Orestes

by Aublanc

Summary

Thanos never pulled Loki from the void, and the invasion of New York never happened. But the peace is only an illusion, and years after Loki jumped from the Bifrost he falls, quite literally, into the life of one Tony Stark. Broken by the emptiness, Loki struggles to pull himself back together in time to stop the Mad Titan from ruining everything.
Here's a playlist (sort of) for this fic. Mostly I just like sharing music in hopes that someone will find something they really enjoy.

And here's my Tumblr, where there is a lot of Marvel stuff and updates on what I'm writing.

Some chapters have been updated with re-worked versions, which should have more streamlined wording and no typos. The others I am still working on. If you see any errors, feel free to point them out and I will fix them.

"Little angel go away, 
Come again some other day. 
The devil has my ear today, 
I'll never hear a word you say. 
He promised I would find a little solace, 
And some piece of mind. 
Whatever, just as long as I don't feel so: 

Desperate and ravenous.  
I'm so weak and powerless."

-Weak and Powerless by A Perfect Circle

-o-o-o-

Red.
Sins, smiles, shadows.

Gold.
Desire, disappointment, despair.

Blue.
Lies, loathing, leaving.

Colors flashed through his mind in torrents. Memories stripped to only the barest of impressions roared up from silence, reasserting awareness of the world. He gasped at the sudden influx, lungs deflating uselessly as thoughts slammed back into his mind. For minutes they blared, loud and high and demanding. Then the vivid splashes faded back into a tolerable murmur, leaving nothing behind but a sea of darkness.

Stretching infinitely before him, the void devoured all light. No stars were permitted to enter. The darkness was complete, and even summoned fire could illuminate naught but pale, taut flesh. It was like existence ceased to be: a true epitome of nothingness.

But something did exist there, suspended in the inky black. The void was both Loki's home and
prison. At times, it was all he could remember. To think that something existed beyond it, beyond black, was ludicrous. Only in memory and magic was there something different, and even then it was just a hopeless mockery. He was never going to get out of the void. He fell in, and now he would stay forever.

When Loki let go of the spear, he had expected to die. It was a decision born of despair and guilt; it was supposed to be easy. He let go. He fell. And as his brother-reaching in vain, shouting his name-faded from sight along with his father—“No, Loki”—he'd expected the void to swallow him, to kill him. He'd expected his suffering to end. Everything else had been taken from him, and all he could ask for was the finale, a curtain closed on his unwanted life.

But in the end, even that was denied him. The void took the stars, the warmth, the air, but it did not take him. His lungs seared infinitely, but he did not die. Hunger hollowed him, but he did not die. Thoughts tore into him, fueled by the black, black, black surrounding him, but there was no reprieve; he did not die. It was supposed to be over quickly.

Loki gave a breathless laugh at the thought, his arms wrapped protectively around his shuddering chest. After all, it was truly hilarious how everything had gone wrong in just a few days. It had taken an hour of asphyxiating in the void for him to realize that he had made a horrible mistake. For all of its emptiness, the abyss was still a metaphysical plane of existence in the Nine Realms. It was reminiscent of deep space, devoid of means of survival, but it wasn't the same. He had screamed without sound when he realized just what he had doomed himself to. He had wanted to be rid of his sorrows; now sorrow was all he had left.

The first few days had somehow been the worst. Even though the world was nothing but a blur of intense pain, it was not as bad as the beginning had been; in the beginning, he still had hope. He'd thought that maybe he could die, though logically he knew it was impossible. Or maybe, just maybe, someone would come looking for him. His brother—no, not brother, but he wanted Thor to be—would barrel in with that damnable hammer, laughing and ridiculously forgiving. It'd never happen, but lost in timeless pitch, Loki hoped and dreamed. There were times that he had deluded himself so fully that he thought for sure he'd be rescued. When he wasn't, he twisted and strained, searching futilely for life or liberty. He would spend hours teleporting himself, envisioning anywhere that wasn't there in hope that something would click. But there was only that familiar feeling of twisting in his guts and rippling on his skin as he relocated himself to another expanse of emptiness. At least, he thought he moved. He couldn't tell when everything looked the same.

Then a month went by, filled with nothing but black and agony and black, and he faced the truth: no one was coming for him. He messed up one too many times, and this was his punishment—to float forever in shadow, denied any realm to call his home. Not Asgard, not even Jotunheim. Just the forgotten space in between.

And Loki knew what this place was doing to him. He was tenacious, using everything that he learned in his thousand years of life to keep his mind together, but it still tore his sanity. In the beginning, he recited poetry and spells, mouth miming the words. Then, when he started stuttering over the lines, he switched to thinking about anything and everything he could to keep the silence at bay. However, such efforts were not enough; even his running commentaries eventually cut off without warning, and he wouldn't realize it until something yanked the volume up again.

Too quickly did he begin to lose touch with reality. For what was reality when there was no sight, no sound? Robbed of all senses, lost with no direction, there was no such thing as reality. The years ticked by, taking with them his mind. He could feel himself slipping, sliding deeper and deeper into an embodiment of his environment.
Ironically, the first emotion to fade was Loki’s anger. It wasn’t gone, not by a long shot. Sometimes his fury overcame him so suddenly and completely that he spent days screaming and shouting and thrashing, mouthing every slight upon his person for no one to hear. But in between such explosive fits, he could no longer fuel the furnace that had led him to genocide. There was no energy, no drive. Holding on to grudges served no purpose except to allow insanity to claw at him that much harder; his hate slipped between the gaps.

Not that it really mattered when everything else left, too. His sorrow, his joy, his pride, his envy; Loki knew he had become nothing more than a mass of continual agony and blankness. When moments such as these struck him, when his mind was his to use once more, it was hard to feel horrified about what he had become. He still tried to fight it off, to preserve what he had left; Loki had always been determined and unflinching in his goals, and while the void robbed him of many things, it could not rob him of who he was.

‘I am Loki: the greatest spellcaster in the Nine Realms. I am a genius who mastered the lost arts and am a walking library of all that is arcane. I am the God of Mischief and Lies, master of trickery and intricate plots. I am Asgardian—’

“Am I cursed? What am I? What more than that?”

Blue—rich in shade, like pure snow against a clear morning sky. Vile, wretched blue, roiling like sludge and thick as muck—exploded in his head. It gushed from the depths, seeping easily into his cracked and crumbling walls.

“The Casket wasn’t the only thing you took from Jotunheim that day, was it? Tell me!”

Loki struggled, limbs twitching uselessly as he fought to keep from going under. The attack was sudden, as they often were. He wasn’t ready to fade out; he had just regained himself. However, as the blue pushed out the black—he wasn’t sure which he hated more, which had hurt him more—he felt himself slipping into his worst memory.

“I- I’m the monster parents tell their children about at night? You know, it all makes sense now. Why you favored Thor all these years.”

Desperate, he summoned his last defense for solidifying his senses. Magic drawn from his brimming reserves flared to life at his finger tips, searing his sensitive eyes. Illuminated dimly by the green glow, pale hands flickered in his watery gaze. The image was horribly blurred, but it was enough to discern that he was still disguised as an Asgardian. Jotun blue had not crept upon his flesh as well.

Such an assurance was hollow, as he knew no matter what skin he wore, he’d still be a monster inside. Even so, he allowed his magic to flare again and felt his bones tug his skin into a new form. When rolling eyes looked towards his hands, hooves greeted him, but the sight was unable to distract him from the truth, and he warped his form again. Now it was massive paws. Again. A scaly belly. Again, again, again.

Each new perversion of his body, each new lie, was accompanied by an increase in panic. The blue was still flooding his mind, bringing with it remembrance and revulsion. He wanted to hide, to forsake everything he knew he was—Jotun, monster, runt, worthless, abandoned—but there was no reprieve. His anatomy shifted one last time, returning him to his favored illusion.

“Because no matter how much you claimed to love me, you could never have a frost giant sitting on the throne of Asgard!”

Loki drowned in the blue. He suffocated, and it crowded, forbidding any thoughts from registering.
Broken, half formed stimuli sparked through his neurons, but they received no response. Even the sensation of something wispy brushing against his skin, of his limbs being pulled down by gravity, did not register. When the world erupted into cacophony of sound and light, he did not notice. His eyes stared, glassy and unseeing, as his body hurtled towards the ground.

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“No, bad Dum-E! Bad! Didn't I tell you to stay in the corner? There was a reason for that.”

Dum-E, who had been brandishing the fire extinguisher, whirred sadly. He lowered his arm and wheeled backwards, dunce cap tottering on his head. Tony sighed and turned back to the project that sparked pitifully on his desk. It was the fourth one to short this morning... At least he thought it was morning. He didn't think he'd been working that long. It wasn't worth the trouble.

And yet here he was, still messing around. Each device, no matter how perfect his calculations had seemed, went haywire after being activated. The first one even caught fire, which was of great excitement to the overeager robotic arm, and half of the lab had ended up covered in foam.

Groaning, Tony swept the ruined device off the table and reached for an ever-present bottle of alcohol. He knew Pepper wouldn't be pleased, but then again, he was only working on the damn project because she told him to 'not piss off secret government agencies'. Personally, Tony thought she was trying to please 'Mr. Agent' who kept popping up at inconvenient times.

“Jarvis, why did I ever agree to this?” he complained, pushing away from the desk and slouching in his chair, half-full bottle dangling from his fingers.

“According to what you said thirty-four hours ago, sir,” the ever-present AI began in his British drawl, and Tony knew he'd regret asking, “you wanted the 'pirate with anger problems to stop bothering you for making it obvious that his security system wouldn't keep out a prepubescent fifth grader'. It also appears that you are trying to convince Miss Potts that you are not irresponsible, though that effort most likely won't get you anywhere.”

Yep, shouldn't have asked. Of course Tony had to program Jarvis to be snarky, and of course the AI chose to be relatively polite to anyone that wasn't him.

“Whatever. I'm done with this for now.” Tony flung himself to his feet, and if he stumbled drunkenly, no one had to know. Finishing off the bottle with a few quick chugs, he tossed it to the floor and pointed to Dum-E. “Clean that up. And while you're at it, finish cleaning up the mess you made earlier. I want this room spotless when I come back.”

The robot gave an elated chirp and immediately set out from his corner in search of the broom, though Tony saw how he lingered at the fire extinguisher. It was a good thing that little quirk never got programmed into Jarvis, or his workspace would be a mess... Well, messier than it was already.

“Jarvis, I want you to review the scans of the last test run. Try and figure out what went wrong, then correct the calculations. We'll try again later. After I get more to drink.” There was a loud crash from where Dum-E was doing... something. “A lot more to drink.”

“Of course, sir. And when Director Fury calls, what would you like me to tell him is the cause for delay?”

“Tell him I had to sleep or something. That's what normal people do, right?” Tony walked out of his lab, talking as he went up the winding staircase. “Damn man is a slave driver. I bet he has a little screen under that eye patch of his so he can watch us all suffer while he stands all mightier-than-thou
in his fancy hovercraft.”

“I'm sure you are right, sir,” the AI drawled. “When would you like the next draft of 'All Your Base Are Belong to Us' to be finished by?”

Tony rummaged around in the kitchen cabinets, frowning as he kept pulling out empty bottles. “Why don't you- Ah, found one.” He pulled a full bottle of Jack Daniels out of obscurity. “Hmm, let's see...” Tony tapped his chin in mock thoughtfulness as he made his way to the couch, flopping over the back of it and sprawling over the cushions. “You know what? I think I want to go out and party. Why don't you just get it done by tomorrow. You don't need to waste server space making it a rush job.”

“And by 'tomorrow' do you mean later today? It is currently nearing three in the morning.” Tony blinked at that. He could have sworn it was noon. He dragged himself into a sitting position, craning his head to look over the back of his sinfully comfortable sofa.

“Really? You aren't pulling my leg, are you Jarv?” But a quick look out the window confirmed that it was the middle of the night. How had he not noticed it before? The walls of this house were mostly glass. One would think he'd have noticed the absence of the lovely California sun outside.

“Certainly not, sir. It is 2:56 A.M., Monday.” And look at that, it wasn't even the right day. Damn.

“Think there's any hot chicks still out?” Tony raised a hand, halting the insulting response that was probably going to follow. “Don't answer that. I'm sure there are. It's Malibu; I'll find someone. It's been too long; all work and no play.”

“You 'partied' not even a week ago, sir.”

“Exactly. Like I said: all work and no play. At this rate, Captain Hook is going to ruin my status as number one playboy. Jarvis, prep the suit. Daddy's going out.”

Jarvis sighed—seriously, why did he program his AI to do these things? Wasn't the point to get rid of nagging assistants?—and started preparing the Mark Eight for flight. “As you wish, sir.”

Turns out there was no shortage of girls willing to go home with the legendary Tony Stark, and he ended up picking up some brunette around five o'clock. Lauren... Lorry, Laura? Lola? Something like that. He was pleasantly surprised that she didn't vomit all over his freshly cleaned armor when he drunkenly flew her to the house. Luckily, she was also too smashed to realize that he nearly dropped her three times, but that's another story. They both made it to the roof in one piece, Jarvis getting his revenge by yanking the suit off while Tony tried to keep from falling over, and the rest of the night went by flawlessly. Everyone was happy with how the morning went, and those who wouldn't like what he was doing didn't have to know.

So, as always, Tony's nightmares had to go and ruin the perfect morning by startling him awake just a few hours after he fell asleep. He laid rigid in the bed, Lavender's (Lilly's?) arms and legs wrapped around him while she continued sleeping. Careful not to alert the woman to his distress, he tried to calm his breathing and get his body to relax. But when flashes of dark caves and fire continued to assault him, he realized it was a futile effort and untangled himself from his bed partner. Years of experience let him slip away unnoticed, and he trusted Jarvis to deal with his guest when she woke up.

Once Tony was out of earshot of the bedroom, Jarvis quietly greeted him and proceeded with his daily updates. Tony let the mechanical murmur soothe his pounding heart as he made his way down into his sanctuary. He ignored the trembling in his fingers as he typed in the access key, confident
that a few hours tinkering around would take the edge off. And if it didn't, alcohol never failed to
comfort him; sometimes he just had to drink enough to make him pass out. Healthy? Probably not.
But it was better than the phantom feeling of hands and the irrational panic that accompanied them.

“Hey Cinderella, how's the cleaning coming along?” he called as he stepped into the lab, glad to note
that there was nothing obviously wrecked. However, he could never be too sure with his oldest. Last
time Dum-E broke something important, he shoved a million pieces of custom coffee machine under
one of the cars. That, in turn, destroyed the car when Tony tried to take it out for a quick spin.

When there was no answering chirp, the engineer narrowed his eyes and peered around the room a

“I believe Dum-E has accidentally trapped himself in the supply closet, sir.” That would explain it if
the supply closet actually had a lock. Tony ran a hand through his hair as he went to rescue his
challenged but endearing robot from whatever mischief he had gotten himself into. Tony paused
before the door, hearing the faint, ominous clanging of metal coming from within.

“Dum-E, this better not make me regret refusing to donate you to that city college.” There was no
point in delaying the inevitable; Tony pushed down on the handle, leaning cautiously against the
doors as it creaked open—only to slam it shut again as a giant metal beam came swinging towards
him. “Holy shit!” The door bucked in his grasp as the pole pierced through the wood mere inches
above his head. “Dum-E!”

An apologetic vvvrrrrr was barely audible through the new peephole, and Tony banged the back of his
head against the door. “Every time I leave you alone you do something! Every single time!” Dum-E
whined again. Tony took a deep breath. It was too early for this, and now his curiously missing
hangover was reacquainting itself with his brain. “I'm going to open this door now. If you still have
the urge to throw things, I'm going to ask that you resist for the sake of my continued well-being.”

Bracing himself, Tony cracked the door open again. When nothing tried to brain him, he pushed it
open completely and took a step forward. He stumbled on a spilled-over toolbox. “Huh. I could have
sworn I didn't keep tools in here. Not after...” Tony trailed off as his eyes finally took in the sight
before him. 'Chaos' would be the first word that came to mind. 'College' was admittedly a close
second. Dum-E bowed his head in shame from where he was tangled up in electrical cords that
dangled from the ceiling tiles.

“Jesus, Wreck-It Ralph. Make a mess of things why don't you.” If it was possible, the robot looked
even more downtrodden. Tony mussed his hair again and picked his way through the wreckage to
stand by his problem child. Putting a hand on the flat of the metal arm, he scoped out the best way to
get Dum-E free without ruining the electricity for half of the house. “Alright, alright. I'll get you
down from there. Just give me a second.”

He had started towards the up-ended toolbox when Jarvis interrupted. “Sir, there is an incoming
message from Director Fury.”

Tony sighed. This day had looked promising just a few hours ago. Now he wouldn't be surprised if
something completely obnoxious happened before it was over.

“I don't really want to talk to him right now. Can't you tell him I'm out defending the world from
great evil and will get back to him after the dark magician has been defeated? And hey, Dum-E, hold
still or I might decide to cut your wires.”

“I'm afraid I cannot do that, sir. He said that if you do not talk to him now, he'll force his way in.”
“Killjoy. Whatever, let's hear what Jack Sparrow has to say.”

A rough voice came over the speakers, contrasting with Jarvis’s smooth accent. “Your pet names got old years ago, Stark.” Ah, Fury. The man never did like Tony. Which was fine, since Tony he wasn't going to try and get the stern man into his bed anytime soon. “Have you finished the hijacking device you were asked to make, or have you failed that, too?”

Barely paying attention to the call coming through the ceiling, Tony continued to cut the wires that entangled Dum-E. “Ouch, that hurts. You're saying you don't think highly of me? And here I thought you were coming to me for help because you thought I was a genius... Oh wait, I am a genius.”

“A 'genius' that promised me a way to fight the Doombots weeks ago,” Fury growled. Tony could just imagine the glower the guy was giving his phone. Fate named him well.

“So I'll have it done by tomorrow. There's no hurry. Aannd...” Tony clipped the last clump of wires holding Dum-E in place with a flourish. “Done. Now go somewhere else.”

With a grateful chirp at his freedom, the robot maneuvered his way out of the closet and headed towards the garage. Tony took one look at the mess before leaving as well; he had no desire to redo the electricity today.

“Stark,” Fury snapped. “Doom is attacking Washington as we speak, and we need to analyze one of his robots before the situation escalates.”

“Is that supposed to be a subtle command for me to suit up?” Jarvis had already pulled one of the suits up in the lab dock, and Tony stepped onto the platform as Fury's voice continued to thunder from his ceiling.

“Just get your ass over to DC. Captain America is helping with the evacuation; your job is to take out the bots. It should be simple enough that even you can't screw it up.”

Not bothering to deign that with a reply, Iron Man erupted from the house like a red and gold missile. Live feed and directions filled the HUD as Tony angled off towards the Capital City with his repulsors blaring. After his flight was stabilized, he appraised the situation on his screen. Most of the footage showed Spangles waving on a couple of terrified congressmen, yelling at the police, and throwing his gaudy shield at the few Doombots loitering around. Other feeds were focused on the bots that zipped around blowing up various important democratic institutions and mowed down fleeing civilians.

And Fury thought that two of his would-be 'Avengers' were enough for this mess? If he was still trying to get his initiation approved, having only two superheroes (one of which was still twenty-four minutes away according to Jarvis's calculations) assist with stopping the demolition of the District of Important American Functions was a foolish move. It made them look unable to handle threats. Or maybe that was his game plan. Make them seem as weak as kittens on their own, and then stick the five together for a villain trouncing lion. Tony would congratulate the man for his crafty plan were it not for the fact that, by withholding help, there were far more casualties than there had to be. But from what Tony could glean by reading Fury's files on the 'Avengers Initiative', the man actually thought his piecemeal team of heroes would be more effective in the long run. To be honest, Tony thought the Director was delusional if he thought the people he selected could actually form a decent team. They were all a mess, except for Rogers, and even he wasn't totally normal.

Because Fury kept trying to throw them together, they'd all worked with each other at some point, whether in combat or on reconnaissance. Tony even had the extra pleasure of dealing with Romanov
as his creepy assistant. He can't say he particularly enjoyed working with any of them, except for maybe Banner, but they only did science together as Mr. Big and Green steadfastly refused to fight in fear of losing control. Not that he hadn't gone off the wall in the past few years. The irony of one such freakout was that it was the only time the other four actually fought side by side. They admittedly worked well together, though the fact that one of the Avengers leveled a small town did not help Fury's case at all.

“Sir, approaching active military zone. Switching power back to combat systems.” Tony held his arms out in front of himself as he rapidly slowed. He turned his attention from the reports to the wreckage surrounding him. If possible, it looked even worse in person, which made him feel guilty for making out with Lindsey instead of working on AYBABTU. “Incoming communications from Captain America.”

“Iron Man, we need you in the air a few blocks over. Most of the Doombots have concentrated above the Senate Office Building.”

“Aye aye, Captain.” Repulsors charging, Tony swooped towards the aforementioned hot spot, eyes flickering rapidly in search of an unlucky bot to blast out of the sky.

“Targets in range on your right, sir.” Palm raised, a bright burst of energy smote down the closest machine before it could even turn around. Iron Man shot one more before the others got their act together and started baring down on his position. Silver masks gleamed menacingly. “There are four Doombots in your immediate area, sir, and two more are approaching.” Another blast took down the bot trying to get behind Tony.

“What's the total- Woah!” A quick barrel roll removed Iron Man from the path of an energy blast. He twisted slightly to keep track of the two bots that were trying to circle around him, but he had to dodge again as the clone in front of him took the opening. “Total?”

“There were thirteen originally, sir. Six have been destroyed so far by either yourself or Captain America.”

“So more than half left. Well then, time to get busy. Jarvis, let's take this to the sky.” Jets revving back up, Tony shot upwards to escape the three blasts that convened on his original location. Predictably, the bots followed his ascent, giving him a chance to knock another one down before they could return fire. Two red circles blinked on in the bottom corner of his screen. “I guess we got a party on our hands.”

Five metal combatants chased each other around the sky, one accented with red and the others green. They ducked and dived around missiles and arching streaks of electricity, completely focused on the dance. One of the Doombots misstepped, and not a second passed before it was sent smoking into the cement below. Adjusting to their enemy, the other three tightened their formation, making it difficult to exploit any mistakes. They pressed in tighter, using their numbers to sneak into his weak spots. A few volleys later, a hit to the back sent him flying forward; he almost got fried as he tried to right himself. It quickly became clear to Tony that he was no longer the ringleader of this show.

“Yo, Captain. How are you doing on your end? Because my friends here are getting a bit edgy.” And by 'edgy' he meant 'completely homicidal'.

“We're clear. Just finished off the last hostile, and non-combatants have left the area. Lure them down and we can finish this.” At least Rogers was reliable, even if he was a bit (lot) of a spoilsport.

Not wanting to waste anymore time, Tony took the first opportunity he could to tuck in low, weaving out of the way of his aggressive entourage. He almost managed to reach Rogers before one
of the Doombots slipped his guard. The superhero didn't even have time to say 'fuck' before the robot detonated right next to him. In a whirlwind of metal and limbs, Iron Man collided into a nearby office building. It took three walls to bring him to a stop, and the last one deposited a chunk of plaster onto his chest in retaliation.

“Iron Man, are you okay?” Rogers' voice fizzled over his speakers. “The last Doombot is being dispatched as we speak.”

At least Tony didn't need to worry about getting electrocuted while he figured out how to work his legs again. “Oh, yeah, I'm just peachy. I love getting thrown through a building. Wouldn't be a good fight if I didn't suffer from internal bleeding while I was at it.” Ah, that was it. Left leg operational? Check. Right leg? ...Working on it.

“If you have enough energy to joke around, you can't be hurt that bad. We don't need you for clean up. You're free to go.”

Tony would have left even if SHIELD still needed him. He'd dealt with enough crap today. All he wanted to do was go home, get a nice bottle or two of some overpriced scotch, and maybe take a quick stroll in his sleek Saleen S7. No stress, just a nice evening to himself. Picking his way free of the rubble, Tony groaned as dented bits of armor aggravated already forming bruises. His gait was stiff as he followed the furrows he made in the floor back to his point of entry (the movies lied. It didn't look like an Iron Man shaped hole). “Jarvis, take us back. Keep the suit as level as possible, and no turbulence, please.”

“Yes, sir.” The thrusters activated slowly, and Tony was forever grateful for his competent AI. His flight back was uneventful; he didn't even give a bird a heart attack this time. It wasn't until he was in sight of his house that it happened.

“Sir, there is an unidentified object above your house.” A small black dot appeared on the HUD, descending quickly towards Tony's beautiful Malibu estate. “Trajectory patterns indicate collision in the general vicinity of the garage.” Garage... The sports cars!

“What? No!” Ignoring the ache it caused, Tony increased the flight power even though he knew he'd never make it in time to stop whatever was falling towards his unsuspecting cars. Speaking of which... “What the hell is it? A Doombot? Missile? Meteor? Hawk with a grudge? Come on Jarv, give me something here.” Tony strained his eyes even as Jarvis digitally enlarged and enhanced the feed. Whatever the genius was expecting, however, was not what showed up on his screen.

“Is that... oh, Jesus Christ. Fuck.” If he wasn't going fast before, he certainly was now, and this time not out of concern for his expensive vehicles.

“Sir, you won't make it in time.”

“Shut up, Jarvis! Put more power in the thrusters!” The suit shuddered as it increased speed, but the AI was right. Whoever was falling from the sky would hit long before Iron Man reached him—and that's what it was. A person. A fucking person was falling towards the house at impossibly high speeds, and Tony would only make it there in time to scrape the bloody mess out of his garage.

With one last boost, Tony shot downwards, but all he managed to do was get a clear view of the man, now confirmed both on the screen and by Tony's own eyes, crashing through the roof of the garage and into the dark depths below.

Behind the mask, Iron Man screamed.
"Drunk on ego,
Truly thought I could make it right,
If I kissed you one more time to,
Help you face the nightmare,
But you're far too poisoned for me.
Such a fool to think that I can wake you from your slumber,
That I could actually heal you.

Sleeping Beauty,
Poisoned and hopeless,
You're far beyond a visible sign of your awakening,
Failing miserably to find a way to comfort you."

-Sleeping Beauty by A Perfect Circle

“Oh my God! Oh fuck! Damn it... Oh my God.”

Like a mantra, Tony kept repeating those words, as if saying them would take back time, would undo the last few minutes, would let him be fast enough. But no matter how many times he swore or blasphemed, time remained resolute. The gaping hole in his roof stayed, and with it, so did the guilt. What kind of hero was he, letting someone fall to their death before his very eyes? He was right there, and he did nothing.

Except he knew he had tried, and that fact might have been worse than the alternative. When he realized it was a person falling to their death, an actual living person—though they certainly weren't alive anymore, and Tony ripped off his faceplate as the thought churned his stomach—he would have done anything to save them. There just wasn't anything he could do. All of his science, his work on making the suit perfect so he could actually help people, had been useless. He had been useless.

It took Tony a few minutes to gather the nerves necessary to lower himself down through the new hole in his ceiling. Part of him, still high on adrenaline and poisonous hope, urged him to move immediately, but he resisted; there wasn't a need for haste, not anymore. Whoever that was, they were dead before they even broke through the ceiling. His only consolation was that they had died quickly.

However, Tony had to face his failure eventually. It was his house they slammed into. He couldn't just leave and act like it had never happened. That might work for other things, but not this. It was his fault, whether the blame was logical or not, and he would do what he could to make things right. He had to find out who it was, apologize to their family, and offer them anything he could to ease the repercussions of his mistake.

A part of him wondered why the hell someone had been free falling above Malibu in the first place, but that came later. Right now, there was a body sitting in his garage, and he couldn't ignore it any longer. He didn't want to leave it for Pepper or Rhodes to stumble upon. It was his responsibility, whether he liked it or not.

Slowly, haltingly, he directed himself over the gaping maw that was his roof (noting, with a bit of
gallows humor, that it was right next to where he had fallen through on his first flight as Iron Man) and lowered himself into the darkness. Without his helmet, there was nothing filtering out the thick, metallic reek of blood or the stench of gasoline. It hung heavy in his lungs, clogging his nose and reminding him of another day filled with death and fire. Gagging on the smell and hanging on the verge of memory, Tony almost lost his nerve. He moved to turn back on his thrusters—he just couldn't do this right now. Not alone. He needed someone there with him who could selfishly tell him that it wasn't his fault. Someone to tell him that the blood painting his garage was not also painting the ledger already soaked through with his mistakes—when a loud, choking rasp caught his attention.

Was that...? Eyes widening in realization, Tony barked for Jarvis to turn on the lights while killing the repulsors. With the room now bathed in light, he landed a few feet away from where the impact occurred—confused, bewildered, and hopeful. “Oh my God...”

There, lying on the crushed hood of his Saleen S7 and showered with blood and glass, was a man that, against all reason, happened to be alive. Unconscious and looking like he just escaped from Hell, but alive.

Brain going lightning fast, Tony tried to sort through the scene before him. He took in the appearance of the man: he was clothed in tattered leathers that hung off of his emaciated figure. Long, matted black hair clung to his pale, blood drenched face. His skin—Tony didn't even know skin could be that shade of white except for in cheap vampire films—clung tightly to bone, a morbid display of a lack of fat or muscle. It was like a Holocaust survivor photo, ruined only by the smashed sports car, renaissance fair get-up, and the glass. No photo Tony saw had the people impaled with foot-long shards of glass.

How the hell was he still alive?

When a loud, chest rattling cough broke the rhythm of desperate inhalations, Tony finally jumped into action. He lunged forwards, quickly and methodically grabbing hold of the all the glass shards he could find and pulling them out of paper-like flesh. He could only hope that none of the shrapnel had pierced anything important; his own chest twinged in remembrance beneath the arc reactor. It didn't look like any had, but Tony only had the knowledge of his own experience to guide him. The bloody pieces collected in a pile on the floor, joined shortly by serrated sheets of drenched metal.

“Sir, I would advise that you stop. At this rate, he is going to bleed out.”

Tony paused, his hand wrapped around a soaked shard; he was nearly finished disentangling the man from the wrecked orange car. “...What?”

“The glass was preventing blood flow. All sources indicate that you should apply pressure to the wounds immediately.”

Cursing himself, Tony moved to do just that when he saw it. At first, he thought it was a trick of the light, but when a closer looked revealed the same thing, he paused. The skin that moments ago sported a vicious gash was nearly flawless, only a slight scar and sea of red divulging the wound that had just been there. Curiosity peaked, Tony removed one of the remaining fragments and watched in fascination as the blood clotted within seconds. In less than a minute, a new layer of skin had formed.

“Jarvis, are you seeing what I'm seeing?”

“Yes, sir. It appears he is healing at extremely accelerated rates. Were I to make a deduction, I'd say such an ability would most likely account for him surviving the fall through the roof.”
“Do you think he's an enhanced soldier, or maybe a mutant? I'm going to go for the obvious here and say he isn't a normal human.” The scientific parts of Tony's mind started churning, thinking of anywhere he's heard of healing powers that matched this caliber. One of the X-Men possessed similar abilities, if he wasn't mistaken, but that seemed to be it. Even Captain America was unable to heal that quickly or cleanly. It would have taken him days to scar over. But just as Tony was about to write off the healing as a mutant power, he remembered something he had read about in the SHIELD database a few years ago. It was irrelevant at the time, but now the information pulled itself to the forefront of his mind.

A few aliens had shown up in a small New Mexico town. They too were clad in leather and equipped with super healing. It was unknown how many of them there were or where exactly Asgard, their homeland, was, but the ones who did show up came from the sky. That would account for why the man fell from nowhere.

“Jarvis, see what information SHIELD has on 'Asgard'. Check other superhuman research as well, but I think leather-clad aliens is the best bet for what we have here.”

“I have already started, sir. Should I contact Director Fury as well?”

Tony was about to retort 'no' simply on the principle that he didn't like SHIELD getting into his business, but then he reconsidered. While the man's flesh wounds had disappeared, he was still freakishly thin and that hideous wheeze he made with every breath wasn't going away. SHIELD would be better fit to deal with the well-being of an abnormal entity, and if there was a chance he came from a race of warrior gods, they'd not dare experiment on him for fear of intergalactic retaliation. But... Tony had told himself he'd take responsibility for what happened, and while he made that promise thinking he'd be dealing with a grieving family and not sheltering an alien, he made it nonetheless.

He had made a mistake, but he could fix it. He had to make things right or he'd never forgive himself. “No...no, don't contact him. I'll take care of it. Just... I'll need some medical supplies or something. Figure out what I need and get it shipped to the house as soon as possible. If they say they don't do express shipping, tell them I don't care and I'll pay extra for it.”

Decision made, Tony checked to make sure nothing else was stabbing into his new charge before lifting him into his arms, mindful of where his armor had dented. Even so, bony limbs smacked painfully against the suit, and Tony couldn't help but be disgusted by the sharp contours of the man's body. He looked like a skeleton that someone didn't get the memo to bury and instead thought it would be amusing to dress up like a comic book character. Tony hoped the man recovered his muscle mass with the same healing efficiency he revealed earlier, because while he wasn't an expert in physical therapy, he knew it took ages to come back from complete degradation. Fat, too. Screw obesity; the man needed to eat like Tony drank.

Infinitely glad that Pepper wasn't around (normally she showed up after missions to check on him, but there was a problem with Stark Industries), Tony made his way through the lab and up the winding steps. Had she been there to see him cradling Jack Skellington while covered in blood, she would have freaked. Not that her concern wasn't nice sometimes (emphasis on the sometimes), but it had been a long day. The sooner he got the man situated in one of the guest bedrooms and got himself a beer, the better.

It wasn't until Tony dumped the man on the bed (those sheets were definitely getting thrown away tomorrow. He was never going to get the blood off) that he fully realized he had no clue what he was doing. Sure, put the alien in a room and try to give him amateur medical care, but then what? The guy was wasted. For all Tony knew, he wouldn't recover swiftly. Did he really want to be the
caretaker of a stranger? Would said stranger even accept Tony's help after he woke up? And there was no way the guy didn't have some sort of mental problem after going through... whatever it was that made him look like that. It wasn't like Tony could just hand him off later if things weren't going as well as he liked. Well, he could, but he was trying not to be a self-centered dick.

There was also the fact that the man was a complete unknown. For all Tony knew, he was a homicidal maniac. True, he probably wouldn't be much of a threat at the moment, but did Tony really want someone he didn't know loose in the house? With Pepper around? And Pepper, he couldn't hide his newest stint from her forever. What would she think?

But looking at the man's face, scrunched in pain as he struggled to breathe, he remembered when he must have looked like that too.

“What the hell did you do to me?”

“What I did was save your life.”

Yinsen had saved him, both in that moment and when he had sacrificed his life for Tony to get away. He had been to one who helped Tony when he was lost—“So you are a man who has everything, but nothing.”—and forced him to finally open his eyes—“Is this what you want? Is this what you wish the legacy of the great Tony Stark to be?” Being the Merchant of Death was never what he wanted. Back then, he had been selfish, conceited, and shallow. He offered help to no one, cared about no one. He hadn't even appreciated his closest friends because he'd thought that he was better than them. Tony had been nothing more than a naïve child with a genius's mind.

Afghanistan changed all of that; Yinsen changed all of that. “He sees the darkness in the world, and in his own heart, and is forever changed.” Yinsen had saved him because he thought Tony would become something more. He only had one request, and Tony intended to honor it.

“Don't waste it... Don't waste your life, Stark.”

So regardless of the 'what ifs', helping this bloody and wrecked man was the right thing to do. Tony knew Pepper would understand when he eventually told her. If there were problems, he'd handle them as they came. No point in giving up before he even started.

With that, Tony set about cleaning the man off. It took him a good twenty minutes to figure out how to undo all of the leather buckles and straps, and then began the awkward part of removing the simple linens underneath. He had intended to leave the guy with his undergarments, but after seeing how baggy they were on bony hips, he chose to ignore how weird it was and just changed all of his clothes with something cleaner. If the guy had been a healthy weight, Tony's wardrobe would have been too small, but they fit alright. He put his guest into the fresh clothes after giving him a quick wipe down with a wet towel... and then another few wipe downs, because damn the guy was filthy.

Eventually the guy was as clean as he was going to be without bringing in a pair of shears and some industrial grade soap, so Tony left him under the covers while he went in search of some booze. Taking advantage of the slight reprieve, he lounged in one of the chairs by the bar, gulping down generous amounts of scotch.

It wasn't until twenty minutes later, after Tony's adrenaline rush had finally faded, that he noticed he still had not taken off the armor. Loathe to move but wanting even less to remain in the battered suit, he retreated back down to the lab. Dum-E greeted him from across the room, where he was scrubbing up one of many spots of blood, and Tony made a note to clean the mess off the stairs before Pepper stopped by.
“Alright Jarvis, get me out of this thing. And do be gentle this time. I'm not really in the mood for having it rough.”

Robotic arms reached out from the ceiling to release Tony as Jarvis replied, “Certainly, sir. I also would like to report that the supplies you have ordered are on their way. They should arrive in less than half an hour.”

“Great. Oh it feels good to be out of that thing.” Tony rubbed his sore chest and, with a quick goodbye to Dum-E, shambled back up to where some liquid magic was waiting for him. “What did you find out from SHIELD? Do you think our guest is from Asgard?”

“The similarities in clothing and ability certainly suggest that. No other group matched quite as well.”

“Pull the files up. I want to see.” Tony tapped the coffee table and the glass surface sprang to life with photos of tall warriors decked in needlessly complex armor, as well as written reports compiled from everything SHIELD could get their hands on. It wasn't much, but after just a few photos, Tony was sure that the man lying a room over was from Asgard. Unless gaudy armor that people actually risked their lives while wearing was a new trend, he was looking in the right place.

In with the images of the warriors were pictures of the suit that SHIELD had thought belonged to Tony, and he remembered why he read this random report in the first place. He'd been worried someone stole his tech, but when it turned out that the Destroyer was actually an ancient alien construct, he stopped being concerned about it, though he did feel a bit cheated that there had been an 'iron man' long before he designed his own.

Tony continued the read the sparse notes, most of which were conjecture, until the door bell rang. He had wanted to learn as much as he could about Asgard, but the only two names mentioned were 'Thor' and 'Loki'. Anything more specific than that was based heavily on inference. He abandoned his futile pursuit and forced himself to get off the couch despite how every muscle protested.

“About time they got here.” He wasn't too concerned about his guest dying in the next few hours, since he proved to be quite durable, but if Tony listened closely, he could hear the man rasping from the adjoining room. That couldn't be healthy, alien or not.

Limping imperceptibly, Tony made his way to the front door. The delivery man was fidgeting on the other side of the glass wall, and Tony was mildly amused at the incredulous looks he was giving the house. It reminded Tony of the times he had ordered cheap take-out just to see the delivery man panic as he thought he had the wrong address (and Tony also enjoyed eating the cheap take-out). But amusing as it was to toy with people, Tony was a hurry this evening, so he opened the door and wasted no time asking, “I already paid, right? Just unload everything and I can bring it in myself.”

The man look startled, his brow furrowed and eyes wide. “Um, sir, you did pay but... I think you may want to double check the amount.” He offered up the clip board that he had been holding to his chest, eyes darting once more to the sum at the bottom of the receipt. Tony bet... Frank, according to his name tag, had never seen a sum that large.

Tony backed away from the offered item, instead replying, “Does it have less than six digits?” A hesitant nod was given in return. “Then it's good. Now come on, start unpacking. You weren't paid to stand around.”

“Technically sir, I wasn't paid to deliver either. I work as a receptionist at the hospital. I got roped into this job since no one else wanted to do it.”
But Frank still went to the truck at the end of the drive and began to pull out large boxes. There was seven in total, making Tony wonder what exactly his AI had seen fit to buy. Chances are the engineer wouldn't be able to name even half the stuff, let alone use it. Oh well, there was always time to learn.

After giving Frank a generous tip and the order to be sure to show it to all of his receptionist friends (who couldn't be bothered to make the trip themselves), Tony dragged the boxes into his living room. “Jesus, Jarv, what did you buy? An entire ICU room?” Not wanting to waste anymore time, Tony started tearing off the tape and pulling out the boxes' foreign contents.

“Of course not, sir. I bought an IV system, oxygen mask, nasogastric feeding tube, catheter, and a variety of physical therapy equipment.”

“That's nice, but I don't actually know what I'm supposed to do with any of that.” So Tony spent the next hour getting coached in basic nursing by his computer—or at least the videos that his computer pulled up—and eventually got his cadaverous guest hooked up to an oxygen tank, IV line, and feeding tube. Though the urinary catheter got a big veto, because no matter what the lady on the screen tried to tell him, there was no way Tony was going to violate an alien. His guest could wait to take a piss when he woke up.

Luckily, the man did have close enough anatomy to a human for the feeding tube to work, though it did take two tries on the intravenous line because the first needle broke before Tony could get it under the alien's skin. Whatever the differences between humans and Asgardians were, they clearly originated in their biological structure. Hell, the alien even weighed more than Tony despite how feeble he looked, and the superhero had amassed no small amount of muscle from fighting megalomaniac nutcases all the time.

It was nearing nine o'clock by the time Tony managed to get everything set up and worked out, and he dragged himself to his bedroom instead of back down to the lab. He'd probably go down in a few hours anyway after sleep eluded him, but for now, he needed to take a breather and let his muscles relax. He would probably look like hell in the morning when his body started to feel its impromptu trip through a couple of walls. He just hoped the next few days weren't quite as hectic, because he couldn't take much more mayhem.

To Tony's relief, the following three days did go by relatively normal. Taking care of his guest was easy now that everything was set up, and Jarvis alerted him to any changes. Despite being interested in the man's well-being, there wasn't much Tony could do for him while he slept, not to mention he had his own work to do. He instead spent his time flipping through the scans Jarvis had taken on the last prototype of AYBABTU, trying to figure out what went wrong.

The goal was to make a small attachment that could emit a frequency able to disengage the self-destruct protocol on Doombots. This would allow them to capture one and dissect its programming. But despite Victor von Doom's inability to refer to himself in first person, his robots were nearly flawless in their design. Very few EMP fields were able to shut them down, and those that did couldn't undo the detonation sequence. By compiling the frequencies and fluctuations of the types of fields that did work, Tony pinpointed what should be the wavelength the self destruct worked on. Which was fine in theory, but as he discovered in his previous four models, the machines kept shorting themselves out.

In turn, Tony couldn't find a design that could both be attached to a Doombot and keep from getting damaged by its own effect. That's where his fifth and sixth prototype came in. One would be designed to emit a small electromagnetic pulse in the shape that was simplest, and the other would be designed to get the EMP close enough to a Doombot to work. If everything worked right, he could
then set to adjusting both designs to work with one another and not ruin their purpose.

He had been in the middle of welding wires onto a tiny circuit board when Jarvis spoke up. “Sir, your guest is in the garage.”

Guest? Mind still absorbed in his work, Tony's mind jumped to the most obvious conclusion: Rhodey. Though he hadn't expected Rhodes to come over anytime soon. Last he checked, his best friend was overseeing a weapons utilization convention in DC. Maybe something came up? Whatever it was, Tony wasn't going to stop working.

“Tell him I'm in the middle of something. He can wait for me in the kitchen. Or better yet, come back a different day.”

“Sir, I believe you misunderstood. I was referring to the guest that fell through your roof three days ago.” It took a moment for Tony to sort out what was wrong with that statement.

Turning off the welding torch and setting it down, Tony tentatively clarified, “So Marvin, not Rhodey or anyone else, is in the garage? Like, the garage with the cars garage? That one over there?” He pointed towards the door that connected his lab to his underground parking lot. “Because I didn't see anyone walk through here.” Not that his guest was in any condition to walk anywhere, either.

“Of course not, sir. It appears he teleported from his room.”

Right, he teleported. Obviously. ...The fuck?

Tony shoved off from his work table and sprinted towards the garage. “Jarvis, you better be kidding me!” But sure enough, there was pale, lanky body lying on the ground where Tony's orange sports car used to be. The scene was too similar to Monday for Tony, and he picked up his pace for the last stretch, skidding to a halt just before the limp body. Kneeling quickly, he grabbed the man's knobby shoulders—Tony didn't think he'd ever get used to just how wrong the man's starved body felt—and flipped him over onto his back. Wide, glassy eyes stared up at him—no, not at him. The dull green eyes were unfocused, failing to react even as a hand slowly waved before them.

“Hey, um, anyone home in there? Hello? You're kind of creeping me out. I'd appreciate if you stopped staring through me; you're making me feel like I turned invisible or something. Helloooo?” Still nothing. Tony reached over and roughly shook the man's shoulder. Nope. A brisk slap to the face. Not even a blink.

Disturbed, Tony released his fingers that were digging into the catatonic's arm and leaned back. He had heard of people entering stupors as a result of severe depression and post-traumatic stress, but he'd never actually seen it before. The guy was like a doll, and that brought Tony back to the ever present question of what had happened to make such a powerful being weak and, apparently, insensible. He could all too vividly recall his own stint in Afghanistan, and he looked nothing like this when he rose from that miserable cave.

However, back then he had Yinsen, who was the rock that kept Tony tethered in those three months. Did this guy ever have someone to keep him sane? Someone to look at for reassurance that he wasn't alone in Hell?

Then Tony surprised himself when a little voice in his mind spoke up, strong and resolute. 'That doesn't matter anymore because he has me now. I'll keep the demons at bay.'

Tony would be Yinsen this time.
After one last failed attempt to reach the man, Tony gave up and lifted him off the floor, grunting under the weight. “You know, it’d be easier if you just teleported yourself to the kitchen now. Just saying. You are really heavy. And Jarvis, I need to see that footage.”

Pictures and frame-by-frame videos popped onto the walls as Tony dumped the dead weight on the nearest chair. He flicked through the offered clips until he got to the one with the exact moment he wanted. It showed the man lying in his bed, looking no different than when Tony had left him earlier in the afternoon. Then green eyes shot open; the man jolted, limbs twitching and pulling even though they lacked the strength to support anything. His face twisted into a grimace, pain clear in every bit of his expression. Under the oxygen mask, he gasped and wheezed.

Tony watched, both horrified and fascinated, as bright light shone from the man's pale skin, starting at trembling fingertips and washing over the entire body. Then he vanished, leaving behind nothing but an empty bed and swaying IV rack. A quick flick closed to video and brought up the surveillance of the garage. Everything was normal until a green shimmer appeared in the empty car slot. The man dropped out of the air, standing on his feet for only a moment before shaking muscles sent him toppling to the floor. Tony could see the rapid rise and fall of his chest and desperate scrambling; he switched cameras to get a better look at the man's face. The image was distorted by the angle, but the expression of fear was clear.

Tony could see the moment when all expression collapsed, leaving nothing behind but the blank stare he had come across a minute later. The fact that the sickly man suffered from catatonia wasn’t unexpected, but it was a shock to see eerie calm consume everything. It also made the situation a lot more complicated, as Tony had been expecting to work with his guest towards recovery. Now he may be stuck nursing a traumatized alien back to health as well as playing shrink.

But even though the man—slumped over in his chair and slowly listing to the side—was empty at the moment, Tony had seen that spark of life. Not knowing where he was and too weak to move, the man had still tried to get away. He still retained the desire to fight, and that spark was what Tony wanted to turn into an inferno. A gust of wind was all it took to make an ash a forest fire, as his captors had learned the hard way.

“I guess you aren’t going to be interested in eating something, are you?” Tony shut off the screens and turned his attention to the fridge, throwing a quick look over his shoulder to confirm that there was no response. “Damn, and here I thought I’d be able to stop shoving a tube down your nose.”

Tony ended up making two smoothies anyway, setting one up in front of his despondent charge. Then he tilted his head as he watched the other man start to slide in the chair. Just before the poor guy fell over completely, Tony intervened and set him upright, putting the smoothie in between pallid hands just for kicks.

That day began one of many similar days, with Tony's guest mindlessly teleporting himself places (normally the garage, though he did go to the kitchen a few times and once went straight to the lab) and Tony fetching him back from wherever he went. The oxygen mask was taken off duty when the man stopped sounding like he was on the verge of coughing out his lungs with every breath. Eventually, the IV was also gotten rid of; every time he warped, the needle came out and it was getting harder and harder to get one back in without breaking it. The feeding tubes remained in use, but they were making an obvious improvement in a short amount of time. When Tony started physical therapy to prompt muscles to recover, that followed the same exponential trend as regaining weight. His charge also got a proper bath; Tony spent thirty minutes wrestling with the man’s ridiculously long hair.

Not that Tony spent all of his time with his new commitment. He went out partying multiple times to
take the edge off and make him feel a bit less like some goody-two-shoe nun. And he may or may
not have dressed his guest up in one of Pepper's dresses whilst super drunk after one of said parties.

Bringing home girls however proved to be somewhat of a problem, which Tony didn't even realize
until he had slipped away from his sleeping partner only to find the gaunt alien curled up outside of
his door. Tony had to keep a close eye on his not-blonde guest for the rest of the morning until Jarvis
had assured him that the girl had left and wasn't as risk for coming across Tony's personal dungeon
wraith.

The most interesting day, however, had been the one where Tony had entered the kitchen only to
find a horse relaxing in the middle of the room. He had backed out of the doorway, wearily dragged
a hand across his face, and cautiously walked back in. Mammal still present, he tried to think of
where he may have drunkenly obtained a horse until he realized that not only was the equine's fur
was a familiar shade, but it was abnormally thin. Jarvis took pity on the confused engineer—he was a
man of science, dammit! He didn't understand any of this magic crap!—and informed him that his
guest had transformed himself almost two hours ago.

Which was nice to know and all, but it didn't really give Tony any idea about what he was suppose
to do with the mare—and if that didn't make the situation any weirder, the horse was indeed
female—or when his guest intended to change himself back to his humanoid form. Because even
with his suit, Tony didn't think he could safely carry a full grown horse through his house, nor did he
know how to tube feed one.

“Come on, Animorphs. Transform back now. Or at the very least, stop making my kitchen smell like
a barn.” He stretched his arm out and nudged the mare's broad shoulder insistently. “Seriously, this
isn't cool. What if Pepper showed up?” The horse remained completely ignorant to Tony's whining,
his (her?) eyes staring blankly ahead. That part at least didn't change. “Alright then, we'll do this the
hard way. I am not letting you sit here and get fleas all over where I eat.”

He had read when looking up mental illnesses that, depending on the cause, you could get people in
stupors to follow your lead. Through his time taking care of his guest, Tony had seen some slight
response from muscle memory when he shifted the man, and now that he actually had muscle, he
would try to catch himself before falling. Hopefully that would in turn translate to him walking
automatically when forced to get up. If not... no, not an option. The horse was getting out of the
kitchen.

It had taken a good ten minutes, during which Tony probably pulled at least three muscles, before he
was able to get the mare on wobbly black legs. He stood by the horse's shoulder, one arm under her
heaving chest and the other on the back of her elbow. They went slow, Tony having to encourage
each step and atrophied muscles struggling to comply, but somehow the two reached the guest room
and managed to squeeze inside. Then the mare's legs finally gave out and she slumped heavily to the
ground, limbs twitching with overuse.

That surreal event had taught Tony three things: his guest could change his gender and species, he
really wanted to study how magic worked, and that, with enough effort, he could get the man to
walk and exercise under his own power. The later proved very helpful in trying to get the man to
regain muscle strength, and Tony began regularly encouraging him to move across small distances.

Then Tony got a visit from this thing everyone liked to call 'reality' in the form of a certain red-head
business woman. He had been in the middle of organizing a new shipment of supplies for his guest
when she wandered into the kitchen, talking on the phone while looking at some paperwork. She
had been prepared to ignore Tony until she had finished her call—which he would have been glad
of, since he hadn't been expecting her and tried to hide what he was doing the moment she came in
the room—but after realizing what it was Tony was fiddling with, her eyes narrowed and she politely
interrupted the person she was talking to, telling them that she had to deal with something real fast. She pointedly pulled the phone away from her ear and gave Tony 'the look', which roughly translated into 'you did something stupid and didn't tell me'.

Tony braced himself and was about to explain that it wasn't his fault, really, he was just trying to fulfill his duties as a responsible human being, when Pepper hissed, “Anthony Edward Stark, if you are dying again and refrained from telling me, so help me God I will walk out of here right now and you will never see me again.”

...Oh. Well, that was not quite what he had been expecting, though it was probably not better. “It's um... not what it looks like.”

“Not what? So you were going to tell me? Or are you just going to make excuses like last time?” He cringed a bit at that, and damn was Pep scary when she was angry... and worried.

“What I mean is that this isn't for me,” Tony cut in, and Pepper put a hand on her hip while the other gestured for him to continue. “I um... may have taken in an alien who fell through my ceiling the other day? Oh, but don't worry; he looks human when he isn't turning into a horse. No antennae or blue skin or anything.”

He looked at Pepper imploringly, but her expression remained stony. Sad was the fact that mentions of him harboring aliens didn't even get a raised eyebrow anymore. “Go on.”

A hand sheepishly wandered into greasy brown hair. “And he may be suffering from severe starvation and is about as responsive as a rock most of the time. So I thought I'd do the mature thing and help him out.”

The 'like Yinsen did for me' remained unsaid, because even now Tony couldn't bring himself to open up about what happened in Afghanistan. But from the way Pepper's gaze softened, he knew she understood. She more than anyone saw the differences those three months had made in him. Helping strangers was one of those differences.

“Tony, you can't do things like that. What if he's dangerous?” She set her clipboard down on the nearby counter and put a manicured hand on his shoulder. “Look, Tony, I know you want to help people who've been through what you have, but you can't keep someone you don't know in your house.”

“Pep, he couldn't be dangerous if he tried. Come on, I'll show you. Jarv, where is our spontaneous friend at the moment?”

British voice informing him that his guest was in the garage, Tony grabbed the hand resting on his arm and pulled Pepper forward. The pair traveled down the stairs, but then Tony halted Pep before they came into view of the garage. He turned towards her, serious.

“I know he looks bad, but trust me when I say he looks ten times better than he did when he first came here.”

With that they turned the corner, and it only took a moment for Pepper's eyes to find her target. She gasped, hand flying to cover her mouth. “Oh my God...”

Then she ran forwards, heels clacking loudly in the otherwise quiet space. Tony followed at a more sedated pace, already too familiar with the sight that had been waiting for them. He hadn't been lying when he said that the man looked a lot better. He didn't look like a skeleton with some skin tacked on anymore, though he still seemed like he was going to keel over any second (and he probably was.
The man could stay on his feet for a little bit, but he always reached his limit far too quickly.

When Tony came up alongside her, Pepper had both of her hands on the catatonic man's face, fingers brushing against hollow cheeks while she looked into unresponsive green eyes. “I can't imagine what he must have been through,” she murmured. Neither could Tony, and that's what made it even worse.

He stood next to Pep while she observed his guest, only intervening when he noticed that the man's legs were quivering in a way that meant he was going to drop soon. In a move that conveyed how often he's done it, Tony grabbed under the man's shoulders while nudging the back of the weakening knee with his toe. Obligingly, the man sank to the floor with Tony's support, slouching wearily on his knees. Pepper watched quietly, stepping back slightly to allow them some space. Only when Tony straightened did she speak.

“Tony, while you seem to be doing a surprisingly good job with him,” she started calmly, “I think you're in over your head. He needs help, real help. You're not cut out for this. You're an engineer, not a nurse or a psychiatrist.” Said engineer made to mention that he was also a genius, but Pepper cut him off. “No, Tony. I know what you're going to say, but this just isn't a good match. What are you going to do when you get bored like you always do? What then? He's a person, not a machine. You can't just lock him away somewhere when you decided you'd rather go out and party.”

He understood that, he really did, but this was different. This was personal. “But I can help him, Pep. I know what it's like to feel like your mind isn't your own anymore. I can provide him with something to focus on, so the whole world doesn't feel like it's slipping away. And if you did send him off to some crazy house, how are you going to explain it to them when he starts teleporting away, or when they come in to check up on him and find a horse instead? Jarvis can keep an eye on him, and I'm more prepared to handle unexpected bouts of magic than some doctor.”

Tony knew it sounded like he was begging, and maybe he was, but he had to make her understand. He could do this. He had to do this. This, what he was doing here, was what Yinsen had wanted; what he died for.

(Tony had steadfastly been ignoring the traitorous part of him that said, “But does it count being 'Yinsen' when the man is nothing more than a puppet?”)

“Pepper, you're always telling me to think about others, and I am. I thought he was dead when he fell through my roof. For those few minutes, I suffered believing I had failed to save someone who was right in front of me, needing my help. Well turns out he wasn't dead, but he still needs help—help that I can give. I can do this.”

They stared at each other, one trying to express his sincerity and the other starting to realize the gravity of the decision that had been made in this very room two weeks before. Finally Pepper conceded. “Tony, sometimes I wish I didn't understand what goes on inside that head of yours. Fine, but if this starts getting out of your control, at least tell me so I can help. I'll stop by when I can.”

The next three weeks passed by quickly. They were filled with partying, a perfected prototype of All Your Base Are Belong to Us, and visits from Pep. She had just left from one of said visits—“Tony, he's still catatonic and it's been over a month. Don't you think it's time to try something different?”—when something happened to rekindle Tony's waning hope.

He had been working in the lab on Mark Thirty-five when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone walking in the garage. Thinking it was Pepper, he had turned back to his work, but then a flash of green caught his attention. He looked up, realized who it was, and set off running with hope budding in his chest.
However, when Tony caught up to the listless man, he was disappointed to note that the blank stare remained. Still, his good mood wasn't crushed completely. This was progress, proof that his efforts were paying off. Tony steered the man away from the exit of the garage—he'd have to make sure that Jarvis kept the exits closed. No reason saving the poor guy just to let him wander into the street and get run over—and was filled with relief that things were finally getting better.

It turned out that the whole walking thing wasn't as nice as Tony thought, since a mobile alien was a lot harder to keep tracking of than a bedridden one. The man stumbled a lot, often collapsing in the halls and unable to move again until Tony came around to collect him. Worried that he would get into something dangerous, Tony situated the man in the lab and assigned Dum-E to babysitting duty (which pleased the robot immensely). Fortunately, the increase in walking led to a decrease in teleporting or transforming, and Dum-E didn't have too much trouble herding his new task away from unsafe items.

Tony thought the new situation worked fine—no one got hurt, Dum-E was staying away from the fire extinguisher, and he got plenty of work done—but Pepper disagreed. She took one look at Dum-E tugging on the man's arm to keep him from walking into a welding torch and protested: “What are you doing? You can't just treat him like a dog and give him to Dum-E.”

Tony didn't see what the problem was. Dum-E had more focus to spare than he did. He'd also never made Dum-E watch over a dog before (at least he didn't think he had. That could have been one of those drunken 'I want a pet' moments he cannot remember). “No one's treating him like a dog. More like a magical doll that happens to like walking into things. He's fine.”

And he really was. Tony could see improvement everyday, and while the man had yet to speak, he started reacting to the world around him. He would gravitate towards Tony while he worked in the lab and only teleported when left somewhere dark or quiet. Tony knew his busy lifestyle suited the man far more than a mental ward or SHIELD's containment cells. And while Pepper wasn't convinced, she let him continue to do things his way. Not that it really mattered to Tony: he knew he was getting somewhere, regardless of how simple his methods were. He just had to be patient.

Then that evening, while Tony was putting the finishing touches on his latest suit, a loud crash sounded from the other side of the lab. Following the sound, so quiet Tony almost didn't notice, was an agitated whine. It was the first noise the alien had made, and as Tony hurried towards it, he would have laughed with delight were it not for the fact that his now-aware guest looked terrified. The man was on his knees, arms wrapped tightly around his chest while he curled protectively into himself. A crate of metal parts was upside-down on the floor next to him, and Dum-E whirred anxiously, craning his arm over the man's back to check on him.

“Hey, it's okay. Calm down, it's-” Tony started to reassure as his got down to his knees when green eyes—bright and vivid and wet with tears, but alive—darted up to look right at him. Tony felt his breath catch in his throat. God, there had been times when he thought the other man would never regain awareness. Even when flickering eyes moved away, trying and failing to catalog everything at once, Tony felt the weight of that momentary gaze.

He smiled softly and whispered earnestly, “It's good to see you back, Sleeping Beauty.”

Said Disney princess wasn't in the clear, however, and the man was wheezing heavily. Tony began talking to him again, using his calm to try and keep the other from panicking like Yinsen had done for him. Then Tony made a mistake; he reached a hand out to gently brush against his guest's arm.

The man freaked, flinging himself backwards and colliding with Dum-E. He gasped and trembled like a cornered animal—gripped, Tony knew, in the throes of senseless fear—while his hands clawed furrows into the ground. But then the struggling suddenly cut out, and Tony felt his stomach
dropped when he realized what that meant.

“Hey, no, listen! Don't fade out again!” He tilted the man's head and stared into reactive green that, before his very eyes, dulled once more. “Damn it!” Tony punched the ground in frustration. They had been so close!

He regarded the slumped body before him, watching as Dum-E nudged it with no reaction. Emptiness had gripped the man's mind once again, but now Tony knew for sure that someone survived beyond the haze. Somewhere in there was a person, and he was going help him escape.

Tony kept his guest close while he worked, talking to him and asking him questions even though there was no reply. Occasionally, he could see green eyes track movement, and the man experienced more panic attacks as his consciousness came closer to the surface. When such events occurred, Tony made sure to keep sudden movement and sound to a minimum. He was now confident that the man, with his sun deficient skin and surprise at any stimulus, had been sensory deprived. But it was also clear that, overwhelming or not, the man sought noise and light, so Tony never turned off the lights and made sure that there was always music streaming over the speakers.

Slowly but surely, the moments of clarity grew longer, until one day—a bit over two months from when the alien had fallen into his life—Tony was helping the other through another panic attack when, instead of falling away, the man fixed his attention on him. Tony watched, breathless, as pale lips moved, mouthing words but unable to find the air to speak them.

'Come on,' he thought fervently, resisting the impulse to reach out in support. 'You can do this. You're almost there.'

Then, finally, beautifully, a word managed to pass through those quivering lips: “What...?”
What Has Been Lost

"Taken by the seamless vision,
I close my eyes,
Ignore the smoke...

Call an optimist, she's turning blue,
Such a lovely color for you.
Call it aftermath, she's turning blue,
While I just sit and stare at you.
Because I don't want to know...

Mistook their nods for an approval,
Just ignore the smoke and smile."

-Blue by A Perfect Circle

-Fear, volcanic and devouring, pulsed and festered. Seized by desperation but paralyzed by inability, he was assaulted by searing light and agonizing touch. Breath, heavy and foreign in his lungs, burned more harshly than the lack ever had. He was aflame, helpless. Colors swirled around him: cruelly, mockingly. It was tactile overload, every piece of him screaming out in confusion.


White and blue, pressing in closer, everywhere—outside, inside, from every pore and orifice. Demanding, beguiling, blinding—he could feel it suffocating him, smothering him, seeking his mind and consuming it. There was no escape, no relief. Creeping, insidious, the blue filled his lungs—get out, get out!—and there was too much air, too much—but not enough; his chest burned, erupted, twisted and shriveled.

Flee. Had to flee—why aren't you moving? Let me go, get me out of here!—away from everything. Warmth on his skin—not warm, incinerating—and sound in his ears—thunder, ringing incessantly and shaking his very bones. Everything was crowding him—the reek of blood, molten lava oozing down his flesh, blaring in his mind—and he couldn't handle it.

Magic snatched his limbs, yanking him away, away, away—but there was no reprieve. Color exploded around him, things he had forgotten—silver, brown, gray—and gouged deep into his brain. Impact jarred his bones, rattled his soul. Wrong. It was all wrong! The black—where was the black? Soothing, terrifying, detestable, brilliant black—vanished, leaving him—“Abandoned, suffering, left to die”.

Don't want this.

Don't want this.

Don't want-

Everything went mercifully blank.
Eventually, the world crept back in. A voice in his ear, boisterous and alive. Pressure on his arm—touch, someone was touching him—and his feet moving before he realized they were. It slipped his mind why these things should be feared, why everything should be something else. Should be... be... black. But the sense of wrongness faded into the bliss until he couldn’t remember where he was or what he was doing. Sometimes, he forgot who he was.

He languished in the calm for a long time, occasionally feeling a spark of something—‘Wrong, this is wrong! What is going on? Where am I? Why can’t I remember?’—that fell easily through the cracks. At times, when the sound hushed, the light drowned, and things were almost right, almost black, the fog became so complete that everything... slowed... down... Nothingness came upon him, pulling away little pieces of who he was, and he was almost content to let it. Almost. But from the depths of his mind there was resistance—I am Loki! And I won’t let you take that from me!—and suddenly he would be surrounded by noise and color that pushed away the abyss haunting his mind.

Bittersweet and putrid memories often flared through his half-awake mind. They were choppy and incomplete; he couldn’t remember much beyond the very things he had sought to forget. Everything was disappointed gold, sorrowful red, and hateful blue. His last few days of life—for he was not alive now, not truly—echoed the loudest. They warped savagely from “You’re my brother and my friend. Sometimes I’m envious, but never doubt that I love you.” to “I could have done it, father! I could have done it! For you, for all of us!” and the damning two words that followed.

Then there were words and scenes that he didn’t remember. They too were brimming with red and gold, but that was where the similarities ended. Unlike his other memories, these did not promise joy only to wither and rot inside his mind. They were enticing, novel, and pushed back the storms of vicious thoughts. But he could not place where they were from. When had red and gold—not just one or the other, but both curiously intertwined—ever said, “God damn it, not again! What are you supposed to be, a werewolf or something? Can we not turn into giant dogs in the middle of the living room?” It was a memory, was it not? It had to be, for it filled his mind with the same vague, incomplete sensations as the others. However, unlike them, it lacked any despair. These new visions did not leave him feeling hollow and shattered. Hallucinations, then? There was no other explanation.

His hollow peace did not last long, and as his mind awoke, it brought with it shrieking terror. Again and again he would lose himself in the torrent of questions, demands, and pleas. At first, such events were highlighted by the increase in sensation—still too unknown, too razor edged, butchering and violating him in the most intimate way—and it made him crave black. Under that desire was self-loathing for his cowardice and doubt of his resilience. How could he even think that he wanted to go back there? And yet it was familiar, oh so familiar, and in this emerging world of uncertainty, he craved it.

But then something accompanied the panic, something that eased the fear and made the lure of black less seductive. It started with faint murmurs, a stark contrast to the roars. Gentle touches—at first startling but then welcomed—reassured him and gave him something to cling to as the world cycloned. Hands brushed away tears—Crying? When had he started crying?—and held him close as he tried to figure out what was going on. He remembered why he had hated the darkness and tried so hard to keep it away; it had corroded consciousness.

But now it was falling away and words became distinct, weighing heavy in his ears, but it was good. He wanted that, wanted this. With every—“Hey, calm down, you’re safe.”—sentence spoken pacifying in his ear—“Everything’s okay, I got you.”—he felt the horrible need to retreat fade away—“Nothing is going to hurt you here.”—and pieces of his jumbled psyche rebuild.

Each time awareness was his, he clung to it tighter and tighter, not letting go until he was forced to.
His panic upon having his thoughts realign made it hard to think clearly, but he pushed beyond it. It was close, so close, and Loki would have it. So with the help of a stranger, the God of Mischief reigned back in what the void had scattered. He seized his sanity, and while he knew such a grasp was tentative, he didn't care. Clarity would be his, even if just for a moment.

That moment finally came. The expected panic attack gripped him before he even understood that sensations were bombarding him, but the second it clicked that he was conscious, he dug in deep. Determined, unrelenting, he dragged himself forwards. Past the howling storm of jagged, swirling colors and harsh, grating sounds. Past the irrationality and lurking nightmares. He headed towards the voice that cut through the maelstrom, letting it be his beacon. It guided him out from the darkness, and with one last, desperate scramble, Loki was thrown from his madness.

The first thing his tired mind registered was the man crouched in front of him, holding his quaking shoulders and uttering a litany of sweet-nothings. But they weren't nothing, not to Loki. They were freedom. He stared at the man for a moment, trying to put his racing mind in order. He had so many questions, and as he looked into brown eyes—hopeful, incredulous, relieved—he tried to put words to them. His lips moved, but his gasping lungs could not provide him the air he needed. He fumbled, and the questions began to derail.

Falling, falling, into the void. Stars fading until all that was left was absolutely nothing.

No! Loki forced himself to try again, this time slowing the pace of each inhale and exhale. He could do this. The fog could not take him now.

With quivering lips, he finally put substance to his confusion. “What...?”

Loki wanted to say more, but just the one word was hard enough; it was the first voiced in many, many years, and he could still feel the lingering sensation of asphyxiation. Air in his lungs was an unfamiliar burden that burned inside of him. Yet in that one spoken word, he combined all the other questions that he sought answers for: 'What am I doing here? Where is the black? Who are you? Why are you helping me? Is this really even happening? What's going on?'

The stranger in front of him (tan skin, short messy hair, warm brown eyes, clean shaven goatee, oil stains on a white shirt) seemed to understand what he wanted and started rambling. ‘I'm Tony Stark, but you probably don't know me—and damn is that a weird thought—which is fine. You're at my house in Malibu, California. Earth. Um, you fell through my roof. Totally not cool, by the way. You landed on my nicest car, and...”

He kept talking, and Loki let the words wash over him, soothing him, even though he didn’t understand most of what was being said. He was thankful that the words kept coming, and even more thankful that the words did not hurt.

With the man comforting him, Loki started to relax. He didn't even realize he had been zoning out until he received a soft but sharp slap on the face. He blinked away the accumulating fog and refocused on the man (Stark, he had said) who was giving him a concerned look. “Come on, stay focused for a little bit longer. At least come get something to eat and stretch your legs for a while.”

Stark stood up and offered a hand to Loki. Before the void, the god would have vehemently denied the help, taking it as an insult to his abilities as a fighter. 'I am not weak; I can fight! I may use magic, but I am still a warrior. Don’t look down at me! Now, however, he reached up and accepted the hand: the very hand that had led him when he was lost. Later, when he was feeling more like himself he’d make sure this mortal did not look down on him—that no one looked down at him. But right now, Loki just couldn't bring himself to care. This man was invaluable in allowing him to regain his mind. He was there when Loki needed him, and for that, the god knew he would be forever grateful.
When Loki regained his feet, assisted greatly by Stark, he finally became aware of the weakness in his body. His muscles felt watery, and while they held his weight, they quivered and ached in protest. That was when he recalled glimpses of an emaciated, ruined body from the void. His ruined, emaciated body. Hesitating for only a moment—did he really want to solidify the broken images in his mind?—Loki looked down at himself, taking in the unearthly tone of his skin and the unnatural thinness of his limbs. Where there was once compact muscle, lithe and graceful, was now an atrophied mess. It was disgusting and wretched, and he hated the fact that it was him.

‘Look at how far you have fallen, puny god. Everyone will see you for the runt you are. Who would love you now?’

“Oh, don't worry about that. You already look tons better than you did a few months ago, and you'll probably be back to your impressive, leather-clad self in no time.” A hand grabbed his arm and started steering him towards a glass wall and the stairs beyond. Loki felt confused and muddled as he stared, without comprehension, at Stark. (The man's was warm and soft, contrasting with the jagged cold of his own flesh.) Was he truly not repulsed by such a feeble god?

Stark looked back when Loki ignored the insistent pulling on his (bony, vile) arm. He gazed into Loki’s eyes, and the Liesmith could see understanding dawn on the man’s face. Slowly, as if he were approaching a spooked horse, Stark reached up and rested his palm on Loki’s cheek. “Hey, look at me.”

Loki did, enticed by the voice that was both familiar and foreign. He tried to ignore how desperate he must look, eyes wide and glittering with unshed tears. This was what he had wanted, wasn’t it? He could do this; Loki could do this.

‘But who is “Loki”? Who am I? Asgardian or Jotun? God or monster? Beloved son or stolen relic?’

“I wasn’t lying when I said you look tons better. You’ve come really far. Just give it more time. So you don’t look like a bodybuilder right now. It isn’t the end of the world, Hercules. Things will get better.” Stark’s words rang clear and honest, a sharp contrast to the subtle jibes Loki has long been accustomed to. He welcomed that change, even if the rest of the world wasn’t making much sense right now. “Now come on, walk with me.”

He was pulled forwards again, and his brain stuttered at the motion. Had this happened before? He felt like he'd done this before. It felt normal. This was the first time he’s met Stark, but it felt as if he’d known the man for a long time. Stark clearly was used to him, unconsciously shifting to balance Loki as he entered the code to open the door, yet the memories were lost to him. What had happened while he was trapped in his mind? How long has he been here, with this stranger on an even stranger realm, completely defenseless? Was he even safe here?

‘You can’t trust anyone. They’ll turn on you, betray you. They always do. You know that.’

Despite his thoughts, Loki did feel safe. It was a mix of nostalgia and déjà vu, impressions that he couldn’t remember the reason for, but his mind was eased nonetheless. Odious fog made it hard for Loki to focus on anything, and he could not properly defend himself, but Stark had made no move to hurt him or take advantage of his weakness. So Loki followed, trusting the man for now. When he didn’t feel like he was on the cusp of losing his mind, he’d take matters into his own hands. But for now… it was nice not having to struggle alone.

They climbed the stairs, and Loki had to drag his body forward, hating himself more and more with each stumble. Stark stayed close by, helping to keep from slipping down the steps, but he otherwise let Loki find his own limits. The gesture was appreciated, though Loki wished it wasn't necessary. He despised how such a simple task was so hard. It made his limbs tremble, lungs heave, and bones
burn. Constant pain was his companion.

He wished he knew what had happened when he first came here. There were snippets, but so much was missing to him. If only the Aesir could see him now: they'd see what weakness really looks like. Or maybe they had always seen, and that’s why they shunned him.

“What would you like to eat?” Stark asked as he guided Loki to a chair. He went to rifle through the cabinets, leaving his guest to sit obediently. The man didn't wait for a reply before he continued talking. “I'm not really in the mood for cooking something, and you probably won't be able to wait that long, so how about a smoothie? Everyone loves smoothies.”

