house until Bruce has a chance to look you over, so we’re here to see if you need any supplies. And to bring you up to speed on what’s happened while you were away.”

“And then what?”

Shrugging, Natasha looks almost honest. “I don’t know. I don’t think anything has been decided yet.”

“And you expect me to believe that you and Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D. are just going to nicely back off and accept the fact that Loki is now on this planet, in this house, with me? You’re not going to, say, burst in here with a bunch of soldiers armed with Tesseract guns? Because I keep having these distinct memories of last time Loki was on Earth.”

“You mean the last time, when Loki killed six agents and tried to initiate an alien invasion over New York City? That last time?”

Okay, so that’s a fair question, and Tony walked straight into it. He bites down on the inside of his lip and has to look away for a second. “Right, yeah, bad example. But...”

“It’s fine,” says Natasha. “And you don’t have to believe me, but here’s what I do know. Bruce has been advocating pretty vocally on your behalf. He believes we should trust your judgment and give Loki a chance. I have to say... I’ve come to agree with him. Fury is on the fence. He’s not convinced Loki can be trusted in any way, but he’s also no longer insisting that we take you immediately into custody like he wanted to do back when you tried to come through that portal in November. He’s agreeing to leave you alone for a while to see what happens. Don’t get me wrong, your house is under surveillance-”

“I would be incredibly shocked and disappointed if it weren’t.”

“-but we’re keeping our distance for now until Fury decides what he wants to do.”

“And until then, what?” Tony asks. “Wait around here for Fury to take his time convincing himself he wants to throw Loki in jail?”
“Guess so,” Natasha replies with a smile.

Well. It’s not the worst situation. And it’s actually better than Tony was fearing. They’re allowed to stay together, at home rather than some S.H.I.E.L.D. facility, and at this juncture it looks as if they have some time to try to figure out what Fury is really up to. Find out if this is real or, more likely, some convoluted plot.


Not bothering to dignify that weak dig with a response, Tony reaches into his pocket to grab out his phone. “Yeah, sure, all of the above. I made a grocery list earlier. I’ll email it.”

A second later, Pepper’s phone dings, and she pulls the list up on screen. “Beef roast or large pack of steak,” she reads aloud. “Fish: boneless I guess. Wide variety of mushrooms. Carrots: the kind that come in the bag already peeled. Fifteen pounds of...” She looks up. “Really? Fifteen pounds of fruit?”

“Keep reading,” Tony says.

And so she does. “Fifteen pounds of fruit. That is not an exaggeration. Literally fifteen pounds or more.” She pauses to give him a look before continuing. “But not basic fruit like apples. I mean mangoes and grapes: the good stuff.”

“No bananas either,” Tony specifies. “Just quality fruit.”

“Eggs: brown ones. Juice boxes and also the kind of juice that comes in a carton. A lot of rice. Sparkling water: Gerolsteiner or San Pellegrino. Bread that comes in a lump instead of a mechanically separated loaf?”

“Yeah, I offered to make Loki toast for breakfast,” Tony explains, “but he didn’t trust the corporate bread Bruce left. He only likes the stuff you have to cut yourself.”

“Frozen pizzas. I forget the brand name. You know, the German one that comes with the round mozzarella. Tony, how can you remember ‘Gerolsteiner’ but not ‘Dr. Oetker’?”

“Dr. Oetker. That’s the one. Get a bunch of those. They fit in the toaster oven.”

“And then you just have regular food. What’s regular food?”

“You know, regular, everyday food,” says Tony. “The kind of food that’s just always around. Like canned pasta and hot dogs and tortilla chips. Whatever you think I should have that I can chuck in the microwave.”

“Is that it?” Natasha asks. “I can pick all that up easily enough.”

“No,” says Pepper, “the last thing on the list is personal lu-Oh my God.”

“That falls under ‘miscellaneous supplies’,,” Tony immediately interjects, more to Natasha than Pepper. “You said ‘miscellaneous supplies’, therefore you are now locked in a legally binding verbal contract to buy me what I need.”

Natasha doesn’t even blink. “Any specific brand name or should I surprise you?”

“I love surprises.”
“No, you don’t,” Pepper snidely butts in.

Tony quickly corrects himself. “I love sexy surprises.”

“I’ll find you the sexiest surprise known to Walmart,” says Natasha, standing. “But before I go, do you mind if I talk to Loki for a minute?”

Yes, Tony minds. Upon consideration, he definitely minds the idea of Natasha and Loki being in the same room together. But since Loki is a grown-up murderous space god who can probably turn Natasha into a toad if need be... “Yeah, go nuts. He’s in the kitchen. But just so you’re aware,” he says loudly enough for Loki to hear as Natasha walks off in that direction, “Loki is very powerful and temperamental, and he won’t stand for any monkey business. He might kick you sideways into an alternate dimension. Or replace your brain with a dog’s brain.” Then adds, under his breath, “I hope.”

Crossing his arms over his chest again, he rocks back on his heels before glancing over at Pepper. She’s staring at him with the sort of exasperated, long-suffering stare that means he’s not going to like whatever she says next.

“Why do you always have to be such an ass?” she asks.

Bingo. Tony does not like that question at all. “How am I being an ass? I let you in, didn’t I? I let Natasha go talk to Loki. I’m cooperating.”

She sighs something that sounds like ‘that’s not what I meant’, but it obviously isn’t supposed be part of the conversation. She does keep staring at him, though, with an expression that looks defensive and disappointed and frustrated and quietly angry all at once. Too complicated to accurately categorize.

“Aren’t you supposed to be telling me all about what happened since I left?” Tony asks to break the silence. “Or something like that?”

“Hm. Yeah. But you know what?” Slinging her purse strap over her shoulder, she stands up and looks over towards the kitchen. “This isn’t a good idea. I thought it would be fine, but it turns out, no, it’s not. I think I’d rather go grocery shopping with Natasha. Somebody else can...” She waves her hand; “deal with this.”

“Uh, why? Why can’t we just get all this S.H.I.E.L.D. briefing crap over with?”

Disbelief wedges its way into the conglomerate stare. “...Really? You have to ask me why I don’t want to talk to you right now?”

“I guess I do?” he says. “I thought we were good? Or at least not awful?” Last time they talked had been good. Hadn’t it? It had been on the phone, back in October. Pepper had called every week or so to check up on him in his state of moping and give him any pertinent news relating to Stark Industries. She’d been concerned and supportive. He hadn’t said anything stupid. Maybe it hadn’t been as comfortable as they once had been, and there’d been a cloud of uncertainty hanging over everything, but they’d been civil. He holds out his hand to try to stop her from leaving. “Last time we talked-”

“Last time we talked,” she cuts in, “you told me everything was fine. You were working on new projects again, and you promised me you’d organize a trip to New York to get yourself out of the house. Then? Next time I call, you don’t answer your phone. Or the next time. Or any time at all, for weeks! And after I’ve gone through every possible excuse on your behalf, and moved on to
assuming a worst case scenario in which you’re dead, I find out from Nick Fury that you and Bruce built some space portal, and you’ve been on Asgard. For a month! And you didn’t even bother to tell me! Or your alleged best friend! Rhodey had no idea where you were, so he called me, and I had no idea where you were or what had happened... Did you even spare a second to think that people might care if you disappeared? That you were on a different planet?! Which is completely insane, but every time I think you’ve done the most inconsiderate and absurd thing possible, you always manage to outdo yourself with something new! So, no,” she says. “I wouldn’t say we’re ‘good’. And you’re not very ‘good’ with several other people, too. In case you were wondering.”

That’s a lot to absorb. A lot of accusations at once, and they’re all flying in so fast Tony doesn’t even know where to begin processing them, other than with a general bad feeling of guilt and shame. “Um,” he mumbles.

“What?” Pepper snaps. “No witty remark this time?”

Not even close. The guilt-shame makes him feel decidedly unwitty. “No. I was just going to say sorry and... wow, I feel like shit now. I didn’t even think about...”

“You never think about anything but yourself.”

“Okay, look,” says Tony. “You know I was messed up. I wasn’t thinking straight and I was so focused on trying to do the one thing I thought I needed to do that I dropped the ball on everything else. I guess I just... blanked out on everything that wasn’t my crazy plan to get to Asgard.”

“You didn’t even tell me you were trying to find a way to go to Asgard!” Pepper shouts.

Tony’s voice rises almost enough to meet hers. “That’s because if I told you, you’d try to stop me!”

“No, the worst excuse ever would be ‘I did it for the lulz’. Which I didn’t do. There were zero lulz involved. A real dearth of lulz. The portal almost failed, I wrecked my armor, Asgard was not happy to see me, I had to go boar hunting, the portal DID fail when Loki and I tried to come back, we were stranded on a horrible ice planet, and I spent the last three months living as a frost giant. Now that I think about it, all that was probably karma getting back at me for being a dick and taking off without telling anybody. I had some very unpleasant times.” Alongside pleasant ones with Loki, but Pepper doesn’t need to know about those.

Huffing out a loud breath, Pepper finally takes a break from glaring at him to look down at her shoes. “Okay, that makes me feel a little better.”

“Great. Revel in that schadenfreude. Now let’s talk.”

“A little better’ isn’t better enough to make me want to interact with you,” she says, fiddling with her purse strap again as she tries to step around him.

“Oh, whatever,” he replies, letting her go. Because, upon closer reflection, he’s realized he doesn’t actually care what information S.H.I.E.L.D. wanted to pass along through Pepper. And he definitely doesn’t care enough to work for it, having to squeeze the words out of an unwilling messenger. “But if you can bring yourself to interact with me for just ten more seconds, I have a favor to ask you.”

She probably only turns around to show off that look of stunned incredulity on her face. “…A favor? Seriously?”

“Yeah. But it’s an easy one, and really, not even for me. I’m having a birthday party for Loki
tomorrow. I’d like you to come, and I’d appreciate it if you passed the invitation on to all our nearest and dearest S.H.I.E.L.D. friends. And Rhodey.”

If possible, Pepper’s expression grows even more stunned and more incredulous. “It’s Loki’s birthday?”

“Alllegedly, yes.”

“Allleged by whom?”

Tony doesn’t answer that. “Anyway. Tomorrow. One o’clock. I expect everyone to be here.”

It looks like Pepper has more to say about that, but halfway through opening her mouth she reconsiders and gives herself a little shake instead. Maybe it helps the absurdity settle into resignation. “You know what? Fine. Birthday party for Loki. Why not? Are we expected to bring gifts, too?”


“Nobody’s in danger of buying Loki diamonds, Tony,” Pepper mutters.

“Good. I just wanted to clarify that.”

“I think we’ll all be in the under-twenty-dollars acquaintance gift category. So with that price cap in mind, what does Loki like?”

“Oh...” That question is so much more difficult to answer than it should be. What does Loki like, outside of surplus Stark Industries promotional sportswear? “I don’t know. Candy. Amaretto. Bath products that smell like tropical fruit.”

“So... low-end mother’s day gifts?”

“No, that’s not it at all,” Tony says, followed seconds later by a reevaluation and, “Wait, yes it is. Low-end mom gifts. Consumables and useable. If it goes on or in the body-”

“How about I stick with ‘mom gifts’,” Pepper cuts him off. “People will know what that means without being accidentally disgusted.”

“Perfect,” says Tony, snapping his fingers. “Tomorrow, one o’clock, Loki’s birthday, bring your finest mom gifts. It’ll be great.”

Pepper stares at him, as if maybe she wants to say something. Actually, it’s pretty obvious she wants to say something, but at the same time is held back by the grace of some social convention or another. She presses her lips together to redistribute that deep crimson lipstick she started to make a habit of wearing towards the end of their relationship, whenever she was in one of her not-to-be-fucked-with moods. It was her little power-play symbol of defiance. All because one time, when they were both in crabby spirits getting ready for a charity gala neither of them wanted to go to, Tony had the bad sense to mention he thought red lipstick was a little too bold and rosy pink looked nicer on her.

“I think it’ll be great,” Tony reiterates to break the silence.

Pepper nods with the polite smile of a long-time service employee as she shakes off whatever was
bothering her and heads down Natasha’s trajectory towards the kitchen. “It’ll be something,” she agrees.
S.H.I.E.L.D. left all the stuff transported back from Asgard in one of the spare bedrooms: both of Tony’s cases with all his broken armor and old laundry, and Loki’s bizarre golden crates full of clothes and books and other such arcane treasures. And of course they went through it all. That much is obvious. In fact, Tony wouldn’t be surprised if Fury and Coulson went through it personally, inspecting every used sock for clues as to Loki’s current evilness level. Each case is open with contents haphazardly spilling out. They didn’t even bother to try to hide their snooping.

Tony might have thought Loki would be bothered by people digging through his personal belongings, but in fact he seems unconcerned. He probably assumed S.H.I.E.L.D. would rifle through everything he brought. So either he brought only boring things like clothing items, or it’s all carefully enchanted and disguised so dumb ol’ mortals can’t get to the goods.

Watching Loki unpack and fold all his shirts and pants and robes and sarongs onto the bed, Tony suspects it’s the first option. But that has to be exactly what Loki wants him to think with this show of mundane sorting. Which means option two is more likely.

Also watching Loki unpack and fold everything, it’s impossible to remember why he was ever so worried about this in the first place, and why it kicked off such a big fight. The sudden appearance of Loki’s things in the house doesn’t feel oppressive, and it’s not making him panic at some false notion of loss of autonomy. It’s actually... calming, if he has to pinpoint a feeling. Reassuring. Grounding. It makes Loki’s presence feel more real and permanent to have these little items come along with him. They’re no longer stranded on Jotunheim or floating through Asgard or on the run from place to place. They’re home now.

To be honest, everything feels pretty perfect.

Careful not to disturb anything Loki’s laid out, Tony crawls across the bed to give him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Loki smiles. “What was that for?”

“No reason. I’m just happy you’re here.”

“With all my things?” he asks, and they both know what that’s supposed to mean.

“Yeah,” Tony says. “With all your things. I’m happy they’re here, too, because they make it feel
like you’re moving in instead of just staying with me. Like I’ve managed to not only lure you into my lair, but also keep you. I’ve successfully captured a wild Loki.”

“How do you know I’m not the one who’s captured you?”

“Uh, because we’re at my house? That makes me the captor. It’s a classic reverse alien abduction scenario.”

“What if I’m an infiltrator, here by my own design?”

“Hm.” Scooching out of the way of Loki’s growing clothing arrangement, Tony sits on the side of the mattress. “Fair point. I guess it’s technically possible for me to have abducted you while you were in the middle of infiltrating my solitary lifestyle. We’ll call it a tie.”

So far on the bed, Loki has at least six pairs of pants, even more shirts, two things that look kind of like long vests, a cape, a weird wizard robe, and a growing pile of who knows what else. Picking up one flimsy garment from the who-knows-what pile, Tony unfolds it to try to figure out what exactly it is.

“Do you need me to clear some closet space in our room for all this?” he asks. “Or does this stuff fit better in drawers?”

“I was thinking I might rather keep most of it in this room,” Loki replies. “Out of the way. I don’t suppose I’ll be wearing it very often.”

“Oh come on. You don’t want to lounge around the house in this?” The thing Tony picked up, as it turns out, is a very sheer and translucent silvery tunic that hangs open down the entire length of the front with no closures to be seen, and he happily takes the opportunity to wave it in front of Loki’s face.

“That’s meant to be worn under several other layers,” says Loki.

“Does it have to be?”

Loki smiles instead of giving an answer with words, though Tony suspects it’s a humoring smile more than a ‘sexy times are in your future’ smile.

Tony chucks the tunic on top of a pillow. “I’ll file that under potential wardrobe choices for your party tomorrow. What else do you have? Please say matching pants. Or at least leather pants so tight you need to dip yourself in a vat of baby oil before pulling them on?”

Still wordless, Loki reaches for the pants pile and hands over a shiny little black leather number that does, indeed, look like it was precisely made to just barely contain the exact geometric shape of his ass.

“Very good, yep, I can definitely see myself peeling these off you with my teeth. Anything else I should know about?”

“This?” Loki offers, rummaging through the pile again and pulling up another pair of black leather pants, though these ones are adorned with wraparound bits and chains and tiny pieces of plate armor in what has to be a Thor-level display of excess.

“Hm. A little too late-90s goth for my tastes. But I’ll tell you what,” he says, standing up. “You keep sorting through all your most seductive Asgardian clothing choices, keeping in mind that I will be expecting a private runway show as soon as Natasha gets back with our miscellaneous supplies.
Meanwhile, I’ll make myself scarce and avoid ruining the surprise by hauling all my crap downstairs. Getting my two cases out of here should give you more room to organize your stuff.”

“Do you need help carrying those?” Loki asks, and it’s not that Tony regrets immediately saying ‘no’ as he stuffs the trailing ends of everything inside the first case and clips the lid shut. It’s more that he regrets his stupid, machismo need to say no, because the goddamn thing has to weigh close to a hundred and fifty pounds with all his armor and other shit in it. And the incredible amount of effort he needs to put into pretending he’s effortlessly carrying it one-handed by the dumb little metal handle probably doesn’t even impress Loki in the slightest.

“You know I can do carry that for you,” he hears Loki sigh when he reaches the bedroom door.

And he hears himself reply, “Nope, I’m good,” while very carefully trying to manoeuver through the doorway without banging up the paint.

Ten seconds later, Loki is at his side, carrying the other case in a way that truly does look effortless. Annoyingly so.

“I told you, I don’t need—”

“Are you certain?” Loki asks, hand slipping under Tony’s to ninja the case right out of his grip.

For a good, long moment, Tony stares at Loki with all the defiant haughtiness he can scrounge up, hoping he at least appears somewhat intimidating as he tries to think of anything manly to say. Loki, meanwhile, poses with one hip angled to the side and one knee casually bent, looking far more like a chic department store mannequin toting two picnic baskets than somebody holding three hundred-odd pounds of scientific equipment and random crap.

In the end, the only thing Tony can think of to say is, “Fine. I guess I am way too rich and important to carry my own things. You can be the grunt while I supervise.”

“You’re so cute,” Loki replies, followed by sounds like it could be an amused snort.

“No I’m not. I’m very powerful and strong. I bet if you were human and didn’t have your weird Asgardian superpowers I could beat you at arm wrestling. And remember when we were Jotuns? I was definitely bigger than you then.”

“Ah yes, you were.” Loki’s voice somehow feels like a condescending pat on the head as they make their way through the house and toward the basement stairs. “Would it make you feel better if I changed you back?”

“No,” Tony grumbles, but only after taking a moment to seriously consider the proposition and weigh all the pros and cons. Being bigger than Loki and able to carry him around was a definite plus. Everything else, though... “Whatever. Just follow me.”

Loki doesn’t even ding the walls with the case corners going down the stairs, which is probably the first time that’s ever happened in the entire history of hauling bulky items between floors. He sets both cases down next to a worktable, then glances around at what can only be described as a scene of mechanical disaster. Tesseract gun parts everywhere, a few partially-assembled prototype beamline frames, tools, pieces of scrap metal and filings... Tony doesn’t remember it looking this much like an episode of Hoarders: Mad Scientist Edition when he left. But if he’s truly honest with himself, he’s also not surprised.

“So, yeah,” he says. “This is my workshop.”
“Where you build your armor?”

“And other whimsical wonders. But that reminds me. Hey, Jarvis?”

Jarvis’ answering voice cuts cleanly through the surrounding chaos. “Yes, sir?”

“Can you throw together a new suit for me? Duplicate of the last. It got a little... uh... completely destroyed during Asgard Quest. I also have a couple ideas for something new, but let’s get this one remade just so I have it on hand for the next couple days.” In case S.H.I.E.L.D. happens.

“Initializing fabrication now.”

As the sounds of machine startup whir in the background, Loki looks up at the ceiling and from one end of the room to the other. “You never did tell me what that voice was.”

“You want the long version or the short?” Tony asks, at which Loki, par for the course, only raises his eyebrows in typical silence. “Great. Medium version it is. He’s a computer, but one that I’ve very specifically programmed with artificial intelligence modules I developed to run my house. Instead of pressing buttons or typing commands into a keyboard, the voice recognition lets me talk to him directly. The more we work together, the better he is at understanding my requests and anticipating what I need. Kind of like your... what did you call it? Dedicated power source?” Loki nods. “Yeah. Like that, but for household and workshop management. Everything important around here is wired into the same system, and he controls it. From the security to the temperature of the fridge.”

“And his name is Jarvis?”

“Yeah. That’s, uh...” Sighing, Tony rakes his hair back. “We had a butler named Edwin Jarvis when I was a kid. I may have very slightly used that Jarvis as inspiration for this one.”

“I see,” says Loki.

Exactly how much Loki does see, Tony can’t tell. Maybe he understands perfectly. Or, more likely, he understands the vague gist of it and is characteristically unwilling to admit to not getting the rest. “Anyway,” Tony says, opting to take the middle road once again and provide a little more detail, “sometimes he has an attitude problem, which is only halfway my fault, because I didn’t exactly program it in. It just developed over the years. He used to be nothing but polite and helpful, and now he makes sarcastic comments about my life choices.”

“Somebody has to,” Jarvis politely and helpfully offers.

“Yeah, good Smeagol always helps,” Tony mutters before turning his attention back to Loki and gesturing at the wide variety of mess on display. “But rewinding for a sec, this is where all the fabulous Iron Man magic happens. Along with other magic like looking at rare cars for sale on the internet and playing Bubble Shooter until three in the morning. So in case I lose track of time and disappear, I recommend checking here first. One time Pepper thought I went missing and called the police, but it turned out I just fell asleep at my desk and slid down onto the floor behind a server box.”

Loki replies to that with nothing more than a “Hmm.” Already he’s looking over at the stairs and shuffling one foot in that direction, tapping his hand against his leg, sending out all possible signals that he’s ready to leave the dungeon. Is it an underground thing for him? After those months spent locked away below Asgard’s golden palace, does he have as much an aversion to basements as Tony does to caves?
"We don’t have to stay down here," Tony quickly says. "With all the mechsplosion everywhere, it doesn’t make for the most inviting environment."

Still facing the stairs, all Loki says is, “I don’t like that noise.”

“Which noise?” There are a lot of noises in the background, and Tony’s learned to tune all of them out of the years: the computers, the ventilation system, the crescendoing whine of metal being shaped and formed under robotic hands. He’s come to think of it as the soundtrack to his shop: something that’s always there.

“That noise,” Loki repeats, though this time he juts his chin over in the direction of the fabrication department. "It’s...” He doesn’t say what.

“I guess it’s kind of irritating, yeah,” Tony admits. “I’ve spent so much time down here I’m used to it by-”

The shriek of a saw slices right through Tony’s train of thought, and even he flinches at the ear-splitting way it rings through the room. Being used to shop noises is one thing; finding this particular sound anything but highly unpleasant is something else entirely. Loki flinches, too, turning sharply away from the sound and closing his eyes as his entire body tenses.

Then he disappears. Just like that. A flinch, a turn, a flicker of golden light, and he’s gone.

“Jarvis?” Tony asks after a moment of stunned inaction. He mentally counts to five, halfway expecting Loki to return, but no luck. And he looks around the room, more out of human habit than a real expectation for Loki to be there. Again, no luck. “Do you... know where Loki went?”

“Loki appeared in your bedroom immediately after disappearing here,” Jarvis answers. Always polite and helpful, as if nothing impossible by the laws of Earth physics just happened here. “Shall I stop assembly on the new armor?”

Taking the stares up two at a time, Tony shakes his head. “No. Keep that going. I need to see what’s up with Loki, but let me know once it’s done.

Loki is indeed in the bedroom, just like Jarvis said, sitting on the end of the bed. And if he noticed Tony approach and stop in the doorway, he doesn’t show it at all. His face is downturned, towards his hands, which are crossed over his knees, and his eyes are closed. Tony almost – almost – gets in one lame comment about how Loki’s Asgardian hearing must be far too sensitive to deal with crude mortal industry, until he picks up on one other little detail.

Loki’s hands are shaking. Actually, his shoulders are shaking too, just barely enough to see, with each rapid breath. And whatever Tony thought this was before (What did he think it was before? Just Loki being dramatic?), it’s not that. The way Tony’ stomach suddenly sinks? The way a net of cold air settles over his neck and shoulders? The way every heartbeat turns heavy, as if it now has to push and force its way through a whole new deluge of blood, thickened and weighed down by fear? It’s something else, and Tony has an awful feeling he knows exactly what. He recognizes exactly what.

“So,” he says from the doorway. “I know you probably don’t want to talk about this, but...”

“You’re right,” Loki replies. Just enough volume to be heard, not enough to give away any emotion. “I don’t.”

“Okay.” Nothing less than Tony expected. When have they ever really talked about these kinds of things? Only once. On Jotunheim, after a long and faltering wait. “Do you, um.” He almost says
‘need’, but that’s a weak word. “Do you want me to do anything?”

“You can... sit over here,” Loki says. It’s phrased in that way that makes it seem like something inconsequential, even though Tony knows it’s not. It really means, ‘I want you to come sit over here.’

So Tony goes to sit. He takes his seat at Loki’s side, close enough for hips and knees to touch, and rests his hand on top of Loki’s crossed wrists. “Anything else?”

Loki shakes his head ‘no’.

Hard as it is to think of anything helpful or supportive to say, it’s ten times harder for Tony to say nothing at all. It’s a self-preservation reflex built on years of avoiding the anxious discomfort and scrutiny of silence: just start spewing out crap and hope some of it turns into a viable tangent. Saying nothing, he feels too exposed, out on a voiceless tundra. But if that’s what Loki wants? He can force his way through it. Clench his teeth and keep his tongue still and listen to the absence of notable sound in the bedroom. There’s the tiny hiss of air coming through the vents, and the soft rhythm of Loki’s breath, and nothing else. He can be quiet. For a few minutes, at least.

“What was it?” he eventually has to ask, even though he knows both the real answer and what Loki’s evasive non-answer is going to be.

“What was what?”

“In the workshop,” Tony says. “Something set you off.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah? Cause I do. It’s like when I came back from Afghanistan and pretended everything was fine, even though I had to sleep with the windows uncovered so when I woke up in the middle of the night from bad dreams I could see all the light pollution outside and know I was back home. Or I had to tell Jarvis to auto-mute the TV or change the channel whenever some news show started speculating about my ordeal, because I didn’t want to listen to that. But those are the understandable things. The obvious things. You tell somebody about that, they get it immediately. You don’t want to talk about what happened. You don’t want to hear gunshots. You don’t like being alone in the dark. You say that kind of thing and people know why and they sympathize and they pat your back and feel sorry for you. But they don’t understand the... uh... the weird little details.”

He pauses to give Loki’s wrist a squeeze. “Then a year later, you’re feeling fine and you’re sleeping better and you haven’t thought about all that shit in a while and everything seems okay. But one day you’re in a lunch meeting and the waiter brings out the orders... And there’s this one certain smell. This one certain spice that used to be in all the food they gave you. Something you haven’t smelled in over a year, that you never even thought about, but suddenly it’s there. And one smell has the power to trigger all these memories and bring everything you thought you’d buried back up to the surface. Everything comes back so fast you don’t have time to process it, and a second later you’re making your excuses and running to the men’s room while clawing at your shirt because the collar’s too tight as you try to puke in the sink even though nothing comes up and you keep choking on your own breath... I think I told them I was allergic to something just to get the fuck out of there. Because people get allergies. They don’t get ‘sorry, I was mentally incapacitated by a smell’. How can one stupid spice be that terrifying?”

“I still don’t want to talk about it, Tony,” Loki murmurs.

“Yeah, I know.” Moving his hand up to rub Loki’s arm, Tony leans in against his shoulder. “I’m
just saying I get it. And I don’t know if I really want to talk about this either. The story of why exactly you hate the sound of a metal saw is... probably not something I want to hear.”

“Probably not,” Loki agrees.

“It wasn’t Asgard, was it?”

“No.”

They’ll leave it at that. Nobody needs to mention the Chitauri by name. “But if you want to talk about anything else...” Tony offers.

“No,” says Loki, and this time it’s loud enough for Tony to hear the waver in his voice. “I don’t. I don’t want to talk about any of this. I only want to forget it.”

“Well. That might take some time.”

“Do you have any of that rum like you did in Phoenix?”

Tony sighs. “Uh. Probably, yeah, but...”

“Then go get it,” Loki tells him. “I want to be drunk and forget everything.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I don’t care.”

“Look,” Tony says, quietly, sliding his hand back down to Loki’s to weave their fingers together (reluctant as Loki is to let him). “Getting drunk right now isn’t going to help anything. Alcohol doesn’t make the past go away; the only thing you’ll end up forgetting is the narrow window of time between drinking enough to pass out and actually passing out. Trust me. I know, due to vast, vast stores of experience in that area.”

“I said I don’t care.”

“Yeah, well, I do,” says Tony. “Too bad for you: I care. So I’m vetoing the rum. If you want some tomorrow at your party, you can go wild, but not right now. Right now we’re going to do something else. How’d you like to take a drive up the coast?”

“I thought we weren’t allowed to leave the house,” Loki mutters.

“Oh. Right. Shit.” It hasn’t even been twelve hours and already Tony’s forgotten that little hangup. “But really, what’s the worst S.H.I.E.L.D. can do if we skip out on them?”

“No. I don’t want to go anywhere. I don’t want...” His voice trails off as he stands up and crosses his arms over his chest, pacing away from the bed. “I don’t want you to feel as if you’re... obliged to try to make me feel better,” he says, distinctly not looking in Tony’s direction. “You can go back to your workshop. I only need to... I’ll be fine.”

And maybe he will be. He’ll probably be fine in a few hours once the adrenaline trickles away and his heart stops pounding and the immediacy of panic subsides. He’ll be fine then, once the logical part of his brain reestablishes itself and convinces the primitive, instinctual part that they’re both safe and everything is under control. He’s just not fine now. He looks nowhere near fine, with all the color drained from his face except for the blotches of red around his eyes, and with his mouth open to accommodate all those shallow, rapid breaths. His arms lie folded across the vulnerability of his
heart, and his curled-in posture says the only reason he’s no longer shaking is because he’s tensing every damn muscle in his body trying to keep himself from falling apart.

‘Fine in a few hours’ is a hell of a long journey from where he stands now.

It’s probably the worst feeling in the world knowing exactly how afraid and helpless and out of control somebody feels, and being completely unable to set things right. Getting up from the bed, Tony takes a few steps of his own over to Loki, to put his hands on Loki’s elbows and urge him to sit down on the edge of the dresser. There’s no resistance. Loki sits, and he leans in when Tony’s arms wrap around his shoulders, and he drops his head against Tony’s chest. “You don’t have to...” he tries in one last, feeble protest attempt, but Tony cuts him off with a quiet ‘shh’.

“Loki, is there anything you want me to do?”

“You don’t have to-” he begins again.

“No, you’re right, I don’t. But I’m choosing to. So think about that for a sec. If there’s anything you want, anything that can help, anything I can do... just let me know.”

Loki does take a second, or thirty, to think about that before eventually deciding on an answer. “I want to sit with you and watch the TV.”

Smiling despite the circumstances at the adorably innocent, absurd way Loki has of saying ‘watch the TV’, Tony kisses his hair. “Okay. Yeah. We can definitely do that.”

Watching TV is a good idea, and has the added up-side of not being on a list of activities that will result in Nick Fury chasing them down in a helicopter. They can not talk all Loki wants while sitting in companionable proximity without the discomfiting burden of silence. “Hey, Jarvis?” Tony says as he leads the way to the media room with his arm around Loki’s back. “Let’s have some top-quality dumb entertainment. Some goofy popcorn movie that requires no critical thought whatsoever. PG-rated. No graphic violence.”

“Might I suggest Raiders of the Lost Ark?” Jarvis replies.

“No, that has Nazis getting their faces melted off. Which normally I enjoy, but not today. Something safer.”

“My apologies. National Treasure?”

Perfect. Nicholas Cage acting like Captain America’s nerdier, Indiana Jones-wannabe cousin. “Sounds good. Run it.”

“Before you begin, it appears that Ms. Potts and Ms. Romanov are just pulling up to the driveway. Are we still on full lockdown?”

Shutting the media room door behind them, Tony grabs a blanket from the shelf before gesturing for Loki to sit on the couch. “Nah. Pepper can let herself in. Tell them to leave everything in the kitchen. Then resume lockdown once they’ve left, and I’m once again on do not disturb until further notice.”

“Understood, sir.”

“If you need to go speak to them...” Loki says before Tony can even sit down.

Tony sits down anyway. “Nope, sure don’t. Pepper and Natasha are two very reliable, capable,
professional women who I’m sure are more than qualified to put groceries away. Now.” Tucking the blanket around them, he leans against Loki and tries to find the most comfortable position. “You said you wanted to forget everything, and I think this is the way to do it. You can forget all about the past and instead fill your brain with a whole bunch of new and very important facts about American history. I’m willing to bet nearly... twenty percent? Maybe even twenty-two percent? Of this is actually real. So it’s totally educational.”

“I see,” Loki murmurs.

“Yeah. So when you see Steve Rogers at the party tomorrow, you can tell him everything you learned about America and the founding fathers and all this completely legitimate, definitely not fake historical lore.”

“Is this TV about Captain America?”

“Excellent question, but no. But it is about a man who is almost as uncool as Captain America. Also it is not a TV, it is a movie. The movie is the show that you watch on the TV, and the TV is the physical box. And technically, this is not a TV, but a hi-def projector.”

It’s not really surprising that Loki doesn’t reply to that.

It’s helping, though: the distraction of the movie and probably even just the act of staring mindlessly at a screen. That’s what Loki did, isn’t it, for all those hours over those days spent with Thor in Atlantic City? They sat on the couch and watched TV in the calm after the shit-storm of S.H.I.E.L.D., as Loki healed himself and repaired the damage inflicted by Fury’s goons. Maybe he has that association now, equating TV with safety and comfort. With rescue and recovery. Maybe it’s also why he has such an odd fondness for Tony’s ill-fitting clothes and Stark Industries t-shirts. (Which, Tony notices, he’s wearing.)

They start by sitting, then move to lying down by halfway through the movie, then Tony sits so Loki can use his legs as a pillow, then they swap places. Tony falls asleep not far into National Treasure 2, and wakes up to Loki poking him and the sight of a blank white wall indicating the movie’s over.

After three episodes of Star Trek accompanied by microwaved pizza (for Tony) and four plain cheese sandwiches (for Loki), Loki final says something that isn’t a question as to the real-world validity of what they’re watching.

“I do want to forget it all, Tony. Permanently. I think that’s the only way.”

Whatever that means? But at least he’s talking. “Oh yeah?” Tony asks.

“I think I could do it. I needed my mother to help before but... my abilities have grown so much since then. I think I could do it alone this time.”

The lazy stupor brought on by seven solid hours on the couch slides right out of Tony’s mind as he realizes what Loki’s talking about, and he sits up straighter. “Wait a sec. You mean some kind of magic thing? Like... erase your memories?”

“Yes,” says Loki, perfectly casually, because in his world that isn’t a totally ridiculous concept.

Tony nods. “Okay. Huh. Is this a normal thing to do on Asgard?”

“It’s not common. But it’s done occasionally. For those with traumatic pasts.”
“Then why didn’t you erase your memories of—” Tony stops himself as his brain catches up with his mouth. What did Loki just say? He needed his mother to help before? “…Oh. You did.”

Loki, staring at the projector screen, slowly closes his eyes. “I did. A long time ago. Which is one of the reasons why I never wanted to discuss that part of my life with you. It’s over and it’s gone and... I don’t remember any of the details. All that’s left is a hazy, summarized version of events. I know what happened, but it feels more like a story I heard from somebody else, about somebody else. There’s no weight to it.”

“So why didn’t you just tell me that? The night we had that huge fight...”

“Because I wanted you to stop chasing after my past when I chose not to tell you, not just when I was unable to tell you. And I still want that, Tony. Do you understand?”

Understanding rolls unpleasantly into Tony’s gut, chased by its common accomplices: guilt and regret. “Yeah,” he mutters. “I... yeah. I’m sorry. That was a shitty thing to say.”

“I know you mean well,” Loki says softly after a moment’s pause. What he leaves unspoken is the ‘but’ addendum to that thought: ‘I know you mean well, but you always manage to miss the point and blurt out the wrong damn thing’. Or maybe, ‘I know you mean well, but good intentions can walk hand in hand with hurtful results’. Something along those lines, loudly inferred in the way Loki still won’t make eye contact.

Leaning back and letting his head drop down against the couch, Tony lets out a long huff of breath. “Sorry. I guess I still—”

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Loki interrupts. And if Tony’s fault is always saying the wrong thing, then Loki’s fault has to be never saying anything at all, as if shoving all problems into the past to insist they doesn’t exist any more and have no bearing on the future is an ideal coping method. The ol’ forgive and forget. Except Tony’s pretty sure Loki’s not all that big on the forgiveness part. Or, come to think of it, the forgetting. It’s more like ignore and pretend not to hold a small grudge until the end of time.

“You sure?” Tony prods, even though he knows what the answer is going to be. Let the record show that Tony Stark never fails to put up a token, half-assed fight for what he’s at least sixty percent sure is the right thing to do.

“Mm,” Loki replies, nodding in the vague but predictable affirmative. “Let’s watch another movie.”

So Tony has Jarvis put on Flight of the Navigator, because they might as well get started into the realm of classic robot flicks from the 80s. Loki settles down onto the couch and a moment later is lying spooned up at Tony’s side. Close. Comfortable. Content. At least on the surface.

And maybe that’s what’s bothering Tony. (Deep inside, in the low places below his stomach; not on the surface.) It becomes a little more obvious every time they have a disagreement and spectacularly fail to communicate: so much of their relationship is based within the shallow outer orbit of attraction and interaction. If he’s really honest with himself, how much does he really know about Loki? More than he did at first, sure, and a few new little facts squeak through the armor every now and then to add detail to the big picture. But that picture overall is still so pixelated and blurred. There are vast areas left uncolored. The background has no depth. Fuck, he couldn’t even answer adequately when Pepper asked what Loki would like for a birthday gift.

He loves Loki...
But. There’s another thought that has an unfortunate modifier. He loves Loki, but, it’s getting harder to keep accepting all the secrecy and emotional guardrails. He loves Loki, but, it feels like there are walls thrown up around arbitrary areas of their relationship and he’s always stumbling into them like a rat in a maze, constantly faced with dozens of dead ends and no clear way forward. He loves Loki, but, how much of what he feels is genuine, and how much is just Loki’s magic simulating a much stronger connection than what really exists?

He said it felt right. That’s what he said, at one point: that being with Loki felt right. It felt natural, as if it’s what should be, when the touch of magic swept through his body and made itself at home in every cell. It made him feel as if he knew Loki so much better than he did, on a level that couldn’t be described or even imagined. And he found himself inserting Loki into old memories, as if things had always been that way and they’d known each other for so much longer than the reality of time could prove. Maybe Loki had been there at Christmas one year. Maybe they’d gone to the beach together. Maybe they’d sat on a blanket on a hill one unusually cool and rainy Fourth of July evening, and cuddled close to share the shelter of Tony’s jacket as fireworks lit up the sky. It’s way too easy to imagine all those things being real, especially when Tony lets his arm drape around Loki’s ribcage and absorb that constant hum of magical energy he radiates.

Maybe Loki feels the same, and just can’t say? Or maybe he doesn’t. It’s impossible to see beyond those inconveniently situated walls to find the truth. But the fact remains that one day Tony’ll need to be able to do just that, if he wants to be able to rely on anything more substantial than magic to hold the two of them together. Because that’s not always going to be enough.

“Hey, Loki?” he whispers.

Loki turns his head halfway, peeking back over his shoulder. “Hm?”

“If you don’t want to talk a lot, okay. I get it. That’s your thing. I won’t push. But here’s my thing. I need to know... something. Anything. About you. I need to feel like you trust me. I need to know that you’re willing to share some stuff with me. The good stuff. The bad stuff. Not all the stuff, but whatever you think you can say. I want to hear it. From the critical to the mundane. Okay?”

Inhaling, Loki holds his breath. “...Right now?”

“No. Not right now. Tomorrow or in a couple days or whenever you’re ready. I want you to think of something you’ve never told anybody else, and tell me.”

Again, Loki holds his breath. “And you’ll do the same?” he finally asks.

“Sure, why not...” Tony allows. If Loki wants to go one for one with deep dark secrets, it’s not as if Tony doesn’t have a blossoming wellspring of those.

He holds on a little more snugly as Loki settles back down. Loki’s still here, after all. Still present and real, even if the surface is all Tony gets for now. Maybe one day the hidden, locked-away, secret interior will be accessible. Until then? He’ll just let the warm, fuzzy feeling of magical opiate numb all his worries and keep the spidery legs of uncertainty from gaining too much of a foothold in his brain.

Everything will be fine.

Somehow, he’ll find a way to make it be fine.

It’s only that, at the moment, things aren’t as fine as he originally though they’d be. And nowhere
near as perfect as he was convinced they were.
Chapter Summary

It's Loki's birthday party, and that goes about as well as can be expected when the guests are Tony's ex and a bunch of SHIELD jerks. And if reason and heartfelt pleas won't get Loki into the good books, maybe some good old-fashioned bribery will.

Chapter Notes

Apologies in advance that this chapter is pretty much nothing but stupid banter.

Also apologies for the fact that July was the month of Three Solid Weekends of Visitors. And also my birthday. And also cosplay con crunch. And also I'm lazy. A perfect storm of getting very little accomplished. And on top of all that, this was originally supposed to end with one more scene, which I've been battling with for the last week or so. But the whole chapter was getting long, and I didn't want to rush what comes next, so I made the executive decision to cut things off here and move the scene to the beginning of the next chapter. It'll still work fine that way. (I keep telling myself.)

Standing at the head of the table and looking across at all those unimpressed faces staring back at him, Tony has the uncanny sense of board room déjà vu. It's all here. The power pose with his hands resting to create little triangles on the tabletop. At least two people leaning back in their chairs with their arms crossed, looking aggressively disinterested. An anonymous throat clearing. The smell of coffee somewhere nearby. He's even wearing a jacket and tie.

Okay, so he’s wearing a jacket and tie with jeans and some stupid slip-on beach shoes that looked a lot cooler online than they do in person. But those are hidden by the table. From the waist up, the illusion is complete.

“Alright, here’s the deal,” he says to his dining room/board room full of acquaintances/employees. “Loki’s waiting in the kitchen, and I have a couple of announcements to make before we invite him in and get the good times rolling. First off, thank you all for coming to his birthday party. I have no idea how old he is and don’t want to ask because I’m pretty sure the answer would be terrifying and incomprehensible. So for ease of both calculation and human time-scale understanding, we’re going to pretend he was born in 1980 and is therefore thirty-three. Any objections?”

Nobody says a thing. A few people look annoyed, but obviously aren’t actually annoyed enough to speak up.

“Excellent. Motion passed. Next item of business: since we are all gathered for the purpose of celebrating Loki’s birthday, I would hereby like to propose that we are all now friends or at least acquaintances on speaking terms.”

Agent Hill raises her hand in a way that just looks sarcastic. “Can I object?”
“Mm, no,” says Tony. “However, we can negotiate. What would everybody say is the going rate for agreeing to make an effort to get along with Loki? Not,” he specifies, “being fake friends or any bullshit. I do not harbor any unreasonable expectation that you’re all going to up and become best buddies over the next few hours. All I’m asking is that you give him a chance. Be nice. Be polite. Be like those work colleagues who nod at each other while microwaving lunch. Can we do that? What do I need to put on the table to get that to happen?”

“Are you trying to bribe us to put up with Loki?” asks one of the perpetually annoyed-looking frowns. It belongs to Steve Rogers.

Hill shakes her head. “It won’t be that easy, Stark. We can’t be bought.”

Except Agent Barton leans forward. “Maybe you should speak for yourself. I’m not above being bought. What are you offering?”

Romanov punches him in the shoulder, but that doesn’t seem to make any difference.

“Name your price,” says Tony.

The expression on Barton’s face is one Tony’s seen a hundred times before: the internal negotiation of ‘how much can I get away with’ carefully balanced against ‘I don’t want to blow this by starting too high’. “Seventy thousand?” he throws out after a moment of deliberation.

“Sold,” Tony says with a smack of his hand down on the table. “I’ll have Jarvis set up a discreet bank account and provide you with access. Any other takers?”

“Absolutely not!” says Pepper. “Tony, you can’t just pay people to be Loki’s friends!”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s not how the world works!”

“Pepper, we’re talking about forging positive new relationships between a hostile immortal space god and the pathetic Earth peons he tried to murder and subjugate. I don’t really think there’s an accepted social protocol here. If a generous application of funding can help smooth the way, I believe we should let it.”

“I second that motion,” says Barton. “And, for an additional hundred grand, I will pretend to like Loki, not just pretend to tolerate him.”

Tony nods. “I will let you know if that becomes necessary. Now are there any other takers? Apparently the going rate is seventy thousand dollars.”

From the seat nearest Tony on the left hand side, Rhodey speaks up. “Can I have seventy thousand dollars?”

“Great question,” Tony replies. “No. As my best friend, I’m pretty sure you’re legally obligated to make an effort at getting along with everybody I date.”

“That is blatantly unfair.”

“Give Loki a chance and I promise never to invoice you for that suit you stole from me. Which, for the record is worth... let’s say... significantly more than seventy thousand dollars.”

Rhodey flops back in his chair with a dejected scowl. “...Okay I guess that’s fair...”
“Wait, I changed my mind,” Barton butts in. “Can I have one of your old Iron Man suits instead of the cash prize?”

“No,” says Tony. “It wouldn’t fit you. You look like you’re a weird shape. And the gloves do not work well with archery. Please don’t ask me how I know. Now moving along...” Tapping his fingers against the table top, he looks to the next face in line. Natasha. “Agent Romanov. You in for seventy thousand dollars?”

She shrugs. “If that’s where things are headed, I guess I could stoop to helping you out and taking that money off your hands.”

“Fantastic. Hill? You’re, uh...?”

Somehow finding it within her power to narrow her eyes into even more of a glare, she drops her head to the side in what has to be the physical equivalent to the phrase ‘bitch please’.

“...Not going to dignify that with a response,” Tony finishes. “Okay, we’ll come back to you. Rogers?”

Pepper answers for him. “No. Steve is not taking your bribe, and neither am I. This is ridiculous, Tony. And insulting, both to us and to Loki. How do you think he would feel if he knew you were buying him friends?”

“Relieved?” Tony guesses. “Unsurprised? I’m only doing what I have to do to square things up with everyone.”

“Without even asking him?” Pepper goes on, clearly not humoring any of Tony’s arguments. “Without letting him speak for himself? He’s not a thing you own, Tony.”

“Well, funny you should mention that,” Tony mutters. But quietly, so Pepper doesn’t hear. Nobody wants to blast open that explosive can of worms any time soon.

“I say we bring Loki in here,” says Steve. “Let him explain himself. Make his own arguments.”

Pepper emphatically nods, because apparently she and Captain America are now a team and that’s a thing that makes sense. “Exactly. You want us to get along with Loki? I think we need to talk to Loki.”

“Sure, fine, whatever,” Tony sighs. Bringing Loki into the mix at this point when everybody’s all riled up probably isn’t a super idea. But on the other hand, considering how the meeting isn’t moving in a positive direction anyway, the addition of Loki himself isn’t likely to make things much worse. Also the ice cream cake is starting to melt. “Jarvis? You can tell Loki we’d like him to come in now.”

“Informing him now,” Jarvis answers. If only everyone else in the room were that cooperative.

“Just so you know,” Tony says in a last-ditch appeal while he still has time, “Loki has a lot of really great qualities.”

“Are these qualities we want to know about?” asks Rhodey.

“Several of them are. At least... three of them are totally family-friendly, G-rated qualities. Like, for example, one day on Asgard he smelled like roses mixed with Deep Woods Off. Which you might think would not be a good combination, but it turns out it’s very alluring.”
Rhodey shakes his head. “That is not G-rated.”

“It’s G-rated for me.”

“Nothing about you is G-rated,” says Natasha.

That is an accurate statement. “Okay fine,” Tony tells them. “Loki also has very soft hands-”

“Not G-rated,” Rhodey interrupts.

“-and he’s incredibly cuddly and affectionate when he’s in the right mood-”

“Really not G-rated.”

“-and yesterday he ate an entire four-pound bag of oats by himself.”

“Now that’s just irrelevant,” says Barton. “Pretty impressive, but irrelevant.”

“Fine, I give up,” says Tony. “But luckily,” he immediately adds as Loki appears in the doorway, “you don’t have to take my word for anything, because here’s Loki to demonstrate in person how great he is. Loki, welcome to the party. Come over here and have a seat.”

There were two distinct scenarios that Tony had imagined when trying to work out a mental preview of how exactly this moment would go. Scenario one involved Loki slinking in like his old Atlantic City teenage goth self, refusing to acknowledge anyone or say anything. Scenario two was that Loki would strut in like his birthright space prince self and immediately piss everybody off by acting all superior. The scenario of everybody actually acting civil had been written off as too improbable from the get-go.

Loki, neither slinking nor strutting, looks uncannily like a normal person as he takes his offered chair at Tony’s right. Well... he looks like an uncommonly attractive normal person. For the occasion of his birthday, he’s arrayed himself in some tight Asgardian pants paired with one of Tony’s more flamboyant dress shirts: black with purple and gold stripes. The cuffs are rolled up to hide the fact that the sleeves are too short and probably a few too many buttons are left undone in the absence of a tie, but nobody who counts is going to complain about that. His hair, still a little damp from the shower, is pulled back into a ponytail with a fancy gold Asgardian clip thing that leaves a few wayward tendrils hanging around his face.

The overall effect is that of somebody who was once the darling rogue of a Eurotrash boy band, but with age and experience has since moved on to being the devilishly charismatic manager of the next big thing in Eurotrash boy bands. It does funny things both to Tony’s stomach and his equilibrium. And makes him seriously question why he invited all these idiots over to his house when he could have spent the day alone with Loki.

“Uhhhhh,” he says, trying to kickstart his brain and get it back on track. What had they even been talking about?

“You’re such a pathetic dumbass,” Rhodey whispers.

That is also an accurate statement. “Okay. Uh. Yeah.” Forcing himself to stop staring at Loki, he looks out at the other, less engaging partygoers. Contrary once again to his mental preview scenarios, everybody (with the exception of Agent Hill) looks like they’re making an effort at appearing to be in a decent mood. Not a good mood, but at least one that isn’t hostile or uncooperative. Pepper’s even put on her fake plastic business meeting smile. “Everybody, this is Loki. Loki, I think you know everybody except my friend James Rhodes, whom everybody calls
Rhodey because James is way too respectable a name for a weirdo like him.”

“Hi,” says Rhodey, waving at Loki from across the table. “Don’t listen to Tony. He just wishes he had as respectable a name as I do, because he was named after Tony from West Side Story.”