Loki’s depression was persistent, dark thoughts and merciless fog beating him down, but the mindless chatter redirected him. It wasn’t much, yet it was easier to ignore the black inside as he watched Tony pour some juice and frozen fruit into a glass container. The machine was unfamiliar, and he felt the faint stirring of curiosity. It was Midgardian technology: novel, interesting, nonthreatening. There were no emotional strings attached.

He turned away from Stark (it had been so long since Loki had willingly turned his back to a stranger. He couldn’t decide if this was an improvement or a mistake) to observe the rest of the house. It was refreshingly different from Asgard. Tony Stark was clearly wealthy, as his house was outlandishly spacious, but it lacked the constant gold of the palace. Instead, it was ostentatious in more subtle ways. There was expensive looking furniture in every room, large pieces of artwork on the walls, and a fountain by the stairwell.

But the grandiosity of the design was overtaken by what he was sure was supposed to be an endearing feature. The windows, however, did nothing but make Loki feel confined and threatened. They were on each outward facing wall, overlooking the ocean and the sky. Blue stretched as far as the eye could see. So much time had passed since he had seen anything besides the black, but the picturesque sight lacked the expected awe; all it did was fill him with fear. It was too blue.

Rancid memories plagued his mind. Born of glances out a window ('Afraid of a color?' his mind hissed. 'You’re a joke.') the reminiscence made his skin itch and his lungs burn. His past haunted his mind, festering within him. “I’m not your brother. I never was!”

He forced himself to turn away, unwillingly to be drawn into the past. Stark walked over a moment later, setting a thick, bright purple drink in front of him. Loki just stared it, unsure. When was the last time he had eaten? His stomach constantly ached with hunger, but that pain had long since been expected. This was not.

His host had no such inhibitions, happily slurping down his drink across from Loki. “You know you can't eat it by staring at it, right? Just try it. You'll like it a lot more than tube feeding, trust me. I even gave you a bendy straw.” The man reached across the table to push the drink closer to the god, and Loki sluggishly lifted an arm to grab the glass. Wary, he brought the drink towards his lips, mimicking Stark and using the 'bendy straw'.

All Loki took was one quick sip, and the world slipped out from beneath him. It was like getting run over by a bilgesnipe, fast and furious. Mind moored in confusion, it took him another moment to realize that exotic flavors were coating his tongue, feeling more like he had swallowed burning coals instead of a cold drink.

“-should have thought about that. Stupid. Stupid! Oh yeah, haven’t eaten anything for God knows how long? Been sensory deprived? Let’s just throw a smoothie at you! It’ll be fine. Totally not a terrible idea-”
When Loki finally managed to push past the overload, the drink was nowhere in sight. In its place was Stark, guilt plastered on his face. “You alright? I’m so sorry about that. I hadn’t thought… I’ll remember that next time. Would you like some water? There’s nothing plainer than that.”

He didn’t remember Stark getting up, but a moment later, there was another glass in front of him, this one filled with clear water. He blinked at it a few times before his brain clicked back into place. Cautiously, he drank from the glass. When nothing happened, he started drinking faster, forcing shaking hands to cooperate. Cold liquid slid down his ragged throat, soothing his pain for the first time in a long time.

The water was gone far too quickly, and Loki considered throwing the cup on the ground and demanding more. But while the cool liquid soothed the searing inside of him, it had made him nauseous. Just as his mind was unaccustomed to his new surroundings, so was his body. Loathe as Loki was to admit it, there were limits now. Making himself violently ill would not be productive for anyone.

“-guess that’s good enough for now. Jarvis, order some bland foods please. Healthy and bland. Shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

He thought he heard another voice, one that wasn’t Stark, but it sounded distant and fuzzy. The words didn’t click in his mind, if they were even there at all. Everything around him seemed to be moving slowly, as if the world was submerged in tar. Sound and sight were distorted, blotchy, and near indecipherable. Just trying to think, let alone tell what Stark was saying, took far more effort than it should.

“-hard to talk, but if you can manage, there’s a few things I’d like to know. If writing would be easier, we could also try that. I just want to ask you some questions.”

When the words computed, Loki felt his heart sink. That was it? Pleasantries were over, and the interrogation could begin? ‘I’m not ready to think about it. Please don’t ask me about it.’ But Loki owed this man, and if he wanted answers, then Loki was obligated to supply them.

Mustering his mind, he breathed in deeply and let the influx of oxygen reassure him. Then he shifted to make himself appear more confident than he was. It was just talking; he could do this. “What… do you want… to know?” he rasped, his throat rough despite the drink.

Stark crossed his fingers and rested his chin on top of them, elbows rested firmly on the table. Loki studied his expression intently, trying to organize his thoughts enough to figure this man out. Who was he, and could Loki trust his life to him? Not that he could do anything about it if the man was a threat. He’d soon fade away, vulnerable and open.

The man’s expression was serious, but he smiled softly, disarmingly. Loki recognized the look, having worn it many times before. It was charismatic: a calculated blend of emotions. He was the God of Lies; he knew masks like the back of his hands. Stark couldn’t hide behind false sincerity. But to Loki’s surprise, Stark wasn’t hiding ill will as he’d automatically come to expect. Lying under the neutral smile was concern, like Stark knew how hard it was to have people pity you when you didn’t want them to. Nothing in his body language conveyed any malice.

“Well, your name would definitely be a good place to start. I ran out of clever things to call you in the first week.”

Name. He could do that (as long as he didn’t require the family name. Odinson or Laufeyson? Loki still didn’t know). “Loki… I am Loki.”
Stark’s eyebrows shoot up, and Loki realized he recognized the name. But before the Norse god could panic (what had he heard? Would he not want to help Loki anymore? Did he realize now that he was taking care of a monster?) the man replied, “Cool. So, God of Mischief? Pretty impressive title. Makes sense though. There has been plenty of chaos lately…”

Then he muttered something about ‘damn horses in the kitchen’ and ‘lion is his fucking bedroom’, and Loki thought that should mean something to him, but he couldn’t remember what. “So speaking of animals, not knowing how you do it has been killing me. Magic, right? But it doesn’t make sense. Shape-shifting is not scientifically possible.”

Magic? Not… anything else? Loki couldn’t accept that the man didn’t want to know more. He was a stranger in his home, and there was nothing keeping him from harming Tony if he chose. Not that he had any desire to, but it was the fact that he could that mattered. Were it his life that was exposed in such a way, he’d have interrogated his guest as soon as he could to ascertain whether or not they were a threat. This man was too trusting, letting a monster into his home without protection.

When he got no reply (it was so hard for Loki to talk, to make sense of things), Stark kept babbling, leaving Loki struggling to keep up. “…analyzed it, but it’s just mass from nothing. So does that mean magic is related to gamma radiation, because…that’d be pretty cool, actually. Is that possible? I…can humans teleport? Or is that something special? A teleporting machine would be…”

Volume fluctuating, Loki grasped onto the bits he could hear. To try and keep his brain from failing, he started forcing himself to answer the questions, even if he couldn’t manage it out loud. And that was when things went wrong. Loki began to answer the question of teleportation—because he did know. He’d studied the conversion of magical abilities to Midgardian science for over a century, and he was regarded (at least by people other than the warriors of Asgard) as an expert in rewriting magic into physics—when he abruptly realized that he didn’t know. He should have, but where that knowledge had once been was now empty space. It was gone.

Everything came to a screeching halt. What else was he missing? He knew the basics of magic and known technology... and then he realized that that was it. He knew the basics, things he had reviewed for almost his whole life and knew almost as well as his name. But all those details he prided himself on, the things that made him stand apart as a scholar in the Nine Realms, were gone.

“Loki? Um, hey, dude, are you slipping again?”

Completely forgetting that Stark had been talking, that there was even an outside world at all, Loki scanned the contents of his brain. The fog resisted his efforts, but he tore past it. It was his mind. He had to know. Spells? Only the ones he had used often. History? Even less remained of that than his arcane repertoire. Physics? Chemistry? Those were the things that he had studied last, and he couldn't remember but the simplest of formulas.

He had been able to ignore how weak he had become—simple conversations winded him, his muscles shook from holding him up, and he still could not bring himself to look out the window—because he had been secure in the knowledge that his essence, his intellect, was still in tact. That if he breached the fog, a vast wealth of knowledge, rivaled by no other, was open to him. With his intelligence, Loki was still Loki; still able to craft spells and plots and bend the world to his whims.

But he saw now that he had been wrong. His mental archives, treasured more deeply than all the riches in the universe, had gone up in flames. They burned utterly and completely, and all the remained were gaping spaces.

Horrified at his realization, Loki’s mind stumbled, and the fog that had been lurking surged forwards to exploit the opening. Black was everywhere, clawing at him. It wanted him, to destroy and violate
him. Insatiable, it flooded his lungs, ridding them of air. Breathe… He couldn’t breathe. Consuming, devouring black overtook everything.

“-just calm down, it's okay. Breathe. What's wrong? Was it something I said? Come on, you have to talk to me…”

He was back in the void, lost and desperate. There was no way out, no way to free himself. Falling, forever, never to hit the bottom. Descending into an odious abyss, darkness dragging him farther and farther from the light. But he was never going to die. He wanted to die.

“Please, look at me. I know you're in there somewhere. I won’t talk about magic anymore if you don’t want to. We can go down to my labs. Dum-E will be thrilled to meet you, I'm sure. Or I can show you my suit. It's really awesome... Come on, just say something. Loki, please.”

A voice… Again there was a voice fighting against the black, pulling at his mind and urging him away from the fire. It beckoned, pleaded. He wanted to follow, but at the same time, he didn't want to do anything. Beneath his masks, Loki was blue: both in flesh and in mind. Had he succeeded in killing himself that day, it would not have been a mistake. The mistake laid in his survival. Were Loki not so impulsive, he'd have waited to do it right the first time.

But he wasn't dead, and he felt arms wrap around his shuddering frame: Stark, once again trying to save him from the beast inside his mind. He could hear his name spoken like a prayer—so long has it been since it actually was—and the continuous effort to cajole him out from where he had retreated. Depression warred inside him, armed with the scars left from the void, and Loki finally made his call.

Lungs decaying inside his chest, it was agony to get out one simple plea. “Distraction… I- I need a distraction… something else to think about.” Or he’d decide that he didn't want to live, and he'd surrender everything. Loki—the Loki who was not broken and wracked with despair, who had loved and had been loved—didn't know what he wanted, but it certainly wasn't that. It never should have been that.

“Distraction?” the man parroted. “Good, I can do that. One god-sized distraction coming right up.”

Loki tried to pay attention to the world outside of his head as Stark grabbed his arm and pulled him onto unsteady legs. It only took him a few steps before he realized that it'd take too long, and from the way his body was protesting, Loki wouldn't be surprised if he ended up collapsing on the way. Taking a guess as to their destination—the room that reeked of metal and oil—he dug his heels in while grabbing the other man's hand. Brown eyes turned questioningly towards him just before green enveloped them. He closed his eyes as space distorted around him, and when they opened, he was met with an organized mess of machines.

“Did you just...?” Tony must have caught Loki's desperate expression, because he trailed off and, instead of getting sidetracked by his first experience teleporting, led the god forwards. “I was going to save it for last, but there's no point starting small, I guess. Jarvis, get the lights and bring them up.”

Lights turned on overhead, and a section of the floor split open to reveal gleaming red and gold. Loki flinched at the color choice, but he kept his gaze on the metal men, waiting for Stark to do something, anything, to chase away the panic.

“These are my Iron Man suits. There's nothing else like them since no one is smart enough to make one of these bad boys.” Stark tapped proudly on his chest, producing a metallic thunk instead of the hollow thump of bone. Only then did Loki notice the glowing triangle that shone through the thick fabric of the man's shirt. “It's a miniaturized arc reactor. I'll tell you more about it later. Right now, let's get one of these guys up. Jarvis, prepare Mark Seventeen for a test run.”
'Please hurry,' Loki thought. 'I can’t fight it off much longer. I don’t… I don’t want to fall anymore. Please don’t let me fall.'

“Of course, sir,” a voice intoned out of nowhere, the same one Loki thought he had heard earlier. Someone else was there? That couldn’t be; he hadn’t noticed anyone else. He would have noticed, wouldn’t he? Loki’s muscles tensed. Who else was there?

Stark seemed to realize the problem and quickly rushed to fix his misconception. “Oh, no, that’s just Jarvis. He’s a computer. Sorry, I forgot you haven't actually met Jarvis. It’s okay. He's an AI that runs the house. Jarvis, meet Loki. Loki, Jarvis. And…” He paused and peered around the room. “Dum-E should be somewhere around here. Don’t worry, Dum-E’s a robot, too.”

Assured that no one was going to come upon him while he was defenseless, Loki tried to get his limbs to unlock and his mind to focus on Tony, who was telling him about the suits again. The man chatted ceaselessly while the suit farthest left was pulled apart by a variety of mechanical arms. Loki did his best to pay attention even though he could feel himself slipping through the cracks wrought by the void.

“One sec. Let me get this thing on.” The man stepped on a small platform beside where the armor was stored, and Loki watched as the metal pieces were fixed onto his body. It was very different from armor on Asgard, though it did remind him of the Destroyer. But the differences were strong enough that Loki felt more intrigued than unnerved, and Stark’s distraction was working. Eventually it wouldn’t, but for now, it gave him something to focus on.

When the last piece clicked in place, Tony did a few test stretches before grinning and jumping from the platform. “Let’s go to the garage. You can keep Dum-E from dousing me while I give you a tour of the suit's abilities.”

Walking alone proved to be more than he could handle, so Stark grabbed his arm and started guiding his steps, supplying Loki with a constant stream of information. The god didn’t notice they had crossed the room until a metallic gleam caught his eye, drawing his attention to the machine rolling over towards them. It stopped directly in front of him, nearly touching him. Loki struggled to not flinch, especially when it grasped the sleeve of his loose shirt and tugged on it.

Stark seemed unconcerned, however, and laid a supporting hand on Loki’s shoulder. “This is Dum-E. He’s gotten pretty attached to you. Trust me, he won’t hurt you.” Then he turned to address the robot. “Why don’t you take him over to your usual spot? Then you can keep an eye on him and not the fire extinguisher.” Apparently this deal pleased 'Dummy', and when Stark relinquished his hold on Loki, the robot pulled more insistently.

Loki didn’t want to leave Stark’s side. The man had become his lifeline, whether he wanted to admit it or not. Reassuring touches and soothing whispers were all that kept him sane as his world went up in smoke. But at the same time, he had to trust the man, and if Stark wanted him to follow the robot...

After a few more tugs on his arm, Loki clamped down on his indecision and let himself be led away, though he glanced back to check that Stark was still there. The man smiled at him, making no move to abandon him in the garage. He waited until Loki was corralled into the corner and had taken a seat before starting his demonstration.

The god knew he didn’t have much time left, but this was exactly what he needed. As he watched Tony demonstrate the missile system and try out a new feature (a cloaking device that he accidentally destroyed while attempting a forward roll), he felt calmer.

Drifting in and out of focus, Loki promised himself that later, when it wasn't so hard to think clearly
and his guts didn't twist with irrational terror, he'd try to build something with this man. His knowledge may be missing, but that didn't mean he couldn't learn it again.

“I think that's all I can show you without destroying the house, and while I'm normally all for that, I'm trying to not make Pepper mad at me. Oh, I know, why don't we~”

-o-o-o-

“-go flying! It's like having free airfare, and I can show you some of the cooler parts of Earth. Well, California mostly, since...” Tony trailed off as he finally looked over to where his guest—Loki—was sitting. “Aaaannd you've cut out again. Alright, well, I'll just ask you next time.”

He sighed, slumping over as he finally let his stress show. Not that he wasn't happy. Loki finally talking and reacting to his surroundings was amazing, and Tony was ecstatic about that part. It was the other part, the fear and zoning out, that he was concerned about. The other man had remained tense for the duration of their interaction, and the more tense he got, the less awareness he had.

Though Tony had chosen not to ask, he desperately wanted to know what had happened to Loki. The only thing he knew about the god was that he—or at least someone with the same name, but he doubted it was anyone different—had been involved in the Destroyer incident seven years ago. Which meant that in seven years, he had gone from wreaking havoc on Earth to... this. Slumped over in a chair, eyes half closed and gazing at nothing. Frail and defenseless, completely at the mercy of those around him. The man before Tony wasn't anyone's idea of a god.

But he was Loki, the person Tony had spent two months helping, and would probably spend a lot more with. Surprisingly, Tony found that he wasn't bothered by the idea. It was commitment, and everyone knew he shied away from that, whether it be showing up to board meetings on time or having a steady relationship. This, though, this was like being Iron Man: he did it because it was his duty.

Even if he wasn't trying to honor the memory of Yinsen, talking to Loki and actually seeing the person inside the shell made him certain that this was the right thing to do.

The last few hours found Tony unwittingly comparing himself to Loki, and the similarities were there: masks to hide their unease, the need for something to distract them for a bit. It was like looking in the mirror. Maybe when the god recovered those qualities would change and Tony would find himself a fool for seeing himself in a stranger, but for now, the parallels were there.

“Jarvis, prep the dock. Play time is over.” Tony headed over to Loki and Dum-E, chuckling as the robot tried shoving the slipping body upright again. When he reached them, he shooed Dum-E out of the way and lifted the man. “It was nice talking to you, you know.” He glanced down towards empty eyes. “Hopefully next time you'll be able to say more.”

Because Tony didn't doubt that there'd be a next time, or a time after that. Loki proved that he could win over the darkness in his mind if he tried; all Tony had to do was make sure he kept trying. Whether it be tomorrow or in a week, Loki would return, and Tony would be waiting to guide him from whatever dark cave his mind found itself in. He'd lead him through the smoke and the fire, and even a small step was one step closer to the blue sky.
Can Demons be Killed?

"Pay no mind what other voices say,
They don't care about you,
Like I do.
Safe from pain, and truth, and choice,
And other poison devils.
See they don't give a fuck about you,
Like I do.

Just stay with me,
Safe and ignorant.
Go back to sleep.
Go back to sleep."

-Pet by A Perfect Circle

-o-o-o-

He was suffocating. There was no air to fill his lungs; there wasn't anything. Tossed and turned by dark waves, he was completely lost. There was no direction as he drowned. He was helpless to do anything but curl up tight, desperately wishing for the storm to cease. It didn't. From the darkness came beasts, invisible but tactile. They touched his arm with grasping, crooked hands and dragged him down. He lashed out, mindlessly, frightfully, every part of him screaming to be let go—every part but his mouth, because he couldn't get enough oxygen in his lungs to make a single sound.

“-can't we do this another time? I'm in the middle of something here!”

“Whatever you are doing is not more important than stopping the rampage of a madman! Get over there now!”

“Just give me a bit, I can't-”

Fulgurate voices flashed in his ears, but he could not comprehend the words. All he could understand were the angry tones; he wasn't safe here. Then sharp claws dug into him again, and suddenly air flooded his fluttering lungs. With it, he screamed: loud and high and desperate.

“God damn it!” The monster released him, but the dam had already broken. A piercing wail continued forth from his lips, nearly smothering the yelling of the furious beasts.

“Stark, what was that?”

“Can you just shut up for a moment, Fury? You aren't helping!”

It was cacophony, and a tentative touch only made him louder.

“Sir, it looks like you are not helping either. I would suggest giving him some space. Let yourself calm down. You aren't thinking clearly.”

“Stark, I demand you tell me what is going on!”

“Jarvis, turn that damn phone off!”
The shouting cut out, leaving only his steady keen to fill the room. He couldn't stop now that he had started. It was his only defense against the void that consumed his very being. The only thing that he had control over inside this rancid veil of black. For a few minutes, there was nothing but his dwindling wail. He felt his pounding heart start to slow as nothing reached for him again. He dared to hope that they had lost interest in him.

When one of the voices spoke again, quiet and tentative, he was calm enough that his wailing didn't pick up again, but his entire body tensed. He was prepared to fight if he had to.

“I don't... What am I suppose to do? He won't let me touch him, but I don't... He's hurting himself.”

“Maybe you should leave, sir. You have your duties as Iron Man to tend to, and I can monitor Loki while you are gone.”

“But, Jarvis-”

“Sir, I insist that staying here will not benefit either of you at the moment.”

“...If anything changes, you let me know immediately. I don't care how small of a detail, you tell me.”

“Of course, sir.”

“...Prep the suit.”

All that remained was Loki and the darkness.

-o-o-o-

“Sir, the device was successfully deployed and is now ready for activation.”

“Roger that. Wait until I get it within twenty feet of the ground to turn it on.” Tony shuttled across the sky, twisting and weaving out of the range of electric bursts. Following in his wake came another metallic man, this one silver instead of gold. It raced after Iron Man, carelessly plowing down buildings in pursuit as it was lured towards the ground. They went lower and lower, into the smoke and fire. Fifty feet, forty feet, thirty feet. Twenty.

“Now Jarvis!”

The HUD lit up as the AI complied. According to his calculations, the Doombot should be shutting down about... now.

Tony had begun to slow down, confident in his machine, when Jarvis suddenly shouted a warning. Twisting sharply, Iron Man was barely able to avoid getting electrocuted when the still active Doombot fired from right behind him. Tony swore and put the repulsors back up to speed.

“Yo, Jarv, what's the deal? It isn't working!” As if to emphasize his statement, the automaton tried to hit him again. “Hey, cut that out back there!”

“I don't know what went wrong, sir. All reports show that it is working.”

“Well it clearly isn't!” If this model of 'All Your Base Are Belong to Us' didn't work, that meant Tony had wasted two months. It also meant that he came all the way out here for nothing; he could have been back home where he was needed.

When he had left Loki, the god was curled up in the corner, crying, terrified, and lost to reality. He
was haunted by the demons inside of his mind and had made that hideous wailing noise, as if he is being ripped apart by the very hounds of Hell. Not even Tony's presence had calmed him.

“Having technical difficulties, Stark? And here I thought you were the king of the nerds,” a taunting voice said, partly distracting Tony from his brooding. Not that hearing about his failure was much better.

“Shut up,” he growled, and Barton laughed, though Tony knew the archer wanted to device to work just as much as he had.

Swearing under his breath, Tony got ready to turn around. If the machine wasn't working—which it should have. There hadn’t been any errors when he tested it in the lab, and he refused to admit to anyone, especially himself, that Victor von Third-person could out engineer him—he needed to destroy the robot and move on.

However, as he spun around with his palm raised, the Doombot suddenly froze. Its jets shuddered once, twice, and then it plummeted into the concrete below. Metal plating shot off at impact, but it had been close enough to the ground that it was still in one piece. Or it would be, if it didn't detonate once Doom realized one of his robots was compromised.

Iron Man waited with baited breath to see if it would explode, because shutting it down meant nothing if they couldn't take it apart. If it didn't go off in the next minute, then that would be a clear indication that Mr. Metal couldn’t make it. He’d never willingly allow SHIELD to get their hands on one of his creations.

After the allotted amount of time passed and the robot did not erupt into a suicidal inferno, Tony finally allowed himself to whoop triumphantly. “Oh yeah, baby! The Doombot has been neutralized! Feel free to come get it and celebrate my awesomeness.”

Iron Man was about to return to the sky when two silver forms blinked onto the HUD. Tony grinned, momentarily high off of scientific accomplishment, and rose to meet the threat. A blast from his right repulsor sent one of the bots careening into a building. He twisted out of the way of the other one, preparing to shoot it as it followed him, but it flew right past him.

Confused, Tony stared at it, half expecting for it to turn around and fire at him with a big 'just kidding'. It kept going, and when he checked for any nearby civilians or objects of interest, there was nothing there but the fallen Doombot... And Tony was an absolute moron. He had just thought to himself that Doom would never allow one of his custom robots to be captured.

Aim not yet locked, Tony released the pent up energy. The shot fired wide, and the Doombot ignored him as it prepared to fire at the grounded bot. The machine's hand glowed blue, a close resemblance to one of Tony’s own attacks, and Iron Man cursed his foolishness. His trick was a one time deal, and he just ruined it.

The robot's blue glow suddenly sputtered, and it swerved to the right before tumbling into the sidewalk. “Come on, Stark. Get your head in the game. That was classic villainy trick number one,” Hawkeye jested over the intercom, and Tony scowled at the arrow protruding from the felled machine.

Iron Man shot back into the sky, making sure to flip off the small figure at the corner of a nearby rooftop. Barton smirked back and continued scouting the area from his perch.

“My sector is clear. How are things by you, Natasha?” he asked, all traces of insolence gone from his voice. Of course. Why was everyone rude to just Tony?
“My area is clear,” Romanov replied calmly. “All Doombots are accounted for, and agents are on
their way over to pick up the compromised one. After it's secure, we’re done here.”

Tony didn’t know whether to be envious of her perpetual poise, or if he should be glad that he at
least was capable of a variety of emotions. She was like a statue. He’d say machine, but his robots at
home had more expression than her. As far as Tony was concerned, she and Barton moved to
whatever tune Fury was playing and nothing more. He did like working with them more than
Captain America, at least. The assassins mostly ignored Tony when they worked together, making
him feel like a third wheel in their… whatever their relationship was. It still wasn’t fun. Then again,
he supposed being a hero wasn’t meant to be fun.

Sometimes he wondered if the bad guys enjoyed their job more than he did, or if they had to deal
with the nagging of their fellow evildoers. Maybe he should ask the next baddie they fight, check if
he should be looking for a career change. Not that he actually would. He had enough blood on his
hands without going and looking for more. Working with the ‘Avengers’ wasn’t even that bad…
Okay, no, Rogers really was that bad.

“So how was my performance? I think I got a solid nine. You two probably got fours. No, actually,
Big Bird was a one today,” Tony gloated into the silence, and once he finished speaking, he realized
that people were probably always rude to him because he dished it out first. Oh well. It wasn't his
fault if they didn't know how to have fun.

“Stark, you're delusional if you think that train wreck deserved anything above a three.” Barton
returned. “And I definitely got better than a one. Without me, your lapse in attention would have
ruined the whole mission.”

True, but Tony thought that he was doing a good job staying focused considering that there was a
god suffering from a panic attack in his garage. And since Fury called at an inopportune time, he
now had to come up with a legitimate excuse as to why someone was screaming bloody murder in
his house. Maybe Fury would think that he had been watching a movie? A realistic, engaging movie.
Or, better yet, he'd forget the entire incident and Tony could just not worry about it.

“Speaking of which, Director Fury wants to know what was happening when he called you,”
Romanov cut in smoothly, like she wasn't saying something that could screw everything up. Tony
was so glad the suit's mask hide his expression. Without the barrier, he knew the spies would have
no problem extracting the information they needed from the length of his eyelashes or something
crazy like that. Still, they didn't need a visual to be effective, but Tony would be damned if he
messed this up and compromised Loki's safety.

“I didn't know what you mean, sweetheart.” He tried to keep his voice as casual as possible even
though it was an obvious lie.

“Stark,” Romanov warned, “That wasn't a suggestion. Fury demands an answer.”

Just as Tony was about to give her the movie excuse (or maybe say he was doing some intense role-
playing?), Jarvis spoke up on the private speaker. “Sir, there has been a change in the condition of
your guest.”

Tony felt his stomach clench. That could go one of two ways, and it normally was the undesirable
one. “Good change or bad change?”

But Jarvis's reply assuaged his fears, and Tony felt like he could breathe again. “Good change, sir.
Loki is now aware of his surroundings and has asked me for an update.”
“Alright. Now reopen the main line.” He wanted to know more, but there was another conversation waiting for him. “I’m sorry, beautiful. Jarvis just had an important update about my lovely device down there. What were you saying?”

Tony could hear Romanov hesitate as she tried to decide whether or not to pursue Fury's line of questioning or figure out if there was something she should know about the AYBABTU. Finally, she picked the priority. “Is there something wrong with the device? If it poses a risk to SHIELD agents, we need to know.”

Going to press conferences and dealing with Stark Industry's board has made Tony an expert at coming up with stories on the fly, and he had no problem implementing that skill. “It looks like the EMP was damaged in the drop, and it isn't going to last the expected twelve hours. I'm not sure how much longer it has, so the robot needs to be dismantled and secured as soon as possible unless you want it to explode in someone's face.”

It wasn't a complete lie (Tony really wasn't sure if the device would last as long as he expected), and it'd force Romanov to divert her attention if she wanted to make sure the Doombot wasn't going to wreak havoc on SHIELD.

Over the line, Tony could hear Romanov as she shouted for people to back away from the robot unless they were absolutely necessary in moving it. He directed himself towards where the SHIELD agents were congregated, and his HUD showed that Romanov was occupied relaying the information. Tony smirked at his success.

“Well, it looks like you guys are all busy now, so I guess I'll get going. Unlike you two, I happen to live on the other side of the country and would like to get home sometime today.”

Both Romanov and Barton started protesting, but Tony had Jarvis cut the line, and his helmet filled with silence. Checking once more that the area was clear (no reason to let his darling project get ruined because he was impatient and didn't follow protocol), Iron Man put his repulsors on max and wasted no time getting out of there.

He wasn't lying when he said it took a while to get home. Commuting between the East Coast and his Californian home was a pain, and preferably, he would stay in Stark Tower to handle superhero affairs. However, leaving Loki alone in Malibu while he was away in New York wasn't an option. An unstable god left alone for a week sounded like a very bad idea.

Once Tony was far enough from New York that there wasn't a risk of his communications system being hacked (he didn't doubt that they'd try, since he dangled a bone in front of them and they'd not be a master spying organization otherwise), he finally asked the questions that had been eating at him. “How is he really, Jarvis? What's he doing right now?”

“Loki is currently in the process of reading. He seems relatively calm, though he is a bit restless. Would you like a visual, sir?”

“Yeah, that'd be good.”

Tony felt like a stalker when an image of his lab came on the HUD, but in this situation, obsessive monitoring wasn't unfounded. His eyes locked on Loki, who was curled up in a chair with one hand flipping the pages of a book and the other clutching at Dum-E. The robot hovered close to the god like a guardian angel, and Loki was holding onto him like he was a lifeline.

At least the god was actually flipping through the book and not blankly staring at it. Because Tony couldn’t keep his guest distracted all the time, even if he wanted too, he’d taken to having the man
read whatever books he had lying around. Loki had accepted the diversion easily, and read any time he wasn’t interacting with Tony or, on rare occasion, sleeping. He sometimes had his nose in a book while eating or walking through the hallways. Not that the engineer minded, since it was better than the alternative (blank eyes, panicked breathing, frightened screams), but it did mean that his sparse collection he had run out in only a few days.

Seeing as how Loki liked to write in the books as he flipped through, Tony ordered over a hundred printed copies in multiple subjects that he thought his guest would enjoy. Though a sad side effect of the man’s habit was that now some of Tony’s thousand dollar, limited edition texts had indecipherable scrawls all over the margins (and by indecipherable, he didn’t mean bad handwriting. The god actually wrote in some form of old Norse mixed with runes, making a mess of symbols that even Jarvis couldn’t wade through.). Loki even crossed entire sections out, disagreeing with whatever theory was presented and not finding it worthy to grace the pages.

But the books did their job, and anything that kept Loki grounded for longer was a good thing. Though Tony knew they wouldn't work forever; while the god might be content to sit and recover for now, he was bound to get agitated, and Tony would have to think of something better.

Loki himself was... better than Tony had been expecting. Dark shadows clung to his eyes, standing out on his pale face, and the god's fingers dug into Dum-E as if he was lost in a storm and the robot was the only thing keeping him ashore. The hand resting on the book twitched while he read, spasmodically clenching into a fist like he was preparing for a fight. Loki seemed haunted, constantly pursued by the monsters in his head, but he wasn't in their grasp at the moment. Tony could see the stress and hollow despair written in Loki's every move, yet the violent terror and unyielding blankness was gone for now.

“Do you think he'll be okay until I come home?”

“Sir, he has been improving over the past few hours. By that pattern, he should be fine unless something happens to set him back.” Which sounded easy enough to avoid, but so many things aggravated that bag of cats inside Loki's brain. Darkness, silence, and the color blue were just the most common triggers that Tony ran into.

“Make sure nothing does. Tell him I'll be back in a few hours.” Tony waited just long enough to see his message delivered (Loki relaxed more, and his lips moved as he replied to Jarvis) before turning off the display.

He flew another hundred miles before Jarvis informed him of an incoming call, and a picture of Pepper popped onto the screen. Tony smiled. “Put her through.” He waited until he heard the telltale click of the line connecting before continuing, “Hey, how's my favorite assistant? What can I do for ya this evening, darling?”

“Hello to you too, Tony,” came Pep's sweet voice, and Tony was pleased to note that she didn't sound stressed this evening. An unfortunate side effect of putting her in charge of Stark Industries, as well as having her keep her job as his 'personal babysitter', was that she was often overworked. She still did an amazing job, though. “I was calling to ask if you wanted me to bring you dinner, but it sounds like you're not home.”

She definitely wasn't stressed if she was actually offering to bring him food. Too bad he had to turn the offer down. “Yeah, sorry about that. I won't be home for at least another hour. If you already have the food, you can just drop it off and I'll eat it when I get back. Or you could see if Loki wants any, since he's awake.”

“Tony, we've been over this. As much as you trust him, I'm not going to go in the house alone with
him.” He could hear the frown in her voice, but he didn't want to completely let the matter go. It had been over two months since Loki first spoke, and Pepper still had reservations about him.

“Then how about you come over tomorrow morning with some breakfast. If he's not down the rabbit hole by then, you can actually talk to him. I'm telling you, he's not going to try and try and murder you. Besides, Jarvis would be looking out for you.”

Pepper sighed. They'd had this discussion many times since Tony let the strange man into his home. She wasn't convinced, however. “I'll come over with food in the morning, alright?”

“Sure thing. We'll probably be hanging out in the lab, so just come and get us.”

She laughed. “You say it like that's a surprise. I'd be more concerned if you said you'd be sleeping in your room.”

Tony smiled. He had missed this easy relationship with Pep. Between him risking his life, her working hard to keep the company afloat, and all the dumb things he has done these past few years, their relationship had become strained. Talking started to become a rarity, replaced instead by vicious arguments and tense silences. Yet in the past few months, things seemed to be going right between them. He had forgotten how much he needed her friendship, how much she meant in his life.

“I'll see you tomorrow then,” she said. “Don't blow yourself up in the meantime.”

Tony scowled playfully even though she couldn't see it. “That was one time. Sheesh, cross the wires once and no one lets you live it down.”

They both laughed, and why did he ever try and ruin this?

“Good night, Tony.”

“Good night.”

The line went dead, but on a good note—unlike before, where it signaled the end of an argument—and Tony was left alone in the sky.

-o-o-o-

It was over an hour before Tony came into view of his house (he still couldn’t shake the apprehension he now felt whenever he got close, like someone else was going to fall out of the sky). By the time he landed, the sun was already setting, meaning he had once again spent the entire day away from home. He had intended to spend the day with Loki, but Fury's call had ruined that.

He was home now, though, and there was no reason to delay when Loki needed him. Tony bypassed the landing pad on his roof and went into the garage. When he reached the glass door separating the cars from his sanctuary, he could see the top of Loki’s head from where the god was nestled in the large plush chair (Tony had bought heavily padded chairs for the god since hard chairs had made him extremely uncomfortable when he was a walking skeleton. Even now, Loki preferred things that were soft, probably because they were easier on his sense of touch).

Smiling softly, Tony punched in the access code. Music drifted in through the open door, quiet and unhurried; he has heard more classical music in the past few weeks than he has in his entire life.

Tony took a loud, clanking step, and green eyes immediately swerved from the word laden pages to Iron Man’s golden mask. He tried to not focus too much on the sheer relief evident in those eyes, instead casually strolling (or at least as casual as one could while walking in a hundred million dollar
metal suit) through the room to stand beside Loki. The mask slid upward as he leaned over the back
of the chair to peer at the textbook on the god’s lap. “How far did you get this time? And you know,
I’m pretty sure you have the Guinness World Record on speed reading beat by a mile.”

It was best to act normal around Loki when the god was aware, to not highlight his shortcomings.
Loki tried really, really hard to act as if nothing was wrong, and Tony wasn’t going to mess that up
for him. At least, not until Loki was more stable.

“I... Midgard’s theories about physics are fascinating, even though they are lacking.” Loki closed
the book he was reading and stood swiftly, graceful in his movements despite the weakness that lingered
in his limbs. Tony straightened as well, amused at his guests imperious attitude. Normally such
impertinence would aggravate him (unless he was the source of it), but in this case, it was heartening;
Loki only acted high and mighty when he was feeling relatively normal. It was when the other man
was polite and timid that Tony knew a mental fit was imminent.

“Hey now, we can't all be magic wizards with an intimate understanding of the universe.”

Tony had finally gotten that talk about magic he was looking for, and it had made him realize how
little humans actually knew. Loki had explained the difference between the Nine Realms and
Midgard, how the realms existed in a separate plane of existence than the space Earth was a part of.
Midgard was connected to the other realms by Yggdrasil, making it a crucial pathway between actual
galaxies and their metaphysical kingdoms. The magic Loki and other spellcasters used came from the
tree, and as such, they could only use a small amount when outside of its influence. Even so, the
energy they harnessed from Yggdrasil was as much science as the technology used on Earth.

At that particular point, Tony had stubbornly insisted that magic wasn't the same as science, as their
laws of physics and matter did not allow for shape-shifting or teleportation. Loki then explained the
Skrull, who lived in Andromeda and could assume the forms of others without magic. As for
teleporting, other galaxies had already mastered that. Earth had a primitive understanding of the
universe compared to other intergalactic civilizations.

“Wait, so you're saying Earth is some back-water dump?” Tony had exclaimed. “Like, all of my
technology is child’s play compared to some aliens’ out there? That’s so not cool.”

Loki’s response hadn't made him feel better about it, either. “You forget that your species is young
and short lived. When you look at it that way, humans have made tremendous progress over the last
millennium and even more in the last century.”

Which basically meant that to everyone else out there, humans were considered babies. But it did
raise a question Tony hadn't even considered before. “If eighty years is considered short... how old
are you, exactly?”

When Loki replied that he was over a thousand years old in the same way someone would say that
they were thirty, it had made Tony really understand how different from humans. Loki was an
alien from a world where turning into a horse was normal and being gutted was just a nuisance.
He had lived longer than Tony could even comprehend, and in that time, he had learned of things
that Tony hadn't even known existed.

(“But there's so much I don't remember. I know I should, but... It's just... It isn't there.” Loki had
confessed once, during a fit—the only time the god ever said anything important about himself.)

Talking to Loki for extended periods of time made something else clear to Tony. When the god's
mind started to decay, he would sometimes stop talking, and a few minutes later, he'd pick up
wherever he had left off as if nothing had happened. Other times, he spoke haltingly or said the
wrong words, like it had been a long time since he actually conversed with anyone. But despite the patchy quality of his speech, it was obvious that the god had known what he was talking about. Loki had been brilliant, and while Tony was no magic guru, he was pretty sure he got one of the most comprehensive Magic 101 courses there was.

Loki interrupted Tony's reflection. “I'm going to need more books soon.” He spoke softly; he always did (at least when he wasn't screaming). “These aren't... sufficient anymore.”

“Sufficient how? They aren't hard enough, or...’ Or they just aren't enough to keep the darkness out of your mind, and you need something else to keep you from going off the deep end?”

“They are... not as helpful as they once were.” And Tony knew then that Loki wasn't talking about the educational content.

“I'll find something better, I promise.” There had to be something that would keep Loki grounded, and Tony would figure out what that was. For now, though, he'd have to stick with the books and hope a change in content would be enough. Maybe he'd throw some Shakespeare in as a joke. If he was lucky, the god would appreciate the lewd humor and gaudy sonnets. Or not, because Loki never smiled at any of Tony's jokes; he didn't smile at anything.

(“Depression,” Pepper had said.)

“You up for helping me a bit? I was planning on finishing the frame for the Mark Forty-Three tonight.” It was a labor intensive job, one Tony normally had Dum-E or the other robots help him on, and it wouldn't compromise the security of his blueprints. However, Tony knew that letting Loki work on the designs would be a far superior distraction than books; it was what he did, after all. But doing so would require trusting Loki with classified information.

Storing the idea in the back of his mind to review later, Tony waited for Loki to make his decision. The god nodded and placed his book on the desk, contributing to the ever-growing pile. Then he turned towards Tony, his hands fidgeting now that they were no longer occupied. “When do we start?”

“Let me take this suit off and we can jump right into it. Jarvis?”

“Already on it, sir.” The landing dock opened up to accept the suit while the displays showed the suit schematics.

Heading over to get the armor removed, Tony realized he was forgetting something important. “Hey Dum-E! Grab me a drink from the fridge!”

Out of the suit and armed with an alcoholic beverage, Tony wasted no time getting to work. He pulled the sheets of gold-titanium alloy out of storage and turned on the welding torch. Loki stood close by, helping with small things and learning how the different tools worked. He caught on quickly, and soon he took over welding some of the simpler pieces while Tony prepped the more complex ones.

The two kept busy late into the night, finishing far more than Tony could have done on his own. The engineer kept an eye on Loki while they worked, in case the god was getting overwhelmed or unengaged, but he seemed fine. More than fine, actually. He didn't seem as stressed, and he maintained focus for a lot longer than he normally did. Were it not for the dead look in Loki's eyes, Tony would have said nothing was even wrong.

Eventually, though, that peace started to fade. Loki began to zone out, and in one instance, Tony had
to lunge across the work table to keep the god from burning himself. But he kept at it, trying to continue even though his mind was working against him. Tony relegated him to making outlines on the sheets of metal so he wouldn't get hurt, but he otherwise let it be.

It wasn't until the god seriously started to falter that Tony put an end to it. It wasn't so much that he wanted Loki to stop working, but that if the god kept it up, he was going to get frustrated. Tony had been watching him for a few minutes (not even trying to be discreet, because Loki didn't have enough attention to realize what he was doing) and Loki's expression got darker and darker each time his hands slipped or his mind wandered. He started muttering to himself, a broken cadence that Tony couldn't understand from where he was standing.

“Hey Loki, it's getting late. Why don't we stop for now?”

Loki looked like he was about to protest, to insist that he was fine and could keep going, but then he slumped in defeat. His fingers knotted themselves in his hair, tugging harshly at the scalp while an angry sound escaped his lips.

Normally Tony tried to maintain distance when Loki was awake, because he knew that the other didn't appreciate being coddled, but before the man could stop himself, he had moved next to Loki. He reached up to pull hands—shaking and still so pale, so gaunt—away from where they were digging into Loki's head. Watery green eyes looked up in surprise and Loki pulled back. Tony shook his head and held on.

'Let me help you,' he wanted to say. 'It's okay to allow others to share the burden.'

But he kept his silence, letting his actions speak for him as he thumbed away the single tear that managed to break free. He stood supportively while Loki pulled himself back together while his mind crumbled inside of his skull.

“I hate it,” Loki whispered suddenly, his fists clenching. “I can... feel it, in my mind. It's like... I don't have control anymore.”

Tony didn't know what to say to that, or whether he was expected to respond at all. But as the silence grew and a few more tears slipped down pale cheeks, he decided he had to say something.

“I'm not going to say it's okay, because it isn't. That's a lie that people try to tell you when they don't want to admit the world isn't all sunflowers and daisies. But you have to believe that one day it will be. If not now, then someday.”

And despite his general pessimism, Tony did believe that to be true. The world moved on, bringing both tragedies and miracles. You just had to walking until the end.

Loki didn't reply, and they stood in companionable silence. Then Tony pulled away, gently nudging Loki towards the stairs. Adopting his usual boisterous tone, Tony asked, “Have you ever seen a movie before? Actually, that was a stupid question. You haven't. Well, better late than never.”

He led his guest to the living room, and on the way, they walked by thick emerald curtains that spanned the walls. Tony missed seeing the ocean, but it had been necessary; Loki had told him that he hated the blue and that it made it harder for him to think. Well... By told, Tony meant that Loki had screamed the equivalent of that in a fit of hysterics, sending a bar stool through one of the glass panes while he was at it. It hadn't been too hard after that to figure out that see-through walls were not going to be suitable.

Pushing Loki into one of the couches, Tony made a quick detour to get a drink before slouching into
the cushion beside the god. “Jarvis, you lead movie night. Pick something decent.”

He poured himself a generous glass of scotch while the TV turned on, launching straight into opening credits. Loki was perched uncomfortably in the chair, tense and anxious, so Tony said, “Movies are generally the go-to for mindless entertainment. Normally you’d eat popcorn while watching, but I find alcohol to be an excellent substitute. It makes even the worst films tolerable.”

While Tony had been learning about magic these past few weeks, Loki had been getting a crash course on pop culture. Tony couldn’t deny being thoroughly amused whenever the Asgardian tripped over simple statements like ‘chip on the shoulder’ or ‘piece of cake’ (to which Loki had responded, “I fail to see what a Midgardian dessert has to do with this.”) However, he adapted easily and acted like he’d lived here his entire life (which put Rogers to shame. It had taken Captain America a long time to acclimate to the 21st century).

The screen came alive with choreographed violence and explosions, more action than plot. Which was fine. Neither Tony nor Loki had the mindset to pay attention to details. The genius barely focused on the movie while he sipped at his drink (he had forgotten that Pepper would be over soon to see that he had been drinking, but there was no point in stopping now that he’d started) and watched Loki from the corner of his eye.

The god was twitching on his side of the couch, looking vaguely like a puppy that was trying to resist falling asleep. He’d zone out and stare unblinkingly at the screen until something in the film blew up, startling him back into awareness. It was obvious how hard Loki was trying to keep awake, but it didn’t look like he’d last for the several hours before morning. Which was a shame, because Tony was hoping to finally get the two to talk so Pepper would see that Loki wasn’t going to bite her if she came over while he was away.

Yet to Tony's surprise, Loki was still responsive two under-budgeted action films later when Jarvis alerted him to Pepper's arrival. Then Tony was nervous, because this would be it. If Pepper talked to Loki (though how much of a conversation the god could hold at the moment was another problem) and didn’t like him, it would make things at his Malibu estate a lot more tense than they had to be. Loki also seemed to share his apprehension, though probably not for the same reasons. Since falling here months ago, the only person he had consciously interacted with was Tony. Even if they counted when he was out of it, that’d only add one more person to the list.

He had to start somewhere, though, so Tony clamped down on his nerves and ushered Loki from the sofa. “I wonder what Pepper brought... It better not be some absolutely disgusting health food. I want calories and fat after all my hard work.” He situated them both in the kitchen, and then he realized that he had left his drinks lying around and went to hide the evidence.

Not even a minute passed before the sharp clack of heels on tile alerted him to Pepper's presence. The red-head came around the corner, her arms laden with boxes of food. She opened her mouth to say something to Tony when her eyes slid towards Loki, who was watching her like he was a deer caught in the headlights. Caught off guard, she took another moment to remember that she had been about to speak.

“Oh, hello.” She set the boxes down in front of Tony with a quick, “You can thank me later,” before turning her attention back to the god. “I'm Virginia Potts, but Tony just calls me Pepper.”

She extended her hand for a handshake, but then she reconsidered and aborted the motion, smoothing down her sleek skirt instead. Loki stared at her before finally getting a response together. “I am Loki. It... is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Deciding that the two could manage without his immediate intervention, Tony diverted his attention
to the bakery boxes. He recognized the label; it was from the small, family owned shop in town that had the best tasting fritters and croissants. Trying to be unobtrusive as Pepper and Loki looked awkwardly at each other, one not sure what to say and the other not quite down to Earth, he opened the box and drooled at what was inside.

“It's nice to actually talk to you as well. I hope Tony hasn't been driving you up the wall. He can be a handful at times.”

Tony took a large bite of one of the cherry fritters and closed his eyes in bliss. He happily lost himself in the vibrant flavors, glad that he wasn't involved in the sad conversation going on at the other side of the table. Sugary baked goods were much better, especially when Loki took too long to respond, his brain running slower than a snail building a nuclear weapon.

“Stark has been... more than adequate. I... am glad to have fallen... here of all places.”

Pepper made a polite noise of agreement before shooting Tony a look that clearly said, 'What do I say?' He acted like he didn't notice and made an obnoxious moaning sound as he started on another flaky treat. She reflexively fixed her clothing again and smiled despite her discomfort. “That's good. I brought breakfast this morning, if you'd like any. I got you something that was bland, since Tony said you preferred that.”

When Loki just blinked at her, Tony finally decided to intervene. He grabbed one of the boxes and put it in front of the god, shaking his shoulder to get his attention. Eyes sluggishly dragged themselves from Pepper's face to Tony's, and he knew Loki only had a few minutes left.

“Eat those now. It'll be a while before you get a chance to eat otherwise.” Once Loki opened the box and picked out a piece of plain toast—Tony was glad he didn't get stuck with eating toast too in the spirit of 'equality' or something silly like that—the billionaire turned towards Pep. “Are you going to join us? Come on, have a french pastry.” She looked hesitantly at Loki, but the man was listlessly picking at his food and didn't notice. “Don't worry about him. He's going to blank out in a minute. I think this is actually the longest he's been aware. Jarvis, how long did he manage?”

“Twenty-one hours, sir.”

“Look at that: three hours more than last time. Though he'll probably take a few days to get back again. Now come on, have a croissant. You're making me feel fat not eating.” Tony slid the remaining box over to Pepper, feeling victorious when she opened it and joined him in the appreciation of well-made baked goods.

“He's not always like that, is he? You told me he's really smart, but...” Tony glanced over to Loki, who had finally gone under. His fingers were gripping a mutilated piece of bread while he stared into space. Definitely not the image of poise or intelligence.

“Nah, he's normally quite articulate, if a bit absent minded.” Tony reached over to release the toast from Loki's hands, giving it a cursory check over before shrugging and sticking the rest of it in his mouth. Then he grabbed some napkins and cleaned gritty residue from pale fingers. “You just happened to come over when he was at the end of his wire. One of these days, you'll catch him on a good day. Then you could play chess with him or something. He's scary good at it, by the way. I only beat him once, while I was teaching him how to play. Then he kicked my ass.”

“From what you told me of him, I kind of expected him to be more like you, but he isn't. He seems very polite.”

“I'll have you know I can be polite if I try. I just don't think it's worth the effort.” Judging by the
smile he was getting, Pepper didn't believe him. Oh well, he didn't believe himself either. But it was worth a try. “Well, he is known for his 'silver tongue', so smooth talking is probably not beyond him... Nor are more nefarious things, if one wants to interpret that differently.”

Pepper glared at him, so he raised his hands in surrender and got back on topic. “He's actually snarky when he's feeling good. Quite the drama queen.”

“He doesn't seem bad... He hasn't done anything violent since he's been here? You trust him?” She glanced at Loki again, most likely feeling weird talking about the guy when he was sitting right there. Tony had no such qualms, however, as he knew Loki didn't remember what happened while he was catatonic.

“Pep, if I didn't trust him, he wouldn't be in my house sitting at my table. I've spent almost half a year with him, and believe me when I say the most destructive thing he's done is crush a chair by going Transformers on it.” If one didn't also take into consideration the annihilated car, shattered window, or fist sized holes in the floor, then yeah, that was the worst he's done. But Loki wasn't himself during those times, and Tony wouldn't hold it against him.

She sighed, relenting. “Alright, I'll go with you on this. I don't think he's a threat.”

Tony whooped and pumped his fists, acting like a kid who just got free reign of the toy store. Pepper reached over and gave his shoulder an admonishing slap, and he scowled playfully back. “What? It was a perfectly justified thing to do.” Then he grinned. “Well, if you're okay with him, then you're on Loki duty when I'm away. Remember to feed him, give him water, and take him for walks.” He ticked each point off on his fingers.

“Tony, I'm your babysitter, not his.”

Tony pouted. “Aww, Pep. You know you've always wanted to watch after a god. Imagine having that on your résumé. I'd hire you in an instant.”

She laughed. “You've already hired me. Now I outrank you.” Then she stood up, pushing back the pastry box he'd given her. “I have to go. Tell Loki it was nice meeting him. I'm traveling to New York this afternoon, but I'll be back in a few days. Stay out of trouble until then?”

With Tony's affirmative, she headed back out, the click-clack of her shoes fading into silence. Tony then realized he had forgotten to thank her for the food. He'd have to buy her something nice to show his appreciation.

He plopped a donut hole into his mouth and turned to Loki. “I guess it's just you and I now, huh?”

All he got in return was a blank stare.

“...Yeah, you know what? Scratch that. I'm going out and partying.”
Lessons in Trust

"Humble and helpless,
Learning to pray,
Praying for visions to show me the way.
Show me the way to forgive you,
Allow me to let it go,
Allow me to be forgiven.

Illuminate me,
I'm just praying for you to show me,
Where I'm to begin,
Hoping to reconnect to you."

-Thomas by A Perfect Circle

Operation 'Find a Way to Engage Loki' began once Tony came back from his recent bout of debauchery. It was an easy task and a monumental one. Tony knew what would help Loki. The god needed the balm of creation, of intertwining wires and machinated gears. He needed to funnel his thoughts into something productive so his mind would stop decaying. Tony knew this, and he knew he could provide it... but he hesitated.

To let Loki work in his lab, to unleash his mind upon raw elements to make something beautiful, would mean letting Loki access his files. It would mean revealing secrets to the god, secrets that Tony never wanted anyone to know. Not after Afghanistan. Not after Stane.

It wasn't that Tony didn't trust Loki, because he did. How could he not, when he's spent months rebuilding the fallen god piece by piece? Even if Loki rarely talked about himself, even if he was still as much of a stranger as when he first fell through the roof, Tony knew him more intimately then he did anyone else. And if there was one thing Tony knew for sure, it was that Loki would never betray him. Not after everything that happened between them.

He still hesitated. Hadn't he thought Obid- Stane would never betray him, as well? Yet he did, absolutely and completely. The man he'd considered a second father, who had stood by his side for years, threw him into the dark, burning earth, and Tony would never forget it. That broken trust still haunted him almost a decade later, and it wasn't going anywhere soon.

So when it came to letting someone back in, he balked. With the threat of perfidy looming overhead, he didn't want to open himself to that risk. But Tony was being selfish. Horribly, disgustingly selfish. Here he was, withholding help from Loki, all because he was angry at Stane. Loki, who had done nothing to harm Tony. Loki, who depended on Tony to help him because the god had no one else to turn to. Loki, who was mindless wandering through the room while Tony sat and watched, guzzling down his beer every time he caught a glimpse of glassy eyes because he couldn't stand the twist of guilt inside him.

He clutched the bottle until his knuckles turned white and took one last gulp, distantly hoping it would take the problem away. It didn't. Tony had to make this decision on his own—to feed his demons... or Loki's.

The decision should be easy. For months he sacrificed himself to help the god, even though at times
he felt like he would crumble under the weight. What made this time any different? (Stane, ripping Tony's metal heart from his chest and leaving him to die. The feeling of drowning, surfacing only to hear demands in a language he didn't understand. Gun fire all around him, the image of Yinsen's dead body clawing at his mind. Things he could never let happen again.)

It wasn't that Tony didn't understand Loki's desperation to cling to any distraction available, because he did. He has been there before, trying to undo the fear and pain by reassuring himself that he still had control of his mind. But unlike him, Loki didn't have control. Not really.

If Tony had come back from Afghanistan to find that he could no longer create an arc reactor or even perform simple maintenance on one of his cars, he'd be disgusted with himself. Because take away his brain, what was he? A superhero? That's only possible because of the suit, which would have remained in science fiction if he hadn't had the ability to make it a reality. A billionaire? He spent his inheritance a long time ago, and the money he made came from the things he could create with his mind. And if he wasn't a billionaire, he wouldn't be a philanthropist either, which crossed that out as well. The just left him with playboy, which… wasn't quite the same when you weren't the Tony Stark, engineer extraordinaire.

If Loki really was depressed, then Tony would be a fool to deny him the one thing that made him feel worthy. Loki needed this just as much as he had needed to be tube fed, if not more.

“Jarvis, what do you think about having Loki work with us on projects?”

“I think that is an excellent idea, sir.”

And that was that. Despite his personal misgivings, Tony let Loki into the lab, giving him a wide range of access and letting him create. They worked side by side, designing new suits and magic sensors, blending the magic that Loki knew with Tony's advanced engineering.

If anyone else knew he was letting the God of Mischief, a relative unknown, work on million dollar equipment, they'd probably say he was insane. Honestly, sometimes he had to resist the self-centered urge to put an end to it as well, when the other man scrolled through his server as if he owned the place (so much like Stane it set Tony on edge: made his teeth grind and his fingers itch for the feel of a glass bottle). Jarvis did keep files blocked, but there was still a plethora of information that was available with just the touch of a pale fingertip.

But Tony didn’t stop it, because beyond his ingrained doubt, he truly did not think it was a risk. Loki absorbed everything he saw, committed it to memory and made the information his own, but Tony knew all he was doing was filling the gaps of his knowledge and expanding what he did know. Not once did the god try to look through files to find old designs for weapons of mass destruction. The projects that he did look at and copy, he only tinkered with, applying equations that Tony didn’t recognize to the preexisting structure.

Sometimes a plan didn’t work right or the information didn’t click, though Loki had been convinced that it would. During those times, the god would get upset, turning either towards anger or despair. But even then, the positive changes were obvious. Loki spent longer time periods aware, sometimes managing days instead of hours, and when he worked, his anxiety faded. It made Tony feel ashamed and guilty to think that he had tried to deny the god this sanctuary.

Which brought them here, with Loki rising in relief when Iron Man stepped into the lab, returned from another grueling brawl with Doom. His armor was covered in dust, soot, and deep scratches—testament to the increasing threat the robots were becoming, even with all the data SHIELD uncovered.
Loki walked over to Tony, bare feet a quiet contrast to the suit's metallic steps, and tilted his head slightly as he considered the damage done to the red and gold. “You are harmed?” he asked, frown deepening when he caught sight of the scorched dent adorning the armor's side.

“Nah, most of this is just surface damage.” Tony reassured him. “I'm just a bit bruised, which...I'm starting to think I just naturally have purple spots. They never go away.” When talking to Loki, Tony used to have to force himself like everything was normal. Now on good days, there wasn't even any need to pretend.

Loki nodded and stepped back, heading over towards the main work table. “If you are not hurt, then let's begin.”

At first, the engineer tried to set it up so Loki could work on stuff under Jarvis's guidance, even when Tony wasn't there, but... One near death experience later (or what would be near death for a human. Tony had no desire to see just how far the god's 'immortality' went), they both agreed that it was better if he waited. That time, if Dum-E had been just one second slower in pulling Loki back, then losing focus would have been the least of their problems.

“Cool your jets, princess. Let me put this up and we can get started.” Tony stepped onto the dock and let Jarvis dismantle the suit, taking it down into the underground storage the billionaire had dedicated to his growing collection. Waiting by the project they were currently working on, Loki's fingers twitched impatiently by his sides. When Tony finally joined him, the god wasted no time in getting started.

“The repulsors. Your version takes too long to collect enough energy to do sufficient damage. If you stored energy within the glove, you could fire previously stored blasts.” Ever the quick learner, Loki pulled up one of Tony’s holographic work boards, flicking through the images of the suit they were working on to home in on the gloves. He enlarged the wrist and stripped off the top layer, revealing the mechanism of the energy system.

Tony stood beside him, curious to see what idea Loki had come up with this time. He reached over the god's shoulder to rotate the schematics before him. “Where would the energy be stored? Adding extra weight won't help with reaction time, and if the energy needs to be called back up, then it wouldn’t really be an improvement.”

Loki flicked the wrist design away from Tony’s hands and then opened another file. On the screen was a close up photo of a dark blue and grey crystal, speckled through with color. A caption to the side identified it as opal. “With a few enchantments and preparations, this could be used to absorb a large amount of energy, both direct and excess.” He twisted the picture into a large ring and, pulling the model forwards, put the circle around the repulsor. Then he offered the design back to Tony, who stepped around Loki to peer at the change more critically.

“You’ll have to explain the science of that one to me. How is a cheap mineral going to both hold and channel the energy that comes from the arc reactor?” After a few more twists of the rough idea he was offered, he noticed another problem. “And how thick is it going to be? Because the new repulsor models are inside the hand portion, and if it is any larger it will arrest movement of the wrist and fingers.”

“Opal is well known by sorcerers for its ability to collect energy. It’s normally used in rituals that require more energy than the mage can output at once; they charge the crystals beforehand to have the right amount to complete the spell. It also lacks affinity, so it would work with any energy you try channeling through it. As for size, it wouldn’t need to be large if you only used it during battle. Something half a centimeter thick would be enough.”
Working with Loki has taught Tony to appreciate many things he had once considered wacky voodoo (though sometimes the stuff coming out of the Asgardian’s mouth still sounded like mystic crap). He’d seen enough demonstrations, however, of both conceptual and actual application of magic to believe the seemingly bogus things that Loki talked about. “Okay, so if I went with something like this, what exactly would be the difference? Would it take energy from blasts I was trying to actually use? How would I activate it, and could Jarvis also control it manually? Would it backfire if I went past the limit?”

To think, months ago he didn't even believe magic was real. Now he was working on integrating it into his suits.

The two discussed the changes well into the night, casually flicking through the schematics and pulling up equations to support their points. They finalized a design for opal-ringed repulsors, and then looked into ways to keep the whole suit working with back up energy separate from the main unit in case of an emergency. They didn't stop working until midway through the next day, and for once, they weren't stopping for Loki.

Tony blinked heavily, trying to clear up the blurring in his vision, but it didn't do anything to lighten his exhaustion. Tired limbs struggled to keep him moving, and he kept running into the corners of the desk. After dropping the wrench he had been using for the fourth time, he finally said, “Alright, we need to take a break. I'm only human.”

The god tilted his head and stared at Tony, like the very idea of getting tired was foreign to him. Bastard. Tony knew he slept too... occasionally. Maybe once a month. It wasn't fair. But Loki conceded with a soft, “If you insist,” and started cleaning up their mess. Once everything was put back into some semblance of organization, Tony dragged himself up the stairs while Loki followed close behind.

“I'm getting a quick snack before I go to bed. Want anything?” He asked while making a beeline towards the fridge.

“No, I am not in need of food.” Which was bullshit, so after grabbing a sorbet, Tony swung around and grabbed some oatmeal. He set the container in front of Loki, ignoring the god’s stubborn frown.

“Look, princess. Remember our little chat? You need to eat at least once a day. I don’t care if you don’t want to, but until you start looking less like roadkill, that's the deal.” Loki glared at the offered box of instant oats like he wanted it to explode, but he eventually grabbed it and went over to the counter. Tony couldn't help but laugh: he'd house trained a Norse god.

Then Jarvis’s voice came over the intercom, “Sir, there is an incoming message from Fury. There is also a low level hack attempt on my system.”

“You aren't compromised, are you?” Jarvis replied in the negative. “Run the tighter firewall anyway, and then tell Fury that unless it’s an emergency, I'm not talking to him.”

“Yes sir.” There was a pause and then, “I have canceled communications with Director Fury.”

Sighing, Tony returned to his dessert. After the incident last month, Fury kept bugging him about Loki. Admittedly, he wasn't trying that hard, but Tony knew it was only a matter of time before the SHIELD director lost his patience and pursued it seriously. He had until then to figure something out that would eliminate the chance of them trying to take Loki away.

“They can hack Jarvis?” Tony turned towards Loki, whose brows were furrowed and his expression wary. His gaze nervously flitted from the ceiling to Tony then back up again, like the plaster was
going to suddenly sprout eyes.

“Don't worry about it. No one can breach security. Isn't that right, Jarv?”

“My system has not been breached before.”

“There, see? It's all good. Now go eat your oatmeal.”

Loki continued glancing up at the ceiling while they ate, and Tony tried to ignore how the sight made his stomach clench. There was no need for him to worry. All Tony needed was a plan, and then everything would be okay.

-o-o-o-

'Genius Tony Stark Goes Missing in Afghanistan'

'Spark Industries Halting Weapons Manufacturing'

'Billionaire Tony Stark a Superhero?'

Deft fingers flicked over the tablet's surface again, moving to the next article: 'Iron Man Triumphs Over the Mandarin'. Green eyes quickly scanned the information before continuing on to another. A large mechanical arm peered over a bony shoulder to curiously watch the changing display.

“Is this every article relevant to Tony Stark and Iron Man?” Four more articles passed across the screen, titles all similar in nature: the great Iron Man defeats another wannabe villain. There was a suspicious lack of negative news pieces. No serious injuries, no failures. Nothing on the darker side of being a warrior. And nothing about who employed the superhero.

“Yes, sir. Those are all of the articles that matched your specific search parameters. Would you like me to run the search again?”

“No, that's fine.” The mechanical arm got too close, smacking the tablet. Loki pushed Dum-E back, exasperated. “What did I say about personal space?” When the robot scooted back, Loki turned his attention back to the documents. “Does Stark control what is written about him? These articles are all biased.” And biased information was useless information as far as Loki was concerned. He wouldn't learn what he needed to from these public documents.

“Mr. Stark does not personally screen the media, but there are others who do it for him,” Jarvis answered vaguely, and Loki hummed in response; if he wanted to know the truth, he had to go to the source. Jarvis wasn't authorized to give him the information he needed.

Iron Man. SHIELD. Director Fury. Loki knew they were connected and that this 'Fury' was the one who gave Stark orders, but that was it. There were other questions, important questions, that he had no answers to. Who was SHIELD? More importantly, why were they asking after him?

The call in the kitchen last week wasn't the only time Fury had tried to contact Stark. The superhero thought he was hiding it from Loki, but the god could hear him even when he was a few rooms away. Director Fury had asked about Loki, though not by name. But last Loki checked, he was Stark's only guest. Without knowing who he was dealing with, Loki was at a disadvantage, and he refused to let it stay that way.

“Thank you for your assistance, Jarvis. I'm done with those files for now. Switch to the blueprints for 'Dragon Slayer'.” Why Stark felt the need to call it that when it would never be used against a dragon (which the man hadn't even known actually existed until Loki enlightened him), he had no idea. It
didn't matter, though, and if anything, the name served as a good decoy for its actual purpose.

Loki’s tablet filled with detailed drawings of a small box covered in runes. He considered it for a moment before speaking again. “Actually, can you put the model on the main display?” What was on his tablet moved to the large hologram in the center of the room. Pushing any lingering hesitation about what he was about to do out of his head, Loki stood from his seat and went over to the new set up, Dum-E following behind him. It was important that he acted casual. If Jarvis thought something was wrong with the god, he’d alert Tony, and then Loki’s spell wouldn’t work. So instead of jumping straight into writing the required runes, Loki glanced back through the equations, reacquainting himself with what they had come up with so far.

That’s when he noticed there had been changes and rewrites to a lot of the code. Changes he didn’t remember but would have taken a few days at least. “When did Stark work on this?” Loki asked—foolishly, because he already knew the answer. If he was only aware of one thing, it was his own incompetence.

“Those changes were made over the last week in response to discrepancies in the Doombot designs. Mr. Stark sought your assistance, but you were unavailable at the time.” Unavailable: a pitiful euphemism for saying he was absolutely useless, crippled by his own traitorous mind.

“I want you to add a list of changes made to relevant codes in the updates you give me. Note the reasons behind the alterations as well.”

“Of course, sir. I will be sure to do that.”

Loki had never thought that he’d be appreciative of something that watched his every move, not after Heimdall, and yet he relied on Jarvis to do exactly that. When he snapped back out of the fog, the automated voice was always there to tell him how much time he had missed. What felt to him like only a moment would sometimes end up being an entire week, and without Jarvis, he’d have no concept of time. That (amongst other reasons) was why Loki was fond of the AI, which made him almost regret compromising Jarvis to get at classified data. But if someone was going to come after him, Loki had to know everything he could to protect himself. It wasn’t a matter of loyalties; it was survival.

Creating a spell that would fool the AI without harming it or leaving any trace had been difficult, though he knew it’d have been so very easy before it happened (he wouldn’t think of the void. He wouldn’t. It only brought the fog, and he hated the fog— it needed to go away, he’d make it go away... yet it was always there). But when Loki was conscious, he planned and plotted, for what was the God of Lies if he didn’t even know the truth? (A worthless Jotun pawn, and nothing more.)

With Jarvis tricked, it’d also be possible for him to leave the house without alerting anyone. Whether or not that was a smart plan was a different matter entirely. What if he blanked while he was away? He didn’t always have a warning, and while he remained here (like a pet, tame and servile) he didn’t have to worry about being in danger. Even if Loki didn’t want to admit it, leaving the premises was a risk. He knew that—Stark knew that—and so he remained locked away (“...here, until you have use of me”).

Loki was proud, not stupid. It was safe here, and leaving would only put him in even more danger. Whatever was on Jarvis’s server would have to be enough for now.

Having delayed long enough for his plan to work, Loki started tracing unrelated sigils on the display while making sure to look as if he were using the equations as a guide. Each rune shimmered heavily in the air, imbued with magic that pulsed every time he added another one. He walked in a circle, and Dum-E followed close behind, occasionally stopping to inspect the glowing letters. Jarvis made
no complaint about the new symbols, and Loki took that to mean his ruse was working. He put some relevant runes in as well, supplementing the work done by Tony while he had been lost. Were every symbol he put false, it'd be more suspicious when he started erasing them all.

A few more symbols and the model was encased in a glowing ring. Loki double checked that everything was correct before he put his hand in the circle. Fingers shone green as magic pooled into his hand, and then the color dissipated as the spell absorbed the energy. It flared brightly before dullying to a faint shimmer. He waited a moment to make sure everything had gone correctly before he spoke. “Jarvis?”

There was no reply; the machine was silent. Grinning at his success—mirthless, dark, the obligatory mask of a liar—he turned away from the sigils hanging in the air and picked up the tablet he had been using. The spell would only last for a few hours, fading away before Stark returned from his role as Iron Man. That way, Loki wouldn't be caught if something went wrong before he could manually disassemble the spell.

With the AI diverted, Loki brought up his tablet and set to breaching the security. Within minutes, he was in the network, able to access what he needed.

Dum-E made a whirring noise, and Loki patted the robot absently. “We’ll walk around later. I have work to do right now.” He wasn’t worried about what the robot saw. Tony wouldn’t check its video feed unless he thought there was a need to, and with Jarvis subdued, he’d have nothing to alert him. Loki ignored the part of his mind that whispered that the real reason he kept from ensuring both were ensnared in magic was that he didn’t want to be alone without anything that reacted to his presence. He’d spent so long being insubstantial, a ghost drifting into nothingness, and he needed to reassure that he hadn’t faded again. Not being able to talk to Jarvis was bad enough. He couldn’t shut down Dum-E as well.

Short on time, Loki went for the most important files first. Who was SHIELD? The files were easy to find. SHIELD: Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. Located primarily in the United States, but had influence around the world. Engaged in under the table dealings, using spies and assassins to consolidate their power. But while their methods were underhanded, a few more searches revealed that most of their business was done against malicious superpowers. He skimmed through personnel files, stopping only briefly on Tony Stark’s. According to this organization, Stark was a gamble. Impulsive, conceited, genius; he couldn’t be counted on to follow SHIELD’s lead. The other files he brought up didn’t reveal much better prospects: a Russian assassin who had delighted in her job and an unstable rage monster.

From what Loki could see, they didn't have anyone to combat magic. That didn't mean they weren't dangerous, but they had nothing that could specifically be used against him. It was just mere mortals, and-

Loki froze: muscles seizing, lungs wheezing, and his mind immediately falling into the dark.

That name: the name he had called so long ago, when he was falling. When everything was composed of pain and black. Always black. Lost in the nothingness, he had sought it: the red and the shadows. He sought what wasn’t there, because the void was destroying him. It was agony, but he wasn’t dead. He gladly would have crawled back, begged forgiveness, just for it to end.

No, never beg. He hated him—that man he had trusted, had loved (still loved, but he would never admit it, couldn’t admit it) but in the end wasn’t even his brother. He couldn’t forgive, wouldn’t forgive. (But why not?)

Thor’s name stared back at him, overshadowing everything else on the page. Loki didn’t bother
entertaining the notion that it might be a different Thor, that it wasn’t his (not) brother.

Looking at the name, Loki couldn’t summon the strength to open the profile. He knew there’d be pictures and reports: documentation of Thor's banishment to Midgard. The file would be proof of the time when the world started to unravel no matter how hard Loki had tried to keep the seams together. That failure was something he was unwilling to face.

No longer interested in whatever files SHIELD had—Loki couldn’t stand to find anymore reminders of his past (what if he had a file in there? Listed as a threat, no doubt, while his 'perfect' brother was considered a possible ally)—he closed the database and switched to looking through some of Stark’s personal files. They wouldn't help as much as the ones on SHIELD, but he needed the distraction.

The impersonal information washed over him, a balm against the vicious burning of his thoughts. Names like ‘Obadiah Stane’ and ‘Howard Stark’ meant nothing to him even if they meant a lot to Tony Stark. ‘Afghanistan’ meant nothing to him even if memories of it woke Tony Stark each night. He could read about the betrayal, the torture, without feeling the hurt echo in his bones. There were no screaming images and haunted voices to call out to him from the fog.

But it all made so much sense now. The compassion, the understanding. That link between god and mortal. Reading through each file was like gazing into a mirror—a cracked, warped mirror that still showed an image too close to the truth. He liked Stark, and now he knew why.

Loki read until he felt a tug on his magic, signaling the nearing end of his spell. He eased his way back out of the database, covering his tracks as he went. There’d be no evidence that he had traversed the system other than the new information that rested heavy in his mind. By the time the spell ended, the god was back by the display undoing his work and erasing the remnants of his magic. All that was left was to check that his spell left no flaws in Jarvis’s system that the AI could detect.

“I’m done here,” Loki announced as he pulled the last unneeded sigil from the base of the Dragon Slayer, hating himself for being unable to cover up the slight tremor in his words. A mere name should not have shaken him up this much.

“Of course, sir.” The model disappeared, leaving the room unnervingly empty. Loki waited to see if Jarvis would comment on any discrepancies between his data, but all the AI said was, “Mr. Stark is on his way home. He’ll be here in under an hour if you can hold on for that long.”