“That is an urban legend,” Tony says.

“It’s not. His mom outright told me she named him Tony because of West Side Story.”

“Oh,” says Loki, with a polite, slow nod. “I... don’t know what that is.”

Annoyingly, Rhodey scootches in a little closer to the table. “Well. See, it’s this old movie about a guy named Tony who—”

“We’re getting off topic,” Tony interrupts. “Nobody cares about the plot of West Side Story.”

“I do,” says Barton. “I suddenly care a lot.”

“A thousand dollars says you don’t,” Tony growls.

Barton slides back into his chair. “I just realized it’s the dumbest movie I ever accidentally saw on TV and I never want to talk about it again.”

“Correct,” says Tony. “Now, getting back to Loki’s birthday...”

“Is this a movie I should watch?” he hears Steve whisper to Pepper, but he can ignore that.

“Why are we talking about West Side Story?” asks a new but familiar voice from the doorway.

Tony can’t ignore that. But what he can do, luckily enough, is take the opportunity to derail the conversation and completely change the topic. “Bruce!” he says. Too enthusiastically, but whatever. “Welcome to Loki’s birthday! I didn’t think you’d be back until tomorrow.”

Finding an empty chair at the far end of the table, Bruce takes a seat. “Oh... yeah. Sorry, I just let myself in. Pepper sent me a text saying you were back, and you were having a party for Loki?”

“Yes,” says Tony. “That is exactly why we are here. The sole reason why we are here: to have a party for Loki. Complete with cake and a world-class build-your-own-hotdog bar.”

“What makes it world-class?” Bruce asks.

“I have seven different kinds of exotic mustard.”

Barton raises his hand. “Is one of the kinds regular yellow?”

“Obviously. What kind of amateur do you think I am? And we can get right to work on eating those as soon as everybody agrees to accept Loki into our tolerant acquaintanceship.”

At that, Agent Hill scoffs loudly, breaking what had been such a nice streak of silence. “Accept? I thought we were still working on you trying to give me a good reason why he shouldn’t be in prison.”

“The reason is because I said so,” Tony replies. “And I’m me, so that’s usually good enough.”

“Despite him being Loki, the known enemy who attempted to initiate an extraterrestrial invasion of Earth?”
“I prefer to think of him as just Loki. Or possibly Loki, comma, my boyfriend.”

“Or Loki, you boyfriend, who topped S.H.I.E.L.D.’s most wanted list? You’re dating a criminal, Stark.”

“Okay, show of hands if you fail,” says Tony, gesturing around to the group. “Never have I ever dated somebody that society considered to be the bad boy or bad girl.”

Barton’s and Natasha’s hands are first to go up, accompanied by snickers and wry smiles. Then Bruce with a reluctant sigh, and Pepper with a pointed glare in Tony’s exact direction.

“Oh, please,” Hill snarls. “More like ‘never have I ever dated somebody who is a very real threat to national security’.”

It’s a serious trial for Tony to not roll his eyes. The funny thing is, though, that the moment those words are spoken, the room goes oddly quiet. All background murmurs die off one by one. Steve glances at Pepper. Rhodey looks over at Bruce. And Natasha just kind of gingerly keeps her hand hovering halfway in the air, turning her palm up as if tagging her gesture with a question mark.

“Really?” Barton asks her.

“I mean, I’m assuming at some point?’ she says. “Odds are good.”

Tony, though, is much more interested in how tensely uncomfortable Bruce and Pepper suddenly are. Tensely uncomfortable in a trying-to-look-inconspicuous kind of way. “I’m missing something important, aren’t I?” he asks.

For the count of five, nobody says anything. And then it all erupts at once in a Celtic knot of interwoven names and facts and sentence fragments that Tony has no hope of untangling. Something about a terrorist, explosions, the president being kidnapped, and Captain America to the rescue? And maybe Bruce said something about a hot lady? “Okay, okay, okay!” he shouts over the racket. “How about one person talks at a time? I nominate Pepper, because she’s always good at paraphrasing things in a condensed, palatable way that sort of holds my attention. Pepper?”

All eyes turn to Pepper, putting her in the spotlight. “Alright, fine,” she sighs. “I guess this is what I was supposed to tell you yesterday, so... Here we go.” She takes a deep breath to square herself before continuing, and looks over to Steve for a little reassuring nod. “Shortly after you left for Asgard, the big news story was a series of terrorist attacks by some nut case calling himself the Mandarin. Concurrently and seemingly unconnected, because why would I have reason to think these two things would be connected, this... person I used to know, Aldrich Killian, showed up looking to potentially partner with Stark Industries on a new piece of bio tech his firm had developed. You weren’t around, so I had to talk to him. And... long story short, mistakes were made, we started seeing each other for a very brief period of time...”

“I don’t like where this is going,” says Tony. “Rhodey, you tell the story.”

“Pepper hooked up with Killian,” Rhodey tells him. “Killian turned out to be behind the whole Mandarin thing. He kidnapped the president, Rogers and I saved the president, there were a lot of explosions. I’m an Avenger now.”

“And?”

Rhodey shrugs. “It was awesome.”

“Yeah, I’ll need a little more detail than that,” Tony says. “Bruce, can you maybe tell the real
story?"

“Oh boy...” Bruce mutters. “So... yes. As Pepper said, it started off with the Mandarin and then Killian showing up. But before any of the awesome explosions Rhodes mentioned, a woman named Maya Hansen came by looking for you. I tried to tell her you weren’t in town, but somehow we started talking about molecular biology and... she was really pretty...”

“You too, huh?” Tony asks. The answering expression of guilt on Bruce’s face says everything Tony needs to know. “So I guess by that whole ‘never have I ever dated somebody who’s a threat to national security’ thing, she was in cahoots with Killian?”

“She was head of his science division,” Steve cuts in, taking up the burden of actually telling Tony what the hell went on. “She came looking for you because she thought you’d be able to help solve a problem. Luckily for us, she found Bruce instead, and confided in him everything she knew of Killian’s plan. Bruce told S.H.I.E.L.D., and S.H.I.E.L.D. sent me in.”

“I thought somebody like Steve would probably be a better choice in a delicate situation,” Bruce adds. “I’m better at staying out of the way unless you want everything completely flattened.”

Steve goes on. “Killian’s plan was to execute the president as part of this Mandarin’s terror campaign. He managed to kidnap both the president and-”

“Alright,” says Steve, nodding slowly. “In the end, Rhodes and I rescued the president and shut down the whole Mandarin operation. Unfortunately, Killian escaped. And there’s been no sign of him since. That was at the end of December. We’ve been trying to track him down, but no luck yet.”

“And that’s it for zany hijinks that went down in my absence?” Tony asks.

“That’s it for zany hijinks that are relevant to you,” Natasha replies.

“Super,” says Tony. “Good work, team. I’m proud of you. You really held down the fort while I was away. And now your beloved Iron Man is back, so I should be able to finish things off and tie up all the loose ends. Send me over all your files on this douche. I’ll track him down for you. Shouldn’t take me more than, what, two days, tops?”

Unfortunately, that’s when Natasha makes one of those little ‘hm’ sounds that’s never followed by anything good. “Actually there is one more thing that’s relevant to you. S.H.I.E.L.D. has decided to terminate your involvement with the Avengers.”

Bullshit. “I highly doubt that. If that were the case, you wouldn’t all be sitting in my dining room right now taking bribes to be pals with my new Loki and waiting to eat novelty hotdogs from Japan.”

Finally deciding to participate in something, Loki looks up with raised eyebrows. “You’re bribing them?”

“Only the best for you, babe,” says Tony.

Loki seems satisfied by that. “Good.”

“See, I told you,” Tony says to Pepper before turning back to Natasha. “Anyway, you can’t dump me. You need me.”
“We’ve replaced you,” says Natasha.

Tony snorts. “With what? Bearing in mind that if you say anything less than ‘giant organic-computer hybrid mecha-dragon from the future’, I will judge you very harshly, because you haven’t really replaced me.”

“We’ve replaced you with somebody who can do everything you can do, who has all the same equipment you do, but also has the very desirable superpower of being able to follow instructions and act like a real team member.”

In case Natasha’s descriptor wasn’t quite enough, the way Rhodey subtly turns his face away and looks at the floor really drives the point home. “Oh,” Tony says. So that’s how it all went down. “Gotcha. Okay. I get it now. This has to do with your original assessment, doesn’t it? ‘Iron Man yes, Tony Stark no’? You found a way to get what you wanted.”

“Fury though it would be the best move for the team.” Natasha’s voice has that delicately explanatory ring to it, like people get when they’re trying to justify something shitty. “After the whole Mandarin incident, he thought the Iron Patriot would—”

“Excuse me, what? Iron Patriot?”

Rhodey groans. “That part wasn’t my fault. Some higher-ups thought it would play better in the media, and then when Iron Patriot and Captain America saved the president? The only way that could have possibly played any better was if it happened on the Fourth of July. The name kind of stuck.”

“Awesome,” says Tony. “So you’re now Iron Patriot, the Avengers underwent a recast for the new season, and that leaves me...? Where? Balancing on the brink of a new segment in my Wikipedia article, subheading: ‘descent into supervillainy’? You realize that by kicking me out of the Good Guys, you’re leaving me wide open to Loki’s questionable influence, right?” He makes sure to aim that last remark directly at Hill. “I’m basically one terrible electrolysis accident away from becoming Lex Luthor.”

“Quit being cute, Stark,” she tells him.

“Sorry, that’s logistically impossible.”

“You never wanted to be part of the Avengers. Coulson had to physically wrangle you into a jet to get you on board the Helicarrier that first time.”

“Maybe I was playing hard-to-get.”

Off to the side, he hears Pepper’s sarcasm-laced whisper: “Oh right, as if that would ever happen...”

“Do you have something to contribute to the conversation, Miss Potts?”

“Yes, I do,” she says, turning to face the table. “I think we’ve wasted enough time arguing about S.H.I.E.L.D. business when this is supposed to be a birthday party for Loki. So, Steve, how about you get the cake out of the box before it melts, and I’ll pass around the plates, and we can try celebrating instead of complaining. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Tony agrees. “I don’t care about these stupid idiots and their crappy club for jerks anyway.”

Handing out plates and forks from the sideboard, Pepper sighs. “That’s very big of you.”
“Besides, now Loki and I can start our own superhero team. With blackjack. And hookers.”

“For two hundred grand, I’ll be on your team,” Barton offers.

“I will review your application and let you know in six to eight weeks,” says Tony.

“Loki, would you care to cut the cake?” Pepper loudly asks.

“Are you crazy?” says Hill. “Don’t give the homicidal alien a knife. Rogers can do it.”

Either uncharacteristically forgiving or very characteristically not giving a hoot about peasants’ opinions of him, Loki waves away the knife with a gesture in Steve’s direction. “I’m sure Captain Rogers will do a fine job with... whatever this is.”

“It’s an ice cream cake,” Tony tells him. “Probably not something you have on Asgard, but you’ll love it. It’s frozen and full of sugar: two of your favorite things.

Less than fully convinced, Loki stares down at the slightly runny cake sitting in front of him. “The top appears to have been disturbed.”

“Oh, yeah,” says Tony. “That’s on Pepper for not being diligent and double-checking the order with Dairy Queen, so we ended up with a cake that said ‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY LORI’. Luckily I was around to save the day with my fantastic genius brain and a very small souvenir of Wisconsin decorative spoon.” He looks up at Natasha. “You’re going to regret kicking me out next time there’s a cake emergency.”

Natasha doesn’t bother looking back at him, being momentarily way too interested in her nails. “Doubt it.”

“It’s for the good of everyone, Stark,” says Hill. “You don’t want to be an Avenger. You never did. And now you’re free to go back to your pre-S.H.I.E.L.D. life. As soon as we figure out what to do with Loki-”

“I’ve already figured out what to do with Loki,” Tony interrupts. “He’s staying here, with me. There you go. Problem solved.”

But Hill shakes her head. “We still have a lot of variables to consider and risks to look at. He’s a significant threat to-”

“You don’t know any of the circumstances,” Tony says. He can feel it happening, and almost pinpoint the exact second: the moment that internal switch in his brain inevitably flips over from ‘mildly annoyed’ to ‘increasingly angry’ the longer this goes on. The longer any conversation with S.H.I.E.L.D. goes on. “It wasn’t Loki behind that attack. Loki didn’t send himself here after the Tesseract. He was acting on the orders of somebody else, brainwashed and forced to-“

Loki’s voice is quiet, but not quiet enough to go unnoticed: “No I wasn’t.”

Momentarily thrown off, Tony can only take a little step to the side and stare down at Loki in the very dictionary definition of dumbstruck silence. “But...” he manages after a second. “You told me...”

“The... they... did any number of horrific things to me,” Loki goes on, scarcely any louder, “but I was never brainwashed. And I was never forced. Everything I did was of my own choice.”

“No.” Tony says. It’s a knee-jerk reaction. Brainwashed or not, what Loki did wasn’t exactly
voluntary. “Loki, they tortured you. They would have killed you.”

“Yes,” Loki agrees, “and then I could have died with a gloss of decency. They would have killed me. But instead I chose to bargain with them. I chose to align myself with them and I chose to accept their terms in that alliance. I chose that.”

“But you...” Tony tries again, even though he gets no further than before.

“Yes, Tony, just... let me at least own my catastrophes. Nothing I did was because I was forced. I did it because I was angry and wanted revenge, and I was willing to enact that revenge anywhere I could, on anyone unfortunate enough to be in my path. I was offered an opportunity, and I took it. There’s nothing worthy of mercy or forgiveness in my story.” He turns his gaze over to Hill at the far end of the table. “And I do not fault you, Agent Hill, for your attitude towards me. You’re right. I am a criminal. I am a threat. To you. To your world. And it’s only due to the very unexpected kindness of the king and queen of Asgard that I’m here in front of you right now rather than locked away in a cell.”

“Why are you here?” Hill asks.

Loki pokes at his cake with the tip of his fork, carving a swirling S-shape into the surface. “I told you before,” he says after a second’s pause. “I have been released into the care of Tony Stark. I am not free, if that’s what worries you. I’ve not been absolved of my crimes. Those will always hang around my neck like a noose ready to tighten if even one more ounce of weight is added, giving me every reason to mind my actions and absolutely no incentive at all to betray Tony or S.H.I.E.L.D. or anyone else. If I did, I’m certain I would die within days, having no allies and nowhere to go. It’s in my best interest to behave nicely and stay here.”

“And will you?”

“Yes,” Loki softly answers, playing with his fork again. “I tried giving my life over to revenge. It didn’t work out so well in the end. I let myself be governed by rage and envy and pettiness, and countless years later I was no better off than when I started. In fact I think I was much worse. Now, deserved or not, I’ve been given a chance to start over. A new life free from the past. And I do understand if you find it difficult to believe me when I say this, but I intend to take that chance. I intend to make better choices for myself, as much as I can, given how dismally I’ve failed in that regard all my life...”

Tony’s hand drops down to Loki’s shoulder for a reassuring squeeze, because how can it not? “Look, nobody’s asking you to forgive Loki right here and now,” he says to the group, echoing back something Frigga once told him that now seems incredibly relevant. “But I will ask you to give him a chance to earn your forgiveness.”

Looking around the table, a lack of outward displays of sneering and eye-rolling seems like a good sign. Everybody might even look a little bit thoughtful: an even better sign. Even Agent Hill. Her eyebrows are still slanted downward in judgment, but something has shifted in her perception. Not much, but maybe just enough to realign one pattern of thought.

She nods in Loki’s direction: one sharp bob of the chin. “We’ll be watching you.”

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Rhodey’s the last one to leave, loitering near the door as everybody else filters out, ready to grab a minute alone with Tony.
“I am... really sorry about that,” is the first thing he says. “I didn’t know S.H.I.E.L.D. was recruiting me as a replacement for you. Not until last night when Romanov mentioned something about you not taking it well and I clued in. I honestly thought we’d end up in this together, which seemed pretty cool to me. If I’d known it was going to be like this, I never would have-”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Tony says, clapping him on the shoulder. “It was bound to happen one day, wasn’t it? You’re the better bet for them. You have that whole military discipline thing going on. I have a wise mouth and probably at least four or five dangerous personality traits that make me unfit for service. This makes more sense.”

“Are you angry about it?”

“Not at you.”

“Okay,” Rhodey says with a slow little nod. “I really didn’t know.”


“It was good to see you.”

“Happy couldn’t make it?”

“Pepper didn’t tell him. He’s in New York and... You know how he goes all Protective Older Brother around you. She figured introducing him to Loki while you’re still in the stage of convincing everybody Loki’s not going to murder you in your sleep wouldn’t be the greatest move.”

“Ah. Right. Good call.”

And then falls the awkward silence. That strained, uncomfortable moment that grows like a wall between two friends who used to be a lot closer but who haven’t spoken in months. And damn, what rollercoaster ride those months have been. How much, exactly, has changed?

Rhodey breaks through first with a muted cough and a tilt of his head towards the living room. “So, uh... This seems kind of like a real thing you have going on with Loki?”

“Guess so,” says Tony, looking off in the direction of Rhodey’s gesture. Along the bank of windows, Loki paces into view and then back out again. Something deep inside makes him want to blurt out a confession of every stupid, sappy thing he’s ever thought about Loki, and ramble on for hours about how Loki’s eyes look blue under bright light but almost green in the yellow-orange of artificial Asgardian lamps. Or how after a shower Loki’s hair always dries with one near-perfect ringlet on the front right side, while the rest is looser waves. Or how he stayed up half the night on the couch long after the last movie ended and Loki fell asleep, staring at the dark screen, wondering if he’d made the right choice before finally deciding yes... though with a few ‘to be determined’ bullet points listed underneath. And wouldn’t it be great to talk to somebody about all that? Sort out his feelings with somebody he knows would have his best interests in mind there to listen and give advice?

Maybe not today, though. Because the something deep inside isn’t ready to emerge, held back by something bigger and closer to the surface that tells him he’s not quite prepared to be that open about his personal life just yet. Cripes, he still has trouble saying the dreaded L-word to Loki. How can he expect himself to bring up that subject matter with somebody else?

“Listen,” Rhodey says, sighing when Tony lets the ball drop and doesn’t go into any more detail. “We should get together sometime soon. You know. Hang out, play some games... I should probably get to know Loki a bit. And I’m going to make you watch The Hobbit even though it
“Actually... yeah,” says Tony. “That sounds really good. I’d tell you to stay right now, but I had a shitty sleep last night and dealing with Agent Hill made things even worse and now I feel exhausted, but yeah, sometime this week. I’ll call you tomorrow. And really? The Hobbit sucks? I mean, I wasn’t expecting it to be a cinematic masterpiece or anything, but...”

“I went in with low expectations, but then the first forty minutes got my hopes up. And then shattered them on a bunch of crappy CGI rocks. And if I have to sit through that shit, you do too.”

“Damn. Okay. I better make Loki watch Lord of the Rings then, so we can get his hopes up and ruin them too. Thursday, maybe?”

“Sounds good. Now go take a nap or something. You got dark circles the size of Mars under your eyes and look like night of the living dead.”

Tony punches him in the arm. A punch that also serves to push him in the direction of outside. “Thanks, bro. Always a delight talking to you.”

“Damn right. Oh, and Tony?” he asks, pausing just outside the door. “Just a heads up: regardless of how he acts and how much money he accepts, Barton’s probably still going to try to shoot what he refers to as ‘every single last motherfucking arrow’ at Loki’s face. Or at least that was his plan last night. Keep that in mind.”

“Yeah, I figured. Thanks for the warning. I’ll pass it along. Talk to you later.”

He leans against the door as it swings shut, resting his forehead against the smooth, cool surface and trying to figure out if this is a headache coming on or if it’s just tension gathered in the back of his neck from having to be nice to S.H.I.E.L.D. for so long. Could be both? He should take a Tylenol anyway. And he should take a nap. That would be the sensible choice. He should go right to bed and stay there until morning. That sounds oddly appealing.

But then again, Natasha did fulfil every request on his shopping list yesterday. And he’s already missed one bedroom opportunity due to a pathetic human need for sleep. One disappointment is enough. Not going to let that happen again. Especially since a birthday should be celebrated properly.

“Hey, Loki?”
Thor Would Have Said Something

Chapter Summary

When a romantic birthday dinner ends in both participants getting sick, it should probably be classified as a disaster.

Chapter Notes

Dang, friends, con season really kicked my ass this year, and I think I'm still recovering. Definitely still trying to get back into the writing thing now that I have a break from dedicating every free hour of my life to the cosplay thing. So for those of you still reading this and putting up with my BS, you have my sincere gratitude, and I hope you like this new chapter.

In the end, Loki’s birthday haul rings up as follows:

- A gift set of high end hair care products from Pepper.
- A gift set of noticeably less high end bath or skin care products from Natasha. Tony can’t tell exactly what they are. The labels are all in Czech or something.
- Assorted chocolates in a supposedly limited edition dog tin from Rhodey.
- A box of Great Value brand granola bars from Rogers.
- A bottle of Great Value brand strawberry soda from Barton.
- A single brown utilitarian potato from Agent Hill.
- Two Snickers bars, a bottle of purple Gatorade, and a pack of beef jerky from Bruce, who apologized for having done his shopping at the gas station on his way over.

All of it lies scattered across the bed, interspersed with the takeout boxes of food Tony ordered for birthday dinner. That comprises:

- Steak.
- Mashed potatoes.
- Roasted zucchini.
- Caprese salad.
- A cheese and olive assortment that’s mostly olives.
- Oysters.
- Some stupid rice pilaf thing Loki insisted on getting.
- Individual raspberry mousses formed into embarrassing heart shapes.

“You gonna finish that?” Tony asks, gesturing at the rice with his fork.

“I don’t think so,” Loki answers.

“Not up to your godly standards?”

“It has peculiar seeds in it.”
“Yeah, well, welcome to California,” Tony says, reaching for the container. “Sometimes stuff has peculiar seeds in it. What about veggies? You want any more salad?”

“More steak.”

“Uh...” Down near their feet, the box that once contained the steak sits suspiciously empty. “Judging by the fact that I ordered four, and only ate one personally, I’d say the magical powers of math tell us you’ve eaten three already?”

Loki nods. “Yes. You should have ordered more.”

“Noted for next time. Until then, how about we finish the rest of this stuff? Have more potatoes. You like potatoes, right? Bland carbs are right up your alley. And hey, where’d the champagne go?”

“You left it in a pile of ice in the sink in the bathroom.”

Damnit. “Right.” It’s too much to hope Loki would follow up that statement with the phrase ‘I’ll go get it’ or a reasonable equivalent. Instead, Loki, being Loki, continues to lie exactly where he is, in the middle of the bed, repeatedly dipping his finger into the plastic tub of mashed potatoes and licking it off. Somehow, he still manages to look elegant and sexy. But then he could probably make scratching his balls look elegant and sexy. Elegant and sexy is just his continuous, non-negotiable state of being.

Rolling out of bed with a sigh, Tony makes his way to the bathroom to grab the bottle out of the sink. He pops the cork on the way back, and takes a long swig. “Looks like I forgot to grab glasses from the kitchen. And I’m way too lazy to walk all the way over there. You okay with drinking right from the bottle, or do you need me to pour it into your mouth? Or maybe I could offer you the cap from a bottle of mouthwash.”

“Why do you not have servants?” Loki asks as Tony sinks back down onto the bed. “Servants could bring glasses for the champagne. And more steak.”

“I guess,” says Tony. “But servants could also get all up in my business and snoop through my classified files, and then I’d probably have to kill them, so... Trust me: it’s better to do without.”

“Servants could cook you breakfast.”

“I already have servants to cook my breakfast. One is called Coffee Maker, and the other is Toaster. Occasionally joined by their pal from the lunch crew, Microwave.”

“Who washes your clothes?”

“Uh, the washing machine? Or, more likely, a dry cleaner, but it’s the specific function of a washing machine to wash clothes. And I definitely know how to dump all my underwear in the washing machine and add detergent and let it do its thing for an hour before I come back and chuck everything in the dryer.”

“Who cleans the toilet?”

“Well, okay,” Tony admits, shifting his position to lie on his side. “That’s done by a very nice Scottish woman named Nancy who comes every Thursday. But she’s more of an independent contractor than a servant. The point is, I don’t have live-in servants, because that’s weird, and I prefer to do everything by myself. Or at least leave it lying around for Nancy to do next Thursday. You’re going to have to get used to that now. Sorry, your highness.”
Loki makes a drawn-out ‘nngggg’ sound as he stretches, kicking the box of granola bars out of the way. “Everyone else got me gifts for my birthday. You should get me a dozen servants.”

“Hm. I was thinking of getting you something more along the lines of a weekend in Playa del Carmen or a shitty car so you can learn how to drive without destroying anything I care about.”

“I know how to drive.”

“Um, yeah, no, I’m pretty sure you don’t.”

“Tony, even the worst idiots on the TV know how to drive,” Loki sighs. “And I’ve watched you at least twice. It’s not difficult.”

“Uh-huh. Sure. We’ll see about that. Anyway,” Tony says, “back to the actual birthday celebrations at hand... You should try one of these oysters.”

Leaning in, Loki looks down at the plate of oysters on ice and makes another ‘nngggg’ sound, though this one somehow manages to convey a completely different mood than the first. “I don’t know. It looks like something that came out of a child’s magical experiment, trying to transform a worm into a rock, but the process went horribly wrong.”

“That is a very imaginative descriptor, but I promise they came out of the ocean, and they’re supposed to look like that.”

“They smell off. Like something I’m not meant to eat.”

“No they don’t. Look. They’re fine.” Picking up an oyster, Tony throws it back in one slurp. “See?” He takes another. “They’re good. I swear. They’re also scientifically proven to be aphrodisiacs, so I think we should eat them all very quickly, and see where that craziness takes us. You know. For science.”

“Or you could eat them all.”

Tony shakes his head. “No, that sounds dangerous. For safety’s sake you need to have at least one. I’m already way too turned on by you just being here looking stupid and perfect. Add eight more oysters into the mix and things might get really out of hand.”

“I’m willing to take that chance.”

“Aw, come on,” Tony groans. “This is supposed to be a romantic birthday dinner. Look, I even found a candle,” he says, pointing to the lone tea light flickering on the dresser. “We have steak, we have oysters, we have heart-shaped pink mousse, we have this bottle of champagne I keep almost spilling all over the bed...”

“You did spill a little on your shorts,” Loki helpfully mentions.

“Right. Anyway, my point is, it’s not a very romantic evening if all you eat is steak and potatoes. We could’ve done that at Denny’s. I just want you to try one oyster. One. You eat one oyster, and then you can have your mousse.”

Loki’s expression changes from bored and cynical to bored and conniving. Always a sign of great things to come. “One oyster,” he offers, “and I get both mousses.”

“Fine,” Tony says with a sigh. “But you have to eat the oyster first.”
“And you have to give me a very long massage.”

“I was probably going to do that anyway.”

Thus satisfied with the terms of their bargain, Loki delicately picks up an oyster as if handling something explosive, and holds it in front of his face. “I hope you know,” he says, “that I am only doing this because it seems to be very important to you, and under no other circumstances would I eat something so obviously foul.”

“You ate eyeballs on Jotunheim,” Tony reminds him.

“That doesn’t count.” Lifting the shell to his lips, Loki takes a preparatory breath. Hold it. Exhales it. Lowers the shell. Lifts it again. Lowers it again.

“The sooner you swallow that thing, the sooner you can be lying naked in a pile of pillows eating all the raspberry mousse while I give you a massage.”

“You’re the worst, and I hate you,” Loki hisses through his teeth. He lifts the oyster again, this time touching it to his lips before pulling back with a sound of disgust.

“How can this be so difficult for you?” Tony asks. “It’s just raw seafood. You love raw seafood. Remember when we went for sushi?”

“That was fish. This is... I don’t even know what this is.”

“It’s similar to fish. You’ll like it. Trust me, will you? Come on. This is getting ridiculous.”

It’s probably exasperation more than anything that pushes Loki over the edge. Tony’s constant, wheedling voice. He’s been known to have that effect on people. With one last searing look of annoyance, Loki lifts the oyster shell, throws it back, and finally swallows the damn thing.

“There!” says Tony. “See? Totally fine.”

Or it would be totally fine if Loki would just stop gagging and coughing like a drama queen.

“Oh come on, it’s not that bad.”

“Yes it is,” Loki whispers.

“You’re such a whiner,” Tony says, holding out the champagne bottle. “Here. Wash it down with a big mouthful of this.”

Loki takes the bottle, but only gets as far as lifting it halfway to his mouth before he freezes. He stops coughing. Though to judge by the expression on his face, that’s not a good thing. His skin, normally ghostly pale with barely any hint of color, has turned white as death and cast with gray.

A very bad feeling drops into the pit of Tony’s stomach. “Uh. You look...”

“I think...” Loki whispers as he slides off the side of the bed and takes three staggering steps in the direction of the bathroom. “I think I...”

“Do you need me to-” Tony begins, but that’s as far as he gets before Loki takes one more wobbly step, inhales a sharp breath, and vomits spectacularly all over the floor.

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“So yeah, it turns out Loki is violently allergic to oysters,” Tony tells Pepper.

“Oh,” she replies. “...And he was eating oysters because?”

“Research, obviously,” says Tony. “It was all part of a very scientifically accurate romantic birthday dinner that may have gone a little off course due to unforeseen results surrounding one of the testing parameters. But that’s all in the past. What I need to talk to you about is, I need you to do me a favor.”

Even in miniaturized form on the phone screen in his hand, there’s no mistaking her dubiously unimpressed expression, halfway between ‘shrug emoticon’ and ‘staring into the camera like you’re on The Office’. “A favor,” she parrots back at him.

“Because of this absurd lockdown S.H.I.E.L.D. has me on, no unauthorized personnel is allowed anywhere near the house. As I learned last night when I had to bribe one of the hired goons outside with the promise of fifty dollars if he walked down to the end of the driveway to grab my takeout through the gate. I don’t even have control over my own gate any more. How fair is that?”

“What’s the favor, Tony?” Pepper asks, clearly not falling for any of this roundabout small talk chumminess.

“Well, uh. The thing is, as a result of the aforementioned oyster allergy, an incident happened in the vicinity of the bathroom door that I’m neither motivated nor qualified to deal with.”

Pepper looks off to the side, somewhere into the depths of space, and whispers something that’s probably ‘oh my god’. “Are you... are you actually asking me to come over and clean your floor?”

“Don’t worry: it was vomit, not the other end.”

“That’s not what I was worried about!” she shouts. “I can’t believe you’d even... Is this a joke?! I honestly can’t tell if you’re being serious or not because every time you ask me to do something completely inappropriate and ridiculous it turns out to be real!”

“It’s real. There is a very real mess of-”

“Why am I even discussing this with you? No! The answer is no! I’m not cleaning your floor!”

Tony almost says ‘it’s Loki’s mess’ but really, would that help anything? No. “It doesn’t have to be you!” he tries instead before Pepper hangs up on him. “You could send your new buddy Steve Rogers instead. Watching him Swiffer up Asgardian party leftovers might turn out to be therapeutic, and help me get over some traumatic childhood-”

“I’m hanging up now,” says Pepper. “I have things to do today, and this is insane.”

“Wait, Pepper.”

“Goodbye, Tony.”

The video screen flickers and fades out, taking Pepper’s image with it. Tony drops his hands down into his lap. “God damnit...”

On the couch at his side, the lump of blankets makes a pathetic groaning sound and lifts what’s probably its head. “If you had servants...” it says.

“Sorry, no servants,” Tony mutters. “I’m just stuck with this one incredibly useless slave who
wouldn’t know a Swiffer from a squeegee, and has no idea how to use either.”

Loki’s head emerges from the blanket nest. “I’m not that sort of slave.”

“Yeah, I know. You’re more the high end sex dungeon type. But next time we have a mess that involves a pile of Armani thongs and some inexplicable lengths of filmy silk fabric, you better believe I’m making you clean it up. And I will watch. While drinking a fine, single malt scotch out of a cut crystal glass. Probably wearing a velvet smoking jacket. You can wear a slightly-too-short satin bath robe with some fish or something embroidered on the back. Turquoise. Maybe electric blue. The fish are gold and orange. I think this scene would play best in a room with white carpet but really dark wood walls, yeah? Track lighting, but not that clunky stuff from the 80s. The modern LED ones.”

“You have very oddly specific fantasies, don’t you?” Loki asks.

“Yes I do,” Tony replies. And he lets the image linger in his mind’s eye just a little while longer, wispy and intangible but too attractive to let slip away just yet. “You don’t?” he throws back at Loki after that moment’s pause.

“Nothing that involves an idea so particular as a blue satin robe with orange fish on it.”

“What, then?” He gently nudges Loki with his elbow. “Come on. Spill it. Distract me from the looming inevitability of having to be a responsible adult and clean up the floor mess myself. What’s your wild and crazy sexual fantasy that doesn’t involve bath robes embroidered with fish?”

“Mmm, I don’t know…” Loki groans as he stretches and drapes himself against Tony’s shoulder (and the tickle of his loose hair almost sets off a whole new, entirely-too-specific mental scenario that Tony really doesn’t have time to think about). “Last night was nice. Originally.”

Tony frowns. “What, the part where we were lying in bed in our pajamas eating takeout right from the box?”

“Yes. I liked that part.”

“That’s not a sexual fantasy, Loki, that’s dinner.”

“I especially liked the part where you promised to give me a very long massage, which hasn’t happened yet, so I’m assuming it will commence… within the next hour?”

“I did give you a very long massage. If you count me rubbing your back for two hours while you lay on the floor next to the toilet.”

“I don’t count that,” Loki says with a shake of his head. “We were both wearing clothes at the time.”

“Alright, then I don’t count you quoting back my promise to give you a massage as a real fantasy. You gotta give me something better. Tell me all about the time you accidentally saw Thor’s girlfriend naked and couldn’t get the image out of your head so you dreamed up a wild tryst with her under a waterfall or something dumb like that. Maybe she turns into a mermaid? I don’t know. It’s your story. Go.”

“A mermaid?” Loki scoffs, at which Tony shrugs.

“You tell me.”
“First of all,” Loki begins, sitting upright because that’s the official Story Telling Pose, “there was nothing accidental about seeing her naked. Second, she wasn’t precisely Thor’s girlfriend, but rather a girl who was his friend and perhaps wished to be somewhat more. And third, a waterfall? That makes no sense. We were in my bedroom, which was next to Thor’s bedroom, where she went looking for him, but found me instead, and I had a large carafe of wine and also an exceptional level of willingness to listen to her complain about Thor for hours on end. Things progressed in the manner you might expect.”

A veil of what has to be very visible surprise falls down as Tony scans Loki’s face for any hint of a lie: any clue that this might be total bullshit. But Loki’s as unreadable as always. “...Wait, are you actually serious?”

“If I wanted to fabricate a story, I would certainly invent something better than drunkenly falling into bed with a girl who would have rather been with my brother.”

“Huh,” says Tony. “Okay then. Was she hot?”

“Yes.”

“Did she ever get together with Thor?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“But seriously, are you making this up?”

“Tony,” Loki groans.

“Hey, you can’t blame me for being suspicious. You and Thor’s girlfriend. Friend. Whatever. See it’s just that I kind of had you pegged as super gay, so this is a revelation. Was it a one-time anomalous thing or are you into the ladies too?”

“It was neither one-time nor anomalous.”

“So what you’re saying is you’re not super gay.”

“Not exclusively, no,” Loki sighs.

Yet another picture begins to form in Tony’s mind. “I need to evaluate this new information.” The picture involves a pair of shapely female legs wrapped around Loki’s bare hips. “I need to evaluate it in great detail but, um. Maybe later when I have a minute to myself.” Or five minutes. Or maybe ten. In the shower. With a bottle of cheap conditioner.

“Whatever it is you’re currently imagining me doing, it’s not going to happen,” Loki says as he stands up. “I’m going to find something to eat.”

“So you’re feeling better?”

“Mostly. Yes. I want some fruit.”

“And then you’ll come back and we can continue this important discussion of things I am very suddenly interested in watching you do?” Tony asks Loki’s retreating shape.

“No.”

“Then will you at least come back and tell me another weird, unexpected Loki fact?”
Pausing before turning the corner that leads to the kitchen, Loki stands with one hand on the wall and a borderline evil smirk on his face. “I was married once,” he says, and then disappears from view.

Every once in a while, Tony’s hit by words that feel like a physical slap in the face. Every once in a while, he’s hit by words that make him choke on his own saliva and then spend a full minute coughing and struggling to breathe again. That? That thing that Loki just said? That qualifies as both.

Still coughing, and trying to wipe away pinprick tears starting to form in the corners of his eyes, he grabs his phone with his free hand and frantically hits redial.

Pepper answers after four rings. “Tony, I can’t talk, I’m on another call, and the only reason I answered is because I know if I don’t you’ll keep calling me back three hundred times.”

“Don’t hang up,” Tony immediately croaks. “This is an emergency. I just learned my boyfriend used to be married and I’m not sure if I should be shocked or aroused and I need to talk to somebody about this before I inevitably do the wrong thing.”

“Don’t you ever bug Rhodey with this crap!”

“No. He’d laugh at me. I can only talk to him about manly things like guns with machetes duct taped to them.”

Pepper doesn’t even say goodbye. She doesn’t even say ‘fuck off’. She doesn’t say anything; just hangs up on him with the beep of the line disconnecting and a red “call ended” icon flashing on the screen. “Fuck,” Tony mutters. “Fuck fuck fuck.”

So his options, at the moment, appear to be a) run madly after Loki and demand some explanations (a tactic that has never gone well in the history of Loki and will more than likely continue to never go well until the ending of the known Loki universe), or b) call somebody else and freak out at them.

“Jarvis?” he says. “Do you have Agent Romanov’s number?”

“Yes, sir,” Jarvis answers. “Shall I call her?”

“Yes. And also, if I try to get up from this couch and run after Loki yelling some incoherent bullshit, remind me that I shouldn’t.”

“Of course. Dialing now.”

Seconds later, Natasha’s face appears on Tony’s phone screen. She’s wearing the kind of unnerving grin that says something’s up. “Tony,” she coos. “You’ll never guess who’s on the other line complaining about you right now.”

“Nobody ever complains about me,” Tony replies. “I’m a gift to this world and you know it. But do you have a minute to talk me out of doing something dumb? Also tell Pepper we’re no longer friends.”

“She’ll be crushed. Give me a second.”

Tony keep his teeth clenched, staring at the call timer on the phone the entire seventeen seconds Natasha’s away. The moment she’s back, he doesn’t even wait for her to say anything before launching into his spiel. “Okay so here’s the problem. To give you a bit of backstory, Loki and I have been sitting on the couch all morning because last night he had an allergic reaction to some
oysters – which I will revisit in more detail later – and spent all night puking, but I am feeling incredibly sexually frustrated because we’ve been back from Asgard for four days now and have not managed to do it even once. It’s been one thing after another, endlessly cockblocked by a series of outrageous circumstances. I don’t like it. So I–"

“Tony, can I interrupt for a second?” Natasha asks, rather extraneously, because she already interrupted. “Just curious: are you drunk or high right now?”

“Oh, well,” he says, coughing again, “I felt shitty this morning, but not regular staying-up-all-night-drinking shitty, so I think I’m getting a cold. I did take a lot of Sudafed and ate a whole pack of Halls Centers and am probably a little high. And sick.”

“I thought so. You don’t look great. But go on.”

“Thanks. Anyway we were talking about sexual fantasies because I feel this is a very important part of both relationship development and also being able to spend the rest of the day in bed, and then it turns out he slept with Thor’s girlfriend once up on a time, and then it turns out he used to be married! And I find this very, very weird but also kind of thrilling? I don’t know. Mostly I’m just trying to stop myself from demanding he give me more details. On the one hand, I feel like this is something I should have known earlier? One of those really important, potential dealbreaker things, like ‘Oh hey I have nine kids’. Which, maybe he does? I have no idea. He never tells me anything. But then on the other hand, he did tell me this. He told me one thing. Voluntarily, without being specifically questioned. I guess that’s a step forward? A positive sign?”

“I am so completely unqualified to give you relationship advice, you know that?” Natasha says. “My current boyfriend is a cat named Buddy. And he’s not even my cat. He’s somebody else’s cat who meows at my door every few weeks and lets me scratch his butt. And I’m good with that. That is the exact level of relationship I am looking for at this point in my life: occasional cat butt scratches. So the best I can do for you is fake a look of concern while I nod and pretend to know what you’re talking about.”

“That’s fine,” says Tony, nodding along with Natasha, who does look very convincingly concerned. “The chances of me listening to your advice would be slim to none anyway. But you know what? I actually feel a lot better about this now. Loki did volunteer information about himself. I’m pretty sure he did it as a shock tactic to get me all riled up, because he’s a cheeky dick, but that’s better than nothing, right?”

Natasha nods more emphatically, radiating concern. “Sure.”

“And I can probably use this to my advantage. Get him to share other critical information when he thinks he’s doing it as part of an imaginary battle of wits. What do you think?”

“I think the Sudafed is making you stupid and you might want to wait until you feel better before charging into a relationship talk disguised as a battle of wits against somebody like Loki.”

“Inconceivable. I feel great.” Another cough forces its way up. “Okay, physically I feel like ass. But mentally I feel very…” He has to pause to dig for the word. “…focused. Do you think space pneumonia is a really thing? I feel like I probably have that. From Asgard.”

“It’s not a real thing, and you are not focused,” says Natasha. “Now, if you want some advice that’s not related to Loki…”

“I don’t.”
“Too bad. I think you should drink some water, take zero more medication, and go have a nap. If, six hours from now, you’re still worried about Loki’s past, which is only your concern as far as he wants to share it with you, call me back and I can feign concern and nod at you again until you talk yourself out of caring too much about things that happened long before he met you. Okay?”

“Okay, yeah, you’re probably right,” Tony mutters. “I guess I’ll just... lie here and pretend my head doesn’t hurt as I stare up at the ceiling. And I’ll try not to think too much about Loki’s ex-wife, who is played by Liv Tyler in the exclusive movie happening right now in my brain.”

“Sounds great. Bye, Tony.”

“Oh, wait,” he manages to slip in before Natasha hangs up. “Remember the puke I told you about earlier?”

“I was trying not to, but yes.”

“Pepper refused to help me out, so~”

Natasha snorts. “She told me.”

“Can you authorize somebody from S.H.I.E.L.D. to come in and clean it up? I tried, but last night I had this theory that I’d be way better at cleaning if I got drunk first, and that theory turned out to be... incredibly incorrect. I may have made things worse. Actually, scratch that: I know I made things worse.”

“How bad are we talking here?”

“Uh, about three steaks, a bunch of potatoes, and one oyster? I don’t know how much food was in him, but wow, a lot sure came out.”

“That’s not what I meant, but... Yeah, I’ll send somebody to deal with it.”

“Thanks, Natasha.”

“Go to bed,” she tells him.

Tony chuck the phone aside as soon as the call disconnects, and lets out a loud, protracted groan as he drops his head back. Did that phone call really help? Yeah. Probably. A bit. If nothing else, at least it distracted him from the immediate sense of surreal chaos that followed the bombshell Loki dropped. “Loki was married,” he says out loud. “Loki was fucking married.” Which sounds insane, but, to be fair, this is a fact presented completely devoid of context. When did it happen? How long did it last? Loki was a prince: had it been an arranged marriage for political gain? Or the Asgardian equivalent to a poorly-thought-out, youthful Vegas misadventure? Or a long-term commitment that had fallen apart after three hundred years...

No, that can’t be possible. Thor would have said something. Wouldn’t he?

Okay, but even if Loki were in a previous, long-term, committed, monogamous relationship, is that something Tony has any right to get all jealously upset over? (No, but being unreasonable, unfair, and wrong has never stopped him before.) Further to that point: does being jealously upset mean that Tony had, on some level, assumed all along that for the past who knows how many years Loki had just been... alone? Not chaste – that much was always clear – but never having any kind of meaningful relationship? How self-centered and supremely shitty would it be for him to not only presume but hope to be the only person Loki ever loved?
“Natasha’s right,” he mutters under his breath. “The Sudafed is making me stupid.”

No, it’s not, but it’s an easy scapegoat for the mess of feelings charging through him right now. He’d have these feelings one way or another, drugs or no drugs. But the Sudafed probably is making it harder for him to deal with them like a rational adult. He’s not focused. All these thoughts spin like racing wheels in his brain, only the wheels are all on an exercise bikes with no chance of making even an inch of progress. The same shit just keeps spinning around and around at 100 RPM.

Lying down on the couch, he closes his eyes. His body hurts. His head hurts. Maybe even his consciousness hurts, because it sure feels crappy being awake right now. His mouth has a bad, sick taste in it, as if germs had a flavor. One might think taking half a blister pack of pills would have done something about all this, but apparently the pharmaceutical industry is still in a medieval stupor when it comes to fixing colds. “Loki...” he groans.

Jarvis answers. “Master Loki is still in the kitchen, pulling all the grapes off the vine and putting them into a bowl.”

“Aw, come on!” says Tony. “That’s not right. Free floating grapes are unwholesome. They need to stay on the stems until you eat them, otherwise...”

“Shall I tell him to stop?”

Tony rubs both hands over his face. “No. As long as he eats all the ones he picks. I don’t care. Whatever. I’m probably dying anyway and shouldn’t bother thinking about grapes. I’m going to have a nap. Just make sure Loki comes to check on me at some point in case I lose my brave battle against consumption or black plague or whatever I have.”

“Of course, sir.”

Making a growling sound that could very well be a death rattle, Tony pulls Loki’s blanket over his entire body. Head included. He forces himself to breathe slowly. And maybe he even falls asleep. It’s impossible to tell with his head so messed up, but maybe he does? Because the next thing he knows, the blanket’s being pulled down, and there’s a hand on his shoulder, and Loki’s voice is floating near his ear.

“Tony... Tony...”

He was asleep. He had to have been asleep, maybe for hours, because waking up feels awful. Waking up means he’s suddenly aware of how cold he is, and how every square inch of skin on his body aches and prickles. ‘What time is it,’ he tries to say, but can only manage to drag a mangled facsimile of the first word up through his dry throat.

Loki’s hand moves up to his cheek. “You’re very hot.”

“No,” he says, trying to curl towards the warmth of Loki’s body, though it takes way too much effort. “I’m freezing... I need...”

“Do you need me to run you a hot bath?”

“I need a doctor,” he whispers. Whispering is so much easier than talking. “Where’s Bruce?”

Jarvis steps in. “I’m afraid Doctor Banner left yesterday after the party and has not yet returned.”

good enough. I don’t need to go to the hospital. Do I? I probably won’t die from this.”

The expression on Loki’s face changes from concern to shock faster than Tony can blink. “What?” he hisses. “What do you mean, die?!”

“No, I said I won’t... I won’t...” He exhales with a groan and has to close his eyes. Christ, he’s so tired. And cold. A shiver skitters up his back and over his ribs as he tries to pull his knees up closer to his chest. But every little movement is too exhausting, failing halfway as he loses strength. He can’t do anything. Not even make a peep of protest as one of Loki’s arms slides around his back and the other hooks under his knees, and he’s lifted up from the couch like a child.

He doesn’t even bother to ask ‘where are you taking me’, because that doesn’t matter. He’s too tired to care. Too tired to think. Too tired to do anything at all except let his head drop down against Loki’s chest, tune out the world, and slip into a comfortable gray haze of unconsciousness.

“Tony!” Loki’s voice says from somewhere, distantly muted, like a sharp sound that’s had all its edges filed away and made fuzzy and frayed.

It’s too far to answer, though, so he lets it go.
Unnecessary Tubes

Chapter Summary

As it turns out, Tony has a lot of worries on his plate. Bad: waking up confused and alone. Worse: SHIELD meddling with his Loki. Worst: how the hell is a relationship between a human and an immortal ever supposed work out in the long run?

Chapter Notes

Ayyy look at me being all semi-productive and shit and finishing a chapter in only two weeks! Hope you like this one, even though it involves A Lot Of Problems! Aw yeah!

In related news, Ragnarok happened and reaffirmed my dedication to the trash heap that is Loki because spending more time thinking about Loki is definitely something I need at this point in my life. But like there's a 100% chance it will drastically increase my writing output so BOY HOWDY AM I EVER GOING TO SPAM Y'ALL IN THE NEAR FUTURE.

When you wake up in a hospital room, there’s supposed to be somebody in the chair by your bedside.

There’s just supposed to be somebody there. It’s like a rule. It shouldn’t even be possible to wake up alone, confused, blinking away the cloudiness of having been asleep for way too long, with only an IV stand and a softly beeping machine for company. There’s supposed to be somebody in that uncomfortable-looking, gray, vinyl-upholstered chair. There should be a Loki.

“What the fuck,” Tony mutters. There’s a window on the wall to his left, but the blinds are drawn, letting in a little sunlight and zero other clues. Everything else in the room is Generic Hospital. Dull white walls, the green tinge of fluorescent lighting, air that’s just a little too cold, and that unnerving, antiseptic smell. “What the fuck,” he repeats, a little louder.

There’s some kind of call button on a long wire strapped to the railing on his bed, and he presses it down with his thumb. Five times, hard, in quick succession. And then holds it down for a good long while because, seriously, what the fuck.

At least three drawn-out minutes later, Bruce Banner appears to casually saunter in through the door. “Oh hey,” he says. “You’re awake.”

What an amazing observation. “Yeah,” Tony replies. “Uh. What, if you don’t mind me asking, the fuck? Also where and why and how the fuck? I’m kind of confused by all this...” He gestures around at the room. “...being in a place that definitely isn’t my house that I’m not supposed to leave.”

“You had a fever of a hundred and five when you were admitted yesterday,” Bruce explains. Calmly. Like a real doctor and everything. He’s even holding an official-looking clipboard, which
he looks down at through the glasses perched on the end of his nose. “You were half awake but
delirious, mumbling nonsense. You probably don’t remember much.”

“The last thing I remember is...” Loki picking him up of the couch? Something like that. “I don’t
even know. Hence my question. What the fuck. Where am I?”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. medical research facility in.”

“What do you mean, a S.H.I.E.L.D. medical research facility?!”

Bruce shakes his head. “I know you don’t actually want me to explain to you what that is, because I
promise it’s exactly what it says on the box. So if you mean ‘why am I at a S.H.I.E.L.D. medical
research facility’, the answer is because Loki brought you here.”

And with that, Tony’s stomach does a funny, unpleasant, twisty thing. “Where is Loki?”

“Uh...” Glancing back over to the door, Bruce could be either genuinely assuming Loki was about
to appear, or he could be stalling for time before having to say something Tony doesn’t want to hear.

“Bruce, where’s Loki?”

“I don’t know?” Bruce answers, which is almost enough to get Tony out of bed, until he continues,
“About an hour ago he and Steve Rogers got into a fight about something ridiculous, so I kicked
them both out. Natasha forcibly escorted them to the cafeteria to get lunch. They might still be
there.”

“Wait,” Tony says, leaning forward in bed. “Back up a sec. You’re telling me Loki willingly
brought me to a S.H.I.E.L.D. facility, and now he’s just wandering around somewhere, not being
arrested and thrown into an interrogation cell or subjected to weird biological experiments?”

Bruce blinks and, to his credit, doesn’t say anything condescending about Tony’s (justifiable)
paranoia. “Well, um, no... We did make him put on some pants because everybody agreed that his
pajamas were not appropriate attire, and Steve’s acting as his chaperone, but mostly he sat around in
here waiting for you to wake up? Sometimes getting in the way and threatening that if somebody
didn’t cure you he’d open an interdimensional portal and send us all to some hell-realm made of the
rotting flesh and tortured remains of vanquished traitors? I don’t know. I had to stop paying
attention to him.”

“Huh. Yeah. Sometimes he’s a little overdramatic with the threats.”

“But yes,” Bruce goes on. “He did willingly bring you here. He phoned me – or maybe Jarvis
phoned me; there was a lot of confusion where I could hear both of them – and demanded that I
come back immediately because you were dying. I told him I was here and would send an
ambulance, but he insisted there wasn’t time. He’d... uh... I can’t remember the word he used, but I
assume it meant teleport? He must’ve been able to magically track my location because a minute
later he suddenly appeared right behind me carrying you and holding one of my shoes in his hand.
Then he said you were more important to him than anything else, and I needed to do everything
possible to save you, which I thought was sweet, even though I am not actually a medical doctor,
and it’s really Doctor Perez who’s in charge of doing everything possible to save you. I’m just here
to keep an eye on things and reassure Loki that the phlebotomist giving you an IV is not ‘barbaric’,
and he doesn’t need to threaten us with the rotting flesh dimension because we’re not able to give
you some magical cure-all bean. I... don’t think he understands how commonplace human illnesses
work.”
“Probably not,” Tony agrees, though he does it with a dumb smile on his face because Loki said he was the most important and aww, that’s adorable. “But I don’t think this is a commonplace human illness. I’m pretty sure it has to be space pneumonia.”

“Actually,” Bruce says, looking down at his clipboard again because it turns out that thing isn’t just a doctor prop, “you have regular old Earth influenza.”

“That doesn’t sound right.”

“Two throat swabs would say otherwise.”

“Are you sure it’s not space flu?”

“It’s the good ol’ H3N2. Same one everybody else around here has been sharing for the past few months. It’s a bad one this year.”

“Lame.” How common. Tony leans back against his pillows. “How long does this crap last?”

“You can expect to feel pretty terrible for the next week or so. The strain is about 95% resistant to the standard antivirals, so about all you can do is drink lots of fluids and get lots of rest. Take some Tylenol.”

Even lamer. “Can I at least do that at home instead of here? These sheets are scratchy and this mattress definitely is not a European pillow top. It’s making my ass hurt just sitting on it, and not in a way that I like my ass to hurt when sitting on something.”

“Ooookay,” says Bruce. “And on that note, I am going to get Doctor Perez to approve your discharge and make Loki take you home as soon as possible. Maybe even immediately, because that sounds like him coming down the hallway right now.”

And it is, in fact, Loki coming down the hallway right now, followed closely by Rogers. Both of them appear in the doorway in quick succession, and both are wearing... standard issue blue S.H.I.E.L.D. uniforms? Its sharp-cut shape looks terrifyingly attractive on Loki’s lean body, and Tony just knows his treacherous brain is already storing this information to pop up again at some inconvenient future time in some embarrassing future way. Why couldn’t they have put him in scrubs and a lab coat? At least sexy doctor is a normal thing to fantasize about. Not sexy fucking S.H.I.E.L.D. agent.

“You’re awake.” Loki sits down on the side of the bed, looking so earnestly worried that Tony’s reaching out to hold hands before he even realizes what he’s doing. The blue uniform really compliments Loki’s eyes nicely. (Son of a bitch...)

“Yeah, I’m... feeling a lot better now that I’m not, you know, actively succumbing to my frail human nature.” He has to look anywhere other than at Loki when he says that. So he looks at Rogers. Who appears to have a dark red bruise forming around his left eye: the kind that promises to evolve into one hell of a shiner. “Did you punch Captain America?”

“I had to,” says Loki. “He said something awful.”

Rogers groans in a way that indicates he’s tried to explain this exact thing numerous times, to no avail. “All I said was, back in my day, influenza killed a lot of people. WHICH,” he yells as Loki turns on him with a threatening snarl, “is not the case these days, because of amazing advances in modern medicine! That was a positive comment!”

“You insinuated Tony might die!” Loki hisses.
“No, I insinuated he probably wouldn’t, because of... Oh, never mind.” Raking his hair back, Rogers knows a lost cause when he sees one. “I’m going back to the cafeteria to get more pudding.”

“You punched Captain America,” Tony says to Loki as he watches Rogers slink back out the door.

Loki sighs. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. But he was being so...”

“No, that wasn’t a reprimand. I’m full-out flattered and impressed.”

“I did not punch Doctor Banner, however,” says Loki, “despite him letting somebody cut a hole in your arm, stick a tube in it, and steal your blood.”

Tony’s eyes flicker momentarily down to the IV taped to his forearm. “Good to know, because the tube is normal, and Doctor Banner would have probably turned into an unfrosty giant and thrown you through a wall.”

The pinched, tight-lipped expression that crosses Bruce’s face right then would seem to mean that he considered that exact scenario, too. But, oblivious to the large, green bullet he recently dodged, Loki keeps on talking. “I need to study more healing magic. It never interested me before, but now... I can certainly see its appeal. Were I more proficient, I could have helped you with no cutting, no blood, and no unnecessary tubes.”

“You really don’t like tubes, do you?” Tony butts in before Bruce has a chance to bite at Loki’s bait-jab.

“I don’t. The one in your arm looks terrible, and will probably leave a scar.”

“How about I remove that,” Bruce offers, stepping forward, “and then the two of you can go home and Loki can complain about everything there instead.”

Sounds like a fine idea as far as Tony’s concerned: get the IV the hell out of his arm, then get himself and Loki the hell out of this dumb S.H.I.E.L.D. medical facility. “I do feel a lot better now,” he says to Loki, primarily as reassurance while Loki watches (with deep and visible disapproval) the IV removal process. “Headache mostly gone, skin no longer hurts, no more fever. Feel a little groggy, but that could be because I’ve been sleeping for a day. What do you say we go home and you can lavish me with attention out of gratitude for my speedy recovery and lack of death?”

“That’s not funny,” Loki mutters.

“I wasn’t joking. I really do want you to lavish me with attention.”

With a wordless sigh, Loki helps him up out of the hospital bed. Not that Tony really needs the help, but he’s getting the distinct impression that Loki’s in some kind of mood and he should just go along with it. He lets Loki’s arm guide him up and onto his feet, and he also lets it stay there, curved protectively around his back like the wing of an overbearing mother hen. It’s still kind of cute.

“You okay walking on your own?” Bruce asks. “Any lightheadedness? Dizziness or weakness?”

“Nope,” Tony replies. “Feeling fine.”

“Well, as I said before, the symptoms usually drag out for a week or so with gradual improvement. You can expect to be tired, achy sore throat, the usual. So lots of rest and keep yourself hydrated. If things start to get worse, though-”

“Eh, I think I’m over the worst,” Tony assures him. “Honestly, I do feel fine. A hundred times
better than yesterday. I’m clearly way too awesome and important to be inconvenienced by the dull little ailments of ordinary mortals.”

The strange expression that crosses Bruce’s face would definitely qualify as the opposite of reassuring, but it’s only there for a second before Bruce nods and starts his way back over to the door. “Alright. Well.” He taps his clipboard. “There are a couple more tests I want to run. I’ll let you know the results. In the meantime, I’ll get somebody to run your discharge paperwork and call you a ride.”

ooo

The ride turns out to be in the back of a S.H.I.E.L.D. van, which is probably the lowest end method of transportation Tony Stark has ever voluntarily endured. Sitting on the uncomfortable, sideways bench seat opposite two armed agents, he can’t help but get the impression this is supposed to be a passive-aggressive, petty move to indirectly punish him for something objectionable either he or Loki did. (Odds are in favor of it being something he did.) He knows S.H.I.E.L.D. has nicer vehicles than this. And yet here they are. In the back of a cube van.

Loki sits next to him, close enough for their knees and hips and elbows and shoulders to gently touch. Silent as Loki remains, he still leans noticeably against Tony. And Tony leans right back. But not anything more. Sitting squished together is about as much PDA as he’s comfortable with in this particular setting. Neither of them says anything. Nobody in the van says anything. No friendly chatter or forced smalltalk or even a ‘turn left here’. Loki spends most of the ride looking down at his hands.

When they get home, he’s no more talkative, following Tony wordlessly into the house. He’s upset about something. That much becomes more obvious with each passing minute. What’s he upset about? Well, that’s another fine Loki mystery.

“I’m gonna make some coffee,” Tony says over his shoulder as Loki trails behind. “You want any?”

“No, thank you,” Loki quietly answers.

So Tony heads to the kitchen and makes himself a cup, awkwardly, in silence, with Loki hovering near his shoulder like a moth.

“Okay, spill it,” he says over the rim of his mug, really not in the mood to drag this out any longer. “You’re mad at me for something. What is it?”

“I’m not... mad at you,” Loki mutters.

“Then what? You’re sure as shit not happy with me. And I’d really appreciate if you just told me what was up instead of standing there all sullen and moody and making me think you’re mad.”

Tony’s expecting some more deflective words. And probably a shrug and a complete lack of eye contact. The usual Loki-treatment. Instead, he gets a preparatory inhalation, a look of hesitation and uncertainty, and... Loki’s hand reaching out to gently touch his cheek. “You nearly died,” Loki whispers.

“No I... didn’t...” Tony replies, struggling even to get those few words out, because shit: this isn’t Loki being angry. This is Loki being – for lack of a better explanation based on that look in his eyes as he stares back at Tony – terrified. And that look terrifies Tony right back.

“You were unconscious, and they put-"
“Don’t you dare mention the tubes again.” Setting his coffee aside, he wraps his arms around Loki’s waist and leans heavily against Loki’s chest and shoulder. “I’m fine,” he says softly. “Really. I’m not dying. I wasn’t in danger of dying. It was just the stupid flu, which I’ve had a million times before, and yeah, this one felt awful at first, but now I’m good. I think it was just one of those 24-hour type viruses. All over now. Back to normal.”

Loki says nothing, but wraps his arms around Tony’s back. Tightly. And gives an extra little squeeze when he kisses Tony’s hair.

“And this is normal,” Tony continues. “Humans get sick sometimes. It happens. It doesn’t mean I’m going to die. It just means every once in a while I’m going to be whiny and needy and miserable for a few days, and you’ll have to bring me hot soup in bed while I watch bad TV.”

“I worry about you, Tony,” Loki whispers.

“You don’t need to worry about this.”

“I always find myself forgetting about your mortality, and then... Something reminds me.”

“Maybe after a while you’ll get used to it?” asks Tony. He pulls back just enough to grab his coffee, keeping one arm around Loki’s waist. The S.H.I.E.L.D. uniform fabric is annoyingly soft under his hand. “But to change the subject for just a sec, can we get rid of this?” He pats Loki’s ribs and pulls at the uniform shirt. “I like you better in Stark Industries clothes. This S.H.I.E.L.D. gear is stirring up some feelings of jealousy and, uh... other stuff.”

Loki unzips his shirt. “Is this the next blue bathrobe with orange fish?”

“Not if I can stop it before it happens.” Which he can try to do by concentrating on Loki’s bare skin as the shirt’s pulled away. Yep, that’s better. The S.H.I.E.L.D. shirt comes off in one fluid motion and falls to the floor. Perfect.

The only imperfect oddity out of place is a little white piece of gauze taped to the inside of Loki’s left arm.

“What happened there?” Tony asks.

“Oh...” Loki looks down and runs the pad of his thumb over the gauze. “While the doctors were taking a sample of your blood, they needed one from me as well. To run tests to find out what was wrong with you.”

Tony’s stomach clenches as a hot prickle suddenly creeps up the back of his neck. “Excuse me?”

“I’m unfamiliar with Midgardian healing techniques, but they said they needed it, so...”

And here Tony had just been thinking that they got away too easily, with too little meddling and way too few forced, lopsided bargains. “So you just let them take your blood?!”

“I had to!” Loki shouts. “They said they couldn’t do anything until-”

“Until they could come up with a good enough reason to get their hands on some rare Asgardian DNA! Jesus Christ, Loki, they were lying to you! They just want your blood to use in their next creepy super-soldier experiment! They want-”

“I don’t care! Your life was in danger, and I did what I had to do!”
“For the last time, I wasn’t dying!” Picking up a plastic bowl from the counter, Tony throws it as hard as he can; it bounces off the wall and hits the floor with an unsatisfying clatter. He should have thrown his coffee cup. At least that would have smashed into bits and made a good mess. “I’m going to kill Bruce,” he hisses through his teeth. “I’m going to...”

“I did what I had to do,” Loki repeats. “And I’m not sorry. I don’t care what S.H.I.E.L.D. does to me, as long as you’re safe.”

But Tony cares (too much) what S.H.I.E.L.D. does to Loki, and all the worse things they’d do if given half a chance. “You can’t let them get away with doing shit like this. They took advantage of you, and... I am going to murder them.”

“I thought you were-”

“Dying. Right. I know.”

“Your human mortality is-”

“Is not something that’s going away anytime soon,” Tony growls. “Kind of the opposite, in fact.”

Crossing his arms, Loki looks down at the floor, and Tony takes the opportunity to stare at his own hands splayed out on the counter. Fucking S.H.I.E.L.D.. Fucking fuck...

“You know,” he hears Loki say, quietly and slowly, “I could... I could change that.”

“Change what?”

Loki sighs. “Your... human mortality.”

“What do you mean?” Tony asks, looking back up.

“I mean that I turned you into a Jotun before. And I could do the same again. Only shift you into an Asgardian form this time.”

You’re joking, Tony almost says, but stops himself. Nothing about the way Loki looks, from his expression to his stance to his fingers anxiously picking at the gauze and tape on his arm, says this is a joke.

“I brought numerous magic books from Asgard,” Loki adds when Tony comes up short on being able to add anything to this bizarre twist in the conversation. “I can research the best way to do this. It will take me a few days, but then-”

“A few days?” Tony interrupts. “Uh, did I miss the part where we had a discussion of the pros and cons of this proposal, and I agreed that I wanted to be an Asgardian? Oh wait, no; this is the first I’ve ever heard of your crazy plan. Is it something you’ve been plotting for a while?”

Loki doesn’t answer, which means yes.

“Were you planning on discussing this with me to see if it’s something I want?”

“It would solve the problem,” Loki says, deflecting the question.

“The ‘problem’ of me being human?” Tony asks.

“I didn’t mean it like that...”
“Maybe not, but that’s how it came out. My human mortality is a problem for you.”

With a frustrated groan, Loki smacks his hand down on the countertop. “Why do you want to die?!”

“What makes you think I want to die?!” Tony shoots back.

“You’re against me helping you, which I can only assume is because you’d rather grow old and die!”

“Or maybe I’m just against you trying to help me by labelling my existence a problem and making decisions without consulting me or telling me anything about what you want to do!”

“You’re ridiculous,” Loki mutters. Picking up the S.H.I.E.L.D. shirt from the floor, he starts off in the direction of the hallway. “I can’t talk to you right now…”

“You never talk to me!” Tony calls after him. “About anything!”

Well. That went smoothly. From yelling about S.H.I.E.L.D. to yelling about immortality in the space of minutes. Tony makes himself another coffee, using more force than is really necessary to push the buttons on the machine, but he’s mad so whatever. Why is Loki like this? Why can’t they ever have a reasonable discussion of their differing opinions without it turning into a Huge Thing?

And did Loki really – really – just suggest changing Tony into an Asgardian? Is that a thing that happened, or is he still having crazy, fevered dreams? Hard to tell. It seems too weird to be real, but in all honesty, when has ‘too weird to be real’ ever stopped Loki before?

Honestly, there’s only one thing to do at a time like this. He takes his coffee into the living room, digs his phone out from the blanket pile on the couch, and calls Rhodey.

“Hey,” he says as soon as Rhodey answers. “You want to come over?”

Rhodey replies with an uhh and a confused pause. “Aren’t you in the hospital? Banner called me. I was going to visit you tomorrow.”

“I was in the hospital. Like an hour ago. That’s old news. I’m home now, and you should come over. I want to play Mario Kart.”

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Rhodey shows up two hours later with a six-pack of crappy beer and a dubious expression on his face. “Where’s Loki?” he asks as Tony shows him in.

“How should I know?” Tony grumbles in reply. “We’re having a fight. He’s sulking somewhere.”

“Fight about what?”

“Oh, you know, normal relationship stuff. Like he’s an immortal alien, and I’m a stupid human, and he wants to magically transform me into immortal alien or something. The usual.”

“Right, that old chestnut,” Rhodey says with a nod. “I broke up with my last girlfriend over the same thing.”

“You can never trust immortal aliens.”

“Alright, but seriously,” says Rhodey. “What’s this about you turning into an immortal alien?”
“Don’t worry, I said no. I think. Or at least I loudly implied no. It’s too weird for me right now.”

“But that’s a thing Loki can do?”

“I guess. Yeah.”

They make their way into the media room, where Rhody drops down onto the couch while Tony pulls out two controllers. “How does that even work, anyway?” Rhody asks. “Dating an immortal? I’ve been trying to wrap my head around the whole concept. One of you ages, the other doesn’t? Seems like an imbalance in the endgame there.”

“Yeah, I’ve been... trying not to think about it,” says Tony.

“Shouldn’t this be something you and Loki, you know, discuss?”

Spoken like a true novice in the fine art of discussing things with Loki. “I don’t know. I always thought the immortality talk would come later? Like first we hook up, then we move in together, then we talk about marriage, and only after that do we tackle the immortality thing. Gotta keep the steps in order. Right now we’re only on step two: moving in together. And that only officially happened on Friday. So I figure we have a couple years to go before I’m crazy enough to think about getting married, if things make it that far, and maybe by then I’ll be ready to consider... being transfigured into an immortal space god.”

“But if this keeps going and you and Loki do end up walking down the aisle...”

Tony throws a controller at him. “Shut up. I don’t want to talk about this. I want to play Mario Kart.”

“I think you do want to talk about it,” says Rhody, catching the controller easily. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have asked me to come over. You can play Mario Kart by yourself.”

Tony drops his head back and sinks down into the couch with a drawn-out groan. “Literally when have I ever wanted to talk about getting married?”

“I don’t know,” Rhody says with a dumbass smirk. “You’re the one who brought it up. Which means you’ve thought about it.”

“Fuck you.”

“Do you have a Pinterest board with wedding ideas? Cakes? Flowers? Color palettes? I can see you in a lavender tux.”

“This is why nobody likes you.”

“I’m trying not to make fun of you but you make it too easy.”

“Okay, if could you stop being a jackass for five minutes...”

“Sorry.” Rearranging himself on the couch, Rhody tries to look more serious. Tony can tell he’s still struggling to hold back a stupid grin, but whatever. Pretending to be supportive is good enough for now.

“Right, so here’s the deal,” Tony begins. “Obviously, yes, I have thought about where this relationship with Loki is going long-term, because he’s somebody I’ve been with for more than five days, and my brain does this annoying thing where it ruins every new relationship by immediately
forcing a decision on whether I’m going to break up with them or potentially be stuck with them forever. Every single person. Immediately. Categorized as dump immediately or risk keeping for eternity. There is no middle ground. Brain ruins everything.”

“So you’ve categorized Loki as ‘keep’,” says Rhodey.

“Well, see, that’s where it gets complicated. I never explicitly did that. The anomaly here is I kind of got used to Loki being around before we ever became a thing. I never intended to have that kind of relationship with him. It just... happened. And then it felt completely normal and it continued on, and it wasn’t until I got all the way to fucking Asgard chasing after him that I started to think about what it meant. I never had the chance for my dumb brain to make its dumb decision. At least not consciously. By the time I realized this, I think subconsciously, the decision had been made, because all I thought at that point was... yeah, okay, this could work. I can imagine myself being with him. I can imagine us going on vacations together and celebrating Christmas together and sitting around bored on the couch on a rainy day whining that there’s nothing good on TV together. I can imagine him there in any situation. He... fits into my life.”

“And you never thought about the fact that he’s an immortal alien and you’re human?”

“Funny enough? No. It crossed my mind a few times, but I’ve never really – really – thought in depth about what it meant. Loki’s told me he forgets I’m human, and I guess it’s the same on my end? I forget he’s not. It’s such a weird concept I think my information processing center just blocks it out.”

“You need to think this through, Tony,” Rhodey says, shaking his head. “Yeah, it’s messed up and crazy. Really crazy. I’m having a tough time with the whole idea, and I’m not even the one living with it. But... I don’t think this is something you can put off for a few years. You need to deal with it a lot sooner than later.”

“You’re probably right,” Tony mutters. “And I also need to deal with the fact that he used to be married, which is just as weird.”

“That’s... significantly less weird than being an immortal alien.”

Maybe for some people. But ex-wives aside, Rhodey is right. This is something Tony will have to deal with, definitely sooner than later. Much as Loki may look and (usually) act like a believable, thirty-three-year-old, normal human, the truth is... he’s not. He’s not any of those things. In reality, he’s something so insanely foreign that Tony can’t even comprehend more than the basic, summarized idea of it. Immortal. Space. God. What do those words even mean, when applied to somebody you think of more in terms of the taste of his skin, or the scent of his hair, or the feel of his lips against your own?

It just doesn’t make any sense. So how the hell is Tony ever supposed make a rational decision about the direction of this relationship if he can’t even figure out what he’s gotten himself into?
A Tantalizingly Unfulfilled Promise

Chapter Summary

After what happened at the hospital, Tony and Loki really need to have a relationship talk. Oorrerr maybe they just need to let off some steam. (And then talk.)

Chapter Notes

I did not intend for this to take over three weeks, but in my defense [insert every dumbass excuse I've ever used in the past here]. Also I have a sinus cold and my head feels like it's full of custard. Weh.

“Jarvis, what’s Loki doing now?”

“Master Loki is still sitting in his bedroom, reading the same book.”

“Really? Still? He hasn’t moved?”

“Not in any significant way.”

“But you’ll tell me if he does anything, right?”

“As per your previous four requests, yes. I will notify you in the event anything changes.”

Jarvis could probably stand to tone down some of that attitude, but whatever. Tony has too many other things on his mind to bother caring about a sass-mouth AI. “Okay,” he says. “Let’s double-reinforce those pressure seals to make sure they’re good and solid. And I think we need to overhaul the manual controls. Automated everything is great, until the system crashes and I’m left trying to fly what amounts to an inflexible, life-size action figure. I want mechanical hand controls that can be utilized in case of system shutdown. Doesn’t have to be fancy, but definitely basic flight utility. Oh, and let’s throw in hydraulic assist shutdown when manual mode’s engaged. That stuff gets in the way.”

“Logging upgrades now.”

“Awesome.” Tony sits back in his chair and watches as Jarvis marks out the improvement notes in blue against the armor schematics showing in gold on the screen. “And what’s Loki doing now?”

“There has been no movement in the last twenty seconds.”

Damnit. “Okay. Well, save this file. I’ll come back to it later. For now, create a new subfile model of just the lower arms and hands. Let’s see what kind of wiggle room we have in there for the manual controls. And oh, while I remember, have you been able to pull up anything useful on that Aldrich Killian guy?”

“Nothing that I believe would help you,” Jarvis answers. “I’ve run exhaustive searches and
catalogued every known mention of him or the A.I.M. group, as well as all references to both confirmed and potential Mandarin attacks. I’ve found nothing since S.H.I.E.L.D. became involved in December. And nothing in my analysis of the material gives any insight into where he might be hiding now. I’m afraid the trail went cold months ago.”

“Hm. Well, I guess it was worth a shot. Thanks, J. But keep looking, yeah?”

“I’ll keep search flags engaged for any new content.”

Tony leans back in his chair, and looks up at the clock. It’s almost one pm, and he’s been hiding down in the lab since after breakfast. And he’s starting to get hungry. The prospect of having to go back upstairs for food looms unpleasantly on the very near horizon.

Not that Loki would necessarily notice if he went upstairs, but he has this nagging feeling in the back of his mind that if he went up, he’d feel compelled to go attempt a conversation. You know. Casually wander over and reopen the whole death/immortality debate while holding a sandwich in one hand and a whole lot of personal baggage in the other.

“Hey, Jarvis?” he asks. “Do you think I should go talk to Loki?”

“I’m afraid I’m not adequately programmed to give you interpersonal relationship advice.”

“Yeah, I know, but... Okay, based on what you’ve witnessed in recent history, because I know you hear and see everything, is going up to talk to Loki a good idea?”

“It seems to me,” Jarvis replies, “that thorough communication is the key to understanding and reconciliation.”

Damnit even more. “Ugh, you’re worse than Rhodey...”

“You did ask.”

“Yeah, I did,” Tony grumbles as he stands. But that doesn’t mean he has to like it. “I’m assuming Loki hasn’t moved?”

“No.”

“Alright then.”

Really, he’s going to have to talk to Loki at some point. That’s just logic. They do share a house, after all. And he’s going to have to do it soon, because he has this not unjustified feeling that the longer he avoids the situation, the worse it’s going to get. He hasn’t said a damn word to Loki since their argument after returning from the hospital. (Well. Maybe he said something like ‘mmm’ or a sleepy equivalent in the middle of the night when he rolled over to find Loki in bed beside him, but that might not strictly qualify as a word. Also Loki wasn’t there when he woke up in the morning, so it’s possible he dreamed the whole thing.)

He takes the stairs up slowly and goes first to the kitchen to make himself a sandwich out of pale, sliced deli loaf that could be either turkey or ham or an unholy combination of both. In any case, it tastes okay with fancy mustard left over from the birthday party. And then, carrying the sandwich plate out in front as if it might act like some kind of protective shield, he heads on over to Loki’s room.

It’s not surprising at all that Loki is sitting on the bed with a book in his hands and a completely blank expression on his face. “Yes?” he asks without looking up.
“Hey,” says Tony. “Uh.” Might as well start with something lame and work his way up to the good stuff. “You hungry? I can make you a sandwich.”

“No, thank you.”

“Okay.” Long pause. “What are you reading?”

“A very old book of... well, magic,” he says with a quiet sigh. “But a general theory book. To improve one’s focus and expand the basis of ability.”

“Cool. Sounds like a real page-turner. Um. Hey, do you mind if I... do you mind if I sit down?”

Loki shakes his head ‘no’. So Tony goes to sit on the side of the bed not occupied by Loki. He sneaks a peek into the book as he does: it’s all text, no pictures, on suitably impressive-looking ancient, yellowed parchment. The words vibrate wildly on the page. It gives him a headache even just to look at it.

“And you can read that?” he asks.

“Yes. But if you can’t, it means the book is so old the allscript enchantment is wearing away.”

“I’m assuming that’s the same kind of magic that let me read the contract Odin gave me?”

“Nearly everything in Asgard is written with the spellwork woven through the script so that anyone can read it. But that can diminish over the years.”

“What does it look like without the enchantment?”

A faint smile tugs at the corner of Loki’s mouth, which is a welcome sight to Tony’s eyes because the longer they can keep up this meaningless yet pleasant exchange, the easier it will be to segue into something actually important. In theory, anyway. So he watches all attentively as Loki traces a finger across the bottom line of text on the page. Wherever Loki touches, golden light is swept aside like dust, leaving only angular, archaic-looking runes drawn in faded ink.

“Huh,” says Tony. As soon as Loki lifts his finger, the gold swirls back in and the painfully vibrating text returns. “Well that’s pretty cool. Does it work in reverse too? Like you can just finger-swipe any text and...?”

“Did you never wonder how I could read all your human words?” Loki asks with a smirk.

“Well, I did at first, way back in the day,” Tony replies. “But then I just assumed it was magic. Similar to how I assumed Asgardians and Frost Giants don’t actually speak English and there was some kind of built-in Babelfish thing going on.”

“That would be the allspeak. Humans are some of the only people I’ve ever met who haven’t developed the ability.”

“I’m going to pretend that’s a mark of unique distinction instead of an implication that we’re somehow dumber than Frost Giants.”

“It’s not necessarily a question of intelligence,” Loki explains, “but one of necessity. Those realms and races that frequently interact with others needed to find an effective way to communicate. It’s now become a given across much of the known universe.”

“And yet here we are on Earth,” Tony mutters, “with our thousands of distinct languages, having to
learn Japanese the old fashioned way. From an app.”

Loki turns to look at him with a rare expression of true surprise. “How many languages?”

“I don’t know,” Tony says with a shrug. “Maybe a couple dozen main ones, but definitely thousands overall.”

“And not a single group on your realm has ever thought that perhaps it might make things easier to simply attune your mental energy to translate foreign words into something you could understand?!”

“Uh.” Blinking in silence, Tony does his best to refrain from snidely pointing out how that’s not really a thing humans can do. “I mean, we did invent Google Translate.”

“Does that do the same thing?”

“Ehhhhhh... kind of. Anyway.” Changing the subject. “Speaking of communication, it’s recently come to my attention that we suck at it, so I’ve been thinking that maybe we should talk about... you know...”

That’s as far as he gets before Loki backs away. Not physically: as far as location is concerned, Loki stays precisely where he is on the bed. It’s only his openness that falters. Same as always. One second he’s speaking freely about magic, and the next he’s in legitimate danger of being crowned grand emperor of poker face.

“Okay, hear me out,” says Tony, pushing forward anyway. “We had a pretty snappy disagreement yesterday, and I don’t think either one of us is stupid enough to think that the subject will just go away or resolve itself. It won’t. This is something we’re going to have to deal with, and...” He inhales and exhales a big breath, looking down at his knees. “I apologize for acting like a dick. I was angry about stuff that wasn’t your fault and I turned on you. But on the other hand, you sprung that immortality thing on me out of nowhere. And that’s not something that can just pop up. It needs a lot of discussion. A lot of really serious discussion.”

He looks up just in time to see Loki glancing down. “I know,” Loki whispers.

“Okay good. So you get how bizarre the whole idea is for me.”

“Likely as strange as your situation is to me.”

Hm. Tony hadn’t thought about that half of things. But it’s true. How strange must this be for Loki? His vastly extended timeline compared to Tony’s would be equivalent to Tony dating somebody with the life expectancy of a hamster. In other words, incredibly fucked up.

“So... yeah,” Tony goes on. “We need to talk about that. But before we do, it sounds like we both need to take some time to think stuff through. I definitely need to... acclimatize myself to the idea of immortality being a real thing. Right now it’s still too weird. I can’t even begin to consider it as a serious option when the whole concept still seems so fake to me. It’s going to take a while.”

Sighing, he shifts closer to Loki so their shoulders touch. “So what I guess I’m trying to say is, I’m not saying no to your offer. I’m saying I need to come to terms with the fact that you offered it. And then I need to have a good, long talk with you about what it means and exactly what’s involved. And then I need to think about it more before making a decision. Does that sound like a deal?”

Instead of answering, Loki asks, “How long?”

“How long before I’m ready to talk about this?”
“Yes.”

“Jeez, I don’t know.” He slips his arm up to link through Loki’s, as if that might do anything to make what he has to say easier for Loki to take in. “A few months, maybe?”

Clearly not the answer Loki was hoping for, but at least it appears to be acceptable. “A few months,” he echoes back. “Very well.”

“You’re not mad at me again, are you?”

“No,” Loki replies. His tone says, ‘Maybe’.

“Phenomenal,” says Tony, opting to go with the verbal answer only. “So now that we’ve come to an understanding and absolutely nobody is mad at anybody for any reason...” He pauses to smile stupidly at Loki, who just gives him the scarcest of eye-narrowings in response. “There’s probably a hundred other things we can talk about while we have this momentum going.”

“I don’t know,” Loki says, voice soft and low. Leaning over, he sets his magic book on the bedside table. “I think I’ll go walk outside for a while.”

“Okay. By yourself, or...?”

“Alone. I also have some things to think over.”

Isn’t it interesting how Tony’s stomach drops at the exact same time Loki stands up from the bed? Yep. Interesting. That’s how he’ll think about it. Just an incredibly interesting tradeoff: one down, one up. Nothing else noteworthy going on. “Sure. Sure. Uh. Anything important?”

Loki pauses in the doorway. Drums his fingers against the wall. “Is this... Is this how you thought everything would be? With me here.”

“Um,” Tony murmurs. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry about... “I guess? Yeah?” This is what he expected. Loki’s here, in his house... How else would it be? “Maybe I thought there’d be a lot more boning going on? But otherwise... yes.”

Loki, without turning around or looking at him, nods.

“And you?” Tony asks. “Is it what you expected?”

The silence that follows doesn’t help anything a goddamn bit. “I don’t know,” Loki eventually says. “I didn’t think much about it before leaving Asgard, so I can’t fairly say what my expectations were.”

“But you’re disappointed,” Tony cuts in. Before Loki can. Because it’s probably easier to deal with that way. Because if Loki says it, he has to be the one to argue, but if he says it...

Loki’s the one to refute the statement with a quiet sigh. “Not disappointed. Only... I suppose I thought it would be more like... before. When we were together, avoiding S.H.I.E.L.D. or plotting ridiculous escape plans on Asgard, or even living in blissful ignorance on Jotunheim. It seemed as if we were on more even ground then. Now it feels like... like I’ve been placed very suddenly into your life. Your life. Your situation in your home in your familiar surroundings with your friends and acquaintances and everything you know. You have everything in the world, and I have only you. Only part of you. I’m now competing for your attention against everything else that came before me, whereas your competition for my time is what?” He gestures around to the room. “A handful of books? Some clothing? The last remnants of my old life, all conveniently condensed into one small
area. This is it. This is what I have. Other than you.”

“Loki, that’s not fair,” Tony says, trying (and failing) to deflect all those accusatory words that come flying in too fast and too sharp. They easily hit their mark.

“You’re right; it’s not,” Loki tells him. “It’s not fair. It’s not fair that when you’re angry and upset with me you have any number of people to call on to vent your frustration, and I have... let me see... Oh. Myself. And it’s not fair at all I’ve given up quite literally everything for you. My family. My home. My world and my culture and my comfort and almost everything I’ve ever owned. And I don’t regret it, because if that’s what it costs to be happy, it’s a price I’ll willingly pay. I don’t regret my choice. But it’s not fair that this is my sacrifice, and in return you won’t even listen to the one thing I might ask of you. Not that you won’t do it, but that you won’t even consider listening to what I would offer you. *That* is what is unfair, Tony.”

“Okay,” Tony mutters. And really, he should say something else, too. He should say he’s sorry, but at the same time, that just feels so ridiculously inappropriate it might make everything worse. He is sorry. The nauseating heat starting to build in his stomach makes that painfully obvious. But... sorry in a way that the word ‘sorry’ doesn’t even cover. There should be a word for this. Somewhere amid all the thousands of extraneous words in the English language, there should be a word for this. “Look, um. Why don’t you come sit back down and we can talk about-”

Loki takes one backwards step out in to the hall. “I think I’d rather be alone right now. You have your things to work through. I have mine. Perhaps you should use this time to familiarize yourself with the idea of not dying. I’ll be outside convincing myself that I’ve been an unreasonable idiot for even saying this to you and running the risk of losing the one thing I have left to care about.”

He’s gone before Tony can think of a single useful thing to say in reply. Which is bad enough on its own, dragging in all the guilt and shame and remorse (or whatever the hypothetical words might be for the fortified versions of those, multiplied by every terrible feeling building up like a lead weight around Tony’s heart). What’s worse, though, is the phantom weight on Tony’s chest, where the arc reactor used to be, of a Jotun finger bone tied on a cord. Which somehow, today, found its way around Loki’s neck, and made a fine and sharp silhouette against the backlit hallway as he turned to leave.

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“Sir, if I may interrupt, Master Loki has returned from his walk and requests your presence upstairs.”

Tony sits upright so fast he almost tips his chair over backwards. “Yeah? Where is he?”

“In your bedroom.”

“Great.” Probably. “And in your expert opinion, does he look like he’s more likely to yell at me, or to suggest we spend the rest of the afternoon getting drunk and fooling around in the pool?”

“In my expert opinion,” Jarvis replies as Tony runs up the stairs, “he appears to be wearing Asgardian attire while standing perfectly still and staring out the window, which places this situation entirely outside of my realm of experience.”

In other words, it could go either way. Tony pauses just outside the bedroom door to smooth his shirt, rake his hair back, and calm the fuck down for a second. He can do this. Whatever ‘this’ ends up being. A reasonable continuation of their previous discussion? Maybe. Tony falling to his knees and promising to do everything better? Sounds likely. Including things he doesn’t know about? Yes. Even though he’ll inevitably forget and fuck up again? One hundred percent.
“Hey,” he says, forcing an artificially slow and nonchalant entrance. As promised, Loki’s over by the window. Staring outside. Wearing at least six different layers of Asgardian complication all bundled together with extra buckles and belts. “You wanted to see me?”

Loki turns around. “I did, yes. Thank you.” Nothing in his voice gives any hint as to his mood.

“You thought through your stuff outside?”

“Mm.” Nodding, Loki steps forward. “I took the time to think my way through numerous things that were bothering me, but in the end, came to the conclusion that... you were right.”

The apology Tony had balanced on the end of his tongue must’ve turned to solid stone for how fast it makes his mouth drop open. “Wait, what?” he says, stumbling over the words

“By which I mean,” Loki says with a sly smile, “you were right about one thing. There is a dismal lack of boning going on in this household.”

It probably says something negative about their relationship that the first thing that springs to Tony’s mind as Loki crosses over to sit on the bed is, “...Is this a trap?”

“Is what a trap?”

“Um, well, you see, I came in here thinking we were going to talk more about all that awkward stuff? Except instead of talking and you being upset, you’re... lying on the bed like you’re about to ask me to draw you like one of my French girls. And I just want to make sure that if I go over there you’re not going to boot me through that interdimensional hell portal you kept threatening Bruce with.”

Loki leans back against the headboard in a pose that he has to know looks like the Earthly manifestation of perfection itself. Eyes half closed, lips barely parted, hair falling down in soft waves to graze all those pleats of filmy fabric at his shoulders... He lifts one hand to tuck a stray curl back behind his ear. The window’s golden sunset light illuminates every angle of his form like a halo, glittering off his clothes and turning his skin to warm velvet. It might be magic. Tony’s pretty sure light doesn’t do that naturally. It only every does this for Loki. It only ever looks this perfect and this beautiful on Loki.

“What good would tossing you through a portal do?” Loki asks. “You see, I’ve realized what the problem is. I’ve been feeling rather neglected lately. And I may no longer live among my people, but I am still a prince of Asgard. And of Jotunheim. And a true god to the people of your realm. And I think I deserve better treatment don’t you?” He doesn’t bother to wait for Tony to answer. “Yes, of course I do. Therefore I have decided to give you a chance to prove how very sorry you are for disappointing me. Not through any apologies or excuses, but through action. Serve me well, and I will forgive my loyal devotee. Will you do this?”

“Yep?” Tony whispers, still not entirely convinced this isn’t a trap.

“Good. Now come over here.”

Tony goes. And he kneels at the bedside, because that seems like the kind of thing he should do in a situation like this. It earns him a smile from Loki, who reaches out to caress his cheek. “So, uh...” he says, turning his head enough to kiss Loki’s palm, “just to be clear, you really don’t want to talk, and you really do want me to draw you like one of my French girls?”

Loki trails one finger across Tony’s lips. “Oh, I do want to talk. But not now. I think later, once we’re both in better moods? Or at least once I’m in a better mood, after I spend several hours
basking in the adoration of your physical affections, and you give me that very long massage that still only exists as a tantalizingly unfulfilled promise.”

That actually makes a lot of sense. And Tony’s sure not going to complain about putting off relationship-talking until he can do it with a much more agreeable, cuddly Loki. “Okay,” he says. “So shall I tear all your clothes off and get down to business?”

“No,” Loki sighs, and flicks him on the forehead like a bad pet. “Why must you be so vulgar? I want you to carefully, *slowly* help me to undress. Then you can shed your own clothing, and we will have a bath, because you smell like oil and I want you to smell like something better. Myrrh, perhaps.”

Tony nods. “I don’t know if I have any myrrh-scented bath products, but I’m sure we can find something you like.”

“Then,” Loki continues, “you may bodily worship me in whatever way you best see fit. As long as it includes a very long massage.”

“I can do that.”

“Good.” He holds out his hand again to barely graze the side of Tony’s face. “You may begin now.”

There are two small clasps fastening the cuff of Loki’s shirt. Just as Loki said, carefully and slowly, Tony undoes them one at a time to reveal the pale skin of Loki’s wrist. Holding Loki’s hand, he places a kiss there. Then moves to the other wrist, with another kiss. At the elbows, heavier fabric edged in decorative metal crisscrosses up his arms to his shoulders. More buckles and clasps hold everything in place. The back of his robe hangs down like a cape, hiding a web of interwoven cords that tighten the wide belt around his waist. It takes a minute for Tony to untie those, kneeling at Loki’s back as he does. Every garment and accessory he removes, he sets aside on a chair against the wall. Until all that remains is Loki’s thin shirt and a pair of soft, satiny pants that lace up each side from hip to waist through a series of coiling, golden loops.

The shirt has to go first. It does up the front in a diagonal line with some kind of space-age snaps that come apart easily as soon as Tony touches them. He slides the fabric down over Loki’s shoulders, trailing his thumbs along with it across the newly bared skin. That calls for more kisses, light but lingering, across Loki’s collar bone. And one a little firmer, with a tiny scratch of teeth, on the side of Loki’s neck as he tugs at the ties on the pants.

The ties loosen and the pants slip down easily from Loki’s hips with Tony’s hands to guide the way. They pool on the floor, letting Loki step free. “Shall I run us a bath?” Tony murmurs below his ear.

“Yes, do,” Loki answers.

With one quick squeeze of Loki’s perfect ass, Tony heads over to the bathroom. He tugs off his shirt as he goes, kicks off his shoes and socks, and steps out of his pants and shorts. The oversize tub will take a while to fill. So as the water runs, he digs through the cupboard to see what body wash, shower gel, or bath foam might be available. The choices appear to be dark gray generic manly scent he vaguely remembers disliking and chucking in there to be forgotten forever, or ‘Christmas Mimosa’. That’ll have to do. It may not be myrrh, but it’s objectively better than WD-40. He returns to the tub and dumps in way too much.

“That smells nice,” Loki’s voice says from the doorway.
“Better than oil?”

“Much better, yes.”

The sight of Loki’s naked body is something Tony knows he’ll never get tired of. The way he walks, so fluid and graceful, like a dancer. Or a predatory cat. The way all the lithe muscles of his legs and arms and back and hips move together in flawless synchronicity. The way he slides into the tub and under the water, leaning back so his hair spills over the edge. Everything he does is a tiny work of art, building layer upon layer into a grand masterpiece of existence.

He’s a being of celestial perfection, and here he is... in Tony’s bathroom. Of all the places in the universe he could be, he’s chosen to be here. That says something, doesn’t it?

Carefully, Tony sinks down at the end of the tub so he can rest his chin on the cool enamel and wrap his arms around Loki’s shoulders. “Sometimes I look at you and wonder...” he says in a soft voice. “You are a god. A prince of fantastic alien realms. And you’re so beautiful and mesmerizing and insanely intelligent, and every time I look at you I want to keep on staring for way longer than I should. Because... not only are you all those things, but you’re also here with me. And I wonder what I did right in my life to deserve somebody like you.”

He can just see the beginnings of a smile as Loki reaches up to clasp his hands and hold them tight. “You are a good person, Tony.”

“A bunch of S.H.I.E.L.D. dupes and former business associates might say otherwise, but with you I try to be. I want to be. I know I fuck up a lot. And... I’m sorry, Loki. If this isn’t what you thought it would be. If you’re sad or lonely or feeling like... I don’t know, like this isn’t living up to your expectations. That’s on me. I’ve been way too distracted by everything and trying to fit back into my old life and thinking about what I need to do, and I haven’t given anywhere near enough though to what you need and what you might want. You did give up a whole hell of a lot to be with me. I need to remind myself that you being here has to feel just as crazy and alienating as Asgard felt for me. And I need to do better. I should’ve done better in the first place.”

With every bit of his sensuous grace, Loki rolls over onto his front, resting one arm on the edge of the tub while the other slips around the back of Tony’s neck. “You’re doing fine now,” he murmurs before pressing his lips to Tony’s in a gentle kiss.

And Tony’s good with that. Whether or not he’s doing fine in general is another question altogether, but not one he’s about to argue right in this moment. Now’s a much better time for tightening his embrace, pulling Loki in closer, and just focusing on kissing instead. Because, fuck, they sure haven’t been doing enough of this lately. Not nearly enough. Not by a long shot.

Loki’s subtle little tug is enough of a hint to get Tony to climb into the bathtub. (Awkwardly, and with one small misstep, because there’s no way he’s breaking their kiss for something as dumb as being able to see where he’s going.) He slides right in next to Loki, legs slipping easily together to settle a little bit too close, because this stupid bathtub was incorrectly designed to fit two people facing each other, not side by side. A serious flaw. But he can make do, because being squished up against Loki’s gloriously naked self isn’t exactly an undesirable situation. He reaches for a wash cloth.

“Shall I rub you all over with Christmas Mimosa bubbles, your worshipfulness?”

“Mm, yes,” Loki hums in his ear.

He runs the soapy cloth all around the shape of Loki’s body, as far as he can reach: from knee to
shoulder, across the chest, down the other side... sweeping across Loki’s hip to his thigh in a
carefully calculated tease. Loki shifts a little closer, and Tony pulls back by the same amount. He
moves up to Loki’s waist and around to rub the small of his back in slow, circular motions. Then on
to his arms. Back to the shoulders. Neck. Taking his sweet time. Spending a minute here, two
there... On the upper chest. Ribs. Stomach. Slipping a little lower... Loki’s breath hitches with a
quiet gasp as Tony’s hand flutters between his legs.

“...Tony...”

“Hm?” Tony asks, nudging his lips against Loki’s again for another long-overdue kiss. He drops the
cloth, letting his hand wrap around Loki’s already hard shaft with a light touch and long, slow
strokes. Again, Loki moves closer, and again, Tony shifts back and minimizes his efforts. “Nuh-
uh,” he says, grinning against the kiss Loki’s not yet ready to end. “You have to wait. I’m not done
washing you.”

“You should focus on washing yourself,” Loki growls, which is followed by an actual bite on
Tony’s lower lip. “You’re the one who smelled of oil.”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure there’s a rule somewhere in ye olde feudal law book that says godly space
princes must be washed first, according to the sacred rituals of erotic bathing. So let me do my job.”

He picks up the cloth again to do another full tour of Loki’s shape. Arms. Shoulders. Back, neck,
chest, legs, moving slower and slower the more Loki tries to urge him on with calculated little shrugs
and shifts. Eventually, he finds his way to caressing up and down Loki’s inner thighs, smoothly and
softly. He lets his fingertips trail after. Then up and back, reaching between Loki’s legs to his ass.
A delicate touch. A quick squeeze. One finger slips its way into the cleft to probe and massage at
Loki’s entrance. Light at first but then more insistently, stopping just shy of pushing inside.

Loki tilts his hips forward as he wraps an arm around Tony’s waist, pulling the two of them flush
together. Skin slick in the bathwater, his knee slides easily between Tony’s. His kiss turns to a bite
once more. Hissing a sigh through his teeth.

Two of Tony’s fingers circle Loki’s hole as Loki presses harder up against him. “I, um... think we’re
done bathing?” he whispers. “Unless you still think I smell.”

“No.” Loki’s answer comes in a hot breath against Tony’s cheek. “Let’s go to the bed.”

It’s hard to manage anything more than the most rushed of towel-dryings when you can’t keep your
hands to yourself. Tony fumbles his way back over to the bed with Loki at his side. One hand on
the towel (which falls to the floor well before Tony’s shin bumps against the bedframe) and the other
keeping a desperate, clinging hold around Loki’s back.

Loki sinks down onto the mattress first, landing on his back and pulling Tony down on top of him.
It’s not even a second later that his eagerly parted legs wrap around Tony’s hips. “Impatient, huh?”
Tony teases between kisses.

Loki’s very simple answer is, “Yes.”

Fair enough. The lube is in the drawer, and it’s a good thing, too, because Tony’s five thousand
percent sure he’d suddenly develop the Hulk-like strength and ninja-like skills to murder somebody
(probably Natasha) with his bare hands if it were missing again. He coats his palm and fingers
before reaching down to Loki’s ass. In return, Loki pushes into the touch. The first of Tony’s
fingers slips easily inside.
After that... it’s honestly a blur. Too fast and frantic to think about it. The primitive, much baser and less evolved corner of his brain takes the wheel, while rational thought is relegated to the bench seat in the back. He’s stroking Loki inside and out, and then his hand is slicking his own cock, and then he’s easing his way in with an insistent, rocking rhythm. Loki’s teeth nip at his earlobe, holding back a word or maybe just a sound that’s low and dark and savage. His heart hammers with every thrust. His mouth is on Loki’s neck to feel the matching, pounding pulse beneath his tongue. Loki’s legs squeeze and tighten their hold, pulling him in, urging him faster and harder and deeper...

He manages to hold back until Loki comes with a sudden and rough cry, back arching up off the bed. And he wraps his arms around Loki’s body, as fully and as tightly as he can, holding Loki as close as he can, with all his needs and wants and desires channelled into this one pinpoint of a moment. With one last thrust he reaches the peak. Gasps and moans into a disarray of black hair as Loki’s fingers dig into his back, just below his shoulder blades.

He keeps his hold on Loki with all the strength he has left until the last of the uncoiling waves ripples its way through his body. Slowly, he loosens the grip of one arm. It’s already stiff in the elbow for holding on so hard for so long. He pulls the other out from under Loki’s back and shifts just enough to lie side by side on the mattress. His lips somehow stay in close proximity to Loki’s jaw. Convenient for soft little kisses as one hand traces lines up and down the smooth, heated skin of Loki’s chest.

“I, um,” he whispers after a minute in lazy silence. “I did fully intend to make that last a lot longer, but you know what? I’m not sorry.”

“Nor am I,” Loki whispers back, turning to meet his kisses.

“Yeah. But like... we can always have another go at it. I don’t have any plans for the rest of the day. Do you?”

“My plans are for you to give me a very long massage.”

Tony groans. “You’re never going to let that go, are you?”

“No. Not until it’s done. I will pester you relentlessly.”

All in all, that’s a pretty convincing argument. “Okay,” Tony says, sitting up and giving Loki a light whack on the thigh. “Roll over. Let’s do this thing.”
Honesty or Secrecy?