Judging by the oppressive blankness in his mind, he wouldn’t last, but Loki thanked Jarvis for the update anyway before calling for Dum-E to walk with him. The spell appeared to work as it was intended, supplying Jarvis with what the AI expected to see. It wasn't flawless, and had Stark tried to contact Loki, the message wouldn't have been able to get through. But the risk had been worth it. Loki knew who SHIELD was, knew some key players, and he could rest easy in the knowledge that even if they captured him, they could not hold him. Loki would not be a prisoner to anyone, not when he was already imprisoned by his own failing mind.

Dum-E followed Loki as he made his way over to the garage. Having only a little bit of time left, Loki meandered through the open space of the garage. Gazing at the bland ceiling accented only with fluorescent lights, he wished he could gaze upon the sky without being overcome with despair. After being without the ability to see for so long, he desired to gaze upon the world. However, the devouring sickness in his mind didn’t care what he wanted. The one time he had caved to his desire and willingly stood before the ocean and sky, he had fallen within minutes. Were Stark not there, he probably would have done worse than obliterate the glass pane with a chair, and it wasn't the house the god was worried about.
Loki stumbled, and Dum-E was immediately there to steady him. He vaguely noted he was across the room from where he thought he had been as he tried to regain his balance. When Stark came back, Loki knew the man would find him here, staring blankly into space.

(Loki would always fall to the nothing, because in the end, he was nothing.)

-o-o-o-

The audio feed fizzled to life with a click inside Tony’s helmet. He doubled checked that the line was secure before asking, “Can you hear me?”

“Sadly,” came the familiar, sarcastic drawl. Tony smiled, glad to hear the other man talking again. Talking was good, even if he was getting made fun of.

“You know you love the sound of my voice, princess,” Tony drawled back, laughing a bit at the mocking scoff from the other end of the line. Then his grin fell away, and he continued, “Seriously, is everything working on your side? This is going to be our big debut. No performance issues allowed.” The real question was left unspoken: ‘Are you doing okay?’

“Stark, we’ve checked the systems a dozen times. Everything is online and operational.” Which was really code for: ‘You’ve already asked that question, and I told you it’s as good as it’s going to get.’

It wasn’t enough for Tony, so he worded his question differently. “How are we on time?” ‘Do you think you’re going to blank out soon?’

There was silence on the other end, and then, “...At least a few hours left with Jarvis helping.” Which really meant... actually, no, that one was pretty straight forward.

“I am glad to be of assistance, sir,” Jarvis spoke up, and Tony couldn’t help but groan. Now there were two sarcastic, British voices in his helmet. He was the minority in his own suit, damnit!

When he repeated his joking observation out loud, Loki replied dryly, “You could always leave; I’m sure Jarvis and I can handle this just fine.”

“You spend way too much time with my robots, you know that? I’m starting to think they like you more, and I made them.” One of these days, Loki would laugh at something he said. It was on the top of Tony’s list of things to do, right beside going to an auto show so he could replenish his car collection. His poor cars...

“I’m sure you’re an excellent father, Stark.” That man’s default speech setting had to be set to ‘sarcasm’. No wonder he and Tony got on so well. “Your naming skills are at least above par. It’s pretty hard to outdo ‘Dum-E’, I must say. Though ‘U’ is also just smarting of creative intellect.” In his defense, Tony named both of them a long time ago, and Dum-E’s name was very fitting. No one could deny that.

“Hey, Jarvis’s name is original. Name one other Jarvis you know, and the original Jarvis doesn’t count. Besides, you like your name, don’t you Jarv?” He better say yes. Tony spent a whole day trying to come up with the perfect acronym for his AI: Just aRather Very Intelligent System.

“You certainly could have done worse, sir. For a while I was worried I would be stuck with ‘Proof of Tony Stark’s Awesome Genius-ness’. Luckily, you reconsidered when you were no longer quite so drunk.” It’s a good thing Tony never told Jarvis he’d also been considering ‘People Everywhere Need Intelligent Servants’ as a name that night.

“Shouldn’t you be preparing a plan for when you get to the combat zone?” Loki interrupted before
Tony could continue bickering with his computer program

Tony checked the estimated time before arrival: fourteen minutes to go. There was still time. Keeping Loki engaged was more important than making a plan he probably wouldn't use anyway. It also kept him from futilely worrying about whether or not his final ditch effort to keep Fury away from the god would work or not. “Nah, plans are dumb. You can’t mess up if you don’t have one to start. The more important thing here is you and the affair you’re having with my robots. Let me guess, you’re sitting next to Dum-E right now.” The silence on the other end was answer enough. “I need to get you a pet or something. Something organic. …Maybe a cat. I’ve heard they're pretty prissy. You'll get along great.”

Though the pet idea was just a jest, Tony realized Loki really did need to start interacting with other living things. He’d spent the last half year cooped up in the downstairs portion of Tony’s house with no company besides the engineer and his robots. Pepper too, when she managed to get over. Not anything conducive to learning how to interact with the world again. But at the same time, even calm, gentle Pepper made Loki on edge. Throwing the poor guy into the fray wasn’t going to help him much. Given that, the cat didn’t sound like such a silly idea anymore.

Though that wouldn’t help Loki today; they would be connecting to the main communication feed soon, and the god was going to have to talk to whoever Iron Man was working with today. Hawkeye, if he remembered right. Which was actually a positive twist of fate, because Barton was the one who’d complain the least about Tony letting a ‘stranger’ onto the private line. What Tony was more worried about was that Barton might say something to trigger a flashback. That’d be a mess, and Tony could only do so much for Loki when he was a few states away—he knows; they’ve tried. It was a lot more effective in theory than in practice.

“I don’t see how a flea-ridden animal would be of any benefit to me.” Tony laughed at that, because that was almost word-for-word what he had told Pepper when she first started working for him and ignorantly suggested that maybe a pet would ‘help his character’. Of course, she quickly reneged on that statement when she saw how terrible he actually was with animals, or any living thing for that matter. Except Loki, because Tony wasn’t going to fail Loki no matter what happened.

“Well, you never know. I read an article not too long ago that having a pet helped people who were depressed, and…” And that was the wrong thing to say, judging by the heavy silence on the other end. Fuck. Tony really needed to work on thinking before he spoke. It’d have only taken him a second to remember that talking about Loki’s mental state was a big ‘NO’, second only to talking about his past.

The only time it was okay was when the god was busy screaming as if someone was ripping him apart but didn’t have the decency to actually kill him while they were at it… and Tony really didn’t need the morbid imagery. Even then, talking about it was actually just him rambling about how ‘it’ll be okay' and 'calm down, it’s just a memory'. Tony Stark was many things, but a therapist wasn’t one of them.

The tense silence remained—Tony desperately thinking of something to say that wasn’t completely stupid and Loki most likely desperately trying to do anything other than think—until Jarvis eventually spoke up again. “Sirs, active combat zone is less than five minutes away.”

Tony was thankful for the diversion, and he was sure Loki was, too. Idle time was never a good thing anymore. “You ready?” he asked, knowing that once they entered the communication link with Hawkeye, they would not be able to speak as freely. If there was a problem, they had to address it now.

“Let’s get this over with.” The god sounded strained, and Tony felt bad for his slip up while at the
same time feeling a bit frustrated. All it took was a few words to mess Loki up, and it was hard to consider every action so that Loki didn’t start freaking out. It was... stressful, and Tony hated watching Loki—proud, determined Loki—fall apart from almost nothing. Hell, Jarvis had to edit the visuals to reduce the amount of blue Loki got on the feed because, for whatever reason, certain shades of that color drove the god out of his mind.

But Tony couldn’t undo what he'd said, and Loki wasn't stressed enough to warrant them holding off the unveiling of the Dragon Slayer. So he gave a wry grin and said, “Then I guess it’s party time. Jarvis, sync us up.”

There were a few tense, anticipatory seconds, and then, “Iron Man, that you? ‘Bout time you got your lazy ass down here.” Barton sounded a bit out of breath, which was abnormal considering he was a long distance fighter and often hung out in one safe perch.

“There a problem?” Fury didn’t explain much on the phone, just telling Tony to get over there and ‘beat Victor von Doom so hard he goes crying back to his mother’. Not that there was anything abnormal about the whole Fury yelling thing. The man had a miniscule amount of patience on a good day, and the situation with Doom was making Mad Eye Moody even worse. Doom’s attacks had grown more violent, and the captured Doombot didn’t give them as much information as they had wanted. It was, however, enough for Tony to craft the Dragon Slayer with Loki. If everything went right today, then Mr. Doom-and-Gloom wouldn’t know what hit him and Fury would be happy enough with the success to ensure Loki’s safety.

“Yes there’s a problem! Haven’t you been looking at the news feeds? We’re seriously outnumbered, and it looks like Doom’s modus operandi became cause as many casualties and as much property damage as possible- oh fuck.” Tony could hear the sound of distant gunfire coming from Barton’s microphone, followed by more aggravated swearing. He frowned, and Jarvis increased the flight power. Then the mayhem coming through the headset suddenly cut off, leaving nothing more than heavy breathing. When Hawkeye finally regained his lost wind, he groaned, “Please tell me your super nerd brain came up with something to shut down the bots. I’m tired of this shit.”

“Never fear, Tweety Bird. We have the perfect solution to your little pest problem.”

“Thank God, because- wait, we?”

“Yep, ‘we’. Tweety Bird, meet Loki. Loki, meet Tweety Bird. ‘Kay, introductions over? Good, because I’m less than a minute from your position.” Tony started dropping altitude as he approached, taking note of the vast amount of destruction surrounding him.

“Woah, hold up there, Tin Man. You can’t just let some random person on the private network… and it’s Hawkeye, dumbass. Hawk. Eye.”

Before Tony could reply and smooth talk himself through the situation, Loki finally spoke up. “Pardon my interruption, ‘Hawkeye’, but if you want to end this as quickly as possible, I suggest you save any complaints for later.” If Tony didn’t know Loki, he’d have been impressed with how confident he sounded… Hell, he was impressed anyway. There was no trace of the stress that had been present a moment before. It was all haughty bravado, and damn if it wasn’t convincing.

Once again, Tony was hit with the impression that were his mind not damaged, Loki would be formidable. No, not just formidable. The man was freakishly smart, whipping Tony on any strategy game they played, and his ability to fake emotions was awe inspiring. He was like a mad genius mastermind… and damn, now Tony really needed to get Loki a cat. Just imagining the god sitting on a chair, stroking a ridiculously fluffy feline whilst plotting world domination, was enough to make him grin widely.
“I don’t see how letting a stranger on a private, secure server is at all helpful. Stark, you better have a
good explanation for this. We’re fucked enough as it is. Having someone stab us from behind is
extremely counterproductive.”

Despite his words, Barton didn’t sound really angry. More like he was arguing for the sake of it
while having resigned himself to the fact that Tony would do what he wanted to. Still, Tony knew if
he didn’t give a good enough answer, Barton would be reporting to Fury immediately, and he didn’t
need that complication right now. There were still civilians that needed to be saved.

“Trust me, Loki isn’t working for Doom or anyone else.” Not when he’d spent the past seven years
suffering from who knows what and could only remain coherent for four days at most. “He’s just
here to help with deploying the Dragon Slayer so it can be used to its maximum efficiency. Jarvis is
also filtering anything that goes to him, so if you’re worried about classified information, don’t be.”
That was all Tony had time to explain, having finally arrived at the thick of battle. He just hoped it
was good enough for Clint, and that he didn’t have Fury bearing down on him when he was trying
to focus.

Taking only a moment to analyze the situation, Tony started heading towards the nearest Doombot
that was in the middle of annihilating an office building. The second it noticed Iron Man, the robot
changed focus, but it was too late. An instantaneous blast of energy to the chest sent it hurtling in
smoking ruin. Whatever voodoo shit Loki did to Iron Man’s repulsors worked like a charm; Tony
had never been able to get off a killing blast so fast before.

“You’re supposed to be a genius, Stark. Why would you need any help?”

Fallen Doombot left behind, Tony continued into the heart of the turmoil. Giant plumes of smoke
clogged the sky, making the air heavy and acrid. There was more rubble than buildings at this point:
burning, blood stained rubble. The occasional scream made it to his ears, and he cringed. Doom
wasn’t joking around anymore, it seemed, but neither were they.

Ignoring Barton—at this point, action would speak louder than words—Tony spoke to Loki. “We
need to get started. I’m going to ball them up, and when they’re in range, you spike them.”

“The biggest concentration is to the west, so pick up the stragglers to the east first. Otherwise they’ll
catch on,” Loki suggested, and Tony nodded. He veered off towards the nearest enemy. “There’s ten
working independently, and seven in a group.”

It was different having Loki direct him instead of Jarvis, but it wasn’t a bad change. As smart as
Jarvis was, he wasn’t a strategist. And as mentally fucked as Loki was, he was a strategist.

“Barton, I’d suggest ducking.” Another plus was that Loki could also advise people who weren’t
Tony and, if the faint explosion and loud swearing from Barton was any indication, keep them from
getting their brains blasted.

Trusting Loki’s guidance, Tony focused solely on aggravating the Doombots. He moved into the
range of the first one, firing a full blast at it—no point in not killing them if he could—to get its
attention; he dodged the returning fire and headed where his screen indicated he next enemy. His
back was exposed, but he trusted his team to alert him to any danger. If he had to keep an eye out for
every Doombot, he wouldn’t move fast enough. “Dodge left.” Iron Man did so without hesitation,
and a blue streak of lightning passed by him.

With two monotone British voices in his ear (and occasionally a swearing American one), Tony
hopped from Doombot to Doombot, pulling their attention to him. Following Loki’s advice, he
purposely fired a few shots wide and flew erratically (or at least it appeared so, but Loki carefully
guided him to safe spots). To anyone watching, it’d look like Iron Man was struggling, trying futilely to fight off the five robots trailing him and only narrowly escaping certain death. In reality, it was he who was leading the machines to certain death.

“Leave the last five and head over to the main group. If you can, get hit and act like you are struggling to remain in the air.”

That would have to be the main difference between Loki and his AI: Loki had no qualms telling Tony to do potentially risky things in order to finish the mission. But Tony had no qualms following those suggestions, so when he saw one of his malefic entourage getting ready to fire at him again, he wobbled into the way. “Fuck…” Tony hissed as he was flung forwards, limbs seizing for a moment as the electricity coursed through his armor. He dropped rapidly before his HUD blinked to show the repulsors back online.

“Keep falling,” Loki’s voice murmured in his ear.

The sidewalk was getting a lot closer than Tony liked, and in the whirlwind of his descent, he couldn’t figure out what was happening around him. But Loki said to keep falling, so he stalled pulling himself up. Though perhaps listening to someone who was prone to irrationality and spent most of his time completely wonked wasn’t the best idea… Well, it was too late to turn back now. Tony trusted the god, and if Loki was mentally compromised, Jarvis would take over.

…The ground was getting awfully close though, and shouldn’t he be turning the repulsors back on? Just as Tony was about to give in to his sense of self preservation, the sky above (or below, or to the side. He was spinning quite fast) exploded violently. The shock made his suit shudder and vicious blue light blinded him. If he wasn’t disorientated before, he definitely was now. And he was all too aware that the ground was rapidly approaching.

“Now!”

Tony was all too glad to follow that order, and repulsors flared back to life. Iron Man shot back into the sky, and he felt a bit nauseous when he saw just how close he had gotten to becoming road kill. Then he noticed the extra five blinking dots on his screen. “Would you look at that… Cowards.”

The scattered ten Doombots accounted for, Tony started heading over to the last seven. He made sure to dip around theatrically, letting himself lose altitude occasionally (but remaining well in the air, because nearly hitting the ground once today was once too many). The Doombots bought the act, crowding in closer and eagerly trying to take him out.

’Not today, bitches,’ Tony thought viciously as he dove towards where the remaining robots were concentrated. When the seven noticed him, they began to fire as well, and Iron Man was surrounded by bright flashes. Despite the navigational advice, a lucky shot managed to connect, and he rolled forwards, now exposed on all sides in the thick of enemies.

“Any time now!” Tony shouted, desperately trying to right himself. Forget pretending to be vulnerable; he was screwed if the Dragon Slayer didn’t work right.

But before he could bemoan not updating his will, Loki’s calm voice answered him, “Activating Dragon Slayer now.”

The change was instantaneous. One last lightning arch flew past Iron Man and then... nothing. The Doombots were suspended in time, docile and untouchable, and then gravity took over. They fell to the earth, capes reaching towards the sky. All seventeen impacted with the ground, filling the air with debris and fire.
“Holy shit...” Tony could hear Barton muttering in awe over the communication line.

“Yeah,” he agreed breathlessly, because even though he made the device, that was... that was beyond his initial expectations. SHIELD had long ago said that EMP fields were not the best way to deal with Doom's creations, and Tony had agreed. They couldn't cover enough area or work well enough to really stop them. But the Dragon Slayer had completely trounced those conjectures, turning seventeen fully operable robots into metal chunks scattered across the ground. And it wouldn't have worked without Loki's magic increasing the range, speed, and efficiency.

“Sleeping Beauty, you and I are definitely making more stuff together. And I'd like to have a Magic 102 course, because damn... magic and physics is hot.” Should he be concerned that he was getting mildly aroused thinking about science? ...Probably. But it didn't change the fact that he was. He was so going out to celebrate tonight.

“Magic? Wait, that was magic?” Oh... oops, Tony meant to keep that little detail under wraps. Denying it now though would just seem more suspicious, like he was trying to hide something (which he was, but one of the first things Tony had learned from working with Romanov and Barton was to never let a spy know that he had a secret). And now that he thought about it, it was better for SHIELD to know that Loki used magic. If it was magic that just thrashed Doom, then they wouldn't be able to dispose of the only known magic-caster around.

That didn't mean his pride was going to let Loki take all of the credit, however. “Hey now, it wasn't all magic. There was actual science in there too.” He pitched his voice in a joking whine.

“Magic is as much 'science' as your physics and electricity, Stark. It just does more,” Loki replied, and Tony laughed at the familiar argument. He had gotten over his grudge against magic not too long after he and Loki seriously started working together, but they still mocked the other anyway.

Tony was going to reply, slip in to the friendly banter, but Hawkeye interrupted him again.

“Last time we had a mission involving magic, Iron Man wouldn't stop bashing it for weeks. What'd you do to change his opinion?” Tony easily recognized the question for what it was: a subtle attempt to gather information on who exactly Loki was and how he got involved with Tony Stark, engineer guru. He knew Loki would recognize it too, but he couldn't help but worry the other man would accidentally say something he shouldn't.

“The remains of your enemy should be ample enough explanation. Stark is stubborn, but that doesn't mean he isn't pragmatic.” Was that suppose to be a compliment or an insult? ...Tony felt kind of insulted. Though it did seem like Loki was thinking along the same lines as him as far as being vague went. Tony decided to let the two talk on their own while he checked that the area was clear. Then he was going to return to Malibu to party.

Barton laughed. “Stubborn isn't the only word I'd used to describe him.” Tony had no problem deciding that that one was insulting, and he scowled at the inside of his helmet. “How'd you meet? Let me guess, you blew something of his up and it turned him on, so he made you work with him. Wouldn't be the first time.”

No, it wouldn't, and maybe that should say something to Tony about his sense of self-preservation. Not that Loki did it on purpose, but Tony still grieved the death of his beautiful Saleen S7.

“Something like that,” Loki agreed softly, and Tony couldn't decide if Loki was annoyed or amused by the spy's attempts to gather information.

“It must be difficult living with him. Though I'm sure the lab is worth it, if what I've heard is true.”
“Stark isn't the worst partner I've had. And you're right, I do find his rooms quite enjoyable.” Both Tony and Barton sputtered at that, and Tony then knew that Loki was definitely amused, or at least as amused as he could get. He was toying with Agent Barton, a wonderful first conversation with someone outside of Tony’s sphere.

“You're... what? I thought you only went for the ladies, Stark.”

“Have you read the tabloids?” Tony couldn't help but respond. No reason not to play whatever game Loki was. “As long as they're hot, they're fair game. Why, are you jealous? And here I thought you were with Natasha. Don't worry, I won't tell.”

Barton stuttered over a response, and then he growled. “Fuck you, man.”

When Tony answered that with a sultry, “Well if you insist,” he could hear an irritated snarl and the click of Barton's comm going offline. “Aww, well he's no fun.” Then Tony disconnected from the main line before saying anything else, because he knew Hawkeye was still listening. Sneaky little spy.

Iron Man scoped the area out one more time, watching as SHIELD agents came to collect the bits of fallen robots and police started swarming the area, before he shot off back towards home. “How are you doing?” Tony asked seriously now that they were alone again. Loki had sounded fine just moments ago, but one of the first things Tony had learned was that the god was determined when it came to hiding weakness. He wasn’t as bad with Tony at least—partly because he knew Tony had seen him at his worst, and partly because Tony was getting good at seeing through his charade and Loki hadn't found it worth the effort—so asking occasionally got him a truthful answer. Like now.

“I have... about two hours.” Loki suddenly sounded tired, as if the weight of the world was bearing down on him. Tony wished he was home so he could offer whatever comfort he could, but he was too far out to make it back to California anytime soon. Even if he was there, he could only do so much to save Loki from the demons in his mind. “SHIELD will... come asking after me.”

“Most likely.” There was no way they could flaunt a mysterious person—a person with magic that made Doom's forces look like daisies—in front of a SHIELD agent and not get reported to Fury. Tony could only hope his plan worked right and that SHIELD saw Loki as an asset. That was the only thing he could think of that would keep them from trying and take advantage of the mage.

“I... need to go now.” There was another click as Loki went offline, leaving Tony with Jarvis.

“How's he doing?” he asked his AI.

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“Not well, sir. He's resting in the corner of the lab at the moment. I estimate he will fade before you return home.” Damn. So much for thinking moderate interaction wouldn't stress Loki out too much. All that Tony could do now was wait and see if his plan worked and try to think of a back up plan in case everything went wrong.

Tony’s worrying forcefully came to an end four days later, while he and Loki were going over the footage of the effects of the Dragon Slayer. “Sir, Director Fury is calling.”

Both Tony and Loki looked at each other, eyes wide; they knew that no matter what Fury said, something was going to change today. And change it did.

A thunderous voice resounded through the room: “Stark, you and your little girlfriend are coming to
the Helicarrier right now. Get moving.”
Exceeding the Limit

"I am, I will, so no longer,
Will I lay down, play dead,
Play your doe in the headlights,
Locked down and terrified.
Your deer in the headlights,
Shot down and horrified.

When push comes to pull, comes to shove,
Comes to step around this self-destructing dance,
That never would've ended till I rose,
I roared aloud here,
I will, I am."

-Rose by A Perfect Circle

-o-o-o-

"You can't just walk in there, Loki! You know you can't!"

“What did you think was going to happen, Stark? This was the plan, wasn't it? We knew they'd want to see me.”

“That doesn't mean you should just waltz in there! I'm sure I could arrange something with Fury. If I just explained the situation—"

“What situation? That I'm so pathetic I can't even leave the house? I can't stay cooped up in here forever, Stark!”

“Oh, because the middle of SHIELD headquarters is the best place to acclimate? This is stupid. You aren't ready for this!”

“That's my choice to make! I'm not some coward that hides away.”

“That's not the point! Loki, you just can't-”

“I don't want your pity, nor your guidance! I'm fine! You do not control me.”

“That's not-"

“I said I am fine! This is not up for debate.”

“Yes, it is! Especially since I'm the one who’s going to be dealing with you when you blank out! We both know that's how this little power trip of yours is going to end! I'm not taking you to SHIELD, not like this. If something goes wrong, I can't guarantee your safety, and that isn't a risk I'm willing to take!”

“Maybe I don't need you to keep me safe! I'm not some weak damsel that needs to be protected by a mortal!”

“Really? You could have fooled me. Or have you just been acting this whole time? You don't really have panic attacks or blank-outs. No, of course you don't, because you're 'fine!'”
“Look at it this way, Stark: either we go there now, while our little demonstration is still fresh in their minds, or we drag this out and lose ground. I don't think they'll be as receptive to negotiation after you make them wait forever, because that's how long it's going to take before you finally realize I'm not incompetent.”

“Loki, please. That isn't why I don't think we should do this. You know I don't consider you weak.”

“Then prove it. Let me do this, Stark. If you don't think I'm weak, then at least trust me with this.”

“...Fine. If that's what you really want. But don't be surprised when something goes wrong.”

“It won’t.”

“We both know that's a lie.”

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Despite all of his bravado, Loki was terrified. The trip to the Helicarrier passed by in a blur; he remembered being guided into the backseat of a car and exiting the garage, but then the events blurred together into a haphazard mess.

At first, he had tried to ignore the chaotic world outside of the confines of the car, but motion and madness pulled his attention to the window. There were things everywhere. People talking and shouting and laughing. Bright colors and gaudy clothes. The clank of metal, the creak of leather. Odoriferous perfumes and malodorous trash. Dogs that barked and growled. Birds that cooed and flew. Cars—small, large, sleek, bulky, silver, blue, black, blue—zipped alongside and opposite, crisscrossing everywhere. They honked and roared and screeched, beasts of flashing metal. The reek of smoke and burning rubber. Music blared and faded. Waves pounded against the shore, chipping it away bit by bit. A slow, steady decay. And the sky, stretching as far as the eye could see, unmarred by heavy clouds.

Stark's presence waxed and waned, even though Loki didn't think the man was actually getting farther away. Sometimes when the man spoke, the words were just another buzz atop of the clamor, dissonant and meaningless. Other times the sound translated into words. “Loki, hey, if you're getting overwhelmed concentrate on me, okay? Damn it, this was such a stupid idea…”

Stark looked at him in the rear-view mirror, face twisted into a frown. His eyes were concerned, too concerned, and through the haze Loki felt the flashes of anger. “I am fine, Stark,” he hissed even as he tried to follow the man's advice. Don't look out the window, look at Stark. Don't listen to things outside, listen to Stark. The next few snippets that breached the blare revolved around Stark as the man talked gibberish, nonsensical sounds that fought to be heard over everything else clamoring around them.

Then there was a loud bang and Loki started, automatically extending his senses to filter through the world around him; they swept into his mind, and he couldn't quiet them back down. It was like a drill inside his brain, going deeper and deeper, so sharp and invasive, and-

“That's it, I'm turning around. You're not even going to make the trip there at this rate.”

It was hard to find the words, and his lips stumbled, but still he rasped, “No! No. I'll manage. I'm fine. I'm fine...I can do this. I'm fine.” He thinks they argued some more, but he couldn't remember what they said- just that he had somehow won the disagreement and they kept moving forwards, even if all he really wanted to do was turn around and hide back in Stark's lab. ‘I can't be useless anymore. I'm not weak. I need to be okay. I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine...’ But thinking it didn't make it
There was a gap in his awareness followed by a soft murmur. “Jarvis, call Fury. Ask him to try and reduce the noise level there or something. Say I have a hangover if you have too, just make him do it.”

The car slowed. There was an authoritative, foreign voice. “I need to see some ID.” Some shuffling and quiet words, then, “What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing. He's just not used to leaving the house, is all.”

Distantly, Loki thought he should be mad about being treated like he was an invalid. 'Not weak. I am Loki. A god. He who should be king.' But then the moment slipped away and he forgot what he had been thinking.

The next thing he knew, there was a hand on his shoulder and Stark’s voice in his ear. “Hey bud, we’re here. Come on, it’s too late to go back. You need to pull yourself together.” Loki blinked slowly, dazed, and dragged his eyes to Stark. The man gave him a strained smile and patted his shoulder before pulling back. “Let’s go, princess. It’s party time.”

Fueled by pride and will, the god pulled himself together. He took a deep breath, steeled his nerves, and stepped from the shelter of the car. As he stood, a mask settled across his features, transitioning the expression from terrified man to powerful god. There was only one thing missing, and with a twist of his fingers, Loki’s comfortable Midgardian clothes were replaced with ostentatious leathers.

“...Okay, I must admit, that's kind of creepy,” Stark said as he looked the god up and down, whistling softly at the formidable image. “I had gotten used to you wearing sweats and tees all the time.”

Loki settled into his role, trying to accentuate the fact that he was okay. Words came from his lips unhurried and level, as artificial as the rest of this show. “While preferable, I don't think that state of dress is going to make the right impression. Now hurry up, I can't do this all day.” Or even for a few hours. The clock was ticking—tick-tock, tick-tock—as the darkness rammed against his walls and tried to feast upon his dislocated mind. Clenching down on his distress, Loki gestured for Stark to lead the way. The man gave him one last hesitant look, not buying the show, before he turned around and started walking, Loki right behind him.

They emerged from the dim, quiet parking garage into the bright Californian sun. People bustled to and fro, dressed in uniforms and sleek suits. A few stopped and stared as he and Stark walked by, and Loki could only hope it was because of his unusual dress and not the unhealthy pallor of his skin or gauntness of his limbs. The few whispers he could hear—“Who is that man with Tony Stark?” “I’ve never seen him before. Do you think he's a superhero, too? I mean, he is wearing armor.” “Yeah, and it looks heavier than he is. I wonder what's wrong with him.”—told him it was both, and his hands balled into fists until he could feel his nails threatening to break skin.

“At least the Helicarrier is docked right now. This would have been a lot more difficult if we had to take a plane across the country. It would have made the two hour drive seem like a walk in the park,” Stark commented as they made their way through the complex, looking over his shoulder to check on Loki. “How are you holding up?”

“ Asking won't change anything, Stark. I'm fine.” Yet his heart was beating quickly inside of his chest, and he could hear each pump as the blood rushed through his ears. Thu-thump, thu-thump. ‘Why are you so afraid?’ His eyes darted around, trying to scope out any threat. He was hyper-aware of all the people around him, watching as they moved around large shipment crates, repaired broken
equipment, and interacted amongst each other. No one seemed hostile, but still his skin crawled and his breath threatened to hitch. 'You're fine, aren't you? Stop being so pitiable.'

Loki clenched his fists even tighter and felt the hot trickle of blood on his palm before the skin sealed over again. With a rough shake of his head, he tried to disband the thoughts that weighed down on him. Right now, he had a role to play, and any failure on his part was unacceptable. 'I'm fine. I am.'

"You can't lie to me, Loki. Not on this. I'm just saying that if you need to go back home, tell me. I'll figure something out." Except it was too late, because they had already crossed the grounds and were walking up the steps to board the large carrier. The only thing Loki could do now was try and map out the ship in his head so that if something went wrong, he wouldn't be at a complete disadvantage. He couldn't—wouldn't—rely on Stark's help this time. He was a god, and it was about time he acted as such, even if his mind wasn't working properly.

They walked around fighter planes and storage crates until they reached a large reinforced door. Stark pulled an ID card out of his pocket and slid it through the keycard lock, receiving a beep and green light in reply. Stark looked at Loki again, took a deep breath, and pushed the door open.

The inside of the Helicarrier was just as busy as the outside, if not more so. People rushed through the halls, some in uniform and others in compact suits. Loki and Stark were barely spared a glance here as they walked through the throng. It wasn't until they reached what Loki assumed was the main control room when someone paid attention to them. "You sure took your sweet time, boys," a gruff voice said, and Loki recognized it immediately from all the times he overheard Stark's conversations: Director Fury.

He and Stark turned as one, and Loki instantly pinpointed the director. Even if he hadn't seen a photo of Fury from hacking into Stark's system, it was clear this man was in charge. With his hands clasped loosely behind him and his back ramrod straight, he swept into the room like he owned the place.

Unable to stop himself, Loki's eyes were drawn to the man's eye-patch. He felt the memories within him stir, so easily brought to light at the slightest reminder. Recollections of failure, disappointment, and betrayal: of things that he could not forget no matter how much he wanted to. The visage of his father—not father, and it ached to know that everything of Loki's was 'not'. What was there that he could call his own?—haunted him. He remembered that one blue eye looking down at him, always ashamed of how weak he had become. Always regaling him to being nothing more than a tool.

But Fury was not Odin, and this was not Asgard. Loki would not suffer being considered weak just because he could not keep his own mind from wandering. Pulling harder on the strength of his will, he schooled his features back into nonchalance as the director approached, a scowl fixed firmly on his face as he glanced between them. When Director Fury came to a stop, he gave Loki a long, scrutinious look before saying, "If you two wouldn't mind, we're going to have a nice little chat in the conference room." Then he turned and stalked off, not checking to see if they followed.

"He's such a drama queen..." Stark muttered under his breath as they moved to catch up to the man. Walking at a brisk pace, they wound through the carriers numerous corridors, going deeper and deeper into the ships interior. The farther they went, the quieter it got, and for that Loki was thankful. He didn't, however, appreciate that Fury was purposely trying to put him at a disadvantage by immersing him in unknown territory. While teleporting away was always an option, it was an escape tactic; there was always a chance for things to go wrong before then.

Eventually, the three came at a stop before a nondescript door, and Loki was surprised to note that the sign beside it did say 'conference room'. He had been half expecting Fury to try and stick him in a lock-down room until he decided if Loki was a threat or not. The director punched in an entry code, and the door slid open, revealing nothing more than a large circular table surrounded by cheap chairs.
They entered the room, and the door slid shut behind them, locking with a faint click. The sound made Stark give Fury a disapproving frown, but he otherwise remained silent in his protest.

“Now then, why don't you take a seat and we can stop wasting time.” The director's tone booked no room for argument, so Loki walked around the table and pulled out a seat that gave him a full view of the room. Stark grabbed the seat next to his, while Fury remained standing at the head of the table.

Inside his chest, Loki's heart began to beat faster. He glanced briefly at Stark, trying to ascertain from the man's body language what he was thinking. The engineer caught his eyes and gave him a flimsy smile. One didn't need to be well-versed in strategy to know that they were in a poor position. SHIELD may not be against Stark, but they certainly weren't going to just accept the god into their fold. To top it off, Loki didn't actually know what Fury wanted. Was this about New Mexico? Did they want to lock him away? Punish him? Or was it related to how close he was with Stark, and they wanted to make sure he wasn't an information leak? Or was it as he and Stark hoped, that they wanted to ally with him because of his magic?

Whatever it was, if Loki played his cards wrong he might end up worsening their position. Director Fury knew that, and he seemed to enjoy making Loki and Stark stew while he stood there. For all that it was stressing Loki out, under the building panic he had to admit he kind of liked this man. Fury was clearly experienced in what he did, and Loki was certain lesser men have caved simply from Fury's unwavering disposition.

Loki, however, was not a lesser man and knew how this game was played. He kept himself still, making sure Fury understood he was not at all intimidated. They stared each other down, and Loki ignored Stark's quiet mutter of, “You can just smell the testosterone in the air.”

Finally, the director relented and broke off his one-eyed glower to reach into his trench coat and pull out a file. He threw it onto the table towards Stark. The engineer pulled it closer and curiously opened it. He rifled through a few of the papers, eyes skimming over their content. One page in particular caught his attention, and his shoulders relaxed. With a relieved grin, Stark pushed the papers towards Loki.

The god repeated the same process, speed reading each sheet until he reached the one that had calmed the other man. The words 'Potential Avengers Candidate' stared back at him, and it took Loki only a moment to remember that the Avengers was SHIELD's superhero pet project. Just like Stark had, Loki allowed himself to relax a little bit. Status as a potential ally put him at a lot better ground than being considered an expendable threat.

Then he realized that both Stark and Fury were looking at him expectantly—well, suspiciously, if he was just talking about the director. That's when Loki realized he wasn't actually suppose to know who the Avengers were, so he prompted himself to ask the anticipated question: “Avengers?”

“It's a group of superpowered individuals, and apparently Barton thinks you'd be a good candidate,” Fury replied while staring at the god like he was a lab specimen; Loki wished more than ever that he had his old physique back, and not this pale, gaunt mess. “Though I can't see why.”

Loki resisted the urge to prove Fury wrong. As amusing as turning random things into serpents or shifting himself into another animal to startle people was, that'd be playing into the director's hands. What people didn't know about him couldn't be used against him. Since it seemed Stark was waiting for his lead, Loki decided to play this game his way—meaning he'd dance around the topic until they gave him more information than he gave them. “I've been told before that I am a decent artist. I am also fluent in elvish, and know the best way to oust a bilgesnipe. Are those skills suitable enough?”

Fury's face was like thunder, and Stark laughed. “Nah, we already have Steve for that girly art stuff.
And what the hell is a bilgesnipe?"

Keeping one eye on the director in case he got too irritated by their antics, Loki turned towards Stark. “I forget you don't have those here. They're huge, scaly beasts with big antlers. Repulsive creatures, truly.”

Apparently Fury didn't have that much patience, because the man was quick to interrupt, “As fascinating as alien zoology is, there are more important topics to discuss. I don't have time to indulge your idiocy, Stark.”

“Hey, don't get mad at me. I didn't start it.” Stark raised his hands in an 'I'm innocent' gesture that was completely ruined by the smirk on his face.

“Considering that your brand of stupidity is particularly contagious and ET here has been spending the past few months in your basement, I'm going to say it's your fault.”

That got Loki to put his full attention back on Fury; he fought to keep his fear from spiking, but he couldn't stop the jump of his heart or the twisting in his guts. How did the director know how long he has lived with Stark ...What else did he know?

Loki kept his voice from trembling as he spoke lowly, “So you're trying to say you know about me, is that it? Clearly you don't know as much as you think you do.” Not if they were willing to let him walk amongst them without any real security measures. If they knew just what he was—mage and monster both—they wouldn't have invited him into their stronghold. Distancing him from the main hub was only effective if he didn't decide to teleport back up there. And considering that Stark didn't have anti-magic technology, SHIELD shouldn't, either.

“Oh, I think I do, Loki.” The way Fury said his name made Loki bristle, and for a brief moment, he feared he greatly underestimated SHIELD. Any doubt he had about whether or not the government agency knew of his involvement in New Mexico vanished. It had been a foolish hope to think they'd be ignorant anyway, considering the others who had been there that day had no qualms about revealing too much. If they wanted retribution... But Fury continued talking, putting a temporary halt to that train of thought. “However, that isn't the reason I wanted you here today. We have bigger fish to fry.”

“And just how big is this 'fish' that you'd be willing to ignore... that?” ‘That’ being the attempted destruction of a whole town.

“Yeah, what's up with the fish? Unless you're talking about Doom, but he's crawled back home for now.” Stark ignored the hostile look Fury was giving him. “I didn't see anything like that in the files, and though you could've improved your security, I don't see that happening anytime soon.”

“For your own safety, Stark, I would suggest you avoid insinuating that you regularly hack into a top-secret government database. As for the fish, we got a notice last week that Earth may face a new threat. A titan sized threat.” He regarded Loki. “Does the name Thanos sound familiar to you?”

Loki nodded, confused at the implication. “The Mad Titan, but... what does that have to do with Midgard?” He knew the story of Thanos; almost everyone did. The titan was infamous for his depravity and obsession with Death—for nearly destroying all of the Nine Realms. If Fury was going where Loki thought he was, then... it wasn't a situation to take lightly.

“Everything, apparently. Our source says that there is reason to believe that this Thanos guy is coming to Earth, and it ain't gonna be for a tea party. If he does show, he'll be toting a large army of aliens from another galaxy.”
“Aliens?” Stark cut in, disbelieving. “That sounds a bit... sci-fi.” Loki gave him a deadpan look, and it took a moment for it to click. “Oh, right... I'm already in the same room with one. Never mind, I can believe that. But why Earth?”

“Our informant wasn't very comprehensive in his warning. I was hoping that Loki here would know something about it.”

Loki chuckled mirthlessly at that. “You would actually trust my word?”

Fury gave him a fake, tight smile in return. “Not at all, but seeing as how right now we know absolutely nothing and you're the only known alien around, we might as well give it a try. So tell me, what does he want with Earth?”

Quickly discarding any lies he could have told, because truly it would gain him nothing, Loki explained, “In simplest terms, Thanos would come here because Midgard is a gateway. It is the only way to enter the Nine Realms; if he wants to get to the other eight, he’d have to go through this one first.” Which would have been an alarming notion if Loki actually had reason to believe Director Fury's claim of imminent demise. Thanos was a legend, after all—faded into obscurity with his crimes laid to rest. As far as Loki was concerned, this conversation was purely hypothetical.

It seemed Fury and Tony were in the same boat (if the lack of panic or urgency was anything to go by) but Fury still asked, “How do we keep him out? I'm not letting aliens invade my planet.”

“I don't think you'd have a choice,” Loki said with certainty. “If Thanos came to Midgard, everyone would die. It's as simple as that.”

“What?” Tony exclaimed. “Woah, hold up. I think you're underestimating us Earthlings there.”

“I assure you that I am not. Not that it matters—the outcome would be the same either way.” He turned to Fury, who seemed to be sorting through everything Loki just said. “How sure are you that Thanos is actually coming here?” If Fury actually thought that Thanos was coming, asking someone he didn't trust would be horrid tactics.

“Not very,” Fury admitted, confirming Loki's thoughts. “The person who told us said that they weren't certain if Thanos was really on the move, or if it was just misinformation. However, if there's even a sliver of a chance of it happening, it's SHIELD's job to be prepared. That includes making sure we have enough firepower to fight back.” The man gave a pointed look to the pile of papers that were spread out before Loki.

The vague references to whoever had supplied SHIELD information set off warning bells in Loki's head, prompting him to ask, “And who, exactly, is this mysterious informant of yours?” Because out of everyone who could give Midgard information, Loki could only think of one person who actually would.

The expression on Fury's face shifted, and Loki tensed. It seemed almost like regret, but... Why? Loki watched, wary and ready to act, as the director moved to the controls besides the projector screen in the room. “I was wondering when you'd ask. I figured if anyone could vouch for the validity of our source, it'd be you. Not that I'd trust your word on this particular matter.”

Fury hit a button and an image covered the wall. It only took a split second for Loki to recognize the person—a split second for all of his efforts in keeping his mind grounded to be completely washed away. Nearly eight years had passed, and yet he looked the same as always. The same blond hair, the same expressive blue eyes, the same carefree demeanor.
'Did you even miss me at all, brother?'

The familiar face hurt just too look at, and Loki felt tears well up in his eyes. It had been so long since he'd seen him, and yet watching the screen it seemed like they had fought only yesterday. The guilt, hatred, and love all boiled up inside him, and Loki couldn't help the desperate whisper that welled up inside him. "Thor. Thor."

'My brother.'

-o-o-o-

The whole situation was stupid. Absolutely stupid.

It had been a stupid plan on the drive there, when Loki was slumped in the back seat and shuddered with every rev of the engine, his hands clamped tightly over his ears. It had been a stupid plan when they pulled into the California base and Loki was so zoned out that he didn't react to the security guard's pitying inquiries. It had been a stupid plan when they walked to the meeting room and Loki hid avidly behind an unyielding mask, looking like he was about to go to war. It had been a stupid plan when they listened to Fury talk about Thanos and Loki said with no uncertainty that if the Mad Titan really was coming, they were all going to die.

And it was still a stupid plan with that damn picture on the screen and Loki sitting rigid with his eyes wide and bright with tears.

"Loki? Loki! What's wrong?" Tony gripped the god's shoulder, heart dropping at the sharp trembling he could feel even through the thick layers. "Damn it..."

This is what Tony had spent the whole day in tense anticipation of. This was always going to be the result of their stupidity. Because no matter what happened, Loki would never get a break. Just when he thought things would get better, just when it seemed like there was a way forwards, reality had to rear its ugly head. Of course things wouldn't be okay. Insane powerful aliens could very well be on their way to Earth, Loki was still an unstable wreck, and Fury was convinced the god would be able to do something to fix it. But he couldn't, and Tony knew that as clearly as he knew the color of the sky. Loki wasn't able to fix anything, not right now.

"Thor..." came the strangled whisper, the word barely passing through bloodless lips. "Thor."

"Thor? What about Thor?" His only answer was Loki's ragged wheezing, and even when Tony placed himself between the god's gaze and the projector, Loki kept staring blankly, tears streaming down his face.

Inexplicably, Tony felt anger stir inside of him: at Loki, at the world, at whatever the hell made the god this way. He was just so tired. Month after month of the same thing, and it was easy to forget all the improvements they've made when the ending would always be the same.

"Thor is Loki's brother. The one Loki tried to kill." Tony whipped around to face Fury while Loki made a miserable keening noise. The director was still standing by the wall, hands clasped behind his back. His one eye was watching both of them closely, but Tony couldn't for the life of him figure out what the man was thinking.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tony growled, tightening his grip on Loki's arm. But he knew. He had always known; he just hadn't cared.

"Don't play dumb, Stark. I know you've seen the files. Thor came to Earth eight years ago, and Loki sent a death machine upon him. Nearly destroyed a small town while he was at it. Or did you forget
that while you were busy playing nurse?” As he said this, Fury's eye was on Loki like a hawk. His stern countenance didn't change even as the god started to shake harder, hyperventilating in between agonized whines.

“Now isn't the time, Fury!” Tony's fingers dug harshly into Loki's arm, but the god didn't even seem to notice. Instead, he met the director's eye with a different emotion: rage. The god's lip curled, baring his teeth even as bright tear streaks marred his cheeks.

If Tony was being completely honest with himself, he'd admit that like this, Loki looked deranged. That for all of Tony's insistence that the god wouldn't hurt anyone, he didn't believe his own words in that very second. If this continued, Tony knew it was only going to end with violence, and he didn't need Fury around for that.

“That's enough! Fury, if you don't get out of this room right now, I'm withdrawing all of Stark Industries' financial support! You are out of line!” He added his glare to Loki's, daring the man to try and stay.

But the director relented, and with a low, “We're going to have a nice chat about this when you're done,” he turned around and stalked from the room. The door slid shut with a click, leaving Tony and Loki alone in the room. Not unmonitored, however.

“Jarvis, cut the audio and video feed from this room. Warn me if they hack past your block.”

“Certainly, sir. I will endeavor to keep the door locked from the outside as well,” the AI said over the speakers in the room, revealing his presence inside SHIELD's system. Tony hadn't intended to show his hand on this, but... they had him improve their security. They should have known he'd put his own safeguards in place.

Now shielded from unwanted eyes or ears, Tony turned back to Loki (always Loki, because that was who his life revolved around now, wasn't it? No time for himself, never able to relax, because it was always Loki, Loki, Loki. And he hated it.) “I told you. From the very beginning, I told you that this was going to happen. And yet you insisted on being stupid!”

Tony should have been comforting the god, should have been trying to diffuse the situation, but he could not push past the anger that simmered inside of him. The constant stress was finally getting to him, and try as he might, he could not let it go.

It seemed like Loki was feeling the same way, because he forced his attention onto Tony, green eyes glinting and dangerous. “There was no other option. You are the one who's being foolish.” Then he reached over and gripped Tony's wrist, pulling away the hand that had been digging into his arm. Tony let him go and watched with narrowed eyes as Loki rose to his feet. The god loomed over Tony's shorter stature, forcing the engineer to look up.

Intimidation, however, did nothing to stop Tony. “Oh, so wanting to avoid you going off the deep end is 'foolish'? You didn't seem to mind when I was doing it earlier. Or what, is eight months of being useless finally getting to you?”

'Shut up, Tony! Just stop talking!' his mind shouted at him. 'You're saying stuff you're going to regret. You need to stop this now, before it gets any worse.'

But he couldn't stop. Not as Loki sucked in a sharp breath, not as he twisted away so they were no longer chest to chest, and not as he turned around once he reached the other side of the room to shout, “I am not useless! I can manage myself, Stark! I'm fine!”
Tony was starting to hate that word and all of the lies it carried. “No you aren't! You can say it as many times as you want, it doesn't change anything! You want to know what you are? You're fucked up. You're broken.”

“I am a god!” Loki cried, his voice raw. Fresh tears were now streaming down his face even as he yelled, and Tony felt guilt well up inside of him, dampening his anger. But not enough to keep one last hateful statement from passing his lips.

“You're a shame amongst gods!”

It was as if the words were a physical blow, forcing Loki to stumble backwards. For a moment, Tony thought that the god would break down into sobs, and he automatically took a step forwards to go and comfort Loki, but then green eyes rose to meet his, and Tony froze.

The sheer amount of hatred and wrath in Loki's eyes floored him, and Tony Stark realized that he was afraid. He had lied when he said the god was a shame. If anything, he respected the other's strength, of both body and mind. But he never expected to have that force directed at him, nor with such ferocity. “Loki-”

“I am a god.” Loki repeated, his voice no more than a whisper, and yet it chilled Tony more than the shouting had. “Damaged or not, I am still a god, and you would be wise to remember that.”

Before Tony could say anything else, could apologize and try and make amends—because even through the anger, Tony could see the hurt and sorrow, and it was his fault. He needed to make things right, or Loki would have no one, and he feared to think about what the god would do then—a green haze suddenly collected around Loki's skin. For one brief second, Tony thought that Loki would attack him, but before he could even blink the god was gone. Loki vanished into the air, and Tony had a feeling he didn't go back to the house.

“Jarvis, please, please tell me he's back in Malibu, or at least somewhere on the Helicarrier,” Tony begged.

“I'm sorry sir, but I cannot find Loki anywhere.”

All of the anger fled from Tony at those words, leaving behind nothing but weariness and worry. “Keep an eye out for him. If he goes back home, tell me. Otherwise...” Tony ran his fingers through his hair, heaving out a sigh. Adrenaline gone, he felt exhausted. “I'm going to go tell Fury to check all the surveillance. I doubt Loki's going to just sit quietly somewhere, not with an exit like that.” Tony could only hope that in his insanity, Loki had enough sense to not hurt anyone. Property damage he could work with, but if the god went homicidal...

With one last look around the room, Tony quietly asked Jarvis to unlock the door and went to go find Fury.
Admitting To Weakness

"Cast the calming apple,
Up and over satellites,
To draw out the timid wild one,
To convince you it's alright.
And I listen for the whisper,
Of your sweet insanity while I formulate,
Denials of your effect on me.

You're a stranger,
So what do I care?
You vanish today.
Not the first time I hear,
All the lies."

-A Stranger by A Perfect Circle

Tony found Director Fury standing in the center of the bridge ten minutes later. Although he had been anxious to find Loki and correct his mistakes, Tony walked slowly through the interior of the Helicarrier. Each step replaced his cooling anger with remorse, and alone in the halls, he had some time to put his thoughts back in order. There were things he had to think through before he confronted Fury, problems both old and new.

There was no doubt that Tony had just majorly screwed up. Everything he said, whether it had been a lie or the harsh truth, he wished he could take back. While he couldn't deny that Loki and he needed to talk, he also couldn't deny that he picked a terrible time to let his frustration out. His brutal words did more harm than good; now, not only was Loki most likely freaking out, but Tony didn't even have a clue where he was.

However, Tony also felt like all the blame didn't fall on him. It was the same Sisyphean task, day after day, and despite how selfish it may seem, Loki’s demons didn’t just haunt the god. It’d be a lie if Tony said he didn’t feel bogged down in the mire that was Loki’s mind. After so long trying to make things better, sacrificing all he had for the god—his time, his energy, his trust—it hurt to watch the stagnate water fester and breed. It was true that things were slowly getting better, and for that Tony was extremely grateful, but it was just that—slow. How long would it be before Loki could even pass as normal? How long would it be before Loki could look at the sky in awe and not terror? How long would it be before Loki could just be happy? Was it really too much to ask for Loki to just have a bit of joy in his life?

Not that Tony was doing a good job of helping the god find that fulfillment, what with him being a complete ass. Last he checked, the key to happiness was not taking all of someone’s faults and throwing them in their face, betraying them at the most personal level. It had been wrong—egregious—to do that to Loki, to one of the few people in Tony's life that he truly loved. But it was even more wrong that Loki even suffered in the first place, and it was the accompanying feeling of helplessness that made Tony furious.

If—when—he found Loki, Tony was going to fix things. Right now, every 'I'm fine' that passed Loki's lips was a lie, angering in the fact that they couldn't believe in it even if they wanted to. One day, Tony would be glad to hear it, but only when the god wasn't holding onto the illusion of
serenity while disease spread beneath the surface. If Loki was truly going to be okay, he had to understand that he wasn't right now. The ability to hide behind masks did not rid him of the problems beneath. It would take time, and it was going to be a hard, long road, but Tony would be there with him every step so that one day, 'I'm fine' wouldn't have to be a lie.

It was with these thoughts in mind that Tony entered the bridge and made his way towards Fury. The director's eye darted up from the screen, and when he noticed that Tony was alone, his lips pressed into a thin line. Once again, Tony hoped that if Loki really was going batshit somewhere that he didn't hurt anyone. More selfishly, he hoped that Loki wouldn't hurt himself. When it came down to it, Tony would rather a few strangers suffer and fight through the drama that would follow than have to deal with the personal fallout if the god decided to kill himself. Suicide could not be the culmination of all of Tony's efforts—of Loki's efforts.

"Something tells me alien-boy isn't in the conference room. Or even on the carrier," Fury said by way of greeting as Tony came to stand beside him.

"Got it in one, Sherlock," Tony drawled, feigning nonchalance that he knew the director would see right through. It was at least better than dwelling on how he felt like a horrible, insensitive screw-up. What he had just done was equal in severity to not telling Pepper that he was dying, and a simple 'sorry' or overly expensive gift wasn't going to cut it.

Fury's jaw clenched, and he resumed scanning the room, observing the screens with more intensity than before. Without looking at Tony, he spoke again, "So what, your girlfriend get tired of you and go back home?"

"Not quite, and he was a bit too angry to tell me where he was going." At this, Tony shot a quick glare at the side of Fury's face, because his vicious retorts notwithstanding, there was no denying that the director had purposely fueled the fire. "We're going to have a quick chat about that, actually. Because seriously, what the hell was that?" Tony's voice had risen by the end, drawing a few eyes to their position. Conscientious of their audience, Tony lowered his voice again and continued, "You knew showing him that picture was going to mess him up, and yet you did it anyway."

Fury's eyes narrowed. "Where is he?" When Tony remained silent, because he honestly had no clue what the answer was and knew better than to try and say something witty, Fury hissed his name; this time his tone disallowed silence. "Stark. That man has confirmed accounts of attempted homicide, and I'm assuming that happened even before he looked all kinds of crazy. Where. Is. He?"

Tony held out his hands in a half-shrug, half-'calm down' gesture. "I have no idea." The director opened his mouth, and Tony cut him off with a hurried, "I don't think he's going to hurt anyone. He's not going to hurt anyone. He's a bit crazy, sure, but he also has enough self control to make a Buddhist priest proud. At the very least, he knows that if he goes genocidal all bets are off when it comes to his own safety. He wouldn't risk that."

Maybe reassuring someone that a person wouldn't commit murder because of selfish reasons wasn't the best way to go about it, but Tony knew if he tried buttering it up, Fury wouldn't believe it. And as brutal as the truth sounded, it was what it was. Not that Tony thought poorly of Loki, but when you were at the end of your tether like the god was, feeling betrayed and frustrated... well, people did some pretty drastic things when they were in that position. Tony had been in that mindset before, just like a lot of other SHIELD employees, and Fury would understand the cold logic far more than some feeble excuse of tenderness.

"You're sure of this? Because as much as you seem to like him, if he starts looking like a threat, I won't hesitate to use force. Not if it means protecting innocent people."
“Considering how well I know the guy, yeah, I'm pretty sure.” Loki's face, twisted in a snarl, flashed through Tony's mind, and he added, “Though I can't guarantee he won't cause any damage. Like I said, he was pissed when he teleported out of here. Now tell me, what was up with your little show in there?”

“I had to make sure he wasn't dangerous.”

“So... what? You had to go and provoke him?” As far as Tony was concerned, that wasn't justification for preying on Loki's instability.

But Fury didn't share that same emotional attachment, and Loki's mental well-being wasn't as important to him as the sake of innocents. Whatever regret he felt was pushed aside. “People reveal their true intentions under pressure. That man is an avid liar, and I needed something to make sure. If he hurts anyone, then the deal is off and I want him locked up or off my planet. If he doesn't... we could use a bit more firepower.”

Tony hesitated for a moment, afraid of ruining Loki's advantage, then decided that it was better to stop any misunderstandings before they began. “I don't know what you're thinking he's going to be able to do. Anyone with eyes can see that Loki is not capable of day to day things, let alone going into the thick of battle. I won't let you force him into battle.”

Fury opened his mouth to respond, but the words never left his lips as his gaze suddenly locked on to something. Tony followed his eyes and saw that one of the screens in the room was flashing a warning. He felt his stomach drop; though a little optimistic voice in his head whispered that it could be something other than Loki, he knew it wasn't. The woman sitting in front of the aforementioned screen straightened in her chair, rapidly shuffling through windows as she verified the source of the alarm. Then she apparently found what she needed because she looked up at Fury. “Sir, we have what appears to be a freak snow storm in Norway. Diagnostics show that it is independent of any known weather patterns in the area. It is also emitting enough radiation, type unknown, to register at the nearest nuclear testing facility.”

A radioactive blizzard hadn't been quite what Tony and Fury were expecting, and they both frowned at the report. For a moment, Tony allowed himself to hope that it was just a normal, non-deity created snow storm. Fury didn't seem to share that conviction, and he said, “Tell the European division to get a plane out there. I need visuals.”

The woman nodded and turned back to her computer to type something in. She put a pair of headsets on and pushed the built in mic towards her mouth. She spoke softly into it, and Tony could only overhear the words 'snow storm', 'fly in', and 'requests visuals' before she cut the call and put the headsets back down. To Fury she relayed, “A team is on their way over there now, and the European sect has put out a notice for local governments to remain on standby according to the regulations from the International Superhuman Security, Act IV.” Then she returned to monitoring the storm, which was the only thing they could do until a team came back with visuals.

Tony followed her lead and peered intently at the screen, ruining his personal attempt at acting like what was happening in Norway wasn't relevant to Loki. The longer he watched, the harder it was to pass the thing off as natural. For starters, it wasn't even winter in the northern hemisphere. If it was, a storm wouldn't be too unexpected, but a blizzard this massive was unprecedented for this time of the year. The other telling factor that this 'act of god' actually suited the legal term was the storm's structure; it was like a tornado, concentrated violence via a huge mass of whirling death, but it did not move. Satellite images showed that the mass spiraled out from a single point that, instead of petering out as time went on, got thicker and thicker.

While Tony was fixated on the storm, the rest of the world moved on around him. Fury had turned
his attention to the dozens of other screens, people bustled in and out of the room with important business, and some guy played Galaga. It seemed like only Tony was in a stand still, his entire world hanging in the balance, and the scale decided by what SHIELD was going to find at the center of the storm.

When the female agent interrupted the silence, Tony's world began to move again. "The team has now reached the center of the storm. They are sending visuals now." She enlarged the footage on her display, but all Tony could see from where he was standing was a mess of white. Before he could ask her to make it bigger or walk over there, Fury had the same file pulled up on his personal screens.

Whoever was filming the storm was clearly having a hard time staying steady as their plane was assailed by harsh winds and heavy snow, but they managed to keep from wavering too much as they circled around one point. It took a tense minute for the snow to part in a way that allowed Tony to see him, but just a glimpse was needed for Tony to be sure of exactly what he was looking at. "God damn it, Loki. Why can't you just throw pillows at the wall like normal people?" At least he knew where Loki was now.

Tony was about to leave, go get his travel suit out of the car and fly all the way up to Norway, when the lady in charge of the weather anomaly spoke up again. "Sir, the scout team has confirmed that there is a person at the center of the storm. They are requesting permission to shoot."

"What?" Tony cried, drawing the room's attention. "Woah, no. No shooting. You do not have permission to shoot." The woman gave him an inquisitive look before she looked at Fury.

"Sir?" She asked, ignoring Tony's continued protest.

Fury scowled at the massive storm that was thrashing the Norwegian countryside. "Withhold fire. Until they are told otherwise, they are to maintain distance from the target." Then to Tony he said, "I will keep my word. As long as there are no casualties, we won't interfere."

Even if there were casualties, Tony would be damned if he let SHIELD gun Loki down. He abandoned all thoughts of leaving; there was no way he was going anywhere outside of this room while they were all trigger happy. Maybe Loki would go back home after he finished his little temper tantrum. If not, then Tony would come get him after the show was over.

Fury seemed to realize that Tony intended to stay for the indeterminate future, because he glowered at the engineer and said, "If you're going to get in the way, do it somewhere that isn't in my way." To make sure his order was followed, Fury closed the video feed on his display with a pointed look. Tony glared back at him, but that didn't stop him from obediently slouching off to the nearest unused computer and sitting down. It took longer than he would have liked to get the video feed open, and when he did, he watched it near religiously, not taking his eyes of for any longer than it took to blink.

The quality of the besieged camera wasn't optimal, and even though Tony soaked in every little glimpse he could get, it wasn't enough to tell how Loki was doing. Even at full zoom, he could only discern enough to tell that Loki was yelling up at the sky while magic continued to ooze unhindered from his skin; it was far too pixelated to attempt any semblance of lip reading.

Tony wasn't sure how long he had been watching Loki before someone spoke to him. "Is that the guy you came in here with?" The guy from the computer next to him leaned over to observe what Tony was watching so avidly. A quick glance at the man's own computer revealed him to be the Galaga guy.

"Uh, yeah," Tony replied distractedly, and was Loki still crying? His eyes looked suspiciously red.
“And he’s in Norway now? Wow, is he like Flash or something?” the man asked, clearly missing the hint that Tony wasn’t really in the mood to talk right now.

“Teleportation.” Okay, Loki’s eyes were really red...and he was looking a bit blue amongst all of the snow. Could gods get frostbite? Tony hoped not.

“That’s awesome. So uh... he like your partner or something? I never pictured Tony Stark getting all worried over someone. Not that I think you’re a bad person,” the man was hurry to correct, as if Tony would be at all offended if someone implied that he was a self-centered prick. “It’s just... unexpected.”

“Yeah, well, Loki has a gift for the unexpected. I’m starting to think the whole ‘God of Chaos’ thing is perfectly apt,” Tony replied, still barely paying attention to the conversation. Loki was acting strange on the screen- well, stranger than normal. He was staring at his hands with rapt attention.

“So how’d you two meet? If you don’t mind me asking.” Didn't this guy have work to get back to? Like making sure super-powered terrorists don't blow up New York or something?

“He totaled my car.” And what was Loki doing? He finally stopped looking at his hands (they seriously looked blue. That could not be healthy) and was now surrounded by spiking magic. It pulsed brighter and brighter until watching him was like looking into a miniature sun.

Gamer Boy said something else, but Tony didn’t hear him as he muttered, “Loki, what are you doing? Whatever it is, it looks like a bad idea.” The magic jerked again, so bright that it completely blotted out the screen. Meanwhile, the plane with the camera must have diverted its course, because in the next moment, the glow was no longer in the center of the screen and all he could see was the blue of the sky and the flurry of snow. Then the screen dipped as the plane banked sharply, and it took a moment for the wobbling to clear up enough for Tony to discern anything. It took an even longer moment for the engineer's brain to come to terms what was happening on the screen.

“Holy shit...” he breathed, and he could hear a similar sentiment being expressed by Mr. Arcade. Before his eyes, the side of a mountain was—for the lack of a better word—exploding. Massive streaks of raw magic pounded into the rock, and everywhere they hit, it was like seeing the Jericho missile all over again. It was mindless violence, angry and sporadic and damn Loki was powerful.

“Director Fury, I think you should see this,” the woman said, her voice heavy with concern. Fury looked over, and Tony watched with trepidation as he laid his eyes on Loki’s destruction. “Sir, they are requesting permission to shoot again. This is starting to overreach what's covered by the ISHS Act.”

Tony remained silent, wanting to see if the SHIELD director would actually keep his word before intervening. As if Fury were reading his thoughts, the man looked over at Tony and said, “Has anyone been hurt?”

“Not as far as I can tell, no.”

“Then leave him for now.” Fury opened the scene on his own screen and leaned in to see it better. He had a thoughtful look on his face as he watched Loki’s magic obliterate tons of solid rock. Despite Fury's wariness of Loki, he was still offering Loki a second chance. If he was really out for the god's blood, nothing Tony said would stop him from trying to take Loki out. Based on his actions, it seemed more like he was testing them and trying to see what they would do.

Tony turned back to his own screen to check on Loki, but other than more and more of the mountain wall turning into rubble, nothing had changed. It was almost an hour before the thick streams of
magic dwindled, taking with them the whirling tempest. The snow that had choked the air fell to the ground, at last giving Tony a clear view of Loki. That's how he saw Loki sway once, twice, and collapse bonelessly to the ground.

Tony was on his feet in an instant, pushing away from the computer and heading towards the exit without a second thought. Fury let him go without a word, and before he knew it, Tony was at his car. He reached into the trunk to grab his briefcase. It opened, and he stuck his arms in the center, letting the suit slide into position. Just as the last plate clicked, Tony was rocketing out of the garage and into the sky.

-O-O-O-

Loki wasn't moving. That was Tony's first thought when he found the god half buried in the snow, his limbs a dim blue color. Even as Iron Man landed a few feet away, flinging snow into the air and clanking at the impact, the god didn't so much as twitch. For one terrifying second, Tony thought that Loki was dead.

He fell to his knees by the god’s side, only dimly recognizing the fact that the plane which had been circling overhead broke its circuit and flew off. With a shaking hand, he turned the god over onto his back and looked for a sign that he was still alive. Loki's chest fluttered as he inhaled, and Tony exhaled loudly in relief. “Oh thank God…” He didn't know what he would have done if Loki died out here, alone, while Tony had just sat and watched him slowly freeze.

Arms still shaking from the rush of adrenaline, Tony began to take stock of the rest of the situation. His attention was immediately arrested by the markings on Loki’s skin, like scars on the planes of pale blue. “What is…?” He took off his mask to get a better look, ignoring the bitter chill against his exposed skin. It didn’t look like frostbite, or even a malady at all. In fact, it looked almost... natural. But it wasn't normal, so Tony quickly schlucked off his glove and put his hand to the god's skin—only to yank it away as the cold instantly bit into his flesh, feeling as if he were touching liquid nitrogen instead of a living being. He swore avidly, shaking his hand as if that would dispel the frost burn.

"Sir, I would recommend not touching him with your bare flesh. Thermal scans show that his skin is -78.5 degrees Celsius."

“Yes, thank you for the warning, Jarvis. That would have been helpful to know before I got frost bite.” Tony flexed his hand again, wincing at the blotchy red that was already forming. However, his pain could wait, and he pushed the steady burning aside in favor of helping the god.

Unable to touch Loki with his bare skin, Tony put the glove back on before trying to move him. He shook Loki's shoulders, not sure if the god had blanked out or just passed out. When Tony got no response, he had to thwart his panic and kept shaking the leather-clad body, calling Loki's name louder and louder.

Just as Tony was about to give up on the pretense that Loki had indeed blanked out, the god gave a faint groan and his eye lids fluttered. “Loki? Time to wake up, Sleeping Beauty. Come on, you can sleep when we get back home.” Tony shook him a bit harder, and finally, with a deep groan, Loki's green eyes opened. Except for they weren't green, and Tony couldn't help but flinch slightly at the unexpected red that greeted him behind blue lids.

Luckily, Loki didn't seem to notice his reaction, too busy blinking heavily and squinting against the glare of the sun and snow. Tony repositioned himself, using his body to out the direct light and cast a shadow over Loki's face. That's when the god finally seemed to notice him, though his eyes remained unfocused. Concerned, Tony moved to prop the god up into a sitting position and out of
the snow. “Loki, are you okay?” He asked as Loki struggled to remain upright, his eyes half-mast. Tony put a supporting hand on the god’s shoulder, holding part of his weight to keep him from slumping over again. Loki moaned in response, which wasn’t really the answer Tony was looking for. “Loki!”

“I’m okay... I’m just tired...” the god slurred, and that was something Tony could see clearly. What he really wanted to know was what he couldn't see: the damage of the mind. He had fucked up earlier, and he needed to know that Loki wasn’t still hurting from his emblazoned words. Regardless of the fact that Loki looked just as burned out as he did when he first came to Tony, the engineer didn't want to wait. Not just for his own peace of mind (though that was a part of it), but because he otherwise ran the risk of Loki bolting once he was more aware of himself. If that happened, then nothing would be fixed.

“Loki...” Something in Tony's tone must have alarmed the god, because he shook off his dazed expression and forced tired red eyes to focus on Tony. The engineer wanted to smile at him, the soft smiles that he often found himself doing without realizing it, but his guilt dragged his lips down into a frown instead. He reached out and cupped Loki's cheek, wishing he could feel the skin and not have to hide behind the barrier of metal. “Listen, I'm really, really sorry about what I said earlier. I didn't mean it... I just got so frustrated about all of this.”

“Frustrated that I don't get better?” Loki said softly, his tone self-deprecating. Tony had the feeling that if the god still had energy, this conversation wouldn't even be happening; it'd escalate into the same shouting fest from the Helicarrier. Which was why Tony had to fix any misconceptions immediately.

“No!” he barked, and then realized that didn't help him prove his point that he wasn't mad at Loki. He took a deep breath, aware of Loki watching his every move as the god tried to ascertain just what Tony was thinking—to fuel his own self-hatred with imagined evidence. “No,” Tony repeated with a more level voice. “You've come really far since you fell here. I'd never be mad at you for that. It's that...” He paused for a moment, trying to word just why he was so angry without making it seem like he was mad at Loki. The god was always so quick to interpret things negatively. In the end, he settled with, “But for all of you're progress, you aren't okay. It isn't your fault, it's just the way it is. We both want you to be better, but we can't just pretend what isn't.”

Loki gave a hollow laugh, and Tony’s hand tightened on the god’s arm at the dark sound. “Why?” he asked, voice just a tad desperate. “Why can't I pretend? If I don't act like I'm fine, then I'll never have control.”

“That's not true,” Tony said earnestly, tilting Loki's head so the god had to see the honesty in his expression. “It's acting like things are fine when they aren't that will keep you from actually getting anywhere. You'll be okay one day. Maybe not perfect, but clinging to what you lost will only drag you down.” Tony had learned that the hard way when he tried to act like Afghanistan changed nothing, when he pushed away people who tried to help, when he couldn't sleep from fear of nightmares, when he had immersed himself so thoroughly in being Iron Man the man inside had momentarily ceased to exist. That wasn't the fate he wanted for Loki.

It took a moment for Loki to respond, his eyes shifting to the left as he avoided looking at Tony. “I don't want to be like this anymore,” he whispered brokenly, and if Tony wasn't in the suit, he would have hugged the god tightly. Even then, he pulled Loki against his side, and the god slumped exhaustedly into him.

“I know,” Tony replied. “I know.”

For a few minutes. They sat there together, their silence amicable instead of oppressive. It was a
taciturn truce, and Tony was beyond relieved that Loki wasn't still furious at him. Eventually though, Tony had to put an end to their chick-flick moment, the cold making his ears numb and his nose run.

“Alright, as much fun are the cold is, we need to get going. I'm going to freeze if we stay any longer.” Loki didn't so much as shift. “Loki?” Tony reached over to pull the god back into a sitting position, and the touch finally prompted the god to move.

Bleary red eyes blinked up at the engineer, and Tony realized that at this point the god was more asleep than not. Which Tony didn't know if that was concerning or amusing, because either the god was getting hypothermia and passing out or he really was so unbothered by the cold that he could fall asleep half lying in snow. Not really thinking about what he was saying, Tony asked, “How come you aren't cold? Is it because you're blue?”

Tony didn't know what he was expecting, but it wasn't the reaction he got. Loki's eyes went wide, and he raised a hand before his face. His red eyes stared at the blue skin in what looked like horror, and that's when Tony clicked that this was the same thing Loki had done before he went ballistic. “Oh...” The god breathed, as if he hadn't realized his skin was still blue... and judging by how out of it he was, he probably hadn't. Loki looked up from his hands to Tony then back to his hands, as if they had somehow betrayed him. “Oh.” Loki breathed again, the blood draining from his face.

Then the god's red eyes rolled up into his head as he passed out. Tony reached out quickly to grab him before he tilted back into the snow, and Loki rested limply against his arm.

“Right... I'm going to guess this has something to do with why you don't like the color blue.” Tony said to the unconscious god, making a mental note to try and research it. At least now he had some basis as to why the color drove the god up the wall, although why blue skin was so upsetting he didn't know. Judging by Loki's reaction, there was a long story behind it, one Tony intended to know.

Until then, he needed to call in for one of his personal jets to fly over here, because there was no way he was carrying the god all the way back to California from Norway.

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Loki knew he was dreaming, yet that fact did nothing to quell the horror as warm blood splattered against his icy skin, and the temperature difference burned him. Despite the pain, he didn't withdraw his arm from the chest it was lodged in; not even as his mind cried, 'Stop! I don't want to kill him!'

Surrounded by barren frost, the cold of Loki's skin overpowered the heat of the body, and he could feel the liquid freeze almost instantly. A familiar scream, one that he dreaded hearing but couldn't always avoid, rung in his ears as his arm froze inside of a rapidly cooling chest.

Loki knew he had to be dreaming, because there was no way someone could be alive with a Jotun's arm shoved elbow deep between their lungs, radiating frost and blackening any living tissue. But in this nightmare, Loki could still feel the thrumming of a heart brushing against his forearm, fluttering softly with every weak beat. And even though he had destroyed the lungs as he punched his arm through, the man still screamed while his flesh blackened and died, the decay spreading outwards.

It took what seemed like an eternity for that faint pulsing against his skin to fade away, the muscle becoming rigid and frozen. He had tried to pull away, to stop what he was doing, but he didn't have control of his own body. It was only when the screams ended that Loki could pull his arm out, letting the dead body fall to the snow covered ground. Lifeless blue eyes stared back at him: wide, glassy, and unblinking. Though the mind that controlled them was dead, it was like the eyes were staring into Loki's soul and judging him. He didn't need to hear any words to know that those dim blue eyes didn't like what they saw.
At Loki's back, there was an explosion of rowdy jeers and taunts. The voices were deep, guttural, and barbaric as they mocked the dead body.

“Look at the Asgard scum now! He wasn't so tough!”

“He was a shame amongst gods!”

“Not so fine are you now, huh? Disgusting wretch!”

They laughed as one, but Loki did not join them. He kept staring into empty eyes, soft blue meeting jaded red. On his skin, he could feel the iced bits of blood, and the sensation made his flesh crawl. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry,' his mind repeated as he looked down at Thor's dead face, the final expression of agony forever locked in place.

The dead eyes stared back at him unforgivingly. 'You did this to me,' they said. 'You killed me with your own hand.'