Chapter Summary

Tony gets an alibi and some test results. Loki gets a lesson in Earth laundry and a job. Bruce gets a traffic violation and an exclusive contract. Pepper and Natasha get an eyeful of unwanted exposure. The bed gets a much-needed change of sheets.

Chapter Notes

Okay so remember back in November when I threatened to spam everyone with new writing in my Ragnarok-fueled enthusiasm? I still desperately want to do that but it turns out that even with Rangarok on my side I am slow as hell and really good at writing stories in my head but not nearly as good at writing them on the computer. So uh. Thank you for putting up with my erratic posting schedule. Maybe one day I will improve.

Four hours later and Tony’s hands ache from rubbing every single damn inch of Loki’s skin, from scalp to toes dozens of times over, but he’s not about to give up any time soon. His thumbs dig into the small of Loki’s back before moving on down to the butt. (Which may have received an unfair percentage of all the attention so far, but who’s keeping score?) Loki, lying with his eyes closed and his arms folded under his pillow, makes a contented ‘mmm’ sound.

Tony leans down to press his lips to the back of one pale thigh in a soft kiss. His finger slips easily into the cleft of Loki’s ass, still slick and welcoming from their accumulation of activities. In response, Loki mmm’s again, and parts his legs a little wider.

“So?” Tony asks, tongue darting out for a quick lick and taste of skin. “Up for another?”

“Always,” Loki lazily murmurs.

It’s nice to go slow. To take time. To hold back and indulge in the sensation of everything, savoring each speck of each moment and drawing it out as long as it can be held. Feeling the beautiful warmth and solid strength of another body, and easily falling together into rhythm that would seem quiet or subdued if not for the intensity at its core. It’s nice for Tony to wrap his arms around Loki’s chest, and to kiss the back of Loki’s neck as curls of hair tickle his face. It’s nice to concentrate on simply being with Loki. Being close to him.

Tony reaches down to grasp Loki’s shaft and stroke along with the leisurely rocking of his hips. Not too fast. Nowhere near urgent. He lets the tension build up one small layer at a time, on a foundation of quickening breaths and straining movements all working their way toward one enticing end. Loki hisses and gasps as he reaches his peak, hand scrambling to grasp Tony’s and lace their fingers together. A few more thrusts to bury himself as deep as he can, and Tony comes a moment later.

It’s nice – really nice – to lie there unmoving in utter contentment for what feels like an age of the Earth, until all the heat dissipates and the bedroom air sits cold against Tony’s naked skin. He
snuggles a little closer against Loki’s back.

Carefully, Loki rolls over until they’re face to face and his lips and tongue can find their way to meet Tony’s mouth. “I love you,” he whispers.

“Mm, sorry, no, you’re confused,” Tony whispers back. “Pretty sure I’m the one who loves you.”

Loki grins. “How much?”

“Excessively,” Tony answers, tightening his hold around Loki’s waist. “Like, for example, right now, I’m at least 99% willing to stay here in bed with you forever despite the fact that I’m starving.”

“You’d starve for me?”

“Yeah. Also lie in what feels like... at least two different damp spots. But for the sake of not suffering needlessly, can I continue to prove how much I love you after we take a food break? Also change the sheets? You kind of did a number on these.”

“You helped with that,” says Loki.

“Three. Three of these damp spots are me. The other ten or whatever are all you.”

“Thirteen.”

“Thirteen,” Tony repeats as he pulls away and sits up. “Wow. Damn, you’re prolific. So, uh, hypothetical question, but if I took you up on that Asgardian offer, would I also gain this superhuman stamina and be able to do it thirteen times in four hours?”

“I’d imagine so, yes.”

“Okay. I am going to keep this very important information in mind for later for when I make a pros and cons list. Big pro: become a literal sex god.”

He rolls out of bed, motioning for Loki to do the same, and tosses the blankets and pillows onto the floor before stripping off the sheets. Predictably, Loki starts to say, “If you had servants-”

“If I had servants,” Tony interrupts, “do you think I’d let them in here to steal all these free DNA samples? Hell no. They could be spies working for all my numerous enemies that I probably have. Also I’d feel weirdly uncomfortable having anybody else do this, you know? So...”

“So you’re going to spend precious time in which you could be giving me another massage to wash the bedclothes.”

Gathering up the armload of sheets, Tony gestures with his head in the direction of the door. “Yeah. I am. Follow me.”

He leads Loki to the laundry room down the hall, where he dumps the sheets in the washing machine, throws in a detergent pod, and selects the sanitize cycle. All of which takes, from start to finish, roughly eight seconds.

“...Oh,” says Loki, watching the washing machine start up. “That’s it?”

Tony pats his shoulder. “Uh-huh. All I have to do is put everything into the laundry robot and let it do the work.”

“That does seem very simple.”
“How is laundry done on Asgard?”

Loki stares uncertainly at Tony for a moment before answering. “I don’t know.”

“Somebody takes it away, does something mysterious, and brings it back clean?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you are a prince. Now come on,” he says, leading the way back down the hall and in the direction of the kitchen. “Let’s find some dinner.”

“Don’t you want to dress first?” Loki asks as they walk.

“Uh, and miss this prime opportunity for naked pizza? I don’t think so.”

“I don’t like pizza.”

“Fine, you can have naked fruit or naked rice or naked bread or naked... miscellaneous.”

Unfortunately, Loki’s already in the middle of ruining those perfectly viable possibilities by casting an unnecessary illusion of clothing over his splendidly naked form. Golden light sparkles before turning into sleek fabric that wraps itself around him like a robe. Blue fabric. A blue robe. With, Tony notices as he slows down for a peek, a highly stylized, Asgardian-looking, orange and gold knotwork fish on the back.

“Cute,” he says with a grin.

Also unfortunately, he’s too busy looking at Loki’s fish as they pass through the living room to notice anything out of the ordinary. Like, for example: Pepper, Natasha, and Bruce all sitting around the coffee table eating Chinese takeout from paper boxes.

Pepper is the first one to yell, followed by Bruce as he notices what Pepper’s yelling at and drops his box in shock. Then Tony, tearing himself away from the Loki-fish-distraction to spin around and zero in on the unexpected visitors. Natasha doesn’t yell. Natasha merely raises her eyebrows. And Loki? Loki smirks.

“Jesus Christ!” Tony shouts. He scrambles to cover himself with anything available, which turns out to be his hands.

“Oh my god,” he can hear Pepper saying, while Bruce seems to have moved on to looking anywhere but at Tony and nervously, profusely apologizing for dropping his food and getting lemon chicken all over the floor.

“Can somebody, um...” Tony tries to ask over the momentary chaos. “Can somebody toss me a pillow or something? To cover up?”

Natasha, always good for a laugh, Frisbees over a coaster. It hits Tony in the leg.

“Oh, whatever,” he groans, dropping his arms to his sides. “It’s nothing everybody here hasn’t seen already.”

“Uh, no, what?” says Bruce, still not looking. “I haven’t seen that. Why would I have seen that?”

“Bullshit. I woke up in a hospital gown the other day. Only a hospital gown.”

Abandoning the quest to scrape chicken and sauce off the floor with the edge of a paper menu,
Bruce risks a glance up. “That wasn’t me!”

“Missed opportunity then,” Tony replies. “Well, lucky you: here’s your next chance. You’re welcome.”

“And why would Natasha have seen you naked?!” Bruce asks.

All attention turns to Natasha, who at least has the good grace to look Tony in the eye rather than at any of the other prominent areas on display. “I get bored and watch a lot of S.H.I.E.L.D. security footage,” is all she says by way of explanation.


In response to that, Natasha gives Pepper one of those really? type looks.

Pepper sighs. “You’re right. That was a dumb question. If there’s a camera anywhere, Tony will inevitably find a way to get naked for it.”

“It’s one of my special talents,” Tony agrees. “But hey, speaking of nudity or lack thereof...” He turns to Loki and gestures at the robe. “What the hell? Did you know they were in here?”

“Yes,” says Loki.

“And you let me walk in naked because...?”

Loki grins like the asshole he is. “It’s funny.”

“Awesome,” says Tony. “But now that you’ve had your mean-spirited chortle at my expense, can you please magic me some clothes so Bruce and Pepper can stop making such a huge, obvious effort not to look, and Natasha can stop staring at me with her soulless, empty gaze as if nothing’s out of the ordinary? It’s weird.”

“When did you stop waxing off your chest hair?” Natasha asks.

“See?!” Tony says, emphasizing his point by smacking Loki in the arm. He then turns to Natasha to snap, “In Asgard, obviously.”

She nods. “And I’m assuming that’s also where you had your arc reactor removed?”

“No. That was on Jotunheim. Which I highly recommend in case you ever need to do some medical tourism. You’d make a great frost gia—”

He stops mid-word as the sudden and foreign sensation of magic clothing begins to slink across his skin and a tickling breath shoots up his spine. Air settles around his hips in wispy fingers, feeling not exactly like nothing, but definitely not like a solid something either. When he looks down he can see black sweatpants forming around his legs. But it feels more like standing in a cloud of tiny insect wings.

“Oh this is creepy,” he mutters through clenched teeth. “This is... ehhh... I don’t know if I like this. Is it supposed to feel like I’m about to be swarmed by thousands of spiders?” he asks Loki. “Also it’s kind of... working its way up my ass crack. Is that normal?”

Still grinning, Loki doesn’t answer.

“Right,” Tony says. “You’re giving me a magic wedgie. Thanks. Anyway...” He turns to address the crowd. “I just realized I have a very important question for everybody here. Namely: why are
you all in my house?”

“I... technically still live here?” Bruce says, going first. “And I have some test results for you?”

Tony nods at him. “Okay, that’s a really good reason. Next?”

Natasha raises her hand like they’re in grade school. “I’m everybody’s driver. And backup.”

“That’s a less good reason,” says Tony. “Why can’t Bruce drive himself?”

“Um, well,” Bruce begins, and staggers over an awkward pause. “The other day I was... pulled over for driving with a passenger who wasn’t wearing a seatbelt. But it turns out my passenger was a large houseplant. And it was wearing a seatbelt. The seatbelt was just looped in a complicated way around the seat back to keep the plant from falling over. So I didn’t get in any trouble for that. But what I did get in trouble for was... uh... I forgot to renew my driver’s license? That expired in December? And is also from British Columbia? And driving a car that’s registered to and insured by Tony Stark while using an expired Canadian driver’s license... didn’t go over very well at all. So, long story short, now somebody from S.H.I.E.L.D. has to drive me everywhere. It’s why I haven’t been home recently. It seemed better for everyone and less horrifically embarrassing if I just... stayed at the medical facility and didn’t ever leave.”

“Huh,” Tony says. “I honestly can’t tell if that’s an amazing reason or the worst reason ever. Points for originality, though. Pepper? Why are you here?”

“I want to be here about as much as you want me to be here,” she replies. “But S.H.I.E.L.D. keeps deciding I’m the best person to tell you things, so...” Picking up a folder from the table – one that looks like it’s filled with a bunch of nonsense Tony doesn’t want to deal with – she takes a few steps forward. “Your quarantine has been lifted. You are now free to leave the house and do whatever ridiculous things you decide to do.”

“What’s the catch?” Tony asks, because there’s always a catch when it comes to S.H.I.E.L.D. Always.

Pepper doesn’t even bother to pretend there isn’t one. “We need to go over your reintegration plan.”

“My... what?”

“Reintegration plan,” she repeats. “Your plan for rejoining the living world after several months of absence? We can’t just tell the world you were on Asgard, Tony.”

“Technically for most of that time I was on Jotunheim, but...”

“Look, here’s the thing,” she says, coming forward to close the gap between them. “When you left, we had to come up with an excuse for your disappearance, since people started asking questions and it wasn’t an option to say you were off in space with your alien boyfriend. Coulson decided to go with the most obvious explanation. So, as far as the public is concerned, you’ve been in rehab since December.”

“Rehab?” Tony snorts. “I’d never go to rehab.”

Shaking the folder in his face, Pepper clearly wants him to take it. When he doesn’t, she walks back over to the coffee table with a sigh and dumps it there.

“Several paparazzi photos, eyewitness accounts, and statements of professional assessment would argue that you were. Since December 3rd, you’ve been at an exclusive substance abuse recovery
center in the Italian Alps. You returned yesterday. All the details are in here. We kept it simple, so there’s not a lot for you to remember.”

“Ugh, fine. What was I in rehab for anyway? It better be something good.”

“Alcoholism.”

“Aw, come on! It couldn’t have been... I don’t know... opium?”

“Like I said,” Pepper tells him. “We went with the obvious. What the media would find easiest to digest. I think it says something about you that not a single person questioned the veracity of our cover story.”

“Well, a lot of single people are dumb and wrong. As it just so happens, I haven’t had any alcohol since... uh...” Yesterday when Rhodey came over. Shit. “I don’t even remember.” He turns to Loki. “Can you believe this crap?”

“Which?” asks Loki. “The plausible cover story, or everyone knowing that you drink too much?”

“Never mind.” Tony turns back to Pepper. “Fine. I was in Italian rehab. Anything else I need to know?”

“We also constructed a role for Loki, and an explanation as to why he’ll suddenly be spending so much time with you. Meet your new executive assistant.”

That statement – that one right there, innocent as it seems – changes the entire mood of the conversation in an instant.

Why that is, Tony’d be hard pressed to say, but... Something feels wrong. Something doesn’t sit quite right in his gut, though he’s not able to pinpoint what. Pepper’s suggestion just feels... slightly off. Slightly unbalanced. Like something that should be a perfect fit but somehow isn’t. A wrong measurement of millimeters or less. A puzzle piece that almost lines up but doesn’t really belong. “Executive assistant,” he echoes back, half under his breath.

It’s a good explanation for Loki’s constant presence. Isn’t it? Executive assistant. The obvious path to take. One nobody would ever question.

“So that’s, uh... how it has to be, I guess?” he says. “Loki’s just my executive assistant. Nothing... nothing else to awkwardly confess or explain.”

Silently, for the long stretch of tense seconds, Pepper holds his gaze. “Would you rather things be presented differently?”

When Tony can’t easily find the answer to that, she goes on, utilizing one of her professional, reasonable voices. “When Coulson and I were first coming up with this plan, he asked me whether I thought you would want to immediately present Loki as your new romantic partner, or keep some level of secrecy about it. I told him my guess would be the latter. However, if you’d rather be open, we can easily rework the plan.”

“I just...” Tony starts, but once again, he can’t figure out what he needs to say. Actually, he’s having a hard time even just figuring out which side he’s on. Honesty or secrecy? It shouldn’t be this hard to choose. It should be honesty. Hands down. It really should be. Should be.

Somehow, though, it isn’t.
He takes a step back, moving closer to Loki. “I think this is something Loki and I are going to have to discuss.”

From behind him, Loki softly says, “We already have.”

“Yeah, but-” Tony tries to say.

“On Jotunheim,” Loki cuts in. “As we walked to the Destroyer. We discussed this very thing, and your reaction then was the same as it is now. Uncertainty. Which means, I think, that we should not rush to act in any way that can’t be undone. I told you then that I understand your position. That hasn’t changed.”

The way Loki smiles at him is too soft and too reassuring to do anything but make Tony’s insides squirm with guilt. “That was then,” he says. “Now’s different.”

“No, it’s exactly the same,” Loki insists. “If you’re not confident in your desire to go out and announce our relationship to the entirety of your world, then we don’t do it. We wait. Simple as that. And, personally, I think waiting is the more sensible thing to do, at least until we have a better understanding of how our life here might unfold.”

“But...”

“But no. It’s been only days, Tony, since we left Asgard. I think we both know we’re still adjusting to our new arrangement. Adding in the unnecessary complication of a public spectacle will help nothing. Pepper’s plan makes the most sense. We should go along with it. For now.”

It makes him feel even squirmier and guiltier that he knows Loki is right. And also that some treacherous part of his brain is distinctly relieved. “Okay, sure,” he mutters. “Executive assistant. Do you even know what that is?”

“Not specifically,” says Loki.

“I have your info package all prepared,” Pepper tells him. “Come sit down for a sec. Natasha and I can quickly run over the basics, then you can read through the remainder later on your own.”

As he walks over to the couch with Pepper, Loki’s performs some kind of reverse Power of Grayskull transformation from bathrobe into business attire. So at least he looks the part of an executive assistant. Maybe not with that hair. But the suit would fit in well at any office Tony’s ever set foot in.

“I guess... that makes sense, right?” Tony asks Bruce, taking a seat in a nearby chair. “Loki being my new assistant.” The new Pepper, he thinks, but is careful not to say out loud. “He’d be with me all the time, go everywhere I go, nobody would think it’s weird that we’re always together...”

“I... guess?” is all Bruce has to say to that.

“Yeah. I think it’ll be good. It’ll be fine. What could possibly go wrong?”

Bruce nods. “I’m not going to answer that.”

“Probably a good idea. Anyway, moving on to safer conversation topics that don’t make me unreasonably anxious: how about those test results you mentioned?”

“Talking about Loki makes you anxious, but medical test results don’t?” Bruce asks.
“Yeah,” says Tony. “I have a lot of very specific, bizarre mental hang-ups. So let’s get my mind off them with some nice, safe, medical test results.”

“Okay,” Bruce slowly says. “Uh. In that case... I guess the most important result is, you don’t have the flu any more.”

Tony leans back in his chair. “Pf. I could’ve told you that. Based on the fact that I feel totally fine. Apart from these magic pants, which feel totally weird.”

“No, Tony, that’s not normal.”

“I don’t think anybody’s trying to pretend magic pants are ‘normal’.”

“I mean you getting over the flu this easily and quickly isn’t normal. The test the lab tech ran on a sample taken shortly before you woke up showed a drastic decrease in viral antigens compared to the sample taken when you were admitted. Drastic as in almost nothing was left.”

“So I kicked that flu’s ass is what you’re saying.”

“No. What I’m saying is... this makes no sense and nobody’s seen anything like it before. It shouldn’t be medically possible. So, on a hunch, I had a look at Loki’s blood sample and... uh...” Bruce pauses. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?” Tony asks through a suddenly and mysteriously clenched jaw.

“Like you’re considering murder?”

“I consider a lot of things. But let’s just back the truck up to where you said that thing about blood that has me feeling all these distinctly negative and rage-filled emotions. Was that you? You were the one who stuck an unnecessary tube in my Loki’s arm and stole his blood and didn’t tell me and I had to find out later when I saw a cotton ball taped to his skin?”

“Uhhh...” Looking at Tony and then at the floor, Bruce fidgets awkwardly with the chicken carton in his hands. “Okay, well, to answer those concerns one at a time, no, I wasn’t the one who took Loki’s blood. Somebody from the lab did. And they didn’t ‘steal’ it; Loki signed a consent form. And they didn’t tell you because you were unconscious at the time, and we didn’t think it was relevant to you.”

“You didn’t think it was relevant to me that you took Loki’s blood to do whatever weird experiments S.H.I.E.L.D. can dream up? Asgardian DNA? That doesn’t sound suspicious to you? Dangerous? In the hands of those scientists who’re always trying to cook up a new and improved Steve Rogers?”

Tony leans forward in his seat. “Hey, who was it who was doing a lot of that a few years back? Oh wait – that was you, wasn’t it? With a secret serum and some gamma radiation? That sure turned out great for you and, wow, I can’t wait to see what happens with your next experiment now that you have some immortal alien blood to throw into the mix.”

“It wasn’t me, Tony!” Bruce says, loud enough for Team Executive Assistant over at the other end of the couch to stop their civilized, folder-filled conversation and stare for a second. “I didn’t do any of this! I wasn’t in charge of any of this, I didn’t ask for any of this, I wasn’t even involved in most of it...” Setting the chicken box on the coffee table, he looks like he’s about to drop his head into his hands. But since his hands are covered in sauce... He reconsiders and grabs a bunch of napkins instead. “Somebody requested a sample of Loki’s blood. I don’t know who, but I assume they had a valid reason for doing so. Like checking for extraterrestrial pathogens in case your illness turned out to be something crazy and you did have space pneumonia. It’s what I would have done as a
“precaution. But if you’re worried about misuse or—”

“Yes.”

“Fine. Both blood samples are in my lab. I can get them tomorrow and either destroy them or give
them to you if you’re paranoid enough to need that.”

“Uh, obviously I am,” says Tony.

“You’ll have them tomorrow,” Bruce sighs.

“Thank you.”

“And I’m not... I’m not doing any of those experiments any more. With serums and gamma rays.
I’m not. I’m done with that. And I promise nobody did anything with Loki’s blood other than run
standard tests related to your illness.”

“Okay,” Tony says, leaning back in his chair. “I just wanted to make sure. The world doesn’t need
S.H.I.E.L.D. messing around trying to make new super soldiers, because if they use Loki’s blood for
that there’s a 300% chance the soldiers will turn out all cryptic and moody, with hazardously soft
skin.”

“That’s not...” Bruce begins, but lets the thought fade out into a huff of breath and doesn’t pursue it
further. “Right,” he says instead. “What if we went back to talking about your results on the very
legitimate tests I ran for your benefit, using the blood Loki voluntarily gave?”

“That sounds fake, but go on.”

“You have... I don’t know,” Bruce blurts out in what can only be annoyance. “The test samples can
only show so much, and I’d need to do a lot more specific, specialized investigation to get a concrete
answer, but right now? My guess is you picked up some kind of...” Shaking his head and searching
for words, he comes up blank for several breath-spans. “Some kind of Asgardian immunity. That’s
the only explanation I can think of.”

“Like... the opposite of an STD?” Tony asks. “A sexually transmitted immunity?”

Turning away, Bruce squeezes his eyes shut and makes one of those face people are always making
whenever an embarrassing topic comes up. “Actually I was going to ask you if you visited an
Asgardian doctor and got some highly advanced vaccinations, but...”

“Nah, it was probably a sex vaccination. I didn’t get any needles, but I did get laid. Right?” he calls
to Loki, who looks up from Pepper’s folder with one annoyed eyebrow raised. “I didn’t get any
weird medical treatments when I was unconscious in Asgard those times, did I?”

“I don’t know exactly what my mother did,” Loki replies.

“Oh that’s right,” Tony tells Bruce. “His mom may have bumped up my pathetic human constitution
after I jumped off the edge of the planet and blacked out.”

“You what?!”

“It was awesome. I took a video.”

“Okay, uh, anyway...” Bruce says. “I ran a test of Loki’s blood to see if I could find any trace of the
flu virus. It came up negative. Completely negative. Absolutely nothing at all: not even a tiny little
hint of exposure. To anything. He’s as clean as... I don’t even know what to compare him to, because there’s nothing that clean on Earth. So that makes me think you now have a bit of whatever it is that gives him this insane immunity. And it’s improved your immune system to the point where you can fully recover from what’s typically a weeks-long illness in only two days. But,” he adds after a quick pause, “I can’t know for sure without running a lot more tests.”

“Is that your vague way of asking me if you can keep the samples?” Tony asks.

Bruce delays answering so long that Tony’s legitimately starting to think he won’t say anything at all. But the eventual semi-coherent mumble comes around: “Yes.” Followed by, “And maybe collect some new ones...”

“I don’t think so.”

Then the mumbling does a complete about-face into a genuine impassioned plea. “Come on, Tony! Don’t you realize what this could mean? Using Loki’s DNA, it might be possible to isolate what exactly it is that provides this immunity! And using that? What if we can come up with more effective vaccines? Or new vaccines against things like Ebola? HIV? Even the common cold? It would be a phenomenal medical breakthrough! Think about what that would mean! All the lives that could be saved!”

“You’re trying to guilt me into doing this for altruistic humanitarian reasons, aren’t you,” says Tony.

“Would it work better if I bribed you by offering Stark Industries the patent on any hypothetical drugs that might come out of this experimentation?”

Now that’s just playing dirty. Because now, as much as Tony wants to refuse on being-a-stubborn-ass principles, the business case is already starting to form in his head. Worse: if he gives in to his imagination for only two seconds, he can see himself getting into this whole line of work. And wouldn’t it make a great diversion from this rehab fiasco to be able to make a big fancy announcement that Stark Industries is starting a foray into the world of pharmaceutical research?

Shit. He’s already planning out a press release. “Bruce...” he groans, rubbing one hand over his face.

“...Is that a yes or a no?” Bruce asks.

“Ugh. I guess it’s a yes, but you’re also making me feel bad about not doing it purely for altruistic humanitarian reasons.”

“So you accept the bribe?”

Tony nods. “Against every speck of my better judgement, yes. For PR reasons, though, we’re going to say Stark Industries is taking on this project because I am deeply committed to helping sick babies.”

“And, just to be clear, I can keep the samples I have? And can potentially obtain more in the future?”

“Yeah, sure, fine. But future samples are only if Loki agrees. And only you’re allowed to work on this. Not you and several of your closest S.H.I.E.L.D. buddies. I expect it to be a Bruce Banner exclusive. I’ll have my legal team draw up the contracts.”

That must be good enough for Bruce. At least for the time being. He holds out his hand to shake, which Tony accepts, and magically a business deal is born.
“I hope I don’t come to regret this,” Tony says, which, as he knows well, is always the first step down the road to regretting something.

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It’s a relief to finally be back in the bedroom, alone with Loki, and feel the awkward tingling of the magic sweatpants dwindle and disappear. Tony rubs his hands over his legs as if he could slough off the remaining vestiges of magical sensation like old lizard skin. “Oh, that feels better. Finally naked again. The way nature intended.”

As Loki puts his intro to executive assisting package down on a nearby end table, the business suit also fades away. Leaving Loki likewise as nature intended. Tony allows himself a minute to enjoy the view before grabbing a clean set of sheets out of the closet and making up the bed. Somewhat half-assedly, and he doesn’t even bother to tuck in the top sheet on the sides, but it’ll do. “There we go,” he says to Loki. “Fresh sheets of dark plum sateen. I think you’ll look really nice lounging seductively on these.”

“Hm,” Loki says, making a face. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? Jewel tones bring out your weird, ethereal paleness. Which I happen to like a lot.”

“It doesn’t look right.”

“It looks fine to me. It’s a bed covered in sheets. What’s else should it look like?”

“Something’s missing,” says Loki.

“Missing?”

“There are no damp spots.”

“Oh.” Tony glances back at the bed. “Damnit, you’re right.”

“Unacceptable.”

“I guess we should fix that, huh?”

“Yes,” Loki agrees. “Immediately.”
A Prelude to Discussion

Chapter Summary

Loki’s actually a great executive assistant, though that may be irrelevant when both he and Tony find themselves hating the stifling situation they’re in. Which means, of course, the best thing to do to free themselves is... something stupid.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Loki, beyond all reasonable (and, for that matter, unreasonable) expectations, turns out to be... a really good executive assistant.

Tony was fully prepared to be That Guy of workplace gossip fame: the boss who hires a woefully unqualified yet smoking hot secretary and proceeds to spend a lot of time fooling around while accomplishing no actual work. In fact, he was kind of looking forward to it. When was the last time he even had sex on the boardroom table? Too long ago, that’s for sure. And it probably wasn’t even with somebody he worked with.

But then Loki comes in with all his efficiency and competence and professionalism. And it’s not even that he really likes the job. Or understands what it’s supposed to entail. Does he know what a press conference is? Probably not. Does he get why they’re doing this? Who knows. But did he read Pepper’s instructional folder? Yes, thoroughly. And did he listen intently to everything she told him? Absolutely. And does he have an eerily perfect, robotic memory for recalling even the most mundane of details and accurately applying them to any given situation at a moment’s notice? He sure as shit does.

So really, it’s more like he’s an actor playing the role of executive assistant. A very good actor. Playing the role very convincingly. He stands off to the side of the stage as if he belongs there without question, hands clasped neatly behind his back, watching with just the right level of polite interest as Tony walks up to the podium in front of a herd of journalists and news crews.

Not a single face in the crowd looks at Loki. That’s how good he is at blending into his new role.

Tony taps his fingertips against the edge of the podium. He can’t look at Loki either, much as he wants to. Because he needs to keep up his side of the story: that of the respectable(-ish) employer, with no wistful or longing glances allowed. So he looks out at his audience instead. “Afternoon, everyone,” he says in a nice, bland greeting. “I’d introduce myself, but I think that’s unnecessary. Everyone here should know who I am, and if you don’t... please raise your hand and tell me what secluded corner of the world you’re from, so I can go there to avoid being recognized by tabloid paparazzi.”

(Pause for polite laughter at a dumb joke. The crowd behaves as expected, and a half-hearted titter rolls through the room.)

“Anyway. I’d like to thank everyone for coming today. I know you all have very busy lives making up scathing rumors about me...” (Pause again. That joke goes over a little better, earning a few genuine chuckles.) “...so I’ll get right to the point. I have a quick announcement to make today.
before turning things over to Trisha Crighton, our Senior VP of Corporate Affairs, to explain a little further. I won’t be taking any questions.”

As usual, the ‘no questions’ parameter results in at least a dozen people immediately launching their hands into the air, a few of them shouting out ‘Mr. Stark!’, as if that’ll help bypass the rule.

“In case anybody’s confused as to exactly what ‘I won’t be taking any questions’ means,” Tony says loudly, leaning forward with his elbows on the podium, “it means those of you waving at me right now are probably going to leave disappointed. No questions. Sorry. Save them for Trisha. If you have any vitally pressing matters you need to discuss with me and only me, you can always talk to my assistant and schedule an interview.” Pause. “I think I have a free afternoon coming up in three years or so.”

(Awkward, nervous laughter. Good.)

Tony glances down at the electronic prompter screen, now displaying a bullet-point list of talking points. Exactly as he and Pepper discussed (or rather, as Pepper discussed, and he grudgingly accepted) over the last few days. “First off, to address the very obvious, larger-than-life, blinking neon elephant in the room: no doubt you’ve all read the statement my team released last week. And you know that for the past several months, I was a patient at the Santa Teresa Recovery Retreat in Lecco, Italy. Without going into too much detail, this past fall I was struggling with a lot of personal issues. Personal issues that continued to build until they severely and negatively impacted my life, to the point where I found myself in need of professional intervention to work my way back to a better place. But I think I’m there now. Things are looking up and I feel like I’m back on track.”

There are still hands waving in the audience, trying to catch his attention. Clearly these people have extreme comprehension problems.

“So with that out of the way...” He looks down at the display screen again and watches it scroll up to highlight talking point two. “Unfortunately, I did not call this entire press conference to talk exclusively about myself, even though we all know I could do that for hours.”

(Pause for more polite laughter, right on schedule.)

“I actually have a very important announcement today. And it’s an announcement that I’m saddened to make, but at the same time I can’t help but give my most sincere congratulations and best wishes to Ms. Virginia Potts, who has accepted a prestigious new position within the public sector at the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division, and has therefore tendered her resignation as CEO of Stark Industries effective immediately.”

And Tony has to stop there, whether he wants to or not, because the entire room erupts in a sudden outburst of chaotic yelling. Those people not already standing jump up out of their seats, and those standing around the periphery surge forward, microphones and voice recorders in hand, trying desperately to shove their way closer to the stage.

Honestly, he doesn’t know why he ever bothers to try to deny questions.

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“I think that went well,” says Loki.

Tony, grabbing a water bottle from the table in the backstage prep room, looks over at him. Was that sarcasm? It can be hard to tell with Loki. “By ‘well’ you mean...?” he asks. Out in the hall, the noise of the press conference builds to another crescendo at whatever is being said. Plainly audible
even through the closed doors.

“It remained entirely civil. Nobody is brawling out there.”

“Oh. You’re being serious.” Cracking the bottle and taking a gulp, Tony shakes his head. “I’m almost afraid to ask what press conferences are like on Asgard if you consider ‘no brawling’ to be a benchmark for something going well.”

“Sometimes armed soldiers are required to keep the peace,” Loki tells him, sounding for all the world like he’s being truthful.

“Right. In that case, since this is your first Earth media circus, I should probably let you know that—”

The door bursts open before he can finish imparting his valuable grain of wisdom, and suddenly there’s Pepper. The expression on her face is an interesting mix of frustration and disbelief.

“That went well,” she says in an uncanny echo of Loki’s sentiment of moments earlier, except this time there’s no question in Tony’s mind about the weighty presence of a vast amount of sarcasm.

“Hey, what did you expect?” Tony asks. “They yelled and panicked back when I announced I was naming you CEO. Of course they’ll yell and panic when I announce you’re leaving. It’s what they do.”

“You didn’t say anything about the planned pharmaceutical branch! Or even the fact that you’ll be taking back the CEO’s chair, which I think is far more important!”

“Hey, you said you wanted me to minimize the media impact of your resignation.”

“Yes!” says Pepper. “By giving them something else to obsess over! Another announcement!”

“No, but I did give them something else to obsess over,” Tony counters. “Trisha’s out there right now saying absolutely nothing about who’s going to be the new CEO, which you know is the biggest question still hanging in the air. What do you think all the speculation is going to be about over the next few days? I promise it won’t be you,” he says. “In a few hours, I’m going to make a vague tweet that mimmmight imply I’m considering stepping back into the position. The media collective will then spend the next several days overanalyzing it to death until I come out with my official announcement. And they’ll do that all while forgetting about you. There we go. Problem solved.”

Pepper stares at him. “And if that doesn’t work?”

“I dunno,” he replies with a shrug. “Guess I’ll do something dumb?”

“You do something dumb on pretty much a daily basis,” she says. “It isn’t exactly newsworthy.”

“Fine, okay.” Stepping forward, he places a hand on her shoulder, which she shakes off in irritation. “In the event that the media go wild and fail to bite at my CEO mystery bait, and they instead take off on a wild tangent insinuating that you felt compelled to step down as Stark Industries CEO because you completely compromised your professional and moral integrity by hooking up with that creepy A.I.M. guy who kidnapped the president...”

Pepper’s mouth drops open, but in an incredible stroke of luck, she looks way too furiously offended to actually say or scream anything.

“If that happens,” Tony assures her, “I promise I will do everything in my power to divert all
“You are such an asshole,” she hisses.

“I’m aware, yeah. Hence my confidence in this maneuver. You may have banged Killian, but I’m in a gay relationship with an immortal deity and erstwhile war criminal from outer space. There is literally no way any self-respecting sensationalist tabloid would run your story over mine. I’m sorry, but you’re just not that interesting.”

“So you’d rather go to absurd lengths to prove a point and recklessly out yourself rather than just stick to the sensible plan I devised and that we both agreed to before you went on stage?”

“Pepper, you’ve known me long enough to be able to anticipate that of course the answer to that question is ‘yes’.”

“Fine,” she says, throwing up her hands. “I don’t know why I’m even bothering to try to talk you out of your dumb idea... I’m not your employee any more. This is Loki’s problem now. Everything wrong with you is Loki’s problem now.”

Stealthily, from the corner of the room where he blended in seamlessly with the business décor, Loki looks up from the phone in his hand. “What?”

“He’s your problem now,” Pepper says to Loki while pointing an accusatory red fingernail in Tony’s direction. “All yours. You are now responsible for assuring him that accidentally using expired sunscreen will not cause permanent skin damage. You are now responsible for telling him his eyes hurt because he spent the last fourteen hours staring at a computer screen, not because he has a rare and fatal eye disease. You are now responsible for accompanying him to the hospital when he’s in a panic and thinks he has lymphoma, but it turns out to be just an ingrown armpit hair.”

Tony nods. “That was a wild night.”

“Yes,” Pepper agrees, glancing back at him. “And all of that is Loki’s problem now. Like remember that time we went to Barcelona, and you were jetlagged and took two sleeping pills? But you thought they didn’t work, so you also took two extra strength Benadryl? And then everything kicked in and you were convinced that if you fell asleep you’d stop breathing and die of an overdose? So you made me stay up for four hours playing backgammon until you decided it was safe to sleep? Remember that? _Loki’s problem now._”

“How often do you almost die?” Loki asks with a furrowed brow and an expression that might be concern but might also just be resigned annoyance.

“I dunno. Probably every other week?” Tony pitches his empty water bottle into the recycling bin and steps forward to give Loki’s butt a quick, possessive pat. “Anyway, now that Pepper’s done yelling at me, we gotta go. What do we have on for the rest of the afternoon? I’m assuming it’s something time-consuming and important.”

Loki taps at his phone. Frowns. Taps it again. And hands it over to Tony. “It’s doing it again.”

“Aw, come on,” Tony says as he takes Loki’s phone. The screen’s glitching and flickering all over the place, dissolving into a mess of diagonally tracked pixels. “This is the third time in two days. Where’s that stylus I gave you?”

“I dropped it and it rolled under the stage,” Loki mutters.

Pepper leans in to investigate the damage. “What...?”
“His magic interferes with the touchscreen,” says Tony. “I swear, I’m about to give up and just get him a stupid, obsolete Blackberry with a physical keyboard...”

“We have your tuxedo fitting for Saturday’s charity gala at 3:30,” Loki says, “but I wasn’t able to see where. Only the phone knows.”

And the phone won’t be giving up that information any time soon. Fantastic. Tony drops it into his pocket. “That’s okay. I think I know where the place is. Somewhere on... uh...”

“I’m already texting you the address,” Pepper says on her way across the room and out the door. “One last favor for old time’s sake.”

Tony flashes her a cheesy grin even though she’s not looking. “You’re the best.”

“I know. And Tony?” she adds, sparing a final look back at him. “When, a month from now, your entire world has fallen apart without me and you’re broke, in legal trouble, dehydrated, wearing a garbage bag, on fire, in a ditch?”

“Don’t call you?” Tony guesses.

She nods. “It’s all Loki’s problem now.”

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The appointment at the tailor goes quickly, with last minute adjustments made and promises secured that the tuxedo will be delivered to Tony’s home by the end of the week. And with that concluding the day’s business, all that’s left to do is brave the rush hour traffic and head home. It’s hard for Tony to keep his eyes on the stupid road when Loki’s sitting there in the passenger seat looking so serenely awe-inspiring in the golden sun of late afternoon, but he’s suffered through worse injustices in the past and will probably suffer through even worse in the future. So he allows himself only a quick little glance every few seconds. (To check and make sure Loki still looks good. The answer is always yes.)

“What do you want for dinner?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” Loki answers, lazily drawing out the words. “Rice.”

“You’ve had rice for the last three days. You need to eat protein.”

“Rice with eggs.”

“No, I think you’ve reached your rice quota for the time being. I’m going to make you eat something else. There’s a pretty good steak house not too far from here that I think you’d like.”

“Chicken nuggets.”

Tony looks over. (Loki is still disastrously attractive, as expected.) “Really? That’s what you want? Not steak?”

“Both.”

“Okay.” Turning his attention back to the ass end of the Escalade in front of them, Tony nods. “How’s this. We go to the steak restaurant and eat grown up food like normal adults, and then if you’re still hungry after, I will buy you chicken nuggets.”

“What if we ate food at home instead?”
There’s something in Loki’s voice: a little downturn, almost. An invisible but audible frown. Barely there, but present enough to make Tony hold back whatever wise-ass quip he was going to chuck out next and, instead, reconsider. He flicks his gaze over to Loki again. Still beautiful: a given. But now leaning against the door frame with eyes half-closed, looking tired and quiet. If ‘quiet’ can be physically manifested in a look.

“You not feeling well?” he asks, knowing full well that’s not the problem, but how else are you supposed to slyly fish for information?

“I just want to go home,” Loki murmurs in his typical, vague way.

“Yeah. Okay. We can do that.”

He changes lanes, mentally recalculating the best route, and speeds up through the next yellow light. Should he say something else? Probably. What? That’s a mystery. With Loki, it’s always a mystery.

Only this time, surprise of surprises, Loki actually... says something first.

And what he says is, “I don’t know if I can do this, Tony,” almost too quiet to hear over the rumbling noise of the car.

Immediately Tony snaps his head over to look at Loki, road safety be damned. “What? What do you mean? What ‘this’ can’t you do?!”

Matching those rapid-fire questions with a counterbalancing weight of silence, Loki fidgets with the buttons on the cuff of his jacket. “Executive assistant,” he finally says.

And Tony lets himself breathe. “Oh. Okay. I was worried for a sec you were going to say something like ‘Earth’ or ‘living together’, and I was going to have to freak out and crash into a pole. What don’t you like about being an executive assistant? You’re really good at it.”

Actually, there’s still a lot of opportunity for freaking out and crashing into a pole, as evidenced by Loki’s long, answering sigh that sounds an awful lot like a prelude to Discussion. So Tony, being a wise and mature adult at least some of the time, pulls off into the next available strip mall.

Also now he can look continuously at Loki.

“It’s only...” Loki hesitantly starts. He’s obviously double-guessing what he wants to say, still fidgeting with the buttons and pushing his hair back and refusing to make any eye contact. “Let’s go somewhere,” he says, which has to be an easy escape route out of whatever he actually wanted to say, but at least it’s something. “Away. Somewhere quiet and secluded without people or S.H.I.E.L.D. or responsibilities. What if, instead of all of this, we simply... left? What’s the worst that would happen?”

“Uh,” says Tony. “Well. Absolute worst case scenario, my company would fall into ruin without me and I’d lose everything and wind up as a hobo wearing a garbage bag on fire in a ditch as Pepper predicted, but...” But this is the second time Loki’s ‘casually’ mentioned a preference for the two of them being off on their own without any of Tony’s life sneaking up to interfere.

“A few days only,” Loki says, in either a plea or an attempt to compromise. “A few days to be on our own somewhere. We could go back to your house in Phoenix or... I don’t even care. Somewhere away from everything."

Where Tony Stark has no distractions and can devote all his time to being a doting boyfriend, is the
implication there. Where Loki has no competition for being the top priority in Tony’s life. Where they can just exist and be themselves, exclusive of outside influence, and maybe find time to smooth out some the little bumps that keep cropping up in their path. Go back, even temporarily, to how it was before Tony’s ridiculous life made everything fifty times more complicated and started throwing out a whole bunch of innovative new roadblocks and detours.

Slowly, Tony nods. “I guess everything survived just fine without me while we were adventuring in space, so another couple days won’t hurt?”

“I’m sure Pepper would understand if you asked her to-”

“No no no,” he quickly interrupts. “I’m not calling her. You heard what she said. I’m your problem now. Everything is your problem now.” Reaching over, he gives Loki’s hand a squeeze, though Loki predictably pulls away.

“Don’t. We’re out in the open. Somebody might see.”

“Loki, we’re parked beside a Taco Bell. Anyone peering into cars around here has definitely seen worse than two guys holding hands.”

“And you’re willing to take that risk?”

Tony takes a quick survey of their surroundings. The only person even remotely close to paying attention to the Fascinating Drama of Tony and Loki is a dad carrying a toddler across the parking lot. And he’s definitely only checking out the car, with no fucks to give about who might be doing what inside it. And even if he did...

“Theoretically speaking,” Tony begins at a less-than-confident pace, “what would be so bad about just... you know... being honest about our relationship? Not hiding anything? Open to the world.”

In an answer far more succinct than words could ever manage, Loki makes a ‘that’s a bad idea’ face. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Uh, because it’s taken me one whole day of lying to confirm my suspicions that it feels really shitty and I don’t like it?”

The ‘bad idea’ expression stays right where it is.

“Look, I know I was kind of waffling before about whether or not to come out with this, but now I think we made the wrong call. Lying about being in rehab is one thing, but lying about you being just my executive assistant feels... It feels like I’m ashamed of you. Or ashamed of myself. Which I’m not. It bugged me when we were on Asgard, but I could deal with that because I had to. Here, what’s stopping me? My own dumb indecisiveness. That’s it.”

“What do you mean?” Loki asks, face moving over from ‘bad idea’ to ‘you’re not making any sense’.

And it takes Tony a second to realize why.

Right. So this is really one of the things they should’ve discussed in more detail. Right up there with the seven thousand other things they should’ve discussed in more detail, but never got around to, because dumb adventures/Odin/Loki being surly/Frost Giants/Thor/poor choices/S.H.I.E.L.D./just having sex instead of being emotionally forthcoming/[insert excuse here] kept getting in the way. But Loki grew up on Asgard. He was a prince of Asgard, educated by Asgard, equally blessed and burdened by Asgard. Being taught, by Asgard, over a thousand years, to carefully hide the more
shamefully secretive aspects of his life.

“You know Earth is real different from Asgard, right?” Tony asks.

“That seems somewhat evident,” Loki allows.

“Right. And here’s the thing.” Deep breath. “You’re from a planet that seems to be... about the size of Ireland? I didn’t really get a good sense. But small. Super small. One society across the board. Here on Earth, however, we have billions of people spanning thousands of cultures, making for a lot of variety. And in the interest of full disclosure, it’s not all good news. There are places on this planet where the two of us being together would be illegal. As in death penalty illegal. There are places in this county where we’d probably be harassed, threatened, and attacked. Fuck, that could still happen anywhere, even right here if the wrong person came by. I’m not going to bullshit you and pretend everything’s so enlightened and progressive, because it’s not. But it’s better than what it could be. Right now, in our specific geographic location, I’m not going to say it’s totally normal for two men or two women to be in a relationship, but it’s at least... acceptable, I guess? It’s on its way to becoming normal? If that makes sense?”

“Normal,” Loki slowly repeats.

“Yeah. Normal enough that if we decide to come out, nothing Asgardian will happen. Neither of us will be thrown in jail and there won’t be any large-scale repercussions. Probably.”

“Probably?” Loki repeats, less slowly.

“I don’t know for sure what will happen,” Tony says. “But I’m assuming mostly minor, inconsequential setbacks. Maybe I’ll lose some business with crusty old bigots, but let’s be real, I don’t want that business anyway. Maybe some people will start acting weird around me. I can deal with that. Definitely a bunch of creepy speculation will be posted all across the internet, but that’ll be short-lived. The most annoying thing will be continuously having to assert that I’m bi, not gay, and all my previous relationships with women really weren’t public shams because I was hiding in the closet. I mean I was in the closet, but...”

All Loki says is, “Hm.” Still looking dubious as ever.

Exhaling loudly, Tony stares out the windshield. The dad and toddler are nowhere in sight. “Maybe we should discuss this somewhere else? Anywhere else?”

“Vacation, obviously.”

As his majesty commands. Tony punches the car back into gear and pulls out onto the street. “Part of me can’t believe we’re about to do this, but the other part isn’t surprised. Actually maybe I’m looking forward to it. That press conference sucked. I could use a break. Where are we going?”

“I don’t know,” says Loki, and imagine that: the second things start going according to his plan, his voice sounds instantly brighter. “Somewhere cool? It’s too hot here.”

“So just like... drive north until we get somewhere you want to stop?”

“That sounds fine.”
“Okay. You still want chicken nuggets?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll stop on the way out of town.”

ooo

Tony’s done way dumber things in the past. Way more irresponsible things. Way more reckless and poorly planned things. Overall, a spur of the moment decision to point the car north and keep on going doesn’t even rank in the top one hundred of questionable life choices. In fact, an argument could be made that it’s one of the better things he’s done lately. Maybe even, considering their current situation, one of the best things.

He rolls over with a low groan, burying his face into a pillow pooled with Loki’s hair and inhaling the scent of hotel shampoo. Rose and green herbs. Wrapping one arm around Loki’s chest, he snugs up as close as he can.

“Why is your skin so soft?” he murmurs as his fingers feel their way across Loki’s ribs.

“Hmm, I grew it that way especially for you,” Loki whispers.

“That’s very kind and thoughtful. I appreciate it.”

Loki squirms until he’s facing up, able to turn his head to sneak a kiss near Tony’s ear. “You’re welcome to touch it wherever and whenever you like.”

“Thank you. I will.”

As opposed as Tony is to moving too much on this ridiculously lazy morning in this ridiculously comfortable bed, he can make some exceptions for Loki’s sake. He can lift himself up and shift himself over so that the crisp cotton sheets glide over his back and Loki’s warm body finds a welcoming position under his front. His lips press against Loki’s and gently part for a kiss.

Immediately, Loki sticks his entire tongue into Tony’s mouth.

Tony jerks back. “Hey! You trying to ruin this, wise guy?”

“Me?” Loki asks, with an expression so innocent and pitiful and adorable that Tony almost feels bad about the accusation.

“Yeah. You. God of mischief.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” says Loki, right before lifting his hands to the back of Tony’s neck and pulling him back down for a far less gentle type of kiss. With much a much more welcome type of tongue.

And Tony would’ve used this as a prime opportunity to test out Loki’s invitation of some wherever/whenever touching, except his stupid fucking phone, which he could’ve sworn was on flight mode, chooses that moment to start vibrating on the night stand.

“Just a second,” he growls, reaching over to switch it back to flight mode.

“Who was that?” Loki asks.

“I don’t care,” he replies, already leaning back into Loki’s neck.
The phone vibrates again ten seconds later.
“What the fff...” Okay maybe something’s wrong with the flight mode setting. But this time he’s not taking any chances and shuts the damn thing down, watching until the screen goes black to be sure.

It goes off again just as he manages to kiss his way down to Loki’s navel.

“Okay seriously, what the hell is going on?!?”

It’s Pepper, according to the call display on the screen that is very clearly no longer powered off. “I don’t believe this... What?!” he snaps, answering the call.

“Tony?” Pepper’s voice says at the other end of the connection. “Oh my god, where are you?!”

“In bed! How did you-”

Pepper cuts him off. “I’ve been trying to call you for three days! But you’re phone’s been off, so I had to get Jarvis to remote in and turn it back on. I’m at your house now. Where are you?!”

With a groan, Tony sinks back down into bed and shuts his eyes. “Yes. My phone was off. For a reason. It didn’t occur to you that maybe I didn’t want to be disturbed?”

“It occurred to me, but you’ve been AWOL since after the press conference, so...”

He should probably listen to what she’s saying. Because it might be important. Chances are slim, but it might be. Likely not as important as Loki’s hand slipping in to skim down the side of his body, from chest to waist to hip and...

Shit, he didn’t mean to make that sound into the phone.

Pepper’s voice stops flat, followed by several seconds of uncomfortable silence. “Are you... are you in the middle of having sex?!” she asks.

“No!” Tony says, pushing Loki’s hand away. “I was, if you must know, at the beginning of having sex when you called. But now I’m- Stop that!” he hisses at Loki, swatting the hand away again. “Stop it!”

Loki pouts, but doesn’t look the least bit likely to stop anything, so Tony climbs out of bed.

“I shouldn’t have asked...” he hears Pepper whisper, but, well, that’s her problem and her bad judgement call.

“Look, is this important?”

“Um, yes, it’s important enough for me to drive all the way to your house to get Jarvis to log into your phone?”

“Can I call you back in an hour? Or never? I thought we weren’t supposed to call each other any more.”

“You’re not supposed to call me. I still get to call you when you completely drop the ball and everything starts falling apart.”

“Nnnnnnn...” Groaning, Tony grabs one of the hotel bathrobes from a chair near the bed and heads downstairs to the sitting area. Out of Loki’s sphere of influence and grabby-hands. “Okay. What?
Did somebody die? Did something explode? Am I being sued?"

“Have you been following any of the news this week?"

“Sure haven’t.”

“Of course not,” says Pepper. “Because if you had been, you’d have noticed that Stark Industries stock is dropping over all the wild speculation you promised me wouldn’t happen! Where’s that tweet you were going to send, alluding to your return to the CEO role?"

Aw, fuck. “Sorry. I forgot about that. Because of...” Loki. “...things. Do you want me to send it now?"

“No. It’s too late for that. What I want you to do is assure me you’re going to be home in the next few hours so we can come up with a plan to handle this and do some damage control at the gala tonight.”

“Aw fuck,” Tony repeats, out loud this time.

“You forgot about that, too,” Pepper says. Not a question.

“Yeah. Sorry. Uhhhh...” His eyes scan the room, taking in 180 degrees of mess in the form of discarded clothing and dumb souvenirs purchased by Loki over the past five days.

“Tony, you can’t back out of this. You’re expected, and you need to be there. We both do.”

“Yes, I know, I get it. I’ll be home soon. Just... give me half an hour to pack up and check out of the hotel, and I can-”

“Which hotel? Where are you?”

What an interesting question. One that could really be answered in a lot of ways. Or at least... a long way and a short way. And in the interest of easing into things, maybe he should go with the long way? “Right. So,” he begins. “Loki and I went on a little road trip.”

“Road trip? As in...?”

“As in we left town. Things felt kinda weird after the press conference and tux fitting, and I could tell Loki wasn’t really happy, so we decided to just... keep going.”

“Please tell me where you are,” Pepper sighs.

“No, you need the background on this, or else it’s not going to make any sense. Loki and I were talking about some stuff, and discussing whether or not we want to go public with our relationship. Loki was a bit hesitant, since Asgard is very culturally different, and he’s not used to the concept of being allowed to be a big ol’ homo in public. And he wanted to go on a little vacation, so I thought, hey, why not drive up to San Francisco and check out the scene there? Relaxing and informative.”

“So you’re in San Francisco. Okay. That’s inconvenient, but I can send the jet to pick you up.”

“I’m not in San Francisco.” (Pepper makes a sound that falls into the same category as an angry ‘what’, but he keeps on talking.) “We actually didn’t make it. We stopped a Courtyard Marriott in San Jose and then in the morning Loki just wanted to keep on driving. I think he really likes being in the car and making up new words to songs he doesn’t know, very quietly singing along with the radio. He has a nice voice. Anyway, we drove all day, until we got to Seattle.”
“You’re in Seattle?!”

“Not exactly. But my car is in Seattle, if that counts?”

“I don’t care about your car! Where are you?!”

“Rude. I care about my car. But since you asked not so nicely, I will tell you that Loki wanted to keep going north. He wanted to see snow. But since he doesn’t have a passport, we couldn’t drive across the border into BC. So we left the car and teleported into Vancouver. And before you say anything!” he sneaks in before Pepper can say anything, “That is totally not as weird as it sounds and you’ve seen me do it before. Teleportation is normal where Loki is concerned. Also illegally sneaking into a foreign country is not as bad as murdering people or instigating an alien invasion, so on the scale of crimes Loki could potentially be committing, this one is nothing to worry about. Please tell S.H.I.E.L.D. that.”

“So you’re in Vancouver,” says Pepper, sounding about as fed-up and worn-down as Tony was hoping she would by this point in the story.

“Close. It turns out Vancouver has exactly the same climate as Seattle and there was no snow there either.”

“You should know that.”

“I do. Now.”

“Is it too much to hope you abandoned the snow idea and came back to stay somewhere closer? Like Las Vegas? Las Vegas probably has fake snow somewhere.”

Wandering over to the window Tony looks out at the overcast sky of low, gray clouds skimming the tops of mountain peaks. Is it snowing? Looks like it. There’s a minimal dusting of white on the windowsill, and small, whirled drifts cling to the shingles of the steeply pitched roof just outside his window. “The thing you need to understand is...” he begins. “I have pretty much no willpower when it comes to saying no to Loki. None at all. All he has to do is look at me with his big eyes and dumb, sad expression, and I cave. It’s awful. So when he says he wants to stay somewhere really fancy with snow...”

“Tony please just tell me where you are so I can send the jet to collect you and bring you home,” Pepper whisper in defeat.

He stares down into the valley fringed with evergreen trees. “We’re at the Banff Springs.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey fronds! So I started this story with a few vague ideas in mind about where it might end up going. A few plot points, a few things to explore... and not a whole lot of specific direction. What this means is, I have one more chapter plotted out, and after that? It's a mystery! Things could go in a lot of different ways. Two more vital sub-plots have to come up before the end, but as to how they fit together, or what surrounds them... uh. I guess what I'm saying is, if anybody has any suggestions or recommendations for things you'd like to happen or where you'd like to see this story go, here's your chance. Shout 'em out now. If you feel like you have a great idea about
where things are heading, I want to know. If you remember any dumb little plot threads that were dropped along the way and want to see them woven back in, because I'm a dumbass and forgot, please tell me.

Otherwise, if you trust me to make this work... I will try my best, but can make no guarantees, because I have way too many stupid ideas that should never see the light of day. ;)}
What Happened in 1982

Chapter Summary

After a Serious Talk™ with Pepper, having to grant an unwanted favor, and a SHIELD-ordered date with Natasha, Tony's starting to think this day couldn't get any worse. All he wants is to be with Loki. So he might as well throw all caution to the wind and do something really stupid, right?

Chapter Notes

Hey friends! First off, thanks to everyone who left suggestions and ideas - I now have a few better-thought-out plans for where this story might go. And if anyone wants to suggest anything further, please feel free! I still have no idea how exactly this trainwreck will end, so...

Second, this chapter is on the long side because it didn't feel right to cut off before the gala scene, meaning that I just kept going to get it done and move the plot along. Hope you like it!

Loki comes slinking down the stairs as soon as Tony hangs up; he must’ve been listening in and waiting for the call to end. He’s wearing the other hotel bathrobe and has his hair pulled back into a sloppy ponytail, and if Tony didn’t have all these dumb responsibilities that needed attending...

“Am I to assume we need to go home?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Tony groans, sliding down into a near-horizontal sit on the couch and chucking his phone aside. “I think we lost track of time. It’s Saturday. I have to be at that gala for the... uh...”

“Children’s hospital.”

“Right. Children’s hospital. In about nine hours. Which means I have to shower and make myself presentable and get dressed, and everybody knows that can take all day, especially when I’m dawdling to avoid having to talk to Pepper.”

Without saying anything, Loki comes over to sit on the couch at Tony’s side, tucking his legs up and leaning against Tony’s shoulder. He smells nice. Really nice. All fresh and clean, like green things and newly laundered clothing. The kind of nice smell that makes Tony not want to move, possibly at all, ever. What’s wrong with just spending the rest of his life on this couch cuddling with Loki? (Subjectively speaking: nothing.)

“So I guess we better pack up all this mess and go home.”

“We’ve had four days at least,” says Loki.

“Three and a half. And one and a half of those were spent in the car.”
“I still appreciate it.” He leans in to kiss Tony’s temple and lets his lips linger there, breath tickling skin with every little exhalation. “You did say you could spare a few days only.”

“Yeah, but now that we’re here...”

Now that they’re here, with Loki’s fingers slowly sliding their way through Tony’s hair, massaging his scalp, why the hell would he ever want to leave? For four (three and a half) days, everything felt... normal again. It felt right again. Just him and Loki and nothing else in the world more important than that. Nothing in their way and nothing intruding on their happiness. Exactly what Loki wanted. And, in a completely shocking turn of events, exactly what Tony didn’t know he desperately wanted as well. It may be a cheesy Lifetime movie trope, but it’s true. The high-powered, grouchy, work-addicted, big city executive really does crave the quiet life in a small town with the weird alien he loves.

“Okay, how about this,” he says, forcing himself to sit up straight. “We head back. I go to the gala. I ditch out as soon as is respectably possible, and come home to the very inviting scene of you in the hot tub with several bottles of champagne so we can get wasted and bang on all the deck furniture. Sound good?”

“Mm, I think I prefer bed. It’s more comfortable.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. We’re old. Bed is more comfortable. But I still do want to start in the hot tub, because yesterday at the spa you looked even more gorgeous than usual and believe me, it was a real hardship not being able to bend you over the side of the pool right then and there. And now I can’t stop thinking about it. That’s probably going to be the only thing that gets me through this gala.”

“Hot tub, champagne, bed,” Loki confirms. “I’ll have it all waiting for you.”

“That makes me feel better. Actually...” Tony stands up. “It motivates me to get going, because the sooner we go home, the sooner I can start getting ready. And maybe hit this thing up early so it doesn’t look bad when I leave super early. Come on. Help me throw everything into bags. Who knows? Maybe we’ll have time for a hot tub before the gala too.”

ooo

Pepper’s waiting in the living room, looking at her phone when they make their grand entrance. And she predictably yells something in surprise at their sudden appearance, though Tony is unable to discern what (it may be just a generic, word-free yell) due to that awful feeling that always comes with teleportation. He staggers, bangs his shin on the coffee table, and sinks to the floor in a puddle of nausea, pain, and swearing.

“Just... gimme a sec...” he says, holding up a hand to wave off the approaching click-click-click of Pepper’s heels. Clenching his teeth, he tries to swallow down the awful feeling in his throat. He’s never going to get used to this. Never. Every time, he psychs himself up and insists it won’t be so bad, and every time... it’s bad. Like his entire body is trying to vomit, but from a stomach that was left behind two alternate dimensions back.

When he’s finally confident enough in his constitution to raise his head, Pepper’s staring at him with an expression of uneasy surprise, and Loki’s just lying on the floor amid all the bags they dropped. “Hi,” he says.

“Do I want to ask?” Pepper whispers.
That question really depends on what she may or may not want to ask. Probably something about
the teleportation, but she could also be curious as to why he and Loki are wearing matching souvenir
of Banff hoodies. Either way... “Nope.”

She nods. “Okay.”

“Yeah. But we’re back and... uh. I was going to go have a shower and start getting dressed
immediately, but on second thought, I really need to sit in this chair for a minute.” At least until his
skeleton goes back to feeling halfway normal and not like it’s made of pool noodles and TV static.
He looks over at Loki as he climbs up into the seat. “Loki, you okay?”

“Hnnn.”

Pretty much how Tony feels. “He’ll be okay. I’m assuming. Anyway, I already feel like shit, so
you might as well go ahead and get started telling me all the awful things that’ve happened that are
my fault somehow.”

“I don’t know if I can,” says Pepper. “You just... you just magically... appeared. How am I
supposed to start talking about stock prices and gossip blogs? That feels wrong.”

“In that case, can I give you my news?”

“Which is?”

Across the room, Loki stands up and sets off, purposefully but shakily, toward the nearest bathroom.

“Coward,” Tony mutters. “Can’t stick around as backup or moral support...”

“Is what you’re about to tell me going to cause me a huge headache?” Pepper asks, looking like she
already knows the answer to that question.

“You? No. You resigned and are no longer involved with Stark Industries. But it’ll probably cause
a headache for somebody, because... I can’t take the CEO role back.”

She lets her arms flop down to her sides with a loud sigh. “I knew it.”

“I can’t,” Tony repeats. “Also I don’t want to. And let’s face it: I was never a good CEO in the first
place. I’m not a business guy, Pep. I’m an ideas guy. I can be a marketing or sales guy. But I’m
not... I’m not the kind of person who’s good at all the details of running a company and keeping all
the shit together. Not like you. Even when I was CEO, I spent most of my time fucking around
while other people made the wheels move smoothly in the background. The company doesn’t need
me for-”

“That’s completely untrue.”

“No, it is true. I’m not needed for the day to day operations. We both know that. I’m just a name
and an occasional presence. Ideas and a push in the right direction. That’s all. Nobody needs me in
the office every day, poking my nose into sales plans and revenue projections.”

“So you’re going to do... what?”

“I’m going to let the board choose the new CEO,” he says, risking movement to lean forward. “And
I’ll stay on as a director and owner to ensure the company is still moving in the direction I want to
see it go. I might involve myself in some special projects, or head up any new expansions I’m
particularly interested in. I’ll do exactly what I’ve been doing for the past two years while you were
CEO. Because as important as this company is to me, I think we’re all at a point where things are better off if I take this step back. And I think my personal life is likewise better off with me taking this step back.”

“That’s what this is really about, isn’t it?” Pepper softly asks after a moment’s pause.

She always was too damn perceptive. “Maybe...” Tony mumbles as he looks down at his knees.

“It’s about you wanting to spend more time with Loki.”

“Oh, so what?” Tony replies, flopping back in the chair. Which, he quickly realizes, was a bad idea as his morning coffee sloshes in his stomach and his blood sloshes in an equally sickening way through his veins, making him wince. “Aren’t people supposed to choose personal happiness over corporate greed?”

“You were never one of those people.”

“Maybe I’ve changed.”

Instead of saying anything, Pepper just walks around the coffee table to sit on the couch. Tony can feel her eyes on him. Even without looking, he can tell she’s watching. Too closely.

“I’ve just... been thinking about it a lot for the past four days. I don’t want to fuck things up. With Loki. I’ve already almost fucked up too many times, so I thought, hey, what about actively trying to do the right thing for once? Novel idea, right? I need to do whatever I can to make him happy. That’s kind of the most important thing right now. So if I have to shift my priorities a little bit...” He lets his voice trail off into a huff of breath followed by silence, hoping that Pepper will pick up the conversation and say something. But she doesn’t. “You don’t have anything sensible and logical to add to that?”

“No.”

“Not going to tell me I need to be more responsible about my business interests?”

“No.”

“Then can you at least say anything? At all? Instead of being so quiet and weird?”

“I don’t know if I have anything to say, Tony. Maybe I’m too busy trying to decide if I’m more surprised and almost proud of you for finally choosing your life over your work... or if I’m more hurt that you never bothered making any kind of choice like that for me.”

Rubbing his hands over his face, Tony swallows back a groan. All the bad feelings of teleportation-sickness have started to subside, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a whole new crop of bad feelings starting to pop up for entirely separate reasons. And, no contest, he’d rather have the first kind of bad feelings back. The kind that aren’t his fault and eventually dissipate without him having to do anything or suffer through any uncomfortable epiphanies of self-awareness. “Would it make you feel any better if I told you it’s because of you that I’m making this decision now?”

“No. Why would it?”

Right. That would’ve been too easy and convenient a fix. “I know I made just about every wrong choice possible when we were together,” he says anyway. “And, deservedly, I ended up losing the best thing I had going because of it. I don’t want to do that a second time. I don’t want to lose what I have with Loki, reliving the same stupid mistakes and being selfish and complacent. So I’m trying.
I’m really, really trying. I know I should have tried harder with you, and I feel like a jerk looking back at all the effort I didn’t put in, but I’m trying to rectify that now. I want to do the right thing this time.”

Surprisingly, Pepper nods at that as she stands back up and takes a few steps away, arms folded over her chest, to look out the window with her back mostly turned to Tony. “Well, I guess that’s something, at least,” she says, maybe more to herself than anything.

“Yeah. And I was thinking about-”

Abruptly, she turns back around. “Why don’t we talk about something else. Something less depressing than our failed relationship.”

That sounded like a Getting Back On Track non sequitur. “Something like falling stock prices and wayward media speculation you’d rather avoid?” Tony guesses.

“Yes,” Pepper replies with a nod and a tight, joyless smile. “Which you’re going to fix.”

“I did make that ambitious promise, didn’t I...”

“You did.”

“Ugghhh...” Briefly, Tony considers trying to stand up so he can pace back and forth on the carpet in front of the couch and look dynamic while he bullshits. Briefly. But a less physically demanding course of action would be to hug a throw pillow while sinking down into his chair like a boneless slime. And that sounds way more appealing. “Okay,” he says, resting his chin on the pillow’s edge. “One thing at a time. Stock prices are stock prices. I can’t do much about that today except go to the gala and act like everything is normal and fine. I’ll go to the next board meeting and make sure everyone knows I’m here, yay, and there’s no need to panic. Things’ll be back on track and pick up again like they always do. Good? Good. Spectacular plan, Mr. Stark. You always know just what to do! Thanks, self. Anyway, as for the other half of my promise...”

“You know I’m not really going to hold you to it if it’s something you don’t want to do,” Pepper says. “We can think of something else.”

“What if I do want to?”

“Right now?”

Tony almost says yes. He opens his mouth, but catches the word just in time. A nagging hook of doubt holds it back. “I mean... maybe not... right now right now. But. You know. Soon. It’s on the agenda.”

“Uh-huh,” Pepper replies with a slow, dubious nod.

“I just have to convince Loki he wants to,” Tony says, though that sounds like an excuse and a blame-shift away from his own constant second-guessing. “He kind of suffers from the mental setback of being Asgardian and has some... uh... hangups on this topic.”

“And you don’t?”

Now feels like a great time not to talk about Tony’s personal issues. “I’m working on it. But I’m now talking about me. I’m talking about Loki and getting him to stop waffling between ‘screw social normalcy; I do what I want’ and ‘no you can’t touch my butt in David’s Tea; we’ll be arrested and drawn and quartered for being sexual deviants’.”
“Right.”

“I did manage to touch his butt a few times in the hotel gift shop without too much fussing.”

“That’s great, but back to what we were talking about without any butt anecdotes…”

“Right, okay,” says Tony. “Bottom line: I will be officially announcing my relationship with Loki. At some point. Eventually. But I need to figure out how and when. Maybe talk to the marketing people, see if we can come up with a plan… Tonight though, to take some of the media attention off you, I’ll probably just do the usual. You know. Get drunk and make an ass of myself.”

“You can’t get drunk,” Pepper sighs. “You’re supposed to have just returned from rehab.”

And if Tony already thought the night was going to suck, well… that just ruins it completely. “Son of a… Fine. Fine, I guess I’ll slowly die of boredom and make a sober ass of myself hitting on somebody famous.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something ridiculous and objectionable to do.”

She’s always so supportive. “Thanks.”

“Now on a different note, since you’ve caused me so many problems over the last few days and definitely owe me… I need a favor.”

“Go ahead.”

Pepper pauses before asking whatever it is she wants to ask. Looking almost… sheepish? Embarrassed? “I… need to borrow… Loki.”

There were a lot of things Tony was anticipating she might say. That wasn’t one of them. That definitely was not one of them. “You need to borrow Loki,” he slowly repeats.

“I need a date for the gala tonight,” she says, letting the words spill out in quick succession as if that’ll help them make any more sense. “I was supposed to go with Steve, but yesterday he-”

“Wait, Steve Rogers? You and Steve Rogers?!”

She replies with a patented Scathing Look.

“Right, sorry, that’s not weird at all. Continue.”

“Yes, I was supposed to go with Steve Rogers, but yesterday he was called away to a S.H.I.E.L.D. mission in Namibia and now can’t make it.”

“So ask Rhodey.”

“Obviously I already thought of that, but Rhodey went on the same mission. And before you even suggest it, so did Coulson.”

“I wasn’t going to suggest Coulson. He wears notch lapels to black tie events, and I don’t want you associating with that unsavory class of person. What about Happy?”

“I asked him. He said he’d feel uncomfortable having to dance and socialize. Believe me, I’ve mentally gone through the entire list of every man I know, from Nick Fury to the guy who gives me creepy smiles at my spin class. The best option at this point is Loki.”
“Uh, what about me?” Tony asks. “We can go together. I don’t have a date, you don’t have a date...”

Pepper shakes her head. “No. I’d rather go with Loki. Besides, you already have an escort. Natasha has been assigned to keep an eye on you.”

“Oh, come on!” Tony shouts.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. lifted your house arrest and you took off for four days with no contact and illegally entered a foreign country! You’re back under surveillance.”

“That is blatantly unfair!”

“You can it that up with Coulson. In the meantime, I’m going to find Loki to see if he wants to come to the gala with me.”

“He won’t!” Tony yells at Pepper’s back as it walks away. “He’s very loyal to me and won’t succumb to your shenanigans!”

Except he probably will, because that’s just the way Tony’s day is going.

Standing up from the chair, Tony stretches his arms above his head and behind his back. Everything feels like it settled back into place following the teleportation: no more wayward innards or misplaced nerves. So that’s one thing that’s gone right since he woke up. One thing to offset all the crap. “Damn Pepper trying to commandeer my Loki...” he mutters to nobody in particular.

But somebody answers anyway. “Trust me: this is a last resort.”

Tony whips around, but he knows who it is by voice alone before he makes eye contact. That’s the unmistakable sound of Natasha Romanov being, once again, unsurprisingly unwelcome in his living room. “You’ve been here all along, haven’t you.”

She shrugs. “I was in the kitchen. You want some tea?” She has one mug in her hands, and a smile that looks like she's just waiting to tell him to go make his own if he falls into the trap of saying 'yes'. When he doesn’t say anything, she changes the subject. “Just so you know, my dress for tonight is robin’s egg blue. In case you want to coordinate your cufflinks or something.”

“Thanks,” he mutters. “I’ll be sure to wear any other color.”

“Car’s coming at seven. I figure we’ll arrive around eight, and stay for maybe an hour and a half before ditching out a little early?”

At least Tony can agree with her there. “Agreed. I take it you want to go to this thing with me as much as I want to go with you?”

“I have better things to do tonight,” she says, enigmatic as usual. “I assume you do too.”

“Yes.” Like hot tub with Loki. “I’ll be ready at seven.”

“Good. And since I’m going to be hanging around here all day, what’s your WiFi network?”

“You’re not allowed to use my WiFi.”

“Can I safely assume it’s the one called ‘Starkship Enterprise’?”

“You are not allowed to use my WiFi!” Tony yells after her as she retreats back to the kitchen. “I'm
not giving you the password!”

“I’m already texting Pepper for it!” she shouts in reply.

Thus the day continues to go downhill, and it’s barely even noon.

ooo

Somehow, Pepper talked Loki into escorting her to the gala. How, Tony has no idea, because all he got was a brush-off line that they were going out to rent Loki a tux and wouldn’t be back, so they’d see Tony there. Also somehow, he was unable to weasel his way out of his mandatory, S.H.I.E.L.D.-prescribed date with Natasha. So six-thirty finds him dressed and ready to go, sitting in the living room waiting. At five to seven, Natasha makes her appearance, wearing (as promised) a robin’s egg blue dress.

It’s a robin’s egg blue dress that shows off an awful lot of cleavage. And paired with the way she’s done up her hair in soft curls, and the elegant makeup, and the subtle hint of fresh, floral perfume... Tony would have to be made of ice and glass not to be, against absolutely every last speck of better judgement, at least slightly attracted. And he’s not made of ice. Or glass. He’s made of stupid, unreliable mortal flesh that always lets him down and leads him into one bad decision after another.

Oh fuck, this is going to be a long and awful night to cap off an irritating day. He just knows it.

“You look nice,” Natasha tells him as she tucks her phone into her tiny, silver-beaded purse.

“You also look... nice,” Tony allows himself to say in return, trying not to stare at her boobs. Though that’s just impossible.

“Quit staring at my tits, Stark.”

“Sorry. But just so you know, spectacular boobs are one of my weaknesses.”

“I thought ‘alive and mostly human’ was your weakness.”

“I have a lot of weaknesses,” he says as he leads the way to the front door and the car waiting outside. “Boobs. Butts. Legs. Hands. Eyes. Hair. Skin. And right now you appear to have all of those things, and it’s making me uncomfortable.”

She pauses before climbing into the back seat. “Would it make things easier if I told you to go ahead and grope ’em now and get it out of your system?”

At that, Tony’s stomach does something funny. “What, really?”

“Sure,” she replies, grinning. “I can’t promise I won’t break your wrist, but you’re welcome to try.”

Yeah, he should have seen that coming. “I’ll behave.”

It’s a long drive to the venue, during which Natasha plays with her phone and Tony stares out the window, trying to keep his mind on safer and more accessible topics than Natasha’s boobs. (Namely: Loki’s ass.) Immediately upon arrival, he makes a beeline for the bar, followed by Natasha, who has to ruin everything with a crushing reminder of what Pepper told him earlier.

“You’re not allowed to drink, Stark.”

Shit. Shit. He squeezes his hand into a fist, crushing the twenty in his grasp. He’d forgotten about that particularly torturous detail. “I know,” he says through clenched teeth. “Pepper already told
me. I was going to get... uh..."

“You’re going to order a Perrier, and you’re going to drink it straight from the bottle,” Natasha orders. “So everybody can see how well you’re doing after your return from rehab.”

That sounds like Tony’s personal nightmare. In fact, this whole evening is shaping up to be a big, extended nightmare. No booze. Forced socialization with people whose names he can’t remember. Bland appetizers that all taste like mayonnaise and dill. Natasha hanging onto his arm like a nanny. Photographers shoving lenses into their faces and snapping pics of the two of them that are no doubt going to be everywhere by morning, heading up inane gossip pieces about Tony Stark’s hot new date. And if he was hoping things would improve when Loki and Pepper arrived? Well...

It’s hard to say whether their appearance, heralded by the flashing of cameras as they glide up the stairs like shimmering royalty, is a blessing or a curse.

Tony almost chokes on his damn Perrier as the crowd slowly parts for the fairytale couple. Pepper, in a floor-length gown of champagne satin that hangs from her body like rainwater, softly shining to match the lariat of pearls at her throat. Loki, in a white jacket to stand out against a parade of lesser men all in black, with his hair pulled back into a perfectly imperfect ponytail that lets wayward waves hang down around his face. He keeps his hand on Pepper’s back as they navigate the sea of people from the entryway over to the dance floor, where they’re stopped by one of her business acquaintances. She gives even that basic greeting the full Hollywood smile. And Loki stands right behind her shoulder, full of princely grace and confidence, waiting his turn to shake hands and laugh at an unheard witticism.

They look good together. They look so good together. Shit, shit.

“You should probably find something else to concentrate on for the rest of the evening,” Natasha says to him, leaning in and speaking in a low voice. “Otherwise one of these photographers is going to get a picture of you and label it ‘the jealous ex’.

“I’m not jealous,” Tony mutters. “Do I look jealous?”

“Yes.”

“Well I’m not. I’m clearly... uh...” Enthralled is probably the right word to use. Enchanted. Mesmerized. “They look fantastic, don’t they?”

“They do look nice,” Natasha agrees.

“Yes. They do. And I’m not jealous, but I definitely am feeling some things right now. A lot of things. In at least two distinct areas.” They look so damn good. “Do you think they’d be up for a three-way later?”

The sound that comes out of Natasha’s throat is half sigh, half exasperated scoff. “I think I can safely answer on Pepper’s behalf: no, hell no, and not even in your dreams.”

“I mean, it doesn’t even have to be a three-way. I’d be completely happy just watching them.”

“Amazing.” Taking him physically by the shoulders, Natasha turns Tony around so his back is to Pepper and Loki. “You know, when I agreed to watch you tonight, I assumed you’d make some weird sexual innuendos or inappropriate remarks. But we’ve been here twenty minutes and you’ve already steered the conversation around to three-ways and voyeurism. You’re a real class act.”

“Yeah, I am. Hey, can we distract me from things I shouldn’t be thinking about by talking shop for a

“Ask away.”

“Loki’s identity,” says Tony. “As in, he needs one. Birth certificate. Passport. Some school and medical records. All that stuff. I need the best fake documents you can provide.”

“I can do that,” Natasha replies. “Just send me over some notes on any specifics you want included.”

“Thanks.”

“Now can you try to act normal? Real person normal, I mean, not you-normal. Pepper and Loki are coming over.”

And here Tony is with nothing but Perrier to help him function. “Fuck... is Loki’s hair still doing that thing?”

“The thing where it’s in a ponytail that makes him look like a skater from 1990?”

“Yeah, that thing. See, in 1990 I was a smartass nerd who wished I could be cool enough to be a skater, so it’s super effective on me.”

For better or worse, Pepper sidles up at that exact moment with a soft touch to Tony’s shoulder, saving him from whatever mean thing would have definitely otherwise come out of Natasha’s mouth. “So!” she says. “You’re here.”

“Wow, yeah, so are you,” Tony replies to that warm greeting. “And Loki. The gang’s all here.” Pepper looks down at the Perrier bottle. “Good. That’s a good choice.”

“Natasha made me.”

“I assumed.”

“And how are you enjoying your first Earth gala?” Tony asks Loki, only partway trusting himself enough to make eye contact.

“It’s pleasant.”

“Very pleasant,” Pepper adds. “Very nice. Nobody’s asked me about you yet,” she says specifically to Tony with another little pat. “And now that we’ve said our obligatory hellos so nobody thinks it’s weird that I’m avoiding you, I think Loki and I want to dance?”

Loki smiles like a dutiful puppy. “Mm-hmm.”

“Uh, Loki doesn’t know how to Earth-dance,” says Tony.

“Tony, nobody really knows how to dance,” Pepper says in answer to that, because she always has an answer to everything. “They just put hands on shoulders and shuffle like eighth graders.”

“I’ve seen it on the TV,” Loki offers.

“See? That’s qualification enough.” Taking Loki by the elbow, Pepper leads the way to the dance floor. “We’ll see you later! Much later!”
“Still think they look nice?” Natasha asks.

“Yep,” Tony says, cutting the word as brief as possible.

“Alright, well, you can’t stand at the bar all night nursing that sparkling water. Let’s do a round of the room so it looks like you’re networking. Keep up appearances. I promise I’ll even laugh when you tell lame jokes to all the bland old men.” In a perfectly choreographed example, her face lights up with wide eyes and a dazzled smile as she gasps with delight and then laughs in a musical cadence. Leaning in close, she touches one hand to her cleavage before moving it over to Tony’s wrist. It’s 100% fake as hell, but so convincing Tony still almost falls for it.

“Damn, you’re so good,” he mutters.

“It’s my job. Come on.”

So they make the rounds. Slowly. Weaving between dull conversations, from golf stories over here to market speculation over there. Every time Tony says something remotely clever, Natasha springs into action, laughing and touching his arm like a worthy sycophant. Sometimes even going so far as to say ‘oh my goooodddddd’ and shake her head in amazement. And Tony will admit it: it’s kind of fun and at first, seeing which of the business goons are desperate enough in their ass-kissing to go along with the show and laugh too loudly at his lukewarm quips. But then it drags on. And on. And they’ve been at it for an hour at least, and Tony keeps looking over at Pepper and Loki, still dancing.

Loki has inexplicably good form, with one hand snug at Pepper’s waist as he leads through a pattern of steps that he’s probably making up but that look fantastic anyway. He says something, and Pepper drops her head back and laughs. Not a fake laugh. They’re fucking legitimately enjoying themselves.

“Hey, uh,” Tony says to Natasha, excusing them from a scintillating discussion of free trade between whoever the shit these people are they’re talking to, “do you want to dance?”

Natasha gives him a look full of eyebrows and suspicion. “You know how to dance?”

“Sweetie, I grew up in a household with a mother who was an extreme Ginger Rogers fan, and a father who spent way too much time working. Guess who had to be Fred Astaire. Do you know how to foxtrot?”

“No, because I’m not sixty.”

“It’s because you’re an uncultured barbarian. Here, it’s easy. I’ll show you.”

Teaching ballroom dancing to Natasha is one of those things that could potentially be fun, in some alternate universe. One where this party was actually enjoyable and he wasn’t moping around and wishing he were dancing with Loki. Instead, in this stupid regular universe, it’s barely tolerable. Natasha’s hand feels wrong in his. Her whole presence is wrong. A sloppy lie, because of...

He glances over at Loki again. Because of what, exactly?

“Hey, uh, random question,” he says quietly to Natasha. “How old were you in 1982?”

Her eyebrow rises. “Is this something to do with the foxtrot?”

“No. Serious and unrelated question. 1982. How old were you?”
“About negative two years old?”

“Oh wow.” He nods. “You really are a wee babby. Anyway, I feel like I have to go through this whole back story so you know where I’m coming from and have the necessary narrative framing, but in 1982 I turned twelve.”

“I know.”

“That’s creepy. But in 1982 I turned twelve, which that really awkward age where you’re starting to realize things about yourself, and you’re starting to not be a kid any more, and that whole disaster known as puberty is conspiring to ruin your life. And my thing was, I knew I liked girls. That was an easy realization. Suddenly girls weren’t gross any more. The harder part was... I started to wonder if I liked boys, too. Actually, I knew I did. I had to stop myself from staring at boys in my class and, uh...” Stopping mid-step, he takes a breath and slowly exhales. Let’s arms fall as the dance unravels into nothing. “Let’s pause for a sec. Do you know what happened in 1982?”

No answer from Natasha.

“I went to a rich kid school. A lot of the boys had fathers that were doctors. And, you know, they hear things. At home. Dinner table talk, conversations between mom and dad, phone calls... So one day, in 1982, this hush-hush story starts spreading around. About a new disease. It’s something that’s been on the medical radar in bits and pieces for a while, but now doctors are starting to realize that all the symptoms are part of a bigger picture. A couple names for this disease are floating around, but the one that makes it to school is GRID. Gay-Related Immune Deficiency.”

Natasha nods, but still says nothing. She knows where this is going.

“Yeah. So right when I was locked in a godawful preteen struggle of trying to figure out whether or not I was gay or what, suddenly there’s this new complication. This new stigma. And unlike a lot of other moral or political bumps in the road, this one didn’t go away after a couple months. It just got worse. Progressively worse. For years. And Natasha... it fucked me up. It fucked me up so bad. I had nightmares, actual nightmares that I might be gay and I’d end up like those men on the news, who everyone was saying deserved what they got because of their degenerate lifestyle. Including my own parents. So I crawled deep into that ol’ closet and told myself I liked women and women only, and that was that. That’s been my face to the world for thirty-one years.”

“I’m... sorry, Tony.”

“It’s okay,” he tells her. “I’m kinda used to it by now. Anyway, that was my sob story to explain why I grew up to be such a disaster in my personal life. Because I could never be myself. Because I was always putting on this show, acting out some crazy, twisted, media-obsessed version of how I thought I should be. It’s insane. Sleeping with a bunch of women trying to prove how straight I was didn’t make me happier or a better person. And now, hesitating to be open and honest about my relationship with Loki isn’t doing a damn thing for me either. Why wasn’t I honest in the first place? There was nothing but my own mental burdens stopping me from saying no he’s not my executive assistant. Or stopping me from coming here tonight with him instead of you. I have zero reason to keep pretending. There’s no absurd rom-com plot device hanging over my head, like I have to marry a nice girl or I won’t get my inheritance. I already have my inheritance, and a shitload of self-made money on top of that. I should be able to do what I want. And what I want is to be with Loki. Right now. I want to dance with Loki.”

“Okay, I get what you’re saying,” Natasha says, stepping forward into the sphere of confidence. “But before you do anything, I suggest you think really carefully about whether or not this is the way you want to do it. Once it’s done, you can’t go back. If you go over to Loki right now...”
“I know. It’ll be a media shit show. But hey, I’ve been stuck in one of those all my adult life.”

“Not like this. There are a dozen photographers here tonight, and if they see you with Loki? There isn’t enough paper in the world to print all the National Enquirers that’ll be sold.”

“There’s... not enough bandwidth in the world to handle the gossip explosion this would cause across social networking?” Tony asks after a pause.

“What?”

“Sorry, Loki’s skater buddies from 1990 sent a fax to say they wanted their reference back. I updated it for you. Anyway. I have thought about this. I’ve thought about this a lot over the past few days. And being here right now, with you, dancing like everything’s peachy? That really drives home how wrong I am to keep up the lie.”

“Okay...” says Natasha. “But—”

“No, there are no more ‘but’s. This isn’t a discussion. I’m not looking for you to talk me through this and help make up my mind. My mind is made up. I actually feel... really confident? Right now?” More so than he’s felt in a long time. Everything feels so focused and clear. He can see, for the first time without barriers, exactly what he needs to do. “The thing is, people like me help perpetuate the social stigma against homosexuality. By being here with you instead of with Loki, I’m saying through my actions that gay relationships should stay in the closet. It’s a vicious cycle: high-profile people are afraid to come out because of what society will think, and by staying hidden, we have no power to incite change. I’m actively making the world a worse place for myself by not being honest.”

“And you’re going to fix that by dancing with Loki.”

“Yes. I am. Right now. I am ending the bullshit right now.”

“Then I hope you know what you’re in for.”

“I lived through being a prisoner of war in Afghanistan,” Tony says. “I think I can handle being called gay by the media. Forty-two year old me can handle it. I’m not doing it for forty-two year old me, though. I’m doing it for twelve year old me, who lay in bed at night absolutely terrified at the thought that he might be gay, hating himself for it, and going out of his way to lock that up and never let it show. Because that’s what you did back then. But it’s not what I’m going to do any more.”

He weaves his way carefully across the dance floor, sidestepping couples and waitstaff until he reaches Pepper and Loki near the opposite side. “Excuse me,” he says, tapping Pepper on the shoulder. “Mind if I cut in?”

“I’m not in the mood to dance with you, Tony,” she replies.

“Good, because I’m here for Loki. You can go powder your nose or something.”

Looking confused, she takes a step back and shakes her head. “You... want to dance with Loki? Are you-”

“Am I serious?” he says. “Yes. Am I crazy? Probably also yes. Whatever you were about to ask, I just spent what felt like the last seven hours explaining myself to Natasha, and I don’t want to go through it again. The answer is yes. I’m here to dance with my Loki.”

He holds out his hand. Loki, wearing the same confused expression as Pepper, looks down at it but
doesn’t make a move.

“Come on. Loki. Don’t leave me hanging. You’re making me feel bad.”

“Why do you want...” Loki murmurs, barely audible above the music.

“Mm, let’s see, because you look really hot? And we’re a couple? And Natasha has way too many boobs for me to deal with right now? And because I love you and want to be with you?”

Something in the tightly-controlled reserve of Loki’s face softens. He doesn’t say yes to Tony’s invitation. But he also doesn’t say no. He doesn’t shoot it down as ridiculous or impossible. So Tony keeps his hand held out: an open offering.

“Loki?”

Slowly, held back by who even knows how many tethers of doubt, Loki reaches out to take Tony’s hand.

“People are staring,” he whispers as Tony steps into position.

“People always stare at me. I’m famous.”

“No, they’re staring at—”

“It’s fine.” Wrapping his left arm around Loki’s waist, Tony pulls the two of them close together. “Everything is going to be fine.” His right hand slides up to Loki’s shoulder. And then, encouraged by a little sideways hint of a smile, to the back of Loki’s neck.

For once, Loki doesn’t hesitate. For once, he seems to agree. He leans down. No guidance necessary. Until his lips meet Tony’s in a soft brush of a kiss.

All around, the flashes of cameras illuminate their bodies with all the subtlety of lightning bolts heralding the storm to come.
Before You Can Say Hate Crime

Chapter Summary

Following what happened at the gala, Tony and Loki really, really, REALLY need to have a serious discussion about where they stand and the future direction of their relationship.

Chapter Notes

This fucking chapter. You guys. :

“I can think of two things wrong with that headline.”

Tony pushes Natasha’s tablet back over to her, across the kitchen island. “‘Tony Stark Gay Shocker’. Bullshit. First of all, I’m not exclusively gay, so that’s just lazy and inaccurate reporting. Second, is anybody really shocked by anything I do any more? No. I think these days I could literally build a Death Star and people would just shake their heads in moderately amused confusion. ‘Tony Stark Gay Shocker’. More like ‘Tony Stark Bisexual Inevitability’.”

He takes a gulp of coffee and a bite of toast before continuing. “Actually that’s a good retort. I should tweet it. By the way, I’m kind of disappointed you didn’t bring me a National Enquirer?”

“With all your tech dependencies, I wasn’t sure you’d know how to use one,” Natasha says as he reaches for his phone. “Are you seriously tweeting that?”

“Yes. Can I just...?” He pulls the tablet back over to snap a picture of the headline on the screen alongside his coffee mug and half-eaten breakfast. “There we go. Very artistic. ‘LOL more like Tony Stark Bisexual Inevitability’. Done. I think that gets the point across nicely, don’t you?”

“I think it’s not going to stop onslaught of reporters clamoring for an interview, or-”

“They can keep clamoring. I’m not talking to anybody today. Which reminds me: why am I talking to you?”

Natasha stares at him with an uncomfortably judgmental expression for several seconds. “You asked me to come over. To discuss Loki’s identity documents. Last night? Before we left the gala?”

“...Oh right.” That sounds like something he’d do, even if he has only fragments of a memory of doing it. “To be fair, I was very preoccupied by several other situations going on last night. For example, I’m pretty sure I almost punched someone who wouldn’t get out of my face.”

“You were mobbed,” Natasha confirms.

“Exactly. Anyway. I made up a file of a bunch of ideas for Loki’s background this morning, when I couldn’t sleep but Loki wasn’t awake yet and he looked too perfect and adorable for me to disturb him, even though he was completely naked and I wanted to-”
“I don’t need to hear those kinds of things about Loki.”

“Nope, sorry, I’m a media-certified gay shocker now, so I think that means I’m obligated to overshare my bedroom antics. What’s your email address?”

“A long series of numbers. I’ll just send you something so you can reply. If you send me details about your sex life, I will end you.”

“Too late.”

“I haven’t even sent my email yet.”

“Yeah, but I’m already planning out my reply,” Tony says. “So it’s essentially written in stone-like pixels.”

“Anything you say will be stored on a S.H.I.E.L.D. data server until the collapse of society.”

“You say that as if it’s a deterrent...” Sticking his phone in his pocket and picking up his breakfast plate, Tony takes another bite of toast. “But seriously,” he says with his mouth full, “I meant what I said about not wanting to talk to anybody today. I’m in hiding. I’m being a hermit. On the couch. With Loki.”

“Being with somebody else completely invalidates your status as a hermit,” Natasha replies, but she has to say it to his hind end because he’s already on his way out of the kitchen.

Loki’s exactly where Tony left him half an hour earlier: on the couch, in his pajamas, tucked up beside some throw pillows, watching bad TV. Bad TV showing a low quality cell phone video of the gala, freeze-framing halfway through a shaky digital zoom into that fateful kiss. Bad TV that, if Tony recalls correctly, he suggested Loki not watch.

“Aw, come on. This crap still? How many times are they going to replay that video?”

Loki doesn’t say anything as Tony sits down.

“Don’t you have anything better to watch? Like that channel that plays nothing but Law & Order reruns? How many times are you going to listen to them discuss your mysterious, poorly recorded presence, like you’re Bigfoot or something?”

“We shouldn’t have done it,” Loki murmurs,

“Yeah, we should have.” Sliding up right next to Loki, Tony balances his plate on his knees so he can wrap one arm around Loki’s back. “It was time. Overdue, in fact.”

“It’s all over the TV.”

“I told you. I’m famous. Do you know how much dumb shit is said about me? I’ve learned to ignore it.” He takes the remote out of Loki’s hands and flicks the channel over to something else that has nothing to do with them. Sports highlights. Perfect.

“I still think we shouldn’t have done it.”

Tony sighs. “So, what? Are you upset with me? Because frankly, I feel pretty darn good today.”

“I’m not upset,” Loki says in that Loki way he has of saying Loki things that don’t ever really mean what they sound like they mean.
“You damn well better not be. You know why? We just pulled one hell of a prank on the world. We went to that gala with our acceptable heterosexual partners and then at the halfway point did the ol’ switcheroo. Now there’s a twist nobody saw coming. Completely ruined a whole lot of people’s nights, because today, instead of the usual bland reporting on who wore what, the entire celebrity gossip world is focused on us. We hijacked the whole event. That’s pretty good. You gotta be proud of that, or I’m a better God of Mischief than you are.”

Okay, *that*, at least, gets a twitch of a smile from Loki.

“You know I’m right,” says Tony.

“I admit you may be *partially* right,” Loki replies. “In the smallest, most miniscule way.”

“I’m totally right. We owned that gala’s ass, and you’re trying not to smile, but I know you agree with me.”

“I’d like to agree with you more, but as it stands, I prefer my pranks to have negative effects on people who aren’t me.”

“What negative effect has any of this had on you so far?”

Loki makes a grab for the remote, but when Tony holds it out of reach, he rolls his eyes like the impatient cynic he is. And conveniently uses his unblockable space magic to change the channel back. “I’m on the TV right now, being discussed in terms that I would categorize as ‘less than kind’.”

“You’re not on TV. ‘Unnamed male partner’ is on TV. And most of those ‘less than kind’ statements are being directed at me.”

Loki nods. “Yes. They are.”

That sounds like the real point of things right there. Loki isn’t worried about himself, because how often has that been a concern in the past? Exactly never. He’s worried about *Tony*. “Okay, look,” Tony says, moving his plate over to the coffee table so he can sit sideways on the couch with one leg tucked under him, facing Loki. “This is... garbage.” He waves his hand dismissively at the TV screen. “It’s meaningless junk used as entertainment only, that nobody takes seriously. It’s not real news. Now, if CNN were dissecting our relationship I might actually give a shit, but the E! network? No. This is background noise. I don’t know what the Asgardian equivalent might be. A minstrel making up a goofy song? That’s about how important it is.”

“They’re saying-”

“I don’t care what they’re saying. It’s utter bull, and anybody who’s dumb enough have their opinion of me changed because of it doesn’t matter. At all. That’s why I want you to turn it off: because it’s not worth listening to and letting it get to you. Okay?”

“I’d just feel better if-”

“Loki. No.” He hands the remote back. “Turn it off. Do yourself a favor. Do you trust me?”

There are endless streams of counters and oppositions in Loki’s eyes, just waiting for their moment, but in true Loki form... they don’t go any further. Unspoken arguments they’ll remain. Silently, Loki takes the remote and switches the TV off.

“You need to trust me here,” Tony tries again, because that sure didn’t feel like any kind of victory.
“I know you’re worried. I can see that, and I understand. Things are different on Asgard and you don’t know what to expect here. But that’s what I’m trying to tell you. Nothing bad is going to happen, either to you or to me, because of last night. I promise, I swear, I will not let anything bad happen. I wouldn’t have done it if I thought it wasn’t the right thing to do and completely safe.”

“You said there were places in the world where we could be executed,” Loki mutters.

Of course that would be the big thing Loki remembers and latches on to. “Okay, yes, that’s true. But obviously we’re never going to go to those places. We’re going to stick to the numerous other places where two men being together is 100% legal and mostly socially acceptable.”

“But you said in this country-”

“What are you so worried about?” Tony interrupts him. “I am, according to several news sources way more reputable than the E! network, one of the most influential and powerful people on Earth. And that’s both economically and physically powerful. Like I’m a superhero. You know that, right? And you’re an actual sorcerer-god from space. It’s not only highly unlikely that anybody could do anything to seriously harm either of us, but I think it might even be impossible. We are not being executed. We are not getting arrested. We’re not even going to have slack-jawed yokels yelling nasty words at us out the window of their step-dad’s Trans Am, because if that ever happened, my vast team of bloodthirsty attack lawyers would be all over their asses before you can say ‘hate crime’. Okay? We are very well protected. So what’re you worried about? Is it something to do with Asgard?”

“No.”

“Then tell me. Please. So we can sort this out.”

Slowly and quietly, Loki’s hand slips over to rest on Tony’s knee.


After a long pause, in a soft voice, Loki asks, “What do you fear most of all?”

Tony sighs. Really, he should’ve seen this coming. When has Loki ever answered a serious question without trying to sidestep or deflect it? (Answer: about as often as he worries about his own well-being.) “If I answer that, will you answer my question?”

“Yes,” Loki replies after another substantial pause.

“Right, uh...” Giving himself a shake, Tony has to think about this for a second or five. What does he fear? Not some lame minor phobia like railroad crossings, which are creepy as hell but completely contextually irrelevant. “I guess... betrayal?” he finally manages to say. “Being lied to while somebody’s going behind my back trying to fuck me over? That always leaves an ugly scar full of nagging doubts that maybe I shouldn’t ever trust anybody. Especially not, I don’t know, a person who was essentially an uncle or even a second father to me. Old friend of my dad’s. Who’d come over for dinner all the time when I was a kid, bring me candy and weird toys from around the world, take me riding on his motorcycle... The kind of person who, one year for my birthday, gave me this crazy prototype Nintendo he got from some business associate in Japan. Somebody who was there when my parents died, and helped me scrape my life together in those first couple shaky months when I had to step up to take control of Stark Industries. And who then hired a terrorist group to kill me so he could take over the company. You know. That kind of thing that could theoretically happen to anybody.”
Loki looks up. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Me too. He was family to me, but I guess I was just a nuisance and an obstacle to him. So. That may have made me a little... extra vigilant. About everything. I used to just not give a shit about people, but now I jump right into assuming the worst, and find any excuse not to trust them. I don’t think it’s an improvement.”

Loki nods. Doesn’t say anything.

“And that’s me,” Tony concludes. “Now it’s your turn. What are you afraid of? Either about this whole media circus or in general.”

Slowly, Loki leans back to sink into the couch, but keeps his hand right where it is on Tony’s knee. His fingers tap out a freeform rhythm like raindrops as he runs his tongue between his teeth and then bites down on his bottom lip.

“I... worry about... losing you,” he finally says, drawing out each quiet, half-whispered word. The bright flare of affection that rises up at Loki’s confession fades almost instantly into a dark ache below Tony’s ribs. “Okay,” he replies, just as quietly. “Any... any specific reason why?”

“I just... do. Maybe because I always tend to lose the people I make the mistake of caring about.”

Loki’s voice is almost too soft to hear as he stares up at the ceiling.

“Do you want to tell me about any of that?” Tony cautiously asks. And when Loki doesn’t answer, he shifts his position again to sit up close at Loki’s side, legs and hips and arms touching, and drops his head against Loki’s shoulder. “Obviously you don’t have to, and I can’t make you. But hear me out. I have this theory, very well established in my mind, dating all the way back to a couple seconds ago. I have this theory that maybe part of your worry comes from you feeling like there’s a kind of invisible barrier between us? A barrier that comes from – specifically – the fact that we don’t share a lot of thoughts and emotions or all that touchy-feely crap. Actually wait, no, we’re pretty good at the touching and feeling. It’s the talking we suck at. But. Um.”

He grabs Loki’s hand. “What I mean is, I think it’s possible you’re feeling isolated because we don’t have the free exchange of ideas part of the relationship going for us. You’re intentionally closing yourself off and not telling me about... whatever... things... because you’re worried you’ll lose me and you don’t want to open yourself up in what you see as a high-risk situation. But at the same time, in doing that, you’re creating more distance. You’re creating more barriers. You don’t fully trust me, so I can never fully understand you, and because I never fully understand you, we move more and more out of alignment in ways that can’t be fixed with just a physical connection. And then the more misaligned we are, the more we don’t understand each other, the bigger the barrier gets and the more you feel justified in keeping your distance. On and on. You’re worried about losing me, but I’m starting to worry it might turn into a self-fulfilling prophesy. We need to change, Loki. Both of us. Not just you: I know I have problems too that I hope you’ll feel comfortable enough to call me out on when I can’t see them for myself. But you need to talk to me. I think I’ve been really patient with you, not pushing anything, not forcing any issues. Now I’m serious... You need to start letting me in on some of whatever’s going on in your head. I think it’ll help. At some point, we need to actually communicate.”