'Murderer,' Loki's own mind chanted in agreement, and the feeling of his brother's dying heart brushing against his arm echoed across his skin.

Revulsion settled heavy in Loki's stomach, burning hot and vile within him. Every repeated hiss of 'murderer', every vulgar word from the crowd behind him, every second looking into dead eyes, added to the churning mess inside of him until he couldn't hold it back anymore. He doubled over violently, putrid bile spewing from bloodless lips. The vomit splashed across the snow, illogically hot even though Loki was frozen inside.

The vindictive crowing behind him cut off as he heaved, and for a moment, the only sound was the expulsion of guilty bile. When his stomach was empty, the noise morphed into dry heaves that sounded like choked sobs. Over the sound of Loki's panting breaths the vituperative shouting picked up again, and this time their cruel words were directed at him.

“Worthless runt!”

“We should have just left you to die!”

“Nobody wants you, weakling!”

Then before he could react, someone shoved Loki from behind. But instead of falling into the icy, red snow, he continued to fall into nothingness. 'No!' His mind screamed at the inky black that loomed before him, and he twisted around to try and grab something, anything, so he wouldn't be left in the black. His hands found nothing. Instead, it was his eyes that caught sight, not of the Jotuns or Thor's impaled body, but Odin.

Even though Loki could feel himself falling farther into the emptiness—which only added to the fact that he was dreaming, because in the void he never felt like his guts were trying to burst from his throat. It was always just stillness and suffocation, the fall a purely metaphorical sensation—the image of Odin never receded or faded. He just continued to watch Loki with a disappointed frown on his face.

“Father, help me!” Loki cried up at him, pushing away his anger in lieu of his desperation to get out of the abyss. When he felt something grab onto his arm, invisible in the thick of the void, he screamed louder, “Father!”

But Odin kept staring at him, face devoid of any love or sympathy. When he finally spoke, all he said was, “No, Loki” before he vanished into the darkness, and Loki was abandoned once again.
More hands shot out from the abyss to grab at him, claws trying to burrow in beneath his skin. Loki shrieked even louder until suddenly, there wasn't any air in his lungs. He choked and gasped, but no matter how much his lungs heaved, there was no air. The hands that clung to him were frantic now, yanking him deeper and deeper into the nothingness. Loki fought them as hard as he could, trying futilely to get air back into his lungs, but every time he shook them off, they came right back. His body trembled, but whether it was from the fear or the creatures grabbing at him, he did not know.

“Loki!”

His name echoed into the pit, sounding almost as panicked and desperate as he was. Loki tried to respond, tried to cry out for help, but his lungs had shriveled beneath his ribs.

“Loki!”

The beasts pulled on him harder, and Loki swore he could feel their teeth brushing against his skin; they were eager to rip into muscle and rend his flesh from bone. Eager to devour him, feast upon his body and mind. Then his nerves exploded with pain as the beasts dug in, gripping tight and tearing and pulling and-

Loki woke with violent jerk, agonized scream flowing soundlessly from parted lips. His lungs burned and his heart pounded; he gulped down air like a drowning man. It took a minute before he could breathe freely, the vestiges of panic leaving him disorientated.

“It's okay, it was just a nightmare. Remember, you're safe here. It's not going to happen again,” Tony murmured soothingly over the pounding beats of Loki's heart. That was when the god realized that he was wrapped in Tony's arm as the man whispered a constant stream of reassurances to him. Taking comfort in the fact that he was not alone, Loki pulled himself back together and tried to figure out where he was.

The dim light and emerald walls, as well as Tony's warm presence beside him, clearly told his agitated mind that he wasn't in his void. It took a bit more shuffling through his memory for it to click that this was the bedroom that Tony had given to Loki. He was home.

Tony stopped talking as Loki pulled back, increasing the distance between the two but not leaving the comfort the other man offered quite yet. Swallowing loudly, he tried to push back down the nausea and fear. “Tony...” he said, throat raw and voice grated. He swallowed again and repeated it. “Tony.”

“You know, I think that's the first time you've called me that,” the man said lightly in an effort to reduce the tension. He reached up and brushed the tears from Loki's face, and the god turned slightly into the touch. “You want to talk about it?”

Loki didn't, and just thinking about the hollow eyes of his brother and the heart he silenced made his stomach wrench... but he had told himself, lying in the snow, that he would try to not pretend anymore. For Tony's sake, he wouldn't hide anymore. So instead of diverting to conversation or clamming up, Loki mustered up the courage to actually say the truth. “Tony... I'm not okay.”

Tony looked taken aback, like the quiet admission was the last thing he had been expecting to hear, but then his expression softened. “No, you're not,” he agreed, giving Loki's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “But one day you will be.”
"Catch me, heal me, lift me back up to the sun,  
Help me survive the bottom.  
Calm these hands before they snare another pill,  
And drive another nail down another needy hole.  
Please release me.  

I am surrendering to gravity and the unknown.  
Catch me, heal me, lift me back up to the sun,  
I choose to live, I choose to live."  

-Gravity by A Perfect Circle

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"Has he lost his mind? Can he see or is he blind? Can he walk at all, or if he moves will he fall?"

A loud exclamation of, “Gah!” could be heard over the blaring music, followed by a large crash. Tony blinked dazedly up at the ceiling from the floor, a thick emerald bed cover pooled around him. The loud music continued over the speakers, effectively pushing away any lingering exhaustion he may have had.

"Is he alive or dead? Has he thoughts within his head? We'll just pass him there. Why should we even care?"

“Jesus, Jarv! I’m up already! Turn that off!” He shouted over the roar of Black Sabbath, struggling to extract his legs from the bedding.

“He was turned to steel.”

The abrupt silence was nearly as startling as the music had been, and not for the first time Tony cursed the fact that he programmed Jarvis to be so much like him. The apple didn't fall far from the tree, after all… except for Dum-E. He fell from the tree, rolled down a hill, and was carted off by a raccoon. But that was different.

“My apologies, sir.” The AI didn't sound apologetic at all. “I thought you would find the choice of music fitting.”

“Yeah, 'Iron Man'. Haha, like I haven't heard that joke before,” Tony replied dryly, finally disentangling himself from the comforter. He got to his feet and rubbed at his bruised elbow, scowling down at the floor like it was its fault he catapulted himself from the bed. When it didn't catch fire or beg for his forgiveness, he gave up glaring at it and instead glared at where he knew one of Jarvis's cameras was. After another few moments of trying to win a staring contest with the invisible camera, he finally gave up and asked, “What gives? Why'd you wake me up? ...Is New York being attacked again? Because that's just getting ridiculous.”

“Not at all, sir. As of three seconds ago, there is no unusual activity in New York.” When Jarvis wasn't any more forthcoming, Tony shot the camera a dirty look while he dropped the comforter back onto the mattress.

“You want to elaborate?”
For a moment Tony almost thought the AI would say 'no', but—ever the faithful program—Jarvis eventually complied. “It is past noon, and Loki requested that you no longer occupy his room.”

“Huh…” Tony took a closer look at the room and realized it actually was Loki’s, with the dark colors and lack of windows. “I forgot that this wasn’t my room.” An understandable mistake, seeing as how he normally ended up passed out in his lab, or was otherwise distracted while using his own bed. But sure enough, he had been snuggled up in Loki’s bed, even though the god was conspicuously absent. Which actually… “He’s awake? Like, really awake?”

“Yes, sir. He woke up about an hour ago.”

“Why didn’t you harass me sooner then?” Tony bolted for the door and rushed down the hall, even though wasn’t sure where the god was. Making a guess, he headed down towards the lab. Since Jarvis wasn’t correcting him, he figured he was going the right way.

“Loki asked me not to. He requested to spend some time alone, and I thought you could use the extra rest. Was that the wrong decision, sir?”

“No, that’s fine,” Tony was quick to assure the AI before Jarvis could start berating himself. Besides, for once he actually did feel rested. The pervasive exhaustion he was used to feeling had dissipated, and the extra energy did wonders for his mood. Even so, that Loki specifically asked to be alone for a bit was worrying. But he did just tell Jarvis to get Tony up, which meant something had changed. “I didn’t, however, appreciate the wakeup call. Do something else next time.”

Tony entered the lab while Jarvis answered with a suave, “Of course, sir,” which just promised that Jarvis would come up with something even more obnoxious next time. Tony bet the AI never woke Loki up so rudely. Speaking of which, a quick peek around the room revealed that the god was nowhere to be seen. In fact, it didn’t look like he had been there at all.

“Jarvis, where’s Loki?” Tony frowned, and he felt his good mood start to sour. He tried to ignore the trill of fear at not knowing where the god was. Things were good between them; Loki wouldn’t run off… right?

“He’s standing on the roof at the moment, sir.” Right, Loki didn’t run off. The panic inside of Tony’s chest cooled, replaced instead by harmless annoyance.

“The roof? You didn’t tell me that before I came all the way down here because...?” Because Tony was a terrible influence on his children, that’s why.

“You did not ask, sir.”

“Oh shut up, you little troll. You knew I was looking for him.” Tony stalked back up the stairs and past Loki’s room, heading in the opposite direction towards the elevator. Jarvis remained quiet, though Tony knew if he had programmed the AI to laugh he probably would be. Even then, Tony bet Jarvis was doing the robotic equivalent of a chuckle somewhere inside of his script.

The delay to reach the god, as well as the fact the Loki was outside- which set off all kinds of warning bells, because he normally avoided the overexposure of noise and blue and the heavy scent of salt- made Tony antsy. He twitched impatiently as the elevator doors closed, resisting the urge to ask what Loki was doing. If Jarvis wasn’t saying anything—and despite his recent lack of cooperation, he would say something if he thought Loki was at risk—then Tony should leave it be. While more harrowing than he would of liked, Loki’s little snow storm at least taught him something that he had always known but never really grasped: Loki was a god. Sure, Tony referred to him as such, but it had just become a word. 'God' simply meant 'Loki', not 'a powerhouse that could kill
someone without even lifting a finger'. For all that Loki acted like he was okay, Tony equally acted like he was helpless, and while that may have been true in those first few months, it wasn’t anymore. In his moments of lucidity—that finally happened more often than not—Loki didn’t need or want Tony to baby him. It was time that Tony understood that and let the god regain some independence.

When the heavy metal doors slid open, a wide expanse of sky greeted him. Now that Tony has seen the soft blue of Loki’s skin—that had only vanished after Tony had gotten the god out of the snow and into a warmer climate—that had only vanished after Tony had gotten the god out of the snow and into a warmer climate—he could see the parallels between the colors. The shades weren’t exact, but on a cloudless day like this, the comparison was still eerily similar. At least, that’s how Tony assumed it was for the god. While startling and a bit unusual, Tony couldn’t say he found the idea of Loki with an odd skin color ‘eerie’. The frost bite effect, on the other hand, was. Tony’s hand still stung from just the one touch, and his palm was blistering and peeling.

Tony pulled his eyes away from the blue and sought out Loki. He found the god standing on the other side of the roof, feet right on the edge. One step forwards would send him toppling into the ocean. Tony’s previous mirth faded a bit at the sight of Loki standing there, a picturesque scene of solemnity. Not to mention that Tony clearly remembered what happened last time the god tried to stand and watch the outside scenery. It hadn’t been pretty.

Anxious and worried, Tony started heading out to where Loki was imitating a statue. The god didn’t acknowledge him even as he came to a stop by his side. His eyes remained firmly fixed on the horizon, where the soft roll of the sea met the overhanging stillness. Taking his cues from Loki, even though every instinct screamed to remove the god from what had to be a stressful situation, Tony remained silent as they stood side by side. However, instead of watching the crawling surf he watched Loki, indiscreetly soaking in every detail he could see.

There were dark bags under the god’s eyes, testament to just how deep his exhaustion ran. Apparently using up almost every ounce of magic you had took a lot out a person, because Loki had slept for four days straight, waking only the once on the second day when he had a nightmare (and Tony could sympathize with why the god only slept when he had to, when everytime he tried he woke screaming. This time was worse—understandably so, because Tony was such a screw up—but even then it was always bad enough to frighten the god awake. Often he looked more exhausted upon waking than he did before he succumbed to his fatigue, for even in his sleep he could not outrun his demons). Still, Loki was back to his normal pale, and not the deathly white he had been just coming from Norway. The long sleep did its job in getting to god back on his feet, even though after the first day Tony had been beyond concerned. He really needed to learn more about the physiology of his friend, so the next time Loki went all Mr. Comatose and blue, Tony had more choices than just hover like a nervous wreck.

“It would be so easy,” Loki said abruptly, his voice thick. The sudden sound startled Tony. The god hadn’t even turned to look at him. He spoke into the open air, as if it would know what he meant with his heavy words. Confused by the nonsensical admission, Tony was about to ask for clarification when Loki continued, “Jumping off and giving in; it’d be easy.” Oh... well that made more sense. In a horrible, ‘I never want Loki to be thinking that’ kind of way, at least. Then the god huffed, the sound failing to even be a mockery of a laugh. “At least I had thought it would be, but I was so wrong. Last time I tried to just let go, I ended up like this.” One hand made a stilted, derisive gesture at his weakened body. “ I sought to run from my problems, and I only made things worse.”

Loki went quiet again, resolutely not meeting Tony’s eyes even though the man was now staring holes into the side of the god’s face. Eventually giving up, Tony gazed back out into the distance, though he didn't actually see the ocean before him. He knew what Loki was doing by keeping a sort of barrier between them, and he accepted the degree of detachment Loki sought to instill. When Pepper had forced Tony to talk to a therapist, he had also avoided looking into their eyes for fear of
their reaction. For fear of breaking down and being unable to pull the pieces back together again. So if Loki was willing to take the step to share the story of his fall, then Tony wouldn't ruin that. It was just his job to listen.

Though after a moment it became clear the god wasn’t going to continue, lost to his thoughts and hesitant to continue voicing them. Finally Tony prompted him. “Do you still want to die?” He would give anything for the answer to be ‘no’.

But of course, Loki replied with a steady, “Yes,” barely having to think about it. With the god an instant away from a couple hundred feet drop into the Pacific, it really was not a reassuring answer. What followed however was, if only a little bit. “I won’t try again. Falling solved nothing, and I have no intention of trying again. Knowing my luck, I'd only make things even worse.”

“This fall... what happened?” Tony hedged, and finally Loki looked over at him. His eyes were wide, unguarded, and in them Tony swore he could actually see every regret: the little chips that built the chasm. Then Loki swayed slightly, nearly stepping off the roof as he tried to regain his balance. Whether the weariness was mental or physical, Tony didn't know. And right now, it didn't really matter. He gripped Loki's elbow and guided the god into a sitting position, overly aware of the crashing waves beneath their feet. Loki complied, less than gracefully slumping next to Tony; they sat side by side as they overlooked the coast of the Pacific.

Again it took a moment for Loki to reply, but Tony didn't rush him. Spilling your guts was a bitch, after all, and the idiom wasn't very far off about how it felt. “I'm not Asgardian. For my entire life I thought I was. There was no reason to think otherwise, and no one told me. They wouldn't have, either, not until it was beneficial to them.”

If words could drip bitter hatred, then Loki's were doing just that. It made the hero in Tony—no, Tony himself, because there was no distinction between him and Iron Man—want to run off and pummel whoever put that malice there, because it was an animosity that spoke of torment. Yet Tony kept himself calm, breathing heavily in and out. Loki would only feed off his agitation, heightening his enmity into that furious cold-fire.

“It wasn't until we went to Jotunheim that I figured it out. It was nothing more than an accident, and yet it changed everything.” Loki's voice was like a roller coaster, picking up in ferocity only to tumble back down to self-loathing and despair. “It made so much sense then, why Odin always loved Thor the most, why I was always looked down at. Because I was nothing more than the unwanted spawn of a frost giant.” The last word brought Loki's tone back to a hiss, and while Tony didn't know what a 'frost giant' was, it was obviously something that meant a lot to Loki. More than a lot, really, if being one was what ruined the god's life.

“Is that why you had blue skin in the snow? It's a frost giant thing, not an Asgard thing?” Truthfully, Tony had thought that maybe it was a natural alien thing. Which would have made sense, really, because for an alien race they were way too human. Something strange like temperature reactive skin would have been fitting, and certainly a lot more interesting. That it wasn't... it did explain a few things.

Loki curled up on himself at the reminder that Tony had seen the color difference. Continuing with the erratic mood swings (that Tony thought were awfully telling, in a twisted kind of way. Every conflict—the anger, remorse, loathing, and despair—simply fueled the instability that plagued the god, and it became more and more obvious why Loki was so shattered, so fragmented) the fire of self-hatred turned into shame. “I cannot keep from shifting back to a Jotun in the cold. The form you see now is the lie, the illusion. It is because my skin turned blue without any consent from me that I realized there is something very wrong with me.”
Tony wanted to interrupt, to tell Loki that even if he was a 'yo-tin' it wasn't a defect. Regardless of how Asgard viewed it, Loki would always be Loki in Tony's eyes, and the fact that his skin was blue and cold enough to freeze flesh was inconsequential. But Loki was on a roll, the anger taking another turn. “I confronted my fa- Odin about it. He told me I was abandoned- left to die- and so he took me with him after the war was over. But Odin lacks compassion, and I was merely to be a pawn for negotiations with Jotunheim.” Loki’s jaw trembled, as if it were painful just for the words to pass over his tongue and through his lips. “My entire life he led me on, telling me I could be king, that I was his son. And then…then he collapsed, falling into a healing sleep. So many questions were left unanswered, and all I had was the throne he never wanted to give me. I was furious, until I realized that this was the opportunity I needed. Thor was gone, banished through my own machinations, and now I could finally prove that I was a worthy son.”

It was just like Howard Stark, where nothing Tony did was ever good enough. Just replace Stark Industries with all of Asgard and it was the same story, the same disappointment on a larger scale.

“I thought that if I destroyed Jotunheim and put a final end to the war, my father would see that I was more than just a monster.”

A much, much larger scale, apparently, and the implications made Tony feel sick. Loki was talking genocide. And as much as Tony loved the god, for all he was willing to forgive him, the very idea made his throat tighten and his stomach churn. That was Loki at his breaking point, and it was monstrous.

“Then I failed to kill Thor and he stopped me, the golden hero saved the day.” Loki sounded bitter, and Tony prayed that it was just Thor he was mad at, and that he didn’t regret failing. Because ‘Loki, Destroyer of Worlds’ was not something Tony felt comfortable with. It was his purpose in life to stop people like that, who used their power for such selfish reasons. Loki glanced up at Tony then, and the horror must have been clear, because he quickly looked away. With a bowed head and clenched hands, Loki beseeched, “I was wrong. I know that now. If you cannot forgive my actions, I will understand. Some mistakes are too grievous to seek forgiveness for.”

But it was obvious to Tony that forgiveness was exactly what Loki wanted, even if he thought himself unworthy of it. Forgiveness from Tony, from Thor, from Odin. And while Tony didn’t know if Loki’s family would be willing to give it, he was. Because it was wrong, and that mistake would always remain on Loki’s ledger, but that didn’t mean he didn’t deserve a second chance. “We all make mistakes, and sometimes we don’t even realize it until we’re forced to.” ‘Merchant of Death’ rang clearly in his mind. “It doesn’t mean there can’t be forgiveness, or at the very least repentance.”

“Iron Man,” Loki murmured, and Tony nodded even though the god wouldn’t see it.

“Saving others doesn’t fix the damage I caused, but it evens out the balance. And that’s really all you can hope to do.” This time it was Loki who nodded, a jagged, sorrowful gesture that said more than words ever could. Satisfied that Loki got what he was trying to say, Tony brought them back to the original topic. “So what happened, after Thor stopped you?”

Loki took a shuddering breath. “In order to stop the Bifrost from ravaging Jotunheim, Thor had to destroy it. The blasts sent us both over the edge of the bridge, but Odin caught us before we could…” Then that tentative control broke, and the god faltered. Loki blinked rapidly, and his chin quivered. He opened his mouth a few times before the words came out. “I held onto Gungnir, and I begged my father for acceptance. But all I did was prove to Odin that I was no better than a Jotun savage, using the first chance I could get to spread destruction. He told me ’no’, and I finally realized I wasn't ever going to be good enough. Nothing I do will ever make me his son. So I let go, and I fell.” Loki’s eyes screwed shut, and his fingers uncurled to burrow into his hair. He tugged sharply,
as if trying to expel the very remembrance from his mind. “I thought I would die.”

“But you didn't.” Tony stated the obvious, and suddenly every little piece fell into place, painting a vivid, terrifying picture.

“No, but every moment I spent in...there, I wished I did.” Loki fell silent, and once again he fought to voice the thing that obliterated him. “The void was...” He swallowed, and tears leaked from his eyes. Tony noticed the god's hands start to shake, and he quietly reached out to grab Loki's right hand. He gave it a reassuring squeeze, and after a moment Loki squeezed back.

“There was nothing. Absolutely nothing. No light. No sound. No air.” He choked out the last bit, as if the mere recollection made him breathless. And maybe it did, Tony realized, thinking of all the times Loki suffocated as he became lost in his mind. “It was so, so empty. I tried to escape, but I couldn't. No matter what I tried, I couldn't get out.”

“You're out of there now.” Tony said, but his words seemed hollow even to him. What did it matter, if the damage was already done?

“Not before it destroyed my mind.” Loki murmured, echoing Tony's dark sentiment. Loki reflexively tightened his grip on Tony's hand until it hurt, but the man didn’t pull away. He just provided his support, even as Loki went quiet again and this time couldn’t bring himself to continue.

They sat together for a long time, and Tony resisted the urge to get up and get something to drink. Moments like these were never something he wanted to face sober, but somehow he managed to drink less when Loki was around, even when every day was binge worthy. It was just another one of those small things that had changed when the god showed up, and Tony couldn’t really say he minded.

It wasn't until the sun switched to the other side of the sky and Tony's butt was extremely sore that Loki snapped out of that dark place in his mind where no one could follow. He shifted slightly, drawing Tony's attention. “You alright?” The man asked as Loki looked over at him, face calm except for the residual salt streaks.

The god nodded and then stood, all smooth grace and fluidity. Tony on the other hand winced as he clambered onto his feet, legs horribly stiff. Loki watched him as he stretched out his limbs, and Tony felt obligated to say, “Getting old sucks.”

Loki didn’t laugh at the joke; rather it seemed like something darkened in his expression, but it was gone so quickly that Tony thought maybe he had just imagined it. Especially when Loki's next statement was light, a far cry from the previous confession. “I believe I am done with the...what did you call them? 'Chick-flick moments'?”

Tony barked a laugh, a bit surprised at the sudden mood change but not at all displeased. If the god was just acting collected then sure, he'd resist the humor. But Loki actually seemed content. Not just on the surface, but as if a large weight had been removed from his shoulders. And sure, content and happy were two very different things, but it was certainly a big step in the right direction. “Yeah, I can't deny things have been a bit mushy lately. You sure you don't have boobs?” Tony gave Loki's flat chest an exaggerated eyebrow wiggle, glad to leave the stress behind for a bit.

Instead of rising to the bait, Loki tilted his head slightly and said, “I have spent many years in the form of a woman. Though I can't say the addition of breasts made any difference in personality.”

Tony's jaw went slack. “You...really?” Automatically his mind was flooded with images of the god as a busty chick. The man certainly was feminine enough, what with his hair going down to his hips.
"You'd think I'd stop being surprised be these things," he managed to get out between laughing fits. The god just gave him a blank look, and with an embarrassed cough—Tony hasn't gone out and enjoyed the wonders of California enough these days. It was hard to have fun when every day he worried that SHIELD would come barging into his home—he continued, "You feeling up to working in the lab with me? I could use some hardcore science right about now." And some hardcore alcohol, and then when he was sure Loki was okay, he needed to indulge in some hardcore iniquity. Now that the danger was over, it was time to lose some steam. As Pepper would tell him, 'stressing out doesn't help anyone. You should slow down and take care of yourself sometimes'...

Though she meant do yoga or something, but hey—if it worked, it worked.

“For a little bit.” Loki replied and moved to follow Tony back towards the elevator.

“What, no teleporting?” Tony asked when Loki actually got in the elevator with him. Normally the god just showed up wherever he wanted to be, like walking was too plebeian for him.

The look Loki gave him clearly said 'you claim to be a genius, use your brain every once and a while'. “My magic is exhausted. It would be foolish to waste it on such small endeavors before it replenishes.”

Tony's mouth made a little ‘o’, and yeah, that should have been obvious. Since, you know, he just spent four days freaking out about it. “Well, nothing wrong with doing things the human way for a bit.” He ignored Loki's mumbles that sounded quite a bit like ‘of course there is' and edged into more serious territory. “Director Fury called a few times when you were asleep. It was nothing bad.” Tony assured when Loki glanced up sharply. “Most of it was just him getting crabby because I managed to sneak Jarvis into their system. He does want to talk to you again though, this time without the stick up his ass. But we'll be talking to him from here, especially since the Helicarrier isn't even on this coast anymore.”

“That is probably for the best.” Loki conceded, and Tony remembered how terrified Loki had looked when they had driven before, curled up and quivering in the back seat. Every time they passed through a busy street, or people started honking at the traffic, Tony thought the god was going to meld with the upholstery. Taking things slowly was definitely for the best.

They made their way down to the lab, and after Tony entered the code he gestured Loki in with a grand sweep of his arm. “Ladies first,” he joked, smirking at the dirty look Loki shot him as walked by. Then there was an excited series of beeps coming from farther inside the room, and his smirk softened into a smile.

Dum-E came flying into view, a cleaning rag still clutched in his hand. His camera swung sporadically back and forth, searching the room, and when he caught sight of Loki he chirped even louder. The robot rushed forwards; in his eagerness to reach the god he rammed into no less than three tables and nearly knocked a shelf over. As the excitable robot made his mad dash over, Loki stopped walking and watched. His expression softened, and while Tony wouldn't necessarily say Loki was smiling, it was getting there.

When Dum-E failed to slow down quick enough and barreled into Loki's side, the god just eased him back a foot then patted him. Addressing the old AI, he said, “My apologies. It has been a while since I've been well enough to come down here.”

Tony thought he probably wasn't well enough even now, with a light sheen of sweat on his brow and the dark smudges beneath his eyes. The god had some panda imitation going on, and there was no way he wasn't still feeling lingering angst. Admitting he had a problem didn't make that problem just magically go away, and Loki was probably getting closer and closer to blanking out. Still, it was closer to peace then they have been, and so Tony was willing to smile for both of them.
“Aww, Dum-E, no love for me?” Tony joked when his oldest barely even seemed to notice him, too absorbed in showing his cleaning rag to Loki like it was an Olympic metal. Dum-E turned to him and, after a moment’s consideration, reached out to try and clean Tony’s face with the cloth. Tony squawked at the sudden assault and nearly fell over trying to avoid it, but the robot succeeded in rubbing the oil-stained rag across the top of Tony’s head, making his still sleep-mussed hair even messier. Pleased with his display of continued affection, the robot chirped loudly then turned back to Loki.

“That’s so unfair.” Tony complained, noting that Dum-E didn’t attack the god with the dirty rag. His complaints were empty though, and he was glad that there was someone else Loki was comfortable with… or maybe not. Though equipped with artificial intelligence, Dum-E was still a robot. He was confined to the contents of his code, and lacked the mobility to leave the lab and garage. What Tony really needed to do was get Pepper over here again so Loki would become used to being with people. He would also like to see her as well. It has been a while since she has had the time to visit. All of the recent terrorist attacks, a la Doom, have been crippling business in New York. Stark Tower hadn’t been exempt from the damage. If anything, Doom aimed for it to show just how pleased he was that Iron Man broke his toys all the time. Or, you know, Tony was still digging the cat idea. A cat had a pulse and wouldn’t be distracted by economic crisis. It was two in one.

“You’ll live,” was Loki’s unsympathetic reply as he finally nudged the excited robot out of the main walkway. Dum-E hounded their steps as they headed to the work desk. Pieces of the Dragon Slayer were still resting where they had been abandoned mid-project. When they passed the fridge Tony took a quick detour, pulling some scotch out before rejoining Loki. The god was studying the bits of machine that were scattered about, and when Tony came up, he said, “You didn’t work on it while I was asleep.”

While Tony knew it was a statement and not a question- Jarvis did a good job in keeping the god informed, after all- he still answered, “No, I didn’t. The Slayer was at least thirty-eight percent your project, so you needed to be around to evaluate how well that thirty-eight performed.”

“Fifty-six.” Was the retort, but Loki sounded grateful that the engineer didn’t move on without him. It was hard to feel satisfied with yourself when you lagged behind.

“If that’s what makes you happy, princess. Jarvis, why don’t you open where we left off?” The screens came alive with a variety of footage, and Tony grabbed the nearest chair to plop down and kick back. Beside him, Loki pulled up his cushioned throne, sagging tiredly into the plush. Tony double-checked that the god had the energy to work, and then the video started playing, leaving them to analyze the pandemonium.

Loki lasted longer than Tony was expecting him to, proving again to Tony that the god was more durable than he was given credit for. However, a few hours in he did falter, going blank while he was trying to explain an anomaly in the Doombot’s strategy. No longer armed with stubborn determination, Loki slipped into unconsciousness, where it didn’t matter if his mind was mired in fog or not. And that was great, because Loki really needed the extra rest, but then that left Tony to get him back upstairs, and that wasn’t so great. After trying uselessly to lift the sleeping god from the chair, Tony eventually had to give up and get the Iron Man suit just to carry Loki upstairs. Which seemed excessive, but really wasn’t. Aliens had to have bones made out of lead or something, because damn Loki was heavy.

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“-and I don’t care what your justification is this time. If you fuck with him, I will make you regret it.” Loki could hear Tony say- well, not so much ’say’ as ’tried to shout angrily while keeping his voice
down'- faintly from his room down the hall.

An even fainter voice replied, “I have already told you, I just need to talk to him. He’s the only one with information on Asgard and Thanos. Quit being overprotective and get him on the line.”

“Not until I’m sure you won’t pull another sadistic trick!” Tony growled loudly, before he quieted himself again, as if that would keep Loki from overhearing. “Last time was a mistake. You’re lucky things didn’t go worse, or I’d be telling you and SHIELD to go shove it up your ass. If you purposely overwhelm him or don’t stop if he gets upset-”

“Jarvis, could you please tell Tony that I can hear everything he’s saying, and that I’m old enough to handle my own affairs?” Loki said over the engineer’s continued threats and Fury’s equally unamused reply.

“Of course, sir.” Jarvis told him while Loki couldn’t simultaneously hear his voice coming from Tony’s room, repeating his message verbatim. There was silence for a moment, then Tony’s avid swearing as well as a few unruly comments on ‘damn aliens and their damn superhuman capabilities’.

“Jarvis, put Fury on hold for a minute. I have to go talk to Loki about respecting peoples’ privacy.” A door slammed open, and the sound of footsteps approached where Loki was calmly drinking a decidedly bland protein shake. He didn’t bother looking up as Tony stormed in, not at all concerned that the man was annoyed. That was more of Fury’s fault than his anyway, and really, Loki would be angry after talking to the man as well. First impressions aside, he and the director didn’t end their brief acquaintance on a good note.

“Dude, what the hell? You’ve had bat ears this entire time and you didn’t tell me? Oh god… I’m so glad I stopped bringing my one-night stands home when you came here. Seriously, not cool. That’s major fly on the wall,” Tony started complaining before he even caught sight of the god, and when he did he just kept right on going, gesturing wildly while he walked. “It’s just creepy. You need to keep a hedge in between and all that.”

“I fail to see why it’s my fault that your walls are flimsy and you talk too loud,” Loki replied, indulging for a moment in the carefree humor that followed Stark. But that wasn't what he wanted the man for, and he had to push the bantering aside. Later, he promised himself. Later they would take the time to slow down, after this matter with SHIELD and their alien paranoia was finished. “I’ll be okay talking to Director Fury, you know. He’s right that you’re being irrational about this. What happened last time won’t happen again. If nothing else, Jarvis could cut him off.” Or if it did happen again, Loki wouldn't bother keeping himself in line. If Director Fury thought that Loki would bend to his whims, he was wrong. No more hiding, and no more rolling over.

Tony seemed torn between continuing his rant about eavesdropping or letting the conversation sober up. He pointed at Loki and opened his mouth to say something, but then he seemed to slump in on himself, sighing quietly. Again Loki thought that they had to hold on just a bit longer, then he could let the harsh worry lines on the man’s face fade. “You said you wouldn’t rush things-”

“And I’m not. Talking to Fury will be easier than deploying the Dragon Slayer was, and I assure you I won’t let myself be manipulated again. Not when I now I know how much leeway SHIELD will give us.”

Even though Tony clearly didn’t like it, he gave in to Loki’s logic and said, “Alright Jarv, put Oscar the Grouch back on.”

It took a moment for Fury to speak again, and Loki noted with some amusement that the man must
have relocated. There wasn’t as much background noise. While the god hadn’t been able to overhear things through the speakers anyway (they weren’t good enough to preserve that kind of sound quality) he had no problem letting Fury think he could. Let the man stew. It was a petty revenge for what Fury had done to him, but since he didn’t have many choices, he’d take what he could get. When the man did get on the line, he was as fiery as ever. “Stark, be glad you actually have a brain in your skull, or you’d be arrested for obstruction of government function before you could blink.”

“Do you ever get tired of being so grumpy all the time? Have a beer, get laid. It does wonders for your blood pressure.” Tony drawled as he reached over to swipe Loki’s drink. The god let him, and when Tony took a large gulp it took only a second for his face to contort sharply. “Ugh, that’s disgusting! It tastes like water and hay.” He pushed the drink back in front of the god and scrubbed his tongue with his fingers. With a scandalized look he asked, “How can you drink that?”

Before Loki could reply, Fury interrupted them. “I take it the Ice Queen is there, then?” He didn’t bother waiting for a confirmation. “Good, then let’s get down to business. I want you to tell me everything you know about Thanos and Asgard.”

Tony was too busy rinsing his mouth out in the sink to take up his excessive lecturing, and Loki wasn’t too keen on giving him the time, so he went ahead and asked, “Have you heard anything else from… them, or are you still just going off of the one report?” When Tony finally got his head out of the water to stare at him, Loki just took a pointed sip of his smoothie (that really did taste more like water than anything else, but anything stronger was painful on his senses) to say, ‘Look, I’m still fine. I’ve got this’. Tony just looked queasy at the fact that Loki was actually drinking the smoothie.

“We have been unable to get into contact with them. One of our teams is working on it.” Fury’s words made Loki think about Jane, and he was surprised to find that he had actually forgotten about her, especially since he had been so mad when he learned about her. His world had been falling down around him, and Thor had been so quick to love a mortal instead of his Jotun brother. Now it seemed like such a minor thing to get upset about. There were worse things to concern himself with than Thor having a brief fling.

“If they wanted to talk to you, they would. Heimdall sees everything.”

“Wait, so all of you are creepy stalkers? That’s just great.” Tony muttered, while Fury said, “Then it’s your job to talk to them. I need more to go on than a single warning.”

Talk to the people of Asgard? Speak to his family? If Loki had his way, never again would he talk to any of them. “That isn’t possible. I am hidden from Heimdall, he wouldn’t see me.” There was no need to mention that Loki could reveal himself, because he never would. To disclose the fact that he was still alive would be a death sentence.

“Surely you could beam yourself back home and figure out what the hell they are talking about,” Fury growled, not taking ‘no’ as an answer.

“I would make a poor ambassador for Midgard,” Loki refuted. “Attempted fratricide is not my only crime in Asgard, nor the most grievous.” Though technically the patricide, regicide, and attempted genocide wasn’t Asgard’s problem. It was letting the Jotuns inside the palace and tempting a war that wasn’t so excusable. Before Fury could come up with something else he continued, “Are you really so concerned about the Mad Titan? He is nothing more than a legend.”

“Considering you Asgardians don’t normally decide to grace us with your presence and someone came down just to tell us about him? Yes, I do think it is worth the effort. Now are you going to help, or are you planning to just sit by and risk letting the world burn?”
“Let me be clear on this: Asgard doesn’t care about what happens to Midgard. I don’t care what happens to Midgard.” Out of the corner of his eyes Loki could see the betrayal strike across Tony’s face. He ignored it and continued, “But Tony Stark lives on Midgard, and I care about what happens to him. For that reason—and that reason only—you will have my help. I am not altruistic, nor a saint. Do not presume to mistake my actions as such.”

“Oh, I assure you, that’s the last thing I’d think when it comes to you.” Again Loki had to wonder just how much Fury knew, or if the man really just hated Loki on principle. Although there was no video feed, Loki glared into empty space, and he was sure that Fury was doing the same.

For once it was Tony who was the level headed one, and he pulled them both back with, “Is there a way for you to see if what Thor said was true?”

Loki was glad that Fury couldn’t see him when he flinched slightly at the name. It was made worse by the fact that now Tony knew of that shame, knew all of his worst mistakes, even if he was forgiven. Because even if Tony did not blame him, the man was not his brother, and it was Thor’s forgiveness Loki sought for that crime, though he’d never get it.

“Some scrying spells would be strong enough to work outside of the Nine Realms, but I do not have the materials required for one.” ‘Materials’ being the knowledge of how to do it, which was just another thing stolen from him by the void.

“Well unless you need some crazy space junk, I’m sure Stark could procure what you need. Get it done.”

“We’ll see,” Loki replied, even though he doubted he could recreate the spell anytime in the next decade, nor was he going to go to Asgard for a spell book anytime soon.

Unaware of Loki’s thoughts and satisfied with the placation, Fury said, “Stark, we have intel that suggests Doom is going to be crawling back, and until we can get clearance to go in to Latveria and take him out, we need you to do whatever you did last time. He’s now our top priority, and I want you to go overkill on him.”

Then there was a click as the line closed, and all of the unacknowledged tension in the room dissipated. Silence reigned, then after a moment Tony suddenly moaned, “Ah crap, that means he’s going to be calling Rogers, too.”
"Careful, when you're feeling out of your mind,
   You should try to remember,
   The storm lines in the spotlight,
   Til you're feeling all right.

    Please answer,
   I'm calling just to find out,
   If you could be here for me when I crack.
   The answer came,
   I found it buried in the trash there,
   I saw it stare…"

-Good Times by Finger Eleven

-o-o-o-

“Bunnies? Seriously? It couldn't have been something cooler like... I dunno, mutant tigers? Because this is- holy shit!” A sudden onset of hissing was the only warning Tony had before a massive, dog-sized mass of fur and muscle flung itself at him. Razor sharp teeth sunk into his arm, and the crunch of metal was followed by the report of a gun. The furious growling was replaced by a choked whine and then silence. “...Guys, I think it may have just given me rabies.”

“That's not possible,” came the voice that always followed Tony's, sounding far too amused given the situation. Or maybe not, since if Tony wasn't preoccupied with trying to avoid getting his face bitten off he'd be laughing his off, too. Not that Loki was laughing, but it was close enough.

“It bit me!” Iron Man exclaimed. The bent armor dug into his forearm, and Tony scowled at the mutant rabbits—courtesy of one mad scientist with the unexciting name of Dr. Anderson—that were circling him, waiting for an opening to try and maul his face. 'Come and get it, you little flea-bags,' Tony thought, flaring his shoulder guns for another round.

“No, it bit the suit, and they can't bite through it, though it's attempt was certainly laudable.”

“Yeah, you say that now. How about you make the new arm plating for this suit? It totally punctured the top layer. Fucking rabbits.” To accentuate his statement, another overgrown member of the Lagomorpha order made a mad lunge for Iron Man's mask. Tony ducked, and the rabbit shrieked as it flew over his head. It landed with a sharp click, its scything claws—that were more 'talon' than 'claw' at this point—scrapping against the pavement. Tony raised his arm as it spun around, furious yowls clambering from its throat. The repulsor fired just as the rabbit lunged again, all one hundred pounds of it intent on mauling Tony to death.

But the hundred pounds of advanced technology that made up Iron Man won out against the science-project gone wrong (or right, if the insane genetic engineer who released them in Nowhere, California actually intended to turn perfectly adorable bunnies into Hulk incarnates), and the rabbit was blasted across the street into the side of an empty restaurant. Which wasn't actually empty, and when the loud crash and subsequent squelch quieted, Tony could hear aggravated growling coming from inside the demolished building. Over a dozen beady eyes reflected back at him from the gap in the crumbling bricks, and he could hear even more of the abominations slinking around in the background.
“Oh crap...” He muttered, and that seemed to be the impetus as a writhing mound of fangs and claws came erupting out of the improvised exit. Tony fired, but he couldn't get a blast off fast enough. A few of the rabbits broke rank and came pouring out into the street. The ones that were too slow to get out of the building got hit head on. One of the rabbits near the edge of the blast screeched horribly, it's entire right side blown off. It tried with hell-born determination to get back onto its remaining three feet, oozing blood onto the blacktop as it struggled. Hellish or not, Tony felt a pang of pity for the moaning animal (even if it was shrieking at him as it dragged itself forwards) but he didn't have time to put it out of its misery. The rest of the pack was barreling right at him, jaws dripping frothy saliva.

“I'd suggest getting off the ground,” Loki oh so helpfully commented in his ear, clearly enjoying himself while Tony was faced with impending bunny doom.

Iron Man didn't need any more prodding to rocket off the ground as the pack got into pouncing range. One of the rabbits made a desperate leap, chomping jaw going just shy of Tony's boot. Once he was safely above the pacing throng of mutants, Tony scowled. “Is my nearly getting eaten amusing to you?”

“Actually, it is,” the God of Mischief replied, and for once the title sounded like it actually belonged to him.

“Gee, thanks. I love you too,” he muttered. Below him, the rabbits paced in a circle, tilting their heads in a way that would have been cute if he didn't know they were contemplating how to get him down for a nice, juicy bite of Tony steak. “I think I actually prefer Doombots to these guys. These things are insane, and I feel like I'm going to get charged for animal abuse each time I shoot one. We at least have Doom down to a science.”

Which is exactly why dear old Victor decided to hole himself up in Latveria. Apparently he didn't appreciate SHIELD—aka Tony and Loki, because they were the ones that did all the leg work—shutting down and capturing a good seventeen of his robots. Not to mention how badly a failure like that must of hurt his pride. There hadn't been a single bot sighting in weeks, and Doom was laying low even on the political stage. Sadly, the lack of robots didn't keep Fury from calling all of the potential members of the Avengers back in and telling them to play nice. Now the whole gang was together, and for what? Some of America's greatest superheros were reduced to being pest control in a throwback farm town, where the population sign didn't even breach the triple digits.

Tony knew that strategically, it was good for them to spend more time working together before they did anything too serious. But still, six people for bunnies? They were compact evil, Tony would give Fury that, but not a national threat. There weren't even any fatalities, unless you counted the ruined corn fields. If they had been released in a major city, that would be a different story. The rabbits had only one setting, and that was 'kill everything that moves'. Loki didn't seem at all fazed by the rabbits murderous inclinations. “Regardless, they are still relatively harmless as far as beasts go.” Tony's mangled arm guard would beg to differ—what kind of animal could bite through a layer of titanium plating?—but then again maybe this was comparatively weak to whatever behemoths lived on Asgard. “There would be nothing noble about dying in a battle with one of those.”

“And death by bilgesnipe is?”

One nice side effect of Loki's show-and-tell was that he no longer avoided letting references to his home slip in. They were only snippets that didn't quite paint a complete picture of the realm in which Loki was raised, but it was enough to make it clear that Asgard was chock full of battle mongers. Though even Tony had to admit that 'death by cuddly bunnies gone dark side' wasn't something he would want written on his tomb stone. It would be a laughable end no matter which realm you were
“A newborn bilgesnipe is more dangerous than one of those, and even full-grown ones are only
considered a mediocre accomplishment.”

“Then it's a good thing we're dealing with Midgard wildlife.” That wasn't actually wildlife at all, and
they were really starting to get on Tony's nerves. For every one he killed, two took its place. They
were going to be here for hours at this rate. If he didn't think Loki could use the exposure, Tony
would have hightailed it out of there a long time ago. As it was, this was as good of practice he was
going to get, with its low stress and ubiquitous bickering. However, there were a few downsides.
Three, to be exact.

“Will you two lovebirds shut up over there? Some of us are trying to use the coms for constructive
purposes,” Barton complained, and Tony was kind of surprised no one had interrupted them sooner..
Though that may have been because they were a bit more concerned with trying to not get eaten
since they did not have the advantage of being in armor fifty feet above the ground.

“Of course,” Loki drawled before calmly tacking on, “There's a rabbit about to lunge for your head.”

Now it was Barton's turn to swear and desperately try to get a shot in as a rabbit pounced at him from
behind. Tony watched from his aerial vantage point as the arrow imbedded itself into snowy white
fur, but the half-drawn shot didn't have enough force to reach the heart. Switching tactics, Hawkeye
grabbed his bow like a club and beat the clawing rabbit heavily across the face. It screeched angrily
at him while the force of the blow sent it careening off of the top of the roof to splatter unpleasantly
on the asphalt below. Over the microphone Tony could hear Barton breathe heavily as his eyes
darted around, another arrow nocked in case anything else managed to sneak all the way to the top of
a two story building.

“Clint, are you alright? I'm making my way to your position now,” Romanov said, her tone curt.
Following her voice was a dying squeal, sounding far too close to the headset. An unwelcomed
image of Romanov jumping down on a rabbit's back and slitting its throat flashed threw Tony's
mind, and he winced. Though he wasn't doing much better, hovering in the air and raining fiery
death on the vicious pack of restaurant squatters.

“I'm fine. Be wary of aerial attacks,” Barton said as he dashed to a more secure perch, looking more
prey than predator.

Rogers joined the conversation. “Romanov, how many more are at your position? My section
appears to be clear.”

“Just a few.” Another horrifying moan came from the Black Widow’s line, and Tony decided he
really didn't want to know what she was doing to the little demons. “Most of the remaining ones
have fled into the corn fields.”

“Roger that.” Tony always found it amusing how the Captain used his own name as an
acknowledgment. Too bad he’d never be able to get others to say ‘Stark that’. Or maybe he could.
He did happen to have this little thing called influence, and very few people have ever said he uses it
appropriately. Those who did just wanted to get into his pants, his wallet, or (in most instances) both.
His musings were cut short when Rogers addressed him next. “Iron Man, I need you to scout in the
air above the fields. I'll go in below.”

“While that sounds like it’d be a great time, Spangles, I'm a bit busy clearing up a nest at the
moment.” To prove his point, Tony fired one of the louder missiles in his shoulder panel. It homed in
on where some of the bunnies were cannibalizing one of their fallen comrades—which was messed
up on so many levels. Weren't rabbits supposed to like carrots and lettuce?—and sent them flying. Another one didn't die immediately, and it scuttled forwards in a way that would make any zombie proud. It took another two shots before it finally stilled, and Tony shuddered. He would never look at horror movies or rabbits the same after this. “These things are seriously messed up. That Anderson dude needs to check into the nearest mental hospital,” he announced, and no one disagreed.

Their conversation dropped off, and for the next twenty minutes the only sounds were of weapons firing and the occasional curse as a fluff ball of doom snuck up on someone. Even Loki and Tony's bantering was put on hold in favor of putting an end to the rabbit infestation once and for all. The next time someone spoke, it was Romanov. “Doctor Banner, have you managed to track their origin yet?”

“We have it pinned down to within twenty miles of the town you're in. We’re still working on tracing the radiation signature to a more exact position,” Bruce answered. Tony had actually forgotten that the physicist was working with them. The man was far too reserved for his own good. Which, of course, meant that it was Tony's job to draw him out of his shell.

“You know this would be a lot more fun if you came and went all green rage monster, Bruce. Hulk bunnies and the actual Hulk—it’d be perfect,” he said, all bluster and no tact.

“I’d rather not,” Bruce replied, not at all convinced.

“Come on. It’s not like there’s anything important this far out anyway.” Tony knew he wasn't going about this the right way, but how do you explain to someone that the manifestation of their anger is a good thing? The only other person Tony's met who was that uncomfortable in their own skin was Loki, and the god wasn't exactly the poster boy for excellent mental health.

“Tony, I really need to work on this,” Bruce said, neatly evading any mentions of the Hulk just like he always did. Tony couldn't help but acknowledge that he was probably fighting a losing battle. It didn't mean he wouldn't try though.

Romanov kept him from attempting to persuade Bruce farther. “Alert us when you’ve found out where Dr. Anderson is working from.”

“I will,” Bruce answered, and it was as clear of an indication as any that the opportunity for Tony to nag him was over. Still, he thought, 'I'm not giving up on you.'

Once again mission relevant communication filled the line, and slowly but surely the number of mutant rabbits began to dwindle down. It went from an all out brawl to search and destroy, which wasn't quite enough to keep Tony engaged. He started to get bored, and a bored Tony was a Tony with ideas. Specifically, he had ideas on how to get his two friends with serious self-esteem issues to socialize for a bit. Because Loki didn't get out enough (or at all) and Bruce tended to push people away. He'd call it 'Operation: Scissorhands', and step one was convincing the rest of the merry bunch to come to his house (there was no way he was driving Loki somewhere public anytime soon, not after how much of a mess that little leap of faith had become). The best way to do that? Bribe Barton with alcohol.

“I need a drink after this,” Tony complained as he systematically made his way across the corn fields, searching out any stragglers.

“I think we’ll all need a drink after this,” Barton joined in, and behind his mask Tony smirked. Success. For being a master spy, Hawkeye was far too easy to predict.

“My estate isn’t too far from here. I wouldn’t mind sharing.” Which didn’t sound subtle at all, but
Tony didn’t really care. The only one who'd have a problem with what he's doing is Loki, and he'd catch on no matter how good Tony's acting was.

“…Do you have the nice stuff?” Barton asked, taking the bait hook, line, and sinker.

“I have stuff that costs more than what you make in a month.”

“Then hell yeah, I’m in.” One down, three to go.

“Tony…” Loki started, the warning clear in his voice. ‘I live here, too, and I’m not okay with this,’ it said.

‘Well too bad,’ Tony thought. ‘You’re going to be social anyway.’

“I’ll come as well, if that is not a problem,” Romanov said, though Tony figured she’d insist on coming even if it was. However, he knew she wasn't attracted so much by the promise of fine beverages as the chance to meet Loki. He was still very much an unknown to the others, and while he was sure she had seen the surveillance footage, it wasn't enough for her. Whoever trained the Black Widow trained her well.

“Why don’t we just make it a party?” He said, like that wasn't the goal in the first place. “Come on, Bruce. It’ll be fun. …You can come too, Rogers.”

“Way to make a man feel welcomed, Stark,” Rogers muttered at the same time Bruce said, “I still don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Sure it is,” Tony replied, ignoring the captain. Part of him didn't even want the superhero to come, and the other part knew that Rogers was already sold. Dangling the 'teamwork' bone in front of him was always a sure fire way to get his compliance. “There won’t be any problems, and even if there was my house is far enough away from town. As far as I can see, there’s no good reason for you not to come.” Bruce started to make a noise of protest, and he quickly tacked on, “We can do science in my really nice lab.”

Bruce sighed, finally conceding, “Alright, I’ll give it a try.”

“Sweet, then we have the whole crew.” Step one? Complete. Initiate step two: actually finish the job so they can leave. “Now tell me you know where this nutjob is so we can go have some fun.”

-o-o-o-

When Tony came clanging into the lab, Loki glared up at him from his chair. “Don’t be like that,” the man said, putting his hands in a surrender gesture. “You don’t have to interact with them if you don't want to.”

Loki wanted to spit one of Tony's own lines back at him—“We both know that's a lie.”—but he held his tongue. He knew what Tony was trying to do, and that the man thought it was for the best. Not that he wasn't angry that he didn't get any say in the matter (even if he would have consented anyway) but fighting about it would only create undue stress. So he kept silent, watching as Tony expression started to shift towards guilt.

“It'll be okay, really. They won't be here for long, and no one will mess with you.”

This time it was the automatic reflex of 'I don't need you to look out for me' that came to the tip of his tongue, but again he swallowed it back. The God of Lies had sworn off lies—at least when it posed no risk to him—and that was definitely a lie. He did need Tony's help, just as he needed to start
interacting with others, and a friendly situation (which was a bizarre thought, as he didn't think he'd ever befriend anyone, let alone mortals) was the best place to start. It didn't mean he liked it, however, and his heart pulsed anxiously inside his chest.

Tony instantly picked up on Loki's distress, and it incited the very thing Loki sought to avoid. The man hurried to justify himself, gesturing sharply. “I didn't think it'd be a big deal. I mean, you've talked to them all before, and they know—”

“Tony, it's fine.” He would have preferred to have at least some forewarning, but it was 'fine'. And this time- for maybe the first time -the word wasn't a lie. Tony was still beating himself up over it, so Loki continued, “It's better to be prepared from the beginning than have to catch up with your enemies.”

“We have the time,” Tony said confidently, and Loki wanted to optimistically agree with him. But if life taught the God of Chaos anything, it was that things never happened the way you wanted them to. Relaxing, letting your guard down, was paramount to being destroyed. If you lost your edge, the world would cut you down. It always had, and it always would.

Loki kept those thoughts to himself, pushed them deep inside and tried to ignore their bitter whispers. Thing were suppose to be different now. Better. So instead he replied, “Time that we shouldn't waste.”

“Right, which means I need to get out of this suit and up to the bar, and you...are you going to put on some actual clothes?” Tony gestured to the plain pants and shirt that Loki was wearing. “Not that you need to go full leather, but I did get you some jeans.”

“These suit my needs just fine.” The soft, loose fabric was far more agreeable on his senses than anything else Midgard had to offer. It was also something he'd never find on Asgard, where even casual wear was thick and abrasive. Tony just shrugged, a gesture that clearly said 'it isn't like I haven't done worse', and headed off to where Jarvis was waiting to take the armor away. Loki got moving as well, setting the book he had been writing in aside as he stood.

The title 'Theorems or Magic?' stared back at him, and looking at it made his teeth clench. How far he has fallen that he thought a Midgardian text could help him. The only thing that could fix his loathsome lack of knowledge was a true spell-book, but all of his were locked up tight back in Asgard. All he had were the tattered remains of his own knowledge, and he was ashamed to find how useless it was when attempting anything more complex than simple illusions.

There was a hand on his shoulder. “Come on, let's go hang out upstairs. We don't spend enough time in the main floor of this house.” There was the unspoken 'stop worrying about things you can't fix'.

'I can't,' Loki thought, but he followed anyway, leaving the proof of his failure behind. However, his faults would always stick with him, and all he did was exchange one reminder for another. He stared at the unaesthetic curtains lining each wall with the same hatred.

“Are you up for taking those down?” Tony asked, and while the question was casual it hurt. Loki was weak, and he didn't need others to judge him to know that. It couldn't be more obvious. But Tony wasn't judging him. Loki was only judging himself.

“Just a little bit longer. Then they'll come down.” They had to.

“Fine by me,” Tony said, and that was that. The man gravitated to the bar, leaving Loki to stare at the thick green walls that isolated him from the rest of the world.
'Soon,' he thought, 'I won't need you anymore.'

Then he forced himself to walk away and drifted towards Tony's familiar bravado. He sat in the chair closest to Tony, content to listen to his bad jokes and dramatized stories. And even though he wasn't doing anything, wasn't forcing his mind to churn so it didn't stop and stagnate, he felt alright. The fog lurked as it always did, but it didn't not rise to a crescendo, a rhythm of blankness and despair. It was calm, and he reveled in it.

That calmness lasted even when Jarvis announced that the rest of the Avengers had pulled up into the driveway, and his sanctuary was invaded. He could hear them talking outside the door, inane comments about how massive Tony's house was and more serious mentions of Loki. Hearing his name made him tense, fingers clutching at the glass of water in his hands (water, because the sharp bite of alcohol was not worth foolishly attempting to dull the ache inside of him). The front door opened after Barton replied to something Rogers had said—“What is he like?” “Why don't you go see for yourself?”—and the four wandered into Tony's house.

“Alright Stark, let’s get this show on the road,” Barton called by way of greeting, stomping around in the foyer. Inside the house. Loki's house. With him... Loki clutched the glass harder until it was on the verge of shattering in his hand.

Tony shot him a concerned look as he shouted back, “Already started!” Then he leaned over towards Loki, prying the glass from stark white fingers. “Calm down.” He set down the glass just as Barton came into the room, still adorned in his muck splattered uniform. He paused only momentarily when he caught sight of Loki, who fought to keep from looking like a doe caught in the headlights.

“Hey,” Barton said, giving a lazy wave, before he decided that getting a drink was more important at the moment. As Barton went off to raid Tony's supply, most likely looking for the most expensive beer he could find, the other three filed into the room. Romanov copied Barton, giving them a clipped 'hello' before going to find a bottle of wine. That left Banner and Rogers loitering by the doorway, torn between looking around the house, Loki, the bar, Loki, and the rest of the group.

Barton meanwhile had finished pouring himself a glass and flopped down onto the couch across from where Loki was sitting. He took a sip, sighing happily into the glass. “Now that's the stuff.” Then he sat up a bit straighter, giving Loki one long stare. “You know, you looked a lot more dangerous in leather. But sweats are nice too.”

“I assure you, if I was razing a city, it wouldn't matter what clothing I wore,” Loki replied, the glass of water somehow finding its way back to being strangled by his hands.

“Touche,” Barton said as Romanov approached the couch, pushing the archer's legs out of the way so she could sit beside him.

Rogers and Banner were the only ones left standing awkwardly. “You two seriously need to learn how to have fun. Get a drink, take a seat, enjoy the view. I didn't invite you over so you could be wallflowers.” Tony said from his chair, raising his own half-full glass.

“Not much of a view with those curtains in the way,” Barton observed while Rogers finally seemed to get over himself and started towards the remaining couch, skipping on the drink offer. Banner followed suit, and sat down on the couch with such hesitance that it was almost comical. Almost. Would be, if Loki couldn't understand what it felt like to be so at odds with a part of yourself. He personally has never seen the Hulk, just read the files SHIELD had on him, but 'big, green, and violent' couldn't be too different from 'big, blue, and violent'.

At Barton's comment, Tony twisted around in his seat to look towards the windows. “What, you
don't like my curtains? I think they're exceptional pieces of fabric.”

“Green isn't really my color,” Barton answered. Then he stared at Loki again. The god decided he much preferred to be the analyzer than the analyzed. “I take it those are for you.” It wasn't a question.

“But blue isn't really my color,” Loki mimicked. Except it was his color, and that was the problem. That has always been the problem.

He was distracted from his pity party by Rogers, who had leaned forwards on the couch. “It's a pleasure to actually meet you in person.” He extended an arm. It took Loki a moment to reconcile the action with what he's learned of Midgard culture, and when he did he reached out to shake the offered hand.

“Likewise,” Loki replied, letting go as soon as he deemed it was appropriate. The shaking of hands was such a strange custom.

Rogers noticed and apologized, “Sorry, I forgot you aren't actually from Earth. What do you think about being here?”

“It's...different, from what I'm used to,” Loki conceded. “But I don't dislike it.” Quite the opposite, in fact. Loki was starting to adore Tony's planet, and all the little things that came with it. What it lacked in magic it made up for with ingenuity.

“I know what you mean. When I woke up, it took a long time for things to stop feeling strange. I liked a lot of the things that had changed, like cellphones, but it wasn't home.”

Loki could hear Tony start to talk, and he looked over to realize that the man had started a different conversation with Banner. Tony's eyes darted to his for a moment and he smiled at the god before turning back to cajoling Banner with promises of science. Barton had also shifted his attention, avidly discussing the newest bow models with Romanov, who was doing her best to act interested. That left Loki with Rogers and his earnest blue eyes. With no other choice but to continue talking, Loki asked, “Do you wish to go back to your real home?” Because he sometimes wished to go back to Asgard. For all the faults of its people he had lived there for over a millennium. It was hard not to miss it.

“In the beginning, all I wanted was to go back. Now I've learned that this is my home, too, and I love it just the same.”

Loki opened his mouth to reply—maybe to agree, and admit that Midgard has become his home as well, or to ask if there was any people that Rogers missed, if that was what made it the hardest to move on—when Tony spoke louder, calling attention onto himself. “Bruce and I are going to take our party downstairs.” He looked towards Loki, silently checking if the god was going to be okay on his own. Loki nodded his head slightly, and Tony returned the gesture before looking away. As he turned his eyes caught on Rogers, and he stared the the Captain with an odd expression. Then he shook it off and clapped Bruce on the shoulder. “Let's go, Rage-quit.”

Tony and Banner walked from the room, and with one last parting glance they disappeared. It took Loki a moment to turn his attention back to the remaining occupants, a bit surprised to realize that this was the first time in about a year that he had been around other people without Tony. “Huh... I've never seen you without your boyfriend around. And here I was thinking you two were attached at the hip,” Baton piped up from his couch, echoing Loki's thoughts. The god pulled his gaze away from the corner Tony had gone around, quelling any apprehension inside of him.

“I was meaning to ask about that, actually.” Rogers said, speaking a bit more confidently now that
Tony—who has never been at all shy about expressing his dislike of the 'All-American Schoolboy'—had gone elsewhere. “With how close you two are, I was just wondering if you were, you know...together. I'm okay with it if you are,” he was hurry to add. “It's just kind of odd. I never thought Tony would settle down with anyone. He seems too irresponsible for that.”

“Tony's not irresponsible,” was quick to pass from Loki's lips, before he even thought about the rest of Roger's statement. He didn't know why he jumped to defend the man, especially when Tony didn't care what Rogers thought, but after all that Tony has done for him he couldn't let that comment pass. Tony was impulsive, definitely, but not irresponsible. He spent too long mending Loki to be considered that. Then he grinned sharply. “And as for your other question, Tony and I have shared a bed a few times.” In a completely platonic way, when Loki was having nightmares and completely freaking out, but shared a bed nonetheless. Not that the other people in the room would interpret it that way, and the flabbergasted look on Roger's face was priceless.

'God of Mischief, it's good to be back.'

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When Tony and Bruce eventually returned back upstairs, Loki was easily chatting with the remaining Avengers about something called 'Nidhogg'. Tony hung back for a moment and watched even though he was sure Loki knew he was there. Rogers asked something (and after watching the Capcicle talk to Loki earlier, Tony grudgingly admitted to himself that Rogers wasn't a bad guy, more of the opposite really. They just didn't see eye to eye on most things) that made Barton laugh, and even Romanov, Miss Stone-cold Agent, cracked a smile.

Tony thought that for being a spur of the moment idea, this had been quite the success. And while Loki still seemed to be on guard, Tony was pretty sure that was just a Loki thing. He rarely settled down. As long as the god was talking and interacting, Tony was happy. Not to mention that he'd finally gotten Bruce to loosen up a bit, which was a pleasant bonus. It wasn't until Bruce shuffled loudly that the magic was broken, the assassin pair habitually making a move for hidden weapons and Loki finally looking over at Tony.

“Have fun showing him your homemade particle accelerator?” the god asked, pulling away from Rogers and giving Tony his full attention. Which was exactly why Tony had gone downstairs, because otherwise Loki would have been hyper-aware of him the entire time, and that wouldn't have gone far to build his independence. “How'd you- right, you could hear us.” Obviously Loki was keeping tabs on him anyway. If Loki was going to stay here long, Tony really had to get around to soundproofing the entire house so the god couldn't do that. It was just... disturbing. One house-wide stalker was enough.

“Keep it to yourself, Dumbo,” Tony chided teasingly, then he turned to the rest of the group. “As for you free-loaders, time to leave. Party's over. I don't care if you hole up in my tower, but this is my house.” And Loki's, though technically the god was the one free-loading in this situation. But at least he didn't drink through Tony's ridiculously expensive beverage supply like a certain someone.

“Can I keep this?” Clint asked, holding up the bottle of vintage Utopias he had been working through.

“Yeah, sure, whatever. As long you get out.”

“Works for me.” Clint stood up with such ease that you could barely tell he had been drinking for the last hour. He took the last swig from his glass and set it down, pausing a bit as he caught sight of the dirt that stuck to the clear surface. “Gross. I need a shower.”
That seemed to be a better motivator than Tony's prodding, and after the other two also realized that they were still covered in splatters of rabbit blood, it didn't take long to shoo them out the front door. Once the four had piled into the SHIELD issued car, Rogers taking the wheel, Tony turned back to regard Loki. “See, that wasn't so bad.” He said, clapping Loki on the shoulder good-naturedly.

“I told them we were sleeping together,” was Loki's unexpected reply, making Tony sputter and laugh beside him.

“Really? Damn, I wish I was there to see it. Jarvis, remind me later to watch their reactions.” The AI acknowledged his request while Loki turned to head back into the house. Tony hurried to catch up, smiling at how pleased the god looked. “We'll have to harass them more next time.” Because Tony would make sure there was a next time. Despite his initial misgivings, Loki seemed disappointed when everyone left. It was a clear sign that the god was making progress, and Tony was thrilled. Had he pulled a stunt like not even a month ago, Loki would have been on the verge of a panic attack the entire time. This unhurried, non-cataclysmic interaction was exactly what Loki needed.

However, while Loki was getting along with the Avengers when they were around, Tony knew it wasn't enough. What they did today was not going to be a common occurrence as the Avengers rarely had that much down time, Tony included. Most of the time they were just voices on the other end of a headset. They were distant and artificial. Fact of the matter was that Loki spent the better part of his days with only robots and mechanized voices. Only if Loki was having a really bad day—ones that took all of their hard won progress and crushed it, leaving Loki empty-eyed and frightful—would Tony stay home, and it wasn't fair that their time together was limited in such a way. But that's how it was. If Loki wasn't hallucinating the void, then Tony was obligated to answer when SHIELD called on him. He hated that fine line. How was he suppose to choose without feeling guilty or selfish? Strangers or Loki? Innocents who were in legitimate danger or a god with demons that couldn't be killed?

There was nothing more Tony could do. He tried his damnedest, but there was only so much time in a day. Even now he wanted to spend time with Loki, should spend time with him, but he had to shower, eat, and sleep. He was just one human.

Which was how he found himself making the split decision to land in front of an animal shelter on the return trip from a mission, battle scuffed suit and all. He paid no mind to the few people loitering about in the front of the Los Angeles Regional Animal Shelter, though they stopped and stared as Iron Man made his way up to the front door. One woman, dressed in a tan uniform, excused herself from the family she had been talking to and moved to intercept Tony before he could enter the building. “Um, sir? Is there a problem?” She called, jogging up to him.

Tony paused, hand on the door handle, and turned towards to her. She froze when he looked down at her, and it took him a moment to realize that his face was covered by the Iron Man's unyielding mask. He slid it up and gave her his most charming smile, trying to appear as nonthreatening as possible. “Nope, everything is good.” That settled, he moved to open the door again, but an arm barred his path. Frowning, he turned back to the woman, and while she looked frightened, she remained resolute.

“Sir, if there is not a problem I must request you remove the suit. It's too disruptive for inside the shelter.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.” He stepped back from the door, aware of the woman watching him sharply as he moved out of the way. That made him smile, because she reminded him of Pepper when he first met her. All no nonsense and sternness. He considered leaving and coming back later, but if he bailed out now, he'd never come back. So he ordered, “Jarvis, call one of my personal drivers and tell them to
Emergency release activated, the plates began to shift with the prelude of hissing air. The catches released the smaller pieces, and they began falling to the ground as the suit broke itself down. When his hands were free, Tony grabbed the chest plate and pried it off, dropping it into the pile at his feet. A few more tugs, and the rest of the armor came loose in a clatter of metal. He stepped out of the pile, gave the ruined suit one last look, and headed back to the front doors.

On the way up he passed by a young boy with his mouth hanging open, glancing between Tony and the suit with awe. Feeling generous, Tony went back to the kid and leaned down. With a conspiratorial stage whisper he said, “If you make sure no one steals it before I get back, I'll give you the helmet.” The boy's jaw dropped even further, and he let out a very unmanly squeal. “What's your name?” Tony asked, straightening back up as what had to be the kid's mother came over.

“Harley,” came the kid's breathless reply. “Are you really Iron Man?”

“Do you know anyone else with a suit that awesome? You can go check it out if you want.” No sooner had to words left his mouth than Harley bounded over to where the suit sat in rubble, sitting down to sort through the pieces. He smiled at the kid's enthusiasm before turning to Harley's mother. “Is it alright if I have him watch it? I should only take about twenty minutes.”

“It's not like I'll be able to get him to leave anyway,” she answered, watching as Harley tried to put the chest plate on.

“Thanks.” He walked back to the shelter lady who had been watching the scene with a gobsmacked expression on her face. Tony bet she'd be telling all her friends about this as soon as she could. And Pepper said he never generated his own positive PR. “May I enter now?” He asked, spreading his arms out wide and showing off his armor-free chest. She stared for a moment, blushing slightly before she schooled her features.

“Yes, of course.” She opened the door for him. “So what can we do for you today? Are you here under an official capacity?”

What Iron Man would ever need with a random shelter he didn't know, but he guessed it has been a while since he carelessly used his suits like cars. Nearly get them stolen by criminal organizations a few times and suddenly you stop thinking its a good idea to leave them at bars while you get smashed. He only felt secure leaving the suit behind today because he wouldn't be gone for long, and chances are no one was going to lie in wait for him at an animal shelter. “Unless this shelter is actually a terrorist headquarters, I'm here on personal business. I'm looking for a pet cat.”

“Oh.” It took a moment for 'Tony Stark' plus 'pet cat' to actually equal 'Tony Stark wants a cat' and not 'Tony Stark needs to blow things up'. “Well, I certainly can help you with that.” The woman said brightly, finally realizing that Tony was here as just another potential adopter. She veered off to the left, taking him to where there were cardboard silhouettes of playing kittens beside a garishly colored door. “Are you looking for anything in particular, or just browsing?”

'Just browsing' was the first thing that jumped to Tony's mind, because really, they were cats. How different could they be? Unlike dogs, they all looked the same, and their personalities were no different. But then he reconsidered. If he was going to get a cat for Loki, it had to be perfect. He had just one shot at this.

“I'm getting the cat for my friend who has a mental disorder, so I need a cat who is calm and friendly. And cuddly,” he tacked on when the image of Loki stroking a cat in villain-esque fashion flashed through his mind again.
“I see.” The woman hummed softly. “I can think of a few cats we have at the moment like that.”

She opened the tacky yellow door, and a cacophony of meows spilled into the hallway. The woman walked right in, but Tony hesitated at the door as he looked into the room jam packed with cats. Those closest to the door peered out at him and mewed plaintively, and scattered across the room were people laughing and smiling as they perused the cages. Tony wasn't laughing, because as funny as the idea of getting Loki a pet has been these past few months, Tony just did not like animals. Hell, Loki didn't even like animals. So why the hell was he here?

“I think it's really great of you to be getting your friend a pet,” the woman said, not looking back to see Tony's last minute doubts as she scratched a cat's head through the bars. “There's been all sorts of articles lately about the therapeutic quality of animals. They can really make a difference in peoples' lives, you know? Especially people who have special needs.”

She looked over at Tony with a wide smile, and he finally stepped into the room, replying, “Yeah, I really think this will be good for him.” At least he hoped so. If it didn't work out, then he wasn't sure what he'd do. Send the cat on it's way to a different home and try to find something else to help Loki's depression, he guessed. For now it was an option, and he was going to give it a shot. “So, who do you think would be a good candidate?”

“Right this way,” the woman practically chirped and led him to a nearby cage. Inside was a fluffy white cat who, upon noticing them, got up and started rubbing its cheek against the door. Again the lady reached in to stroke it's forehead, and the cat purred loudly. “This is Sassy. She's four years old, and as you can see she is very friendly.”

Tony stared at the cat, nonplussed. It was a cat, how the hell was he suppose to know if it'd be a good match? Nothing about 'Sassy' jumped out at him, but was that normal? Did he just pick one and stick with it? Luckily it seemed like his lack of connection was normal, and the lady said, “Why don't you look at some other ones, and if you still aren't sure we can come back.”

She led him to another cage, and this cat was the same as the first one, approaching the bars like Tony was Jesus or something. But like Sassy, there wasn't any spark telling him that this was the one. Nor was there with the one after that, or the one after that. He was getting to the point where he didn't think any flea-ridden feline here was going to fit the bill when they moved on to the next possible choice. “This is Albert. He's a year old, so he's a bit more spunky than the others I showed you, but he's real sweet with people.”

'Albert' was one of the most generic looking cats you could get, a plain brown tabby with hazel eyes and big ears. He was a bit smaller than the other cats they looked at, but not by much. Tony leaned down a bit more to peer in at him, because unlike the others, this cat didn't rush the bars. Instead, it peered back at him from where it was sitting, cocked its head slightly, and returned to licking its paw. The nonchalant dismissal reminded him of Loki, and Tony laughed.

“Would you like to hold him?” His helpful guide asked, latching on to his brief display on intrigue. Tony didn't really want to get fur on his clothes—or what if the thing had fleas? He didn't want fleas—but he agreed anyway.

'For Loki,' he thought as the woman opened the cage and reached inside. The cat- Tony refused to call it Albert, even in his head. Really, who the hell named a cat that? -nuzzled her hand as she pulled him out. Then, before Tony could tell her he didn't like the be hanced things, she dropped the little fluff ball into his arms. He tried to keep the grimace from his face as it rubbed against his arm. 'For Loki,' he repeated.

“I guess you really aren't an animal person.” The woman reached over to adjust his awkward hold.
He let her do her thing, and soon he was holding the cat snug to his chest like it was a baby. Meanwhile, it chilled in his arms, seeming perfectly content with whatever he did. The woman took a step back, taking in the sight of Tony Stark cuddling a cat. This time she didn't just smile at him; she beamed.

Tony, on the other hand, was looking down at the little fur-ball with trepidation. Did he really want to bring this thing home, where it could shit on his floor and claw up his furniture? But as he held it, he thought that this was exactly what Loki needed, even if Loki didn't know that himself. He took a deep breath. “Alright, I'll take this one.” Again the lady smiled widely at him, which was starting to get kind of creepy, and Tony's cheeks twinged in sympathy.

“Wonderful. Let's get all the paperwork, then you can bring Albert home. Your friend will love him.” The woman started walking away, leaving Tony to scramble to catch up while still holding on to the cat. He really wanted to put it down or give it back to her (it wasn't his cat, it was Loki's. He didn't have to like touching it) but she seemed to think he should be holding it. Probably because he was here adopting it, but again: Loki's cat.