Quelle surprise: Loki remains absolutely still and silent.

“And you know,” Tony tacks on, “part of the reason for me monologuing all that just now was to nudge you toward actually responding. Tell me something. Come on. You can keep all your dark secrets if you want, about your life and your past and how you used to be married or whatever, and I
can live with not knowing. But I need you to tell me about the things that directly affect me and us. I need that. I can’t be guessing all the time.”

Pulling his hand out of Tony’s grip, Loki presses the tip of his thumb against his teeth, which catch on the nail. It’s already bitten short and ragged. But that sure doesn’t stop him from trying to make it even shorter. “I know.”

“So...?”

He has to extricate himself from Tony’s various levels of hanging on: not just pull his hand away, but shrug his shoulders and move position on the couch so he’s sitting at the edge of the cushion, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. And if that’s what he needs to do? Create a little gap of space between them, like a safe neutral zone in case the conversation goes wrong and hasty getaway is in order? Well, that’s what has to be done.

“Being with you is... probably the only truly good thing that’s ever happened to me,” he says, speaking every word so precisely and formally, like a third-party messenger for his own thoughts. Maybe this kind of compartmentalization makes it easier. The Loki who thinks those things isn’t the same Loki who gives them voice. Gotta keep up that distance. “And every day I have some new, terrible thought about how I might possibly lose you. Maybe you’ll wake up one morning and realize what an awful mistake you’ve made, burdening yourself with me. Or maybe you’ll meet someone else. Someone better. Maybe you’ll decide you should have stayed with Pepper. Maybe so many things. Or maybe everything will work out perfectly, so perfectly, and we live in bliss and joy until one day, suddenly, too many years have passed and...” He lets his shoulders sag. “There are so many ways I could lose you.”

“Hm,” says Tony, even though it’s his turn now to be uncomfortably speechless. Instead of a reply, his hand moves in to rub its way up and down Loki’s back in a stilted gesture of reassurance. “I, um... I don’t know... what I can do to fix that,” he admits.

“I don’t know if there is anything you can do. Because, Tony, I know it’s irrational. I know I’m being paranoid and jumping from one preposterous conclusion to the next along a path of worst possible scenarios, but at the same time... I also know that one day I will lose you. Whether that be sooner or later...”

“You don’t know-”

Loki cuts right through that weak rebuttal. “Yes, I do. You’re mortal. We have, at absolute best, a few dozen years. Unhelpful as it is to dwell on that fact, lying to myself about how long you might live only makes things worse.”

Oh. “So that’s what this is about, then.”


That’s what it’s about. The mortality hurdle. Again. Tony should’ve guessed. Why would Loki be so upset about what a bunch of stupid humans on the E! network thought? No, that’s peanuts. That’s only the cosmetic surface issue, when Loki’s issues always run at least four cryptic layers deep. What he’s really worried about is the status of their relationship as a whole. The big picture. The really big picture. The where-does-this-end-up-down-the-road picture. The despite-that-grand-public-gesture-how-seriously-committed-is-Tony-Stark picture.

“Then I guess... um... yeah, right,” Tony says, stumbling over those simple monosyllables and finishing the sentence off with a nervous, throat-clearing cough. “I guess... I guess we better... um.
We should talk about that. Probably. Yeah.”

“I thought you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“No, I said I wasn’t ready to talk about it. But in all honesty, what are the chances I’ll ever be ready to talk about something like that? So might as well go for it now. Tell me all about your idea of turning me into an elf so we can sail into the west together.”

“...What?”

“Never mind. Ignore that reference. I keep forgetting you’re the only person on the planet who’s never heard of Lord of the Rings. Anyway, just tell me what your whole Asgardian transformation immortality plan involves.”

Loki shakes his head. “There’s... very little to it. All I need to do is enlist the help of my mother and perhaps a few other trusted witches.”

“Sounds like there’s probably more to it than that,” says Tony. “Such as, traveling to Asgard to see these people?”

“Or they could come here.”

“I guess...” Tony allows. Though which is worse: returning to Asgard, or inviting strange Asgardian rituals into his home? “But what would this transformation involve? Is it just like a longevity thing, or would there be outward physical changes as well? Mental changes?”

“Likely, yes.”

“Such as...?”

“I don’t know exactly.”

“Right, see now this is the part I don’t like,” says Tony, scooching up to the edge of the cushion and sitting straighter at Loki’s side. “I can’t just say, ‘Okay, go wild, turn me into an Asgardian’ not knowing what might happen. When you turned me into a frost giant, it fundamentally changed who I was as a person. Hell, when you transform into a frost giant, it changes who you are. You know that. First hand. And I know you don’t like it. So maybe you get why I’m wary of losing who I am and becoming something else.”

“It wouldn’t be that drastic a change,” Loki tells him. “Jotun brains are very different from both human and Asgardian. But a human brain is identical to Asgardian in most ways. Only... ah...”

“Trying to find a nice way to say ‘dumbed-down’, aren’t you?”

“I think ‘limited’ is the better word choice,” Loki tactfully finishes. “An Asgardian brain to a human brain is the same, but more. So I should think you would retain much of yourself, while gaining new abilities that an Asgardian mind can access.”

“Yeah, you think I’d retain much of myself. Not you know I’d retain all of myself. There’s a difference.”

“Tony...” Loki sighs, as if that’s somehow an unreasonable contention.

“No, I’m serious,” Tony says. “You thinking I’ll probably stay mostly the same isn’t good enough. Maybe you haven’t noticed, but I’m pretty much my favorite person. I don’t want to change that. I
need to know for sure, 100%, no question, that I’ll definitely stay completely myself.”

“Tony, there’s no way I can promise that.”

“Then how do you expect me to promise to go along with this without knowing what I’m getting into?”

“So you have decided against it,” Loki mutters. And he leans not-so-subtly away.

“No, I haven’t,” says Tony, “and now you’re trying to guilt trip me, which is a real shitty move. Don’t do that. All I’ve decided is I need a hell of a lot more information and reassurance before I can make a decision. Before I can do anything, you need to figure out a way to make sure this isn’t going to fuck me over.”

“There isn’t—”

“Bullshit. There’s always something. There’s always some way to figure out how to do what needs to be done. So maybe instead of moping there, feeling sorry for yourself because I’m a dumb, selfish, mortal who refuses to bow down in awe and accept your help, maybe you should think about compromises? Alternatives? Anything?”

“And how exactly does one compromise immortality?!?” Loki hisses, and if he sounds like he’s getting angry now, that’s only a good thing in Tony’s mind. At least Angry Loki sometimes sticks around for the fight instead of giving up and slithering off to sulk in silence.

“I don’t know. I’m just throwing out ideas here. We need to talk about this, so I’m trying to talk. I’m trying to have a discussion. I’m trying to bring up all the annoying, practical details of undergoing something as massively fucking complicated as replotting the layout of my entire future. Details you seem to be overlooking. The safety of this weird, back-alley procedure is only one of them. Another would be: where would we live? I don’t think we can stay on Earth as immortals, and returning to Asgard seems like the world’s worst idea. So where would we live? What would we do? How would we support ourselves? What would—”

“You think I haven’t thought about all that?” Loki interrupts.

“How would I know what you’ve thought about?” Tony snaps. “You never tell me anything!”

With a frustrated growl, Loki jumps up from the couch. And for one awful moment, Tony’s sure he’s going to storm out. Just leave, like he did before. Like he’s done in the past, when things start going contrary to his interests. And Tony almost apologizes. He should apologize, shouldn’t he? For saying something so flippantly dumb and counterproductive when he’s trying to hold an adult conversation? The I’m sorry rests right there on his tongue, ready to fly.

But instead of leaving... Loki turns around after only three steps. “I’ve thought about it,” he says, sounding so much calmer than he looks. “I’ve thought about this all. In very specific detail. Every day. Every day, I think about what we should do, because it’s the only way I can distract myself from thinking about how you might die. I think about how we could live. If only you’d agree. And Tony, what I think is that you’re so caught up in immediate concerns and the net of your familiar life on Earth that you’re missing everything else. All the possibilities. You need to look beyond. Think of all the years we could have, and then think of what those years would let us do. Where we could go. What you could learn and experience. Think of that instead. There’s so much out there that I think you would want to see. The only thing stopping you now is that you don’t know about it, so if you’d only listen to me...”
The discussion’s sudden and sharp change in direction knocks Tony off balance. Loki was supposed to say something cutting, like an attack. Not something... halfway inspirational? And almost kind? Caught off guard, he lets his body flop back, sinking down against the back of the couch. “I... what?” he fumbles to say.

Loki comes back over to the couch, but doesn’t sit down. Instead, he reaches out to let his fingertips skim over Tony’s shoulder: a distant and melancholy touch. “Have you never wanted to see what exists beyond your own comfortable little home? All the other worlds? All of their knowledge and technology? If you loved that disgusting marketplace on Asgard, I promise there’s far more and far better for sale on planets that aren’t shackled by Earth’s limited resources or Asgard’s fierce adherence to tradition.”

It’s not so much a switch being flipped as it is a dial being slowly turned. Not an immediate epiphany, but a dawning realization. A little droplet of an idea that steadily grows in to something bigger. And really, Tony has to ask himself: why the hell did he never consider that angle before? Honestly, what did he think when Loki brought up the option of immortality? That they’d stay on earth being awkwardly non-aging anomalies who’d have to hide their identities like pop culture vampire stereotypes? Or that they’d go back to Asgard and be miserable outcasts? Instead of the objectively awesome possibility of living in fucking space?! “Shit,” he whispers.

“You’re beginning to understand the possibilities?”

“I am... hearing the possibilities,” he says, just to say something so he doesn’t end up sitting there with his mouth hanging open like a dumbstruck idiot at all the insane potential roads forward now rapidly unfolding in his brain. “Understanding is going to take... uh...”

It’s going to take a while. Oh boy, is this every going to take a good, long while. Because space. Space. Living with Loki. In space. Visiting other planets. It sounds so completely crazy (crazier, at least, than dating an alien wizard-god) and easily one or two steps beyond the threshold of believability at the moment. Space. Not just immortality, but interstellar immortality, as if that doesn’t add a whole new level of making Tony feel like he’s over his head and out of his depth... How’s he supposed to even begin to wrap his brain around that, when he’s still stuck back where they were two minutes ago on the logistics of the Asgardian transformation alone?

And on that note: would this sudden, new possibility of leaving boring old Earth behind and spending the next thousand or so years exploring the starscape with Loki be worth the risk of turning into something and someone else?

(Yes? But also no? But maybe more yes? That’s a tough call, and one he’s pretty sure he won’t be able to answer without a whole lot more thought.)

“You need more time to think about this,” Loki says as a statement of observance, because Tony’s reply is a foregone conclusion that doesn’t necessitate the asking of a question.

“I... need a shit load more time to think about this,” Tony agrees.

“How long do you think you need?”

Groaning, Tony presses his hands up over his eyes. “Aw, Jesus, Loki... You asked me that before, and the answer is the same. I don’t know. This is weird as hell for me, and you pushing makes it even weirder.”

“I’m not trying to push you.”
“Well maybe not, but from my side it damn well feels like that’s what you’re doing.”

“I only want you to take this seriously and consider.”

“I am,” Tony says. “Okay? I am taking this seriously. That’s why I need time to think about it, instead of making a stupid, rushed decision that I’m not ready to make. I need to come to terms with the whole concept of your space move offer, which, knowing me – spoiler alert – I will very likely agree to. Because space. But we also need to have a lot more talks where I ask you a million questions about weird whys and hows and what-ifs and timelines and plans and... This is going to be a multi-month project. Actually it’s probably going to be a multi-year project, before we get through everything and make a final decision. I need you to be good with that. What you’re asking is huge. You gotta realize.”

Whether he does or not, Loki nods. “I know.”

“And while I’m doing my thinking, I really need you to do more thinking about how you could turn me into an Asgardian or whatever in a way that doesn’t change what I don’t want changed. Above all else, I need to fully understand what my options are before committing to anything.”

“I suppose I could... ask my mother,” Loki says as he sits back down, exhaling his words. “She may know of someone with more experience in this specific branch of magic.”

“Okay. Good. See? Now we’re getting somewhere. By the way, this is how talking is supposed to happen. We share our grievances and we argue, and then we eventually work our way around to some sort of consensus on how to move forward. Except usually in a normal relationship, people debate how to remodel the bathroom, or what kind of new car to get. Not magically altering somebody’s life expectancy and then moving to space. Just FYI.”

“Are we meant to have a ‘normal’ relationship?”

Tony slips his arm around Loki’s waist. “Fuck no. This is way better.”

Incredibly goddamn weird? Yes. Occasionally frustrating as hell? Also yes. But better.

ooo

There’s another thing Tony needs to do today. You know. Besides committing to serious consideration of a permanent move to space (which one might think would be enough to heap on one’s plate, but no). There’s one other thing. And that other thing he needs to do is extinguish some of the inane rumors blazing their way across the world of gossip before they get too out of hand.

There’s really only one way to combat internet rumors like that. So, sitting down at a desk in his workshop, he turns on his camera and hits record.

“Hey,” he says to the lens and the inevitable millions of people who will end up watching this grainy, low-light confession. “It’s me. Everyone knows who I am, and if you don’t, I’d question your motivation for watching my video. Anyway, I’m here to set the record straight on a couple things and tell you the real story before all the lies get too out of hand. I thought about doing some interviews, but those always run the risk of being edited or presented in a way that distorts the facts to suit the interviewer’s agenda, so I figured the best way to get the actual truth out there is to just do it myself. And here we go. My side and –let’s be honest – the only valid side to this story.”

He leans forward in his chair. “First up. Number one. There were approximately eight hundred billion mentions today of me being ‘gay’, which is factually incorrect. Take note: I am bisexual. Always have been. Refused to admit it to myself for a while, but that’s neither here nor there. I’m
bisexual, and I feel like it’s critical to correct people who say otherwise not just because this is who I am and what I want to put out there, but because some cretins are now claiming I’m ‘gay’ as a way to invalidate past relationships I’ve had with women. That’s some bullshit. To anybody saying my relationship with Pepper was a sham, that I was using her to pretend to be straight, or anything along those lines: no. I’m telling everyone now how wrong that entire mindset is. The truth is Pepper and I broke up because we were just incompatible as a couple, and also probably because I’m an inconsiderate jerk. But rest assured, our relationship was real, and it ended for reasons entirely unrelated to sexuality.

“Which brings us to point two in this confessional video,” he says, holding up two fingers as a bare minimum visual aide. “Yes, Pepper knew. About me. She’s known for a long time. And she’s known about my new relationship pretty much since it started. So that one clickbait headline I saw about Pepper being ‘shocked and dismayed’ is total bunk. I mean, come on guys. She invited my boyfriend to the gala as her date. Actually the term she used was ‘borrow’. She borrowed my boyfriend because the date she was planning on bringing had something come up last minute and couldn’t make it. Anyway, I didn’t suddenly hook up with a random guy, and I definitely didn’t steal him from my ex on the dance floor last night. He is, truth be told, somebody I’ve been seeing for a while. And that would be point three.”

Tony takes a breath. Holds it. Exhales. Here goes. “His name is Loki, and he and I have been... kind of? On and off? Together? Since last July? The timeline is weird and complicated, but we’ve been together together since November. I don’t want to go into a lot of identifying details or specifics without making sure he’s okay with it first, and also it’s none of anybody’s damn business. So all I’m going to say is we met through work and have actually... been having a decent go of things. We kept quiet because neither of us was entirely sure we wanted to subject ourselves to the astonishing levels of public scrutiny you guys are now heaping down on us, but last night at the gala, I was hanging out with Natasha – a work friend who’s also 100% aware of everything, so don’t get any ideas – and watching Pepper dance with Loki and, uh... It felt wrong? You know? To keep up this pointless charade of compulsory heterosexuality? So, I decided, wow! What a great opportunity for coming out! In front of everybody! With all these paparazzi assholes hovering around! What could possibly go awry in this scenario, am I right? But for real, it all comes down to the fact that I was lying to the world about myself and my relationship, and it felt like shit. I really care about Loki, and pretending I didn’t felt like shit. Watching him dance with somebody else because I was too scared to be honest felt like shit.

“So there you have it,” he says to wrap things up. “This is a short video confessional because I don’t really feel like I should have to explain myself to the internet, but I did want to clear a few things up. In summary: I’m bisexual, I’m in a relationship with a man named Loki, Pepper is fully in the loop, I’m going public with all this now because continuing to hide it felt like shit, and every crazy assumption everyone is making right now is completely wrong. Maybe I’ll answer more questions in the future if and when Loki’s comfortable sharing some information about himself, but maybe everyone’ll just have to learn to live with disappointment. Honest to God, it’s really none of your fucking business. Okay? Okay. I’m glad we had this talk. Now don’t get all weird and make me regret posting this.”

That should be a good enough wrap-up to the video. Yeah. Good enough. He switches off the camera. “Hey Jarvis?” he says before he can change his mind. “Go ahead and dump this bad boy on YouTube and spam away across whatever social media accounts I still have active.”

“Including LinkedIn?”

“Uh. Maybe not LinkedIn.”
“Uploading now, sir. And I would also like to inform you that two individuals have just arrived in the driveway.”

Tony runs his hands back through his hair. “Shit. S.H.I.E.L.D.?!” So much for being a hermit.

“No. These two arrived with a massive spike in electromagnetic energy, unlike anything I’ve ever encountered. My readings indicate they simply... appeared out of nowhere. They must have been using some form of block to disrupt my scanners, though—”

“I don’t think so,” Tony interrupts, and he’s already up out of his chair and halfway to the stairs. “Give me a visual?”

The security camera feed appears a second later on every screen within Tony’s sightline, showing what Jarvis just told him: two figures are walking up the driveway toward the front door. Man and woman. Both wearing, exactly as he suspected and/or feared, Asgardian clothes.

One of them, he recognizes immediately.

“Hey Loki?” he shouts as he gets to the top of the stairs. “You better get out here.”

Really, he didn’t even need to say that, because Loki’s right there rounding the corner coming from the bedroom hallway. “I sensed them, too.”

“What do you think they want?”

“How should I know?”

“You haven’t had any contact with anyone on Asgard?”

Loki shakes his head. “Not since we left.”

Awesome. So this is an unplanned and unexpected visit. Tony’s absolute favorite kind. Spec-fucking-tacular. “Can we pretend we’re not home?”

“No. He’ll know we’re in here.”

In other words, Tony should just get it over with and open the damn door. Greet his company with an enthusiastic, glowing smile. Or at least a strained, fake smile as he undoes the deadbolt and lets the door swing wide.

Why does an already trying day have to end with this magnitude of extra complication?

“Heeeeyyyyyyyyy,” he says to the large and (now that Tony can get a good look at him up close) notably humorless figure standing on the doorstep. “Thor.”
Disastrous Sex Magic

Chapter Summary

When Thor appears, it means something's wrong. And what's wrong is that the universe is in terrible danger, and somebody whose name may or may not be Loki has to help fix it.

Chapter Notes

Please see my tumblr for numerous amazing excuses as to why this chapter took so long! :D (Numerous = at least one.)

Also, I would like to extend a sincere thank you to everyone who's reading this and putting up with my shitty update schedule. I'd say I'm trying my best but let's face it I'm just not very good at timeliness.

Thor doesn’t explain his sudden appearance. Nor does he even sum up. What he does say is, “I need to speak with Loki,” and leaves it at that.

What he also does not do, in addition to every single other thing Tony assumed a person who randomly showed up on an acquaintance’s doorstep might reasonably do, is introduce the petite brunette tagging along at his side.

“Hi,” she says, holding out her hand to Tony as Thor shoves his way into the house and presumably drags Loki off into the void or maybe the TV room. “I’m Jane. Foster. Jane Foster. Um. Sorry, Thor, uh...”


The bashful and borderline guilty smile that lights up her face is one Tony’s seen hundreds of times before. It’s the smile of somebody who’s seconds away from embarrassing herself by either saying something fannish and awkward, or rambling on in the clutches of incoherent, nervous energy. Maybe even both. “I know,” she says. “I’ve actually followed a lot of your work, and, um, I was at a talk you gave? At the Advancements in Physics Symposium in Chicago in 2007? About quantum entanglement and theoretical applications in the future of aerospace engineering? I found that really fascinating, since so many of the ideas overlapped with the research I’d been doing for my PhD thesis, and-”

“You’re a scientist?”

“Oh... yeah.” Looking down at her outlandish Asgardian attire, Jane runs two self-conscious hands over her armored waist. “Astrophysicist. I don’t... I don’t normally dress like this.”

“Right,” says Tony. That’s where he heard the name before. Jane Foster and Erik Selvig. All the
notes Coulson gave him back before this whole Asgardian shenanigan started, what feels like a lifetime ago. “Why don’t you come inside? You want a drink? Knowing the Bobbsey Twins, if they don’t start fighting within thirty seconds, they’re liable to talk for hours. We may have a while. Coffee? Tea? Something stronger?”

“After the day I’ve had, I could go for something stronger,” Jane says as she follows him to the living room. “Thank you. If you don’t mind.”

As if Tony would ever mind. “What’s your drink of choice?”

“Gin and tonic?”

Mommost of the mom drinks. But Tony’s pretty sure he has a few cans of tonic somewhere in farthest back corner of one of those underused bar cupboards. He fixes Jane her gin and tonic, then pours a scotch for himself. “Cheers.”

“Thank you. Your house is really beautiful, by the way. And... wow, I’m sorry, I feel so awkward sitting here. If I say something stupid...”

“You clearly just came here from Asgard,” says Tony, “and being in my house is making you feel awkward?”

“Yeahhh,” she whispers, biting her lip. “Uhhh... It’s a... it’s a different kind of awkward? I mean, Asgard is obviously...” She doesn’t say exactly what it is. “Totally different.”

“Yeah,” Tony agrees.

She jumps on that little shared connection between them with an immediate, furious nod. “Thor told me you’d been there. It’s amazing, isn’t it? I hardly had any time to see anything, but the level of technology... I wish I had a month just to look at it all.”

“It’s something all right. Hey, so.” Trying to steer the conversation in a more informative direction, he sits down in the chair next to hers. “Not that I’m not genuinely thrilled to see Thor, because he’s always a treat, but this whole, uh, sudden appearance thing? It’s kind of throwing me off my game. So maybe just to get me up to speed, could you run through literally the entire sequence of events that led to... whatever happened? And why Thor is now here? And why he needs to speak to Loki so urgently? I’d feel better knowing these things.”

Theoretically, anyway. There’s always a real good chance that once he learns what’s going on he’ll realize he was better off not knowing, but that’s Five-Minutes-From-Now-Tony’s problem.


“This isn’t about what happened last night at the charity ball, is it?”

Jane frowns. “The what?”

Good. So overprotective older brother Thor isn’t here to kick Tony’s ass for dishonoring Loki on international television. And if he’s here for an ass-kicking due to different reasons, well... that’s another one of Five-Minutes-From-Now-Tony’s problems. “Never mind. Tell me your grand tale.”

Unlike Thor, Jane seems to be detail-oriented enough to tell the story thoroughly, starting from the beginning, which involves a lot background into her scientific research. And if this were the whole story, wouldn’t that make everything easier? Just Jane, in London, working on her wormhole theories and describing the specialized equipment she designed and built. This is the kind of story
Tony likes. The kind of story he knows Jane is spicing up specifically for his benefit, with electromechanical specs and exact measurements on scanning frequencies, because she probably gets to talk about this sort of thing with very few other random strangers. All stories should be like this.

But of course Jane wouldn’t be in his living room right now if things ended there. So act two starts off with a wild left turn into what-the-fucksville, featuring Jane going off to investigate a strange reading and ending up stepping into an alternate reality somehow. A strange, semi-sentient energy invades her body. Thor shows up and drags her off to Asgard, where she’s insulted by Odin (welcome to the club) and learns about something called the Convergence and dark elves trying to destroy the universe because apparently that’s what dark elves do.

She says all of that completely straight: not even a hint of apprehension about the weirdness. She’s probably assuming that Tony, being the only other person on Earth who’s been to Asgard, would be well acquainted with the kind of shit that goes down there and find all of this perfectly plausible.

Unfortunately, she’s right. “Okay...” he says, rubbing his forehead in anticipation of the headache that he’ll just take for granted is on its way. “So I’m guessing Thor is looking for Loki’s help in dealing with Asgard’s new elf infestation?”

“Kind of,” says Jane. “Uh...” For the first time, she pauses, and seems hesitant about what she wants to say next. “Thor does need Loki’s help. The Aether is too entwined with my body’s energy. No-one on Asgard knew how to siphon it out, and—”

“He thinks Loki can?”

She shakes her head. “No. Only Malekith can control it. Only Malekith can draw it out, but if he gains control before Thor can destroy it... everything would be over. We can’t risk letting that happen on Asgard. Or on Earth. Thor thinks the only remotely safe place to try would be on Svartalfheim, but Odin disagrees with the whole plan and won’t open the Bifrost to send us there. So... we need Loki. Thor says Loki knows of these secret, magical paths between worlds.”

Right. That sounds way more like something Loki would be able to do. “Yeah, okay,” Tony says. “He’s mentioned those to me before.”

“Did he mention knowing about one between Earth and Svartalfheim?”

“No. Actually... I think he specifically mentioned not knowing the whereabouts of one between Earth and Svartalfheim.” And also something about the atmosphere on Svartalfheim being toxic enough to kill a person within three days.

“But he’d be able to find it?”

“Probably? When he and I were on Asgard, before the Bifrost was repaired, we were looking into ways to get back to Earth. One of the options was to go through Svartalfheim, though Loki nixed that idea because he didn’t think we’d be able to find the pathway before the poison air killed us. But if we’re looking from this side, we’ll have more time.”

“No we won’t,” Jane mutters. “Malekith can sense the Aether. He tracked me to Asgard within a day, and he’s probably on his way here right now. At best, we have until tomorrow.”

Tony should have expected that. When is anything ever easy? “But wait,” he says, mind skipping back to something Jane said a few sentences ago. “You said Odin shut down the Bifrost. How did you get here? One of those interplanetary pathways, or... No, wait. You appeared in my driveway. So somebody has access to another way to travel between worlds?”
“It’s a dedicated gateway,” Thor’s voice interjects from somewhere off to the right, prompting Tony to look up. “Every time a portal is opened, it creates a temporary tunnel through space. When Loki opened that portal between the palace and your home here, my mother was able to trace it soon enough after its creation that it hadn’t yet fully closed. She and several powerful witches pinned it open and created a weak but stable link that can be utilized by those who know where it is and have the ability to open it. A few of my mother’s close friends helped us to escape and come here despite my father’s orders that we remain on Asgard.”

All Tony can do is blink as Thor sits down on the couch. “Um. Are you saying... there’s a wormhole in the middle of my driveway? That goes to Asgard?”

“Yes.”

Strictly speaking, it’s not the weirdest thing Tony’s heard in the past few minutes. But it may be the most intrusively disconcerting. “…And I’m just learning about this now because...?”

“I only learned of it recently myself. My mother salvaged the link in secret, before the Bifrost was repaired, in case it might be useful to you and Loki. Only she and five others knew of its existence.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“I don’t care,” says Thor, uncharacteristically harsh and stony. “We have more critical things to worry about, as I’m sure Jane has told you. We need Loki to find the way to Svartalfheim within the next few hours.”

“Why Loki?” Tony has to ask. “It sounds like Asgard has other powerful witches or wizards or sorcerers or whatever you want to call them. Why do you specifically need Loki’s help?”

“He’s the one who’s studied these pathways. He knows the locations of more of them than anyone else, and has been more successful at finding them.”

“Okay then, why Loki alone? If magic can be done in groups, why not bring some of these powerful people from Asgard with you? Why didn’t you bring your mother along with you?”

Thor looks over at Jane, and in turn, Jane looks down at her drink. “You didn’t tell him.”

“I was... thinking about how to say it,” Jane replies.

That’s all that’s needed for Tony’s stomach to preemptively drop. He knows what Thor’s about to say before Thor even takes the breath to say it. Somehow, in moments like this, he always knows.

“My mother is dead, Tony Stark.”

Of course, the knowing doesn’t make the hearing any easier. “I’m... sorry,” he murmurs.

“I appreciate the thought, but now isn’t the time to be sorry. It’s time to act before any more lives are lost. She was murdered by Malekith, and the sooner I knock his worthless head from his body, the sooner her death will be avenged. What I need you to do is go speak to Loki. He’s taken the news too hard, but the world can’t wait for him to mourn. He won’t listen to me. He may listen to you. Whatever you need to do... Every minute we waste puts us all in greater danger.”

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In the grand scheme of things, when it comes to saving the world, Tony would realistically be better off employing any one of his other numerous skills. Any of them. Any at all. Blowing shit up.

But as luck would have it, the skill that is required to actually save the world is his weakest one. Namely: talking through emotional, personal issues with Loki.

(Fuck.)

“Hey,” he says, softly, as he pushes open the bedroom door. In the darkness, he can just make out the shape of Loki’s back lying on the bed. “Thor said you were in here.”

Loki says nothing as he crosses the room and sits on the edge of the mattress. The energy in the air, though... It’s not an awkward silence, or an angry silence, or a defeated silence. It’s a terrifying silence. An overwhelming silence, full of a thousand things Tony can’t even begin to identify, let alone address.

But he has to start somewhere.

“Thor... told me what happened.”

No response from Loki. Not that he was expecting anything.

“You probably remember this, because you remember everything, but... I told you a while back how my mom was killed when I was twenty-one. Suddenly. An accident. So. I think I know exactly how you feel right now.”

“I remember,” Loki whispers.

“Yeah. Do you... do you want to talk about it at all?”

“No.”

Understandable. Tony never wanted to talk about it either. Everyone always asked how he was, how he was feeling, as if the answer could possibly be anything other than ‘terrible’. He didn’t want to talk. He wanted to scream and throw things and watch them shatter, or lie in bed staring at the ceiling as he spent every ounce of strength just concentrating on not letting his life fall apart. Talking, when the wounds were fresh, just kept making them bigger.

“Do you want me to sit here and do nothing and help you not be overwhelmed by all those dumb fucking intrusive thoughts that make your brain feel like it’s spinning out of control and losing its hold on the rest of your body?”

“Yes. Or... you can lie down.”

“I can do that.”

Lying on the mattress, his arm fits easily and comfortably around the curve of Loki’s body. It feels right, somehow, to snug up close and press a kiss to the back of Loki’s neck. I’m here, it says. Right here. With you. And given everything Loki said earlier about losing everyone he loves? That seems important.

A minute later, Loki rolls over to face him, head resting on his shoulder. “Thor sent you in here to talk to me, didn’t he?”

“Yeahhhhhhh,” Tony admits. “But if you don’t feel like talking, I don’t feel much like carrying out
his orders. We can just lie here instead. Although.” He sighs. “I do have this awful suspicion he might come barging in to see what the holdup is.”

“Likely.”

“But I bet we have a few minutes.” He kisses Loki’s hair. “And... I really am sorry about your mom. She was-”

“Tony, I need you to not say that right now.”

“No?”

“I need you to not say anything about it. I need to just... pretend everything is fine. For now.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tony agrees with a little nod. It’s not like he’s never done that exact thing before.

“What did Thor say to you?” Loki asks to change the subject.

“Nothing much. Mostly that he wants you to get your ass out there and help him find the hidden pathway to Svartalfheim. So maybe... I don’t know. Is what he wants you to do even possible? Because if not, let me know. I have no qualms about telling him to go fuck off and find a different way to save the universe so we can stay in bed.”

“It’s possible.”

“Within the timeframe? Jane made it sound like we have less than a day to find this pathway.”

“Yes. Within the timeframe. But... I don’t think anyone will like the method.”

“Why not?”

After a moment of still silence, Loki slowly sits up. “Tracking down the pathway on my own would take days. Even weeks. To find it sooner, I need to amplify my own abilities, and the only way to do that is through... uh... sex magic.”

“Excuse me, why wouldn’t I like that method?”

Loki strategically gets up off the bed before answering. “Because it couldn’t be with you.”

“That doesn’t make sense. We’ve had all kinds of crazy magic sex.”

“No, that’s different. That’s to rebalance. To reduce magical overload, by transferring the excess to you. Masculine energy dampens magic. It’s why most men can’t wield it, and why male witches are so rare. Only those who carry at least half feminine energy in their souls can ever gain any true skill.”

“...Oh,” says Tony. And he has the most uncomfortable feeling he knows where this is headed.

“Sex magic is incredibly powerful, but volatile, and can only be used and controlled under specific circumstances. At least one partner needs to be strong enough to harness the energy of two people. It works better if both are, but if needed, it can be done one-sided. The weaker partner does, though, need to have at least some magical ability. There needs to be something to combine. Most importantly, it needs to be a male-female pair. Otherwise... the results will be at best ineffective and at worst disastrous.”

need to do this with a female witch.”

“Yes.”

“So we need to go back to Asgard.”

“There isn’t time.”

“I understand that. But on the other hand, I don’t really know any local Malibu witches I can hit up for a ritualistic booty call on a Sunday night. So our options are kind of limited.”

And then Loki tenses. Exactly as if he’s about to say the thing he’s been trying to avoid having to say. “Jane currently carries all the power of the Aether within her body.”

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Predictably, Thor loses his shit. And Tony’s glad he was the one who volunteered to outline the plan, because he’s pretty sure that if Loki had explained things, there’d be some Asgardian-on-Asgardian violence going down in the middle of the living room.

“No!” Thor snarls. “Absolutely not!” Etcetera. He says a lot of things that are all variations on the theme of ‘no, and also fuck you for even suggesting it’.

“It’s not exactly something I’m overly eager to do, either!” Loki shouts back at him. “But if time is at a premium-”

“We’ll find another way!”

“Thor, there is no other way!”

“We’ll find another way!”

“Will you listen to me, you moron?! What you want me to do is not possible without sex magic! And I’d think the fate of the universe being at stake would be enough for you to get over yourself and accept that!”

“I refuse to let you treat Jane this way!”

Kicking a chair in frustration, Loki rubs his hands over his face. “With all due respect – which, by the way, is none – I don’t care what you think! This isn’t up to you and your absurd jealousy! I’m sure Tony feels the same way, but you don’t see him shouting like an ass!”

“I’mmmmm... actually okay with this and willing to see how it plays out,” Tony says.

Loki grabs a magazine from the coffee table and hurls it at him.

“Hey! Okay! I’m very upset over the idea of Loki having to get it on with an attractive woman! But, you know, fate of the universe. I can rein in my terrible, terrible jealousy.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Loki hisses.

Tony nods. “Overflowing.”

“This has nothing to do with you, Tony Stark,” says Thor.

“No, it doesn’t,” says Jane, finally stepping in. Physically. Between Thor and Loki. She puts her
hand on Thor’s chest. “And Loki’s right: this has nothing to do with you, either. I think it’s up to me.”

“Exactly,” Loki agrees, with a smug little smirk in Thor’s direction.

“But-” Thor tries.

Jane shuts him down immediately. “No. I appreciate you trying to protect me, but this is a choice I get to make for myself.”

From the look of pure rage on his face, Thor sure doesn’t appreciate her appreciating his effort. But he takes a step back. Reluctantly. And lowers his fists.

Exhaling loudly, Jane gives her arms a shake. She bites her lip, puts her hands on her hips, and turns to Loki with a grounding breath. “Are you insane?!” she yells. “I’m not sleeping with you!”

“Oh for...” Loki groans at the same time as Thor shouts, “There! You heard Jane! She said no!”

“We’re going to figure out something else,” Jane says. “We have to figure out-”

“I think you have a fundamental misunderstanding of how sex magic works,” Loki interrupts.

“Is it magic that happens when people have sex?!” she snaps back at him.

“In a basic sense, yes, but-”

“Then I think I understand it!”

“It needn’t be an entire event,” Loki says, holding up his hands as he fishes through the air for whatever he deems to be acceptable terminology. “The strength of the Aether should be enough that I only need a certain level of bodily contact to access it.”

“What level?” Jane asks, sounding no less mistrustful.

Loki looks off at an imaginary point nowhere near either Jane or Thor. “Possibly some... minor... fooling around?”

“Which means what, exactly?!”

“I can’t say for certain. I won’t know until I can feel the Aether’s power. It could be as little as holding hands, but might involve... kissing and such forth?”

“Fully clothed?”

“Of course.”

“No groping.”

Loki looks away again. “I can’t promise that.”

“Butt only, over the skirt,” Jane offers by way of compromise.

“Fine,” Loki agrees.

“Fine,” Jane echoes.

“No, this is not fine,” growls Thor.
“Thor, do you want to save the universe or not?” Loki asks.

“I think we should let them save the universe;” says Tony. He almost pats Thor reassuringly on the arm, but holds back. Because Thor looks like he’s in a punching mood.

“Maybe we should do this somewhere private?” Jane suggests.

To which everybody else says, “No,” all for a very diverse array of reasons.

“I may need Tony to assist in finding the pathway once I’ve tracked its energy signature,” says Loki, voicing the only objection that could be considered valid. “He knows the geography of this planet and can help mark the location on a map.”

Not what Jane was hoping to hear, but she shakes her head anyway with a little shrug of acceptance. “Fine. Whatever. Can we just... Let’s get this over with. Before I think about it too much and change my mind.”

“Agreed,” says Loki. He motions to the couch. “Sit down?”

Very primly, Jane sits as far forward as she can on the cushion, hands on knees and back straight. Loki mirrors her position, though on him the rigid posture looks purposeful rather than defensive. “Give yourself a moment to prepare,” he tells her, calmly and even kindly. “When you’re ready, take my hand.”

“Okay,” says Jane. “But just so you’re aware, if you do anything weird...”

“Thor will punch me?” Loki guesses.

“I will punch you,” Thor growls to confirm.

“What an astonishing plot twist. But Jane, please ignore him. Pretend he’s not here; it’ll make things easier. Close your eyes if that helps. I need you to clear your mind, and take my hand.”

After only a moment’s hesitation more, Jane does.

“Good,” says Loki, again speaking in that soothing voice. “I can feel the energy of the Aether. It’s powerful, but it’s guarded. Anything I do will need to be very slow to keep it from rejecting my presence. And it’s unusual. Foreign. Unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. This may take a while as I attune myself to its workings.”

“We don’t have a while,” Thor helpfully reminds everyone.

“We don’t have a choice,” Loki replies. “This is our only option and if you want it done correctly...”

“I don’t want it done at all! And Jane didn’t agree to spend hours doing-”

“No, Thor, I’m fine,” Jane cuts him off. “I thought this was going to be so weird, but actually it’s... um...” Looking down, she slowly interlocks her fingers with Loki’s. “You have really soft hands,” she whispers.

“Thank you,” says Loki.

“And you know what I said before? About everything staying over the clothes and only butt grabs? I think I was being too strict. Was I being too strict?”

“Not at all.”
“No, I was. I wasn’t taking this seriously. But now I realize how important this magic is, and I am fully committed. Fully. Whatever we need to do to save the universe.”

Loki nods. “That’s very noble of you, but I know you’re only saying it because my magic has started to saturate your mind and override your morals and inhibitions.” Extricating his fingers from Jane’s grip, he slips back into a more chaste form of hand-holding. “So let’s honor the boundaries you set before, and how about you let me control how things proceed?”

She smiles sappily at him. “I’d let you control anything.”

“Mmm, you probably shouldn’t.”

At Tony’s side, Thor lets out a hissing sound like explosive gas just starting to leak from a dangerously fragile vessel.

“Tony?” Loki asks.

And Tony’s right there to be useful in any possible way. “Yep?”

“I need a three-dimensional map of this planet.”

“Sure thing. Hey, Jarvis? Can you pull up a-”


Right. Of course he’s going to send Tony off on a wild goose chase for a piece of goddamn dark ages technology right when things get going. Of fucking course. But if Tony remembers correctly, there’s a decorative globe made of semiprecious stones on one of the shelves in his office: big enough to show all the countries of the world more or less in their correct locations, but not new enough for East and West Germany to have morphed together into one single-color blob. On the one hand, he should probably get an updated globe that isn’t a high school graduation gift from 1984, but on the other, Google Maps is now a thing that exists.

Running back with the globe, Tony returns to the living room just in time to see that nothing at all has changed.

“Thank you,” says Loki. “Now, please listen to me very carefully, because there are other things I need you to do. If things start to go wrong-”

“How will I know if things start to go wrong?” Tony asks.

“You’ll know it when you see it.”

“That’s not very reassuring.”

“Fine. Thor will know it when he sees it.”

“That’s more reassuring.”

“Now if something goes wrong,” Loki continues, “it is critically important that you do not touch me at all. Can you please repeat what I just said back to me so I know you understood?”

“I’m not allowed to touch you at all for some reason.”

“The reason is you could very easily be driven insane by the magical current, and might also die.”
“I’m feeling much less reassured again.”

Jane’s eyes, serenely closed up until then, shoot open. “Wait, am I going to go insane?!”

“No,” Loki reassures her in that smooth, calm voice, rubbing her hands between his. “You’re a woman. You’ll be fine. Close your eyes and concentrate on the magic.” He looks back up at Tony. “Don’t touch me. If things go wrong, take Jane and put her in a room by herself. This is very important.”

“Ominous but feasible,” says Tony.

“Then wait for Thor to tell you what to do next.”

“That sounds like the exact opposite of what I would ever choose to do, but okay.”

“Repeat all that back to me.”

Tony sighs. “Don’t touch you because I’ll go insane and die, take Jane, put her in a room by herself, listen to Thor, and I’ll assume you also want me to keep snide comments to myself when Thor tells me to do something that seems dumb and counterproductive.”

“Thank you. Leave the map here.”

That means ‘go away’ without having to say it. Tony returns to his place beside Thor, who’s still making intermittent hissing noises. Even though Loki and Jane are still just holding hands (and continue to do nothing but that for the next half hour).

Overall, for something called sex magic, the whole process is neither particularly sexy nor magical, and is boring as hell to watch.

Tony finds his attention wandering over to Thor more often than not, since Thor’s increasingly elaborate show of angry huffing and shuffling is at least partly entertaining. “Hey, uh, how long is this supposed to take?” he asks.

“Not this long, I’m sure,” Thor growls. “Loki’s drawing things out to irritate me. I know it.”

Tony almost says something to the contrary, but then he remembers who they’re talking about. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Over the second half hour, all that happens is Loki’s hand slides up to Jane’s elbow, and the two of them lean in close together. As if they might kiss. Might. Loki’s lips hover just an inch from Jane’s. Then slowly, his hand slides from her elbow up her arm to her neck, thumb just resting against the curve of her cheek. Jane hisses in a sudden, rough breath at the new touch. The tip of Loki’s nose brushes hers. And Thor scowls so hard Tony can almost hear it.

Maybe it’s for the best that things stop right there, right then, with Loki suddenly pulling back and leaving only one hand on Jane’s shoulder. “Map. Now.”

Both Tony and Thor almost collide as they scramble to finally do something, but Thor gets there first, picking up the globe and shoving it over-eagerly in Loki’s direction. Tony skids to a stop at Thor’s side just in time to see Loki’s finger trace a line from the tip of Greenland, over to Iceland, and come to a stop on the west coast of a roughly shaped jade landmass floating in the lapis lazuli ocean.

“Here,” he says, giving it a gentle tap. “This area. Once we’re nearer, I’ll be able to track the exact
location. But it will be here.”

“Good,” says Thor, as he unsubtly shoves his way onto the couch to sit between Loki and Jane. “Very good. Finally. Where is that? How long will it take to get there? A few hours?”

Loki glances up at Tony, turning the question over to him.

“Ah,” says Tony, because of course he’s going to have to be the one to explain bad news to Thor again. “What’s your exact definition of ‘a few’?”

“Two? Three?”

“Nine? Ten?” Tony counters, like this is a negotiation or something.

Thor’s expression darkens. And Tony thought it was dark enough already. But this takes things to fun new extremes. “For the sake of your world, I hope we can get there before Malekith finds his way here.”

“Uh, yeah, me too.”

“How do we get there?” asks Jane. “Is it weird of me to assume you have a private jet?”

“No, I think it’s pretty contextually obvious I have a private jet, otherwise I’d be instructing you to whip out your phone and log onto Expedia right now, and also I would’ve said it’d take twenty hours to... never mind, this isn’t relevant.” He claps his hands. “Okay gang, we have five minutes to pack some ass-kicking supplies, snacks, and spare underwear. The airport express rolls out ASAP. Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir?” Jarvis smartly replies.

“Get the jet ready. Wheels up in an hour. And set a flight plan for Shannon, Ireland.”

“Why would he not have a private jet?” Tony hears Thor whisper to Jane.

“Most people don’t,” Jane whispers back.

“Oh. ...What is a private jet?”

“Don’t worry, pal,” says Tony. “You’re about to find out.”
Chapter Summary

With the gang’s arrival in Ireland, ready to hunt down Malekith, everything slowly starts to go wrong. Just not in any of the ways Tony imagined.

Chapter Notes

Friends, I am making an effort this month, in place of NaNoWriMo (which I can never manage), to get three chapters of this fic finished. That is my goal. And I’m... kind of on track to achieve that goal? Anyhow, I hope I can manage to do that, and I hope you enjoy this horrible chapter! :D

Loki’s quiet on the plane. And it’s not necessarily a ‘good’ quiet or a ‘bad’ quiet this time: just a quiet that happens to be what’s needed in the moment, no matter what way things fall.

Per Loki’s wishes, Tony doesn’t try to say anything. Instead, he just lets Loki lean against him as they stare out the window at the night sky, its blackness only interrupted by the faint reflection of a blinking wing light in the glass. It’s nice, somehow, knowing nothing else is out there. Nothing else is nearby. They’re alone in the air, on a kind of pause from life, with only the crew up front and Thor and Jane in the bedroom cabin at the back for minimal company. A comfortable, segregated little pod, away from the rest of the world. At least until the jet lands.

He’s always liked flying. And planes. And staring out the window, even if there’s nothing to see. He could do that for hours. Anywhere else it’d be boring as hell, but on a plane...

He reaches up to run his hand through Loki’s hair, letting his fingers twist around a few loose curls. In response, Loki makes a low, contented mmm sound.

Yeah, he could do this for hours.

But a short while later, there’s a creak of a door opening at the rear of the plane and the click of it shutting again, then Thor’s heavy, even footsteps approaching down the aisle. Thor takes a seat across from Tony before dropping his head into his hands.

And Tony’s going to take the easy road here and continue on not talking, not saying anything, until Thor decides how and where the conversation should go.

“Jane is... Jane is resting,” he says. “I think the presence of the Aether is taking its toll on her.”

Loki raises his head, as if to make some kind of snide, Loki-ish comment, but in an odd moment of either better judgement or compassion, seems to decide against it. He lies back down. “The magic we performed will have exacerbated her condition and accelerated the rate at which the Aether takes hold. You should let her rest now so some of her strength still remains to face Malekith.”
Thor’s eyes look over to Tony. “How much longer until we arrive?”

“Six hours? Ish?” Tony shrugs.

“Can’t this thing fly any faster?”

“Not really, no. It’s basic civilian equipment. I haven’t exactly had any need for a better passenger jet, which, come to think of it, is a preposterous oversight on my part that you can bet I’ll be remedying within the next few weeks. But for now we have to deal with this.”

“Why didn’t you ask your friend Rhody for help?” Loki mutters.

“Um. Well,” says Tony. “For one, I don’t want to get him in trouble with the government like I always end up doing, and two, I didn’t think of it until exactly right now. So I guess the bigger question is, why didn’t you suggest that four hours ago before we left?”

“I assumed you knew what you were doing.”

“That’s a terrible assumption! I never know what I’m doing! I am literally always making shit up as I go along and you should know that about me by now!”

Thor nods. “I knew that.”

“Right!” Tony says. “So I think we can all agree it’s Loki’s fault that we’re not currently forty percent closer to Ireland, because he neglected to remind me that we could harass Rhody into commandeering us some fancy-ass military grade aircraft from S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

That should’ve elicited a better response from Thor: a hearty, good-natured chortle at Loki’s expense. That’s what this kind of goofy banter is for, isn’t it? But no. Thor just smiles weakly, then slides right back into his stony-faced focus. “We should use this time to make plans. I don’t want to face Malekith unprepared. First: what do we do once we land? Jane sent an email to her assistant, Darcy, who will rent a car and meet us at the airport. From there, Loki, how long will it take you to find the pathway?”

“Not long,” Loki replies through a yawn. “I should be able to sense its presence once we’re closer.”

“And Malekith?” asks Thor. “Will you be able to sense his arrival, if he gets here before we can make it to Svartalfheim?”

“I will. And he’s not here yet.”

Thus satisfied by Loki’s answers, at least for the time being, Thor leans back in his seat. “Good. So we land, we take the car, we-”

“We land,” Tony interrupts, “Loki magically smuggles you into the country while I distract the immigration officials because I’m pretty sure I’m the only one here with a passport, and then we take the car.”

“Is that some sort of Midgardian thing?” Thor asks. Except he asks Loki, not Tony, as if Loki would have any idea what passports and immigration officials are.

Accordingly, Loki says, “How should I know?”

“Yeah, it’s a Midgardian thing,” says Tony. “Just trust me on that. Anyway.” He gestures to Thor to continue.
“We land. We do... that. We take the car, and we drive...?” Once again, he looks expectantly to Loki for an answer.

“North,” Loki tells him. “Tony showed me a map on his phone. So we take the car, we drive north toward a town called Kinvarra, and the pathway is there. Somewhere in the hills south of the town. I can see it indistinctly in my mind.”

“How long is the drive?”

“Less than an hour,” says Tony. “Forty minutes, maybe? At least according to the all-seeing eye of Google.”

Thor drops his head back to look up at the ceiling, muttering something that sounds like, How big is this stupid planet? But what he says out loud is, “Fine. Sounds fine.”

He looks relaxed – he looks ‘fine’ – on a superficial, surface level. He folds his hands across his stomach and slumps down in his seat, letting his knees fall to the sides. He exhales a loud breath that turns into a hum. But under that, he’s tense. His shoulders are stiff and the heel of his boot taps against the floor. His teeth grind together, clenched hard against the nerves and the uncertainty and all the things he doesn’t want to say.

Tony wouldn’t have expected this level of anxiety from somebody like Thor. Thor, who, in stories of the past, sounded like he made a name for himself being unfazed by anything thrown at him. How many times has he saved the damn universe already in his life? But maybe, with his mother’s death and Jane’s life hanging in the balance... maybe this one hits a little too close to home.

“Hey, uh, Thor... Why don’t you tell me about this convergence thing?” Tony suggests, if for no other reason than it’ll give Thor something to occupy his mind for a little while.

“I’m sure Loki can explain it better than I can,” Thor mutters.

Loki snorts. “I know as much about the Convergence as you do.”

“Exactly.”

Or maybe Loki’s pointless contrarianism will give Thor something to occupy his mind. He leans forward with an annoyed scowl. “The Nine Realms, of which both Asgard and Midgard are a part, are linked across the universe by an unseen web of energy. There are connection points between all of them. One to the next. As we seek today: the path to Svartalfheim. But there’s more than that, too. Every ten thousand years, all nine will drift into cosmic alignment. When this happens, the energy web strengthens, and the borders between worlds become... unstable. They overlap. They converge. They become one, as many loremasters theorize they once were at the birth of time and space. The Convergence lasts only a short time, but while the realms align, larger, more visible doorways will open, allowing free travel between them. It could end up being a harmless anomaly. Or it could be chaos.”

“Okay...” Tony says slowly, trying to wrap his head around all that and figure out a way to make it make sense. There doesn’t seem to be one. So, moving on: “And how does this Malekith asshole fit into the story?”

“The dark elves seek to destroy all light. With the Aether alone, Malekith would be able to accomplish this. One realm at a time, one corner of space at a time, he could extinguish the stars. It would take thousands of years, but he could do it. But with the nine realms converged... all he
would need to do is set his power loose in one place, and it would spread to the other eight, growing in strength and picking up momentum as it moved through each one, feeding on that realm’s light and turning matter to dark matter. Funneled through the Convergence, the Aether could corrupt every star in the known universe. Within minutes.”

“So when you say ‘destroy the universe’,” Tony says, “That’s not... yeah, that’s not hyperbole. He’s literally going to destroy the universe.”

“Yes.”

Awesome. Awesome. Just fucking awesome. “And your big plan is to take Jane, A.K.A. the Aether, right to him on Svartalfheim?”

“It’s a risk, yes, but Malekith is the only one who can control the Aether and siphon it from Jane’s body.”

“Right,” says Tony. He also shifts forward in his seat (as much as he can, with Loki leaning against him), to rest his elbows on his knees. “But, counterargument, maybe consider that we should probably go with any other possible plan that isn’t taking the Aether right to the guy who’s going to use it to destroy the universe?”

“What else would you have us do?” Thor asks, frowning.

Tony shakes his head. “I don’t know. But you know how in shitty fantasy stories, there’s always this stupid idea put forward that the heroes have to do one specific thing to defeat the bad guy? And that one specific thing always involves them taking the magic artifact right to the evil wizard’s lair, conveniently putting themselves in terrible danger for the sake of making the plot more exciting? I kind of feel like we’re living that right now. We’re doing the one specific fucking thing we definitely shouldn’t be doing. Instead of, like... anything else. Anything at all. Anything except the one mind-blowingly stupid thing we’re currently doing.”

“Tony Stark...”

“No, listen. We could, for example, just keep Jane moving through the realms. Loki knows where a lot of these pathways are, so we use them. All we need to do is play keepaway with the Aether until the Convergence is over. Then we confront Malekith. After the immediate danger of him destroying the universe within minutes has passed.”

“And in that time, the power of the Aether could overwhelm Jane, and she could die,” Thor growls.

“Okay, true,” Tony agrees. “And that’s a common argument used in said shitty fantasy stories. One of the heroes could die. Now excuse me if I sound like a huge bastard here, but wouldn’t one death be way preferably to the entire universe being destroyed?”

Jolting forward to the edge of his seat, Thor raises his fist with a snarl of rage. “Don’t you dare speak like that!”

“What, with common sense?!” Tony shouts back, trying his damnedest not to be intimidated by that Asgardian fist hovering inches from his face.

“Don’t be so arrogant as to think you know the entire story, Tony Stark!”

“So why don’t you explain it to me?” Tony asks. Then nudges Loki. “And why are you so weirdly quiet and not butting to tell us we’re both wrong and you have the only plan that’ll work?”
“Oh, I’m just enjoying listening to somebody else try to argue with Thor for once,” Loki tells him with a lazy smile.

“Enough!” says Thor. “We need to do this now, because it’s the only chance we have to destroy the Aether for good! It’s dangerous, yes, and there are risks, which is why we need to face Malekith on Svartalfheim instead of here on Earth! Once he pulls the Aether from Jane, we have this one chance to destroy it while it’s exposed. The Convergence and the bending of worlds make it unstable. When the Convergence passes, so does its vulnerability. We can only destroy it now. We can’t wait for safer conditions. Is that clear?”

Leaning back, Tony looks down at Loki. “I guess... that’s a fair excuse. Kind of a take the One Ring into Mordor scenario, which I would qualify as unshitty fantasy.”

Loki, in turn, looks at Thor. “Did you actually spend time thinking this through?”

“Yes,” Thor grumbles.

“I’m not sure whether to be shocked, amazed, or proud of you.”

“You should quit the stupid commentary and make yourself useful,” Thor says. “Help me come up with a plan. A solid plan for destroying the Aether once it’s free of Jane’s body but before Malekith has full control of it. We need to work together on this, and we need to know exactly what we’re doing. No guesswork, no improvisation. We have only one chance, and it needs to be successful. Or we die.”

Sitting upright, Loki grins in an unsettling way. “Hmm. I rather like this new Thor.”

“I don’t,” Tony mutters. But he gets the distinct impression that neither Thor nor Loki is paying any attention to him.

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Jane’s cohorts are waiting at the airport when they arrive, standing next to a bright white Nissan Micra. As far as Tony’s concerned they look less like scientists and more like random college kids, but at any point did Tony ever ask if they were even qualified to help out with this mission? No. So that’s on him.

He focuses on the one thing he can control. Sort of. “This is an... interesting choice of vehicle.” Patting the hood of the car, he looks over at Jane. “Hey, so. Any ideas how six grown adults are supposed to fit in here? With all our stuff?”

“Oh, we’re not coming,” says the girl in the slouchy beanie, whose name he’s already forgotten despite having been introduced all of twenty seconds ago. She gestures to herself and the blond boy. “We’re just here for moral support. I hope.”

“No, they’re not coming,” Jane confirms as she rifles through the bag of equipment the kids brought her. “I just needed...” She pulls something out of the bag. “Here we go. This should help keep track of any atmospheric anomalies and energy fluctuations.”

“Yeah, um, four grown adults in there is only going to be slightly less cramped.”

“Three,” says Loki, which does nothing except prompt Tony to blink at him in confusion.

“You’re... not coming? How’s that supposed to work? Is Jane’s phase meter capable of tracking the pathway?”
“No. Ahh...” Loki steps conspicuously closer to Thor. “You’re not coming.”

“Bullshit.” That’s Tony’s first reaction. His second reaction is: “Who just got you here from halfway across the world? I’m part of this. I’m coming with you.”

“Yes, you brought us here. And that means you’ve now completed your part in this mission. The rest of it is up to Thor and me. Alone.”

“With Jane?”

Sighing, Loki takes a few steps closer, like a parent who wants to speak quietly to avoid a scene. “Clearly Jane needs to come. She brings the Aether. And because of that, I may need to spend all my resources protecting her from Malekith. I can’t have you along as a distraction. I can’t afford the temptation of trying to protect you as well when I need to focus everything on Jane.”

“And why do you think you need to protect me?” Tony asks. “I think I’m capable of looking after myself. I’m a big boy.”

Loki doesn’t even break eye contact. “You’re a human with a gun. You’re capable of fighting other humans with guns. But this? This is something vastly different and outside your realm of experience. I can’t risk it, Tony. You’re staying here.”

“You can’t make me.”

“Is that so?”

He places both hands on Tony’s shoulders. It’s a condescending gesture, but Tony doesn’t really think anything more of it. That is, until a strangely cold and numb sensation begins to seep through his veins. Down from his shoulders. Through his arms. Filling his chest. Trickling down to his legs. “What the...”

He tries to lift his hand. He tries to take a step. His foot moves, sliding forward barely an inch, and that’s it. His entire body from the neck down freezes in place, unable to so much as wiggle a toe.

“You’re staying here,” Loki repeats. “I’m sorry, Tony. I am. I’m sorry to have to do this to you, but I can’t have you arguing your way into coming with us.”

“Undo this,” Tony hisses. “Loki you son of a fuck, undo this right now!”

“No. I’m sorry. I told you I can’t risk it. You need to stay here and stay safe.”

“I’m not safe, you asshole! I’m in the middle of a parking lot and I can’t move!”

“The paralysis will wear off in a few hours,” Loki says as he walks back over to Thor and Jane. “I’m sure Darcy and Ian can look after you until then.”

So those are the kids’ names, but it’s not as if Tony can really bring himself to care in this particular moment. “Loki, you better fucking unfreeze me right now or I swear to God...”

“Um,” says Jane, glancing nervously between Loki and Tony. “Are you sure...?”

“No, he’s not!” Tony shouts in a last-ditch appeal to the one person who might be on his side. “He’s making a shitty judgement call on his own instead of discussing this with the team!”

“I’m sure,” Loki tells her. “Armor and bullets are no use against dark elf magic. He can do far more good staying here and preparing to rally his Avenger friends to defend Earth in case the worst comes
to pass and Malekith gains control of the Aether. Let’s go.” He opens the car door.

“That’s a load of shit! I can help you, you dumb fucks! You need me to drive that stupid clown car!”

“I can drive,” says Loki.

“No you can’t! You don’t know how to drive! You don’t even have a learner’s permit!”

“I can drive,” Jane says, pointing Loki in the direction of the back seat.

Before opening the door, Loki looks over at Darcy and Ian with the kind of soul-shredding stare that Tony might aesthetically appreciate if he weren’t at that moment overrun with blinding, fiery rage directed at everything Loki-related. “You two,” he says, “are responsible for Tony Stark’s wellbeing. If any harm comes to him while we are gone, I will personally pull out your bones, one by one, until nothing is left but a pile of mangled flesh. Remember that.”

“What?” says Darcy, while Ian adds, “Um...”

And on that note, Loki, Jane, and Thor all pile into the car with Jane’s bag of gadgets, leaving Tony standing where he is, frozen, screaming uselessly at the back hatch as it disappears past the lot gate, down the road, and out of sight.

“Are you really frozen in place?” Darcy asks, sauntering up to stand beside him. “Is that Asgardian magic?”

“Yeah, it is, and I am,” Tony growls through his teeth. “But I need to be following that car, so if you-”

“Can you move at all?”

“No, I can’t other than...” Twisting his neck to look at her takes so much more effort than it should. “...my head, a bit. But-”

“This is so creepy. Bu it’ll be okay.” She pats him on the back, which might just be a thinly veiled cover for trying to cop a feel and find out if he really is as solid and unmoving as he looks. “Don’t worry. We got a hotel room at the Radisson right here at the airport. You can hang with us.”

“Wow, thanks, that’s exactly what I was worried about.”

“The Coke machine on our floor’s broken and it gave me like five Cokes for one Euro.”

“That’s amazing, but hey, uh, Darcy, is it? Can you maybe go rent another car real quick so we can chase those morons down? My credit card’s in my wallet in my briefcase over there. Pick out something nice that can outstrip a Nissan Micra. Which I think is anything.”

“Nn, I don’t think Jane would want us to do that.”

“Jane wouldn’t care.”

“What if we just went back to the room? I kind of want to eat my Pringles that I left by the TV.” She turns around to address the other kid. “Sound good to you, intern?”

“Um, my name’s Ian,” he says. “Hi, Mr. Stark. And yes, I’d prefer to go back to the hotel and get some food.”
“He hasn’t eaten since he had this weird-looking egg sandwich from the WHSmith at Gatwick, which I told him was a bad idea but he didn’t listen. Ooh.” She grabs Tony’s arm, potentially feeling again. “Instead of getting a rental car, can we use your credit card for room service?”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Aww you’re no fun.”

“Correct. I am no fun. I am pissed off. But here’s a deal for you. Can you open that big aluminum case there? It has my armor in it. If you can help me get my armor on, I think I can have Jarvis do all the flying even when I’m paralyzed. In return, you can keep one of my credit cards.”

“That sounds complicated. I really think we should just stay here like Jane wants and so Thor’s brother doesn’t pull out all our bones. Is he really your boyfriend? I saw your video. It was all over facebook this morning.”

If Tony concentrates hard, really hard, he can just about move his fingers ten percent of the way into making a fist.

“You’re wearing the same shirt you were in the video. Did you leave right after making it?”

“Darcy,” he says, as calmly as he can manage. “Jane probably didn’t fill you in on the gravity of the situation here, but let me just assure you that the fate of the fucking universe is at stake. I need to follow her and Thor and Loki. Now.”

“Can’t Thor handle it? I’ve seen Thor handle some pretty epic stuff.”

“No. Thor does not understand the finer nuances of taking the Ring to Mordor, and if human Aragorn doesn’t show up at the Black Gates to create a diversion, something will go wrong and Sauron will plunge the entire universe into everlasting darkness. You get what I’m saying?”

She laughs. She laughs. And squeezes his upper arm, which definitely is a solidity check. “You’re funny. I loved that movie when I was a kid.”

“No, Darcy, you don’t-”

“Okay, moving out!” she says, sauntering off again. “Intern? Let’s go find us a luggage cart. We need to keep Mr. Stark safe so I think we should probably wheel him over to the hotel. Looks like it might rain.”

“Darcy!” Tony yells after her. “Darcy!” But she doesn’t even turn around.

Fifteen percent. Maybe Tony’s rage can help him make fifteen percent of a fist.

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When Loki said the paralysis would wear off in a few hours, what he really meant was that it would start to wear off in a few hours. After two hours, propped up in the corner of a hotel room next to the damp-smelling drapes, Tony can move his hands and feet a little.

After three hours, he can bend his joints, stiffly Tin Man-like within a limited range of motion, to shuffle a few steps before some dangerous teetering convinces him to change his mind.

After four hours and a bit, his arms are almost mobile, but his legs still feel like he’s wearing ill-fitting lead pants. It takes several minutes to zombie-walk over to the bathroom. He still can’t bend at the
And finally, six plus hours later, he’s flexible enough to half kneel, half topple down beside his armor case. “Okay,” he says. His fingers struggle with the fine motor skill of opening the latch, but he gets it after a few tries. “Here’s the plan. I’m going to suit up and get the fuck out of here. Jarvis should be able to track the clown car’s location, and I’m going to Svartalfheim after those dipshits. You can... keep doing whatever you’re doing until I get back.”

Neither Darcy nor Ian looks away from the TV. “...What?” Darcy asks a distracted several seconds later.

“Yep, just like that. Perfect.” Slowly and awkwardly, he pulls out the armor, letting it roll onto the floor in its neatly folded rectangle. Good. If he can just wiggle into position...

He’s about to initiate the automated engagement system when something big and red crashes through the window.

Darcy screams as a shower of glass explodes across her bed, and Ian leaps up to flatten himself against the wall. Tony, stuck on the floor and less than halfway mobile, is too slow to roll out of the way. Something that feels exactly like a booted foot hits him square in the ribs, then the large red blur trips and collapses beside him.

“Thor?!” he hears Darcy yell, and he forces his neck up to look. Yeah, that’s Thor. That’s Thor’s red cape. And that’s Thor’s booted foot, right in the vicinity of Tony’s ribs.

“What the hell?! Don’t you know how to use a door?!”

Grunting, Thor hefts himself to his feet. “Darcy, I apologize if I frightened you, but I have no time. Loki is badly injured. I need to leave him here so he’ll be safe while I go back for Jane.”

“What do you mean, go-”

But that’s all the explanation they get before Thor swings his hammer and he’s off again, back through the window, accompanied by another scream from Darcy as she scrambles away and falls off the edge of the mattress.

Because there’s one other person left behind in the room with them now: one limp figure laid out across the foot of Darcy’s bed.

*Loki is badly injured*...

If only Tony could move. If only he could move faster than this goddamn fucking *crawl*, ignoring the bite of glass shards in his skin as he inches his way up onto his hands and knees.

“Oh God...” Ian whispers from the corner. Which doesn’t help at all. It only conjures up the worst possible images in Tony’s mind: of Loki, the last time they were in a hotel room after an adventure with Thor. Of Loki, with deathly white skin, lying in a pool of his own blood.

*Oh God*, Tony repeats inside his head. *Oh God, oh God, oh God please let this be better...*

It takes way too long to reach the edge of the bed and pull himself up. And how bad is it that he can’t even tell if the blood on his hands, warm and slippery and dripping down his wrists, is his own from the glass or Loki’s from where it coated the duvet?

“Tony...” Loki says. Weakly. But he says it, and if he can speak... The relief that floods through
Tony is almost enough for him to lose his precarious balance and fall back to the floor.

“I’m here,” Tony replies. “But... Fuck, Loki, fucking... fuck...”

Loki’s hand, also red and slick with blood, finds his after a moment of fumbling. And just like that, with one touch, all remnants of cool numbness disappear from Tony’s body. It all evaporates away. He can move again. He can stand again.

Though when he does, and when he looks down... the sickness that plunges into his gut makes him wish he hadn’t.

_Oh God_ is right. “What happened?” he whispers.

Loki’s gray lips barely move when he speaks. “He stabbed me.”

Whoever ‘he’ is, Tony doesn’t even care. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that Loki is lying so terrifyingly still, scarcely breathing, as blood pools on his chest. And at his back, seeping out in a crimson halo on the white bedding beneath him. Soaking through everything faster than Tony can even keep track of.

“Okay,” Tony says. “Okay...” Because he has to do something, right? “Ian? I need you to get me all the towels in the bathroom. Right now. Go.”

Ian, with no word of complaint, dashes to the bathroom and is back only seconds later with his arms full of towels. And what an odd sense of déjà vu it is when Tony presses one against Loki’s chest.

“You, um... you really need to stop doing this, you know?” Tony says, fighting to keep his voice level against the building sense of panic. “This is the third hotel room you’ve bled all over.”

“I’m sorry, Tony.”

“Yeah I bet you are.” The first towel soaks through too quickly. Tony grabs another. “You’re sorry now you left me behind. You know why? Because while you dumb Asgardians fight close enough to get stabbed, this human with a gun would’ve just shot those motherfuckers in the face from a mile away with a guided missile. You remember that for next time.”

“I’m so sorry...”

The second towel also soaks through too quickly. “It’s... it’s okay...” Tony says, trying not to focus on how Loki’s eyes are too wide or how the only color in his face is the pink foam in the corner of his mouth where more blood bubbles up with every shaky breath. He squeezes Loki’s hand. It’s cold to the touch. “You’ll be okay. You’ll be fine. Remember when this happened before? And you just needed to regenerate your blood while the wound healed? Concentrate on that. You’ll be fine.”

“I’ll be fine,” Loki says. Words only halfway voiced, sounding distinctly not fine.

“This happened before?” Ian asks, as if Tony has time to answer dumb questions like that.

“Yeah, but how about instead of standing there with your thumb up your ass, you continue to make yourself useful and rip up one of these sheets to make bandages? Darcy, you too. There should be a pocket knife in my briefcase.”

The momentary look of apprehension is probably in response to being told to destroy hotel property, but that’s quickly dismissed. The hotel can sacrifice a few sheets to help save a life. And hell, isn’t
this room all shot to shit anyway, with the blood-soaked bed and a floor covered in glass from the smashed window? Ian pulls a clean sheet off the second bed while Darcy runs to grab the knife, and they get to work.

“I don’t need... bandages...” Loki says.

Tony might beg to differ on that count. “Then what do you need?”

“I need you to go. I need to be alone.”

“Uh, no. That sounds like the opposite of what you need right now.”

“I need to...” He tries to sit up, but slumps immediately down again with a choked-back groan of pain.

“No, don’t try to get up,” Tony tells him. “You need to lie here, you need to be calm and not move, and you need to do whatever magic it is that lets you heal this.”

“That won’t work. I need to... go and...”

“Why? Why won’t that work?”

“Too much,” Loki whispers. He hisses in a long breath and holds it, trapped in his mouth with a tightly clenched jaw.

“Too much what?” Tony asks, and when Loki won’t answer, he just asks again. “Too much what, Loki?”

Loki’s eyes fall closed. “Get them out of here.”

“Who, Darcy and Ian? They’re just trying to help, but as soon as the bandages are done, I-”

He stops mid-sentence when he realizes why Loki said that. And unfortunately, Darcy notices too.

“Uh, Mr. Stark?” she asks, staring at the tendrils of blue creeping like spider legs through Loki’s skin: up his neck to his cheek and his ear, disappearing into blood-matted hair. “What’s... what is...”

“You know what?” Tony says, taking her by the shoulders and steering her toward the door. “It’s probably better if I deal with this myself.” He grabs Ian’s arm. “You too. Go see if that Coke machine is still broken.”

“We don’t have any money.”

Grabbing his wallet from the table next to the TV, he shoves it into Darcy’s hands. “Go wild. Don’t come back until tomorrow.”

“But where will we-”

“Sleep? Go get another room. This one’s a disaster anyway.” He shuts the door to one more wait Mr. Stark, but that’s easy to ignore.

Over on the bed, Loki’s skin has turned almost completely blue.

“This is a good thing, isn’t it?” Tony asks. A question coupled neatly with the desperate hope of self-reassurance. “Jotun bodies heal quickly. That’s what you told me. And this is what you did last time. So. No problem. Everything’s fine. Right?”
“I’m sure it will be fine,” Loki murmurs, with a sickly, blood-soaked gurgle to his voice and a weak and wispy tone that manages to unravel every bit of confidence his words might otherwise hold. “I will be... fine...”

His bright red eyes drop closed, and the weight in Tony’s heart falls. Not like an anchor, plunging firm and dependable into rough waters to hold him securely in place, but like a leaf. Fluttering. Inconsistent. Unpredictable. Its destination unknown. A chaotic trajectory downward at the mercy of outside forces that can’t be controlled, whipping it like the wind.

As Loki’s breathing slows, Tony’s heart falls like a leaf.
With Thor's plan to fight Malekith ending in disaster, it's time to move on to Plan B. If only Tony could muster the mental fortitude to deal with any of that.

Eventually, Thor comes back. It’s hard to say when exactly. (Ten minutes? An hour? Two?) It’s not as if Tony has a lot of mental energy to expend on pointless observations like the time. But Thor comes back, with Jane, through the window, and by then, Tony has his armor on. It feels like a good decision to be wearing it. Its protective shell encases his body, and its mechanical strength surrounds his arms. That feels right. It feels grounding. Everything else is slipping away, but at least the armor still feels real and solid and dependable.

Several things happen once Thor comes back. One: Tony punches him in the face. Right in the nose. And Thor, caught off guard by a sudden metal fist, stumbles back with a stupid, shocked expression.

Two: Jane asks how Loki is, if he’s still alive, and says something trite and hollow about being so, so sorry for what happened. (Actually... maybe this happened before Tony punched Thor? The sequence is a little fuzzy. Tony also doesn’t have a lot of mental energy to expend on pointless observations like the correct order of events.) In any case, she says it, which just makes Tony remember what Loki said earlier. Don’t say sorry. Just pretend everything is okay. Everything is normal. That’s the only way to keep going. Tony doesn’t have time to give in to ‘sorry’, which just saps away all his anger (the kind of anger that helps him punch Thor in the face) and replaces it with something useless, brittle, and crumbling. ‘Sorry’ turns rage into deflated helplessness.

Three: Thor kicks down the bathroom door. (This definitely happened after the punching.) Because Loki is in the bathroom, in the bathtub, where Tony carried him (oh right, that’s why he put on the suit, not just to punch Thor), because... Maybe it’s easier to be a frost giant in the bathroom. Or part
of a frost giant.

The thing is. The thing is. The thing is.

Yes, Loki has survived worse injuries. He survived the blood-magic knife, and he survived being shot with a Tesseract gun. His Jotun nature helps with that. Jotun bodies heal quickly. Isn’t that what Loki said? That’s what Loki said. Jotun bodies heal quickly. You can run them through or even cut off an entire leg, and they’ll just be minorly inconvenienced for a couple hours. They’re resilient as hell.

But the thing is, there are certain situations where they’re not resilient as hell. They’re susceptible to some things. And one of those things is poison. Any toxin that gets into their bodies, they can’t get rid of. They have no way to metabolize it. Something that would just make a human sick? Might end up killing a Jotun. And that sword or whatever it was that stabbed Loki sure was coated in an awful lot of creepy fucking elf poison.

So Loki’s survived in the past because he could call on his frost giant heritage. Take advantage of that expedited healing. But he can’t change now because the poison would kill him. But he can’t stay as an Asgardian either, because he’s bleeding out too much. With limited means to close the wound in the absence of advanced healing powers.

This means that when Thor kicks down the bathroom door, what he finds is a version of Loki who doesn’t really belong in one category or another. Not dead (Tony wouldn’t have stopped at just a single punch if that were the case), but not all that alive either. Somewhere in the middle, still and silent and barely breathing. Not Jotun, but not Asgardian. Blue skin and red eyes combined with black hair and his normal, human-scale size. It’s like he’s stuck somewhere in the middle between two sets of two extremes. And no clear way forward in either case.

“Loki,” Thor says, kneeling down beside the bathtub. “Loki, can you hear me?”

Loki doesn’t answer. He’s either not alive enough or not Asgardian enough to care about something as inconsequential as paying attention to Thor.

So Thor, undeterred, stands up to talk to Tony instead. “We need to go. We can’t stay here. Malekith...”

Malekith something. Thor keeps talking, but it turns out Tony’s either not present enough or not invested enough to care about something as inconsequential as paying attention to Thor. At least not fully. His brain paraphrases: Malekith took the Aether, which Tony already guessed, based on the catastrophic nature of Thor’s return. They have to stop him. They need to go back to London. Because of... because of... because of...

Thor grabs Tony by the shoulder and shakes him. “Are you listening to me?”

“No,” Tony answers. No sense lying.

Thor shakes him harder. “Tony, I need your help. We have to go. Now. There’s no time. Loki can’t stay here, but I know where he’ll be safe. Then you and I and Jane can...”

Something again. It’s too difficult to pay attention to more than a few words at a time. It’s not that Tony’s mind intentionally wanders back to the bathtub and blue skin and red eyes and...

How in the world is Loki ever supposed to be ‘safe’ now, after everything that happened?

There were so many things that could have gone wrong with Thor’s plan to destroy the Aether on
Svartalfheim. So many little things. But the real punchline is, the one thing that did go (horribly, sickeningly) wrong isn’t anything Tony had originally even considered a threat.

The possibility that Loki might be injured just... didn’t cross his mind. That was never a potential outcome. The universe was in danger. Jane was in danger. Not Loki. Loki, by virtue of being ignored in this equation, was supposed to be safe.

He was supposed to be ‘safe’.

ooo

They leave the hotel, somehow. Thor gets Loki bundled up in a charnel cocoon of sheets and bedding, and they all leave, with Darcy and Ian reappearing in the convoy along the way. Outside, the night sky is blanketed in with a low cloud cover. Rain comes down in spits, making the air cold and the pavement slick.

“Heimdall!” Thor shouts up into the darkness. “Father? I do not expect your forgiveness, but Loki is badly injured. Please, you need to reopen the Bifrost and bring him home!”

Tony is very specifically not too out of it to realize that by ‘home’, Thor means ‘Asgard’. “Wait, what are you doing?! We can’t send Loki back to Asgard! Who knows what they’ll-”

“We can’t keep him with us,” Thor bluntly replies. “We have no way to properly care for him, and no time to do it even if we could. He needs Asgardian healers. If we don’t send him back, he may not survive.” He looks back up at the sky. “Heimdall!”


“Instead of helping us fight Malekith?” Thor asks, giving him a hard look. A judgmental look.

“You didn’t seem to need my help before.”

“That was Loki’s decision.” Stealing a quick glance down at Loki’s gray-blue face, the unspoken implication is, and see where that got us. “Now Malekith has the Aether, and he’ll be more powerful than ever.”

If only Tony could bring himself to give a shit about the fate of the universe when he’s busy using every last cell in his body to worry about Loki.

“Tony Stark, you’ll be of no use in Asgard. You’re not a healer, so what will you do? Sit alone and wait while Loki recovers? It could be days.”

“Unless the universe is destroyed in the next few hours,” Tony mutters.

“You think this is a joke?!” Thor snarls at him.

“No, I think it’s a hopeless situation with no right answer, in which case I should do what I want. And what I want is to stay with Loki.”

“Heimdall!” Thor shouts again, and this time the clouds overhead begin to gleam with a dull rainbow of light. “If you want to go with Loki, Tony Stark, I won’t stop you. But I am asking you to stay. I am asking you to help me. If you truly wish to commit yourself to my brother and share your life with him, then it would be your duty as a man of Asgard to help protect its people and all the Nine Realms. Now would be a good time to prove your loyalty and your worth.”
Oh Jesus. “Are you seriously trying to guilt trip me with honor and morality?!” Tony asks. “Because let me disillusion you right now: I have none.”

“I’m trying to make you see that-”

Thor’s argument is cut off mid-sentence by sudden beam of light that flashes white-hot, shot through with prismatic colors, and crackles with the sound of electricity. Tony shuts his eyes against it, but when he looks back it’s gone. And in its place stand three Asgardian women. Tall and somber and facing Thor in the shape of an arrowhead.

“We will take Loki,” the first one says. “You... will need to speak to your father once this matter is settled.”

“Is he still angry?” Thor mumbles as the second and third women step forward to take Loki under the arms and knees, carrying him with practiced ease back to the center of the burning pattern the Bifrost beam left in the pavement.

“He’s not pleased,” says the first. “And he would have ordered you back immediately, but now the Aether is in the hands of the dark elves.”

“I’ll set it right. Where is Malekith now?”

“There are few of the dark elves that Heimdall can see. Their presence eludes him, like ripples of water through a net. But he believes they are heading here. To Midgard.”

Thor nods. “Thank you.” And gestures with his chin to Loki. “Let me know how he does.”

How easy would it be for Tony to step into that light beam when it comes back down? Real easy. It’d be the easiest thing in the world. Just two steps forward, and off he goes, following Loki and those three healer women to Asgard. But of course Thor had to go and ruin everything by saying what he said about... committing. And sharing lives. And duty and...

“Shit,” he mutters to himself, and that’s enough to make the decision for him. Two seconds of hesitation is all it takes for a chance to be missed, and for the Bifrost to disappear into the night air. All that’s left behind is that strange pattern embossed on the ground. And Thor, standing there with an infuriating little smile.

“You decided not to go.”

“No,” says Tony, actively making an effort not to punch him again. “I, uhhh...”

“It would seem to me you do have some honor and morality.”

“Fuck you, no I don’t,” Tony growls. “I only realized you were right: I can’t do any good sitting around waiting for Loki, so I might as well help you here. But just so you know, I’m doing this for purely selfish reasons, such as: I like blowing stuff up, and also now you’ll owe me one. So let’s go kill this elf asshole.”

Thor claps him on the back, hard enough to almost make him stumble forward. “Loki will be fine, you know. He’s in good hands.”

The way Thor says that is 80% believable, too. “Uh huh. And this feud it sounds like you’re having with your dad won’t have any negative impact on me getting him back, will it?”

“Probably not.”
That’s a little less than 80% believable. Fuck. But there’s nothing Tony can do about it now. He’s stuck with Thor and this big ol’ crap storm, and all ways forward point to the same end. They need to get the Aether back. “Fine. What’s our next step?”

Jane steps in to answer that. “We need to go back to London. Back to my lab. If Malekith is coming here, I have equipment we can use to track any anomalies in Earth’s atmosphere that would signify his arrival and help track down his location. But we also need to find Erik Selvig. If anybody can help us, it’s him.”

―Where is he?―

―No idea.― Jane shakes her head. “He hasn’t answered any of my texts, and calls go straight to voicemail.”

―Uh,‖ says Darcy, stepping forward with a goofy little wave. “I think I can help with that.”

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Tracking down Erik Selvig turns out to be the easy part of the quest, owing to the fact that he was safely ensconced in Jane’s living room the whole time, on the sofa with a cup of instant noodles. That Darcy and Ian had found him two days earlier but not bothered to mention it to Jane was probably only a minor glitch given the circumstances. (Darcy insisted the right opportunity bring this up never occurred.) The important thing is, he was found. And he knew, somehow, where Malekith would land on Earth.

Not that he divulges that information to Tony. And not that Tony specifically cares.

―No, it’s fine,‖ Tony says to Jane when she comes to check on him, sitting as he is in the dark at the kitchen table, staring at distant haloes of city lights through foggy window panes. “I get it. Loki Temple of Doomed him, so he’s entitled to feel specific ways about Loki. Can’t blame him for being suspicious of me by extension.”

―He’s not suspicious,‖ Jane tries to say. “He’s just...”

―Mistrustful, then. He wouldn’t even look at me for more than a fraction of a second.”

“I think he just needs to get to know you and realize-”

“Yeah, well, that can wait.” Standing, Tony stretches his arms above his head and behind his back, feeling the pull of tense muscles. “The magical power of friendship isn’t high priority right now. How about we concentrate on doing what needs to be done first, and then Selvig and I can talk about our feelings later.”

“He could use your help on the gravimetric spikes. They’re still just a prototype.”

“Jane, I know you’re trying to smooth things out, but come on. He doesn’t want my help. And I don’t know if I want to help. I’m too...” He sighs. “Tired. I’m too tired.” Too exhausted. Too mentally drained. Too hung up on Loki to be able to think of anything else. “If we can be honest for a sec, I’m kind of looking forward to this new dynamic where Thor just tells me what to do and I do it. I’m good with being a hired goon. That’s my preferred level of engagement at this particular juncture.”

With a sad little smile, she nods at him. “You know... Loki’s going to be fine. He’ll be fine.”

“You feeling the need to tell me that gives evidence to the contrary, but okay.”
She nods more firmly. “He’ll be fine.”

Tony’d like to believe that. It would be really nice if he could believe that. It would be really damn fantastic if he could just buy into the optimism for a few hours instead of sitting up all night at Jane’s kitchen table, fighting back the urge to drink himself stupid and only winning that battle because he can’t find so much as a single can of beer in the whole place. When morning finally rolls around, he’s already in the suit, first standing and first ready to go. And maybe it makes things easier, wearing all the armor? If there’s a mask over his face, he doesn’t have to make direct eye contact with Selvig. It’s almost like he’s not himself. He’s not Tony Stark, he’s just an anonymous robot, listening to Thor’s briefing on the daily plan of attack.

“When Malekith came to Asgard,” Thor tells them all, “he came with an army. There’s no reason to think he won’t do the same this time. He needs to unleash the Aether himself, but he’ll send out his troops to create chaos and distraction. Tony Stark: that will be your responsibility. Keep the dark elves contained and protect civilians.”

“Got it,” Tony woodenly replies. It’s an easy enough job, and something he can do without too much mental investment. Good.

“Selvig, Jane, Darcy, and Ian will take the gravimetric spikes and place them around Malekith’s landing site.”

He says that almost as a question. Like he doesn’t really understand the whole technology side of things and is just going along with what Jane and Selvig told him they were going to do, which is, realistically, the most likely scenario. And it’s not as if Tony fully understands the damn technology either. (Not that he’d ever admit it. Something about gravity. He’ll worry about it later when he has the capacity to both think and care.)

“I will deal with Malekith myself. His power is too great for any of you to face, so stay away, and stay on your guard. I’ll do what I can to keep his attention focused on me and protect you.” He looks up at Tony. “Tony Stark will help me on that count.”

“Uh-huh,” says Tony. He can already feel the prickle of impatience snaking its way through his body. This is too much planning. How much planning do they need to run out and smoke a bunch of aliens? The feel of the suit on his body is too restrictive indoors. He needs to be out. He needs to be out doing something, not standing in here listening to Jane and Selvig bring up questions of spike placement while Darcy asserts her ability to assist them and Ian just looks vastly out of his depth. It would only take a couple seconds to leave. He door from the kitchen leads out onto a roof patio and...

“Right,” he says, in the middle of Selvig saying something else about... he doesn’t even know what because he wasn’t paying attention. “I think I’m going to get a head start. You know. Fly around, scout things out, get an aerial view of anything weird.”

“But we haven’t even determined-” Thor tries.

“Then let me know when you have,” Tony cuts him off. “Whatever it is you need to determine. Let me know. Call me. You have my number. I’ll try to remind myself to consider remembering to answer. For now, I gotta go.”

“But the destabilization of the boundaries of the worlds!” Selvig says as he turns to head for the door, as if that’s a combination of words that makes sense to say. Obviously Tony missed something.

“Yeah, I’ll be sure to watch out for that.”
“You can’t see it,” Selvig insists. “Not until it’s too late and you walk right into a rift leading halfway across the universe. If it happens, stop immediately and come back exactly the way you came. And do it quickly, because they can open and close at any time. If you don’t find it again... you’ll be stranded in a foreign world.”

Okay, Tony really missed something. But instead of making him worried, which a warning like that logically should, it just makes him annoyed. He’ll go through a rift in space and get stranded in an alien world if he wants to. Fuck you, Erik Selvig. “...Right, sure. I’ll try to remind myself to remember to consider that, too.” And he heads for the door. “I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

Maybe somebody says ‘wait, Tony,’ as he goes. It’s possible. Or he might just be expecting that to happen. But a moment later he’s out on the rooftop, and a moment after that he’s flying, and London and Jane and Thor and Selvig and all their petty annoyances are safely below.

If only he could fly all the way to Asgard. He’s halfway frustrated and out of sorts enough to try. But instead he has to settle for flying over London looking for evil elves, which honestly sounds almost as outlandish. Nothing below indicates the presence of anything other than regular old humans going about their regular old human lives on a regular old human work day.

“Jarvis, let’s keep sensors up,” he says. “Scan for any anomalies in energy, heat, radiation, magnetic field, the works.”

“Collecting and analyzing base level data now. I can see nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Good. Let me know if anything pops up.”

“I have an incoming call from Jane Foster. Shall I put it through?”

Might as well. It’s not as if Tony’s doing anything other than flying in circles for the time being. “Yeah. Let’s have it.”

Jane’s voice is in his ear a second later. “Tony?” It sounds vaguely underwater, which he’s going to snidely attribute to her probably having a crappy phone, and nothing to do with his own tech.

“Yeah.”

“My equipment isn’t picking up anything yet, but we’re on our way to Greenwich now. What do you see?”

He almost asks ‘why Greenwich’, but that was probably one of the items up for discussion during the long period of time in which he either wasn’t part of the conversation or wasn’t paying attention. “A bunch of tourists gawking at me from the London Eye. What’s your ETA? I’ll meet you there.”

“Twenty minutes?” she says. “We’ll keep you updated.”

“Sure thing.”

“Do you need a flight plan?” Jarvis asks once Jane disconnects.

“Nah. I’ve been to London a hundred times. I know Mordor’s to the left.”

“It’s to your right.”

“That’s what I meant.”

“Your other right,” he specifies as Tony starts flying again and a small wireframe map comes up on
the display with a blinking green light off to the east.

It’s going to be one of those days. “I knew that.”

“Evidently.”

“Don’t you sass me with that smug, synthesized British accent. You were born in California and are just as much a dumb American as I am.”

“Of course, sir.”

Up ahead, there’s still no sign of Himself the Elf. No sensor pings, either. But Tony can keep flying around and playing lookout, peering down at the river and the roads, searching for anything weird. So far nothing more interesting than a dog squatting next to a tree.

“Let’s bump up our scanning sensitivity,” he tells Jarvis. “See if we can pick up anything at all.”

“I’ve increased to the maximum level I can manage without interference from radio and cellular signals. I can find nothing out of the ordinary.”

“How far does the range extend?”

“Approximately fourteen hundred meters.”

“Can we increase that?”

“I can try, but it may degrade the sensitivity.”

Tony’s about to say, ‘Fine.’ He’s about to tell Jarvis to go ahead. He’s about to do that. But the funny thing is (and by ‘funny’ he means ‘completely disorienting’), one second he’s flying over the Tower Bridge, and the next he’s... in a vast, twilight-blue wasteland of icy rock and snow. One that looks gut-wrenchingly familiar.

Immediately, an alarm sounds, accompanied by every single square millimeter of his helmet display lighting up with a bright, blaring red. “Sir, all systems are offline,” says Jarvis, in case Tony hadn’t guessed already. “I’ve lost connectivity with all networks.”

“Yeah, I got that,” Tony growls, flashing his repulsors forward to come to a quick stop and hover in mid-air. “I think we flew into one of those space-rifts Selvig mentioned. Take us back the way we came.”

“GPS is unavailable,” Jarvis replies, making Tony’s stomach twist with a feeling of what he realizes might very soon turn into panic. “I have no locational tracking data to reverse trajectory.”

“Shit.” Fine. Okay. They can do this the old fashioned way. “Can you at least turn me around 180 degrees?”

“The digital compass is reliant on satellite data. The best I can do is calculate based on visual landmarks.”

And Tony’s going to have to be okay with that, largely because he has no other choice. “Sure. Let’s go. Slowly. Turn me around, and we go back exactly the way we came. That’s what Selvig said to do if this happened.”

Slowly, as instructed, Jarvis turns the suit around until Tony’s facing the opposite direction. “Good. Now let’s move back this way at a moderate speed and we should hit the rift again to take us back to
London. Can you scan for anything that might pinpoint its location?"

“I’m afraid my sensors are blind. I’m down to the onboard computer with minimal processing capacity. We have enhanced optical targeting, motion sense, and internal power controls only.”

So they need to do this the really old fashioned way. “Fantastic,” Tony says. “Can you make a note for when we get back that my idea to keep everything in cloud server infrastructure was the dumbest move in human history and we need to completely scrap that in favor of a more robust onboard system?”

“I will save a memo to the hard drive, which you will need to manually download once we regain network access.”

Of fucking course.

It feels like they’re going at a painfully slow speed, but Tony won’t risk anything faster for fear of missing the rift. But after a solid minute of flying, he knows they’re not on the right track. “No, we’ve passed it,” he says. “Turn around again. Do you have any data on our flight angle at the time of disconnection?”

“I’m sorry. The last data save was seven seconds before we lost connection.”

“I think we were on a slight descent.” He’d dropped altitude to get a closer look at that dog, hadn’t he? “Let’s head up three meters and try that.”

Except that doesn’t work either. And neither does dropping back down. And neither does spiraling through the area where the rift should be. And by this time, despite Tony’s best efforts to keep his emotions under control, he knows his heart is beating too fast and his breath is coming too quick and shallow and he’s clenching his neck and jaw in a way that builds a tension headache all the way up the back of his skull. He can’t find the rift.

“Okay J,” he says, fighting to stay calm. “This isn’t working. It’s time for a backup plan.”

“What plan do you recommend?”

Frowning, Tony once again stops in mid-air. That's not what Jarvis should be saying. He should be getting back an analysis of the situation, complete with an idea or two on how to move forward. Instead, there’s nothing.

Because, oh.

He doesn’t really have Jarvis here, does he? The full AI exists on the cloud server. What he has, in the suit, offline, is a pared-down version. He has the essential bare minimum, shrunk down to what can fit on his suit’s hard drive.

“I’m going to fly directly into the ground at high speed and crash,” he says as a test.

Jarvis answers with, “My current estimate based on optical scanning is that you are twenty-seven meters from the ground.”

It brings a cold sweat to the surface of his skin. What he has isn’t Jarvis. Not really. What he has is one step up from Siri, using Jarvis’ voice.

And if he didn’t feel way too vulnerable and alone before, boy howdy does he ever now. He’s alone. Entirely alone, with incredibly limited resources and no viable plan, in an inhospitable world.
that's probably billions of miles from home. But if he lets himself fall into the trap of thinking too much about that he'll be supremely fucked, instead of just the slightly less dire level of incredibly fucked he is already. So. Time to shift gears.

“Scratch that last. I need to kick things into survival mode. Do you have anything in your memory about Jotunheim?”

“I can find no record of ‘Jotunheim’ in my database.”

It was a long shot, but still Tony had a spark of hope. Not any more. Everything he told Jarvis – the real Jarvis – about Jotunheim would be saved elsewhere. “Well, congrats, you’re about to learn a lot. Record everything you see and hear, as much as disc space allows. We’re on a planet – actually a moon, as far as I can tell – called Jotunheim. I’ve been here before. And if we want to get back home, we need to change strategies. I think the rift closed. We should’ve found it by now. So, backup plan. We need to find civilization and talk to the locals.” And pray they don’t eat him on sight.

“I’m scanning the area now for heat signatures. I can find no signs of life.”

“Heat scanning won’t do us much good. The Jotuns are known as frost giants, and they don’t have body heat. Scan for movement instead. Everything, no matter how small. They’re skilled hunters, so if they see us coming, they could hide and stay still. Scan topography as well. Their settlements are pretty well camouflaged from the outside, but if you map anything looking like an inorganic structure, bring it up.”

“Scanning now, sir.”

Maybe he’ll be lucky. Maybe the rift took him somewhere close to Helblindi’s city, and he’ll be able to sweet-talk his way into getting a guide to take him over to the pathway back to Earth. The one that had previously been guarded by the destroyer, which he decapitated. He was still owed a trip home as payment for that valiant deed, wasn’t he? So with any luck, he can cash in now. He only needs to survive long enough to find his way to Helblindi.

“Run me some power level diagnostics, will you J?”

“Power level at eight-six percent. Based on current usage levels, I estimate we have nine hours and twelve minutes remaining.”

“See what we can do to draw that out. Decrease display brightness and resolution by half. Shut down weapons and all other non-essential systems. Optimize flight speed for power conservation. And calculate wind direction so we can go with it rather than against it. Where does that put us?”

“Estimated power supply now at sixteen hours, thirty-one minutes.”

Better. But still not good. Sixteen and a half hours to find a friendly needle of civilization in this frozen haystack of a planet-moon. Sixteen and a half hours left to live unless he can pull a miracle out of his ass. “Okay,” he mutters. “Let me know if you find anything else to cut. For now, let’s go with the wind.”

Under other circumstances, he would have been bored out of his mind to fly across Jotunheim, staring down at the ground. Under current circumstances, the time seems to pass way too quickly. Seconds tick away into minutes, and suddenly three hours have passed and Jarvis is telling him the suit’s down to seventy percent power. Then it’s at sixty percent. Then fifty.

“Any other unnecessary systems we can cut or at least pare down?” Tony asks.
“Dropping internal climate control to sixty-five degrees might give us another twenty minutes.”

And here Tony was about to ask if it would be possible to turn up the heat, given the freezing Jotunheim wind blasting him and seeping in through all plate joints. “Not worth it,” he says. “Stay the course. Keep a lookout for—”

Right there, he stops, mouth still open. Is that...

Jarvis’ scanners must’ve spotted it the same time he did. “Sir, I’m reading a cluster of regular structures ahead.”

“I see it.” There’s a wall of jagged rock looking like any other patch of the surrounding landscape, but from a bird’s eye view, the city inside it is easy to pick out. Roads. Buildings. A large arena with a partially completed roof. And on the far side... a gaping crater.

All the hope that had gone missing over the past few hours comes rushing back in, full force, at that sight. That’s Helblindi’s city. Helblindi’s city. Against all odds, he found the one place containing the one person on all of Jotunheim that might actually be able to help him get home. His heart beats faster again, but this time it’s not from fear but from pure relief. Should he smile? Probably not, because it feels dumb, but he does it anyway.

“That’s it,” he tells Jarvis. “That’s exactly what we’re looking for. Disengage economy mode, J. Display up, full flight power. Let’s pay Loki’s family a friendly little visit. Uh. Weapons back up, just in case they forget who I am and need a quick memory jog.”

“Re-engaging all systems now.”

Tony could continue flying at economy speed and reach the city in about one minute, but that suddenly seems like a ridiculous amount of time to wait. With full power back at his disposal, he kicks the repulsors into high gear and shoots ahead. Twice as fast. He’s been on Jotunheim way too long, and the sooner he can get Helblindi to show him to that pathway back to Earth, the better.

“Okay J,” he says as he approaches the city. “Keep all sensors up. As far as I know these guys don’t have any advanced weapons, but I could always be wrong. And a rock can still hurt. I’m going to set down in the middle of the arena over there; you watch my back.”

“Of course, sir,” says Jarvis.

But as soon as it’s said, Tony’s surroundings shift once again with a jarring suddenness. The twilight-gray sky changes in an instant to brilliant sunset orange. The barren, icy wasteland becomes a cityscape clad in high-tech brilliance. And before he even has a split second to react, Tony flies head first at the speed of sound into something massive, golden, and very solid.
In the Walls of the Dome

Chapter Summary

When Tony wakes up, he has a lot of questions. Specifically, questions like 'where am I?' and 'what the hell happened?'. Unfortunately, questions tend to lead to answers, and sometimes the answers aren’t anything close to what you want to hear.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends, I'm posting this chapter within a reasonable timeframe to make up for the extreme delay on the last one! Also I’ve added a new tag: “Ragnarok-adjacent”. This story won’t actually be dealing with any of the Ragnarok plot, but that doesn’t mean we can’t fuck with the backstory! ENJOY.

It isn’t often that Tony wakes up feeling good. Not just ‘not bad’ or ‘okay’: honest-to-gosh good. Really good. Phenomenal, even. Every single muscle in his body is as relaxed as if he just came out of an hour long soak in the hot tub. The bed sheets are smooth and soft against his skin. The mattress is comfortable and warm. However much sleep he got, it must’ve been the exact right amount, because he feels really damn good.

Yawning, he rolls over onto his back and opens his eyes to the welcoming golden sunshine of morning. Or day. Or... well, that doesn’t really matter.

The first thought that crosses his blissfully hazy mind is, Where the heck am I?

It’s followed quickly by, Oh... looks like I'm on Asgard.

Should he be concerned by that? Probably, but whatever. He closes his eyes again and lets himself drift back off for a minute, just enjoying the feeling of absolute contentment that flows through his veins. Like a gentle massages at the cellular level.

“Tony?”

That sounds like Loki. He opens his eyes again and lifts his head. The person sitting in a lounge chair in the corner of the room looks like Loki.

“Loki?”

Of course it’s Loki. Who else would look and sound like Loki? That was a dumb question.

“Finally awake,” Loki says, setting down his book as he gets up to walk over to Tony’s bed. “How do you feel?”

“Fantastic,” Tony answers.
Loki’s eyebrows knot in suspicion. “Are you being sarcastic?”

“No. That was serious. I feel really good right now. I think I had the best sleep of my life, and now I feel like... uh... You know the taste of mango juice? That’s how I feel. Very pleasant and smooth.”

“I see.” Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, Loki tucks one leg under himself and leans over to feel Tony’s forehead. “They only gave you a quarter dose of the pain elixir, but that’s still clearly too much for a human.”

“This feels like exactly the right dose.”

“It’s absolutely not. Can you sit up?”

“Yes.” Tony wiggles up into a halfway-sitting position to lean against the headboard.

“Any difficulty moving?”