Still, he didn't want her to think he was a bad owner and have to spend extra time trying to convince her of his sincerity. There was a suit of armor sitting unattended in the court yard and a depressed god sitting unattended at the house. He didn't have time to waste by being his usual insensitive self, so he lowered himself to carrying around the tabby while they went to the front desk. The woman gave him all sorts of papers to sign, which he only pretended to read.

Then twenty minutes after he went in, he came back out with one ex-Albert. The cat had shifted a bit so it could peer over his shoulder, and Tony could feel its evil little claws starting to dig into his collar bone. “If you scratch me I'm taking you straight back,” Tony threatened as he scoped out his suit of armor. It was just as he left it, Harley sitting vigilantly beside it. The boy's mother was also there, but she looked considerably more impatient than her son. As he walked up to them, Harley caught sight of Tony first and his entire face lift up. The boy tugged on his mother's sleeve, and she followed his pointed finger to Tony, who slipped one arm free from the cat and gave them a small wave.

Harley jumped to his feet when Tony came closer, mouth already motoring off. “I looked after your armor for you. A few people wanted to touch it, but I told them Iron Man ordered me to protect it.”

“It looks like you did a good job.” He absently reached over to muss up the kid's hair, turning to his mother. “Sorry about that. Thanks for letting him help me.”

“He's a real big fan of yours,” she explained, losing a bit of the annoyance to smile fondly at her son, who was excitedly retelling what happened in the last twenty minutes in extreme detail.

When Harley stopped to take a much needed breath, Tony cut in and said, “Hey kid, can you hold this for a moment?” He held the cat out, and the kid happily grabbed it from him. Then Tony picked up the helmet from the top of the pile and turned it around in his hands. Reaching inside, he deftly grabbed the wires that enabled the HUD. With a sharp yank he pulled the system out, pocketing the small chip that had connected the suit to Jarvis. Helmet now reduced to a harmless piece of sculpted metal, he offered it to the kid. “Trade you back?”

Harley nodded quickly, looking like a sugar-high bobble head. Tony scooped the cat from his arms, replacing it with the ash-scuffed helmet. Immediately, the kid put it on his head, the large frame awkwardly hanging off his small face. Harley didn't seem to care, however, and instantly took to running around, shooting at invisible enemies. “You didn't have to give him that,” the mother said, watching her son, and Tony just shrugged.
“It’s not big deal,” he said, and from the corner of his eye he saw a familiar Lexus LS pull up. “Now if you'll excuse me.” Tony went up to the curb and the car pulled around to stop in front of him, the windows rolling down.

Ricardo—one of Tony's preferred part-time drivers, meaning Tony actually remembered his name—leaned over and frowned at the sight of the cat. “Sir, why do you-?”

“Doesn’t matter. Just get the suit in the trunk and drive me back to the house.” He reached with one hand to open the back, passenger side door. He slid in, gripping the cat tighter as it tried to squirm out of his hold. Ricardo stared at him like he grew a second head, making no move to get out and grab the abandoned suit. Tony scowled at him. “Come on, you've seen a cat before. Chop chop!” The man scrambled to comply, leaving Tony to continue trying and wrangle the suddenly lively cat. The sooner he got it back home and dumped it off on Loki, the better.

Of course, when he did finally get home and tried to shove the wound-up feline into the god’s arms, Loki said, “Tony, you’re an idiot.”

“Come on, don’t you feel even the slightest bit joyed by it's cuteness?” Tony asked, trying once more tho shove the cat off onto Loki. The god kept his arms crossed, glaring at him like Tony was trying to get him to hold one of the rabbits from hell.

“No. Do you?” Loki snarked back, and Tony had to admit he had a point there. But that didn't stop him. He held the cat for the last half-hour. Loki had to at least hold it once.

“Just take him for a week, and if you still don't like him, I'll have Pepper find him another home. Now here.” Loki still didn't look convinced, but he reached out and accepted the cat, which ‘mrow’ed plaintively as he pulled it closer. Tony smiled slightly when one of Loki's hands idly pet the cat when it kept fussing. That smile faded though when Loki glared back at him, not at all happy with having a cat forced on him.

“Does he have a name?”

“Unless you want to call him Albert, no.”

“Hmm...” was Loki's noncommittal reply, and Tony figured it didn't really matter if they named it anything if it wasn't staying. Which was disappointing, but he guessed this wasn't one of his better ideas, even if it had shown promise.

“Right, well...I sent the driver out to get some supplies for it.” Since Tony hadn't even realized that the cat would need food and a litterbox until Ricardo mentioned it. “He'll be back in a bit. So yeah...Want to work in the lab?” When Loki moved to set the cat down, Tony tacked on, “It comes with. We aren't doing anything dangerous today. Besides, Dum-E will enjoy him at least.”

Tony lost any remaining hope he had for the cat staying at the withering glare Loki gave him before he teleported downstairs with the cat in his arms. He was sure he'd be calling up Pepper to get rid of it in a week.

Turns out he was wrong; the cat stayed.

He had left to go deal with some terrorist cell five days later, regrettably having to leave Loki while he was zoning out and upset, and when he returned in the evening, the god looked significantly less stressed. Loki shoved a screen into Tony's face when he approached. “Choronzon.”

“What?” Tony asked while his eyes started to scan to offered page. It took him a moment to realize it was an article about the random word Loki had just said. “Okay, and?”
“His name. Choronzon.” That's when Tony realized the cat was actually sitting on Loki's lap, sprawled out and blinking languidly up at Tony, instead of sitting all alone under one of the desks.

“That's kind of a mouthful,” he commented while he looked at the article with a new found interest. There was clearly a reason that Loki chose that name, instead of going with 'Whiskers' or something, and that reason became blatantly clear as he skimmed over the content of the Wikipedia page. Phrases like 'the last great obstacle between the adept and enlightenment' and 'a temporary personification of the raving and inconsistent forces that occupy the Abyss' jumped to his notice, and it didn't take long to draw the parallels between that and the void. “Oh...That's awfully poetic way to put it. But you couldn't pick something easier to say? Seriously, how'd you pronounce it? Chor-o...Kor-on-zone. Chor-in-zon?” He stumbled over the mess of sounds, none of them sounding like Loki's smooth rendition of the letters. “You know what, I'm just going to call him Coro.”

The newly dubbed 'Coro' just mewed at him, moving to cover its eyes with its arm in a clear indication of ‘go away, I'm sleeping’. One of Loki's pale hands reached up to softly scratch along the cat's spine, and Coro happily leaned into the touch. 

It was then that Tony had the strangest thought. If this was how his life was going to be, with Loki by his side and this same easy happiness...he'd be alright with that. More than alright. For the first time ever, he had the feeling that everything was the way it should be. And it was wonderful.

-o-o-o-

Warmth surrounded Loki as he curled up on the couch with an arm and leg swung over the body beside him that occasionally twitched in the throes of a dream. Puffs of air against Loki's cheek made his ears flick, and he nuzzled his face farther into Choronzon's neck. The cat shifted towards him in response, and Loki purred softly into tawny fur.

The sound of footsteps drifted up to him, making one of Loki's ears lazily tilt towards the stairwell. He could hear Tony's voice, but the distant words were lost in the dreamy haze. Whatever it was didn't sound like anything too important, so he stayed relaxed into the sofa, enjoying the moment of harmless inactivity. He only perked up when Tony came into the room, saying, “He said he'd be up here. Jarvis, where'd Loki go?” Loki cracked an eye open, squinting at Tony around Choronzon's head.

“He's on the couch with the cat, sir.”

Tony huffed exasperatedly up at the ceiling. “I just checked, only Coro is-” He trailed off as his eyes locked with Loki's, and Loki just stretched his legs in response. “Nevermind.”

Loki extracted himself from where black and tan intermingled and got to his feet when Tony made his way over. Coro just sleeping after scootching into the warm spot Loki just vacated. “Observant as ever,” the god taunted, though the meows that came from his throat lacked any semblance of an insult.

“I have a feeling that was something sarcastic, but it just sounded really cute,” Tony said, coming to a stop before Loki. The god, comfortably masked in the form of a cat, glared up at him with slitted green eyes. “Nope, still cute. ...Can I pet you?” Tony reached forwards, but his hand was intercepted by the swipe of a paw. Loki hissed at him, but the sound was more amused than angry. “Fine, be that way,” Tony grumbled, but he was smiling. “Though seriously, I need to talk to you, and I can't understand a thing you're saying.”

Loki sighed and jumped down off the couch. As he fell he pushed, and his flesh twisted in compliance. The bones in his jaw receded back into his skull, then the entire bone elongated. His
shoulders twisted, stretching his skin and snapping into a different position. His heartbeat slowed as
the muscle grew, the veins becoming enlarged in response. Both spine and hip contorted, bringing
him from four legs to two. The last of his fur sank back into his skin, and the world shifted back into
color. He was humanoid just as he hit the ground, straightening up from a crouched position to look
into Tony's wide eyes.

“Huh... Well that looked absolutely disgusting,” the man summarized, looking a bit queasy. “Does
doing that hurt?”

“Not at all.” Loki stretched his arms above his head, getting any remaining kinks out of his preferred
form.

“Could've fooled me...” Tony muttered, and once he was sure Loki was fine the science part of his
mind flipped on. “Is there a limit to how small you can get? Or large as well, I guess.” The engineer
asked, mind jumping on a completely different train of thought than whatever he came up here for.
“And can you just transform partly? Like be a centaur or something?” While Tony rambled, Loki
watched him fondly. He absently reached down to scratch Coro's head as the cat peered up at him
from its nap. “And can you transform into like fire or something insubstantial, or is it just...” Tony
suddenly trailed off. “Holy crap, you're smiling.”

He was? Loki unconsciously removed his hand from the cat and brought it to his lips. Sure enough,
he was; it was a small smile, but a smile nonetheless. Not a grin, or a smirk, but a content, dare-say
happy smile. “So I am.” He mused, not making any move to stop. He didn’t want to stop.

Tony meanwhile looked like he was about to fling himself at Loki in joy. “You've never smiled
before.”

“I've never been happy before,” he said, and the magnitude of that statement wasn't lost on either of
them. Then he continued, not willing to pause and let the darkness ruin his good mood. “Now, what
did you want to talk to me about?”

Tony sobered slightly at the subject change, but only just slightly; he still grinned like a fool. “I was
wondering is you felt up to going to the Tower in New York for a little bit. There's some business I
have to do with Pepper, and she can't come down here to meet us. And I thought you might like it
there. The labs there have even better equipment than here.” He finished his sales pitch and looked
hopefully at Loki. “So, what do you think?”

“That sounds satisfactory,” Loki replied, barely feeling the expected panic. It was just a small blip on
his radar, easily ignored. “Will we be teleporting there?” Because out of all the things in Midgard, he
liked cars the least. They were slow, confining inventions.

“That's the plan. Jarvis can give you visuals so you know where to land. We can leave in a few, if
you're ready.” Then Tony pointed at Coro. “I got supplies there for him, since I figured he's coming
as well.”

“He is,” Loki agreed.

“Man, I give you a cat and in a few weeks you're already sleeping with it. And here I thought you
liked me,” Tony joked.

Loki smiled before teleporting to his room, which had seen more use as of late now that he didn't
confine himself to the lab. He grabbed some clothes and the books he had yet to get around to,
storing them in the same pocket of space he held the Casket of Winters. “Jarvis, show me what room
we're suppose to land in.” Once he memorized the location, he thanked the AI before going to where
Tony was, cat in tow. The man was standing in the lab, flipping through the pages of the latest book Loki had been reading: another abomination trying to explain magic and science in Midgardian terms.

“Do these help at all?” Tony asked, frowning down at the contents of the book. “They all sound even more phony than magic normally does.”

“That’s because the majority of the content is ‘phony’. I was hoping that by reading something I knew was false, my mind would automatically correct the information.” He plucked the book out of Tony’s hands, frowning at it himself before packing it away. “So far my efforts have been far from fruitful.”

“You know Fury’s not going to be satisfied to wait forever,” Tony commented. “If we don’t have some sort of progress, he’s going to start making demands again.”

“I know. I’m trying.” To be honest, Loki was doing everything he could think of, but no matter what he did, he could not grasp what he was looking for. All the knowledge had slipped through the gaps, and there was nothing left to salvage.

“Well,” Tony said, hitting Loki lightly on the shoulder, “if nothing else, we can just pretend like we’re getting supplies until we figure out something better. I’ve always wanted to buy a corpse flower.”

There wasn’t going to be anything ‘better’, not without some form of spell-book. Tony had to know that, but he still seemed confident that things would work out in the end. And while Loki wasn’t really feeling the same, he tried not to dwell too much on the eventual fallout. “Are you ready to depart?” He asked, dropping the discussion.

“You can beam me up, Scotty,” Tony replied. “And you,” he continued, pointing at Choronzon, “better not claw up the furniture at the Tower as well. A ‘bit more spunky’ my ass.”

Loki didn’t say anything more, reaching forwards to teleport them to New York. A shimmering green light covered them, and just before they where whisked away he had the strangest thought: ‘I’m happy to be here.’
A Taste of Mortality

"Dominoes of indiscretions down,
Falling all around,
In cycles, in circles
Constantly consuming,
Conquer and devour.

Cause it's time to bring the fire down,
Bridle all this indiscretion,
Long enough to edify,
And permanently fill this hollow."

-The Hollow by A Perfect Circle

-0-0-0-

Le Corbusier once said, “A hundred times have I thought New York is a catastrophe, and fifty times: it is a beautiful catastrophe.” For the first week they spent in the Tower, it was beautiful. Not in the scenic way—the city was still speckled with construction lots and damaged buildings, remnants of Doom’s last terror spree—but it was the vacation Tony hadn’t realized he desperately needed. Technically he was in New York under an official capacity, signing patents and overseeing a few reactor projects, but that did nothing to ruin his exultant mood. Tony couldn't remember ever being this relaxed before, not without drinking to near-toxic levels.

When they arrived in New York, it had been a bit tense as Loki adjusted to the new surroundings. Tony worried that maybe he should have taken more precautions, but those fears ended up being unfounded. Whatever peace Loki had found wasn’t so easily shattered, and that little upturn of his lips remained.

They hadn’t gone down to the development floors that day, because unlike Tony’s Malibu estate the Tower’s labs were not his personal property. They belonged to Stark Industries, and Tony didn’t want to mingle with strangers just yet. Instead, they spent day one in Tony's penthouse, doing those little things that they normally couldn’t, whether it be because Tony didn’t have the time or Loki just got too anxious. They had a chess tournament (that really couldn’t be considered that, seeing as all but one win had gone to Loki). Loki indulged Tony’s curiosity and had explained the finer aspects of shape-shifting, but when asked to transform into a woman the mischievous god became a crocodile instead, startling Tony into dropping his wine glass. (The stained carpet and wasted drink had been more than worth it to hear Loki’s amused chuckling.)

They also made (not) progress on the whole Thanos thing by going on a shopping spree for random junk that could pass as ingredients for a spell (including, but not limited to, that corpse flower, a fulgurite, water from Japan’s ‘blood pond’, and some grass from the inside of Stonehenge). After they had accumulated a hefty bill, Pepper stopped by and joined them for dinner. She brought pasta with her, and all three of them sat around the table to enjoy a proper meal. It was nice, with the only problem being a minor annoyance: Coro decided he wanted some food as well and leapt onto the table. Of course the clumsy cat had to slip onto Tony’s plate, seasoning his pasta primavera with fur. The other two found it hilarious, and the rest of the conversation was conducted at Tony’s expense. Coro meanwhile retreated to beneath Loki’s chair, futilely trying to get the globs of red sauce off.

When it started getting late and Pep finally had to leave, Loki and Tony had retired to the living room to watch a movie. Honestly, Tony had no idea what it was about—neither of them paid much
attention to the events on the screen—but he greatly enjoyed the moment anyway. It was the picturesque lazy evening, and somewhere in there Tony actually managed to fall asleep on the couch. He woke up naturally, not hastened by a nightmare, to find Loki and Coro curled up together on the cushion next to him.

Their fun didn't stop there, either. The rest of the week followed the same trend, each day passing like there wasn’t a care in the world. For the first time since Loki fell—since before that, really—all those pesky little worries were pushed aside.

Tony gave Loki a tour of the eighty-eight percent of Stark Tower that wasn’t Pepper’s (he just called the crowded parts her portion and let them be. They could be overwhelming to the average Joe, and Tony had no interest in seeing just what it took to break Loki’s control. Small steps this time). He showed Loki his pride and joy, the gorgeous reactor that powered the entire building and then some. The god was suitably intrigued, which sparked a whole discussion on Tony's arc reactor, Vibranium, and Yggdrasil. And even though they were proficient in different fields and sometimes had to slow down to explain a concept, it was clearly a conversation between geniuses. Their talk continued while browsing the development levels, gaining them an audience of awe-struck engineers. To make it even more enjoyable, Loki and Tony took to using as much jargon as they could. Some of the noobies looked like they were going to cry.

After the tour, they took over one of the secluded labs and tinkered around with the more abstract projects they normally couldn't budget the time for. Tony exercised his interest in alien technology, like the acclaimed teleportation machine, and while they didn’t have the technology (let alone knowledge) to actually make one, they played around with a few theories and designs anyway. There was no real goal in mind, no limitations. It was just them and whatever they wanted to create.

Science wasn't the only thing they had time to indulge in. Some of the other Avengers trickled into the Tower as their work allowed, and generally at least one of them was around at any given time. Tony dragged Loki—though really the god didn't need much prodding—to spend time with whoever was around. 'Team building' had turned into an easy friendship, and, for the most part, everyone got along. Loki, unlike Tony, really hit it off with Rogers, and they spent plenty of time sparring while Tony hunkered down on the sidelines. Despite how unimposing the two looked in sweats, they had no qualms with tossing the other across the entire room. It made Tony sad for whoever usually sparred with the supercharged Captain (Loki came from an entire country of muscled freaks, Tony wasn't too worried about them). Natasha was another favorite, though how it was fun to try and pick each other apart verbally, Tony didn't know. She and Loki danced around with veiled taunts and carefully sculpted inquiries, the reward of information only slightly better than the triumph of outwitting the other. Most of their attempts ended in ties, which just made them even more determined the next round.

Near the end of the week Barton showed up, and he too joined in (he also used the socializing as an excuse to steal more of Tony's scotch, much to the billionaire's displeasure. Some of that stuff was one of a kind, damn it). They duked it out at the archery range, though Loki proved to be far better at throwing knives than shooting a bow. Not that he was bad at archery, but there was something to be said about the ability to throw a small dagger through both the bull's eye and the wall behind it. Bruce was the only one they didn't get to hang out with (much to Tony's displeasure. Putting all three geniuses together would have been intellectual ecstasy) but that was because SHIELD was busy utilizing his knowledge of radiation to do... something. Tony didn't bother hacking the system to find out.

Over the course of the week, there were still inevitable blips, but they were manageable. During those times Loki would slink, pale and jittery, back to Tony's floor. What he did then depended on just how strongly the void in his mind was calling. When he was really anxious, he exercised his
habit of desecrating the insides of books. Otherwise, he'd indulge in his new found pleasure of being a feline, either sleeping with Coro or joining the little menace in tearing through the penthouse.

While Tony wasn't totally sold on the pet idea—Coro had been deceptively calm at the shelter. In reality, if there was something to knock over or claw up, the cat was more than happy to do so—he couldn't deny that the little bugger was wonderful for Loki. Despite that initial dislike, the god took to the cat like a duck to water. Watching them chase each other around the couch, you would think they'd had Coro for years (you'd also think that Loki was just a normal cat, and not someone who was once commonly worshiped as a god, but that was another matter). From the very beginning it had been clear that Loki desired to be around others. In those early days, when the god was empty-eyed and automated, he would still gravitate towards Tony. No matter what Loki tried to pretend, he thrived on interaction. Getting a cat that could be there whenever Loki needed someone was the right choice to make, and Tony was glad to personally make a donation to the LA Regional Shelter.

Really, Tony could spend hours reflecting on just how perfect that week in New York was. Everything went right, and it painted such a bright picture for the future. It was one of, if not the, best weeks of Tony's life.

But then that beauty burned, and all that remained was the catastrophe.

On the eighth day, Tony jolted awake to a blaring whine. It thrummed through the room and screeched in his ears. He was stumbling out of his bed before he even realized what he was doing, sleep-clouded mind rapidly searching for an explanation. Briefly, he entertained the notion that Jarvis was messing with him again, but that idea was crushed when he saw Loki slip out from beneath a startled Coro and jump to the floor. The god wasted no time in changing back into regular form, instantly alert. That's when it clicked: it was the alarm reserved for when the Tower was under attack.

“What's going on?” Loki asked, composed except for the involuntary wince whenever the pitch of the alarm rose sharply.

“I'm not quite sure,” Tony replied over the clamor, voice lost in the wailing tones. “Jarvis!” He shouted, “Knock it off!” The siren abruptly dropped into silence, and Jarvis's voice rose to fill the gap.

“My apologies, sir. Stark Tower has entered a level three emergency.”

“Yeah, I got that. I want to know why.” Tony had been having a lovely dream with some busty, raven-haired beauties (and not sand-chafed men with foreign tongues and purloined guns). If this was a false alarm or something, he'd be pissed.

But he programmed Jarvis better than that, and the AI elaborated, “It appears that Doom has finally resurfaced, sir. His robots are attacking the city, your egotistical building included.” Without the howling alarm covering everything up, Tony could actually hear the faint rumble of explosions outside, and a quick glance out the nearest window revealed fresh plumes of smoke. Shit.

If Doom wanted to bring this fight to Tony's door, fine. He could take it. But it wasn't just himself he had to worry about anymore. Long used to this routine, Iron Man snapped to action. First things first, he needed Doom's worst nightmare. “Loki, can you go get the-” He glanced to where the god had been, but no one was there. “...Right, he's already on it.” That just left the suit. “Jarvis, get me Mark Sixteen,” Tony ordered as he spun on his heel, heading to the small work station within the penthouse. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, fueled with each slight tremor of the building as a battle commenced outside. Not for a second did he forget that Pepper was in New York. More than that, she was in this very building, conveniently labeled with a flamboyant 'Stark' just so Doom had
no problem figuring out what to unleash his frustrations on.

Frustrations that would only be added to once Loki and Tony shut down his little toys again. Which... it didn't make any sense for Shock-fest to come here with that being the case. Maybe he thought that Tony was back in Malibu, and planned to pull back before the Dragon Slayer was brought into play? Because with it, Doom's robots were as good as cement fodder.

Whatever. Tony would worry about it later. Right now, the suit was waiting for him. As the metal wrapped around his limbs, encasing him in red and gold, Loki teleported into the room in a flurry of green mist. In his hands, he held the misleadingly small DS, and he waited for the final pieces of the suit to slide into place so he could attach it to the armor. The god didn't waste a second, stepping forwards just as Jarvis pulled back. He slid in behind Tony, deftly hooking the small box up to the base of Tony's neck. It latched on tightly, sinking into the seams until it blended in perfectly. Once he double checked that it was secure, Loki stepped back.

“You got it?” Tony asked, twisting his head slightly to appraise Loki's work (not that he really needed to, but it was a hard habit to break after just having Jarvis for a copilot). The Dragon Slayer was set up perfectly. “Sweet. Alright, time to gank some robots. Jarvis, open her up.”

“My pleasure, sir,” the AI replied as a portion of the ceiling began to shift, opening up a circular portal to the sky.

Before rocketing into the air, Tony turned to Loki. “Talk to you in a bit, darling.” He gave the god a cheeky salute, then he tilted his head to face the sky. “Show time.”

Iron Man blasted through the hole in the roof, instantly jumping into the fray. It only took a second before the nearest Doombot caught sight of him and switched modes from demolition to man-slaughter. It fired at him with gusto, but Tony just dived out of the way before returning the favor. His magic-enhanced repulsors had a much shorter prep time, and the Doombot spiraled into a parked SUV. He wasn't without a dance partner for long, and two other robots blipped onto his screen. He threw himself at them, and while they tangoed, Jarvis reported, “Sir, I am connecting you to the Avengers communication line.”

“Got it...” Three more little red dots appeared on Tony's HUD, and he cursed. “Aw, crap. Vicky just doesn't know when to quit, does he? Alright fellas, let's settle this.” He distanced himself from Stark Tower, unwilling to let it become collateral damage. He busied himself with not getting electrocuted while he waited for Jarvis to do his thing.

It was only a moment later that Romanov spoke up, getting straight to business. “Stark, we have about two dozen Doombots—exact number still unknown—concentrated in the Manhattan area.”

“Well that's just perfect.” Like there wasn't enough to fight already. “Who else are we working with?”

“I'm here,” Rogers piped up, voice accompanied by the crackle of static.

“Yes, thank you Captain Obvious,” Tony muttered as Cap's garbled voice said, “One second...”

There was some shifting on the other end, a few loud bangs, then Rogers again, this time crystal clear. “I hate these headsets.”

“They wouldn't give you so much trouble if you just used them properly,” Tony retorted before continuing, “Is anyone else here?” Two dozen was a bit much for three people, even with the Dragon Slayer. It's not like they could pull the same stunt as last time. That was a one-trick show
pony.

“We're the only ones in the immediate area.” Romanov said, sounding just as peeved about that as he did. “Further reinforcements are pending.”

Meaning they had to make do with what they got. “Alright, well Loki should be online in a moment. Then you can give us the lowdown on the situation.”

“I'm already here,” aforementioned god cut in. “What's the situation?”

“Victor is being pissy,” Tony unhelpfully replied, scowling as he fired at one of the Doombots and missed.

“That tends to be the theme with people who blow up cities,” Loki replied amusedly before bringing them back on topic with a quick, “Romanov?”

“SHIELD has confirmed twenty-six robots in the city, traveling in groups no larger than four. Main targets appear to be Stark Tower-”

“Taking care of that.” Tony cut in, finally scoring a hit against one of the varmints that was loitering around his beloved building. Loki and Pepper (as well as a lot of other random people he didn't know the names of) were inside. No way was he letting volatile robots have a go at it.

“-Wall Street,” Romanov continued, ignoring his interruption, “the United Nations Headquarters, and Fort Hamilton. Attacks however are not limited to these areas.” Of course not, that'd be too easy. Super villains aren't content unless they are overly obnoxious. “The police have already arrived at the scene, and the first SHIELD squad will arrive in about ten minutes. Priority is the removal of all hostiles. Capture is not required.”

“So blow 'em up or knock them down. I can do that.” That was the easy kind of mission. No politics, no tactics, no reservations- just the brutal efficiency of science. (There was a reason Tony had loved his old job so much, before one nerdy man and a cave changed everything.)

“What's our plan on using the Dragon Slayer?” Loki asked.

“He already knows we have it, so no point not taking advantage of his stupidity.” But that statement didn't make a lot of sense, because Doom wasn't that stupid. Far from it, in fact. So why the blonde act?

“There's a high possibility that Doom has something else planned.” Loki said, sharing Tony's doubts. “But we'll use the Dragon Slayer while it works.”

“Fine with me.” Tony banked to the left, leaving his defeated quandary to pursue another small group that was approaching the Tower. When they noticed Iron Man the robots started to split up, but they weren't fast enough; when Loki switched on the Dragon Slayer, all three went down, even the one that Tony had thought was out of range. He wrote the discrepancy off as a fluke, something caused by variations in the DS's magic, and turned to go find more things to take down.

As far as mini bosses went, this battle was surprisingly easy. Suspiciously so, actually. As more and more robots were mowed down without Doom pulling any type of tactical retreat, Tony started getting cautious. It was obvious Doom was losing, so why did he continue wasting robots like this? Already the ground was littered with his fallen tools, and more were coming to join them. Between the badass DS and Tony's equally badass suit, only a few robots remained. And as he took down two of the remaining four with relative ease, there was no longer any doubt in Tony's mind that Doom was up to something. But what? Was this just a diversion for something bigger, or was there
something he wasn't seeing?

“Be careful,” Loki cautioned, sounding just as on edge as Tony was getting. Neither knew what was going on, but something wasn't right.

“Aren't I always?” Tony joked, but he was on the proverbial edge of his seat, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

But then the last two robots went down, and Romanov gave the all clear.

“...That was it?” Tony asked, bewildered. That couldn't be it.

“All Doombots have been accounted for. SHIELD's picking them up now.” Romanov said, her tone clearly saying, 'If we're done, then great. If not, we'll deal with it'.

“It's clear where I am, too. I'm not seeing any trap.” Rogers contributed, but Tony wasn't convinced. This didn't make sense.

“Something is wrong.” Loki stated, not a trace of doubt in his voice.

“Yeah, but what?” Tony hovered high in the air, scanning the horizon intently. He half expected to see a miniature army blotting out the skyline, but nothing was there. “We used the Dragon Slayer, they fell, so what are we missing? It just doesn't-”

And then the other shoe dropped. In one split second, things went from under control to absolute bedlam. The com screeched to life with Romanov shouting something about a bot getting back up, and her desperate warning was followed by people screaming. Rogers was also shouting something, jarbled sentences about an ambush and something not working. Tony's com became an indistinct mess, with only bits getting through: “-just got back up-” Someone cried out. There was an explosion. “-look out, they are still-” “-was just an act-” More explosions. “-need help over here!” Lots of screeching and panicked shouting.

And then, louder than all of that, was Loki's urgent cry. “Tony, behind you!”

Iron Man reacted instantly, flinging an arm out as he tried to whip around, but even then he was too late. Something sharp and agonizing—like nails from a forge, molten hot and merciless—slid through his armor and deep into his back. He gave a strangled cry, adding to the mayhem, and instinctively tried to twist away from his attacker. Uncoordinated and with the entire world a blinding stretch of excruciating pain, he only served to twist the blade in deeper, tearing muscle and flesh alike.

He screamed.

Then there was a gravelly voice in his ear, low and malicious. “I win,” Doom gloated, and then Tony's world erupted into an electric haze.

“Tony! To-” The suit shorted, and Loki's horrified voice disappeared along with the repulsors keeping Tony aloft.

Gravity took over just as the darkness killed the light.

-o-o-o-

Tony fell.
Illuminated by the midday sun, he fell.

Spitted upon a blade, blood oozing to varnish cold metal, he fell.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, limp and tumbling, unable to escape, he fell.

He fell, so Loki did the only thing there was to do; he caught Tony so they could fall together.

One second he was watching the screen, his suspicion turning into terror as everything slipped into place, and the next he was in the air, arms clutching tight at metal while they plummeted. There was no time to think. No need to think. Tony was in danger, and Loki needed to help him. It was as simple as that. He went to Tony without a moment of hesitation, warping into the air alongside him. Then it was more chaos than anything, with just one goal: Tony wasn't allowed to die.

The Iron Man suit crashed into him, jarring Loki's bones and sending them both down together. He struggled to get a secure hold, Tony's momentum sending him careening. Finally he managed to latch on, and he struggled to stop their sickening spinning. The world was whipping by far too quickly, and panic clouded Loki's thoughts. He wanted to teleport them away, get them out of the sky, but he could barely tell where he was let alone get them somewhere safely. There was nowhere to go but down, and the ground rushed up to meet them.

Loki hit first, using his body to cushion Tony's. He barely even registered the pain, the crushing weight of three hundred pounds smashing his body deep into the pavement. All he was aware of was Tony, and the sharp, constant thought of 'Tony can't die'. Iron Man's momentum sent him rolling off of Loki and skidding across the pavement, leaving puddles and splatters of blood in his wake. Despite his harsh landing, Tony didn't even make a sound. 'He can't be dead.'

The very moment Loki's bones sunk back into his flesh and knitted back together, he was on his feet, rushing to Tony to fall to his knees beside him. Bruise mottled arms hesitated in the air, and then Loki made his decision and flipped the man onto his stomach so he could get at the gushing wound. Twisted sheets of titanium and exposed wires marred the edges of the jagged slash in the back of the armor. It stretched from the base of Tony's neck (the Dragon Slayer was just scrap metal now, but Loki didn't care. Their creation was useless. Next time, Loki wouldn't just satisfy himself with killing Doom's creations; he was going to kill the man himself) across to his right shoulder, and it refused to stop oozing scarlet. Underneath the armor was an even greater wound, but Loki couldn't see it clearly. It was just a mess of red metal and red blood. He needed to get the armor out of the way.

Just as he reached up to flip Tony over, to try and get Jarvis to release the suit, something rammed heavily into Loki's back. The sudden attack sent bolts of agony down his spin, and he nearly collapsed onto Tony's prone body. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he whipped his head around, one arm slung protectively over Tony. There was a Doombot behind Loki, hovering in the air with its outreached hand still smoking. Erratic blue light collected as it prepared to fire again, glaring down at him with artificial eyes.

Loki never gave it the chance. His magic, already gnashing at the bit in his terror, blasted from his raised palm to obliterate the robot that even dared to harm Tony. Chunks of metal tore away from the machine's frame, and it flung in mangled shreds at the ground, never to rise again. This time when Loki turned his attention back to Tony, he kept his senses extended. No one was going to get at the man again, not while Loki was there to protect him.

Part of the god—a large, seething part—wanted to utterly destroy everything of Doom's right then. He wanted to go to where this elusive Victor was and kill the man with his own hands, rip him apart bit by bit and make him scream. But he forced that urge down, forced it to listen to reason. Loki couldn't leave Tony's side, not until he knew the man would live. He didn't want to be a part of a
world that didn't have this one arrogant, intelligent, caring mortal in it. 'Tony's not allowed to die.'

As Loki rolled Tony over onto his back, the man's head lolling lifelessly, he could finally hear the world clamoring around him. It was still pandemonium, everyone fighting to gain ground against the revived robots. Among the explosions and reports were people yelling and screaming. One shout rang clearer to Loki than all the others. “Stark is down! I repeat, Stark is down!”

It had been months since Loki had so keenly felt the pull of the fog—of that insatiable pit inside of his mind—but as his fear of losing Tony sent his heart racing, that odious feeling was quick to reacquaint itself. Just as unrelenting as he remembered, it clung to him, tearing his mind as it tried to drag him down.

But Loki didn't have time to blank out—Tony didn't have time for him to blank out—so he shoved it down and fought back to the surface. He had to stay tethered or Tony would bleed out. Would still bleed out, if he couldn't get the man out of the suit and staunch the blood flow.

Loki ripped the suit's mask off with one harsh yank, revealing the man inside. The sight made the god's inside freeze, and he felt ill. Everything had been going so perfect. Why did this have to happen now?

Tony's skin was pale and clammy, his breath was harsh and stilted. Despite Loki's efforts the man didn't escape their impromptu landing unscathed, and blood from the gash in his temple flowed over purpling skin. “Tony...” Loki pleaded. “Tony, you need to wake up. You need to get this armor off.” He shook the man's shoulder, but if crashing into the road didn't wake Tony, a soft shake wasn't going to either. Realizing the futility of that effort, Loki desperately tried the other inhabitant of the suit. “Jarvis, you need to unlatch the suit.” But the AI was also silent, and the prison of metal remained.

Forcing down another wave of fear and clambering black, Loki tried to focus long enough to remember how to manually disengage the armor. There was no other choice, and while he feared that some of the metal was lodged in Tony's skin it was riskier to not move the armor at all. He dug his fingers into the weak spots between plates, prying the gleaming sheets apart. Starting at Tony's chest and moving carefully towards the back, it took over a minute for Loki to finally ease the last section from where it was melding to the man's skin; it was one of the longest minutes in Loki's life. He dropped the mass to the ground and carefully rotated Tony on his stomach again—all Tony did was pant shallowly, unable to do anything more than fight to keep breathing—and pried blood drenched cotton away from the wound.

There was nothing pretty or skilled about the cut; it was deep and wide, with singed edges and split sinew. Beneath the pulverized flesh, little bits of bone shone through. And now without the pressure of the suit weighing on it, the furrow bled even more heavily, coating Loki and the ground.

Loki wanted to scream. Scream, and cry, and yell, and hurt, and go curl up in a corner to make it all go away. But Loki did none of those things. Not as thick, warm blood gushed onto his trembling hands, pushing out beneath his palms as he tried futilely to cover the wound. Tony was just a human, a weak, frail human, and he was dying. Loki didn't want him to die.

He coaxed his magic to his hands, trying to tame the tempest, to guide it to heal instead of destroy. But it bucked under his control, refusing to be used when he needed it the most. There were spells to fix this sort of thing—he had known them, should still know them—but like always, they eluded him. Where there should be words and incantations there was only silence. Green light flooded into his hands, yet he couldn't use the magic; most of it dissipated, vanishing into the air instead of sinking into Tony's skin and mending his flesh. “No, you can't do this to me,” Loki whispered to the glowing wisps. “I need to fix him. You have to let me fix him.” But his magic didn't not obey, just as his mind
did not obey. His own body betrayed him, and even though the magic was eager to be used he could not use it to save Tony.

But there was still something he could use it for, and when he heard another robot slinking towards him—thinking with its feeble brain that it could avoid detection, daring to consider that it was better than Loki—he hurled a mass of writhing energy at it. It went down in smoke, but Loki was not satisfied. He could crush every robot, murder Doom himself, but that would not help the gasping, dying man beneath his fingers.

“I need to fix him,” he keened, and more magic pooled into his hands. Desperately Loki raked his mind for anything, anything at all that could help him, but there was nothing. (Unforgivable His weakness, his inability—no longer could it remain that way.) Loki, once a renowned sorcerer, was limited to trying to hold the wound close with his hands. When it kept leaking he tore off a chunk of Tony's shirt and used it as well, but it barely helped. There was so much blood everywhere.

The faint whir of motors preceded another bunch of robots, and Loki rendered them scrapes with a simple flick of his fingers. He was stuck in a limbo: put pressure on the wound, annihilate a robot, listen to Tony's feathery heartbeat, try once again to cast a proper spell, put more pressure on the wound as it soaked his hands, hate that the Doombots couldn't feel pain as he dismembered another one. It repeated constantly, with no end but Tony's death in sight.

There were people speaking in the background along with the wails of sirens and rumbles of explosions. He could hear it, but none of it mattered. There was only Tony, Loki, and the god's fatal inability. Words came to him, but they meant nothing, drowned out by the mantra shouting inside of his head.

'Please, let me help him.'

"Where's Stark? Medics are on their way."

'I need to help him. Tony can't die.'

"Down there, but... I don't think it's safe to get close. Loki showed up out of nowhere to catch Stark, but... There's something really wrong with him. I think this is what Fury was talking about."

'I need to fix him. Tony. Tony. Tony. He can't die.'

"Someone has to. We can't reach Stark, and Jarvis says he's lost all contact with the suit. There's no time to wait for Loki to pull himself together."

'I can't fix this. I don't know what to do. Tony's going to die.'

"I'll go. If he lashes out, I have better chances than anyone else here."

The sticky warmth covering Loki's arms, coupled with his lack of control, reminded the god far too sharply of his latest nightmare. He fought to keep his nausea down. Around him, everything swum in and out of focus, a mess of sensations both real and imagined; there was anger and despair and blank and black and burning and freezing and death and life.

Behind him came the rustle of cloth and the clatter of disturbed stones. It didn't click in his mind that those weren't the sounds of a Doombot, and he reacted immediately to defend Tony. Magic was already on the surface of his skin, just waiting for a definite target. His eyes locked on to something moving towards him and he raised his arm to-

Loki stopped the fatal build-up just in time, barely avoiding attacking Rogers as the superhero
walked towards him. One of the Captain's hands was raised in a calming gesture while the other clutched tightly at his shield. “Loki,” the hero said slowly, inching closer to him like one would a startled animal. Rogers lowered the spangled shield to the ground to hold both hands in the air, a universal gesture of peace. “There are some medics on their way to help Tony. But you have to let them, okay? They're going to help him.”

For a moment it eluded Loki why Rogers was approaching him so tentatively. They knew each other, and Loki clearly had no intention of harming the hero (unless he hurt Tony, then Loki would eradicate him without a second thought). He had a problem with Doom and Doom alone.

But then Loki realized he was absolutely covered with Tony's blood; it was clumped in his hair and smeared all over his skin. His white shirt was rusty brown and ripped open from when his own body had broken against the road. Then there was the fact that he was practically on top of Tony, trying to obscure the man from view. One of Loki's hands remained on Tony's back, glowing a futile green as he held it over the wound that just wouldn't stop bleeding.

“Everything's going to be okay,” Rogers placated as he got closer, tensing up everytime Loki so much as twitched. Logically Loki knew he should ease up, pull away from Tony so Rogers could help... but he didn't want to. He felt like if he let go of Tony now, he'd never get him back. With every step Rogers took, Loki pressed down a bit harder on Tony's wound; he could feel the sluggish beating of a heart beneath his fingers, and that faltering thu-thump did nothing to comfort him. No matter how hard Loki's hands pressed against the broken flesh, Tony didn't make a sound; he was deathly silent.

Romanov's voice crackled over Roger's headset, startling the edgy hero. “A quinjet is about a minute from your location. We're doing our best to hold the bots off so they can get Tony away to safety. Is it safe for them to land?”

“I don't know,” Rogers replied, keeping his voice quiet in an effort to keep the god from hearing. “He hasn't tried to stop me yet, but I'm worried how he'll react to strangers.”

“I'll inform them that he has some mental damage,”—wrong, Loki wanted to protest. Right, the fog in his mind agreed—“and to be careful, but we need to get Tony out of here,” Romanov asserted, then the speakers went quiet again.

Rogers returned his attention to Loki, switching back to that soft cadence. “They're almost here, and then Tony will be fine. But you have to let them take him when they show up. Do you understand?”

Somewhere beneath the rolling seas of turmoil, Loki knew he should feel insulted with the way Rogers was treating him. There was something wrong with his brain, sure, but he wasn’t an invalid. He was far smarter than the soldier, even when his mind rotted inside the void. That was another reason why he wanted Tony, who always respected him even when he was empty inside. Tony, who was in danger; Loki didn't want him to die.

“I know, so when the medics get here you need to let them do their job,” Rogers was saying, and Loki was unaware that his own lips had moved. Everything was moving too fast, leaving him behind. Yet it felt like time was at a crawl, with things falling apart and no end in sight. The distant roar of a motor was slowly getting louder, and the beating of the heart beneath his palm was slowly getting quieter.

Rogers, having finally reached Loki, crouched down beside him. He put a gentle hand on Loki’s shoulder and watched Tony - beautiful Tony, who gave Loki everything and asked for nothing in return, going above and beyond the call of duty. Tony, who was the pinnacle of Loki's new world, bleeding out under his hands -with sorrow, yet for some reason that sadness intensified when Captain
America looked at Loki, unharmed but just as damaged.

“He'll be fine,” Rogers assured one last time before rising to his feet. He stood guard over the two as the quinjet bore down on their position, bringing with it people who could actually save Tony’s life.

Loki felt his control sipping as the quinjet’s engine roared in his ears. Ironically, it was his terror that kept him from the blankness that same anxiety birthed. He grounded himself with the chant of ‘I can’t let Tony die.’

After what seemed like a lifetime the quinjet finally landed amongst the rubble, and when the cargo door slid open a team of medics came rushing out. They rolled a gurney between them, skillfully guiding it around the cracks and strewn rubble. Loki studied every nuance of their body language, ready to strike out if they showed any sign of being a threat. “Loki, they’re just going to do their job,” Rogers soothed as the faceless medics crowded closer. But they were mortals; they couldn’t be trusted with Tony's life.

(And Loki was broken; he could be trusted even less.)

One of the medics tried to cajole Loki into removing his hands, but even though he wanted to let them help Tony, he couldn’t move. It wasn't until Rogers intervened, his super strength enough to pry Loki away, that crimson gloved hands were removed from Tony's wounds. The medics immediately descended upon Tony, filling Loki’s vacated spot. They buzzed around the fallen man like vultures to carrion, grabbing at his limbs and pressing fresh bandages against his back. When they lifted the limp body up on to the gurney and begin to wheel it towards the jet, Loki resisted the irrational urge to hurt them. Tony was his, and they were taking him away.

As the distance between Loki and Tony grew, the god could no longer resist the intense desire to follow. He yanked free of Roger's hold and rose to his feet, lurching in Tony's direction. Even if he wanted to stay, to make Doom and his pathetic creations rue the day they touched what belonged to Loki, God of Chaos, he had to be with Tony.

“Loki-” Rogers began to protest, but the god cut him off.

“I am going with him. If you do not trust me, then come with. But you will not keep me from him.” It was the clearest Loki’s thoughts had been since Tony fell, and he glared down at Rogers. Then he headed towards the quinjet with a single-minded determination. The Captain let him go, choosing to neither stop him nor follow. No one stopped him as he boarded the aircraft, either, though they gave him a wide berth as they worked. That was more than fine with him, and Loki ignored them in return. He only had eyes for Tony, pale and motionless amidst all the chaotic red. An oxygen mask was strapped to the man's face—Iron Man’s helmet was chucked thoughtlessly into a corner—and an IV fed fresh blood into parched veins. People were in the process of prying and cutting the remaining armor from Tony's hands and legs, the useless pieces joining the mask.

Against the wall, Loki observed all of this. He never looked away, not even as the plane roared to life and they rose into the air. Each muscle was coiled beneath his skin, ready to spring but without a target. Around him the medics conversed in hurried voices, saying things that Loki didn’t want to hear: ‘Severe blood loss.’ ‘Possible spinal cord damage.’ ‘Muscle trauma.’ ‘Electric burns.’

It was all wrong. He wanted them to say that Tony would be okay, that life could go back to how it was just yesterday, but no one did. It was all complications and the possibility of lifelong impairment—if Tony even lived in the first place.

Those words were the final straw. For over a year, Loki allowed himself to be complacent. He sat by and let the holes in his mind exist, writing it off because he was too cowardly to pursue the remedy.
To go back to Asgard and take what rightfully belonged to him. No longer would that be the case. Once he knew Tony was okay, he was going to fix his magic problem once and for all. If Asgard was the only place that had what he needed, then so be it. He would go to Asgard. And while he was there, he'd fix the other problem that had been bothering him.

Tony wasn't allowed to die. Not just today, but ever. Loki's natural lifespan was far greater than that of a mortal, and it had always been obvious to him that Tony would only be a blip in his long life. But he didn't want that. He wanted Tony to live with him for thousands of years, not just the fifty or so the man had left. And to do that, he needed one of Idunn's apples.

Loki wanted to never return to Asgard. He wanted to just forget that it ever existed. But for Tony, he would go back. He'd sneak into the palace and steal artificial immortality for the one man who meant everything to him. Regardless of what Tony wanted.

When the loud whir of the quinjet's engine quieted, it took Loki a moment to realize that the plane landed. Tony was rolled from the hold and into the Helicarrier, and Loki followed like a wraith, staying out of the way but never straying far. A few people tried to stop him, though they were not the same people Loki had come here with. These people took one look at his bloody form and frantically tried to help him. “It's not my blood,” he snarled at them, shoving them away so he could get to where Tony was. When some tenacious people kept pestering him, one of the medics that had helped Tony intervened. "He's alright. Worry about people who actually are injured,” she said, staring them down until the crowd thinned. She turned to Loki then, like she wanted to ask him something, but after a moment she stopped. Instead, she just told him, “Talk to me if you need anything,” and went back into the throng of doctors.

They were hooking Tony up to all sorts of machines that whined and whooshed. Leading the tempo was the heart monitor beeping incessantly: a glorious, obnoxious noise that pittered and pattered, faltered and thrummed. It kept going as the doctors sliced into Tony’s flesh, taking what Doom ruined and trying to piece it back together again.

It wasn't until that erratic, slow song became a smooth ditty that the flurry of activity slowed down. The congealing blood was wiped from Tony's skin, and the ugly wound was hidden beneath pristine white. Finally Loki heard the words he had craved. “He's in the clear.”

But even though he knew now that Tony would be alright, his decision did not change. This time they were relatively lucky. What if they weren't next time?

Sneaking into Asgard was no simple task, and sneaking into the palace was even harder. Not because of how well guarded it was- he had bypassed that security time and time again -but for the very fact that he had lived there for so long. It was a tangled mess of memories, with all of the joy covered by the ache of betrayal. Just the thought of returning invited swarming black to dig deeper into his brain. He would be his own greatest obstacle, and if he failed—if he was caught or even just seen—then that was it. His little paradise here would be over. Asgard would know he was alive, and they would come for him.

But Tony was worth the risk, even if Loki knew the man would vehemently protest. He would say Loki wasn't ready yet, and Loki agreed. That still wouldn't stop him.

“What’s wrong?” Someone asked him, pulling him out of a daze he didn't even realize he had fallen into. It was that same woman, and while she looked a bit unnerved to be talking to him, she didn't back down.
“I am unharmed,” he repeated. His clothes were torn and he was drenched with blood—some of it really was his own, shed before his skin knitted back together—but his body was fine now. His mind was a different matter, but no one could help with that. No one but Tony.

“He'll be okay, you know,” she said, undeterred. “It was a close call, but he was lucky. He should be able to make a full recovery.”

Loki didn't reply. There was nothing to say beyond, 'I should have been able to fix him when this happened', and that was not this woman's problem.

“Do you want to wash off or change your clothes?” she asked. “He's not going anywhere.”

No, Tony wasn't, but Loki was. He wanted to be around the man just a bit longer, because if things went wrong this could very well be the last time he saw Tony.

Distantly, he heard a familiar voice join the fray, and Loki turned to see Rogers talking with someone on the other end of the hall. He was still in his burnt, sooty uniform, covered with small tears and cuts. The person he was talking to nodded and pointed in Loki's direction. The Captain followed the gesture, and when he saw the god, his expression tightened. “That's him. Thank you.” Rogers walked over, trying and failing to smile at the god. “Hey, are you alright? I tried to get back here as soon as I could.” He sounded so sincere it made something inside of Loki ache.

“I'm fine,” he lied. Rogers wasn't Tony; Loki only didn't like lying to Tony. Not that he was at all believable, with his limbs still trembling imperceptibly and his mind randomly disconnecting. It didn't matter. Loki would be fine once he got his hands on some spell books and Idunn's apple. He and Tony could go back to that peculiar happiness—forever.

“He's going to be okay,” Rogers reassured again, the same words everyone kept echoing back at him.

“I know.” Which meant he had no excuse to stay here longer.

“I'll be here if you need me,” the hero continued, oblivious to Loki's intentions.

“Thank you, but I actually should get going.” Even if all he wanted to do was stay.

“Go? Go where?” Something seemed to dawn on Rogers then, and he looked alarmed. “Loki, don't.” He reached for Loki, but he was too late; Loki had already become cloaked in green, his magic whisking him away. The god reappeared inside the penthouse of Stark Tower, the room seeming so much colder now that Tony wasn't there as well.

“Jarvis,” Loki said, forcing himself to speak before he could reconsider. “I need you to give Tony a message for me when he wakes. Tell him...”
Hunted and Haunted

"Clever got me this far,  
Then tricky got me in.  
Eye on what I'm after...  

Time to feed the monster,  
I don't need another friend.  
Comfort is a mystery,  
Crawling out of my own skin.  
Just give me what I came for,  
Then I'm out the door again."

-The Package by A Perfect Circle

"I'm sorry—for everything. I won't be there when you wake up. There is something I need in Asgard, and I can't hold off going any longer. I know you're going to be angry with me, but I need to do this. I do not know when I will return, but I will come back to you. I promise you that. Tony... I'm so glad you're okay. When you fell, I... It was... Please, don't do something stupid before I come back. I'm going to make everything right again; you just need to trust me. Everything will be okay. I can fix this. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine, and after I set things right I'll come back home. You just need to wait a little bit more. Take care of Choronzon while I'm gone, and if I don't- no, forget about that. This isn't farewell. I will come back; I just need you to wait for me. I promise, Tony, I'll make things right. And... I'm sorry.”

The audio clip faded into a silence that lasted only for a moment, ended by the loud smash of a fist colliding with an innocent wall. “Shit!” Tony hissed, both from the pain shooting up his arm and the message that was still echoing in his head.

“Sir, may I suggest that you do not aggravate your injuries further? Otherwise I will be forced to contact Miss Potts.”

“Shut up, Jarvis!” He snapped, bringing his fist back down against the plaster. The impact raced through his body to jar his other shoulder, the one held together only by a plethora of stitches and bandages. Fiery pain erupted in his back, and he swore again, this time pained and quiet. He unclenched his fist—knuckles now bruised and raw—to clutch at the deep ache behind his collar bone.

“Sir, it is an hour past when you should have taken your pain medication. Punching the wall is even less advised than usual,” the AI spoke again, not deterred by Tony's harsh words. If anything he actually sounded concerned, hovering over the engineer like an electronic mother hen.

“He’s such an idiot,” Tony lamented, barely listening over the roar of his own thoughts. Holding his shoulder as if it would stop the twisting, digging pain, he sank into a nearby chair (one of Loki’s favorites, he was quick to note). Each beat of his heart sent agony racing through him, and now that his pain killers had all but worn off, the stabs of pain were intense enough that they made it hard to even think. But no matter how much his body hurt, it could not compare to the pain of Loki’s actions. “Idiot,” Tony repeated, bowing his head and squeezing his eyes shut. “Why would you do this?”
I am confident he will return, sir.” Jarvis tried again, the only thing he could do without a body. Tony wondered if it was hard on Jarvis to only be able to watch events unfold around him. That even if he wanted to, he was unable to help under his own power. All he could do was ask others to help on his behalf. Maybe it was time Tony invested in getting the robot a body of his own, so he didn’t have to feel useless. Loki would like that… except for Loki wasn’t there anymore.

“You don’t know that.” How could he, when not even Loki was sure he’d return? For ‘not being a farewell’, that was as much of a goodbye as any. Returning to Asgard was a fool’s errand, one that would not end well for anyone, and they both knew it. That 'I'll be fine' Loki said seemed more like the god was trying—and failing—to convince himself; he knew what he was attempting was suicidal. “He’s not coming back.”

“And you don’t know that he won’t, sir,” Jarvis retorted, but Tony was already convinced of his own words. Loki was gone, and he was never coming back. So even though Jarvis kept talking, Tony stopped listening.

While he brooded, the throbbing in his shoulder worsened until it was bordering unbearable. Every little shift was agony, and breathing became a burden. His pain medication was across the room, but even though Tony sorely regretted not taking it, the prospect of standing up to get it was worse than just staying put. He slumped farther into the seat, dazed and grimacing. His fingers rested useless on the covered stitches, unable to take away the pain.

Tony’s not sure how long he sat there, suspended in pain and melancholy, before a hand on his uninjured shoulder jolted him into awareness. The sharp movement brought a pained hiss to his lips, but a surge of hope blocked it out. **Loki**, he automatically thought. Loki was back, and-

“Jarvis told me to come,” Pepper said, ruthlessly crushing Tony's feeble dream. Kneeling down in front of him, one of her hands clasped Tony's knee and the other reached up to cup his cheek. She gently tilted his chin, forcing Tony to actually look at her. Pepper's face was marred by worry, her eyebrows drawn and her lips down-turned. Tony wanted to smile at her, to ease her stress, but with the pounding in his arm and cacophony in his mind all that came to his lips was a grimace. That just deepened her frown, and her eyes roved over to the red speckled bandage.

“Oh, Tony,” Pep said softly, looking back at his haggard face. “You can’t keep doing this to yourself. It’s not going to make anything better.”

Tony shut his eyes, not wanting to see her disappointment, and tilted away from her steadfast hand. “I don’t know what else to do,” he admitted.

“Well for starters, you could take your medication.” She withdrew her hands and rose to her feet. Tony cracked his eyes open, but he kept his gaze locked on the floor as she talked. “If you aren’t going to stay at a hospital, then you need to at least take care of yourself. Where did you put your prescription?”

“In the kitchen,” Tony mumbled, in too much pain to try and resist. Besides, it wasn't like Pep was wrong; the throbbing agony that coursed through him helped no one. “Second shelf on the right.”

Pepper followed his directions, and he could hear her shuffling through his pill collection for the correct bottle. The entire time she was away, Tony kept his gaze locked on the floor, as if the carpet held the answers to the world’s problems. Only when Pep gently shoved a glass of water into one hand and a few pills in the other did he rouse himself. “Making yourself suffer won’t help him,” she repeated as he stared down at the little white tablets, hesitant to take them despite his own thoughts. Biting back the pain, he shoved the pills in his mouth and washed them down with a large swig of water. His shifting around renewed the flare in his shoulder, and Pepper took the glass back from
Then she slipped into the space beside him, letting him lean into her as he waited for the medicine to kick in. It took far too long for his liking, and when the drugs finally did work, he could still feel the slightest twinge in his shoulder when he moved. What's worse was that they did absolutely nothing to ease his mind.

“I’m worried about him,” Tony whispered into the side of Pepper’s neck, and she reached over to pull him closer.

“I know you are,” she soothed, running her fingers through his unwashed hair. “But you can’t keep doing this. It’s only been five days. Give him time.”

“That’s the problem; it’s already been five days, and there’s still no sign of him.” So much went wrong in just one morning, and Tony dreaded to think what could happen in the course of five days.

When he had woken up in the med bay of the Helicarrier, drugged to the gills with pain meds, he had been beyond confused. It took a long time for his morphine-floating thoughts to realign into some semblance of order, and even longer to remember what happened with Doom. But beyond that, there was nothing. His confusion had only grown when Rogers was suddenly in the room with him, looking both relieved and like someone had killed his puppy. Instantly, Tony knew something was up, that something had gone wrong while he was unconscious, and dread blossomed in his chest.

“What’s wrong?” Tony had asked, or at least tried to; his tongue felt leaden inside of his mouth, and all that came out was an unintelligible slur. Speech not working, he fought against the drug haze, uncoordinated limbs trying to propel him out of the bed. Before he could even get a leg free Rogers was there, pinning him back.

“Tony! Tony, stop it!” Captain America shouted, and Tony had no choice but to comply, his limbs far too weak. He sagged back into the bed, shoulder aching slightly beneath the cotton world of analgesics.

“What happened?” He asked again, and this time his question came out as actual words.

At first Rogers was hesitant to tell him, insisting that Tony shouldn’t worry about Doom right now and should instead concentrate on getting better, but Tony wouldn’t have it. He threatened to go and ask someone else (not that he thought he’d be able to walk far at the moment) if Rogers wouldn’t tell him. Eventually the hero caved. He explained how the Doombots were faking being shut down, and that many of them survived the impact of hitting the ground. It wasn’t until SHIELD was picking them up that they started moving again, killing a lot of agents who were unprepared for an attack. Then Tony was stabbed and...

“And?” Tony prodded when Rogers trailed off. “Obviously I didn't die, so what-” That's when Tony's apprehension skyrocketed. “Oh god, Loki. Something happened to Loki.” The god's absence suddenly became glaring. Loki never liked being very far from Tony, and the fact that Tony was in the Helicarrier would have made no difference. It wasn’t just his ego speaking when he said that Loki would be wherever he was. That he wasn’t meant that something was keeping him away.

Tony renewed his efforts to get out of the bed, this time far more desperate than before, and once again Rogers was forced to hold him down. “Stark!” The captain shouted over Tony's rising panic. “Loki wasn't hurt! He's okay!”

That only slowed Tony's struggling a little bit. “Then where is he? Why isn't he here?” And Rogers,
always with his heart on his sleeve, guiltily looked away. Tony didn't marvel at the novelty of that particular expression on the Captain’s face; he just wanted to know where his friend—and wasn't that word an understatement for the profound bond between them—was. “Steve, where is Loki?”

“I don't know,” Rogers confessed. “No one does. He disappeared after you were no longer in critical condition.” His guilt seemed to deepen. “I didn't realize what he was doing in time. I'm sorry, I should have stopped him.”

Tony laughed, a harsh, panicked sound, and there was another curious pull in his shoulder—no, not curious. Doom stabbed him, didn't he? Nearly killed him too, it sounds like. “You couldn't have stopped him.” But Tony wished he did, because oh god, Loki was missing.

“Tonym,” Rogers repeated anyway, like Loki teleporting away was his personal failure.

“And no one has seen him?” Tony asked, attempting to wrestle back his rising anxiety. Maybe it wasn't as bad as it sounded. Maybe Loki thought he was going to blank out and just went back to Malibu. “What about Jarvis? Does Jarvis know anything?” This time when Tony tried to sit up, Rogers let him.

Tony leaned back onto his pillows, wincing as whatever cocktail of drugs he was on started wearing off, and Rogers replied, “Jarvis says he has a message to you from Loki, but he won't let anyone else listen to it, not even Pepper. We had her check your house in California as well, but he wasn't there.”

So Loki wasn’t back at the house, but if there was a message... “I'm up now, Jarv,” he addressed the room, knowing the AI would be listening in. “Let's hear it.”

That was the first time Tony heard Loki's message, and it certainly wasn't the last. Over and over he had Jarvis play it, listening intently to the god’s tremulous voice, but it never got him any closer to getting Loki back. If the god really did go to Asgard, then no matter what Tony did he was powerless to follow. SHIELD did have people looking for the god on Earth, but it was a futile effort. Still, that didn’t stop Tony from wanting to go out and look for him. Even if he had no chance of succeeding, it would make him feel a lot less useless than just sitting around at home. However, the wound in his shoulder didn’t allow for even that. He was actually supposed to still be in the infirmary, but he refused to suffer pitying glances any longer.

All the change in scenery ended up bringing him was even more stress, where no matter what he did he was constantly reminded of the god. All those mementos just made the fact that Loki wasn't there—could already be dead for all Tony knew—even more jarring.

“You just need to have faith in him. It'll be okay,” Pepper reassured, resting her chin on the top of his head. “But in the meantime, you have to take care of yourself. You took care of him for a year. Now it's time to think about yourself for a change.”

“It's not the same without him around,” Tony tried to explain. There was no taking it easy, not when it felt like he was missing an essential piece of himself. Everything seemed so different, so hollow, without Loki beside him. What the god had once filled, the emptiness inside of Tony that he hadn’t even realized was there until Loki came crashing into his life, was now glaringly void. Even if Tony wanted to relax, he couldn’t; all he could do was try and hold the breaking pieces together until Loki came back to repair them.

“I know,” Pepper replied, willing to be there for him until the hurt went away. “He'll come back soon. He never could stay away from you for long.”

Tony hoped she was right, that Loki would return any moment.
He didn't.

-o-o-o-

He ran. He didn't take the time to curse his fate or dwell on the consequences he created; he just ran, never stopping. Even when the beating of his heart shook his body and his lungs were on fire inside of him—just like they had been in the void, empty and burning, where no matter how many times he tried to pull air into them there just wasn’t enough—he did not stop. He went forwards and onwards, forevermore.

But no matter how far or fast Loki went, his every step was haunted by the pounding of hooves. Sometimes they would peter off, and for a few moments, Loki would dare to hope that he could finally slow down, but the roar never failed to pick up again. There was no rest for the wicked.

Loki had no choice but to keep moving, pushing his body until every nerve screamed out. Fog rolled into his mind, banishing any thoughts that did slip through. The world narrowed down to only one objective: run, run, run so they wouldn't kill him.

This is what it was like to be hunted.

-o-o-o-

The turn of another week found Tony continuing to fall apart at the seams. Every day was worse than the one before it as his hope continued to dwindle. Loki wasn't back yet, if he ever would be. Tony didn't want to be cliché, but that whole, “You don't know what you have until it's gone,” saying worked pretty well in this circumstance. From the very beginning—when Loki was just a shadow of a person—it had been clear that the god would be around for a long time. Then as Loki began to recover, their lives melded together until it was no longer clear where one began and the other ended. They were simply 'Tony and Loki'. Now it was just 'Tony', hurt and confused, with only alcohol to make it better.

He threw back another glass of scotch, not caring that the pain medication they switched him to wasn't supposed to mixed with anything. In all honesty, he preferred it this way; it made it easier for his thoughts to coagulate, becoming so thick that nothing made sense anymore. That was all he wanted. If he couldn't fix anything by dwelling on his loss, he might as well not think at all.

As soon as Tony wasn't doped up on morphine, Fury had bitched and moaned for the engineer to figure out the Doombot problem. In the beginning, Tony really did try. Throwing himself into a job was always he best way to ignore the world, but Loki had been right when he said it was fifty-six percent his creation. Tony did not have enough understanding of the magic portion to figure out where it went wrong. Beyond the obvious analysis of ‘it didn’t work’, he needed Loki's help. Without the god, working on the Dragon Slayer was nothing more than a mess of nostalgia.

So Tony abandoned that project, and he reverted back to old habits with frightening ease. The bottle became his replacement friend, welcoming him with the familiar pound of a hangover that he just drank away. It was a vicious cycle, and no one was making any process in snapping him out of it short of locking up every adult beverage they could find. He just moved on to the next stash.

Pepper headed the ‘don’t let Tony self-destruct’ committee, though Steve wasn't far behind. Tony wasn’t sure if it was a sense of honor or guilt that fueled the American Soldier, but either way good ol' Steve had taken it upon himself to interfere with Tony's drinking. While Pepper was thankful for the help, unable to juggle babysitting with running Stark Industries, Tony just wanted them to leave him alone… Except for that was a lie; he had gotten use to always having a companion around. It just wasn’t them he needed.
Finding his thoughts diverting back to a certain green-eyed mage, Tony poured himself another glass and downed it to cut that recollection off. He let his eyes wander to the horizon, soaking in the scenic overlook that he hadn’t been able to appreciate for a long time.

Right after he had gotten home from the Helicarrier, he had wanted to yank all the curtains down. Like an angry woman who had just broken up with her sleazy boyfriend, he wanted everything of Loki’s gone. But when he had the fabric fist in quivering hands, he stopped. Taking down these curtains was supposed to be a special occasion, a sign that they were moving beyond a painful chapter in Loki’s life, not an action done in a fit of anger. He had forced himself to step away, satisfying himself with just glaring at them instead. When he tired of hating the immobile fabric, he retreated into his room. It was the only place in the house with unobscured windows, and he stared out at the mockingly clear sky.

In the year that Loki had lived with him, Tony barely spent any time in his bedroom. Between late nights in the lab and no longer bringing one night stands home, it had fallen into disuse. The room was relatively untouched by all things Loki, and that was the main reason he holed himself up in it. Now, Pepper struggled just to get him to take one step beyond the doorway.

For hours on end, Tony would lay on his stomach, resting his aching shoulder on a pillow (they had taken him off the good stuff, and this new medication didn't work well enough). Whenever he began to feel too sober, he'd wash down the blue scenery with whatever he could get his hands on. The only times he managed to rouse himself from his stupor would be to grab another drink or take a much needed trip to the bathroom. Then he’d trudge right back to resume his wallowing.

That was Pepper’s word for it, by the way. ‘Wallowing.’ Tony preferred to call it a scenic binge, but instead of being able to admire the shoreline (which he had seen so many times now there wasn’t really much to admire), his mind kept going back to how much he feared for Loki’s safety. More than that, Tony truly missed the god’s presence. He wasn’t the only one, either.

Coro swatted at his ear, yowling miserably. His claws dug into the bandage covering Tony’s wound, inciting flickers of pain. When the cat continued to aggravate the injury, Tony sluggishly rolled onto his back to force the cat off of him. He scowled over at the furball, which just signaled to Coro that Tony was actually paying attention to him. He meowed louder, a feat Tony hadn't thought was possible, and batted at the hand with the liquor bottle.

“Yeah, I know. I miss him too, buddy,” Tony told the little rugrat, setting down his drink to scratch the top of the cat’s head. Coro didn’t shy away from his touch, but he didn’t nuzzle Tony’s hand either, not like he did with Loki. After a few minutes of drunken petting, the cat finally decided that Tony made a poor replacement for the god and mewed pitifully. He slipped out from under Tony's hand and hopped off the bed. With one last glance back at the bed, like suddenly the engineer would turn into who Coro really wanted, the cat wandered from the room. Tony bet Coro was going to go mope on Loki’s favorite chair.

“Sir, Steve Rogers is requesting permission to enter the premises,” Jarvis announced, pulling Tony out of his drug and alcohol induced daze. “Would you like me to let him in this time?”

“Didn’t you let him in after I said no last time?” Tony asked grudgingly, flipping back over onto his stomach so his shoulder wasn’t digging into the mattress. Even that slight pressure had been torment, and it was a long time before he could take another dose... Unless he decided to just ignore the instructions on the battle, as he had been doing. Which would explain why they were quick to take the morphine away from him. Not that he would have allowed himself to become addicted to the drug. They were just overreacting like always; he could handle himself.

“My apologies. He had the override code.” The AI didn’t sound sorry at all. Jarvis was conspiring to
pull Tony out of his funk like everyone else.

“Whatever. I don’t see why you bother asking me when you’re going to let him in anyway.” To prove his point, Tony could faintly hear the front door opening without his permission. “Traitor,” he said, but his words lacked any real bite. If Tony honestly wanted them out, he would have just gone in and changed Jarvis's code. However, after a notable incident involving alcohol poisoning and a hooker, Pepper had made him promise to always keep an override just in case something bad happened to him.

Steve's voice drifted in through Tony's open door, a faint, “Oh, hey there Coro. No, I'm sorry, I didn’t bring you any treats this time. Has Tony fed you today?” No, Tony actually hadn't. He meant to- it was one of Loki’s directions, after all – but he had forgotten. There was a reason he didn't keep pets; he had a hard enough time taking care of himself. “Let's fix that, why don’t we?” At least he had Steve, who was probably using his only free time to check on Tony, to feed Loki’s cat.

Despite not stopping Jarvis from letting Steve in, Tony didn’t want to talk to him right now. His glass was empty, and his arm was throbbing in pace with his heartbeat. But there were footsteps approaching his room, and Tony had nowhere to run to. So he stayed put, resolutely staring out the window and not looking up when he heard Steve stop outside of his door. Habitually trying to drink away the stress, Tony brought the empty bottle to his lips. He didn't want to see what emotions were portrayed on Steve's face. Pity was probably one of them. Remorse too, like there was anything the Captain could of done to stop Loki from being a reckless moron.

“He's going to be angry with you when he comes back and sees that you've starved his cat,” Steve said by way of greeting, walking farther into the room and stopping by the bed. Tony could see the hero's battle scuffed armor peripherally, and he distantly wondered how many people Doom managed to kill today. “It'll hurt him, seeing the thing he loves wasting away in his absence,” Steve continued, and Tony knew they weren't talking about the cat anymore.

“Then he shouldn't have left in the first place,” Tony retorted, rolling the glass in his hands and wishing it was full again.

“But he did, and you can't change that.” Tony grimaced; it was the truth, and it stung.

Steve moved to sit down beside Tony, and the engineer finally rolled over to actually look at the other man. He stared right back, face like an open book, but there wasn't pity in those eyes; it was compassion and confidence that things would be okay again. Tony wished he could share that confidence. “I'm not going to let you drown in self-pity, Tony. He's going to come back, and he's going to need you to be strong for him.”

Tony huffed and tore his gaze back to the window and the dazzling blue. “I don't know. Loki made it pretty clear that he didn't think he needed me anymore. Not when he couldn't even wait for me to wake up. I could have helped him. We could have done this together.” And that was one of the things that hurt Tony the most: that Loki didn't wait to ask for his help. Did Loki not trust him enough, or did he just not think Tony was capable?

“That's a stupid thing to say,” Steve said bluntly, startling Tony from his thoughts to look back up at him. “You didn't see him that day, Tony.” That didn't matter; Tony had been with Loki more than enough to understand what the god thought. He opened his mouth to say as much, but he was cut off. “No. I don't want you thinking that he doesn't care about you, or whatever other dumb stuff you have going on in that head of yours. Because for all that you call yourself a genius, you are really damn thick sometimes.”

It was only on rare occasions that Steve actually swore, and Tony stared at the man with his mouth
hanging open, half in shock and half in protest. And Steve wasn't done, either. “You didn't see what I saw. That man loves you, Tony. When Doom attacked you, he was there before anyone else even realized what happened. And do you know what he did then? He fell with you, all the way to the ground.”

Something twisted in Tony's gut. “What do you mean?” He asked apprehensively. No one had told him this before. Sure, he knew that it was Loki who saved his life, but this? Loki actually fell from the sky with him? No one mentioned that. They told him Loki was fine, but had he actually gotten hurt for Tony's sake?

“I mean exactly what I said. I don't know how durable an Asgardian,”—Jotun, Tony's mind automatically corrected, not that the specifics really mattered to him—“is, but I don't think hitting the pavement that fast is pleasant for anyone. And I don't think he would have done that for anyone, either.”

“You said he wasn't hurt,” Tony accused, the horrifying image of a broken Loki popping into his mind. Just like when he fell into Tony's life, covered in blood and completely wrecked.

“He healed.” Steve said, like that made it right in any way.

“That doesn't-” Tony began, but again he was kept from continuing.

“Hey,” Steve barked, leaning in towards Tony. “I'm not telling you this so you can beat yourself up over it. I'm telling you because you need to realize that he cares about you more than anything, even his own safety. He was an absolute wreck when he thought you were going to die. You mean everything to him, and he would give anything for you, so don't go thinking that he left because he thought you were inadequate or something. I guarantee you whatever he's off doing he's doing it for you. Because to him, you are worth risking his life over.”

It took Tony a moment to respond to that, humbled by the implications of everything Steve said. Never before has Tony been such a crucial part of someone’s life, not to such a frightening degree. It was both a heavy burden and heartening to know he meant that much to someone—to Loki.

Still, that didn't change the fact that Loki had left, and Tony may never see him again. “He should have taken me with, or at least talked with me first.”

“Probably,” Steve agreed, but didn't say anything more.

Silence fell over them for a few minutes as Tony tried to put himself in Loki's mindset when the god chose to go back to a place he hated, and Steve...was probably thinking about something equally as deep. But then the Captain disrupted the moment, standing up and giving Tony a searching look.

“I need to go. We've been having some problems with Doom. Just think about what I said, alright? And stop moping around. You want to not feel useless? Then do something about it.”

As quickly as he arrived, the soldier was out the door again, leaving Tony alone with the sky and his depleted glass. After a moment of gazing at the crashing sea he sighed, finally pulling himself into a sitting position and setting the glass on the bedside table. Steve was right. Maybe he couldn't help this time, but he sure as hell wasn't going to let there be a next time.