“Nope.”

“Good. It seems you’re healing well.”

“From what?”

Exhaling, Loki looks down at his hands. “You, ah... appeared out of nowhere. Someone said through a spatial rift caused by the convergence. But you appeared suddenly in the sky, crashed into a tower, and fell to the courtyard below. The guards who carried you in thought you would certainly be dead already. It seems, though, that your armor saved your life.” He looks back at Tony. “You were unconscious. Spine broken in two places, among other less urgent fractures. But alive.”

“...Huh,” says Tony. On the one hand, he doesn’t remember anything like that, but on the other, it kind of sounds like something he’d do.

And on that note: what exactly does he remember? He looks around the room. Not this, for sure. “We’re on Asgard?”

“Yes.”

So if he flew through a rift, how did Loki get here? And why was he flying in his armor in the first place? If he drops his head and closes his eyes and tries to think back...

“What do you remember, Tony?” Carefully, Loki’s arm makes its way around his back, and he can feel the weight of Loki’s body shifting to lie close beside him.

“Ireland,” he says after a moment. “We took the jet with Thor and Jane to Ireland, and then...” Why can’t he remember anything after that? “Everything’s too fuzzy.”

“It could be the elixir. It’s been known to temporarily block the memory of what happened along with physical pain.”

“Malekith. I remember Thor talking about that. So I guess our team won?”

“Eventually, yes.”

“Huh. Good. That’s good. So if I came through a space rift, how did you get here?”
Was that a tense little inhalation from Loki? Maybe? Or Tony could be imagining things. But all Loki says is, “Bifrost.”

“Hm.” Well, it doesn’t really matter. Tony drops his head down to lean against Loki’s shoulder, and Loki wraps both arms around him, pulling him snug and close. With a kiss to the forehead. Which Tony very much appreciates, because feeling very good feels very better in Loki’s immediate presence. There’s a tingle of magic in Loki’s touch.

“You should try to get up and walk,” Loki murmurs to him. “Healing magic can only do so much. You’ll need to coax your body into doing the rest on its own.”

“Uh-huh,” Tony replies. “But what if I did that... later.”

“You want to stay in bed for now?”

“You don’t?”

Loki nods. “Fair enough.”

“I could go for some food, though. Oh man. You know what’s a really appealing word right now? Buffet.”

“It’s probably not in your best interest to eat while the elixir is still in your system.”

“What if I just want a grilled cheese sandwich? Do you guys have that here? Or do you only have Asgardian food? Wait. Do you ever have, like, Midgard night where you eat... I don’t know... hamburgers, but the burger is made of taco meat, and it’s served on a Chinese steam bun topped with spaghetti? ...Actually that might be good.”

“Tony.”

“Okay you’re right, it’s weird. Scratch that. But I do want a grilled cheese sandwich. With a pickle.”

“I think you should sleep a while longer, until the elixir has worn down and you can think more clearly.”

Now that sounds ridiculous. “I mean. If you insist.”

“Go back to sleep.” Kissing him again, Loki subtly urges him back down so he’s lying flat on the bed, and tucks the blanket around his shoulders. “It shouldn’t last much longer.”

“Fine,” Tony says. “But before I fall asleep again, I just thought of something really important.”

“Which is?”

“Do snakes think of themselves as snakes? Like, do they know they’re snakes? Do you ever think about how animals view themselves and each other?”

“No,” says Loki. “I can’t say as I’ve ever thought about that.”

“Huh. Also: should we have a theme song?”

“Go to sleep, Tony.”

“I’ll write us one.”
It is often that Tony wakes up feeling like total ass. And that’s exactly the case when he stumbles out of foggy, disorienting dreams and blinks his eyes open with a sluggish groan, squinting against the light of what appears to be late afternoon. His head hurts. His back hurts. His ribcage hurts. Actually maybe it would be easier to list the things that don’t hurt, since that list would be as follows: his tongue and his hair. Everything else, from his big toe to his right ear, feels like it’s in the process of recovering from several unpleasant injuries, but a lot of things also just plain ache from lying in bed too long. He groans again, arching his back off the mattress as he tries to alleviate some of the discomfort. Loki’s arm is still under his shoulders, and that sure doesn’t help.

“Still feel fantastic?” Loki asks, sounding like he’s smirking.

“No,” Tony growls through clenched teeth, which, unsurprisingly, hurt. “Fuck. Ugh. The good drugs wore off. I feel like a shitty human again. This is the worst.”

Loki, of course, laughs. But at least he kisses Tony’s cheek as he does it, which makes things superficially better.

“Can you call somebody to dope me up again? I don’t like all these assorted things I’m feeling.”

“Maybe later,” Loki tells him. “Tonight. For now, I’m afraid it’s in your best interest to suffer through some of the pain and let your body reorient itself without magical interference. You’ll heal more effectively.”

“Uh, do I look like the kind of basic chump who cares about effectiveness?”

“No, but luckily I’m here to tell you what to do.”

Just what Tony wasn’t hoping for. “That sounds like the opposite of luck.”

“So with that in mind...” Loki gets up from the bed, tugging at Tony’s arm in an effort to convince him to do the same. “Stand up. You’re going to walk around the room for a few minutes, and then I’ll have somebody make you a grilled cheese taco hamburger or whatever nonsense you wanted earlier.”

As much as Tony’s everything hurts from just lying there, the thought of getting out of bed seems somehow even less appealing than staying. “What if I don’t want to?”

Loki shrugs. “I’ll go find food on my own, leaving you here to be miserable by yourself.”

“I don’t think you’d dare,” Tony says, staring Loki down with as serious an expression as he can muster through face muscles that inexplicably hurt. “I am far too precious and vulnerable for you to leave me.”

“Oh you think so.”

“I know so.”

The correct adjective to describe the manner in which Loki leans over the bed would be ‘threatening’. He leans over, far enough to need to brace himself with his hands on the mattress, and narrows his eyes at Tony. His hair falls around his face like a black veil, probably on purpose to some dramatic and sinister effect. “You think so,” he repeats in a low voice.

“Yep,” says Tony.
Slowly, Loki sinks down to kiss Tony’s cheek, then his jaw, then his ear, then his eyelid. “Of course you are. You know I would literally turn anyone who tried to harm you inside out. Either through magic or with my bare hands. Or perhaps an innovative combination of the two techniques.”

“That is the sweetest and most romantic thing anybody’s ever said to me,” Tony whispers.

Realistically, it’s only the fact that he feels like absolute garbage that’s stopping him from reaching up, wrapping his arms around Loki’s neck, and pulling Loki down onto the bed for an X-rated cuddle. Instead, he’s the one getting pulled upwards into a very G-rated hug, which quickly turns into an even more G-rated sit-on-the-edge-of-the-bed as Loki maneuvers him into the correct position for standing.

“You only need to walk over to the table and back,” Loki tells him. “Just to make sure you’ve not lost any function in your legs. Table and back. It’s hardly anything.”

Bullshit. That table is at least twenty feet away. “And then I can have my grilled cheese taco burger?”

“If that’s what you really want, yes.”

“And some strong booze? And dessert? And then you spend the next several hours gently rocking me and telling me everything will be fine while I cry like a baby because my entire skin feels like one big bruise?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Sure.” Tony inhales loudly, and huffs the breath out again. “Walk to the table. I’m gonna do it. Totally about to do it. I’m preparing myself right now to stand up, and then I’ll walk over there. Any second now.”

“Would you like me to help you stand?”

“...Maybe...”

It’s always disconcerting to be reminded of Loki’s immense relative strength, and to experience it first-hand in the form of being picked up off the bed like a small child and stood on the floor. And while standing doesn’t necessarily feel worse than lying down, it sure doesn’t feel better. It just feels awful in an exciting new way. Tony wraps both arms around Loki’s waist and leans against him for support.

“Are you able to stand?”

“Yeah,” he mutters. “I can. I don’t like it, but I can. Actually. Instead of walking to the table, can we go over to the bathroom? I need to...”

It might be the word ‘bathroom’ that triggers Tony’s memory. Or the way he’s pretty desperately clinging to Loki? Or the combination of the both. Maybe it’s both. Whatever it is, everything floods back in the space of an instant. Before he can even take a breath. All the memories come crashing in, and all the overwhelming emotions that go with them. Loki. At the hotel. In the bathtub. Injured. And all the blood.

“Shit,” he hisses, feeling his knees weaken.

“What?” Loki asks. “Is it moving too painful? Do you need to sit down again?”
“No. I just...” His hand slides around to just below Loki’s sternum, pressing gently, as if he might be able to feel anything. Any evidence of what had happened. Instead, there’s only smooth, warm skin beneath the thin fabric of Loki’s shirt. “You’re... you’re okay, aren’t you?” he asks. “I just got hit by a big ol’ load of all my memories of what happened, and... you almost died. You almost died.”

“I’m fine, Tony,” Loki softly says.

“Dying is not fine.”

“I’m fine now.”

“No you’re not.” His arms return to their position encircling Loki’s waist, and squeeze tightly. “I need to cuddle you.”

“You flew face first into a tower. I thought you said you wanted me to cuddle you.”

“No, you had your turn. I get to cuddle you now. Lie down. This is going to take at least half an hour.”

“Tony...”

“Just let me...” He tries to wrap his arms over top of Loki’s, but Loki easily breaks out of that hold. “You’re not making this any easier on yourself.” He tries again. It’s about the only move he can do from this position. Shockingly, it doesn’t work any better the second time.

“Stop it,” says Loki. “I’m stronger than you.” And by way of pinning Tony’s arms down in a tight embrace, he expertly illustrates that point.

“Why won’t you... let me... cuddle you...” It’s no use. No matter how much he struggles, he can’t escape. “Damnit, Loki.”

Loki kisses the top of his head. “You’re so adorable when you try.”

“No, I’m very manly and powerful. Except right now...” Twenty seconds of fighting against the iron grip has taken its toll in his current diminished shape. He drops his forehead down onto Loki’s shoulder. “...I’m also very tired, so I’m going to be the bigger person and let you win this round.”

“Will you walk over to the table now?”

“Yeah yeah, whatever. But can you do me a tall for a sec and grab my wrists and lift me up by my arms, as high as you can? My spine feels compressed and I need an extreme stretch out.”

The fact that Loki can do it so easily should probably be cause for concern, but Tony’ll just add it to the bottom of the list containing all the other concerns caused by this relationship. Loki lifts him up until his toes just barely touch the ground. He bends his knees to let himself hang with no support, and something in his back gives a satisfying crack. “Ooh. Yeah. That’s the ticket.”

“Good?”

“Give it a couple more seconds.”

There could be worse times for a knock at the door. But this one is, Tony has to admit, pretty awkward. There’s a knock at the door, and then the door opens before Loki even has a chance to ask who’s there. Because it isn’t some random servant bringing food, or a healer coming to check on Loki.
Tony’s progress.

It’s Odin. And he shows himself in, stopping just inside to stare at the elegant tableau of Loki holding Tony up by his wrists, and Tony dangling like a pendulum.

Loki, as if they hadn’t just been doing something weird, slowly lowers Tony back down. And Tony, as if they hadn’t just been doing something weird, takes a sideways step and smooths his pajamas.

Odin, as if he hadn’t just seen them doing something weird, nods a greeting. “Loki. Tony Stark.”

“Father,” says Loki.

“Hi,” says Tony.

And thus having established that the three of them will politely pretend nothing unusual was going on, Odin clasps his hands behind his back and makes his way across the room. “Thor has left,” he says once he comes to a stop in front of Loki.

“Back to Midgard?” Loki asks.

“Yes.”

“Hm. I suppose I’ll do the same soon. Now that Tony has nearly recovered.”

“Of course, of course, yes…”

Tony, standing off to the side, is infinitely grateful he’s not part of this stilted attempt at a conversation and has no expectation to participate.

“So, ah,” Odin continues after an uncomfortable pause. “I have a few things. Of your mother’s. I think… I think she would want you to have them.”

That had to have had some effect on Loki. It had to, because it had an effect on Tony, making something clench inside his chest. He looks over without thinking, at Loki’s face, but the master of expressionless stoicism is out in fine form. Loki only gives the barest of acknowledging nods. “I’d appreciate that,” he says.

“Good,” says Odin. “Very good. If you want to come with me, I’ll show you what-”

Loki stops him. “Tomorrow. Tony is still feeling poorly. We’d prefer to stay here for now.”

Regarding Tony with an expression sitting somewhere between uncertain and shocked, Odin takes a step back. “Are you sure it wouldn’t be better for you to come on your own?”

“No,” Loki tells him.

“I mean, it’s okay with me,” Tony says. “If you need to go sort something out, I’m okay on my own for a couple hours.”

But Loki’s firm in his answer. “I’d prefer to stay here.” It sounds non-negotiable.

Odin’s silent a few moments longer before sighing and beginning his retreat back to the door. “If that’s what you want,” he says. “We can go through her things tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Loki quietly replies.
There's nothing more after that. No 'goodbye' or 'see you then'. Just Odin making his way back out, looking so much older and frailer than Tony remembers. Didn't he stand tall and imposing before? His shoulders sag now, and his back seems bent under the weight of age. He's gained years since their last meeting.

When the door closes behind him, Loki speaks before Tony has the chance to say anything. "I should call for some food. What would you like? I'm not sure what manner of Earth fare the cooks might know, but if you describe it well enough, I'm sure they can manage something."

"Loki, um..."

"Or I could just request something simple. Meat, bread... That would do, wouldn't it?"

"Do you want to... talk about stuff? About your mom?"

"No."

That's the kind of 'no' Tony used to give. The kind of 'no' he's well acquainted with. The kind of 'no' that usually means 'I just want to think about it in silence by myself and maybe later talk about something adjacent to the issue, but not the issue itself'. "Okay, well, um," Tony says to steer the conversation off into a new branch. "I guess it must be pretty tough for you to be here. In Asgard. Having to deal with everything."

"Yes," Loki answers, barely speaking the word.

"I know it was really weird for me going back to my parents' house after they... um, after the accident."

"And that's why I want to leave as soon as possible."

"It might help, though. Staying a few days. Coming to terms with things."

"No, I want to leave," Loki says, more forcefully.

"Okay." It's not like Tony's one to push this kind of talk. Or even one who has any clue what to say. "Then why don't you order up some food. Whatever you want. I'm good with anything. We can eat dinner, get a bit drunk, you can cuddle me even though you clearly only won that fight through nefarious means, and then tomorrow we can deal with your family stuff in a quick and efficient way and head back home. Sound good?"

"Yes."

"Super. I'm going to force myself to shuffle over to the bathroom. If I'm not back in twenty minutes, assume I fell into the toilet and need to be rescued."

"Do you need help?" Loki asks, finally showing something close to a smile, because this is what he needs right now. A distraction, the illusion of normalcy, and something under his control to worry about. (Namely, Tony not dying in the toilet.)

"Nah I'm good. Order me something awesome for dinner. I'll be judging you on your choice."

Loki nods. "A large bucket of raisins it is."

"Perfect. Thanks, asshole."

ooo
There’s always a strange and very specific feeling that accompanies the state of being in a parent’s bedroom, whether that be the bedroom of your own parent or somebody else’s. Tony remembers it from when he was a kid. When he used to sneak up to his mom and dad’s room when they were out to watch satellite TV, or even when he was called in there legitimately to help his mom reach something down from the high closet shelves using a rickety step stool. There was always that slightly uncomfortable feeling of not belonging. Trespassing. The miniscule thrill of being somewhere he wasn’t supposed to be. And it feels exactly the same walking into the palatial bedroom of the queen of Asgard.

If Loki feels that way, he doesn’t show it, because Loki doesn’t show anything. He passes through the room with detached coolness, glancing down at a rug on the floor or over at a chair or up at the finial of a curtain rod. He paces to the far wall and back before speaking to Odin.

“What did you want me to take?”

“Whatever you think is important to you,” Odin replies.

Standing near the doorway, Tony leans against the wall and watches Loki do another circle. His legs and back, while not as bad as the previous day, still ache from the stair climb up here. Ideally he’d like to sit, but since the nearest chair is well on the other side of Odin and he’s pretty sure he’d be committing a huge social faux pas by sitting in the presence of a king without being invited to... he’ll just deal with this. And continue to stand and watch.

Eventually, Loki gestures to the bed. “There used to be a different blanket. Pale blue fading into dark, with silver embroidery like a field of stars in the night sky. Where is it?”

“I’ll ask your mother’s attendants,” says Odin. “It may have been taken for cleaning or repairs.”

“Ask them. I want the blanket. And the table that used to be here: silver legs, with two wooden surface tiers in the shape of leaves, inlaid with gold veining. Have them find that as well.”

He does a third sweep through the room, this time picking up little things here and there – a decorative orb, a bottle, a mirror, a book – and placing them together on a low dressing table. He disappears down a side corridor that must lead to a closet, and comes back a few minutes later with an assortment of clothing and furs, laying them across the end of the bed. And once that’s complete, he sits down at what Tony would’ve guessed to be a desk. But instead of having a solid writing surface, the polished gold and wood top dissolves as soon as Loki skims his hand over it in a swirling Z pattern, revealing secret storage beneath. Loki pulls out a necklace glittering with pale pink gems.

Tony doesn’t miss the surprised hiss of breath Odin takes. “Your mother’s jewelry,” he says, as if he either hadn’t known about the secret of the desk, or hadn’t expected Loki to know how to open it.

Loki pulls out two more necklaces, one delicately draped over each hand, and holds them up to catch the light. “I’ll take all of this.”

“All of it?”

“Yes,” Loki snarls, turning his head with a sharp look. “All. Who else do you think should have it? Thor’s nonexistent wife? Or were you planning to remarry?”

Odin, with no way to respond to that, merely nods. “If you wish. Take it.”

“Thank you. Call the attendants in to pack it up: everything I’ve specified. The items, the clothing, and all the jewelry. With the exception of this silver box of earrings: these I would like divided fairly
amongst her personal maids in thanks for their service. Everything else, pack it up. Tony and I will be leaving immediately and I want to take it with me. You can send the other things later once they’re located.” He stands, continuing to stare at Odin. “Now tell me what it is you want from me. This is your last chance.”

“What I want?” Odin asks, with what might just be mock innocence.

“I know you want something from me. If this were merely about distribution of mother’s effects, you would have chosen a few things and given them to me. Instead you let me take whatever I want with barely a comment. This is a bribe, not a peace offering, and a substantial bribe at that. What do you want?”

“Only that you help me convince your brother to come back to Asgard,” Odin says after a moment’s pause.”

“Why?” asks Loki.

“Because he will not listen to me. But in the end, he always listens to you.”

“I mean why must he come back? If Thor chooses to renounce the throne and live on Midgard with his human lover, I can’t say as I fault him at all for that choice.”

“I cannot allow him to abandon his birthright.”

“Why not?”

When Odin doesn’t answer, Loki makes the demand again. “Why not?”

Odin sighs. “There are deep reasons that I am unable to-”

“More like unwilling.” Loki snaps. Gesturing to the three servants at the door, he beckons them in. “All of this, please,” he tells them. “Pack it up for immediate travel and take it to my room. I’ll be leaving within the hour.”

“Loki, if you will only trust me...”

“But I don’t,” Loki says. “I don’t trust you. I can’t trust you. You’ve lied to me before, and I know you’re lying to me now. So unless you’re willing to divulge everything and be completely honest about what you’re doing, I’m leaving. You can resolve things with Thor yourself.”

“The very fate of Asgard rests on Thor taking the crown!”

Loki nods. “Then I suppose the very fate of Asgard also rests on you explaining to me why.”

“Loki,” Odin groans. “If you only knew...”

“Yes, if I only knew,” Loki agrees with a tight smile. “But since you refuse to tell me... Let’s go, Tony.”

Tony, up until this point perfectly content to pretend to be invisible and stay out of the confrontation, reluctantly steps forward. At least Odin doesn’t look at him. Odin’s too busy keeping all attention on Loki.

“I can... show you,” Odin says in a hollow voice as Loki reaches the doorway.

Loki doesn’t even look back. “Show me what?”
“Take Tony Stark to your room. Then meet me in the royal hall. I will show you.”

“You can show Tony as well.”

“This is for you only, Loki, and only because of my most dire need.”

“Anything you tell me, I promise I will tell Tony immediately. So you might as well save me the effort and let him come along to hear it first-hand”

Tony doesn’t turn around either, because he knows if he did, he’d only see Odin’s stormy glare.

“Very well,” Odin finally allows. He knows there’s no winning this argument. “Come with me.”

They let Odin lead the way, Loki following close behind and Tony hanging onto Loki’s arm for support as they descend staircase after staircase. When they finally reach the hall, which Tony’s sure he’s been in before but never really bothered to look at because he was always in a hurry, Odin continues on without a word. Tony looks up at the high ceiling. There’s a shallow dome overhead, lit by a circle of windows, and a fresco in the flattened peak of the dome. Scenes of Asgardian life have been animated with slow-moving circles and ribbons of golden magic. There’s the rainbow bridge and palace, and a Jotun who must be Laufey, and Asgard’s royal family: Odin, Frigga, Thor, and Loki.

“Nice halo, Dangerous Liaison,” Tony murmurs to Loki as they look up.

Loki, erring on the side of interpreting that as an insult, elbows him in the ribs.

Odin only stops when they reach a large column in the far back corner of the hall. There, he places his hand against the geometrically carved stone. And just as the desk had done for Loki in Frigga’s bedroom, the firm surface of the column dissolves away under Odin’s touch, revealing a hidden spiral stair.

The surprise in Loki’s eyes shows exactly how much he knew about this particular reveal. That draws a wry smile from Odin. “Oh yes. There are many old secrets in this palace that not even you know.”

“So I see,” Loki replies.

And then up they go. Any sliver of hope Tony held that this might be a short ascent immediately falls away: they go up in a tight spiral for what must be at least a hundred steps, in near darkness the entire way. The glow of Odin’s staff gives off minimal light. At the top of the stair, Odin pauses to direct them down a corridor, and then onto a narrow walkway. The low ceiling curves so much Tony has to lean and stoop to avoid hitting his head. He keeps one arm out to feel his way through the dark.

“Where are we?” Loki asks.

“In the walls of the dome,” Odin answers. “Above the windows. There you see the curve of the dome’s ceiling. That false interior was built when your brother was born. To seal away the original structure.”

“Why would you want to seal-”

When Loki looks up, he doesn’t even need to finish the question.

With a bright golden flare from Odin’s staff, the dark masonry above their heads is illuminated. But
instead of blank stone, this original dome, too, is covered in fresco. Ancient and crumbling, beginning only inches from Tony’s face, this one depicts a wholly different viewpoint. Black and red images of bloody conquest flash like blood and then fade into shadows beyond the reach of Odin’s light. At its center, half visible, stands Odin the great warlord. Around its edges, scenes of a woman in black riding a massive wolf. Armies fall before her sword. As Tony’s eyes adjust to the light, it all comes into view.

“What is this?” Loki whispers, turning his head to try to see it all.

The Absolutely Unheard-of Tactic of Telling the Truth

Chapter Summary

At long last, Odin tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about all three of his children.

Chapter Notes

So uh the shit that goes down in this chapter took a WIDE LEFT TURN away from what I had originally planned for the rest of the story (Disclaimer: what I had originally planned was very vague and unfocused and I was mostly running on the assumption it would work itself out, which is I guess what happened, in a way?), but at least now I have, like, a plot and stuff, and know exactly where I'm going. How many chapters are left at this point? That's a mystery!

My most sincere thanks to everyone who's reading and leaving kudos, and I really hope you like this chapter. :)

Thus Odin begins his tale.

“I had great ambitions back then, all those years ago, when I was newly crowned king of Asgard. Under my father Bor's rule, our people had always dealt peacefully with other realms. But I wanted more. I wanted to unite them all under my own kingship into a single, vast empire. And do it by war and bloodshed if necessary. Asgard would be the center of the known world: a fearsome and unstoppable force.

“There was, at that time, a sorceress of astounding power who was both feared and venerated. I went to ask her to bless me with the strength and knowledge to succeed in my plan. Instead of a blessing, she gave me a bargain: she would have a child by me. And this child, born of the essence of Asgard itself and drawing strength from its immense, ancient magic, would grow to be my heir. And the greatest warrior our realm had ever seen. Through this child, she said, I would have everything I desired. I agreed. And so Hela was born.

“I expected a boy, much like Thor. But what I got instead was a girl. Small. Thin. With black hair and ice-blue eyes, like her mother. But the sorceress bade me trust her, and give Hela the training both of a warrior and a witch. This I did, though reluctantly. And slowly I began to see that I had not been deceived. This little girl was able to defeat even my strongest men. And when she was grown, I took her with me at the head of my army, and we razed the lands of Vanaheim. And Alfheim. And Jotunheim. And the rest. Destroying what opposition we faced and taking what we wished, all for the glory of Asgard.

“So Hela became the Goddess of Death. And I became the Allfather of the nine realms I held in my grasp. A golden age, we called it. For a thousand years, we built our strength and our legacy.”

Sighing, he stares up at the shadowed dome and its scenes of gore and destruction. “But with age
comes a waxing of wisdom and a waning of bloodlust. One day I looked out over the nine realms and plainly saw how I ruled with terror and steel. Then I thought, perhaps my father had been the better king. Perhaps there was a better way for me, and for Asgard. We could lift up our subjects instead of cutting them down, and govern with fairness in place of brutality. Build an even greater empire on mutual strength and cooperation. But Hela... disagreed. She wanted to push farther. Take more. Drown entire civilizations in carnage. Her thirst for violence would never be satisfied.

“I could hold her back. I could rein her in. Somewhat. But ultimately, she was my heir, bound by my vow to the sorceress, and once I was gone I knew Asgard would fall under the rule of a tyrannical queen. There was only one way to salvage peace, and that would be to get rid of Hela.”

“So you killed her,” Loki murmurs.

Odin shakes his head. “No. Many tried. All failed. She was too powerful, and seemed to draw yet more strength from each life she took. In the end, we were forced to imprison her. Banish her away to a remote realm from which she could not escape. And we could only do that by the greatest of magic and deception, and a careful plan. I had to disinherit her.

“I knew that by law any legitimate son I had would replace her, my eldest but illegitimate daughter, in the line of succession. But Hela knew this too. And when I married Frigga, Hela cursed her. With barrenness. No son of Frigga’s would ever supplant my daughter.”

“But Thor...” Loki says.

“Yes. Thor. This was all part of the plan, Loki. We grieved Frigga’s barrenness. And Hela gloated. But we knew she would. We know what she would do. It was all part of the plan. My public marriage to Frigga, you see, had been false. Nothing more than a show. My true marriage had taken place the previous day, to a different woman. Another witch. Very powerful, but kind and good-hearted. Noble. For the sake of our people’s future, she had volunteered to be the mother of my heir, and pour all her strength into this child, knowing that he would be our only hope to defeat the goddess of death. I married her in secret, and the next day Frigga stood as her proxy for the wedding festivities. No-one else knew the truth, save Heimdall.”

Taking a step back, Loki looks pale. Even in the dimness of the dome, his skin is paler than pale. “Frigga isn’t Thor’s mother.”

“No. Thor’s mother was named Gaea. She died in the birth, sacrificing her life to give everything she had to her son, and now her body lies in a place of high honor in the crypt of the witches’ temple. For the duration of her pregnancy, she hid from Hela on Midgard, and only returned to Asgard when it was time for the baby to come. I had sent Hela away on a mission to the farthest reaches of the known galaxy, on the pretense of scouting more realms to conquer. By the time she realized the truth... it was too late.

“The witches loyal to Frigga trapped her in the Bifrost on her return. Her power had been diminished by her absence from Asgard, and by the breaking of the covenant of her inheritance upon the birth of my true son. So she was banished, and sealed away. But the magic that binds her will only last as long as I live. To renew the binding, I must formally pass kingship to my rightful heir, Thor, before my death. If I die before he is crowned...”

“...She’ll be free,” Loki finishes.

Odin nods. “So you see. Thor must return to Asgard. His coronation must proceed. He must speak the oath of kingship, and accept the great responsibility that comes with this station. And in time, he must marry and produce an heir of his own, to continue the line of kings. I am old, Loki, and I
fear...” With a heavy sigh, he places both hands on the railing of the walkway and lets his head drop down.

“Then tell him!” Loki says. “Tell him all this! Once he knows what’s at stake, you know he’ll do it!”

“I can’t tell him that Frigga isn’t his real mother. It would be—”

“Devastating, yes! I felt rather the same way when I learned I’m actually the son of Laufey of Jotunheim. But keeping this from Thor will do no good. Tell him. Everything. About Hela, about Gaea, about Frigga, who it seems isn’t even your real wife...”

“No, she is...was my wife,” says Odin. “I married her truthfully after Gaea’s death. Asgard needed a queen. Thor needed a mother.”

“You still need to tell him.” Stepping forward, Loki opens his mouth again to continue, but stops. Freezes. Reconsiders. Hand raised mid-air, mid-gesture, an odd look comes over his face, and he steps back as if rewinding his actions of the past moment. He hisses out a breath between his teeth as he leans against the curvature of the wall. “Oh,” he says. “I see. You want me to tell him.”

“Loki...”

“No, that makes sense. You want me to tell him. You want me to run off to Thor with all these sordid family secrets. You want me to be the villain and take the brunt of his wrath, so he’ll come storming back to you to demand the truth. Then you can placate him with stories of his mother’s great heroism and spin this into a tale of honor and sacrifice and duty. And he’ll feel very special, and take his destiny very seriously and agree to the coronation at once. That’s what you want. You want a messenger.”

“Perhaps we should... go back downstairs,” Odin suggests. “Sit a while.”

“I think I’ve heard enough.”

“There’s more.”

With a scoff of exasperation, Loki rubs his forehead. “Of course there is. About what?”

“About all the realms. About Jotunheim.” He flicks his gaze over in Tony’s direction. “About Midgard. Come downstairs with me. I’ll tell you of my last great vision. To fix all this chaos.”

So Odin goes. And Loki follows. He looks highly dubious, but he follows, and Tony follows Loki. They make their way back down the narrow spiral stair to the royal hall, then on to a smaller, more comfortable sitting room off to the side. A servant is already pouring drinks. Odin takes one chair, Loki takes another, and Tony, deciding he doesn’t really want to pretend to be involved in this, opts to stand near the wall and examine a tapestry. It has little crystal beads woven in here and there to catch the light. Neat.

“Wine?” Odin asks Loki, reaching for a cup.

“No.”

“Hmm.”

A minute later, another servant hurries in with a tray of bread and cheese and fruit. Odin sure takes his time choosing the best berries and a little cake thing, while Loki waits in impatient silence.
Finally, after eating his cake and a piece of cheese and finishing his wine, Odin continues.

“I’ve been giving this a great deal of thought,” he says. “In recent years. I believe the time of Asgard’s absolute rule is coming to an end. The other realms should be our equals and allies, not our vassals.”

“What about our enemies?” Loki asks.

“Svartalfheim,” Odin sighs. “I fear that one may be gone forever. The dark elves are all but extinct now.”

“You know I meant Jotunheim.”

“Of course... Jotunheim. Well. With the new peace you’ve secured, I believe we can move forward. Build and strengthen a new relationship. Perhaps with you leading the way.”

“Helblindi is king of Jotunheim,” Loki says, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. “I don’t want his crown.”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant to place you more in the position of ambassador. You would represent Jotunheim’s interests in the court of Asgard. Speak for your people. Ensure Thor, as king, acts fairly toward them.”

With a soft groan, Loki looks up to the ceiling. “Why would I want to help Thor wrangle the Jotnar? You know he’ll ruin everything within a year.”

“That’s why I want you to help him.”

“You mean clean up his disasters.”

“Loki, you are the best man for this position,” says Odin. “Jotun by birth, you’ve gained their trust, but you have the advantage of knowing the workings of Asgardian politics better than almost anyone.”

“Yes, I was born to be a king, remember? But I think I’ll have to decline your most generous offer. Unless, of course, you’re willing to make Tony the ambassador for Midgard.”

“I was about to suggest that myself.”

Tony, only halfway paying attention, spins around just in time to see Loki’s head snap back up. “Uh, what? What was that?”

“Ambassador for Midgard,” Odin tells him. “For the past thousand years, Midgard has been largely ignored and left to its own devices. I think now it may be time to bring your realm closer into our alliance.”

Okay, now Tony has to pay attention. He steps back into the sphere of conversation and takes a seat on the wide arm of Loki’s chair. “Uh,” he says. “You want me to represent Earth – Midgard – in the Democratic Order of Planets. Me?”


“...Are you sure.”

“Why? You think yourself unqualified? Or you can think of someone better?”
“I mean, no... Maybe Queen Elizabeth.” He glances at Loki, who looks just as surprised by this turn of events as he feels. “I guess, uh, I wouldn’t exactly call myself the logical choice. But then, conversely, when I think about it, pretty much everybody else on Earth is way too stupid. So...”

“So we’ll consider your offer,” says Loki. “This isn’t something one can decide in the space of a moment.”

“Naturally. Spend the next few days considering.”

“And in the meantime,” Loki says as he gets up out of his chair, “we’ll be returning to Midgard. I’ll do my best to convince Thor to return home. You can do your own part convincing him to become king. Might I suggest the absolutely unheard-of tactic of telling the truth for once?!”

“Loki...” Odin says with a shake of his head. “There are some secrets that are better left buried.”

“I disagree. You don’t keep secrets about someone else’s life. You don’t keep someone from knowing their own truth.”

“You don’t think you’d be happier if you never knew your Jotun heritage?”

“No, I don’t. Because I still would have found out. Eventually. Somehow. And it would’ve hurt far less to have been told from the start instead of stumbling into the sudden discovery that my entire life was a lie. And on that note?” Placing one hand on the small of Tony’s back, he steers both of them toward the door. “We’re leaving. And I hope you can recognize that all the contempt I feel for you now is entirely – entirely – due to your lies, your manipulation, and your demonstrated inability to think of anyone but yourself.”

“You think you want to know the truth.” A sad little laugh accompanies Odin’s words.

“Yes!” Loki shouts, whipping back around. “Yes, I want to know the truth! All of it! Is there more?!”

“There’s more.”

Growling in frustration, Loki rubs both hands over his face.

“You should sit back down,” Odin suggests.

Loki doesn’t sit down. Loki doesn’t even move, standing there with his fingertips pressing against his forehead like an ineffective charm against an inevitable headache. “Just tell me.”

“If you insist,” says Odin, as if that might be an adequate disclaimer to absolve him from any backlash stemming from whatever he’s about to say. He calls for another cup of wine before starting.

“After Thor was born, I heard disturbing news out of Jotunheim. Now that the threat of Hela no longer hung over the nine realms, Laufey felt bold enough to challenge me. And he had a new weapon on his side: the Casket of Ancient winters. Created for him by none other than Hela’s mother, refined from the sacred artifacts of his people. She was furious with me for how I had broken my promise and disinherited her daughter, and so she went to Laufey. She knew she could use him to get her revenge on me. Unfortunately for her... Laufey was impatient. He rose up to challenge Asgard before her plan was fully formed. And he was defeated. I allowed him to live, though, because I knew his actions were not fully his own. The sorceress, Hela’s mother... I killed her myself. There on Jotunheim. I could not risk letting her live. Not once I had seen the extent of her plotting.
"You see," he continues, very softly, "she had gone to Laufey with the very same offer she had once
given me. She would bear him a child. And that child, his heir, would be more powerful than any.
A new God of Death to replace the daughter she had lost."

His shoulders sag, but his head looks up. "That's why I took you, Loki. Not out of spite or cruelty,
but because I knew what you would become under Laufey's hand. I thought the best thing would be
to bring you to Asgard, and have Frigga temper your inherent power with light and kindness. I
thought... perhaps one day, if Hela broke free, you would be a great asset. You might even be the
one with the ability to kill her. So I brought you here to raise as my own child. A brother to my
son. A son to my wife. A mirror to your sister. A correction to my mistake."

In that moment, the room is so quiet Tony can hear the pounding of his heart and the rush of blood as
it fills his head, hot with shock beneath the sudden cold sweat on his skin.

Under any other circumstances, Loki's next-to-silent whisper would be inaudible. "...what..."

"You wanted your truth, Loki, and there it is. You are the son of Laufey, king of Jotunheim, and of
the sorceress Farbauti of Asgard. You take after her. Black hair, eyes like ice... and, I'm sure, the
same capacity for fantastic and terrible magical strength. That is the secret I kept from you. And I
think you can understand why."

"I see," Loki says. His words are more than a whisper this time, but only just. Looking over at
Tony, there's a shimmer of panic humming beneath his otherwise emotionless expression. "Tony. I
think we should go now."

All Tony can manage to say is, "I... um."

So Loki grabs his hand. Maybe not roughly, but with a definite sense of urgency. And one second
they're at the doorway of Odin's little side room, and the next, they're somewhere else, pulled so
smoothly through space that Tony barely registers the leap. It's their room. But their old room.
Where they'd stayed before, last time they were in Asgard. Loki drops Tony's hand.

"Hey..." Tony begins, feeling that old, familiar need to say something, but coming up empty.

Loki, who obviously has an agenda that doesn't involve talking, steps forward. He raises his arms to
cross them in front of his face. And in one slick moment, he flings them apart. Hands outstretched.
As if ripping a hole through the air. Which is... exactly what happens. With an explosion of golden
light, reality parts before him like a curtain, leaving an open portal.

Once again, Loki grabs Tony's hand. A few steps later, they're standing in the middle of his
driveway back in Malibu. The portal closes behind them.

"Oh wow," Tony says. "That is, I have to admit, kind of handy. Huge security threat, but handy."

"Do you have your keys?" Loki asks.

Tony runs his hands over the pockets of the Asgardian clothes he was given. Or where pockets
would be, if Asgardian clothes had pockets in normal places. "...No. However, I did reset Jarvis’
security configuration before we left in case of this exact scenario, so he should be able to open the
door for us."

That turns out to be unnecessary. Because by the time they reach the front door, it's already
opening, with Pepper standing there on the other side.

"Oh my god, Tony," she groans, grabbing him into a squishing hug.
Awkwardly, he pats her on the back. “Hi, yeah, I’m alive, thank you.”

“Thor said you broke your spine.”

“Yes. That is true. But luckily I did it on Asgard, and they were able to fix everything and give me a lot of really good drugs.”

She pulls back. “You should come inside. Thor’s here. And Jane. And Bruce, and also Natasha came over. And Steve. If I’d have known you were coming back I would’ve told them all to leave so you could rest. Should I tell them to leave?”

Looking over at Loki, Tony just says, “Ah. Well.”

“I’m fine,” Loki mutters. Sidling past Pepper, he shows himself inside and disappears around the corner.

“He’s not fine,” says Tony. “Can we, um?” He gestures Pepper into the house, following close behind.

Inside, as promised, the gang’s all there, sitting in the living room. Somebody (if Tony had to guess, he’d say Bruce) hauled in an old tube TV, which is now placed on the coffee table, hooked up to a Super Nintendo. On the couch, Thor and Steve are sitting hunched over and leaning forward, intensely mashing buttons on their controllers. For reasons that aren’t exactly clear, both of them are shirtless.

“Oh, uh,” Pepper says, immediately identifying that as something in need of explanation. “Thor was like that when we arrived, and then Steve took his shirt off to match on a dare. And that was an hour ago, but nobody complained, so they’ve been sitting like that ever since.”

In the background, Tony can distinctly hear Bruce mumble, “I complained.”

Steve stands up in greeting, handing his controller off to Natasha. “Tony. We were worried about you.”

“Yes, me too,” Tony replies. “I’m fine, though. I’m awesome. Now. Comparatively speaking. But hey, uh, not to be an asshole by ditching out on this swell party that’s randomly happening in my house, because I sure would love to stay and play whatever this is with you...”

“Street Fighter Two,” says Natasha.

“Spectacular. But the thing is, Loki just got some really weird news-”

“About what?” Thor asks without looking up from the TV.

“I’ll see if he wants to tell you later. For now though, I’d just like everyone to understand that Loki isn’t in the greatest place. Also I’m looking for qualified volunteers to talk to him before I go in there and say the wrong thing and make it worse.”

Thor shakes his head. “No, I know I’d make things much worse.”

“Yeah you’re probably right. This is a me responsibility. I’ll go see if he needs anything. You all can stay here. Or go home. Not like I’m going to notice either way.” He waves on his way out. “Maybe see you later.”

Several voices call ‘bye’, etcetera, as Tony makes his way down the corridor to the bedroom. It’s
only a guess that this is where Loki will be, but it turns out to be the right one. Loki’s sitting on the
floor with his back against the window. He’s stripped off his Asgardian clothes, which now lie in a
scattered pile on the floor. In their place, he’s wearing a pair of Tony’s sweatpants and a Stark
Industries t-shirt.

“Hey,” Tony says as he crosses the room. He’s greeted by a quiet ‘Mm’ from Loki, which gives him
nothing to go on.

He has fifteen steps from the door to the window. Fifteen steps to figure out what to say and where
to start and how to deal with what just happened. Fifteen steps to solve the immediate puzzle of
what Loki needs. But he’s supposed to be good at puzzles, right? He can do this. In fifteen steps.

It’s just a mystery puzzle. So what are the clues? One: Loki left Asgard as fast as possible. He
didn’t want to be there any more. Not just that he didn’t want to be with Odin, but that he wanted
off the whole damn planet. So he came back here. Specifically, to the bedroom. To be alone. But
to Tony’s bedroom. Not the other bedroom where he keeps all his stuff, where he went before when
he wanted to be alone-alone. He wants to be alone, but it looks like there’s an open invitation for
Tony to be alone with him.

Two: he left those Asgardian clothes on the floor. Normally he’s more careful in his undressing and
puts things away, or at least drapes them neatly over a chair. These clothes were shed quickly and
forgotten. But then he got dressed again. And not in anything of his own, but very deliberately in
Tony’s clothes. Just like when he was upset at Tony before and he reverted back to full Asgardian
regalia, this was a specific choice. A specific symbol.

Logical conclusion? All ties to Asgard are temporarily severed. Loki’s family has proven, once
again, to be a raging inferno of a disappointment. So he’ll align himself elsewhere.

He wants to feel as if he belongs elsewhere.

And isn’t that convenient, because he sure as fuck belongs right here. Sitting down on the floor,
Tony gets only halfway through wrapping his arms around Loki’s shoulders before Loki’s already
doing the same right back. He pulls Loki close, and Loki pulls himself in even closer. Then a kiss.
And not some delicate little kiss on the cheek or forehead. A real kiss. Lips against lips, deep and
consuming. Because that’s what Loki needs right now. To feel wanted. And loved. Despite all
the bullshit.

“Look,” Tony whispers, breaking away after a good long moment. “I don’t give a single uninspired
fuck about your parents or your past or whatever. I love you. Because of you. That’s all I care
about.”

Silently, Loki nods.

“Odin’s a dick. That’s on him, not you. He’s the one who fucked up and did all this crazy shit, and
he’s the one who lied to you, and he’s the one who should’ve been honest about all this a long time
ago. To you and Thor both. What he did was a supreme asshole move.”

“He’s not the one who was born to be the new god of death, though,” Loki mutters.

“No. But does that even matter? Loki, you could be the god of cabbage, or the god of stubbing
your toe, or the god of opening the fridge over and over hoping to find something good to eat, but
there’s only spaghetti sauce and expired yogurt. You could be the god of anything, and it wouldn’t
make one bit of difference to me. As long as you’re you.”
Loki cups the side of Tony’s face with one hand before gently kissing him again. “No, I know. And I’m exceptionally grateful for that. But you see... it matters to me.”

“Yeah?”

“It matters to me to be told that I was essentially born to be a weapon. That I am, at my core, a force for evil.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“No, I think it is,” says Loki. “You heard Odin. He brought me back to Asgard so Frigga could mold my destructive tendencies into something more acceptable.”

“Well, maybe she succeeded.”

“And if she didn’t?”

“Seems to me like she must have, presuming you even had these destructive tendencies in the first place. Because honestly, if you really were born inherently evil, I’m pretty sure you’d be thrilled to hear you’re now the god of death. Not terrified by the news.”

“Perhaps...” Loki allows.

“You’re being too hard on yourself.”

Sighing, Loki closes his eyes. He turns his head to partially hide his face against Tony’s shoulder. The way his hair falls, like a protective mask, does the rest. He stays like that for at least a minute. Not speaking. Taking in only shallow little breaths. And Tony lets him, because it feels like he’s prepping himself to say something, and there’s no good way to rush that.

“I... shouldn’t have been able to open that portal,” is what finally comes.

“The portal to the driveway?”

“I shouldn’t have been able to open it. Normally something like that would require the power of... three or four? At least? It should be impossible for me, by myself, to open it. But I did.”

“Okay?” Tony asks, not really sure where this is going.

“I just... I knew I could do it. I don’t know how, but in that room, at the time, I knew I could open it. I didn’t even think or consider what I was doing. I only did it. Easily. And before that you must’ve noticed the shift up to the room was very smooth. Much less jarring than I’ve ever been able to do in the past.”

“I... did notice that,” Tony says. “I guess I figured it was because the distance was so short?”

“No. I think it’s because Odin was telling the truth. Frigga did temper my magic somehow. Maybe she repressed it or placed limits. And now that she’s gone, those limits have disappeared. Before, I could... I don’t really know how to explain this. But it was almost as if I could feel the extent of my abilities. There was a finite limit to what I could do, like a border keeping me in. I always operated within that border, and assumed that was as far as I could go. Now when I look for it, the border is gone. I know where it used to be, and it’s not there any more. There’s nothing stopping me from racing past its old constraints and... I don’t know. I don’t know what comes next.”

“Is that a bad thing, though?”
“How can it not be? What’s to stop me now? What’s to stop me from destroying entire worlds, which it looks like my sister was perfectly capable of doing?”

“Uh, well,” says Tony, “I think you’re stopping you? I’m sure as hell not.” He gives Loki a quick squeeze. “The god of death should be able to break out of my flimsy embrace and Godzilla his way through the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area if he wants to. But since you’re not doing that, the only logical conclusion I can come to is: you don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to,” Loki quietly repeats.

“Also remember that one time you did try to destroy Jotunheim and then felt really awful about it?”

“I don’t really need reminding, thank you.”

“But it’s true.”

“Maybe, but what Odin said...”

“I thought we already established Odin’s full of shit,” Tony says, pushing Loki’s hair back.

“He was telling the truth this time.”

“He was telling what he thought was the truth. Listen to me for a sec. All he really told you was that your mom was this insanely powerful sorceress. That part we can safely say is true. The rest might be true or it might be stuff that Odin’s only guessing. He never said that your mother told him anything outright. So did she? Or did he just assume? And even if she did tell him anything, who’s to say she wasn’t lying just to fuck with him? He killed her, so we’ll never know for sure. All we can say is that he thinks she intended for you to be Hela part two.”

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“Because Hela failed. And if your mother was really as dangerous as Odin says she was, why would she make the same mistake twice?”

That gets Loki to look up. With an expression full of challenging skepticism. “But he said ‘god of death’, which-”

“Yeah. God of death. But there’s more than one kind of death, isn’t there? Maybe I have a different perspective on this because I come from a planet where death is an everyday occurrence and not just blood and murder. Asgardians may think of death personified as some sword-wielding maniac, but here, death as an entity is usually a quieter and more subdued force. Inevitable but calm, kind of waiting in the shadows. Steady. Unobtrusive. It can be peaceful and sometimes even merciful. It’s just... there. A constant part of life, looming in the background like an impartial judge, patiently waiting and biding its time. It’s sad and maybe creepy or unnerving, yeah, but not necessarily evil. So I guess what I’m saying is if Odin’s going to tell you you’re the god of death, but by that he really means the god of carnage, then no, I’m calling bullshit. That’s not you. But if somebody were to tell me you were the god of a different kind of death? The kind of death that can’t be classified as good or bad, but just exists all around us as this... this inescapable force? Yeah. Okay. I could believe it.”

Everything Loki might have to say about that remains unspoken. Instead of words, it all rolls up into a silent expression that seems to be one part hopeful, one part doubtful, and a full counterbalance of uncertain fear. He looks so terribly vulnerable.

How the hell could somebody like that ever be the god of death?
“Okay look,” Tony continues, low and quiet. “Remember another thing Odin said. Hela was exactly what he wanted. An unbeatable warrior. Somebody to bring his enemies to their knees. I think he’s assuming you’d be the same when there’s no proof of that. Maybe instead you’re what your mom wanted. And since nobody has any idea what that might be, all you can do is—”

“Tony, I don’t want to talk about this any more,” Loki says, stopping him there.

“...You sure?”

“I can’t.”

“Am I saying the wrong thing and wrecking it all?”

“No.” Looking down, Loki wraps his arms around his knees and lets his head fall. “Everything you’ve said sounds entirely reasonable, and it should be what I need to hear. It should be. But I think... I think I just need to... give in to all the horrible things that keep surging through my head. For a while. Let them run their course. Then maybe I’ll be able to think straight. But I can’t right now, so there’s no point trying.”


“Stay, please.”

“Just sit here, or do you want a distraction?”

“What kind of distraction?”

“I dunno. Watch TV?”

That leads into a long pause, with Loki just staring down at the floor. But eventually he says, “Yes.”

“Perfect.” One last quick squeeze around Loki’s shoulders, and then Tony stands up, offering his hand. Loki takes it. “I’m excellent at distractions and have just the thing in mind. The epic story of a young man who grows up not knowing himself, learns the shocking truth about his real father and a secret sister, then fights to overcome his inner darkness and the path of evil he’s told is his destiny before going on to become the greatest hero in the galaxy.”

Loki narrows his eyes. “Is this Star Wars?”

“I’m not sure how you guessed that, unless months of hanging around with me mean you picked it up by osmosis, but yes. It’s Star Wars. I’m making you watch it. In fact, you know what? I’m making everyone watch it. Steve probably hasn’t seen this either. Hey, Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir?” Jarvis answers as Loki begins to look like he has serious regrets about the unfolding of the situation.

“Where are my Star Wars tapes?”

“Media room, lower cabinets, second from the left.”

“Tony,” Loki sighs, “on second thought, I think I’d really rather be alone right now, and—”

“Uh-uh,” says Tony. “Nope. I think you’d really better not be alone right now. Trust me on that. So we’re going to watch Star Wars, and we’re going to watch it with the whole gang. You don’t
have to talk to them or look at them or even watch the movie or stay awake, but you’re not going to be alone. Got it?” He grabs Loki’s hand again, and when Loki makes a half-assed effort at pulling away, he wraps his other hand around Loki’s wrist. “Got it?”

Loki looks pointedly not at Tony. “…Fine…”

“Great. See? It’s working already. I’m annoying and distracting you back to your normal self. Come on. You’re gonna love this. You can complain to me about all the ways it gets space magic wrong.”

“You are by far the most distracting person I’ve ever met.”

“Thank you,” Tony says, patting Loki’s ass. “I try.”

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