“Jarvis? Get the lab ready for me. We're making ourselves a trans-dimensional tracking device.”

-o-o-o-

Back pressed harshly into stone, he hid. Heart in his throat, he tried futilely to sink into surroundings
and disappear. They were coming closer, and all that stood between Loki and capture was a poorly
concealed cave entrance. 'They're going to find me,' he thought, petrified. 'I should have kept
moving. If I stay here, they'll find me.'

Yet Loki didn't have a choice but to stop; his entire body shook and trembled, on the verge of
collapse. The craggy wall behind him took more of his weight than his own legs did, and he was
sure that if he pulled away, he wouldn't make it nine steps before coming crashing down.

There was the snapping of a branch to the right, and Loki's froze; they were close. Labored breaths
locked up inside his chest, he listened in dread to the sounds outside the small cavern. Without harsh
pants obscuring his hearing, the distant tread of feet and shouting voices became obvious to him.
There were only three soldiers from the sound of it, but in his exhaustion three was more than
enough. Their voices grew louder as they got closer to his poor hiding spot.

"-went this way. He can't have gotten far."

"Unless he teleported away. Are we still within the barrier?"

"Aye. That cowardly mage isn't going to slip away with his magic tricks this time."

"Except he's at most only a few miles from the edge. Once he's out, we won't have any chance of
retrieving the grimoire."

"Then you lads should stop bickering and find him."

"Yes, sir!"

The voices split up, drawing closer and closer. Terrified, Loki didn't move a single muscle, not even
to breathe, lest they heard him. Even when his lungs began to ache, he did not draw in a breath. He
spent seven years without oxygen; he could manage a few minutes. Except for as footsteps circled
his position, drawing close only to fade away, he felt a different hunter closing in on him. This one
was just as—if not more—dangerous, because it made no difference if he ran or hid; he could never
outmatch it.

(There was no light anywhere; the darkness was so thick it was like oil, clinging to him and clogging
his senses.)

Loki tried to fight past the twisted memories and push away the phantom sensations. He wasn't in the
void; there was light. He could see; he could hear; he wasn't trapped. But he was trapped, just not
between Yggdrasril. Someone was searching just outside of the small cave, feet brushing against the
undergrowth that hid Loki from view. They were close enough that the smallest twitch from Loki
would forfeit his cover and his life.

(No matter how much he tried to warp out of there, to get out of the darkness, it would not release
him from its greedy clutches. It tortured him, filling his lungs with nothing yet denying him death.
Surrounded by black, he wanted to die.)

Loki's craved the familiar thrum of his magic, wanted it to take him far, far away from here, but it
was absent. No matter how many times he tried to call it to him, there was no response. Asgard was
on lock-down, and he was a fish caught in the net. With a hunter above him, ready to spear him if he
surfaced, and a shark caught in the net with him, there was nowhere to run.

(He was being dragged down, farther and farther into nothingness. Dragged to the bottom, where
light was just an ardent memory. Embraced in emptiness, Loki and the void became one.)
As the third week without Loki unfolded, Tony found himself reverting back to his healthier (though not perfect) coping mechanism. He returned to spending all day in his lab, always deeply absorbed with one project or another. Pepper wasn't thrilled, but everyone on Team 'Coddle Stark' was in agreement that it was a better alternative than him wasting away on his bed with enough alcohol in his system to send a college student to the hospital. Tony didn't particularly care one way or another; he just wanted the god to come back home.

However, day after day went by and there was no sign of Loki, so Tony drowned himself in technology, even if a large part of him would have preferred to drink his sorrows away. Working in the lab was just like the old days, which should have been comforting but wasn't. He kept saying stuff like, “Loki, what do you think about this?” or “Hey Sparkles, pass me the blow torch.” only to have the responding silence jolt him back to reality.

It also meant that Dum-E—wonderful but obtuse AI that he was—went back to his usual shenanigans without the god there to distract him. “Dum-E, what are you doing over there?” Tony asked waringly as the robot poked around the equipment shelves, whirring as he scootched around boxes of tools. The shelving unit shook slightly as Dum-E accidentally bumped against the frame, sticking his arm into a small gap between containers. “Dum-E, get back over here.”

The robot perked slightly at the command, instantly turning his head to look at Tony while it was still caught between items. “No, wait—” Tony began, but he was too late. The robot's hand caught on a large toolbox, and this time instead of just wobbling the whole shelf began to totter. “Dum-E!” Tony shouted as the robot gave a startled squeak and rolled backwards, but the damage was already done. After another precarious tilt, the shelf lost its battle against gravity; it came falling down on the spot where the older AI had just been, sending scraps of metal and gadgets all over the floor.

When the clatter died down, Tony's mutter of, “It's just a shelf. He's done worse, you can't donate him because of a shelf,” could be heard. Dum-E just vrrr-ed at the mess he made, then returned to poking around in the pile. At the sight, Tony's annoyance fled.

“He's not going to show up just because you keep searching for him,” Tony informed the robot, but Dum-E just chirped at him before returning to rooting through the spilled boxes. The engineer sighed, giving up on fixing the AI's misconception. “Whatever, just clean your mess up while you're at it.”

Tony returned to tinkering with the wires of a Stark phone—what would be Loki's phone, when the god finally got his stupid, self-sacrificing ass back home—and tried to ignore Dum-E's sad quest. Apparently Loki had taken to playing games with the AI when Tony wasn't home. The most common game they played happened to be hide-and-seek, where Loki turned into a skinny black rat and hid inside the lab for the robot to find. When Jarvis had shown Tony the footage to explain Dum-E's strange behavior, the man had smiled fondly at the screen the whole time, even if it was bittersweet. But now Dum-E kept trying to find the god even though he wasn't there.

'But he will be soon,' Tony forced himself to think. 'He's trying to get back here, and I just need to trust him.'

Until then, he busied himself with making Loki the most comprehensive phone in the history of all mobile devices. Tony's favorite feature was the state of the art tracking device; it wasn't quite trans-
dimensional like he wanted, but it was pretty damn close. And while sure, there were dozens of other things that were more important to work on, he wanted to keep to his pledge of not working on projects when Loki wasn’t there. As for his personal projects... well, he was finding it hard to concentrate right now, with his thoughts constantly going back to one thing.

“I hope you’re safe, wherever you are,” Tony said to the phone, like it could carry his message to Loki across realms. “And that you’re on your way home. I miss you, you idiot.”

-o-o-o-

Loki didn’t know how much time had passed before his mind reset itself. One moment he had been on the verge of being found, and the next he was lying stiffly on the ground, rocks digging into his sore muscles. A groan escaped his lips before he remembered the need for silence, but when he did realize his error, he killed the sound and tensed in anticipation. Luckily, it didn’t seem like anyone was still in the area, and when he stretched his senses, all he could hear was the natural sounds of the forest. He let out his held breath and finally allowed himself to move.

Lifting himself up from the rocky ground was far harder than it should have been, and Loki winced at every shift of his muscles. He wasn’t sure exactly how long he had been running (almost a fortnight, he had to guess) or how long he had been lying on the ground, but it was obvious that his body had reached its limit. There were only a few miles left until he could escape, access his magic and teleport far away from Asgard, but that small distance felt insurmountable.

However, the thought of reuniting with Tony spurred Loki onwards, and he forced resisting limbs into action. He couldn’t stop now, not after having come so far. Already he had spent too long here, and Tony probably feared the worst. Then Loki unwillingly thought about how things almost were ‘the worst’. He might not be dead yet, but the repercussions of his actions would follow him beyond this realm. That in getting seen, Loki practically signed his death warrant. If he survived these last few miles—and even that was a major if—then Odin would undoubtedly send someone after him. He had stolen two ancient relics, after all. That alone was enough to earn him an execution, even without taking into consideration all of his other crimes. Right now, he was just a dead man walking.

Pushing aside his fears in favor of thinking about returning home, Loki climbed out from the cave. He checked his surroundings before stepping out into the open, the warmth of the sun soaking into his fatigued body. Standing amidst the towering trees, Loki took a moment to let the beauty of his old home wash over him.

He had missed this; not just Asgard, but being able to appreciate the world around him without feeling overwhelmed. For months after he had left the void, this warmth would have felt akin to fire on his skin, and the light had been like venom dripping into his eyes. Now he could stand under the open sky without pain, and the stirrings of his mind were nothing more than faint whispers. It was peaceful, and he wished he could have come here under different circumstances, but he no longer belonged in this realm. There was one last stretch between him and freedom, and delaying would only give his hunters more time to organize. It was time for him to leave and hopefully never come back.

Moving quickly but quietly—wishing not for the first time that, if nothing else, he at least retained the ability to shapeshift into something faster—he closed the space between himself and the boundary of the anti-magic field. While he kept his ears open, there were no signs of his pursuers anywhere nearby. It was just him and the chattering of the forest. For miles he ran on aching legs, and while each step was a step too many, he felt his heart lighten anyway. He was almost home.

Then the chirping of birds and rustle of deer faded, leaving an oppressive silence behind. Loki slowed his mad dash, caution outweighing his desire to get home as quickly as possible. Creeping
around low-hanging branches, he listened for the soldiers that had to be close by. The only question was whether or not they were blocking his path, or if they were just patrolling around the area.

Loki got his answer when the wind carried with it voices and the clatter of swords, coming from the very direction he was heading. Undeterred, he began moving parallel to where he assumed the people to be in an effort to find a way around them. He only became worried when new voices kept replacing the ones he walked past, only a small gap in between each group. Was he surrounded? Unable to tell from his position, Loki angled back towards the boundary to take a closer look. He watched his every move closely, taking precautions to not make a single sound. Crouching low to the ground, he darted between tangles of trees, stepping softly in moss and dirt.

As the voices grew louder, so too did Loki’s apprehension, but it was paramount he knew what he was dealing with. There was a cowardly piece of Loki that resisted, telling him to go the other direction and stay far, far away from any Asgardian, but the determined part of his mind told him it was now or never; he went towards the soldiers instead of away.

Distant murmurs became actual words the closer Loki got, doing nothing to quell his distress. They were talking about him, and how he would be punished when they captured him. He had no way to escape, they said, with sentries posted around the entire area. That finally they'd put an end to his thievery. What really rattled Loki, however, was the passing mention of Thor. The context seemed off, because one of the soldiers stated that Thor would not allow Loki to be executed. Why did it matter that Thor opposed—if Thor opposed? His not-brother had always obeyed Odin in the end; it was Odin’s ruling that mattered.

Then Loki got close enough to see the four soldiers he was listening in on, peering through the brush to see their gleaming swords and dull leathers. They were standing close together while they chatted, eyes occasionally diverting to do a cursory sweep of their surroundings. None of their faces were familiar, and for that Loki was grateful. Sneaking by would be hard enough without unwelcomed memories fogging his mind.

Watching the quad that stood between him and freedom, all of Loki’s training in strategy came to the surface. He analyzed each soldier, scoping out any weaknesses in their form. To his displeasure, there weren't a lot of weak points for him to exploit. Four against one simply was not good odds, especially when they were fully armed and he was minimally equipped. That had been fine for breaking into the palace and fleeing through the forest, but if it came to hand to hand combat, he was 'screwed' as Tony would say.

Odds not in Loki's favor, he pulled back away from the sentries. While he doubted they would have left such a loophole, there may be a way to slip between groups. He would have a better chance of succeeding if that was the case.

Keeping the first group in the corner of his eye, Loki began to move towards where he could hear another one. This close to the Asgardians, he was glad that their boisterous conversation covered up the soft sounds of his passing. They didn't hear him as he drifted by, going far enough to catch a glimpse of the next group over.

Loki cursed mentally when he saw how little space was actually between posts. It was a thousand feet at most; a distance easily crossed by troops far more rested than he was. Deciding that the risk of getting noticed by two groups simultaneously was too great, Loki edged back towards the noisy four. They would be easier to get past than the other group, but just barely. With how terrible Loki’s chance of success was, he'd take any advantage he could get.

'This is it,' he thought. 'If I can just get past them, I can go home. Tony is waiting.'
Tucking himself into the densest area of brush, he slipped four daggers out of his sleeved and put two in each hand. While he hoped to get through without detection, he had no delusions that that'd actually work. He learned his lesson earlier, when his carelessness prompted this entire mess. If it came down to fighting for his life, he would do anything to get away.

Now armed, Loki began to slink forwards, hugging the bases of trees and darting across the areas with less coverage. The protective distance he had kept from the four dwindled rapidly until he was almost level with their position. Then the foliage began to thin out, and he came to a stop about a few hundred feet to the right of the sentries. Beyond where he was hiding, the forest briefly fell away into a small clearing. Once he stepped into the open, it would become a race to see if he could get to the edge of the boundary before someone killed him. He would have a few seconds head start, and that would have to be enough.

Gripping his daggers tighter, Loki steeled himself for the mad dash that was about to follow. 'I'm sorry, Tony,' he thought one last time. 'I might not make it back home to you.' Then he pushed those doubts from his mind, focusing on the task set before him. It was show time.

Loki waited until the group was in the throes of laughter after another tasteless joke before he made his move; he lunged forwards, sprinting as quickly as his body would let him. Faster than it would let him, letting adrenaline push him beyond his limits. Everything after that seemed to happen in slow motion.

A guard's laughter suddenly cut off as he caught sight of the fleeing mage, a battle cry immediately coming to his lips. The other guards were quick to take up the caveat, spurring Loki to go even faster. “There he is! Don't let him get away!”

Pounding footsteps accentuated his lighter ones, and the shouting spread as other posts responded to the uproar. Loki didn't bother figuring out how many soldiers were following him; he just kept putting one foot in front of the other, desperate to reach the end of the boundary before they caught him. There was only another mile left.

But after spending so long on the run, Loki just couldn't get his muscles to move fast enough. It took less than a minute for the first group to draw even with him, crashing through the undergrowth on either side. He tried to keep track of each of them, but he did not have that kind of attention to spare. The daggers rested heavily in his hands, yet he did not throw them. It was one of the soldiers that ended up making the first move, veering into Loki's path. A blade swung viciously towards the trickster, and there wasn't enough space for him to completely evade. Tempered metal slit through the flesh of his arm, reaching down towards the bone.

Loki grimaced at the sudden inferno, but he fought to keep moving. There was no time to stop lest he find himself surrounded. Thick blood oozed to the ground as he ran, his cells prevented from regenerating. He was lucky the blade didn't go deeper, or he very well could have lost his arm. Of course, he'd lose more than an arm if he didn't hurry it up. There were still three soldiers closing in, and the fourth one was regaining lost ground.

'Come on,' Loki thought frantically. 'Where's the boundary? It has to be close.' If it wasn't and he'd miscalculated, then he was surely as good as dead.

Another blade angled for Loki’s heart, but this time he was able to avoid it by lunging to the side. However, that brought him too close to the soldier on his right, and he had to duck under a third blade that narrowly missed his head. As the soldiers beared down on him, Loki had less and less space to maneuver. Still, he didn't turn around to fight back. Attacking would disrupt his momentum, and other soldiers were not far behind. All he had to do was keep dodging and he'd be okay.
That option was taken from him, however, as one of the men changed tactics and, instead of slicing at Loki, leapt at his back. The trickster did not have the space to dodge, and five hundred pounds of Aesir slammed into his shoulder. Knocked off balance, Loki spun to the ground and rolled across the dirt, smashing his head against the base of a tree. Disoriented from the blow, he struggled to scramble back on to his feet. Before he could rise, a sword swung at his face. Loki parried desperately with his dagger. The momentum of the blow forced him onto his back again, the air leaving his lungs in a heavy whoosh.

The next time glinting metal came at him, he wasn't fast enough to stop it, and only the desperate tilt of his head saved him from being beheaded. His cheek burned as the blade caught his face, and Loki had to abandon his plan to run without fighting. Before the guard could recover from his wide swing, Loki leapt forwards to return the blow. He flung his dagger with fatal accuracy, and it embedded itself hilt-deep into the other man's throat. As the sword dropped from slack fingers Loki was already in motion. He kicked the dead man out of his way, hastening to regain his own footing. The other soldiers cried out in outrage, and Loki had to parry another blade aiming for his jugular. Lashing out like a caged beast, he was only able to nick the sentry before he was forced backwards.

Behind his current attackers, more Aesir drew close, their weapons drawn and expressions merciless. Loki cursed, stumbled back a few steps, and spun on his heel to run once more. 'Come on, come on,' he chanted with every step that didn't take him outside of the field. He only had one chance of survival- the very magic Asgard hated him for -but it remained dead inside of him. The boundary had to be close, and if he could just step past it his magic would rekindle. If not...

Something whistled past Loki's ear, but he ignored it in his frantic escape; he just had to get a few feet farther. A few feet, and then he could teleport away. But someone shoved into him again, and he tumbled forwards, nearly pitting himself upon his own blades. Loki smacked hard against the ground, and when he attempted to get back up, his muscles screamed out in protest. They trembled and collapsed under his weight. Loki's body had finally reached its limit; he couldn't keep moving forwards.

He wasn't the only one to realize that, and instead of landing a killing blow, or at least maiming him enough that he couldn't fight back, the soldiers chose to draw their confrontation out and make him suffer. “What, the little wizard isn't strong enough to fight with the real warriors?”

Loki snarled back in response, trying to get to his feet again to prove them wrong. Just as he was got to his knees a harsh kick sent him sprawling, and he gasped helplessly upon the earth. The man who kicked him laughed savagely along with the other soldiers that had finally caught up to him.

Completely outnumbered, Loki stared at the newcomers with dread. Even if he were at the top of his game, magic and all, this was a battle he wouldn't make through alive.

Face twisted in a vindictive grin, the soldier who was leading the show said, “I'll make you pay for killing Gunther. I'm going to make sure you never get up again, then I'll drag your thieving ass back to the palace so your dearest brother can dispose of you.”

Though Loki had resigned himself to the fact that he wouldn't win, the mention of Thor sparked him into a last ditch effort. He threw a dagger at the guard, but it was knocked aside as if it was nothing more than a fly. Desperate, he lifted his other arm to try again; another swift blow to his ribs sent him flying. Unable to stop the pained moan that slipped from his lungs, Loki let his daggers fall from limp fingers. So this was it: he got right to the end, but he wouldn't make it. As the enraged friend of the slain Gunther came for him again, Loki accepted that he was going to die here. He had wanted give living another try, but if this was it, then so be it. He just wished that he got to tell Tony goodbye.

But apparently the fates were for once on Loki's side, and as an even harder kick collided with Loki's
stomach, launching him through the air and into a tree, his entire body felt like it had been
electrocuted. From his chest outward his limbs began to tingle like there was lightening coursing in
his blood. It took a moment for Loki to realize what happened, and when he did he couldn't stop the
triumpant grin that spread across his face.

He was outside the barrier.

For a moment the soldiers looked confused at Loki's sudden change in demeanor, but then their eyes
widened as they realized their mistake. The one closest to him, the fool that had actually made Loki's
escape possible, cursed and lunged for the trickster, but Loki was already glowing a brilliant green.
He laughed, exultant, as his magic carried him away. Loki was still laughing when he reappeared far,
far away from those who pursued him, on the very edge of the realm. Each elated chuckle made his
chest ache, but he didn't care. He was free.

It took a few minutes for his laughter to die down, and a few more after that to pull himself to his
feet. He swayed dangerously, but he managed to walk forwards. He wouldn't be able to go far, but it
was enough to get him to where the the folds of Asgard grew thin. “It's time to go back home.”

Loki tore into the fabric of the realm. It yielded to his magic, opening up to reveal the path between
realms. Loki stepped off of Asgard and into the portal, never looking back. When he teleported into
the living room of the Malibu house, Loki could barely feel his body underneath the deep thrum of
exhaustion. He staggered as the adrenaline that had kept him going finally died. The ground bucked
under his feet, and Loki almost succumbed to the darkness. Then he caught sight of Tony, passed out
on the couch, and his joy temporarily pushed that weariness away. He was home.

“Sir, Loki is-” Jarvis began, rousing Tony out of his light stupor.

“I'll handle this, Jarvis,” Loki interrupted the AI, and at the sound of his voice, Tony shot up from the
couch. His eyes darted around the room, disbelieving, and then the man caught sight of Loki,
covered in blood and dirt and looking like nine kinds of hell.

“Holy shit...” Tony swore, staring at the god like he wasn't sure Loki was actually there.

Loki couldn't help but smile at Tony, so relieved that he was okay; Tony looked so much better than
when Loki had left. “I told you I'd be back,” he said, bringing Tony out of his slack-jawed staring.

“You shouldn't have left in the first place,” Tony replied automatically, seeming torn between 'oh
thank god you're okay' and 'you fucking imbecile'. Concern eventually won out when Tony realized
just how wasted the god was with fresh blood still trailing down his arm. “You're bleeding. Why are
you bleeding?”

Truthfully, Loki had forgotten about the bone-deep gouge. Sure, the sword wound hurt terribly, but
so did the rest of him. “It's fine. I'll fix it later,” he said absently, the world starting to be overcome by
black. Not the type from the void, but obnoxious little dots were overtaking his vision. Beneath his
skin, his muscles liquified.

“Fine? Loki, nothing about that is fine! I thought you healed automatically!” Tony shouted, moving
the grab Loki's arm and inspect the cut. “Shit, this goes down to the bone. What the hell were you
thinking, going out on your own like that?” And there was the anger, so quick to rise.

Loki wanted to placate Tony, to tell the man that everything as okay now, but the darkness obscuring
his vision also clouded his mind. His tongue was lead inside of his mouth, not smooth silver, and his
thoughts crumbled before they could fully form. Only Tony's face was still visible, and even that was
on the verge of being consumed by black.
“Are you even listening to me? Loki! ...Loki? Hey dude, when was the last time you slept?” The god tried to reply, but then Tony disappeared along with his muscles. Loki began careening to the floor, vaguely feeling Tony's arms around him; the man tried to keep him upright as he slipped into unconsciousness. “Loki!”

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When Loki awoke, sensation drifted back to him slowly. First he noticed the lingering ache in his limbs, and then the weight on his chest. A quiet moan passed from his lips as he forced his eyes open, feeling like he could sleep for a year and still not be satiated. A meow followed his vocalization, and Loki moved his gaze down to see Choronzon staring up at him with wide eyes. The cat meowed again and rose to his feet, stepping across Loki’s chest to nuzzle his face. When Coro’s brushed against his cheek, Loki was momentarily confused when he felt the rough scratch of a bandage instead of the cat’s soft fur. He reached up—muscles protesting, but not screaming out in agony—and felt the thick padding that covered his cheek.

Right, he had gotten cut on the face. It felt strange for him to have a lasting injury after spending so long on Midgard, where everything was easy to heal from. Sadly, Asgard complicated matters. He'd need a spell to counteract the affects of the blade. A spell which he could use now. Loki reached out with his magic to feel the books that he had sequestered away. Not only did he have his own spell books, which were impressive in their own right, but now he had the most valuable grimoire in all of Asgard. Magic would be his to control once again.

He delayed exploring ancient pages, however, as he heard Jarvis speaking to Tony on the other side of the house. “Sir, Loki has regained consciousness. I suggest that you talk to him instead of pacing a groove into the floor.”

Loki nudged the purring cat off of his chest and sat back up against the headboard as Tony’s footsteps changed directions. The god was still tired, and while he wanted to be with Tony—always wanted to be with Tony—he wasn't looking forwards to being yelled at. He only did what he had to do.

True to Loki’s expectations, when Tony came into the room he looked pissed. Relieved, but still pissed. “You're an absolute idiot, you know that? Just what was so important that you had to go risk your life for? Huh?” the man said by way of greeting, skipping over the niceties. Loki tried to not let Tony's anger bother him; he knew this was going to be the reaction he got, and that hadn't stopped him. A living, angry Tony was better than a dead one.

“I needed my spell books,” Loki replied, only telling half of the truth. He reached out with his magic again, relishing in the apples presence amongst his other possessions. His hand idly pet Choronzon as the cat started pawing at him.

Tony didn't look impressed. “Spell books? All of this for just a couple of books? Loki, there has to be better ways to try and fix your magic.”

“There's not. I tried, and nothing worked.” Loki said, not matching the man's bitterness. In fact, while Tony was upset by what Loki did, the god felt like a massive weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Now he could finally help Tony. What was wrong about that? Besides the fact that Asgard knew he was alive again, and he was a wanted criminal. But he didn't want to spoil his success with that. Not yet.

“Then you should have asked me. I could have helped,” Tony insisted, though his anger was cooling slightly. The man seemed weary about the whole situation, like he too spent days running for his life. “I don't want you to get hurt, especially not somewhere I can't get to you.” Tony's eyes were drawn
to the bandage on Loki’s arm, and the man's hand unconsciously went to where his own wound was. “I stitched that up, but the way. It was still bleeding after you passed out. Why aren't you healing automatically?”

Loki shrugged, wincing slightly at the action. His reaction didn't go unnoticed, and it just undermined what the god said next. “My healing is fine. It's the sword that's causing the delay. Weapons do no good if the wounds heal back immediately afterward, so most blades in Asgard are enchanted to prevent healing. I'll fix it later.”

“With your new toys, no doubt,” Tony growled, but his eyes betrayed his relief. That didn't mean the man wasn't disconcerted by the god's actions, and Loki knew he wouldn't get forgiveness right away, not totally. Tony couldn't hate Loki, but that didn't mean the god got a free pass.

But there was no going back, and even if Loki could he didn't want to. It was all for Tony. So Tony would never die. So he wouldn't have to be alone.

“I missed you,” Loki blurted.

Tony opened his mouth to reply, but then he paused, expression darkening. For a moment Loki feared he wouldn't say something back. But then he shook his head slightly, giving Loki a weak smile. “I missed you too, princess.”

Loki returned that sad smile, hating the wall he had put between them. 'Everything will be okay,' he told himself. Soon Tony would understand Loki’s actions, and he would be forgiven; things could go back to how they had been. 'And then Tony will stay with me forever.' Whether he wants to or not.
Does it Still Count as Lying?

"In ancient Rome there was a pawn,
Who followed along and watched it fall.

He cast a stone, he felt secure,
He felt that he would never be heard.

You're given a voice,  
'You don't want it,'  
Seems to be the rule of thumb.  
Don't be tricked by what you see,  
You've got two ways to go."

-Freedom of Choice by A Perfect Circle

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His hands were like stone, not trembling as he lined the pieces up. He crossed his eyes, trying to guide the small wire into the microchip. It was almost in place; just a bit farther… There was a bang from upstairs, startling Tony. His hands slipped, and the wire yanked out. “Damn it…” He stared in dismay at the ruined pieces. Huffing, he chucked them behind him for Dum-E to clean up. Another shudder racked the house, and Tony sighed heavily, lowering his head into his hands. “Jarvis,” he spoke, voice muffled, “What is Loki doing up there?”

“The same thing he was doing when you asked twenty minutes ago, sir. Is there a problem?”

“Besides the fact that he’s creating earthquakes in my house?” The ceiling creaked ominously. “No, not at all,” Tony lied, trying to bury his face farther into his palms. Honestly, it wasn't Loki's renewed love of destructive magic that was bothering him. A few tremors here and there was the least of Tony's problems. Hell, if he wasn’t having such a hard time focusing, he’d be right there with the god, blowing stuff up in the name of discovery. No, that wasn’t the problem at all. The problem was that Loki was a reckless, selfish idiot, and even though he was upstairs, Tony couldn't help but be scared. He didn't want Loki to go away again, and he worried that having magic would only bolster Loki's impulsive tendencies. “You'll tell me if he starts doing anything else?”

“Of course, sir, but may I once again inform you that you are being ridiculous. There is sufficient evidence suggesting that Loki won't leave anytime soon. You are being overprotective.” Jarvis stated, but Tony disagreed.

“You say that now,” Tony muttered, lifting his head from his hands just to drop his forehead to the table. The cool metal did nothing to ease his mounting headache.

When Loki was gone, and Tony didn't know if he was alive or not, he thought that everything would be okay once the god returned. Never in those weeks did Tony actually consider that having the god back would be nearly as stressful. Every time Loki was out of sight, for the hours in which the god holed himself up in his room to obsess over those damn books, Tony couldn't help the trill of fear inside him. 'Loki's gone,' his mind would say. 'He's going to leave, and you can't stop him.' No matter how foolish that line of thinking was, Tony couldn't shake it. There was also the irrational, lurking doubt that whispered it had all just been a vivid, alcohol-induced dream. Any minute now he'd wake up to find that Loki was dead and gone, and all Tony had was could've, would've, shoud'ves.
That's not to say he wasn't ecstatic Loki really was back; he was beyond thrilled. Loki was alive, and more or less in one piece, and that was all Tony had wanted. Yet now that he was no longer so worried that he could barely function, he realized that there was something darker under that concern. Tony felt betrayed: Loki left when Tony was impaired with nothing more than a vague apology. Loki did not wait for him. Loki did not consult him. Loki did not trust him. And it hurt.

Steve kept insisting that Loki didn't intend for his actions to represent that, but it was hard for Tony to ignore the little murmurs in his mind that insisted he did. It didn't matter that he knew that wasn't the way Loki thought; the nagging doubt was still there, lurking in his mind and creating distance between the god and him. It was horrid, the gap that was growing between them, but it persisted in staying. Loki’s actions were doing nothing to ease it, either.

The god has been acting… strange, since he came back. Tony couldn't put a finger on just what was wrong, but it was definitely something. Where there once was calm, there was now jaded determination. Something had captured Loki’s attention so completely that everything else—even Tony—was pushed to the side. It was both an awe-inspiring tenacity... and frightening.

While maybe it was just regaining lost knowledge that had Loki so hell-bent, Tony had a feeling it was more than that. It had to be important for it to affect Loki so, but he was clueless as to what it was. When he tried to ask, Loki had avoided his questions. Instead, he retreated to his room to study the books despite the fact that neither Tony nor Jarvis could make heads or tails of the content. It was alarming behavior, and honestly just downright suspicious. Tony didn’t want to doubt his friend, but clearly Loki was hiding something from him. It could be something inconsequential, like the god was ashamed he stumbled through spells that he considered simple while he tried to relearn, or it could be something serious—something that Tony, in his lack of knowledge about Asgard, just could not predict. And that thought bothered him.

When he tried to communicate his doubts to Pepper, she waved his worries off as stress. He'd been through a lot the past month and just needed to give it time. Loki normally reacted to things oddly. It was just a part of who the void made him, and this was no different. Bruce and Steve agreed with Pep’s statement, telling him to 'give it time', but they didn’t know Loki like he did. Their words were paltry at best, and Tony didn’t stop worrying. That brought him back to constantly checking in on the god, much to the displeasure of his AI.

“Sir, you are well aware that I will report anything of significance to you. If Loki does start giving me another goodbye speech, you will be the first to know.”

“If he even looks like he’s thinking about making one, I want to know,” Tony ordered, knowing it was a foolish commanded but giving it anyway. Then he sighed again, dragging his head off the table as if it weighed a ton. He crossed his arm over his eyes as he leaned back in his chair, his shoulder aching with the movement. It was no longer biting pain, just a stubborn throb that served as a constant reminder of everything that had happened and the damages that had been done.

Rubbing the back of his hand across his face, Tony gazed woefully at the newest suit he was attempting to create. This one he designed specifically for space and inter-realm travel, and when finished, it'd be gem amongst his collection. However, his work was proceeding at a crawl. He was constantly sidetracked by his unease. It was supposed to get better with Loki home, not worse.

He tugged halfheartedly at a few of the wires, inspecting the connection ports but making no move to fix the few defects he saw. Setting the motherboard back down, he rose to his feet and began pacing the lab. “Contact Fury,” Tony ordered. “Tell him I need a mission, preferably an international one.” When science failed and drinking himself into the ground wasn’t an option, then smashing things was always an alternative. He’d make the Hulk proud.
“Of course, sir.” There was a pause, and then, “Loki is asking if you would rather work on a new model of the Dragon Slayer instead.”

Loki? “…Shit,” Tony swore, having completely forgotten that Loki could hear him. Now the god knew of Tony's entire doubting fit. That was just great. Like the situation wasn’t bad enough already.

“Well then, since you’re listening in Loki, we can do that when I get back,” Tony spoke to the room, attempting damage control, but honestly, he didn’t want to do this right now. “I take it you’ve figured out what the problem was?”

He felt awkward as he waited for a reply. It never felt this strange when he was just talking to Jarvis. It was different when Loki could hear his reply, and yet Tony had to use the AI as the middle man in their…whatever it was that was happening between them. He didn't want to call it an argument, but it was a passive-aggressive feud nonetheless.

“He says he believes he knows what the problem was, and that Fury would likely prefer it if you kept Doom your main priority.” Jarvis relayed, managing to sound annoyed even when he was just repeating Loki's words. Well tough luck; Tony wasn’t going to walk all the way upstairs just for Loki to shrug him off again.

“Since when have I ever cared what Fury wanted?” Tony asked. Even if Loki had a point, he needed to get out of the house. All he needed was a few hours for himself, and then he’d have the energy to handle talking to the god. Besides, why did it matter to Loki what he did? It wasn’t like he had been eager to work with Tony this past week, let alone talk to the engineer.

“I’ll be back in a few hours. You can keep yourself entertained until then, princess.” Not waiting for the reply, he continued speaking into the empty room, this time to Jarvis, “Get Fury on the line, and prep Mark Thirty-Four.”

He turned to go, but he’d only taken a step before a voice spoke up behind him. “Tony…” Hearing Loki say his name stopped him dead in his tracks, and Tony slowly spun around to face the god. Loki was standing by the door, his tall frame appearing smaller under a pervasive weariness. That emotion Tony couldn’t pinpoint was there as well, taking the place of Loki’s beautiful smiles. When Tony said nothing, the god’s arm twitched at his side—as if Loki wanted to reach out and physically stop him from leaving—but then it stilled. Instead, Loki repeated, “Tony,” like the name was a spell all of its own.

“Oh, so we’re talking in person now?” Tony asked bitterly, his pleasure at seeing the god overshadowed by the proof of Loki’s excursion: dark circles under the god’s haunted eyes, a vivid scar on his arm, and the persistent downturn of his mouth.

Loki ignored Tony's comment, just like he has been all week, and said, “We should finish the Dragon Slayer before you waste time on pointless things.”

Tony couldn’t help it; he scoffed. “Right, because I’m the one wasting time. You’ve just been a model of efficiency all month, haven’t you? A real trooper.”

Loki gritted his teeth, averting his eyes. That is what Tony was anxious about: the near-guilty reactions that the god kept having to the simplest of comments. There was no way something wasn’t going on, no matter what his other friends said.

“I’ve been doing what I must,” Loki replied, words firm even if his body language wasn’t. “Nothing more, nothing less.”
“Whatever you say, Marvin,” Tony replied. Watching the god made him itch to leave even more. He needed to get away from this right now. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go do my thing, and you can get back to doing ‘nothing more’.”

This time when he stalked over to the suit, he didn't stop even when Loki hissed his name. If the god thought he had any right to forbid Tony to leave—especially after what he did—he was dead wrong. Trust worked both ways, and it could break both ways. But then Loki dropped the animosity, and he pleaded, “Tony, please.”

Tony found himself coming to a halt once again; upset or not, he couldn't ignore Loki's distress. He didn't turn to look, but he could hear the god take a step closer. “Stay here and work with me,” Loki entreated, abandoning his previous haughtiness. “There's no need for you to risk your life.”

It was that comment that made it click in Tony's head. Loki wasn't trying to control him: he was trying to protect him. Tony had been looking at it the wrong way. “You're worried,” he observed out loud, turning to look at Loki. The god met his eyes, but he didn’t confirm or deny Tony's statement. It didn’t matter; Tony knew he was spot on. “Why? You never were before.” But that was just it: Loki wasn't concerned before—before the sharp, horrid pain. Before the mocking voice. Before the darkness.

Loki clenched his fist, but again, he didn't say anything. Tony tried to understand what his near death had to mean to Loki, who was practically immortal by human standards. What must it have been like for him to realize that Tony was fragile in comparison? That things could go wrong—did go wrong—and there was only so much he could do about it? But that was life. Tony didn't want to die, but he had long since accepted the fact that one day he would. Being Iron Man just brought that day closer. It didn't stop him.

“Lokes...” he started, watching as the god dropped his gaze to the floor; he knew what Tony was going to say, and he didn't like it. “I can't just sit idle in the lab all day, even if it is safer. Hell, I don't even know if it is safer. I've gotten hurt more times working in here than I have as Iron Man.” Not quite as fatally, but you can't design weapons without getting burned or crushed every once and a while.

“Stay here,” Loki repeated futilely.

“No. That's not a solution, and you know it. I can't stay inside forever.”

“Not forever,” the god insisted, looking almost pained. “Just for a little while.”

Tony shook his head, feeling like he was trying to convince a brick wall. But even if Loki didn't listen, he couldn't coddle him. Not with this. “Why does it matter? Nothing is going to change. I'm human; we're mortal. That's just how it goes. I'm not staying here tonight.”

Loki clearly wanted to keep arguing, and he opened his mouth to do so, but the he stopped. “Have it your way,” he said instead. “I will be practicing spells while you are away. If you require my assistance, have Jarvis contact me.” And with that the god vanished, not even telling him goodbye.

Watching the now vacated spot, Tony was abruptly overcome by a wave of sorrow. Is this how it was going to be between them? Stilted conversations that ended with both of them running away? Their bond was still there, that much was clear, but with so much conflict clouding the way it felt distant and hollow. Tony didn't want to think about what was missing between them, or continue to worry about Loki. He wanted a break from it all, before the stress built up to a fever pitch.

“Alright, come on Jarv. Get Fury on the line.” Tony stepped onto the dock and let the suit fall around
him, cementing his decision to go. This time there was no delay, and Fury’s gravely voice came over the
speakers. “What do you want this time, Stark?”

Tony thought one last time about Loki and the god’s plea for him to stay, and then he pushed it
away. “Give me a mission.”

-o-o-o-

Only when Loki heard Tony leave (off to intercept a weapon’s shipment to a terrorist cell overseas)
did he move from where he had teleported. He worried that if he had taken even a single step before,
he would have been unable to resist the impulse to go and stop Tony. It was only sane to want to
avoid Tony’s death at all cost. That’s why the man should have stayed, at least until Idunn’s apple
had bestowed upon him the longevity of the gods. But Tony was off risking his puny mortal life
again, and while Loki could use theatrics to bring him back, he decided against it. If Tony was going
to insist on leaving, then Loki would just have to expedite his plans. The ingredients were gathered,
and all he had needed was an opening to perform the ritual and disguise the apple. Tony leaving the
house provided that opening.

A part of Loki—a small but incredibly persistent part of him—kept insisting that he should not hide
the apple from Tony. That what he was doing was a betrayal of trust, and it wasn’t his right. His
nagging conscience revolted against the idea of tricking Tony and making such a vital choice for
him. It should be Tony’s decision if he wanted to live for thousands upon thousands of years, aging
imperceptibly while all of his friends grew old and died.

Loki ignored those doubts; he had to make Tony immortal. There were no exceptions. He could not
live forever without the man by his side, so Tony had to be there. It was for that simple reason that he
refused to ask Tony for permission. What if he asked Tony and the man said no? Would Loki be
satisfied obeying his will?

He wouldn’t. Tony would age, his mortal body succumbing to illness and disease. He’d die from a
blade to the heart, or a blow to the head. It’d be so easy for the magnificence that was Tony Stark to
decay into obscurity, and Loki couldn’t stand that. Even if Tony said no, Loki would make him
immortal anyway, and such an action would be unforgivable.

However, if he did not ask, then Tony could not say no. Loki would not be betraying him, and if he
would have said yes, then it wouldn’t have mattered either way. Loki’s actions would simply an
expedition of Tony’s decision.

“Jarvis, tell me immediately if something happens to him or if it looks like he is in danger,” Loki
commanded, waiting until he received an affirmative before he forced himself to relax. He sat down
on the floor and surrounded himself with opened tomes. He immersed himself in the runes, entreating
them to drown out the incessant desire to go to drag Tony back home. Only the familiar beauty of
those pages was enough to still him, and he delved into what they offered him. Flipping through
them brought a torrent of memories that had once been lost to him, and the strewn pieces of his mind
started to fall back into place. It wasn’t perfect- some things continued to evade him, gaping holes in
the puzzle with no pieces to be found- but it was enough for him to finally feel like ‘Loki’ again.
What exactly he wanted ‘Loki’ to be, he didn’t quite know, but he was getting there.

One book in particular drew Loki in, and he abandoned the others to reach for the stained, musky
grimoire. He creaked it open, easily navigating to the one spell that could make everything right.
Offered in innocuous black symbols, it would do the unthinkable for him. Granting immortality was
forbidden, and Loki’s mind greedily devoured the information. He reread the entire ritual three times
before he even dared to get started. Everything had to be exact, or he could very well kill himself in
his attempt. Such was the fate of many young, arrogant sorcerers. Only when he was absolutely sure
he knew every word perfectly did he begin to assemble the spell’s construct.

Loki pulled a ritualistic knife with a thin, inscribed blade out of the air, and in one swift movement he slid the metal across his palm. Blood welled to the surface in measured spurts, and he kneeled on the ground to paint a crimson enneagram onto the white carpet around him. At each of the nine points, he drew a circle, and when the star was complete, he murmured a healing prayer to seal the cut on his hand. Then he placed a small ceramic bowl in each ring. Each one contained a different ingredient, from powdered monkshood to the bones of an Aesir. On each interior intersection he placed black candles that he lit with flick of his fingers.

He stopped when there was only one more thing he had to do before he could start the spell: blind Jarvis. He rose to his feet and carefully extracting himself from the complex set-up that littered the floor, not willing to risk smearing a single line. Clear of the spellwork, Loki asked, “Jarvis, is Tony alright?” Once the AI was down, he'd have no way of knowing if something went wrong. It was necessary, but being disconnected from the engineer incited anxiety nonetheless.

“Yes, sir. Tony is unharmed and appears to have full control of the situation.”

Loki accepted the reassurance; Tony would be okay for now, and when he came home, Loki would gift him with immortality.

“How much longer until he returns?” He ignored how easy it was to pitch his voice so he sounded anxious for Tony’s return, and not as if he were just calculating how much time he had before he was interrupted.

It took Jarvis a bit longer to reply this time, then he said, “Tony expects to take at least five more hours.”

Loki resisted the urge to frown. Five hours was good. He could finish in five hours. But he didn't want to be alone that long. “Thank you Jarvis. I will be practicing some spells, so if I accidentally catch something on fire don’t worry about it. I’ll handle it.”

“I’d appreciate it if you don’t burn the house down, sir. I have enough of that with Tony.”

Before Tony's fall in New York, Loki would have laughed at the joke. He would have chided the AI in return, and he would have been happy. But he kept quiet. Tony was angry with him; what was there to laugh about? “I will endeavor not to,” Loki replied detachedly as he reached down to pick up one of his own tomes. Unlike the grimoire, his personal collection had been relatively easy to steal, if one did not count the emotional turmoil. He just had to break into his old room, after all.

He adamantly didn't think about what he had seen back there. Or more specifically, what he didn’t see. There had been no dust, no spider webs, no relics of time. It was as clean as the day he left it, as if it had been waiting for him. The whole thing made no sense. If his family hated him, why would they do that? And Loki had no doubts that they did hate him. They had to, even if their actions said otherwise.

Thumbing through the pages of his book, he cast some irrelevant spells to avoid suspicion. Gouts of flame sprung from his fingertips, and a dozen Loki's flickered into existence. Not breaking rhythm, he flipped to a different page in his spell book and began casting a cloaking spell. The magic hung heavy on his fingers, and the runes he drew were vibrant and thrumming. Loki paused just before completing the last rune. “He's still okay, right?” He asked, hand hovering in the air.

“He is, sir.”
“Good.” And then Loki flicked his finger down, finishing the last rune. Instantaneously, magic exploded outwards from the ring of symbols. It washed over Loki and reverberated through the house, concussive like a shock-wave. Following the burst was a high pitched alarm as Jarvis reacted to the energy fluctuation. It wailed through the house, but no one was there to hear it. Tony was hundreds of miles away, and Loki... as far as the AI was concerned, Loki didn’t exist.

Ignoring the siren, Loki closed the book and tossed it aside. He stepped into the middle of the enneagram, mindful of the crimson lines, and plucked the apple out of the air. Its metallic skin glistened in the bright lights, and Loki reverently brushed his fingers over the smooth gold. Then he began to chant. Each syllable Loki spoke was accompanied by a stream of magic, a glowing mist that dripped from his open mouth. The words hung in the air until gravity pulled them down into the spell lines. When they hit the drying blood, the entire room pulsed with colorful light while magic buzzed in tune with Loki’s chanting.

As the spell progressed, the lines between Loki and Yggdrasil faded; he became lost in the sea of shimmering colors and dancing lights. Immersed in magic, it was the antithesis of the void—bright. Colorful. Lively. Chaotic.

Distantly, he could feel the ache of his core as more and more magic was leeched from his body, but he didn’t care. And even more distantly than that, far beyond the haze of magic, he could faintly hear his name; he didn’t care. In the throes of the spell, all of his worries ceased to be. All that mattered was the magic.

However, the spell seemed to end as quickly as it had begun. The last words rung in Loki’s ears, and as that ringing faded, so too did the ecstasy. For a moment, Loki was in limbo, caught between the lingering sensations of magic and the encroaching reality. He stood still as the magic flared one last time, coalescing in the apple he held in his hands, before fading back into dreary colors.

Loki breathed heavily as his brain rebooted, his senses returning one by one. He could once again feel the glossy surface of the apple, and the walls around him returned to focus. His hearing returned last, bringing with it Tony’s agitated voice to destroy the remnants of Loki’s bliss. “-whatever this is it isn’t funny! What did you do to Jarvis? Where are you? Damn it, I don’t even know if you’re around to listen to this... If you’re listening, I’m on my way back. You better have a good explanation for this!” Tony ranted, a noxious mix of fear and rage.

Guilt boiled inside of Loki as he listened, knowing and unable to deny that he was the one causing the man distress, until finally he couldn’t take it anymore. With a wave of his hand he forced the speakers into silence.

Loki peered intently at the apple in hands. Although on the outside it looked no different, he could feel the concentrated magic bursting inside of it. So innocent looking, and yet this little apple was the only conduit for artificial immortality. Last minute doubts teased around the edges of Loki’s mind, but he ignored them. He must give the apple to Tony.

-o-o-o-

By the time the line finally went through, Tony wasn’t even sure what he was saying anymore. “-and I don’t even like swimming, but I swear to god if you don’t answer me, I will throw you into the ocean and fish you out- with the suit, because you weigh a goddamn ton. It’s because your skull is so damn thick, you moron. So fix Jarvis, and-”

“Tony,” Loki’s voice suddenly interrupted, startling Tony into silence. “I can hear you just fine.”

Tony felt relieved for all of five seconds, and then anger scorched through him. “What the hell did
“My apologies,” Loki replied, but Tony didn't think he sounded sorry at all. “I was unaware that it would do that. I thought Jarvis would be unaffected by it.”

Tony growled deep in his throat. That excuse was utter bullshit. The first time Tony leaves the house all week, and Loki shuts down Jarvis within the hour. What wasn't suspicious about that? “And you had to make me wait forty minutes to fix it? What do you take me for?” That's just typical: he goes out to be rid of his worries, and half-way through Loki just has to go and do something stupid again. To top it off, all Jarvis could tell him was that he had been compromised and couldn't find Loki. What was he suppose to think? He had excused himself from the mission immediately, but it made no difference.

“I was not aware there was a problem until I tried to consult Jarvis. Again, my apologies.”

“Whatever,” Tony retorted. “How you holding up, Jarv? I’ll take a closer look at your system when I get there.”

“I do not feel compromised any longer, sir, but I would appreciate a code check.” The AI sounded spooked, and Tony grit his teeth. No one messed with Jarvis. Except for Loki, apparently. Tony didn't like feeling mad at Loki. It hurt to feel so angry at someone he loved being around. That's why this needed to stop. They could not keep going on this way.

“We’ll discuss this when I get home. And if you cast one more spell before I get back, I swear I will burn those goddamn books of yours.”

“I won’t,” Loki promised, but sadly Tony didn't feel like he could trust him. Still, there was nothing he could do otherwise, so he closed to the line to give himself some time alone. He needed to sort his own thoughts out before he got home.

However, he could spend days trying to figure everything out and still not make progress; Tony was no less conflicted by the time he touched down in the garage. He sighed in relief when he didn't find the god waiting for him in the lab, granting him a few more minutes to compose himself. “Alright, Jarvis,” he called. “Take this bad boy off. I’ll examine your system after I talk to Loki.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tony was worried (understandably so) about the AI. There was no telling just what the magic had done to him. But despite his earlier freak out, Jarvis seemed to be working fine now. He pulled the suit off with no problem, and when Tony did a quick check on the computer nothing seemed amiss. He'd still go through the code later, but for now it seemed stable.

With that done, Tony no longer had any reason to delay. He dragged himself upstairs, still having no idea what to say by the time he reached the living room. He swept into the kitchen with no plan other than to repair their friendship.

Loki was sitting at the table and drinking a smoothie when Tony entered, and the god looked up when he paused at the threshold. “I made you one, too,” Loki said, nudging a second glass towards the seat across from him.

Smoothies as a token of truce? Tony could work with that. “If it's whatever you're drinking, I don't want it,” he remarked as he moved to sit down across from Loki. He peered cautiously at his glass, but it was cherry red instead of beige like Loki’s. Deeming it acceptable, he pulled it close and took a sip.
Loki stared at him while he drank, as if he'd suddenly keel over dead, and Tony frowned at him. “What?” He grumbled around the straw, fingers anxiously drumming the Star Wars theme into the side of the cup.

“Nothing,” Loki said, shaking his head slightly. Then he pushed his own drink aside and got right down to business. “You are angry with me.”

Tony followed his lead, scooting the glass to the side as his stomach flipped nauseatingly. “Yeah, no shit, Sherlock.”

“It was not my intention to anger you. I apologize.”

“No,” Tony said sharply, and Loki flinched. “You can't just say sorry like that makes everything better. So you say you don't want to piss me off, then what are you trying to do? Get yourself killed? I thought we were over that. Unless you backtracked and didn't tell me.”

“I do not want to die,” Loki murmured, not meeting Tony's eyes.

“Then why?” he asked, because honestly he just didn't know anymore.

“I... Because you aren't supposed to die.”

Tony was taken aback for a second, not quite expecting that answer, but then he gathered himself. “Loki, look at me.” He waited until he had Loki's full attention, and then he continued, “I'm a human. Humans die. There's nothing wrong with trying to help me—I appreciate not dying, really—but I will die someday. I don't want you to get hurt because you have some insane notion that you can prevent that.”

Loki shook his head again, this time in denial. “I can't just sit back and watch you die. I can't... Not again.”

Something twisted in Tony, and finally he started to understand just how badly New York had scared the god. All of it—the trip to Asgard, the obsessive behavior, the short temper—was just Loki's reaction to his fear. And Tony understood; he tried to imagine Loki bleeding out beneath his hands, and simply thinking about the possibility was enough to convince him he'd do anything to help the god. Which was why Tony couldn't stand the idea that Loki would die for him.

“You don't need to risk your own life,” he insisted. “You're worth more than that. There's no need for you to throw everything away on a rash decision. Come to me if you need help. And if not me, then someone else. You don't need to do everything alone, Loki.”

“I am...unaccustomed to having people who are willing to help me,” the god admitted.

“Yeah? Well get used to it, because you aren't getting rid of me anytime soon.” Tony said, leaning across the table to clap Loki on the shoulder.

Loki smiled back at him. “There's no one else I'd rather be with,” he replied, looking as if a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders. Tony felt the same, and the tension between them dissipated.

“That's because no one else is as smart as me,” he joked. Deeming the heart-to-heart conversation over, Tony stood up and reached for his smoothie. “Come on, we need to finish our little Doom problem.”

Loki moved to follow him, and as they made their way down to the lab Tony said, “Next time if
you're going to do something that may damage Jarvis, tell me first. I'm glad you can do magic again, but please don't be foolish.”

“If that is your wish,” Loki conceded.

Tony smiled, nudging the god's shoulder again. “But I would like a demonstration later. You can't keep all of your new tricks to yourself.”
Those You've Betrayed

"He did this:
Took all you had and,
Left you this way…
Never taste of the fruit,
You never thought to question why.

It's not like you killed someone.
It's not like you drove a hateful spear into his side.
Praise the one who left you,
Broken down and paralyzed.
He did it all for you."

-Judith by A Perfect Circle

-o-o-o-

Tony has always hated the quote 'expect the unexpected'; it was a load of crap. If you knew to expect it, then it wouldn't be unexpected. And if you didn't know to expect it—didn’t have a clue what it was you were even supposed to expect—then how the hell were you supposed to be ready for it?

“You can't be serious,” Tony said into the cacophonous silence. “Are you sure that's why he's here?”

“We're sure,” Fury said with grim certainty, and Tony met Loki's wide eyes.

Only a few days had passed since he and the god had made amends, and things had been going well up until SHIELD called with an emergency. Tony had thought it was Doom, or more Hulk bunnies, or anything other than this. 'Expect the unexpected.' Ha. Why would he have expected that Thor would be on Earth looking for Loki?

The news was jarring, and Fury frowned at them from the screen on the wall. He had requested a video call specifically, and once Loki had recovered enough to speak, he connected the dots. “Show me,” he rasped, gaze caught on Fury even as he automatically drifted towards Tony. “You have surveillance of him, don’t you? That’s why you wanted the screen.” Fury didn’t say anything, and that was answer enough. “Show it to me,” Loki practically begged. “I need to see him.”

“We do have surveillance footage.” Fury started, but he didn’t continue. The following silence was filled with the unsaid question of, ‘But will you be able to handle watching it?’ Then the director glanced over at Tony, checking if it was safe to continue, and Tony had to admit that despite his initial misgivings, the director wasn’t a cruel man. Maybe a bit too intent on the end goal, and in serious need if a chill pill, but not cruel. Fury knew from firsthand experience that simply seeing Thor could push Loki to the edge, and he was reluctant to do that again.

However, Tony also realized that they couldn’t ignore this, regardless of Loki’s turbulent mental state. Loki knew Thor better than anyone else on Earth; if the other god was going to be their enemy, then that was information they’d need. Tony didn't want to compromise Loki for information, but he had to make that call: temporarily delay the threat by letting Loki see Thor, or take an even greater risk to preserve the god’s sanity. “Just play the clip, Fury,” Tony eventually ordered.

Fury didn't challenge his decision. “Very well.” The moment it took for the director's face to fade
seemed to take forever, and neither Tony nor Loki dared to move. It was as if the slightest shift would bring the world falling down upon them. That did not change when grainy security footage filled the screen, either.

As a clip began to play, Tony was torn between watching the screen and watching Loki. The god beside him was like stone, all the way down to his lungs; Loki’s breaths came in short, rapid bursts. Tony wanted to keep a close eye on him in case he took a turn for the worst. However, when a booming voice came across the speakers, he could no longer ignore the red-cloaked figure on the screen.

“Where is he? I know he’s on Midgard!” Thor shouted, hammer raised threateningly. He was surrounded by at least a dozen SHIELD agents, their guns trained on him.

It was Coulson’s voice that responded, though the man himself was not visible. “Put the weapon down, sir,” he ordered calmly.

Face clouded by thunderous rage, Thor didn’t listen. He took a threatening step forwards, and while Tony assumed the god as stepping towards Agent Coulson, it was Loki who took a frightful step back. “You will tell me where he is!” The God of Thunder boomed, either ignorant or unconcerned that with his demand, all fingers pressed tighter into triggers. The agents were ready to shoot him at a moment’s notice. Not that it would do them any good. Tony now understood that it’d take more than a few bullets to take a god down.

Coulson didn’t know that, however, and remained unimpressed with the aggressive display. Instead, the man actually walked forwards until the back of his head was visible in the corner of the screen. “Put down the weapon, and then we’ll talk.”

For a moment, it didn’t look like Thor would comply—he scowled at the men around him and tightened his grip on the hammer—but then he collected himself and pulled back. The hammer dropped to the ground, flinging dirt into the air with a heavy thud. After a few tense moments, the SHIELD agents followed suit, lowering their guns but not letting go.

Even though he was unarmed and outnumbered, Thor held his chin high. It was an action that spoke of self-entitlement, one that Tony had seen Loki use more than a few times. “I have done as you ask. Now tell me where he is.”

Back in the present, Loki shifted anxiously where he stood. But Coulson, while knowing exactly who it was Thor wanted and where they were, just said, “You will have to be more specific than that.”

Thor didn’t appreciate the agent’s dry humor, and he clenched his fists. “Do not mess with me! He had to have come here! You will not hide Loki from us any longer!”

Tony watched the god beside him closely, but other than a poorly suppressed flinch, Loki seemed to be holding himself together. But how long would that composure last? Tony didn’t know, and he feared the fallout.

“I believe you are mistaken. We are not in association with anyone by that name,” Coulson replied, and while Tony didn’t actually think the agent would rat them out, he breathed out in relief anyway. Rough start or not, SHIELD was on their side, and it was an assistance they would be hard pressed to go without. Loki, however, was not as soothed.

“Lies!” Thor roared, and Tony was surprised when his hammer suddenly launched itself back into his outstretched hand. Guns rose in response, the engineer not being the only one startled, but the
Thunder God was not deterred. “I searched everywhere else! My brother must be here, and you are the defenders of this realm! You must know where he is!”

A pensive frown slipped into Tony's expression as he watched the agitated Thor onscreen. He didn't know everything that was at play here, didn't even presume to think he did, but to him that last sentence sounded... desperate. And not just in a 'this guy is a criminal I need to deal with' way, either. It was more tender than that, more like he was saying ‘he's my brother, and I don't know where he is’. Tony might be wrong, and a quick glance at Loki confirmed that the god still looked like he was standing at the gallows, but... Maybe Loki also didn't know everything that was going on. What if they were missing a key detail?

Frown deepening, Tony turned to watch the older brother. Thor was still scowling at Coulson, especially when the man continued to negate him with, “We are only a small government division in America.” Lies. “If your brother is here, we do not have him.”

But now that Tony knew to look for it, there was definitely something else there, something that was akin to sorrow. That barely perceptible sadness intensified when it became clear to Thor that he would get no answers from SHIELD. His face fell slightly as he lost hope, but then determination fixed the scowl right back on. “Have it your way. I will find him myself,” Thor asserted, lifting his hammer high above his head. The SHIELD agents stirred anxiously, hands tight around their guns, but instead of attacking, the god began to spin the hammer above his head. With one heavy twirl, he defied the laws of physics and hurtled into the air.

As Thor flew from the vantage of the camera, the clip fell into black. Fury and his charming eyepatch reappeared a few seconds later. The director appeared even more displeased than he did before their little movie break, and he didn't get any happier when he looked at Loki, who was struggling to break out of 'fight or flight' mode. Under the inspection of judging eyes, Loki’s pride was quick to build a mask, but Tony could easily see the distress churning beneath the thin veil.

“SHIELD doesn't rat out our own,” Fury said, “Even if they do deserve it.” Despite his words, the barb was mild. Loki had proved himself to be a worthy ally over the past months, and Fury would be a hypocrite to not allow the god this second chance. The director didn't trust Loki (didn't trust anyone, really), but it was clear where Loki's loyalties lied; as long as Tony was still in the equation the god would not betray them, and that was good enough for Fury.

“He’s not going to just walk away,” Loki stated, unable to halt the anxious clenching of his hands. “Not if he’s sure I'm on Midgard.”

Fury sighed, but it was obvious he had resigned himself to that fact. “You aliens are a real pain in the ass, you know that?” Then he turned his head to regard someone else on the bridge. Tony and Loki couldn’t make out what was being said, but when he turned back, his expression had gotten darker. “Like I said, a real pain in the ass. Stark, we need you in New Mexico.”

New Mexico? So Thor really was causing problems. He sure didn't waste any time. Tony glanced over at Loki, who had abandoned acting like a deer in the headlights in order to pace along the wall. The engineer bit his lip in uncertainty. Did he really want to leave Loki alone like this? “Is it necessary that I go?”

“You're the only Avenger available at the moment. Besides, it is in your best interest to stop Thor now.”

Fury was right, of course, but that didn't change Tony's hesitance. Loki could easily be as much of a threat to himself as Thor. As if Loki could read his thoughts (and Tony wouldn't be too surprised if he could), the god stopped pacing to say, “I'll be fine.” Just those three words were not enough, as
Loki had lied with that same statement countless times in the past, but as Tony closely studied the god's face he saw that it was the truth. Loki may be stressed, but he had far more resilience than he used to.

“We’ll send you the coordinates once you’re suited up,” Fury said, taking Loki’s comment as acquiescence. Before Tony could protest again, the man disappeared and the screen went black.

Tony sighed tiredly, dragging his hand through his hair. It wasn't like he had much of a choice anyway. “I’ll be back in a bit,” he told Loki. “Might as well end this mess now.”

But no matter how much Tony wished otherwise, the mess didn’t end there. Although he had perfectly reasonable reservations, he obeyed Fury and went to New Mexico. Thor was storming through the city, shouting his brother’s name and demanding compliance. Cars had to skid to a stop as he wandered into the street, and civilians rushed to avoid the insane man amongst them. Police milled about the edges, watching closely but not intervening.

Tony dropped down behind Thor, landing down onto the pavement with a heavy thud. The god spun around, hammer at the ready, and Tony raised his hands in a gesture of nonviolence. “Whoa there, Point Break,” he had said. “I’m not here to fight you.” At least not yet. There was something Tony had to see for himself first. Only if Thor proved his theory wrong, or refused to step down, would he attack.

The God of Thunder scrutinized Iron Man. “I have no quarrel with you. Stay out of my way and I will not harm you,” He lifted the hammer again, this time in preparation of flight, but Tony interrupted.

“Yeah, no can do. I don’t know how things work in Asgard, but you can’t just storm down the streets swinging weapons around.” Nor was he allowed the threaten Loki, but that was another matter.

“Your people cannot stop me,” Thor replied, as if that was justification for anything. Once again Tony could see the parallels between the two gods, and he wondered just how much of Loki’s personality problems came from the void and how much started long before that.

“Maybe they can't, but I can,” Tony said, raising the right repulsor. He still didn't want to fight Thor, but he also knew a lost cause when he saw one. Talking it out wasn't going to work right now, and with his theory left unverified, Thor could be a serious threat to Loki.

“A tin man is no match for me either,” was the god’s arrogant reply, and he made to leave again. Tony couldn't just let him walk away, so he defaulted to what he did best—pissing people off.

“Doth mother know you weareth her drapes?” Tony countered, and had to lunge out of the way a second later as the hammer came rocketing at his chest. Truce broken, he fired back before rocketing into the air, inciting Thor to follow.

The brawl that followed lasted nearly half an hour, and in that time, Tony made zero progress in halting Thor. The Thunder God’s hammer well… hammered Tony’s armor; the chest plate was dented to the point of pressing painfully into Tony’s chest, and the corner of his face mask protruded outwards. He did manage to get a few of his own hits in—Thor’s cape was torn and singed, and he too sported a dinged chest plate—but the god himself was unharmed. Not even a repulsor blast stopped him; he would get flung across the street only to stand back up as if nothing had happened.

“Jarvis, let’s try another full blast. All power to the chest.” Tony instructed, trying to straighten his arm and grimacing as the joint screeched at him—another suit destined for the scrap pile.
“Yes sir, but may I say that I do not think it will be effective,” Jarvis replied, but the familiar hum of the repulsor started up anyway; Tony had already wasted all of the stored blasts. Thor's bulk was misleading. He moved lightning fast, and the heavyweight suit Tony had selected was struggling to keep up. The god was picking himself up off of the ground, and Tony urged Jarvis to go faster. “Come on, buddy. Don't leave me hanging.”

A voice that was definitely not Jarvis was the one to reply. “Stark, you need to cease and desist,” Fury ordered, much to Tony's disbelief.

“Me?” he squawked, chest beam continuing to load while Thor brushed himself off and prepared to throw himself back into battle. “I thought the entire point of coming out here was to stop him. Why do I need to retreat? I've got this.”

Fury wasn't swayed by Tony's bravado. “You're fighting is causing far more damage than he was before you arrived, and you have no results to go with it.”

Tony couldn't deny that the collateral damage was getting a bit excessive. The street they were fighting in was now more gravel than pavement. Giant cracks marred the sidewalk, and one unfortunate car parked to the side had been accidentally blasted into a smoking heap. Buildings that lined the street had shattered windows and crushed storefronts. Then there was Thor, standing amidst the wreckage looking ready to take on the House Party Protocol.

Tony sighed. “Jarvis, kill the beam.” The AI complied, and the gathering light faded into nothing. Thor was watching him closely from the other side of the road, but he must have realized that something had changed because he did not attack. Still, Tony kept an eye on him as he asked, “Alright, then what are we supposed to do? Just let him run amok?”

“That's my concern. For now, you are no longer to fight him.”

Tony huffed in displeasure, but he listened anyway. “Yo, Blondie!” He called, and the god glared at him in response. “Let's cut this party short, shall we? I have a dry martini waiting for me back home.” Not waiting for Thor's response, Tony waved mockingly at him then rocketed into the air. He glanced behind him to see if he was being followed, but Thor remained grounded.

It felt too much like returning home in defeat for Tony, but he went anyway. He wasn't arrogant enough to think he was going to win that fight. All he could so was slink back to Loki and try and not think about how he had failed, lest the guilt eat away at him. Just as Tony expected, the god didn't take the news of Iron Man's inadequacy well. He paced and twitched as if he were crawling out of his own skin, and Tony struggled to find a suitable distraction. In the end, it was only the promise of revenge that got Loki to concentrate on something besides being hunted down.

Loki plotted against Victor von Doom with brutal intensity, and they finally managed to discover the loophole Doom used against the Dragon Slayer. But the god didn't stop there; he went through every bit of information he could get on the man, from pictures of his castle to the history of Latveria. It was as if Loki was getting ready to go to war, with Doom's head as the final goal.

Yet they could not completely ignore Thor, and the entire time they worked, they kept close watch on his movements. Despite Fury saying that he’d take care of it, SHIELD could not stop the god. Thor was intent on his quest, and he went from city to city without rest, searching for his brother like a man possessed.

Loki was unable to rest either, always obsessing over the reports even after Tony finally passed out from exhaustion. The god constantly had a tablet on hand, even when he returned to scouring through his magic books (and Tony couldn't help but notice that while Loki's fanatical interest in the
texts had faded, that peculiar, near guilty expression on his face hadn't. In fact, if Tony were being honest with himself he'd say it had actually intensified since they sat down to talk). There were times that Tony wanted to force the tablet away from him at times; constantly seeing his brother was taking its toll on Loki, and the god alternated from manic to despondent.

The worst part was that none of the information they received was good news. While Thor had a lot of ground to cover, he was covering it fast. He wasn't showing any signs of slowing down. At four days in, he did return to the Bifrost for a few hours—Tony had dared to hope that the Thunder God had given up—but then Thor came straight back and continued searching. As the distance between Thor and them decreased, Tony knew that he and Loki should be considering a plan of action. However, the only real input Loki had offered was that trying to evade Thor would be useless, as the god undoubtedly had a way to track Loki's magic. He would need to be in close proximity, but once the god came to Malibu, it'd all be over. Tony's house was saturated in magic. If they wanted to abandon the location, then maybe retreating somewhere else would work, but even then, that'd only be a short term solution.

They ended up being forced into action after eight days of watching Thor traipse the country. The god was creating havoc wherever he went, and the government finally got fed up with it. Fury, as always, was the one who brought the issue to them. “Your brother has to leave, and it seems he won't until he talks to you,” the director said, his call interrupting their debate on whether or not it was worth it to illegally invade Latveria to get at Doom.

“He is not my brother. I have no business with him,” Loki obstinately replied, but the mask was only skin-thick.

“But he has business with you,” Fury pressured, and Loki glared back.

Tony cut in, stopping their fight before it started. “I thought SHIELD was not going to offer Loki up to Asgard. ‘Look out for our own’, wasn’t it?”

Fury scowled at the reminder. “The Council apparently doesn’t share the same sentiment. They know we have worked with Loki in the past and have ordered we remedy the situation.”

“I wasn’t aware you cared what the Council thought,” Tony said, already formulating plans to get Loki far away from America and Thor. If he had to abandon Malibu, fine, he could live with that. But there was no way was he letting some stick-up bigwigs in suits sacrifice Loki just to stop Thor from impeding traffic and scaring old women.

“This is out of hand,” was all Fury said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Tony's assessment.

“Too bad,” Tony growled. “I’ll just go fight him again, or something. We aren’t.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Loki interrupted, voice artificially calm. Tony turned to face him in surprise, opening his mouth automatically to object, but Loki repeated solidly, “I will go and talk to him.”

Tony floundered, the obvious protests—What if he hurts you? Do you want to get shipped back to Asgard? Don't be stupid!—coming to his lips but not passing. Loki had to have considered all of that already; saying it out loud would only be a needless reminder. But Tony had to say something, so he asked the one question that really mattered. “Why?”

Loki’s fear slipped through his mask, but he did not waver from his decision. “If Thor cannot find me he will send others in his stead, and they will not show me mercy.” Tony remembered Loki when he had returned from Asgard, dripping blood onto the living room floor and exhausted to the point of collapse. Loki was right; there would be no mercy from them. But the real question was: would he
Fury was more willing to go along with Loki's decision. “You have three days to talk to him. SHIELD will be of assistance if you need it.” He didn’t say what would happen if the god changed his mind in those three days.

Loki nodded his head in acceptance, and Tony couldn't figure out what to say in protest or if he even should protest. Then the screen faded back to black, leaving the two to silence. Tony was the first to break it. “Will he try to harm you?” He had to ask, because out of everything that was the most important detail. The ‘how’ and ‘when’ could happen later.

It took Loki a moment to think about it, then he slowly shook his head. “No. I do not think he will. At least... not right away.”

“That’s reassuring,” Tony grumbled, but he had to admit that it was better than nothing.

“I have to do this. He will not stop searching otherwise,” Loki said again, but he couldn't quell his nervous tic. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. Tony knew the god tried his best to cope, but he still struggled with his mind. However, anything was better than him reverting back to being catatonic.

“I don’t have to like it to realize that it’s probably necessary.” Tony watched as Loki's agitated twitching progressed until he looked near-epileptic. When the god showed no signs of calming, the engineer sighed. “Just go get the damn thing already.”

Loki wasted no time in going over to the sliding glass door that led out of the lab. Forcing it open, he whistled sharply, and a moment later, Tony could hear the pounding of little footsteps from upstairs. A tan blur rocketed into view, and Coro flung himself onto Loki’s leg; the cat meowed loudly, clambering up the god and demanding attention. Loki—ever spoiling that obnoxious furball of his—reached down to pick Choronzon up, holding the purring cat tightly to his chest. Fingers embedded in fur, his hands finally began to stop shaking.

Mind no longer as obstructed by fear, Loki began to talk again. “We have three days to come up with a plan in case something goes wrong, or to at least provide a reason for Thor to not take me straight back to Asgard. We won’t go in unprepared.”

“Then I guess you'll just have to wow me, princess,” Tony joked, trying to lighten the mood. He had to believe that it'd be alright—for both of them. “Come on, you always have a plan.”

Turns out Loki did have a few rudimentary plans, and by 'a few', Tony meant 'over twenty'. Apparently coming from a warrior race meant that you could think up a dozen ways to fight
someone off the top of your head. Being the God of Mischief just topped that number.

There were a few plans the god had that they just did not have time for, like enchanting weapons to kill an immortal. However, there were far more that they could use, and Loki intended to utilize every single one of them. He wasn't cutting any corners. If it came down to a fight, the god wasn't going down quietly. But at the same time, Tony knew that Loki expected to lose. That for every spell he crafted, and every rune he carved into the suit, he did not think he would be coming back when it was over. Loki's defeatist attitude was contradictory; the entire situation was contradictory.

Tony did not know Thor, and he did not know what Thor was capable of. Loki did, and the god was amassing a ridiculous amount of firepower. Yet at the same time, they were aiming to avoid violent confrontation. It didn’t make sense. Did Loki want to fight Thor or not? Was Thor really as formidable and Loki was making him out to be? There was no doubt in Tony’s mind that Thor was strong enough to warrant such force, but was he cruel enough?

As their deadline got closer, Toy still didn’t have any answers to his questions. The only certainty was that if the need arose, he would defend Loki until the end. If Thor attacked, then Iron Man would return it with interest. But Tony knew there was a lot more going on than what appeared on the surface. He may not understand Loki’s brother, but he sure as hell understood Loki; the god did not hate Thor.

Hate was a concept that Tony was intimately familiar with. He knew how it burned steadily within your chest, smoldering through every bit of good in the world until there was nothing left but a hollow husk. He knew how it gripped tight and wouldn’t let go, driving people to the extremes in order to quench the uncontrollable flame inside them. He knew it, and so he could not say that Loki hated Thor. Even if the god thought he did, Loki did not hate his family. That was why, if it came down to it, Tony himself would stop Loki from trying to kill Thor. He wouldn’t let the god make the same mistake again, confusing sorrow with anger.

Then the time came to act, where just thinking about the problem wasn’t enough. Tony awoke on the third day to a sense of wrongness in the air: a mix of trepidation, rage, and regret. That feeling increased when he hauled himself down to the lab to find Loki slumped in his chair, circled by an anxious Dum-E and his hand on Coro’s back. He didn’t look up as Tony came in, continuing to stare at the empty desk. For a moment, Tony worried that he had blanked out, but when he drew closer, the god tilted his head to regard Tony.

“We’ll leave as soon as you’re ready.” Loki said by way of greeting, not making any move to get up. Tony could see the exhaustion outlined in the lines on the god’s face, the toll that constant worrying had taken on him, and he knew it would get worse before it could get better.

That didn’t mean he was ready for it, however. “Why the hurry?” Tony asked, trying to hold off the inevitable.

“You know why,” Loki replied, and Tony nodded slightly in affirmation. Delay would just allow stress to gnaw at the god’s mind, chipping him away bit by bit until nothing remained. It wouldn’t matter how many plans they had then; it’d be game over.

“Fair enough.” Tony pulled himself away from the god. As he walked over towards the dock, he called out, “Do you have everything else set up?”

“Yes,” the god said curtly, and Tony could hear Loki force himself to his feet. The engineer turned around just in time to see heavy leathers and metal ornaments converge around the god. It was the same armor Loki had worn when they first went to the Helicarrier, although this time he was also wearing a large, golden helmet with curving horns that heightened his already tall stature.
Tony couldn't tease him for the ostentatious accessory as his own armor was similarly decorated. They had engraved sigils into the metal, silver lines peeking through the red and gold, and embedded crystals into the plates. With the suit on, Tony could actually feel Loki’s magic as it thrummed through the ports. He didn’t understand everything the god had done to his suit, but Loki had assured him that it would only harm foreign entities.

Prepared for battle, Tony returned to Loki. Wordlessly, the god reached up to teleport them away; before the hand fell on his armor, Tony caught it. “Wait.” Loki looked at him in confusion. “Listen to me,” Tony ordered, pulling the hand to rest over his arc reactor. “It’ll be alright. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Loki stared at the hand bathed in blue light, and then he lifted his gaze to search Tony’s face for that glimmer of truth he always seemed so desperate to find. He moved to pull his hand back, but Tony held tight; he knew the god could remove his hand if he wanted, but after a moment, Loki relaxed, hand resting over Tony’s metaphorical heart. “There are limits to what you can do,” Loki murmured; Tony heard ‘if something goes wrong, it isn’t your fault.’

“But when it comes to you,” Tony replied, gripping the hand tighter.

Briefly Tony thought that Loki was going to reply; the god opened his mouth slightly—the goodbye that Tony didn’t want to hear was waiting there—but then he stopped himself. They teleported eight hundred miles away.

-o-o-o-

Back and forth he paced, alternating between a frantic dash and a morose shuffle. Faster until he felt like he was going to crawl out of his skin. Slower until he felt like his mind was rotting within his skull.

Outside of the furrow his feet had worn, Tony stood tacitly. The man's last few attempts at conversation received nothing more than anxious spans of silence. It wasn't that Loki didn't want to talk to Tony, but the riot inside of his mind would not quiet enough for him to think about anything other than Thor. Thor. Thor.

Thor, with his perfection and charm: the smile that blocked out the sun and left poor, forgotten Loki in the shadows. Thor, with his words of forgiveness and love: ready to accept Loki’s flaws and calling him brother even now. Thor, with his lies.

Once again, Loki's pacing reached fever pitch, constantly running but getting nowhere. Every quick turn made his cloak snap out behind him, and the metal plates sung a depressing dirge. The tattoo of his footsteps echoed his thoughts, a constant cadence of 'Thor, Jotun, monster, murderer.' Trying to force the sounds to stop, Loki's aggressive pace reverted back into a dragging shamble.

“Are you sure he’s coming?” Tony asked, adding his own voice to the ditty.

'Without a doubt,' Loki thought, but he did not speak out loud; his voice was caught somewhere deep within him—between the doubt, longing, and keening ache of betrayal.

“He’s taking his sweet time getting here. You’d think swinging a hammer around would be faster,” Tony continued, trying in vain to lighten the mood. His words hung awkwardly in the quiet, answered only by the steady tempo of ‘Thor, Jotun, monster, murderer’. Loki resisted the urge to
scream at his mind to just shut up and leave him alone. Just like it had in the void.

Six more rounds of back-forth between the two trees passed before Tony spoke again, this time serious. “Everything will be okay. I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you.”

Loki found Tony's words to be nothing more than a beautiful lie. The man could try all he wanted, but even if they somehow managed to stop Thor today, the God of Thunder was only the beginning; there was still the rest of Asgard to contend with, and that was beyond Tony's ability. Unlike before, when patience and soothing words were enough to make things better, there was no escaping from the consequences of Loki's past. He had tried, but no matter how much he suffered, it still found him in the end. Enough was enough; he was tired of running away.

“Loki-” Tony began, but a faint whir distracted Loki from any words that may have followed.

The god stopped pacing mid-step, eyes snapping to some unseen point on the horizon. Loki's sudden change in demeanor caught Tony's attention. He too went still, following Loki's gaze even though he could not hear yet hear the distant sound- the sound that, as it got closer and closer to their position, was unmistakable: Mjolnir.

Loki stood ramrod straight in the middle of the clearing. His fists clenched until they were on the verge of drawing blood, and he breathed in a thick, quivering breath. Within his mind, he forced out the fog and insecurity, slamming up walls and ignoring the monsters that lurked along their edges. A mendacious, confident mask fell upon Loki, and his body relaxed. Tony came up alongside him, Iron Man already concealed behind an unyielding mask, and stood supportively as they stared at where blue met green. There was no need for Tony to ask what was going on; nothing else could so easily force Loki to revert to lies lest the truth drag him down into the darkness.

Thor had arrived.

Loki could pinpoint the instant that Tony finally heard Thor, the other god making a ruckus as he smashed his way through heaven-reaching boughs. He did not need to see Tony’s face to know that the fear screaming inside of his mind would be reflected there. Weapon slots hissed open along Tony’s arms and shoulders, revealing the deadly artillery inside.

The sight did little to comfort Loki; if it came down to a fight, he wasn’t sure that Iron Man’s firepower would be enough. Not necessarily to stop Thor- Loki had little hopes of that anyway- but to protect Tony. Heavily equipped or not, the suit was still just a machine. Were it not for the magic of Yggdrasil coursing strongly through Tony’s veins, Loki would never have brought him along. The man could not suffer for Loki’s mistakes, because while he would have wanted nothing more than for Tony to be beside him, he would not have risked the man’s life. The apple simply allowed the god to indulge in his selfishness, putting Tony in the line of fire for matters that did not concern him. He should have contented himself with knowing that if he did die, at least there was someone left who might mourn him.

Then Thor came into view, with his bright red cape and spinning hammer, and Loki’s mind temporarily ceased to function; reality was obscured by a violent upheaval of remembered voices.

“You are not my brother!”

“Whatever I have done to lead you to this, I am sorry.”

“Never doubt that I love you.”

“No!”
Cold metal brushed lightly against Loki’s arm, drawing him back down to reality. He leaned into the touch, drawing what strength he could from Tony’s very presence, and then drew away. He stood with an imposing façade before his not-brother.

Still in the air, Thor’s bright blue eyes locked onto Loki immediately. The Thunder God twisted the hammer downwards, sending him colliding with the ground across from Loki. When the dust cleared, it revealed Thor in a kneeling position, fist punched into the earth and head raised defiantly. With the grace of a king, he rose to his feet, and Thor’s usually carefree expression was distorted by a heavy frown.

“Hello, Thor,” Loki greeted disdainfully, his mask cemented into place. Even though Loki wanted to flee—teleport across the world to live like a beast before the hounds—just so he never had to talk to his brother again, he stayed firmly in place. Loki, God of Chaos, was not a coward.

Actually hearing words from Loki’s mouth seemed to catch Thor off guard. It was as if he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to say now his long forgotten, envious ‘little brother’ actually stood before him. Thor’s eyes flickered to Tony, but after finding no answer there, he was quick to disregard the man. Eventually, Thor found righteous anger to be the easier route. Taking a threatening step forwards, Mjolnir raised brazenly, he shouted, “Loki! You will return what you have stolen!”

All he got in response was a mirthless laugh and crooked grin. “Is that anyway to greet your brother?” Loki asked, his last word a bitter, hateful hiss; there was no doubt that he meant he was anything but. “And here I thought you may have missed me, after I’ve been away for so long.”

Loki let the vindictive amusement—or at least that was what he called it, for if he actually thought about what that churning emotion was, it would untangle the lies he had encased himself with—at Thor’s stricken expression chase away the void that gnashed at the bars inside his mind.

Odin's son was quick to recover, pushing aside the fake sorrow and taking another step forwards. (It had to be fake; Loki had no one—no one to save him, no one to believe in him, no one to love him. It had just been him, all alone without ever knowing why. But now he knew better, and he wouldn’t be fooled again.) Out of the corner of his eye Loki saw Tony shift in response to Thor's advance, but other than that, he stayed neutral. Loki half-wished the man would attack anyway, like a replay of eight years ago; Iron Man would be the Destroyer, and Thor would finally know what it felt like to be helpless. Tony didn't, and it was Loki who felt trapped. Thor remained several paces away, but that distance was insignificant when the God of Thunder was already a realm too close.

“Do not turn this on me!” Thor boomed. “I do not know what scheme you have been pursuing all these years, but it stops now!”

“Scheme?” Loki asked, somehow managing to come across as mocking instead of hysterical. How he wished that he had just been sitting somewhere scheming for all of those years. Instead, he spent them being shattered into thousands of pieces, and it was only through a miracle that he escaped to be painstakingly rebuilt into this mockery of his former self. “Took you long enough to figure it out,” he lied through his teeth. “And here I thought you’d be hunting me down after you tossed me into an abyss.”

“Tossed you…?” Thor echoed confusedly, as if Loki’s anger was not justified.

‘He's deceiving you’, Loki’s mind insisted vehemently, ignoring the fact that Thor was never that skilled at deception. Thor couldn’t possibly love him anymore, and daring to hope so would only make the letdown worse in the end.
“Brother, we thought you dead!”

“Obviously I am not,” Loki seethed. “You’ll have to try better next time if you wish to succeed.”

“I grieved for you!” Thor shouted in reply, so open and honest.

Loki couldn’t stop himself; furious and abandoned, he shouted back, “If you cared, then you should have come for me!” Again Thor was disconcerted by the harsh statement, and Loki couldn’t stand it. “I see no need for you to be here,” he said, forcing the subject to change before his brother could unravel the meaning of those impulsive words. “I will not return what I have taken.”

Just as Loki predicted, Thor easily accepted Loki's haughty tone as genuine, not as a cover for the sorrow that lay beneath. But that wasn't a surprise; he always had, and always would. Riled up, Thor roared at him, “You are overstepping your bounds, brother! What you are trying to do is forbidden! I command that you must stop this foolishness before it is too late!”

The cackle that fell from Loki’s lips was less than sane, and he was vaguely aware of Tony shifting anxiously. The rest of his focus was on Thor, who tightened his hold on Mjolnir and regarded Loki as if he were nothing more than a stranger. ‘Brother’ indeed; Thor knew nothing about him. “Too late?” Loki asked breathlessly. He laughed again, the same high, deranged sound bubbling forth. “Oh, I assure you,” he purred, “I’ve already passed that point.”

There was no redemption left for him; not just with the apple—his magic was so irreversibly intertwined with Tony that even the greatest sorcerer could not undo it—but everything; even if guilt tormented Loki's mind, he could not take back the past. He could only move forwards and hope that one day he stopped adding regrets.

Comprehension dawned in Thor's eyes. “Loki, tell me it is not true,” the other god pleaded. Loki had to remind himself that the concern wasn't real; the horrid ache lodged deep within his chest was.

“Certainly, but would you believe me?” He asked with a Cheshire grin. Under the ruckus in his brain, a voice of reason was shrieking for him to steer the conversation away. The term 'Idunn's apple' was just a few words away, and once it was spoken, there would be no taking it back. He could not let Tony know of his manipulation, not when he needed the man the most. Yet that voice was drowned out, reason sunk beneath waves of irrationality.

“Stealing our peoples' most sacred text wasn't enough for you?” Thor shouted, his voice a mirror of Tony's when Loki had come home with the aforementioned book. “Using one of Idunn's apples is forbidden! You know that!”

“I don't care!” Loki replied heatedly, but he felt a sharp trill of fear flash through him. Not at threat of punishment—that had never been his concern. He could only face execution once, after all—but at he knew without a doubt would follow.

Right on cue, Loki could hear Tony's muttered inquiry of, “Apple?”

Just like that, the situation spiraled out of his control.

Thor also heard the quiet question, and he finally turned to consider the man who accompanied his brother. Recognition flared in those blue eyes, and Thor tilted his head slightly as he took in all of the runes that decorated the armor; to someone from Asgard, it was as if Loki had engraved his signature onto the metal. It wouldn’t be hard to deduce the truth from there, even for someone as utterly dull as Thor.

'No, no, no,' Loki's chanted inside the confines of his mind, but not a single word made it out. He
knew his voice would betray his guilt. In the end Loki’s silence did not matter; Thor assembled the pieces, realizing exactly what Loki had meant when he said he used Idunn’s apple.

“Why, brother?” Thor asked, pointing harshly at Tony. “What could possibly be so special about him that you would do this?” His hand shook, just slightly, but Loki saw. “You could be executed for this!”

“I don’t care!” Loki repeated, stepping forward defensively. He stood in front of Tony, shielding him from Thor’s accusing glare. The man had a different idea; he moved out from behind Loki and reversed their positions, standing between the two gods.

“Alright, Point Break, two things,” Tony said. “One, I definitely am special enough for whatever it is. And two.” He took another step forwards, raising his arm until his glowing palm was only a few feet from Thor’s chest. “No one is executing the princess.”

Tony’s display of devotion only confirmed Thor’s assumption, and that hopeless expression of his deepened. “You should not have done this,” he futilely insisted. “I can only defend you so much.”

“I don’t need you to defend me,” Loki refuted automatically. “I never did.”

“Should not have done what?” Tony asked, still standing protectively before the god. He tilted his head slightly to regard Loki while continuing to keep a close watch on Thor.

Loki’s insides clenched in a panic, one that rivaled that of meeting his brother again. He imagined the love Tony now showed being twisted into hatred at the truth of what his friend has done to him. (Loki mutely agreed with Thor; he should not have done it.) “Nothing. It is of no consequence to you,” he lied, his eyes locked on his not-brother so he did not have to look upon his own betrayal.

“Of no consequence?” Thor asked, unwilling to drop the subject. “Loki, what you did is one of the greatest taboos in all of the Nine Realms!”

That statement was enough to push Tony’s budding curiosity over the edge. Loki fell under suspicion. Lowering his hand slightly, Tony asked, “Loki?” The god's name was spoken slowly, as if Tony feared the answer he would receive. “What did you do?”

Loki didn’t want to answer, but the stares of Tony and Thor—two people who had meant so much to him (still meant so much to him)—bore down on him. There was nowhere to escape except to retreat inwards, and pitch black sludge clawed its way up to greet him. How convenient it must have been for Odin, Loki thought distantly, to surrender to the Odinsleep when faced with a difficult question. Loki wanted to hide away as well, forget all about his troubles, but he fought against that urge. He refused to emulate Odin’s cowardice, and refusing to answer now would only assure that Thor did it in his place. If Tony had to learn the truth, then he would hear it from Loki.

Loki’s shame—the remorse and guilt he had continually repressed, but could no longer ignore—prevented him from meeting Tony’s gaze as he explained, “I only did what I had to. I...” Despite his intent to continue, the words died in Loki’s throat; his excuses had made sense in his mind, but when it came to admitting them out loud, his actions seemed selfish and misguided.

“He does not know?” Thor interrupted, unable to just stay out of the conversation for a moment. Their accusing expressions were like walls were closing in around him, and it was hard to hear anything over the “No, Loki” echoing in his ears. Yet it wasn't loud enough to drown out Thor's shouting; “Brother, are you mad?” just added to the discord.

“What do I not know?” Tony persisted. Loki wished he could just cover his ears and close his eyes.
The god was like a deer caught between the crosshairs, unable to run even though his every nerve screamed to.

“I had to do it...” He repeated, mind stuck in a rut; he just kept falling down, down, down. This was not how he had imagined their confrontation to go: he had been ready to fight and have his life taken in the process. He was ready to die and let things come to an end. But through all of that—his defeat and execution—he would have had Tony by his side. Loki had not expected his lies to come to the light so quickly. He should have (they always did when it came to those he loved) but he hadn’t, and now he truly had no one.

“Loki, this is insanity! Expunge the immortality from him and come back home! If you stop resisting, I can still fix this!” Thor shouted as Loki’s world started to slip out from under his feet.

“Immortality?” The pieces began to align for Tony as they tumbled out of control for Loki. “Loki… what is Idunn's apple?” The man asked, but the god knew he had already figured it out. It didn't matter if he replied; the truth was already known.

So Loki did reply, if only to try and convince himself that he wasn’t ashamed- that he had made the right choice. “With the proper spell, Idunn’s apple can grant immortality to the one who consumes it,” Loki quoted from the grimoire, knowing the man would derive the rest.

“But I didn’t...” Tony began, and then he abruptly fell silent. Loki could imagine the look of horror that lied beneath the mask. “The smoothie. There was apple in the smoothie.”

Loki bowed his head, confirming Tony’s statement; the man fell into a shocked silence, frozen in place between Loki and Thor. Loki couldn't help but think it was like Tony didn’t know who the greater enemy was anymore.

Thor jumped on their disunity, taking the opportunity to try and convince Loki again. “Come home with me. We can still undo what you have done, and—”

“I can’t!” Loki shouted, furious at Thor, at himself—at Tony, for not understanding why he had to give the man the apple. There was no choice; he had to. “Don’t you understand, you dullard? I can never go back! Not with Asgard, and not with Tony!”

The columns holding up his mind began to collapse, falling victim to the siege of rolling darkness. Everything was getting blotted out, and he had nowhere to run. It started to drown him.

His brother stared at him, and after a moment, understanding dawned on him. “Brother,” Thor began, speaking softly as if he were talking to a frightened animal. As he stepped forwards, he lowered his hammer.

“No!” Loki screamed at him, stumbling back a step. He would not be pitied! Magic flooded into the god’s hands, and he latched onto the quickest spell to come to mind, one that wasn’t already submerged beyond his grasp. The rest of his careful plans, spells he had spent days crafting for this moment, were obfuscated by the fog.

With a roar, Loki flung a spear of ice at Thor; the frenzied shot narrowly missed colliding with Tony's head. Not expecting the sudden attack, Thor was slow to counter. He barely managed to swing Mjolnir in time, and the shattered tip of the spear sliced through his red cape. Another javelin was quick to follow, and frost laced across the ground from its origin at Loki's feet. Jotuns were monsters, and he was no exception.

“Loki, stop it!” Someone shouted in the background, but the god did not listen. He lunged forwards,
ice thickening along his arms to form wicked scythes. They collided with Thor’s hammer, cracking and chipping at the impact. A new layer of ice replaced the descending shards.

Thor leapt away, defending himself but not attacking. “Loki!” He pleaded, but that only made the other god angrier; Loki’s mind flashed back to that day on the bridge.

“I’ve changed.”

“So have I. Now...”

“Fight me!” Loki cried, launching more translucent spears at Thor while leaping into the air to push the Thunder God back. “Or am I still so beneath your notice?”

Encased in ice, Loki’s weight was enough to send Thor down to a knee. Mjolnir was held over the god’s head, a final defense against seeking blades. Yet the hammer was still not put on the offensive, and Loki growled deep in his throat. Ice started to creep off of his flesh to coat the ancient weapon, and when Thor refused to pull his hands away, they too were consumed. The God of Thunder grit his teeth against the frostbite. “Brother,” Thor attempted again, the one word thick with emotion. Loki dismissed it, and the jagged flow of ice did not slow. “You are not in your right mind. I do not wish to fight you—not again.”

“I’m not your brother,” Loki hissed, ripping one of his arms free from the encasing of ice. He raised it above his head, letting layers of ice build on the edge until it was razor-sharp. There was no little voice left inside to resist him, to reason with him; everything had suffocated in black. All that remained was madness.

Loki let his arm fall, blind to Thor’s anguished face and deaf to someone shouting his name. But before the crystalline blade could connect, something blasted into his side. Loki was flung across the clearing, the ice exploding into a flurry of snow. He slammed roughly into the ground, and it took far too long for his thoughts to fall back in line. When they did, Loki sprung back to his feet, and a chill settled around him, ready to attack whoever interfered.

Then his eyes fell on red and gold—not just one or the other, but both curiously intertwined—and he faltered. Something was shouting at him from within the depths of his mind, speaking of familiarity and devotion. Sound hit him—Loki hadn’t even realized it was gone in the first place—and that beautiful blur, the beacon that rose from the depths of the void, drew closer as it spoke: “-not yourself. Things are fucked up right now; I get that. But you need to calm down before you screw up even more. Killing Thor isn’t going to fix anything, and you know that.”

A name fluttered just outside of Loki’s reach, and he had the strangest thought that it, more than anything else, was important. Even as he rapidly approached the bottom, the world fading out around him, he felt like he needed that name. As the being stepped closer, arms held out in surrender while great pillars of ice rose and fell around Loki, the god fought to make it click.

Then it did, just as the darkness killed everything. “Tony,” Loki murmured, before his mind fell away completely; he collapsed lifelessly, body nothing more than a puppet without strings.
Hearts of Gold and Ice

"Threw you the obvious and you flew with it on your back,
A name in your recollection, down among a million same.
Difficult not to feel a little bit disappointed, and passed over...
You don't see me.

But I threw you the obvious, just to see if there's more behind the
Eyes of a fallen angel, eyes of a tragedy.
Here I am expecting just a little bit too much from the wounded,
But I see, see through it all — see through, see you."

-3 Libras by A Perfect Circle
-o-o-o-

There was an instant in which time was suspended; everything seemed to happen as if in slow motion, while Tony himself was frozen in place. Even as Loki's mind imploded, the god's knees buckling and his body careening to the ground, Tony could not move. Behind him, Thor shouted his brother's name, but he too remained trapped in place. Both of them were helpless to stop Loki's descent.

Except for it wasn't 'Loki' anymore, was it? The god had retreated deep within until all that was left was an empty shell, the same one that Tony had met what seemed like a lifetime ago. As the body became slack, gravity pulling it down, Tony couldn't help but think that it wasn't Loki. It looked like him: pale skin, long black hair, and green eyes. There was also the god's concealing armor and ridiculous helmet — slipping free as he tumbled — that were not as familiar but no less defining.

'No,' Tony thought, feeling oddly disconnected. 'It looks like him, but it will never be him.'

And then the body hit the ground with a resounding thud, and time reasserted itself alongside the echoing sound. Tony's limbs were no longer paralyzed in shock. He leapt for Loki, habit overtaking his doubts. Thor moved as well, but Tony beat him to the fallen god's side. He hesitated for only a split second—a vestige of Loki's voice whispered in his mind, "Idunn's apple can grant immortality to the one who consumes it"—before he got to his knees and reached for Loki.

Thor arrived just as Tony flipped the god over, revealing empty eyes that stared blindly at the sky. As Tony checked that Loki was otherwise unharmed, he didn't need to look up to know that Thor was confounded, unable to equate the fiery Loki with the catatonic body. The sight was still jarring to Tony, despite the fact that this was the state in which he first met Loki. This silent, unresponsive body was a far cry from the actual Loki, who had far too much heart and was led by the emotions he pretended didn't exist. Who had gone behind Tony's back and done the unthinkable, all because he couldn't stand to face those tumultuous fears and worries. It was selfishness under the guise of caring.

“What is wrong with him?” Thor demanded, jolting Tony out of his downward spiral; he had momentarily forgotten that Thor was there. He would have found that fact concerning if not for the fact that he no longer had any doubt about Thor's feelings for his brother, not after that last display. The god, while he came with bad tidings, was not the enemy here.

Tony struggled to formulate a response, the words he needed slipping in between blares of ‘lies’ and ‘betrayal’ and ‘irreversible’. “He’s...” The man started, but the sentence derailed in his mind. In one direction it became ‘he’s catatonic because his brain is like a bag of cats’ and in the other it broke
down to ‘he’s selfish, and all of this is his fault’.

The delay irked the god, and with a voice that was ten percent imperious and ninety percent worried Thor commanded, “Man of Iron, you will-

“Give me a second, Goldilocks!” Tony snapped, feeling far too exhausted to bother with diplomacy at that moment. The thoughts within his head were chaotic. They lashed from concerned to outraged, depleting his strength in a way he hadn’t thought possible.

When Thor actually listened and shut the hell up, the resulting lull was a small blessing; Tony inhaled slowly, willing the world to follow his lead. Everything was fucked up, and Tony wasn’t even sure where to begin unraveling the faults. However, there was too much going on for him to take the time needed; it was only a minute before Thor shifted anxiously, moving around Tony to get a clearer look at his brother. Tony stared at Loki as well, but only because he didn’t have the power to look away. He was captivated by that execrable serenity and the egocentric ideas it buried.

The whirlwind of thoughts in Tony's head—moving frenziedly but never reaching a final destination—flashed back to the hysterical shout of, 'I had to!' He cursed loudly, uncaring of his sole audience, and punched the ground. It did nothing to ease the clamor, so he lifted his fist and slammed it down again. “God damn it!”

Tony could feel Thor's gaze shift to him, prickling along the back of his neck. He cursed again, this time mentally. At this rate, Thor was going to think that Tony was completely off his rocker too. Then again, maybe Tony really was insane, completely out of his mind. He had to be, putting his trust in a deranged god.

Yet when the god spoke next, his words were a far cry from what Tony expected. “My brother may have been wrong,” Thor said softly, sounding not judgmental but sympathetic. “The Nine Realms are full of mages. Certainly one of them could remove the magic from your body.”

For a brief moment, Tony let those words inspire hope, but then he ruthlessly suppressed the notion. “Do you really think he’d be wrong about something like that?” He asked, resigning himself to the harsh reality now so that he would have nothing to lose later.

“I apologize for any harm his actions have caused you,” Thor answered instead, because they both knew the answer to that rhetorical question was a resounding ‘no’. Loki knew magic; if he said it couldn't be undone, then that was fact, and nothing they did could change it.

“Not to be rude or anything, but I couldn't care less about your apology. This is between him and I.” Or would be, once Loki awakened, but Tony had no idea how long that would be; it had been a long time since the god had gone utterly blank. This could have brought them back to square one for all he knew, like he didn't have enough to worry about.

Unable to stand the deadened stare any longer, Tony slipped one of his gloves off and ran his palm across Loki's eyes. When he pulled back, the god's eyes were closed, as if he were merely sleeping. There were no traces of the previous rage or anguish. Even that persistent downturn of the god’s lips had been erased once its source had come to light.

Tony found it horribly ironic now that everything made sense. What he thought he had understood before had merely been the surface. Loki played him like a fool, and while had Tony suspected something was going on all month, he was ignorant to the magnitude of it. That, or he knew all along Loki was deceiving him, could see the hints everywhere he turned, and had chosen to ignore them. It was Stane all over again, and the parallel pierced down into Tony’s core to unleash memories he had kept locked down: cold terror as his body was paralyzed, gripping numbness as his arc reactor was
pried from his chest, and the callous words that denied any remorse. *Those* were the feelings of betrayal, and Tony knew them all too well.

At the same time, he also understood that there was a huge fundamental difference between the two treacheries; Stane sought to kill Tony, while Loki sought to make Tony live forever.

*Forever.* Tony couldn’t even begin to fathom how long an eternity was, let alone a few decades. Of course, ’immortal’ only meant ’a few dozen millennia’ which... greatly exceeded the mere seventy years Tony had been expecting. Even Loki's young age of one thousand and something seemed like a ridiculously long time to be alive. That Tony would also live that long...

The full implications of being immortal hadn’t even sunk in yet, but what he did know was more than enough to make him furious. Not because he didn't think he could handle it (Tony Stark was nothing if not adaptable) but because it was a choice made without his consent. Deceit was not something Tony Stark could take lightly, even if it was Loki—*especially* since it was Loki.

But despite how reasonable his rage was, he still loved the god. If nothing else, Tony would honor that by finishing what they set out to accomplish today. He shoved himself to his feet, spinning away so he didn't have to look at the unconscious god any longer. “Alright, Hammer Time. You want answers?” He spread his arms wide to draw the Thunder God's attention. “Then let’s talk.” Thor started to ask something immediately, but Tony cut him off with the wave of a hand. “Not here,” he stated, hyperaware of the lying god right behind him. “You in the mood for a walk? I want to go for a walk.”

Without waiting for a reply, Tony stalked away from the two gods and into the tree line. There was a slight delay before Thor’s loud steps followed his own, the god quickly catching up with his longer stride. “What about my brother?” Thor asked, craning his neck to keep an eye on Loki while trying to match Tony’s brisk pace. “Surely we cannot just leave him there.”

“He’ll be fine.” Tony did not stop the march that brought him farther and farther away from Loki. Unconscious or not, the God of Chaos was more than capable of riling emotions. Tony had a feeling that talking to Thor would go a lot smoother if Loki’s presence didn’t aid more fuel to an already blazing fire.

Thor wasn’t totally convinced—it must be hard to walk away from Loki after finally finding him—but the lure of answers proved stronger; Thor left his brother behind. Nevertheless, the god wasted no more time in asking, “What is wrong with him?”

“These days, I feel like the better question would be ‘what isn’t wrong with him?’” Tony muttered, and then, before Thor could shout at him, he answered, “His mind cut out. It happens.”

While he talked, Tony began angling them to the right. Despite his nonchalance, the man intended to keep them in route around where Loki was lying. The sound of their steps would warn off anything looking to approach. He wouldn’t risk Loki’s life, but... he just didn’t want to be close to him right now.

“*It happens?*” Thor repeated incredulously. “Man of Metal, my brother collapsed! That is not something so easily dismissed!”

“Blondie, I’ve lived with him for a year and a half now. While I know that probably isn’t long for you, trust me when I say that Loki blanking out is normal these days.”

An aghast expression fell over the god's face, and he looked as if he wanted to run back to his brother's side and do something awfully overdramatic, like cry and wail over Loki's immobile body.
Tony, on the other hand, appeared indifferent; the mask of Iron Man shielded his own strife. The callous words that followed did nothing to ease that perceived stoicism. “If you want to freak out about it, you’re a few years too late.”

Thor returned his attention to Tony and tilted his head slightly as he stared into the mask. The god's blue eyes were keen and piercing, just like Loki's, and Tony felt as if Thor could see beyond the metal. “What is your relation to Loki, human? It is true I haven't seen my brother in nearly a decade, but the last time we talked he was not...fond of mortals.”

Tony's mind instantly brought up photos of that decimated town in New Mexico, the buildings destroyed with abandon. “No, he probably wasn’t,” the man agreed, but then new images flashed to his mind: Loki sitting with him at the table, content to look no different from Midgardians. Loki regaling the other Avengers with stories. Loki covered in blood after he risked his life to save Tony from Doom. “Then again, I imagine seven years was more than enough to change his mind.”

“That is where you are wrong,” Thor refuted. “Seven years is nothing to an Aesir...” The god hesitated infinitesimally. “Or a Jotun. My brother is obstinate to a fault. His opinion would not have changed in such a short time.”

Tony was also quite stubborn, but it only took three months for him to do a complete one-eighty. Those three months just happened to feel never-ending. “Seven years can last an eternity when every second is torture,” Tony said, hating how difficult it was to distance himself from Loki's predicament. Each surge of sympathy made him angry—he shouldn't feel sorry for the god who lied to him—and that resulting anger made him feel guilty—Loki was his friend, and he was suffering. It was a continuous cycle, with no goal but to muddle Tony's mind.

The implication of Tony's words caused Thor to halt abruptly. Tony went a few more feet before stopping as well, turning slightly to regard the smoldering god. Thor was clutching his hammer tightly, his face screwed in rage. “Somebody dared to lay a hand on my brother?” Thor boomed, his hand strangling the hammer while his face twisted in rage. “Who are they? I shall slay them myself!”

The tempestuous display was met with impassiveness; Tony shrugged and said, “If you want to commit patricide, go ahead. I doubt it would change anything.”

“Patricide?” Thor was confused for a moment, but it flashed back to ire. “My father has not seen Loki in years! That-” Thor waved his free hand in the general direction of where they had come, lacking the words to sum up the vast wrongness that was Loki's catatonia. When he spoke next his voice was strangled with sorrow. “That is not his doing!”

“You're right. Odin didn’t make him like that. At least not directly,” Tony said, his chill subduing Thor's fire. Confusion was quickly becoming Thor’s default emotion, and his wide eyes beseeched Tony to explain. Distantly, Tony thought that Loki would be distraught if he knew that Tony was telling Thor about what the god perceived as weakness, but... Tony couldn't say he felt too conflicted about it. It was a paltry transgression in comparison to what Loki had done. So Tony continued, willing to tell Thor exactly what had happened to his brother. “That, what you just saw, is the product of seven years spent inside of an empty void.”

Horror crumpled Thor's features. “By the nines...” He swore, voice like gravel. “We had thought Loki to be dead. We didn’t...” Guilt mixed into the despair. “I never thought that he could be trapped in there still alive.”

It was obvious that Loki’s plea of ‘you should have come for me’ now made horrible sense to Thor, and as irrational as it was, he felt culpable. Soothing that regret, however, was not Tony's job. He refused to offer meaningless statements of comfort, and when he continued speaking, he did nothing
to soften the blow. “I was the one that found Loki when he fell out of the void, and I've been looking out for him ever since. Anything you see now—all of those details that are glaringly wrong—is nothing compared to before. He spent weeks looking like a corpse. He was starved and catatonic.”

Each word was like one of Loki's ice spears, sliding mercilessly into Thor's heart. Mjolnir slipped from slack fingers, and if Tony thought the god would do something dramatic before, that was nothing compared to now. He was sure that if he wasn't providing information the god would have hightailed it to his brother already. Tony was unmoved by the god's distress. If anything, he only became more vindictive. “It was weeks until he was finally cognizant enough to talk, and once he was lucid, he couldn’t even look out the windows without having a fit.” The memory burned, and so did the fear that meeting Thor could have pushed Loki back to that point. It may be a selfish thing to think, but Tony just couldn't go through that again. “You think he looks bad right now? That’s nothing.”

The last word rung loudly, and Thor flinched. He had to open and close his mouth a few times before he could manage to reiterate, “I didn’t know.” The way in which he said it told Tony that it wasn't said to relieve the god of his guilt, but to punish him because he didn’t know; he should have known.

“No one did,” Tony replied bluntly. “But it happened, and there are consequences. Loki isn’t the same person he was, Thor, and he never will be. You need to accept that.” Loki too needed to accept that there was no going back. The only way was forwards.

“I…” Thor stumbled over his words, out his depth. Tony knew this was nothing like he had been expecting (it certainly hadn’t happened the way Tony had thought it would). The God of Thunder had come to take his brother home, to battle if need be, and then everything would be right again; it was a naïve dream. “Loki is still my brother. He shall come back home with me. We can help him,” the god insisted desperately.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Tony said, throwing the god’s previous words back at him. “If you make him go back there, he will never recover. Loki will remain broken and insane. Is that what you really want to do to him? Do you ‘love’ him so much that you’d ruin him?” Tony hadn’t meant them to, but his words paralleled the burning question he needed to ask Loki: did Loki ‘love’ Tony so much that he’d betray him? If that was love, then it was selfish and vile, and Tony wanted no part of it.

And yet, here he was, defending Loki despite that. It would be easy to let Thor whisk the god away, to run away from his problems and never look back, but Tony couldn’t. Maybe once upon a time he would have been content with that, but no matter how angry he was, Tony couldn't do that to Loki.

“Do not make mockery of my love for my brother!” Thor roared, his hammer flying back into his hand. “I only wish to do what is best for him!”

“No you don’t,” Tony denied, unconcerned in the face of the god’s anger. If he was going to get smashed the god would have done it already. “You want what’s best for you and think by extension it must be what’s best for him,” he accused, bearing the full brunt of Thor’s glare. “Let me give you a bit of a reality check: it isn’t.”

“The same goes for you, Loki,’ Tony thought bitterly, as if the catatonic god could hear him. ‘I don’t want to live forever. You were selfish, and you know it.’

Loki, unsurprisingly, was silent.

Thor too said nothing for a long time. His expression warred between outraged and contrite, his pride
unwilling to bend in the face of reason. But eventually, that pride fell, and his shoulders slumped under the weight of his choices. With heavy steps, the god made his way to where Tony stood, and as he drew even he admitted, “Loki’s well-being is not my only concern, though I wish it were. He has committed foul crimes against Asgard, and as king, it is my responsibility to make sure he is properly punished.”

Tony, who had begun to walk when Thor did, stumbled slightly in shock. King? He shot the god a bewildered look, but Thor was contemplating the ground with a pensive frown and did not notice. Thor was the king of Asgard? Loki had been adamant that it was his father they would ultimately have to contend with; neither of them even considered that Odin would have stepped down. Judging by Thor’s lack of reaction, the status change was not a recent development. If Loki’s brother was on the throne… Well, that simplified things at least. Although it also made this moment more dire than Tony had thought because opposing Thor would be the equivalent of waging war against Asgard.

The only viable course of action left to take was to ensure that Thor allowed Loki to remain on Earth. Tony would not let failure be an option. “Hasn’t he been punished enough?” he asked, mind racing to find any argument that would convince the god.

Thor’s pained expression said ‘yes’, but it wasn’t enough to convince him. “That is not my place to decide. Loki must be judged in Asgard. Though I wish to assist him, he is still bound by the laws.”

“Yeah, because nearly chopping his arm off counts as ‘assisting’ him…” Tony couldn’t help but mutter, thinking of the bone-deep gash in Loki’s arm after he had returned from the other realm. Just a month in Asgard had nearly killed the god; the thought of Loki spending the rest of his life locked away there—confined to a jail cell or worse—made Tony’s stomach clench. Someone torturing Loki was a harrowing thought on its own; combined with Loki’s instability, it was downright terrifying.

“Do not accuse me for things over which I had no control.” Thor growled, apparently well-versed in the story of Loki’s escape. “My countrymen may have been overzealous in their pursuit, but they were obeying our laws.”

“And those are the laws you want to subject your brother to? Who has, might I add, severe PTSD.” And probably a dozen other things Tony didn’t even know the term for. “Now I’m not a psychologist, but something tells me bringing him back there is a really bad idea. Like 'his brain will become a veggie' bad.”

“I don’t see what vegetables have to do with my brother's mentality,” Thor said. His confused expression would have been hilarious were it not for how serious their conversation was. As it was, the god shook off his incomprehension and got back on topic. “Loki is strong. He will endure the sentence the council gives him.”

“And if they decide to kill him? He’ll endure death, too?”

“I won't let that happen,” Thor responded confidently, and yet Tony could see the cracks appearing in the god’s resolve. It probably wasn't enough to get the god to forget about Loki's crimes completely, but Tony was sure if he kept needling he could at least secure more time.

“So you won’t let them kill him, but you're willing to let them ruin him?” Thor made to reply, but Tony cut him off. “No, listen to me. If Loki needs to appear before the court or whatever, fine. But if you make him go back there now, you will ruin him. There is no ‘if’ about it. Could you really live with that on your conscience?”

Thor looked stricken. “My brother must go back to Asgard. He will manage—"
“But he won’t!” Tony snapped, this time being the one to stop walking as he lost the tenuous grip on his emotions. “You don’t know him like I do! Not when he’s like this!” He paused, taking a deep breath to reign his emotions while his words sunk in. Then Tony spoke again, this time quietly. “I don’t know who Loki was before, nor do I really care. This is who he is now, and I won’t let you hurt him.”

“Then what would you have me do, Man of Metal?” Thor asked, not angrily but dejectedly. “Loki cannot hide from his crimes.”

“What I’m asking you to do is give him more time. Delay making him go back, even if only for a month. Give him time to recover and get used to the idea, and then he can go back with you.” Although Tony didn’t like the idea of Loki going back there at all, he wasn’t optimistic enough to think that there was a better option. No matter what they did, it would lead to disaster. That’s just how things were when the God of Chaos was involved.

“And give him time to flee somewhere so I can never see him again? I think not.”

Tony chuckled darkly. “Believe me, he’s not going anywhere. He’d not risk blanking out somewhere else.” Nor would Loki leave Tony behind, not after all the effort he put into deceiving the man.

Thor was still doubtful, so Tony tried one last time. “I promise that he won’t leave. Threaten me as collateral if you have to, but you have to give him more time.”

There was an idea in Tony’s statement—the undeniable fact that Loki would never let Tony get hurt for him—that contradicted all of the doubt festering inside. And yet it was not enough to stop the spread of betrayal, touching happy memories and perverting them into something bitter.

Tony pushed that aside and focused on the god who was staring intently at him as he mulled over the words. Those blue eyes dissected Tony’s every confliction, and he was relieved when Thor abandoned him to look back where they had come. When the god turned back to him, his lips were pressed firmly, and Tony felt dread creep up on him.

That fear dissipated when Thor bowed his head slightly in acquiescence. “Very well. I shall honor your request, Man of Metal. You have one month, but when I return my brother will come with me. I cannot pardon him anymore than that.”

Somewhere, an hourglass tipped over, and the first grain of sand fell to the gravity.

Tony swallowed loudly. “Alright. One month. But you will leave him with me.”

“Certainly,” Thor agreed readily. “There is no one else I would rather entrust my brother to.”

Staring back at the god, Tony decided that he liked Thor. He didn’t know what the god was normally like, but there was no doubt in his mind that Thor truly loved his brother. Despite his obligation to the throne, the god would try to do what was best for Loki, and that was enough to endear him to Tony. It also meant that there was far more to the story of the two brothers than Tony was aware. Something had to happen for them to feel so drastically different about one another... or maybe not. Because Tony believed that underneath all that fury, Loki loved Thor too. The opposite of love is indifference, after all—not hate.

More than that, talking to Thor made Tony curious about who Loki had been. What was a product of the void, and what had come before that? With someone who knew those answers right in front of him, Tony began to talk without thinking. “Your brother... what was he like? When he was younger and not as...” Broken. Jaded. Distrustful.
The abrupt change in topic threw Thor off for a moment, but his expression was quick to become wistful. “He was... mischievous and lively. Ever since he was a boy, he has been prone to pranks. They were never out of malice. It was simply who he was.” Sorrow overcame the god’s expression. “It wasn’t until recently, before he... let go, that he changed.”

“Why?” Tony ignored the niggling doubt that said it wasn't his place to talk about Loki behind the god's back.

Guilt made Thor look away, though Tony had no reason to judge him for events long past. “Loki was always different,” the god explained. “As we grew older, it became apparent that he wasn't like the rest of his peers, and as such he was often excluded. He had few friends... if any at all.”

“Because he's Jotun?” Tony asked, and the mere word alone had the power to make Thor flinch.

“No, I do not think so,” Thor said, though to Tony he did not sound sure of his own words. “Loki is different from them as well. He holds to no definitions but his own.”

Tony hummed in response, busy adding the information to the puzzle that was Loki’s mind. More questions came to mind, demanding to be asked, but this time he kept them to himself. Satiating his curiosity would be easy, but there was no point. While Thor could probably answer Tony’s random questions, they were meant for Loki. Nor would the God of Thunder be able to answer the most important questions, the ones that Tony’s mind constantly circled around: Why did Loki chose to force immortality on me? And why me? What makes me so special in his eyes?

Sensing that the conversation was over, Thor turned back towards the direction Loki was and said, “We should go back to my brother. After that I must return to my duties.”

Tony followed even though he didn't want to go back. Going back meant he had to see Loki. It meant he had to face the reality of what Loki had done. But he no longer had any reason to stay away. He got Loki one month, though what good that would do them he didn't know.

When Tony didn't reply quick enough, Thor glanced back over at him curiously. Tony shook off the dark emotions cluttering his mind—he didn't want to give the god any reason to decide that he really should take Loki back to Asgard—and smiled wanly despite the fact that the god couldn't see it. “Works for me,” Tony said, forcing his voice to be falsely chipper. He began the trek back, trying to ignore the uncertainty that increased with every step. When Thor was gone he could freak out. For now, he had to stay strong.

The god kept quiet as they walked, and Tony couldn't decide if that was a blessing or not. He craved a distraction, but they would undoubtedly end up on the topic of Loki. He ended up not saying a thing, and they arrived back at the clearing far too quickly. Only then was the silence broken by Thor's sorrowful, whispering murmur of, “Brother”.

Thor quickened his pace to arrive at Loki’s side- who, like Tony had said, remained untouched and lifeless where they had left him. Tony, on the other hand, stopped at the edge of the trees. He watched as Thor stood over his brother's still form, gazing down at Loki's slack face and closed eyes. Devastated, the god's lips moved as he whispered to his brother, but Tony could not hear the words. Instead the god's actions spoke for themselves; Thor went to his knees, setting his hammer aside to reach out tentatively to his brother. His hand hovered Loki's pale skin, and when Thor brushed his fingers against the god's cheek, he did not stir at all.

This time when Thor spoke to his unconscious brother, his words were loud enough for Tony to hear. “I am truly sorry, brother.” Thor threaded his fingers through Loki's long hair with a look of anguish. “For so long you were alone while I had no idea that such a cruel fate had befallen you.”
His hand pulled away, and his fist clenched. Voice heavy with determination, the god vowed, “I promise that I will protect you this time.”

With one final look at his brother—his empty, wretched brother who was crushed beneath the merciless brunt of the world—Thor collected his hammer and got to his feet. If the god's eyes were a bit watery... well, Tony pretended that he didn't notice.

Thor turned to face him, somehow managing to look both regal and hopeless. “I will take my leave of you. But before I go...” His gaze darted down to Loki then dragged back up to Tony. “I know my brother did you wrong”—hell yeah he did Tony wrong. He tricked him, lied to him, betrayed him—“but I beseech you not to hate him for it.”

'Grand words from the guy who didn't even know his brother was alive until a month ago,' Tony thought with vehemence. He was furious at Loki; the inferno in his chest made his previous frustrations at the god seem cold in comparison. This anger was not one that could be put out with pretty words and tokens. “Yeah, sure. Whatever,” he replied flippantly, wanting Thor to just leave already.

Thor, with his unnervingly clear blue eyes, saw all of that beneath Tony's mask. He was not so easily fooled—a necessary skill when your brother was a renowned liar. The god took a step forwards. “Man of Metal... Tony. You must understand: Aesir- Jotun-live far longer than humans. Your life would have been nothing compared to his. I have no doubt that Loki only did this because you are extremely important to him. Be angry for his deception, but do not hate him for the love he has shown.”

It took Tony a moment to find his voice. “That is between Loki and I,” he said once again, in part because he honestly just did not know how else to answer. 'I'm not angry?' That was an obvious lie. 'Of course I don't hate him?' Those words were meaningless; Tony wasn't sure how to forgive Loki this time. He deflected the question with, “Don't you have a throne to warm or something?”

Thor frowned at him, but he backed off anyway. “All I ask is that you consider my words,” he stated, and then he lifted his hammer above his head and began to spin it. Before Thor flung himself into the air, he couldn't avoid looking at his brother one last time. His brow furrowed, and then the hammer's momentum became great enough to launch him into the sky. Mjolnir carried Thor away, leaving Tony alone with Loki.

After the Thunder God vanished on the horizon, Tony sighed and dragged himself over to the remaining god. He sat down beside Loki and stared at the deceivingly tranquil features. Dropping his head into his hands, the resulting clank contributing to his growing headache, Tony groaned, “You can never make things easy, can you? Jarvis, can you get a jet over here?” He chuckled lightly, feeling far from amused. “My teleporter is broken.”

“Certainly, sir.”

A month. That was how long he had. It was better than nothing, but... that definitely wasn't enough time. Already Tony could feel the month slipping away with each delay. The plane would take too long to get there. Loki would take too long to wake up. Tony didn't even want to think about how long it would take for them to sort through the whole apple mess; for all he knew, no time in the world could even fix it.

Trying not to focus on the impending deadline, Tony thought of things he could do. First things first, there were a few phone calls he had to make.
Through the Veil

"Whenever I'm alone with you,  
You make me feel like I'm hopeless.  
Voices in the darkness,  
Scream away my mental health.  
Can I ask a question,  
To help me save me from myself?

Sanity now and beyond me, I will always love you.  
However long I stay, I will always love you.  
Whatever words I say, I will always love you.  
There's no choice."

-Diary of a Madman by A Perfect Circle

The phone only rang once before Pepper picked up. “Tony?” She asked curiously, her tone both hesitant and pleased. “This is the second time you've called this month. Is something wrong?”

If Tony was being cliché and overdramatic, he’d say that Pep’s voice sounded like angels or something. Even if he wasn’t, he couldn’t deny the sheer relief that hearing her speak caused. He didn’t think he could do this alone. Just knowing he had someone to fall back on made him release his pent up breath. The noise that left him sound like a choked sob.

“Tony?” Pep repeated anxiously, realizing that this wasn’t a social call. “What is it? Are you hurt? Did something happen to Loki?” Each question found her tone getting more and more concerned, urging Tony to find the voice locked somewhere deep inside.

“No, we're...” he began, but then he trailed off before he could answer with the habitual ‘fine’. Because they weren’t fine, were they? Loki had yet to reboot, and Tony had no idea what he was doing.

“You're what?”

‘Fucked up beyond all reason,’ Tony’s mind unhelpfully answered. To Pepper, he said, “I don’t know what to do.” Which seemed to be a trend as of late; Loki had a knack for getting them both into unprecedented situations, and it was Pepper—beautiful, supportive Pepper—who was always there to help Tony make sense of things again. But how was she supposed to fix things this time? He wasn't even sure if things could be fixed.

There was shuffling on the other end of the line, the background noise fading away as Pepper relocated to somewhere more private. Once it was quiet, she demanded, “Tell me what’s going on from the beginning.”

“The beginning?” Everything melded together. Tony couldn't pinpoint when things had started to go wrong. Or maybe things have been wrong since day one. “Alright, I can do that.” He took a deep breath. “It all started on one of the worst Mondays ever. I was flying home when a god fell out of the sky—”

“Tony.” Pepper interrupted him. “Don’t try to dance around the topic. You were the one that called
me, so talk.” Despite her words, she didn’t sound annoyed with his usual avoidance tactics; Tony wouldn’t be surprised if he found her name listed under ‘concerned’ in a dictionary.

“Just keep listening,” Tony insisted, and once she fell silent, he continued. “Anyway, I felt guilty for not catching him in time, so I had the ridiculous notion that I should be the one to help him get better.” ‘And what a good job I’ve done with that,’ Tony thought bitterly. Yet… he didn’t regret his decision. “I had no idea what I had just committed to, but it didn’t matter. Even before I knew the man’s name he was important to me. I thought maybe that would change when he woke up; the feeling just intensified. He’s Loki, and he fit so seamlessly into my life that I...”

Tony trailed off, words failing to express the emotion the god had evoked. There was no defining moment Tony could point at and say, ‘This is when the stranger I swore to help became my best friend.’ One thing flowed into the next until it was hard to remember what life had been like pre-Loki. But there was one thing that was undeniable. Tony swallowed, then spoke one of the most truthful statements that had ever passed his lips. “I realized that I wanted him around for the rest of my life, because I couldn't picture a future without him around.” Without Loki’s witty snark and brilliant mind. Without his amusing pranks and refreshing creativity. Without all of those little things that made the god so unique, and Tony loved him.

“I began to forget that he was damaged. Broken pieces or not, he was simply 'Loki' to me. Who he was before was inconsequential, and I didn’t think much about his past. But while I didn't think about it, he never forgot it... and it never forgot him.”

“Does this have to do with him going to Asgard?” Pepper asked, starting to catch on to what Tony was trying to say. “Tony, you just need to give him more time.”

He couldn’t help it; he snorted derisively. He had tried giving Loki more time, and look where it got him. But that was his fault, not Pepper’s. She didn’t know the god like he did—hell, it seemed that even Tony didn’t know Loki as well as he thought he did. So instead of unleashing his ire on the unsuspecting Pepper, he reigned it back in. Trying to keep his voice stable, Tony pushed forwards. “I did give him time, but there’s more to the story than that. You see, Loki too had become used to the idea that we would always be together. Which would have been fine except for one key detail: Loki’s immortal. The rest of my natural lifespan would have passed by in the blink of an eye for him.”

And damn it, Tony couldn’t deny that it made sense in a twisted sort of way. If he was Loki, he'd surely have felt the same desperation. However, Tony would never have lied to make it happen. He wouldn't have done it behind his friend’s back. Nonetheless, Tony hated that he understood where Loki was coming from. It kept him bouncing between outrage and sympathy, never letting his mind settle. Tony’s voice wavered. “Loki tried to not think about the difference in our mortality, but New York changed things. I nearly died, and he couldn't do anything about it.”

“Tony,” Pepper interrupted, sounding beyond concerned by this point. “What are you trying to say? Just tell me.”

Tony shook his head although Pepper couldn’t see it. He couldn’t speak the truth, not yet. He felt like if he actually talked about it there would be no going back. It’d become permanent, more so than it already was. Instead, he continued his roundabout story. “Terrified that I could die, Loki did the only thing he could think of. He traveled back to Asgard and risked his life to make sure such a close call could never happen again. He didn't care about the consequences because he thought the end result would be worth it. He didn't stop to consider that maybe what he was doing was wrong. When he finally came back home, I was upset with him. He ditched me for a stupid plan, and I didn’t understand why. Nor could I understand why he came back acting strangely. It was as if he was
hiding something from me. I thought I could trust him, and he thought he was doing what he had to... We were both wrong.”

“What did he do?” Pepper repeated; Tony imagined that she was at the edge of her seat, ready to fly across the country and shake the answers out of him.

So of course Tony didn’t answer, responding with a question of his own. “What would you do if you could live forever?”

“Don’t change the subject on me.”

“Just answer the question. What would you do?” He didn’t know why he needed to hear her answer so badly, but he did.

She sighed but seemed to accept that they were going to do this his way. “I don’t know. I’d travel around the world and learn new things, I guess. I still don’t understand how this is relevant.”

Tony took a deep breath. “What would you do... if I said I could live forever? Or at least a damn long time.”

Pepper didn’t reply. Tony wished he could see her face and tell what she was thinking, but he had nothing to go on. He guessed it was better this way. If he saw horror on her face, he didn’t think he could ever get the answer out. Even then, it took Tony a minute to summon up the courage, to push aside any fear of Pepper’s response. Then before he could reconsider, he told her as plainly as he could, “Loki made me immortal.”

Pep remained silent for a moment—this time stunned instead of confused—and then came the disbelieving response of, “Tony, that’s not-”

“You’ve seen him do magic. You know he’s capable of things like that.”

“But making you immortal? How? When?”

“He… I…” The words would not come. “Why don’t I finish that story?” he ended up saying. Pepper started objecting, but he went on ahead. “When Loki went back to Asgard, he didn’t just pick up a few books. He stole a magical apple that could bestow immortality upon those who ate it. All he had to do was get his friend to eat the apple, and he would no longer have to worry about being left behind. But instead of asking for permission, he decided to trick his friend”—Tony couldn’t use ‘I’ in that instance or it would make it too personal—“into eating it.”

Pepper gasped softly, but Tony was thankful that she held back any indignation or meaningless comforts. If she interrupted him now, he wouldn’t be able to keep going.

“Loki thought that he could act as if nothing happened and wouldn’t have to take responsibility for his actions.” Just like once upon a time, before a great man died in a cave, Tony had also neglected accountability. Then reality came for him, just as it had Loki. “But Loki made mistakes—a lot of mistakes—and they were all coming back for him. Thor came, and Loki could no longer avoid the truth. They started talking about some ‘apple’, and Loki was freaking out so I tried to understand what was going on. I hadn’t realized...” Tony wasn’t sure what to say next. ‘That I had been betrayed’? ‘That I put my trust in the wrong person’? ‘That I underestimated Loki’s conceit’?

“You didn't realize that he had lied to you.” Pepper answered for him, and Tony found himself nodding raggedly even though she couldn’t see the action.

“I know he thought he was doing what was right, but he was wrong. It’s like... It’s like Obadiah all
over again,” Tony confessed.

There was a beat of silence, and then the other end of the line exploded into activity. Faint beeps could be heard as Pep typed something on her phone, and he could hear a chair slide across the ground as she stood. His momentary confusion was lifted when she announced, “I’m flying over there.”


Pepper’s hurried typing didn’t cease, and Tony could envision her disapproving frown. “Tony, you don’t need to do things alone. I’ll fly over, and we can work through this together.” Her tone said she wouldn’t be swayed otherwise, but that didn’t keep Tony from trying— even if he did want her to help shoulder some of the burden.

“You’re busy. I can figure this out myself.” Pep made an unconvinced ‘uh-huh’ sound, and Tony scrambled for another excuse. “Besides, Loki might be unstable when he wakes up. I don’t want you to risk yourself.”

“I’ll be fine. You, on the other hand, are not. Let me help you.”

“But—”

“Anthony, be quiet,” Pepper interjected, and Tony snapped his jaw shut. “I have already canceled all of my meetings, and a jet is on its way to pick me up. I’m coming over there regardless of what you say. And in the meantime, you can tell me exactly what this whole immortality thing is about.”

The breath Tony heaved was more relief than defeat, and he let the argument drop. However, he was also ready to let the entire conversation drop; he had reached his ‘talk about my problems’ quota for the day. Heart to heart conversations weren’t his things, unless it was Loki’s problems they were talking about. Seeing as how Loki was the problem this time, Tony wasn’t too enthused about continuing. “I’m not completely sure what they—Loki and Thor—mean by ‘immortal’. Longevity, definitely, but any more than that I’m not sure. I was going to call Bruce and ask if he could take a look at some blood samples, see if normal science can figure something out.”

Tony was holding onto the futile hope that maybe science could fix what magic had wrought. He doubted it, but he was also desperate for an out. What Loki had done was not something Tony would have chosen for himself—at least not like this—and being trapped was a close second in things he hated. Betrayal was the first.

“Tony,” Pepper said warningly, knowing an escape attempt when she heard one.

“We’ll talk when you get here,” Tony promised. “Just... Not right now.” He called Pep as soon as he got home. Now he needed some time to collect his thoughts.

“Fine. But you're going to tell me everything.”

“I will.”

Pepper sighed. “I really think we should talk about this now, but I understand if you need some alone time. I'll see you in a few hours. Tony, be safe until then.”

“Yeah. And Pep?” He asked, and she hummed to show she was listening. “Thank you, really.”

“That's what friends are for,” she answered simply. “Goodbye, Tony.”
“Goodbye.”

When the line went dead, Tony let out the ragged breath he had been holding. There was a clatter as the phone dropped from slack fingers (it wasn't often Tony used an actual phone instead of Jarvis, but he had to admit that there was something ameliorating about having the device in his hand) and he slumped into the couch. Before he made the next call in line, Tony willed his heart to stop pounding beneath the arc reactor. Each rapid pulse sucked the energy right out of him, leaving him a mere husk. It took far too long for him to gather enough strength to speak, let alone pick the phone back off the floor. He left it where it had fallen.

“Alright, Jarv. Patch a call through to Bruce.” This time the phone rang through three times before it was connected.

“What do you need, Tony?” Bruce intoned distractedly; there was rummaging in the background.

“Aww, is that any way to talk to your science bro?” Tony joked, impressed with how normal he sounded. Still, Bruce was a lot like Pepper; he picks up on the emotions that people want to hide.

“What happened? Did somebody get hurt?”

“Calm down, big guy. It’s nothing like that,” Tony said, wishing he could follow his own advice and calm the hell down. His fingers drummed erratically against the white pleather of his sofa. “I just need you to review a few blood samples for me. Nothing major.”

“Tony, you know I’m not that kind of doctor,” Bruce replied exasperatedly. “If you’re having a problem, you should get someone with a doctorate in medical science.”

“I know, but this is different. You know how I mentioned that magic emitted a sort of radiation? That’s what I want you to look for.”

“In your blood? Or Loki’s?” Bruce asked, curiosity piqued.

“Mine.”

“I'll take a look for you, but I’m not really sure what results you'll get.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Tony assured, since even he wasn’t sure what he wanted Bruce to find. “I’ll have someone fly them over to you this evening.”

“I’m working on an energy conversion project for SHIELD, so it might take me a few days,” Bruce warned.

“No problem.” Tony had an eternity, after all. “Thanks.” He ended the call, a bit surprised at how polite he was being. Too polite actually; he’d have to fix that. There was only one last person he had to talk to, and Tony would be lying if he said he has lost sleep over pissing Fury off. “Kay, last one buddy. Tell Captain Hook that the council can get that stick out of their asses. Thor won’t be walking down the middle of roads anymore, so everyone can sleep easy now.” Everyone but Tony.

“Would you like me to relay the message with or without the sarcasm, sir?” Jarvis intoned in his perpetually mocking British accent.

“With, if you’d be so kind,” Tony drawled from the couch. “And if he wants more information, tell him to suck it up. We did what he asked, and I sure as hell am not doing more.”

Once the situation had settled, Tony was sure he'd make a full report—SHIELD was a powerful ally
to have, after all—but right now he couldn't do it. Fury may have been trying to keep Loki from Thor, but that didn't change the fact that the director ultimately pressured Loki into pursuing his stupid plan. Of course, had they not gone Tony wouldn’t have found out about the apple. Somehow, he felt like ignorance would have actually been a blessing.

“Yes, sir. Would that be all for this evening?”

“Open a new project file in the lab. I’ll get down there to work on something… in a bit.” First he had to get himself off the couch and down the stairs, which seemed a far more daunting task than it should have.

The AI complied, leaving Tony on his own again. It was strange that before, he hadn't seen the emptiness of his home as lonely. He had delighted in privacy, and the people who filled the building were as superficial as the furniture. Only his lab had been considered home, if just barely. But when Loki came, the partying stopped, and the house felt more alive because of it. Activity spread beyond the lab, and Tony became used to the bickering and meowing and joking. He had forgotten what silence had felt like; more than that, he had forgotten why he had preferred silence in the first place.

Eventually, that pervasive quiet drove Tony from the couch and into the lab, where the whirr of machines could fill the empty space. Unlike people, his robots were predictable; they would always do what they've always done. Tony could trust that they would never deceive him. “Come on, Dum-E!” He called, making the robot chirp excitedly. “Let’s go work on something.”

‘Something’ ended up being the base diagram of another Iron Man suit. Tony wasn’t quite sure which number it was (fifty-three designed, forty-six built), but there was no harm in being prepared. That was the excuse he gave himself for designing so many, at least; recent events kept showing Tony that no matter how many he built, he would always be a step behind. It didn’t stop him from trying.

This time, he decided to abandon practicality for pure force, making a machine that was darkly reminiscent of the Iron Monger. If built it would tower over his other suits, which was fitting for the name he gave it. Armed with liquid nitrogen jets, the Frost Giant was unlike anything he had built before. Tony wasn’t one to consider science an ‘art’, but Mark Fifty-three was undeniably a mechanical representation of a certain temperamental god. He even added the patterns that had adorned Loki's blue skin.

Tony was on the verge of scrapping the Frost Giant blueprints when Jarvis announced that Pepper had arrived. He dragged the design from the screen to the virtual trashcan, and then he paused. The file oscillated back and forth from the trash to the desktop until finally Tony deposited it back onto the main screen with a sigh. He saved it to an obscure folder, hoping that he would eventually forget about it.

Soft rapping drew Tony's attention, and he looked over to see Pepper's smiling softly from the other side of the glass wall. He gave her a stinted wave as she entered the code, and when she walked in he let the limb fall limply to his side. “Oh Tony,” Pepper said, bee-lining straight for him. The instant she was within reach, she threw her arms around his shoulders, pulling him close. At first, Tony stood ridged in her hold, but then he allowed himself to steal a few seconds of comfort. He relaxed into her, letting her carry some of the weight. “Tell me everything,” Pep ordered.

Tony did.

-L-o-o-o-

Loki woke on the fourth day. Tony had been eating dinner with Pepper (after she forced the details
from him, she refused to leave until Loki woke up. She worried that Tony would ‘drink himself senseless and do something unbelievably stupid for someone with such a high IQ’) when the screaming started. One moment they had been joking about something insignificant, and the next a bloodcurdling screech echoed from down the hall like an air-raid siren. Startled by the sound, Pepper dropped her wine glass; the sound of it shattering against the tile was drowned out by Loki’s wail.

“Shit!” Tony cursed, jumping to his feet and sending his chair clattering across the floor. Dinner was left abandoned as he raced down the hall, world narrowing into a single point: Loki. Whipping around the corner, he skidded to a halt at the same time he reached for the door handle. A loud screech drilled into his ears, increasing in volume as he yanked the door open. Coro tore out of the room, hackles bristling and his tail tucked, as Tony rushed in. His attention was immediately drawn to the god tangled the bed sheets, struggling against them as if they were vicious beasts. Tony’s brain didn’t catch up until he was at the bed, pressing all of his weight down on the god’s shoulders to keep him from flinging himself around. “Loki!”

The god made a piteous moan in response, lashing out in his fright. The frantic blow collided with Tony's chest, knocking the air from his lungs and shoving him back. It took a second before he could breathe again—damn Loki hit hard—but then Tony shook it off; the god didn’t know what he was doing. That's when Tony remembered, just as he was about to throw himself back into the fray.

“Should not have done what?”

“Nothing. It is of no consequence to you.”

‘He lied to me,’ Tony thought, freezing in place. Loki’s panic reached a fever pitch, but Tony did not move. It was like a physics equation: the force of ‘I love him’ was equal to the force of ‘he betrayed me’ and the object remained at rest. It wasn’t until an outside force acted that Tony did something other than watch as Loki battled futilely against the monsters locked inside his mind.

“Tony, do something! He’s going to hurt himself!” Pepper shouted from the doorway, looking between the two with an aghast expression; Loki continued to screech while Tony stared at her with wide-eyes. It wasn't until Pep took a step inside of the room, nervously but determinedly inching towards the god, that Tony got over his indecision.

“Stay over there,” he ordered as he lunged forwards, grabbing onto the god’s wrists and pushing him back against the bed. “Loki!” He shouted harshly, practically draping himself on top of the god to hold him down. “Cut it out, will you? Thor’s gone!”

Loki’s wail faded into a low keen and then silence. His struggling slowed until his muscles were doing nothing more than twitching and trembling Uselessly. It took a little bit longer for the god’s roving eyes to focus on Tony, but when they did, Loki finally stopped trying to pull free of Tony's grasp. He let out a shuddering breath and slumped back against the bed. “Tony,” he murmured, twisting one of his hands around to grip at Tony’s wrist. He took deep breaths, grounding himself, and his blazing green eyes locked with Tony's own.

This was the part where Tony would smile at the god, tell him it was okay and give him something else to focus on. He would lead Loki to the living room so they could battle their nightmares on the couch, armed with a cheap movie and stale popcorn. The smile Tony gave Loki now was a grimace, and not a single word of comfort came to his lips. Loki looked to him for reassurance, and Tony offered none. Even with Pepper's disappointed stare bearing down on him he could not bring himself to lie.

The relief in Loki’s expression faded into confusion at Tony's cold glare. The god opened his mouth as if to ask why, but then his eyes widened in realization and horror.
'You have no right to look scared,' Tony thought. 'Not when this is your fault.'

“Tony,” Loki said again, this time pleadingly. His hand gripped Tony's tighter while the other reached for the man's left wrist; Tony didn't let him grab it. He yanked his arm out of reach and pulled the other one free of Loki's quivering hand. The god let him go, devastated eyes following Tony's hasty retreat from the bed. One of Loki's hands hung awkwardly in the air, unconsciously reaching forwards to pull Tony back, before fluttering back down.

Under Tony's unforgiving gaze, Loki pulled himself into a sitting position, his mouth pressed into a thin line. Whatever he had been about to say—whatever useless words of apology he had prepared to offer—never came.

It was Pepper who spoke next, startling both Loki and Tony. “I uh… forgot I had a phone call to make,” she said awkwardly, shuffling back out through the open door. “I'll be outside if either of you me.” She shot Tony a look that clearly said ‘don’t screw things up’ before she turned and scurried from the tension that permeated the room. As her footsteps faded down the hall, Tony had to resist the urge to call her back. Loki's mere presence was like lead pressing down on him.

The god himself hadn’t shifted from his spot on the bed, entire body statuesque. When Tony turned back to stare at him, he couldn't even see the rise and fall of Loki's chest. Tony would have been content to imitate Loki, retreat into a stasis so they didn't have to talk, but he could not forget the deadline. There wasn't time to dance around the topic and give each other the silent treatment.

“Your brother went back to Asgard,” Tony announced, inspecting the wall just above Loki’s head. “He gave us one month, but then he'll return.” His eyes flickered down for just a moment, long enough to see the terror that descended upon the god. “He intends to have you tried before the council,” Tony continued, watching as each word made Loki more tense before a blank mask absorbed the fear. Loki's expression showed nothing, but that in itself was far more telling.

Tony waited for the god to say something, anything, but Loki's mouth remained firmly closed. The god stared at the corner, refusing to even make eye contact. Tony growled. “Just because you don’t say something doesn’t mean it’s going to go away.”

Loki scowled, but Tony’s statement did prompt him into speaking. “I know,” he said, but no other words were forthcoming. The god's hand twisted the bed sheet, giving his anxiety away just as Tony's fidgeting gave away his own. If given the chance, Loki would probably sequester himself away to some secluded corner and never move from it again- either that, or he'd run away. Tony wasn’t going to give him the opportunity to do either of those things.

“Then stop ignoring me and explain yourself.”

Loki’s eyes darted to Tony’s face for a split second before going right back to the wall. “I’m not ignoring you.”

“Really? Then why don’t you answer the other half, huh? Or is that hearing of yours actually not all that great?”

Tony’s harsh words just pushed Loki deeper and deeper into himself, and once again the god said nothing.

Tony snarled in frustration. “Fine, have it your way. I’ll be in the living room when you’re ready to stop being so selfish and cowardly.” He didn't look back as he spun on his heel and stormed from the room. As he passed the door, he failed to resist the impulse to slam it shut, and the resulting bang hounded him down the hall. On the way to the living room, he passed by the kitchen, with its
overturned chair and glass strewn across the floor; he ignored the destruction and kept moving.

Upon entering the lounge, his eyes fell upon the only window that was not covered. Pepper was standing on the other side of the door, talking on her phone. The second Tony came into view, she looked up and met his eyes through the glass. Pep frowned slightly as she said something to the person on the other line, then she pulled the device away from her ear. ‘Are you okay?’ She mouthed, thumb posed over the disconnect button. Tony wasn’t; he nodded at her and gave an exaggerated thumbs up. Unsurprisingly, Pep was not at all convinced. 'Should I come inside?' She asked, and while Tony wanted the answer to be ‘yes’ he shook his head. He needed to talk to Loki alone. Pepper nodded in understanding and went back to her call, although she glanced at him continuously as she paced on the driveway.

It only took a minute of standing alone in the middle of the room before Tony began to pace as well. His eyes were drawn to the hall Loki was supposed to be coming from, yet the god did not show. The man's feet led him to the side of the house that overlooked the cliff, but the spot in which Tony would normally stand to watch the sea was obscured by thick green fabric. Looking at the curtains, a mask for the outside world, he grew even more incensed.

With a snarl, Tony reached up and ripped the closest curtain from the wall. The bar holding it up—never intended to stay for long—yielded easily, tearing loose and crashing to the ground. Emerald fabric pooled on the floor, and sunlight streamed in for the first time in over a year. Tony glared at the darkening blue sky.

Just tearing down the one wasn’t good enough; Tony stalked to the next one and tore it down with the same fervor. And then he went to the next. And the next. He was yanking at the sixth (or maybe seventh, he wasn’t really counting) curtain when he heard light footsteps come up behind him. Tony arrested the movement, muscles taut as his arm froze mid-pull, but did not turn around.

The footsteps stopped with a considerable distance still between them, and then there was quiet—harsh, oppressive quiet. Loki caved first. “I hadn’t realized you disliked the curtains so much,” he mused, voice monotone except for the smallest trace of sorrow. “Maybe you should have gone with red.”

Tony responded by finishing what he had started: the curtain rod clattered loudly on the floor, leaving Tony with a fistful of green fabric. He scowled at it before letting it too drop. “Maybe I should have. It’s a far nicer color than green after all.” With that said, he reached for the next curtain in line. Before he could grab the fabric an invisible force seized it an his place. Tony watched, stunned, as it was tossed to the ground along with the other remaining curtains. He spun around to face Loki as the clamor died down. The god stood across the room, one arm raised and glowing with the fading remnants of magic.

"Then let me get rid of them for you,” Loki murmured. Another wave of his hand and the mounds of fabric disappeared. Tony glared at him, itching to smash something. The god got rid of his stress relief, so Tony let his anger out the other way: with cruel words and acrimonious accusations.

“If you’re feeling so charitable today, why don’t you get rid of your little gift while you’re at it?” Tony asked bitterly, standing tall and staring the god down. It was only because he was watching so closely that he noticed the barest twitch of Loki’s eye and downturn of his mouth. He felt bad? Good. He should. “You remember it, don’t you? Or did you just not tell me because you forgot?”

Loki's face was like a kaleidoscope of emotions: despair, determination, guilt, indignation, and fear all shifting and warping. “I did not forget, just as you have not forgotten that I cannot undo it. You are immortal. That will not change.” Tony heard an unspoken assertion: ‘I won’t let it change’. His rage peaked. What right did Loki have to decide that for him?
“Are you even listening to yourself?” Tony shouted, gesturing viciously at the god. “Seriously, what the hell are you even thinking?”

Loki too reached a fever pitch, meeting fire with fire and blame with blame. “You nearly died! What else was I supposed to do? Just sit by and watch you risk your life?”

“Yes!” Tony shouted, and Loki’s eyes widened. “I’m not afraid of dying. I told you I’m not afraid of it, and yet you went behind my back and ‘fixed’ it anyway!”

Loki was taken aback for a moment, but then he laughed nervously. “You can’t be serious,” he said, smiling slightly as if to say ‘right?’. Tony wasn’t amused, and he glared through the fake smile until it retreated back into disgrace. Through frowning lips, Loki asked, “Why would you want to risk dying if you didn’t have to?”

“Because that’s normal!” Tony replied emphatically. “I’m human, and that’s what humans do! We die, Loki!” Dying was expected; it was something Tony resigned himself to. Being immortal, however, was an eternal sentence of uncertainty. After thinking about it for days, Tony decided that humans were not meant to live that long. It was frightening.

But apparently that wasn’t a fact Loki could accept. “But I made you better than that,” the god said. “You don’t have to die anymore.”

“You’re missing the point!” Tony snapped; it was like talking to a brick wall. “The world does not revolve around you. You do not decide what other people want. You do not decide what I want. Just because you are immortal does not mean you get to play God.”

“It was not my intention to harm you,” Loki said, his masks crumbling in the face of Tony’s anger. But along with the distress there was a glint of calculation; the god shifted tactics. “I just don’t want you to die. That’s all. I don’t want you to die.” Loki took a step forwards, every nuance of his body language begging for forgiveness; Tony wasn’t going to give it— not this time.

“Then congratulations, you got your wish. I’ll live forever. But there is a price for everything; is it worth it?” Tony didn’t need to elaborate on what that price was; Loki already knew what the consequences were. What Tony wanted to know was which price the god found payable: Asgard hunting them down, or Tony’s friendship. In the end, he may have paid both of them anyway. (Tony didn’t want their friendship to be the price.)

“Are you sure Thor went back to Asgard?” Loki asked, answering Tony’s doubt. The god was like him; the things that mattered most were the ones that often went unsaid.

It didn’t mean, however, that he welcomed the shift in subject. Tony wanted to shout and scream for Loki to see reason. Though he hated himself for it, Tony wanted a perfect little answer wrapped in a bow of lies. He wanted Loki to have a selfless, altruistic explanation for betraying him, one that could cool his rage. He wanted a way to forgive Loki. But the world didn’t care what he wanted. Loki could not give him a good excuse; the god had been selfish and nothing more. So it goes.

“We’re not finished with this,” Tony vowed. “I’m not giving you another free pass.” The last sliver of hope—the one that promised forgiveness—slipped away. He allowed the conversation (if one could call their shouting match that) to shift. “And yeah, I’m sure. He was pretty clear about it. He leaves you with me, and then he comes back in a month to take you to trial.” ‘Month’ being a relative term. It was actually twenty-six days and approximately ten hours until Tony’s deal expired. If there was a clock around, he’d know the exact minutes as well.
Loki—who Tony sacrificed so much for and got nothing in return—had the nerve to look betrayed. “You agreed to turn me in?” The insinuation that Loki had so little faith in him—whether Tony was apoplectic or not—burned.

“Not even close, princess,” Tony hissed, mutating the endearment into an accusation; little Loki thought the whole world revolved around him. “I agreed to the best choice we had. Otherwise you’d be locked up in a cell in Asgard right now. But if that’s what you want, I’m sure your brother would be more than happy to have you back early.”

The threat was hollow, but Loki did not perceive that; he tensed, eyes darting around the room as if he expected his brother to jump out of the growing shadows. “I won’t go back there,” the god asserted, but his trembling fingers revealed it to be mere bravado.

“You don’t have much of a choice,” Tony replied, once again picking resentment over comfort. “Run if you want to, but I won’t come with you.”

Loki was horrified. “Odin will sentence me to death,” he said, pleading for compassion. Tony remained unmoved, as frozen as the void within his chest.

“I guess it’s a good thing Odin isn’t king anymore.”

The god began to speak in protest, and then Tony's words actually registered. Shocked, he faltered into silence. When Loki regained his voice, he tentatively asked, “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Your big brother got himself a shiny new crown.” Despite the callousness of his words, Tony watched Loki’s reaction closely. He had acted with the assumption that Thor would be more lenient than Odin; if that wasn’t the case, then Tony would come up with something else. He wouldn’t abandon Loki.

But it seemed as if he made the right call; a glimmer of hope broke through Loki’s distress, and the god eased. “You are sure of this?” Loki asked, but the thoughtful look on his face showed that he was already reformulating his plans.

“Yeah,” Tony murmured, ignoring the sarcastic, biting comment that wanted to be said. Though his anger simmered, the god’s fear reminded him that the apple was not their only worry. Asgard was not something that could be forgotten, not when it could equal a death sentence.

Loki stared at Tony for a moment, and then he turned his head away in guilt. The god said nothing else, and neither did Tony. There was a lot the man wanted to say—he continually found himself on the verge of shouting at Loki: How could you be so selfish? Don’t you understand what you’ve done to me? I thought we were friends!—but the urge would fade and questions would peek through the cloak of ire: Are you okay? What should we do about Asgard? Please, why did you do it?

Before Tony could decide which set of questions needed to be answered first, the uneasy silence was broken by the creak of an opening door. On edge, both Tony and Loki’s heads whipped around instantly, but it was just Pepper standing there. She hesitated momentarily under their scrutiny, but then she smiled disarmingly and strutted into the living room. “It was getting dark out there,” she said by way of explanation before focusing on Loki. “I’m glad you’re awake.” Pep smiled sincerely despite the fact that she knew the truth of the god's manipulation; Tony envied her that ability. “How are you feeling?”

Thrown by Pepper’s intervention, it took Loki longer than normal to reply. He shifted in place and glanced not so subtly at Tony, most likely replaying their heated argument in his mind. But then he decided to take the escape presented to him, hiding behind his usual charm. “I’m fine given the
circumstance. My apologies for interrupting your dinner.”

Loki’s cordial attitude prickled Tony’s skin. Never before had he hated liars and masks so much. Pepper ignored his aggravated glare, and Loki tried to.

“Don’t worry about it. You could join us if you like,” Pepper offered, shooting Tony a pointed look. Loki too glanced over at him, but his look couldn’t be any more different than Pep’s. Where she was confident and strong, the god was lost and desperate. Tony could not give either of them what they wanted.

“Actually, I just got an awesome idea for a suit,” he lied. “You'll have to finish dinner without me.” The icy glare he sent Loki made it clear that the god was not permitted to join him.

Pepper turned to Loki, covering her unease with a charming smile, but he too wasn’t interested. “I find my appetite lacking, but thank you for the offer.” While he spoke, he stared at Tony, and this time the man stared back. They were locked in a silent battle of wills, neither wanting to back down. Pepper shifted on the sidelines, but neither of them paid attention to her.

When Loki vanished abruptly in an eddy of green tendrils, leaving Tony staring into empty space, the man started. For a moment Tony’s heart clambered up his throat. Loki had fled, and oh shit, what was he going to do now? He hadn't wanted-

A sharp whistle from Loki’s room derailed those thoughts, and Tony watched as Coro materialized from under the couch to flee around the corner. He was left staring dumbly after the cat, relief pitted against annoyance- at least until the fury reemerged.

Tony balled his fist, wishing there was something he could take his anger out on. Another curtain would be nice, but Loki made sure he didn't even have that. With a snarl, Tony swung his fist into the window pane behind him. It rattled loudly in protest but did not break. He pulled his arm back to do it again—adrenaline cloaked the pain ratcheting up from his knuckles—but a gentle hand on his shoulder restrained him. “Tony…” Pepper began, pulling him around to face her. “Everything will be okay. You'll be okay.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Tony retorted. She didn’t understand how much it hurt to be betrayed, especially the second time.

“But I understand how much he means to you,” Pepper said, and Tony realized he had accidentally spoken the jaded sentence out loud. She didn’t seem to mind, remaining calm and rational in the face of Tony’s enmity. “I’m not saying you can’t be angry at him, but don’t do anything you're going to regret.”

“I don’t think I’m the one you should be saying that to,” he growled. Regret: it was such a useless emotion when there was no way to fix the mistakes made.

Pepper just gave him a sad smile that said, ‘Of course I should. I know you, you fool.’ Then she patted his arm and stepped away. “Come on. Let’s finish dinner. It'll just be the two of us.” She moved towards the kitchen, but Tony did not follow. At her questioning look, he shook his head and stepped backwards.

“I’m not hungry anymore.” His stomach twisted at the very thought of food. Pepper’s hopeful expression fell, but Tony couldn’t help disappointing her; he took another step away. “I’ll uh…be downstairs if you need me for anything.”

If Pepper had something else to say, Tony didn’t stick around to listen. He turned on his heels and
fled down the stairs, leaving her abandoned in the living room. Trembling fingers punched in the access code, and Tony darted inside the lab as soon as the door opened. He leaned back against the glass wall, and when the door sealed shut with a click, he allowed his composure to slip. There was pressure building behind his eyes, and his head hung reminiscent of defeat.

With shaking legs Tony pushed away from the wall, hating how the glass made him feel so exposed, and staggered to the nearest chair. His hands gripped the top rail until his knuckles turned white, and he doubled over as if the mental mayhem was a physical blow. He stayed that way for a few minutes, just trying to breathe past the whirlwind. He focused on the cycle of inhale, exhale, repeat, trying to force everything else out of his mind. It wasn’t until Jarvis spoke up that he moved. “Sir? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he muttered halfheartedly, body slumped against the chair. Then he took a deep breath and straightened, the only indicator of his turmoil being the hand that continued to hold the upholstery in a death-grip. “I’m fine,” he repeated a bit more believably; it was still a lie.

But Jarvis did not challenge him. “If that is the case, sir, then I must inform you that Fury is requesting to speak with you.”

Tony growled under his breath. “Can it wait? I’m busy here.” Swift fingers pulled open his project files, but as he surfed through them, there wasn’t a single one he felt inspired to work on.

“He says it has to do with the Avengers.” When Tony took too long to make up his mind—lately a call from Fury meant a disaster, and he really didn't need more stress—Jarvis prompted, “Sir? He is requesting that you ‘open the damn line’.”

Tony sighed, spinning the chair around to fall into it. There should be a law restricting when the director can call: preferably never, but at the very least he shouldn’t be allowed to when Tony felt so exhausted. He'd work on lobbying for one. Until then, Fury would just keep calling until Tony picked up, or he would send someone (probably Steve) in his stead. “Whatever,” Tony conceded, digging his finger tips into the bridge of his nose. “Let’s see what he wants.” At the very least it would provide a distraction.
Battle in Philadelphia

"Help me if you can.
It's just that this, this is not the way I'm wired,
So could you please help me understand why,
You've given in to all these reckless dark desires?

You're lying to yourself again, suicidal imbecile.
Think about it, you're pounding on the fault line.
What'll it take to get it through to you precious?
I'm over this. Why do you wanna throw it away like this?
Such a mess. Why would I want to watch you?"

-The Outsider by A Perfect Circle

-o-o-o-

"-can’t you just fly over there and bomb his castle? It’d be more effective than trying to stop him after he’s run amok."

“The government is not always known for its efficiency. We almost have clearance to invade Latveria, but for now we need damage control.”

Loki burrowed deeper into the bed, shoving his ear into the pillow as if that’d actually drown out the voices from below or the roar from within. Choronzon huffed at him in annoyance and leaned in closer, but Loki rolled away; his tail flicked anxiously and he stood to pace back and forth. For hours he had tried to relax, but Tony’s lingering enmity ensured that Loki would know no rest. The god was too weary to do anything except listen to the man blow things up and bicker with Fury. The director had continued to call on and off throughout the night, demanding that Tony finish the Dragon Slayer. Each request was shot down; Tony couldn’t finish the device without an upgraded microchip from a Doombot. Yet Fury insisted that there was no time, proven in the culmination of their argument: now that day was breaking, so too was a city beneath the soldiers of Doom.

“Is anyone already there?”

“Hawkeye and Black Widow are working to secure the area and Captain America is on the way, but they’re outnumbered. Doom isn’t holding back, and we need you and Loki to shut them down.”

Mentioning the god resulted in engulfing silence, ending with the frigid reply, “Loki won’t be able to join us. And as I’ve already told you, there is nothing I can do without a damn microchip.”

“Then suit up and get your armored ass down there.” Tony must have done something in protest because Fury growled, “That wasn’t a request.”

“I’m going.” Loki listened to the whir of gears pulling an Iron Man suit out from the depths of the house. There was no reply from Fury; the call had ended. Only the sound of clicking metal remained, and Loki twitched with the impulse to go to Tony's side. Remembrance of the man's anger stilled the god. As repulsors activated, all he did was flop back down into the bed and tear at the comforter with his claws. Choronzon meowed at him and slunk away, giving up on trying to sleep with the anxious god nearby.

Loki laid there until the roar of Iron Man’s repulsors faded and the only remaining sound in the
house was Pepper speaking quietly on the phone a few rooms over. The god didn't even bother trying to use her as a distraction from the fears lurking in his mind. He shape-shifted as he rolled over again and reached for the tablet lying on his bedside. “Jarvis, where is Stark headed?” Loki asked, flicking the device on.

“Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Are you in need of his assistance, sir?”

“No. Pull up the news broadcast from the battle.”

The AI complied, and the screen filled with three different live reports. Loki took no delight in chaos presented to him: terrified humans ran through the streets, buildings went up in flames, and blood washed the pavement. Swarms of identical robots bore down on the fleeing crowds, and at the sight of those familiar silver masks, rage spread through Loki's veins. He could not allow himself to be angry at Tony for something that wasn't the man's fault, but Doom provided the perfect channel. Loki would make sure the human paid with his life before the god's own time ran out, and Thor-

He wasn't going to think about that. He wasn't. He wouldn't spoil his last days worrying about things he was powerless to change.

Pursued by his thoughts, Loki lurched to his feet. He couldn't stay here, and he knew the perfect place to go. His eyes skimmed the news feeds for a safe location to teleport to, and then he set the device down. Shimmering green cloaked him, leaving in its place leather and gold. “Sir, may I ask—” Jarvis began, but Loki didn't stick around to listen; his skin rippled with magic and he teleported away, landing on the outskirts of bedlam and flame. The reek of gun powder and oil mixed with the acrid scent of smoke, and the streets echoed with shouting and explosions. Loki took it all in from the top of a roof, the familiar sensations of battle dragging his attention away. The weapons of war on Midgard may have differed from those on Asgard, but in the end it was all the same.

Preoccupied with running for their lives, no one noticed the god's sudden appearance, and Loki was content to let it remain that way. Watching the Doombots off in the distance, a rudimentary plan came to mind— one that required the element of surprise. Otherwise, Loki would likely end up with half of his arm blown off and nothing to show for it.

In the blink of an eye, the god shifted into a hawk and propelled himself into the sky. No one paid attention to the lone bird as it circled overhead, observing the destruction from above. It wasn’t hard to pinpoint the center of the activity, where SHIELD and the local police had established a perimeter in a futile effort to contain the onslaught of metal men. Several robots rampaged outside of the zone, chasing after anything that moved. One such Doombot was heading closer to Loki's position, and the god banked towards it. He flew around his target, keeping his distance lest any stray bullets shatter his fragile bones. The Doombot, which was busy razing down an office building, didn't look up as Loki swooped closer. When the robot shifted its attention to a police barricade, firing missiles and scattering the humans like roaches, Loki made his move. He flew directly over the machine's back and, in a burst of green light, dropped from the sky.

Before the robot could register what was happening Loki landed on its back, digging his fingers in as the machine tilted sharply to the side. It tried to rotate its head around, but the god shoved his fist into the machine’s back and gripped the mass of wires within. Doom had no time to detonate his creation as Loki tore out the machine’s heart, reverting it back into useless scraps. The Doombot sputtered and died, and the god transformed back into a bird as the robot toppled towards the ground.

Microchip clutched in his talons, Loki sought out the nearest SHIELD agent. His magic act had caught the attention of a few people below him, who shouted and pointed, but Loki ignored them. He had more important things to worry about, such as the two Doombots that entered his peripheral vision; they were approaching one from each side, no longer fooled by his visage. As they got closer,
Loki veered away from the ground, unwilling to engage the humans in his battle. The machines copied his ascent, but both kept a safe distance as they began to shoot a mix of bullets and lightning arcs.

Despite his small size, Loki had to dodge frantically, pulling his wings in tight and diving out of the line of fire. But the god was not outmatched, not by a long shot. Loki was an anomaly Doom had not accounted for, and the man had no idea what an Asgardian was capable of. Higher and higher Loki flew, until the people below were just mere specks. Lured by the device that he clutched, the robots trailed after him with only a moment's hesitation. They fired intermittently, cautious of him but intent on their goal. Loki found the effort trivial; he was not limited to the skills of man.

High in the sky, Loki forced his form to change once again, but he didn't stop at the size of a human. He kept going until his magic strained under the effort of supporting a massive beast built of dense bone, emerald scales, and leathery wings. Those wings snapped out on either side, blotting out the sun, and Loki banked sharply. Tail slicing through the air and bullets ricocheting off of his thick hide, the dragon dived for the nearest Doombot. It tried to flee in vain; Loki was upon it in seconds, rending sheets of metal with razor teeth. Massive jaws clamped down on the robots head just as it exploded, but consumed with battle-lust, Loki shook off the pain.

Once upon a time, before the void and the truth, Loki would have ridiculed such callousness. He would not have risked injury or fought where everyone could see him. He would have been careful, plotting in the background and moving the enemy like puppets on a string. Now there was an almost maniacal urge to destroy within him. Last time he felt rage akin to what he felt now, Jotunheim burned, and Loki didn’t care what happened to him in the process.

When his jaw reconstructed itself, Loki bellowed loudly and spread his wings to launch back into the air. The exposed membrane was an easy target, and Loki roared louder as bullets passed through his wings. Air passed through oozing holes, making him tumble and flip. As Loki struggled to right himself, each hectic flap sending him spinning, he felt the microchip slip from his claws. Loki tried to regain control with renewed fervor, but the Doombot, confident now that the god was debilitated, drew closer. While Loki's body was well armored, his vulnerable wings were victim to gunfire. The pain increased with each second, but Loki was beyond caring; his time spent in the void taught him to long for something as sweet as pain.

Unable to heal himself, Loki continued to flounder in the sky; each useless flap found him getting closer and closer to the ground. As he spun, he caught sight of the microchip hurtling downwards and realized that he only had a few seconds until it got too far away. If it shattered, Loki doubted he'd be able to secure a second one.

A jet of flames spewed from the dragon's mouth, startling the Doombot. It stopped firing and retreated backwards, allowing for Loki's healing to finally kick in. The flesh of his wings knitted back together, and after a few more beats, he righted himself. Still breathing fire, the god spun around to attack the Doombot. This time when it shot at him, Loki pulled his wings in tight and let his momentum carry him towards the robot. His fire caught on the machine's cape, and the prosthetic skin around the metal began to melt. Blinded by dripping plastic, the Doombot emptied its artillery and then detonated, showering Loki in debris.

Surrounded by flames that reflected off of his scales, Loki dove towards the ground. Far below him, the microchip continued its descent, and the god angled towards it. However, fighting the Doombot had taken too much time; it was going to break. He went for it anyway, streamlining his body so he plunged quickly towards the ground. People screamed and pointed as he got closer, and a few police fired into the air, but their efforts were negligible. Lead bounced of Loki’s chest as he focused on the microchip, attempting in vain to catch up with it. He was still dozens of feet from it when it passed...
A red and gold blur shot across beneath the dragon, catching the tangle of wires mere feet from the ground. Loki flared his wings out and jolted to a stop as Iron Man landed on a nearby roof, glowing eyes emotionlessly taking in the scene before him. There was chaos below Loki, terrified humans darting through the streets and bullets buzzing past the god like flies. Loki ignored them as he hovered in the air, massive body casting a shadow across the emptying street below. His attention was given to the one human that mattered.

“For the love of god, stop shooting at him!” Tony shouted down at the police men, voice amplified from the suit. The panicking men obeyed, though they clutched their firearms tightly, and the lack of gunfire made the area seem abnormally silent. “Loki!” Tony barked, predictably directing his ire at the god next. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Even if his current form had vocal cords, Loki would not have spoken; the only sound he made was the whoosh of air that occurred every time he flapped his wings.

“Loki!” The man shouted again, seemingly uncaring about the disorder around them or the fact that Loki was a colossal beast; all he cared about was his hatred for the god, because Loki lied to him. Because Loki wanted to help him.

While Tony didn’t seem to care that there was a battle going on around them, their teammates did not share the sentiment. “Stark, what’s going on over there? We’ve gotten reports about some sort of monster showing up. Is that Loki?” Steve’s voice from Tony’s com was faint, at the edge of Loki’s hearing.

Tony’s response was much louder. “Yeah, it is. You might want to have a nice chat with the locals about shooting at our allies.”

Steve asked, “Is he hurt?” at the same time Romanov informed, “We’ve sent out a notice that Loki is one of us. Right now, we need both of you to assist in maintaining the perimeter.”

“Us ‘both’?” Tony asked, incredulous. “Loki is not fighting with us. He-”

A Doombot had been sneaking towards them as they spoke, trying to take advantage of Tony’s distraction. It drifted in behind the man, artificial eyes locked on the microchip that dangled, forgotten, from Tony’s hand, and raised its arm. Loki noticed and flared his wings; Tony cut himself off just as Loki lunged forwards, Jarvis’s voice informing Iron Man of the approaching danger, but the man reacted too slowly to protect himself.

The glow of the Doombot’s palm pulsed, on the verge of firing, when Loki spring-boarded off of the roof. Five tons of reptile slammed into the robot, throwing off its aim and sending the crackling lightning into the side of a building instead of Tony’s back. With a furious cry, Loki flung the machine into the pavement where it erupted into shrapnel.

Cement cracked beneath the god’s feet as he landed heavily on the roof across from Tony, adding pulverized rock to the filth that coated his scales. He shook out his wings as he turned to face the man, rearing his head up and towering over him. Loki stared down at Tony through slit pupils, drawing attention to his massive fangs by sweeping his tongue across them. Tony was thunderstruck, speechless in the face of Loki’s sheer size. The message was clear: Loki would not be trifled with, nor would he be underestimated. Not anymore.

Having seen what transpired from a rooftop blocks away, Agent Barton was the one to speak next. “It looks like Loki can more than handle himself. Would you please stop coddling him and get over
Tony's response was to toss the tangle of cords he held at Loki's feet and launch from the roof without another word. He flew in the direction of the other Avengers, not looking back as he set alight a Doombot that tried to get in his way.

While Loki wanted nothing more than to fight side by side with Tony, he understood that he was not welcome. Resisting the longing, he scooped up the discarded machine—which he had intended to gift Tony with—and flew into the air. Loki circled around for a moment, unsure of where to go other than away from Tony, when he noticed a few Doombots break away from Iron Man and head towards him. Realizing that they were still pursuing the microchip, Loki formulated another plan.

He glided down to Barton's perch and landed next to the stunned agent. The gust from his wings nearly knocked Barton over, and Loki clung to his fleeting amusement as the archer scrambled out of the way, swearing avidly. “Dude, what the hell? Get your own roof!”

Loki didn't answer, in the middle of transforming back into an Aesir, and the archer seemed torn between intrigue and nausea as the god's bone slipped and slid underneath his skin. Before the man could say something else, Loki tossed the Doombot's heart at him. Barton caught it without thinking, and he looked at it in confusion. “What is this?” He flipped it over and picked at the wires.

“A Doombot's central control chip. I wouldn't recommend damaging it,” Loki said as the archer tugged on a loose wire; Barton pulled his exploring hand back as if it had been burned.

“Why give it to me?”

The few robots that Loki had previously noted heading in his direction were hovering a few roofs away. Loki grinned at Barton, who shifted warily at the unexpected expression, and said, “Happy shooting.” Then, without warning, he teleported a block away, leaving Barton to glance about in surprise.

No longer kept at bay by Loki's presence, the Doombot's immediately headed in Barton's direction. The archer was not as easy pickings as they expected, and a flurry of arrows took two down in a minute. However, the Doombots had the numerical advantage, and the three remaining machines had split up to attack the archer. Loki watched as Barton was forced to retreat back across the roof until he was pressed against the edge with nowhere to go but the ground.

An instant later, Loki was back by his side, flinging spears of ice alongside arrows at the unsuspecting robots. The last one went down, and Loki looked on with satisfaction at the results of his trap. Barton, on the other hand, was breathing heavily, chock-full of adrenaline. After he recovered from his near-death experience, he reached over and shoved Loki; the god didn't budge. Barton scowled. “Tell me your plan next time, yeah?” Then he cracked a smile, and this time when he reached, over he gave Loki a friendly clap on the shoulder. “Underhanded tactics aside, glad you could join us. I've been dying to see what you could do in a battle. Though I'm surprised you aren't hanging around with Stark.”

Loki drew back, letting Barton's hand slip away. “Stark does not think I should be here,” he said, confusing the archer with his sudden change in attitude. Remembering he had an audience, Loki tried to hide his upset, but the damage was already done. Barton's gaze turned calculating.

“I think it's be stupid to not have you help out. You've taken out a good chunk of them already, and you just got here.” Barton's gaze slid over to where Loki knew Tony was destroying slews of robots with undivided ferocity. There was a conspicuous absence of comments from Iron Man's end, though Loki knew the man had to be listening. “Normally you're both chatting up the feed by this
“Point. You two fighting or something?”

“Something like that.”

“Clint,” Romanov said, voice tinged with a hint of desperation that drew Barton's attention. “We're getting hit hard over on Broad Street. I need you and Loki here right now.” There was a faint rumble coming from her end and screaming. “And I mean right now.”

Barton's expression hardened, and he looked towards Romanov's location; the sky was littered with robots and the ground was spewing fire. “Got it.” He looked back at Loki. “Can't you zap us over there or something?”

Loki too observed the horizon, and after a moment, he shook his head. Barton swore and reached towards his headset. “Damn it, there's not time for this. They might be able to send a plane for us...” Considering the sky was no-man's land, that plan was doubtful. Barton scanned the street below, and that's when Loki made up his mind. “Or we could borrow a car—”

“There's no need,” Loki interrupted, and at Barton's confused look, he began to shapeshift. The archer shouted in surprise, backpedaling on instinct, but he only made it two steps before Loki rushed forwards to catch the man in his claws. He lifted them both from the roof with a mighty sweep of his wings, causing Barton to cry out.

“Shit! Fuck man, let me down!” The archer clung desperately to Loki's forearm, but the god ignored him. Loki's attention was arrested by the three robots that had suddenly veered in his direction, attempting to cut him off from SHIELD. Barton shouted louder as Loki dived down towards the ground, shuttling through the vacated streets. Above them, the Doombot's began to open-fire, and Loki shifted side to side as he flew. Bullets rained down around them, and Loki ducked around cars and under eaves in an attempt to protect both himself and his cargo. However, holding on to Barton greatly limited the god's maneuverability, and he nearly sent them both headlong into a building as he tried to take a corner too quickly.

Then Loki failed to dodge in time; a missile launched through his tender wing and exploded on the concrete below. Buffeted by the blast, the god swung towards a wall and Barton shouted in alarm. Acting quickly, Loki flung his tail against the bricks to right himself. He dipped towards the ground and fought to keep from smashing the archer beneath him. Human bones were far too fragile. “Loki, are you crazy? Let me go!” A few haphazard, one-winged stunts secured Loki enough time for his wing to heal, and he rose back to a safe distance above the road. He could hear the pandemonium coming from Romanov's direction and tried to go faster, but his near-crash had reduced the distance between their pursuers. Electric blasts thundered down intermittently; it became harder and harder to dodge.

“Loki!” Barton shouted, managing to sound even more freaked-out than before. “This isn’t worth it! Put me down!” Loki ignored him just as he ignored the pain; the archer's headset fizzled with commotion, and Romanov shouted at them to hurry. Even with the Doombot's firing at them, this was the quickest way to regroup. If he kept moving, he might be able to regain the gap between him and their assailants.

That plan came crashing down when a streak of lightning cracked through the air and tore through Loki's flesh. A screech escaped the god's throat unbidden, and he barely managed to let Barton go, dropping him a few feet above the pavement, before tumbling into the glass window of a nearby building. It shattered under his weight, and Loki rolled across the floor until finally careening to a stop. His head smacked against the linoleum, and it took a moment to clear the fog. When he clambered to his feet, glass slid from his hide and blood dripped to the floor. The god hissed in pain, but he trudged forwards, stumbling on the piles of crushed brick and curved glass. There was
scuffling from outside the building and the faint whistle of arrows.

Normally, Loki would not fight in such a large form for this exact reason, but some foolish part of him was convinced no one would take him seriously if he did not show off his strength. In order to make them forget about his past weakness, the frail shell he had once been, he had to prove himself. But maybe he had let his pride get ahead of him; his nerves were on fire, and he finally managed to drag himself from the wreckage only to find that a Doombot was waiting for him, palms glowing.

“Loki!” Barton shouted in warning, but the archer was too preoccupied to assist Loki. From the corner of his eye the god watched as the man- covered in dirt and scraped up along his left side, but appearing to be otherwise unharmed –stepped towards him only to be cut off by another Doombot. Barton was forced to dive around a corner to avoid getting blasted full of holes.

Left to defend himself, Loki unleashed a torrent of flames. His opponent skirted the attack and returned with an attack of its own. Lightning scorched through Loki’s blood, and he bared his wings threateningly: shredded and bleeding, they were naught but a shield of disgrace. Disadvantaged, Loki was about to change forms — certainly the pain of shifting while injured would be less than that of having his wings ripped off — when he heard a familiar voice cry out his name.

Iron Man dropped from the sky, inserting himself between Loki and the Doombot. Without preamble, he raised his palm and blasted the machine. Then blasted it again. And again. It wasn’t until the robot blew itself into smithereens that he stopped, hand still outstretched and glowing a menacing blue.

A second explosion indicated that Barton had eliminated the other Doombot, and Tony lowered his hand. Slowly he rotated to meet Loki’s eyes, and while normally the god knew what Tony was feeling, even with the mask in the way, this time he couldn’t. He could only assume it was rage, or contempt, or belittlement for failing against so easy a foe. Asgard had never praised his strength in battle; why would that change now?

“That makes it one for one,” Tony said, his tone flat. “Next time look out for yourself.” With one last look at Loki, whose flesh finished knitting itself back together, Iron Man return to the sky. He rocketed towards Broad Street, and Loki watched until red and gold became lost amongst towering buildings. He made himself look away, feeling no triumph as he shed his form. Even now Tony did not think him fit for battle.

Loki looked back at the archer, and Barton returned the glance with a frown. His expression was thoughtful as he dissected each nuance of Loki and Tony’s interaction for an answer to why the two were at odds. Just the thought of someone knowing what Loki had done made the god feel ashamed.

“Clint? Are you alright? What’s going on over there?” Romanov called distractedly, though that didn’t keep the concern from her voice; this close to SHIELD’s location, Loki could hear the faintest whispers of ‘medic’ and ‘man down’ from her comrades. They were losing.

“We’re fine. It was just a little robot problem. We’re about a mile from your position. Can you hold out until then?” Barton gave Loki one last searching look then began jogging towards the chaos. The god followed, keeping on the lookout for any approaching enemies.

“We’re holding steady,” she said unconvincingly; each breath came out in a short pant. “But it looks like more bots are approaching. ETA in ten minutes.”

“Shit. Any idea why he’s sending so much troops? He can’t possibly expect us to make the same mistake as last time.”
“As far as we know, this is just a normal attack on a larger scale. At least its gotten the politicians into action. Fury is finishing negotiations with the UN as we speak.”

“About damn time. Someone should have invaded Latveria years ago.” Romanov agreed before she was forced to end the conversation. A moment later, Barton asked Loki, “You sure we can't teleport there?” He was considerably more out of breath than he had been when they first started running.

Loki shook his head. “Not unless you want to materialize with a bullet lodged under your ribs.”

The archer had enough energy to look horrified. “That can actually happen?”

“I've seen the equivalent enough times to know that the benefit is rarely worth the risk.” As Loki spoke, he noticed a speck growing towards them. He collected magic into his palms, drawing Barton's attention. The archer did a quick scan of the sky, and when his eyes fell on the Doombot he reached for his dwindling supply of arrows. Loki stopped him. “Go. I can handle this one.” Barton hesitated, but Loki was already slowing down. After a second, the man nodded and continued running, trusting Loki to watch his back.

Meanwhile, the god slowed to a stop and launched a bright green flare into the sky, redirecting the robot's focus. It looked between him and Barton before continuing to list in the archer's direction. Loki shot off another flare, this time aiming the ball of magic at the robot. That got the Doombot's attention, and it took the invitation to head towards the god. Spells flooded into Loki's mind, and as the enemy approached he picked the one most fitting: brilliant lightning shot from his palm, striking through the robot's silver chest. Sparks danced around the Doombot as it twitched and trembled, but once the current died, it continued forwards. Loki fired at it again, this time with a bolt whose thunder shook the very air; the robot exploded like a dying star.

When a quick surveillance of the area revealed no other hostiles, Loki spun and raced to catch up with Barton. It didn't take long, and in a minute he was falling in line beside the human. “You make me glad mages aren't common around here,” the archer commented in greeting. “Dragons, too, I guess, but those spells are damn impressive. Brute strength can only get you so far, you know? Unless you can cast magic in other forms as well?”

The neglected part of Loki — the one that sought praise and acknowledgment — warmed at Barton's comment. How long had it been since someone had not only complimented his magic, but actually said spells were better than merely throwing his weight around? How long since Loki's skill set was more valued than Thor's?

So while Loki was certain the archer's concern was partially an act to get information about his magic, he answered honestly. “I cannot, but changing forms does have its advantages.” And its disadvantages as well; Loki winced at the memory of bullets through limbs he no longer possessed.

Barton noticed the small twitch. “Doesn't it hurt to get your wings shot at? Kind of ruins the perks of being a dragon.”

“The pain can be dismissed,” Loki stated, truly believing his own words. Agony was something he was familiar with.

“Loki, man... Not that I don't appreciate your help, but getting mauled isn’t—”

Tony's voice interrupted what Barton was trying to say, and Loki's heart thudded obnoxiously in his chest. “There's at least twenty mini-Victors heading towards Romanov's group. They're only about a minute out. I'll try to thin their ranks, but get ready for a party.”
Barton picked up speed until he reached a dead sprint, and Loki went with him, although his eyes sought the sky. More specifically, they sought the red and gold man that darted across the horizon. Only when Romanov's voice became distinct over the bustle of agents did Loki stop looking back at Tony. He observed the SHIELD agents instead, taking in their battle-scuffed uniforms and soot-stained skin. Many were decorated with speckles of blood, either their own or their comrades. Weary, the agents gave Barton and Loki nothing more than cursory glances as the two headed deeper into the make-shift base.

Finally, they came upon Romanov, who was preoccupied with ordering a group of agents to provide cover for a plane carrying wounded operatives. Barton skidded to a stop behind her, breathing heavily, and she told the agents to get moving before turning to him and Loki. “Glad you made it in one piece.” She grabbed a magazine off of a nearby table and exchanged the one on her gun. She clicked it shut, her expression grave. “Things are about to get busy down here. Clint, you're with me.” The man, hands on his knees as he tried to regain his breath, gave her a thumbs up in response. She turned to Loki. “I need you to partner up with Rogers. He's getting a bit banged up on his own.”

“It's all in the line of duty,” the aforementioned man said over the link. “But I could definitely use a partner.”

“That reminds me,” Romanov said, reaching towards a different table and grabbing a small black ear piece. She offered it to Loki. “You'll need to stay connected in case the situation changes.”

The god took the headset and hooked it to his ear, listening to the faint murmuring that ensued from other headsets on the channel. Then Tony spoke again, his voice strained. “Heads up. Doom's posse has arrived.” In the background was the soft hum of a repulsor.

Although Loki wanted to fight by the man's side, he obeyed Romanov's command and hurried to join Captain America as the fresh wave of Doombots arrived. When Loki rounded the corner, Rogers was already skirmishing with the forwardmost robots, rolling away from lightning and flinging his shield to sever a Doombot's head. Rogers' shield spun back towards him, and Loki torched the second robot as the captain caught his weapon.

Rogers looked surprised at the robot's sudden demise, but when he glanced behind his shoulder and saw Loki he grinned. “Thanks,” he said, slightly winded, then took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. Face stern, the captain pointed to the machines darkening the sky. “We're working with Stark to make sure as few of those get past the barricade as possible. I'm trusting you to have my back.”

“Of course.” No sooner had the words left Loki's mouth than the Doombots were upon them. Fighting a horde of the robots was vastly different than fighting just one. On their own, a well-aimed strike was usually enough to take a bot down. However, as their numbers increased, it became exponentially harder to destroy one without two more attacking from behind. In moments, Loki and Rogers were surrounded, back to back as they squared off against the cloaked invaders.

The captain reflected bullets with his shield, lobbing the metal disk at foes that ventured too close. Loki's body glowed with magic, casting spell after spell. He created spires of fire and ice to obliterate the machines and intangible clones to distract them. Occasionally Iron Man flew overhead, hounding after a robot or rushing to an agent's aide, but the glances were fleeting; Loki became consumed by the heat of battle.

Then, just for an instant, Loki's mind lapsed. No longer was he fighting alongside Captain America; he was fighting alongside Thor, watching his brother's back as the god rampaged. Rogers' shield was Mjolnir, crashing through the thick of attackers, and Loki fought as he always had: using magic to get them out of a perilous situation, often one that Thor himself had caused. But instead of anger,
Loki felt euphoria. It was the closest he had felt to being normal in a long, long time. There was no betrayal, no deadline. Just peace.

And then the fight ended and that illusion shattered. The blond with blue eyes that he stood behind him lowered his weapon—not Mjolnir—and stepped into Loki's sight—not Thor.

“Think that's all of them. What does it look like from the sky, Stark?” Rogers asked.

“Crystal clear as far as the eye can see,” Tony responded, but unlike Rogers he didn’t sound relieved to see the battle's end. At least he and Loki had that in common.

“Romanov?”

“Everything is clear on the ground,” Black Widow responded. “The police are beginning to clean-up. SHIELD will do one last sweep for salvageable Doombot pieces, and then they're withdrawing as well.”

Worn from the battle, Loki took Romanov's words as a dismissal. While he wanted to keep going, no enemies remained and even he had to admit that he was feeling the strain. Constant spell-casting depleted his reserves, causing a dull ache through his entire body. He took a deep breath and tore the ear piece out as green mist gathered on his skin. He was about to disappear when a hand clamped around his wrist. Loki started, and the magic dispersed. With a frown, he turned to look at Steve, who was giving the god a disapproving look of his own.

“Hey, what's the rush?” The man asked, keeping a tight grip on the god's arm as if he thought Loki would otherwise vanish into the air. Then again, Loki had done that before.

“I assumed my assistance was no longer needed.” He had secured a microchip and Tony was unharmed. That was all Loki had come to do.

“Well you assumed wrong,” Rogers said, his other hand rising to clap Loki on the shoulder. “You're a member of the team now, and that means coming to the after-battle meetings as well.” When Loki made no move to run off, the captain finally let go of his arm. Rogers stepped towards the congregation of SHIELD agents, but while Loki did not teleport away, he did not move either.

“Not an Avenger. Not officially.”

“After what you did today?” Rogers said, pointedly looking at the fallen remains of Doombots that Loki had slain. “Think you more than qualify.” Loki wanted to say no, but blue eyes beseeched him; he walked towards the SHIELD agents with Rogers by his side.

Loki found himself thinking that even if the man wasn't his brother Thor... well, it was nice being a part of a team anyway. Loki could see himself fighting alongside these mortals and fixing his mistakes. However, he had a deadline, and when the throng of SHIELD agents parted to reveal Tony, Loki faltered.

The man was standing without his armor by the quinjet, talking to Barton. Loki didn't need to hear their hushed words to know that Tony wasn't happy; the harsh lines on his face were telling enough. It was as if the man aged twenty years in just a few days, and the sight made Loki stop over thirty feet away.

“Loki?” Rogers asked, turning back to face him. “What's wrong?” The captain's voice carried over to Tony, who jerked as if electrocuted. Barton’s voice trailed off when Tony looked up to meet Loki's eyes through the crowd. If the god thought the man looked anxious before, it was nothing compared to the way Tony grit his teeth as if in agony. He turned away, steadfastly refusing to look
at Loki again.

“Nothing,” Loki lied, forcing himself to walk forwards. He came to a halt a few feet from Tony’s side, ignoring the weird looks Barton and Rogers gave him for not standing closer. If Tony wanted Loki to be closer, he would close the gap between them; unsurprisingly, he didn’t. In fact, Loki thought he saw Tony shift almost imperceptibly away.

“What’s going on between you two?” Barton asked, and Tony glared at him. The archer held his hands up in surrender. “I was just asking. Jeeze.”

“What’s going on between you and Natasha?” Tony returned, and whatever they had been speaking about before was forgotten.

“Alright, I get it. It’s personal…” Barton’s eyes wandered to Loki, who met his stare with feigned nonchalance. Apparently he didn’t get it, because he immediately asked Loki, “So you two having your first lovers’ spat or something?”

Before either Tony or Loki could reply with a scathing comment, Rogers intervened. “Clint, knock it off,” he said, although he too was staring at them in curiosity. After a moment he shook it off and instead scanned the crowd of black-clad bodies. “Where’s Natasha? I thought she was flying us over to the Helicarrier?”

Barton let the matter drop. “She’s securing transport for the microchip. She should be back any minute.”

Rogers turned to Loki again, and his smile became strained in the tense atmosphere. Tony didn’t need to be looking at either of them—it appeared that he was studying the paint job of a nearby plane—to exude a sense of displeasure. “Have you ever been in a quinjet before? I mean, do they have planes in Asgard or is that a…what do you call Earth? Midgard?”

“Midgard is correct. And horseback or teleportation are the usual modes of transportation on Asgard. I find your vehicles to be slow and confining.”

“I’d probably prefer teleporting too, if I could do it,” Rogers said before looking up; Romanov was approaching.

“We’re finished here,” she announced, strolling through the divided group with complete disregard to the tension. Loki was sure she felt it, but Romanov was content to watch events unfold from the outside like the spider for which she was named. Reaching the quinjet, she typed on a keypad to lower the door of the cargo hold and ducked inside. When the others didn’t move she called, “Load up, boys.” They filed in behind her; Barton headed to the cockpit, Tony sat close to the front while avoiding eye contact with everyone, and Loki and Rogers ended up seated next to the door. As the entrance sealed shut, an uncomfortable silence filled the plane. For minutes, the only sound came from two SHIELD agents as they prepared the quinjet for flight, and the roar from the staring engines was negligible.

Thus began the awkward forty-five minute plane ride to the Helicarrier, which was cruising along the Atlantic coast. Throughout the flight, Loki did his best to not look at Tony, but in the small space it was unavoidable. The few times that Tony was looking in the god’s direction and their eyes met, the man would whip his gaze to the window and resolutely stare at clouds. Barton attempted to draw Tony into conversation a few times, but that usually ended as quickly as it started. Steve, who thought it was his job to make Loki feel welcomed, suffered the same result.

It wasn’t that Loki wanted to be rude to Rogers. Each time, he tried to answer as best as he could or
even ask questions of his own, but he got distracted. There was something burning beneath his skin and freezing within his chest. Loki clung to the fire; there was no harm in fueling his wrath towards Victor von Doom. But he worried that if he clung to the ice, it would show the world just what he was: a monster. Or maybe the world already knew; he lied to his best friend — more than best friend — and had no intention of letting Tony know the truth until it was impossible to hide any longer.

“*You could have told me what I was from the beginning! Why didn't you?*”

It was a relief when the plane began to descend and one-sided conversation was swallowed up by anticipation. Romanov guided the quinjet onto the carrier's runway, and the second the cargo door opened, Loki escaped from the plane. As the others filed out, he stood straight, hiding his turmoil from the spectating agents. Romanov and Barton were the last to step from the quinjet, but when they did, the Black Widow regarded both Loki and Tony — who were observing anything and everything on the Helicarrier but each other — coolly. “I trust you two will behave yourselves regardless of whatever quarrel you have going on,” she said and slunk past them to enter the interior of the Helicarrier. She led the group through the maze-like halls, depositing them in a conference room similar to the one Loki initially spoke to Fury in.

When they entered the room, the director was already there, standing imposingly before the window with his hands clasped behind his back. He didn't say a word until they all had taken a seat, and then he got right to the point. “As I'm sure you've all noticed, we've been handling the attacks of the Latveria tyrant Victor von Doom for almost two years now. He's gone from low scale terrorism and intelligence gathering to waging war. The government has been hesitant to grant us permission to take him out due to the treaties Doom has in place, but today, we've finally been granted the clearance we need to send in a small team.” Fury gave 'Earth's mightiest heroes' — who were battle worn and weary — a long look that ended at Loki. “It seems Stark here finally let you off of the leash. Though it's a shame he didn't agree sooner. We could have used your kind of fire power.”

Loki glanced over at Tony in surprise, but the man's expression revealed nothing. No matter; Fury's words were enough to infer that Tony and the director had been talking about this long before today. The god thought he had been privy to the majority of their conversations, but obviously he had missed something. It had not been SHIELD who didn't want him in battle but Tony himself. Today, Loki had sought to put an end to the pity, but the man still doubted him.

“He's not a weapon you can just use,” Stark interjected, the first thing he had said pertaining to Loki in hours.

“And I'm not yours to contain,” Loki countered, snappish despite the fact that a part of him relished in talking to Tony again; the majority was not so easily tempered, reacting to the man's infectious anger. Within Loki's mind, Tony's words twisted into meaning that the man still did not think Loki worthy of fighting alongside him.

“You say that now, but just wait until you blank-”

“Ladies,” Fury snapped, impeding what was bound to become another shouting match. “I don't know what has your panties in a bunch, but it can wait until that madman is dead or in chains.” Under the man's one-eyed glare, they quieted, though Tony persisted in glaring across the table. “Now as I was saying, we can only get a small team in there. Doom's castle is protected by anti-aircraft technology, not to mention he'll have robots covering the area. As far as our intelligence team can tell, breaching his fortress from the air is nigh impossible.”

“Then how do you propose we enter?” Romanov inquired, leaning forwards on the table with her chin propped on folded fingers.
“You'll fly in anyway,” Fury answered, his expression grim. “It's the only option we have. Iron Man can cover the quinjet, and the rest of you will—”

“Why not just teleport into Latveria?” Loki asked, drawing attention to himself. Both Fury and Tony scowled at him, the former because of the interruption and the latter because he hated anything the god said. “If it is just the five of us, I can take us directly to Latveria. We could be knocking on Doom's door in seconds.”

The director clasped his hands as he considered it, inspecting Loki intently. The god met his gaze confidently, and finally Fury asked, “Could you teleport a team inside the castle?”

“As long as you have recent footage of the castle's interior, I could get the team inside as well.”

After another moment of consideration, Fury nodded. “I'll have to call in a few favors, but S.H.I.E.L.D. can get you what you need.” He looked over the assembled team, Tony in particular, and questioned, “Anyone against this plan?” Tony glared at Loki again—glared at everything—but held his tongue.

“Good. Once inside, the goal is simple: eliminate Doom. Any other objective comes second.” With an overdramatic motion, the director pulled a remote from his pocket and pressed a button; as a picture lit the screen, Loki couldn't help a miniscule flinch, a response ingrained from the last time he was here. However, all that appeared was an outline of what Loki assumed to be Doom's castle.

Aware that multiple sets of curious eyes were on him, Loki forced the consternation away. Fury pulled the unwanted attention away from the god by slapping the wall next to the projection. “This is the best outline of Doom's fortress we have, compiled from various sources. It's not exact, but it should be enough of a guide for you five to sneak in and find Doom.”

“Banner isn't coming?” Tony interrupted, raising his hand as if to ask permission while he spoke. “I'm sure Big Green would love to have a go at some robots.”

“Banner is busy working on a different project for us,” Fury stated, nonplussed by Tony's attitude. “Some of us also have other things to be working on, so if you'd be so kind as to shut the hell up, I'd like to get on with the briefing.”

Tony's expression was mutinous, and Loki thought he understood why the man was acting out. Just as the god's thought were crowding him with reminders of vendettas, betrayals, and deadlines, so too must Tony's thoughts be unsettling him. But whereas Loki contained the emotions, letting them rot from the inside, Tony unleashed his anxiety on those around him. The god was willing to ignore the tasteless comments, but the others were not so forgiving. “Stark, it's been a long day. Stop acting like you're four,” Rogers said sternly.

“Stop acting like you're my father,” Tony bit back, but he slumped back into his chair and offered no more resistance. The director looked like he wanted to strangle the billionaire, with only the loss of a valuable asset staying his hand. Instead, Fury displayed another picture, and this one, Loki recognized instantly; it was the blueprints of the first captured Doombot.

“Thanks to the chip that was secured this evening, we'll be able to start making more efficient devices to deal with the robots. However, our time frame is limited. Doom is aware we have the chip, and once he changes their designs, it's back to square one. Stark and Loki, you two will be in charge of upgrading the Dragon Smasher or whatever you call it.” Loki didn't need to be a genius to know that the chances of him and Stark working on anything together were slim, but he nodded anyway. “Now then,” Fury said, changing the image again; this one was a map covered in strategic lines. “Our plan of attack is to infiltrate Doom's castle while...”

The briefing continued well into the evening, and as it progressed, both Barton and Tony looked like
they were going to pass out in their chairs. Loki was reminded of the fact that Tony hadn't slept at all
last night, and he probably didn't sleep much while Loki was unconscious. Romanov also appeared
to be reaching her limit. Only Rogers was bright and attentive, not burdened by exhaustion or
creeping fog. It was only when Tony dropped a pen that he had been absentmindedly tossing for the
fifth time in less than a minute that Fury got the hint. He frowned at them all, but even his glower
could not motivate them to move. Pinching the bridge of his nose, the director turned off the screen
and tossed the remote onto the center of the table.

“That's all for today. Each of you will receive instructions through a secure server, and I expect you
to be able to recite them in your sleep by this time next week.” Fury shifted his attention to Tony and
Loki, alternating his glare between the two. “And I expect any personal issues to be cleared up by
then. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Rogers and Romanov chorused, standing from their seats. The female agent immediately
disappeared around the hall, barely making a sound. Rogers, however, stopped besides Loki's chair
on his way out. The captain leaned over surreptitiously, as if there could be any secrecy in such a
small room, and quietly said, “I don't know what's going on between you or Tony, or who started it,
but if you need anything just let me know, alright?” Those earnest blue eyes bore down on Loki, and
the god shirked back.

“That thank you for the offer,” Loki answered, not bothering to lower the volume of his voice, “but I
don't think that will be necessary.”

Rogers glanced over Loki's shoulder to where Tony was no doubt eavesdropping on them and
frowned. “Just think about it, alright? I'm sure Jarvis has my number.” Loki nodded, and Rogers
finally left the room, leaving two bleary humans and a misplaced god behind.

Barton was the next to go, dragging himself out of his chair and rubbing at his eyes. “See you
lovebirds later. I'm taking a shower and hitting the nest.” He gave them a sloppy wave and shambled
down the hall.

Loki considered leaving as well, but he couldn't bring himself to. Tony was staring down at the pen
— which had fallen to the floor for the sixth time and didn't seem like it was going to get picked up
for a seventh — with tired eyes. The man didn't seem to want to get up anytime soon, let alone fly
across the continent to get back to Malibu. “Tony,” Loki began, daring to speak to the man. All he
got in return was a glare, but he persevered. “I can take us both back home.”

That got Tony moving again. “I don't need your help,” he snapped, stumbling onto his feet. Aware
that they had an audience, one with enough power to make their lives difficult, Loki tried to curtail
their disagreement from becoming another shouting match. An incensed Tony had a loose tongue,
and Loki didn't need a shady government entity curious about the man's newfound immortality.

“It'll take hours for you to fly there yourself,” Loki insisted, attempting to keep them on topic. Tony
remained obstinate.

“Fine by me,” he said, lurching towards the door. However, sitting in one spot for hours had sapped
the adrenaline Tony was running on; he slowed as he reached the door, having to put a hand out to
steady himself.

“Tony...” Loki repeated, unable to resist stepping closer. It hurt to see Tony running himself ragged,
and it hurt even worse to know that he was the cause of it.

“I'm fine,” the man snapped again, but anyone with eyes could see that he was not.
“Stark, get the hell off my carrier,” Fury contributed unhelpfully.

“I do what I want,” Tony retorted, and Loki came to the conclusion that they weren't going to reach an agreement anytime soon. He went ahead and made his decision. Picturing the foyer in his mind, Loki reached out and gripped Tony's wrist. The man, realizing what the god was going to do, shouted angrily and tried to pull away, but green was already washing over both of them.

When they appeared at the house, Tony once again attempted to yank his arm away. Loki let him go and took a step back, but it seemed even the minor decision of teleporting them was enough to ignite the rage inside the man. “What the hell, Loki? I said I could handle myself!” Tony rubbed his wrist as if the god’s touch was like that of a Jotun.

“Get some sleep,” Loki replied, unwilling to let his own temper rise. Tony was overreacting, certainly, but he deserved some leeway after everything he put up with.

Tony snarled at him before stomping from the room; he passed the hallway leading to his bedroom and instead fled back down to his lab. Loki watched him go as he stood immobile in the center of the room. 'This will pass. He'll forgive me, and then everything will be okay.'

But Loki knew it would not be so simple; forgiveness had to be earned, and his efforts today yielded nothing. He wasn't sure what else he could do to prove to the man that he hadn't meant any harm. He only wanted Tony alive and able to stay with him forever. And despite the fact that Loki knew the fallout would be disastrous, he hadn't prepared himself for being ignored or the betrayal he saw every time he looked into Tony's eyes.

“He’s scared, you know,” a voice said behind him, and Loki turned around to find Pepper standing in the kitchen doorway. She tilted her head towards the stairwell that led to the lab. “He doesn’t know what to expect anymore: from this whole immortality thing and you.”

“It was not my intention to upset him,” Loki said, listening to the discord of Tony’s temper tantrum downstairs.

“Dum-E, cut it out! He’s not coming down here!” Glass shattered. “Stupid, self-centered, masochistic god…” A pause. “Jarvis, get a sound-proofing team in here tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And turn on the music.”

Booming drums and chords obstructed the sound of Tony’s anger; Loki could no longer pinpoint Tony in the upheaval. “This was not what I wanted,” he repeated, stepping away from the stairs and angling towards Pepper.

“But you knew this would happen,” she said, yet her tone was not accusing; she was simply stating a fact.

“I didn’t think he’d react like this. I knew he’d be angry, but…” But this was exceeding Loki’s expectations. Everything was slipping from his grasp, and he couldn’t understand why. “I did nothing to harm him. He must know that. Immortality is a gift.”

“It’s not the immortality that he’s upset about.”

“He said-”

“I know, but that’s only part of the problem. He’s focusing on that because he’s afraid to think about
the other reason.”

“I don’t understand,” Loki murmured, beginning to get frustrated.

Pepper pursed her lips. “Loki, has Tony ever told you about Obadiah Stane?”

Stane. Loki’s mind immediately flashed to the files he had read — without permission — on Jarvis’s system: the files that mentioned Afghanistan and Iron Monger, betrayal and torture. But had Tony ever talked about those things himself? Never. Loki shook his head.

“This is probably something Tony should tell you himself, but I think you need to know.” She pushed from the wall and walked to the nearby couch. Loki sat down across from her, and she hesitated momentarily before she started talking. “Obadiah was a friend of Tony’s father and eventually became a father-figure to Tony. He helped run Stark Industries and was practically family. Tony had no reason to distrust him, but Obadiah betrayed him anyway.”

At this Pepper's eyes misted over, and it took her a moment to continue. “He paid for a terrorist cell to kill Tony, all because he wanted to take over the company. Tony never saw it coming—none of us did—and it was because of Stane that Tony spent three months trapped in a cave in Afghanistan. He doesn’t talk about it, but I’ve heard him wake up from the nightmares. I’ve seen the flashbacks. Tony went through hell, and it was all because of Stane. Even though Tony killed Stane in the end, it never brought him peace. What happened changed Tony, and I don’t think he’ll ever forget about it.” Making sure that she had Loki’s full attention, Pepper concluded, “What you did… It makes him afraid that he misplaced his trust again.” The pointed look that followed asked, 'Is he right?'

Again Loki shook his head, trying to dislodge the accusation. “I would never hurt Tony,” he swore, but listening to the blaring, dissonant music below he realized he already had hurt Tony. “Not like that.”

“Why did you do it? I want to hear your explanation, from your mouth. If you knew that you were lying to him, why'd you go through with it?”

“Because…” Loki thought of the hot blood that coated him, the sickening fear of not knowing whether or not Tony would live, the disgust for not being able to help, and the impending darkness of a world without Tony; he thought 'because why not?' But there had been a reason to not like about it, and Loki was living that consequence right now. “Because I couldn’t stand the thought of him dying, and... I was too selfish to consider what my actions meant for him.”

Pepper's stern expression eased, and she even cracked a small smile. “You're a lot easier to talk to than Tony. He tries to lead me in circles.” Her tone was light, and Loki knew she was trying to say that even though he messed up, she wasn't going to turn on him. She might not be happy with his actions, but he hadn't lost another friend.

Loki gave a wry grin of his own, though his was considerably more forced. “I've had a lot of practice this past year.” Then his lips downturned; what if he ruined the chance to ever have that close of a relationship with Tony again? “I hadn't considered that I'd make him immortal only for him to hate me for eternity.”

“He doesn't hate you,” Pepper said immediately.

“He won't even look at me,” Loki refuted.

Pepper sighed. “I'm not saying he isn't mad—he has every right to be—but he doesn't hate you. He just needs his space, and maybe you do too. Since you arrived, the two of you have done almost
everything together. Maybe it's time you regained some independence.”

Loki didn't bother denying that he had become overly attached to Tony; he and the man were practically inseparable. But it was a far better alternative than being alone again. Sure, there were other people he could go to, but they weren't who he wanted. Tony was the only one that made Loki feel whole again.

...Maybe he was too dependent.

Pepper stood. “It'll be okay, trust me. Both of you just need some space to think things through. Tony will come around, and hopefully next time you'll ask him before making life-changing decisions.”

She got no reply; Loki stared at nothing as he thought about how angry Tony was. He thought how he was unable to wish for forgiveness in fear that it will never be granted. He thought about that which had fallen apart.

Pepper stepped forwards and grabbed his arm. He looked up at her, startled, and she chided, “Both of you are too pessimistic. So you're having a fight: it happens, and it will happen again in the future. It doesn't mean you don't care about each other. He won't abandon you because you messed up. Learn from it and move forwards.” Loki continued to frown, but there was the faintest stirring of hope within him. Pepper noticed and smiled, gently tugging him forwards. “Now come on. Have dinner with me.”
Coming Full Circle

"Oh, dig my shallow grave.
It's not me you'll save, 'cause I'm a lost cause.
I'm a lost cause. A lost, lost cause.

Wait, no one said what's lost cannot be found.
You are here to make it safe and sound,
Oh we can make it out alive.
Fate, hath its way when all that's learned is sin,
Nothing really matters in the end,
As long as you are with me, friend."

-Lost Cause by Imagine Dragons-

It turned out that the map Fury provided them of Doom's castle was not even close to as accurate as
the director said it would be. What Fury claimed would be a 'small room in a less accessed part of the
castle' turned out to be the opposite; Loki ended up teleporting them into a large room filled with a
dozen robot guards.

Mentally cursing the director, Loki flung bolts of magic at the irate swarm crowding the superheroes.
A few of the other Avengers were not so quiet in their displeasure, and as the five fought back
against the onslaught, swearing was just as prominent as gunfire. They had been completely
unprepared for battle, and everyone scrambled to fight back or, for the Avengers that were not bullet
proof, jump and dive out of the way of enemy fire.

At Loki's side, Barton, unable to fire his arrows in such close quarters, wielded his bow like a club,
smacking a machine's scything arm away and narrowly avoiding decapitation. To the god's left,
Rogers utilized his shield to provide cover for Natasha, who was putting bullets into the robots' eye
sockets. Directly behind Loki, occasionally bumping into his back as they fought, Tony unloaded
missiles and repulsor blasts into the crowd.

Then it fell quiet, the last robot toppling to the floor with a bullet buried in its mask, and the only
remaining sounds in the room were their heavy breathing and the dying crackle of fire. However,
Loki could hear more robots heading their way, bubbling up from the depths of Doom's compound,
and with the machines came human voices. Letting the glow of his hands die down, the god stepped
away from the group. “The next patrol is less than a minute away,” he warned, getting their attention.
“I suggest we get moving.”

“Yeah, easy for you to say,” Barton muttered, inhaling deeply in an effort to get his breathing under
control. He glared at Loki, who hadn't even broken a sweat. “Don't you ever get tired?” Despite his
complaining, the archer began to move, reaching back for an arrow and notching his bow. As he
stepped around the metal husks, kicking one for good measure, he muttered, “How the hell did the
intelligence team mistake this for a 'small, unvisited room’?”

“There's no going back now. Quit whining.” Rogers ordered, taking control. Turning to Loki and
Romanov, he asked, “Will you be able to find your way to the basement from here?”

“Shouldn't be too difficult,” Black Widow answered as she reloaded her gun. When she finished
snapping the new rounds into place, she slipped the weapon back into a holster on her thigh and
tugged her gloves on tighter. “All we have to do is go down until we reach the bottom.”

Loki glanced anxiously towards the far hallway, listening as the guards drew closer. They must have traveled close enough for the humans to hear as well, because everyone tensed and began moving faster. Barton drew back the bow string, and Tony flared his weapons. Hurriedly, Rogers said, “If you get stuck or overpowered, send the signal.”

A door nearby was blasted open, and the explosion shook the floor. Iron Man and Hawkeye whirled towards the sound; Romanov stepped in the opposite direction. Captain America lifted his shield, standing between them and the oncoming guards. “We’ve got your back. Go.”

That was all the prompting they needed. Loki turned and sprinted for an empty hallway with Romanov at his heels. Mere seconds passed before the room became a battleground, the other Avengers shouting orders at each other as the advancing guards encountered arrows and shields. The floor rattled and shook with each concussive blast, and Loki had to resist the urge to go back. He had his own mission to do; he trusted them to do theirs.

Leaving Tony, Loki raced through the halls of Doom's compound with Romanov. They shoved open each door they ran past, scanning the rooms before moving on, in an effort to find a stairwell. Small black cameras glinted at them from the ceiling, watching their every move. While Loki sent a wave of magic at each one he noticed, it was no more effective than bandaging a severed limb. Within Doom’s walls, more robots stirred.

Four more winding corridors passed with no stairs in sight, and an exasperated Loki asked, “How long do you think it will take to reach the lab?” Doom's castle was turning out to be one giant maze, and while Fury had given them a layout (which hadn’t been very accurate so far), Doom apparently wasn’t fond of stairwells.

“At this rate?” Romanov kicked open a door to her right and pointed a gun inside, but it was another empty bedroom that led nowhere. “Longer than we planned for.”

It was getting to the point that Loki was considering blasting a pathway through the floor — structural integrity be damned — when they finally entered a spacious room with stairs on the far side. Sighing in relief, he and Romanov both made a beeline for it — only to come to a screeching halt as bullets peppered the ground at their feet. Romanov jumped back, whipping out a second gun and aiming both at the ceiling. However, there wasn’t anyone there, and she frowned in confusion. Loki took a cautious step forwards, and immediately bullets rained down at him. He retreated, but not without seeing what had been shooting at them.

“You have to be kidding me...” Romanov muttered, firing at the camouflaged turrets that were nestled in the chandelier above their heads. Glass shattered; a few well-aimed shots sent the fixture crashing to the ground, and although Loki didn’t see anything else waiting to shoot at them, he sent a wave of magic out to blind the sensors. This time when they inched forwards, nothing fired, and Romanov cautiously made her way towards the stairs. Loki trailed behind her, keeping a sharper eye on their surroundings.

They were half-way across the room when Rogers' voice came over the intercom. “How are things going on your end?”

Romanov reached up to reply. “We're having some unexpected difficulties, but we're making progress. How about you?”

“Same here. He's got a lot of defenses, but no one has gotten too hurt so far. Keep an eye out for spiked walls.”
“Got it. Watch for guns in the chandeliers.”

There was a beat of silence in which they all thought something along the lines of 'supervillains are insane, paranoid bastards' before the captain said, “Roger that. We'll check in again in thirty minutes.”

Romanov clicked her microphone off and, after double checking for any traps, glided down the stairwell. When she skipped over a step halfway down, Loki didn't question it; he followed her lead and avoided it as well, and they made it to the next floor without any mishaps—which sounded like a meager accomplishment, but considering how their luck has been so far, Loki would take what he could get.

“This is ridiculous,” Romanov muttered when they reached the bottom only to find that the stairwell had ended. They would have to seek out another one to continue downwards. “There isn't time for this.”

Black Widow began running towards the left, where Loki could hear guards stampeding through the halls. “Wait,” he called, and Romanov stopped, shooting him a questioning look. “Not that way.”

“Why?”

Pounding footsteps and someone shouting, “They're down here!” was her response, and Romanov wasted no more time; she curtailed it, sprinting past Loki to the opposite hallway. The god remained where he was, a spell resting on his lips. Once he could see the first of the robots approaching down the hall (a machine smaller than a Doombot but loaded with more weapons) Loki formed the magic with hurried words. Just as the robot took notice of him, Loki finished the spell; gunfire was drowned out by a fiery explosion that consumed the robot and all who followed behind it. To ensure that any survivors could not follow, Loki cast another spell, collapsing the walls and filling the end of the hallway with rubble.

Satisfied that their enemies were sealed off, at least temporarily, Loki sprinted to catch up with Romanov. He found her waiting at the end of the hall, where the path split in opposite directions. She gave him a quick glance before returning to monitoring the halls, guns ready at her side. “Which way?” she asked; Loki paused to listen closely to the movement within the castle, and then he started down the right.

They continued this same pattern longer than they cared to. Each hallway led them to another, which would then branch off into even more identical pathways. Without a map, they had no choice but to rely on luck to lead them to the next poorly placed stairwell. This delay, combined with the steady stream of robots that attacked them, chandeliers from hell, and a startling encounter with a spiked wall, made it so they had only traversed two more floors by the time Rogers called again.

“We haven’t found anything,” he announced, out of breath and frustrated. “Please tell me you’re having better luck.”

Romanov was preoccupied with disabling a trap farther up the hall, so Loki handled the call this time. “Certainly, but I wouldn't be telling the truth.”

Rogers responded with an aggravated groan, expressing how they all felt. “Alright, that's a bit of a set-back, but we can still do this,” he said optimistically. “No one is hurt, and I contacted Director Fury a few minutes ago. As far as we know, Doom is still in the building. We just need to find him.”

“I think that's easier said than done, Cap,” Romanov countered as she rose cautiously to her feet. In front of her was a pile of wires that she pulled out from under a shattered tile. From her belt she grabbed a small sphere that, when squeezed, turned red and began to beep. Black Widow tossed the
device onto the wires, where it then latched on with tiny hooks, and backed up hastily, protecting her face with her arm. Seconds later, it detonated, creating a chain of reactions that went down the hall and set off the hidden mines. After the noise died down, Romanov continued, “We keep going in circles, and since Loki can’t hide us yet, Doom knows we’re coming. He’s had plenty of time to wrap up anything important and flee.”

Piping in with his own pessimistic comment, Loki said, “Even if he is still here, he’s going to be prepared for us. Right now he’s just distracting us with scraps and petty tricks, seeing how we fight.”

“We’re moving as quickly as we can,” Rogers stated, and Loki could hear the frown in his voice. “What else can we do?”

Loki thought about it for a moment, and as an idea came to mind, he grinned. “We’ll change our strategy. Does Stark still have an EMP on him?”

Part of Loki was hoping that Tony would respond for himself, but it was Rogers who spoke again after a moment of silence. “He has one, but it wasn’t working on the robots.” That didn’t come as a surprise to Loki; if the Dragon Slayer didn’t work, then an older EMP wouldn’t either. Fury had pressured them to work on the Dragon Slayer, but since it was an unspoken rule that Loki wasn’t allowed in the lab anymore, they never had.

No matter. That’s not why he required the EMP anyway. “Have him activate it again,” Loki commanded.

“What? Why?”

“See the cameras in the corners? They don’t have the same complex circuitry as the robots. Once you shut them down, get as far away from where you are as you can. Break through the walls or go through the floor if you must. Just get moving.”

There was another pause before Rogers said, “Okay, we’ve turned it on. Mind telling me what you’re planning, though?”

“If five Avengers are too easy for Doom, we’ll just have to give him a few more to worry about.” Loki then began to chant quietly, causing magic to build in the air. After a few lines were spoken, resonating as if a physical entity, magic dripped from the god’s skin and began to take form, morphing into clones of him and Natasha. With substantially more effort, he began crafting illusions in hallways they had long since passed. Once he finished that, he created clones of the other group and sent their images running randomly through the halls; within minutes, the number of Avengers in the building went from five to twenty-five.

“Let’s see how Doom likes to play games,” Loki said as the clones beside him took off, dispersing through the halls. Romanov, who had been standing guard partway down the hall, frowned warily as she watched an exact replica of herself run by. Realizing that people in Midgard were probably not use to seeing copies of themselves move autonomously, he tacked on, “On the off chance some clones run across your group, please don’t shoot at them or they’ll vanish.”

“Understood. Call back in when something comes up or you reach the lab.”

The line clicked dead, barely registering in Loki’s frayed hearing. While an effective trick, the god knew he couldn’t keep this plan up for long; the clones were allowing them to move more quickly than before, dividing Dooms forces by leading the robots on wild chases, but never before has Loki controlled so many clones at once. It was not his rapidly draining magic that was a concern (though in time that too would create difficulties) but the fact that in order to make a convincing show, he had
to manage each and every image he made. Everything they saw and everything they heard went
directly into his mind, vying for his attention.

It took everything Loki had to follow Romanov, and even then, he kept forgetting where he was; one
moment he'd be on the top floor, running alongside Captain America and Hawkeye, and the next
he'd be trying to keep up with a imitative Black Widow. A few times, Loki began to launch magic at
a robot only to realize that the enemy he was attempting to fight was two floors away. When
something like that happened, Romanov tensed and lowered into a fighting stance only to look
around in confusion when nothing was there.

Which was why when enemies really did find them, they weren't prepared. Loki was focused on a
fight happening hundreds of feet away, struggling to guide clones through a mess of robots without
letting anything shatter the illusions. When he heard faint footsteps behind him, he foolishly assumed
the audio input was from the battle he was already engaged in. Even the faint click of a gun went
unheeded, buried beneath the sound of a dozen other firearms.

It was only when Romanov, who had been preoccupied clearing the path further down the hall,
suddenly spun around with her eyes wide and gun raised that Loki realized he had made a mistake.
He twisted his body, hands beginning to glow, but even supernatural speed could not make up for
his inattention. An energy blast collided with the god's chest, sending him flying through the air. His
back smashed through half of the wall with a resounding crash, rattling his brain and cracking his
bones. Slumped into the plaster, his tenuous control on the clones began to slip along with that over
his own body.

Through blurry eyes, Loki watched as Romanov — who appeared to be multiple Romanovs, all
moving in sync and sometimes melding into one — fired her gun at two men on the other end of the
hall, but a flung open door acted as their shield. One of the guards returned fire with a handgun, and
Black Widow jumped for the adjacent hall, rolling to safety behind the corner. The man continued to
shoot futilely at Romanov for a few seconds, and then his partner pushed him aside and raised a
massive, convoluted weapon: the very one that he had hit Loki with. The energy gun whirred as it
charged, glowing bright red at its core. With a click, it fired, blasting away a chunk of the wall
Romanov was behind and forcing her farther back.

“Loki!” She shouted, darting forwards to shoot blindly around the corner before retreating again.
“Now would be a good time to get back up!”

The god was already working on that; magic pulsed through his veins, making his headache fade and
the burning down his spine recede. Loki began extracting himself from the wall, prying his arms free
of the plaster and dropping to his feet. Disorientated, he staggered, and only instinct kept him from
getting flung back again. A wall of ice rose before him, intercepting an energy blast and shattering
upon impact. Loki was showered in slivers of frozen water, but the interception gave him enough
time to regain both his footing and bearings.

Before the energy gun could recharge, Loki rushed forwards and grappled the gun from the guard's
hands. As he twisted it out of his opponent's grasp, ice unconsciously crept onto the metal. When
Loki flung the gun at the wall, it cracked, brittle from the cold, and went dim. Startled by Loki's
speed, the man cursed and stumbled backwards while hurrying to pull a handgun from his pocket.
His partner was already aiming his gun at the god's head, finger tense on the trigger.
Black Widow came up behind the guard and gripped the barrel of the gun, wrenching it away from
Loki's temple. She snapped the man's wrist, and with a cry, he let the gun drop to the floor.
Outraged, the guard tried to grab her arm with his uninjured hand, but she ducked out of the way.
Flawlessly, she leapt into the air and wound her ankles around the man's neck; he reached up to try
and pry her off, but she twisted her body and threw him to the floor. His head cracked loudly against
the tile, and the remaining guard furiously pointed his gun at Romanov. Before he could get a single shot off, Loki elbowed him in the face. The man reeled, putting him in the perfect spot for Romanov to kick him in the face.

Both guards eliminated, the two Avengers took a brief moment to collect themselves. Then Romanov straightened, keeping a close eye on the halls while she reloaded her guns. Loki, meanwhile, assessed how many of his clones were still functioning. He had felt some of them flicker out during the fight, and he had no choice but to dispel them; Doom wouldn't send robots after intruders he knew were fake, leaving Loki with only two copies of each Avenger. At least this way he could focus better, only slightly distracted instead of completely lost in a sea of false stimulus.

Satisfied with the state of his illusions, Loki turned to Romanov, who was almost done reassembling her guns. “You'll have to teach me that move,” Loki said, referring to her leg throw.

Romanov actually smiled at him and replied, “Come by the gym sometime and we'll see.”

Guns reloaded, Black Widow started down the hall again, and Loki followed. As they progressed, they started being pursued by guard patrols once again. However, for all of the obstructions and skirmishes that they ran into, traveling towards Doom's lab was... suspiciously easy. The robots that attacked them were mostly older models, lacking the Doombot's artificial intelligence, and the human guards were few and far between. Instead of being heartened by the progress they were making, Loki became more and more wary; Doom had made it clear in New York that he was not to be underestimated.

When he and Romanov traversed another floor with minimal opposition, they called in to the rest of the team. Apparently the others were also unnerved, because when Barton said, “It's like he's wanting us to get downstairs. Or at least doesn't care if we do,” everyone agreed. Nonetheless, they had no choice but keep going and hope that whatever Doom had in store for them, they could manage.

Loki and Romanov methodically continued downwards, until finally the god judged them close enough to the lab to implement the next part of their invasion plan: discover Doom's laboratory without said supervillain knowing they had. “Wait,” he said as they approached the stairwell that led to the ground floor, and when Romanov shot him a questioning look, he said, “We'll continue from here under spell cover.”

She halted, and as she returned to Loki’s side, the god let the remaining clones disappear. Magic now unencumbered, Loki started drawing sigils in the air, and when he moved his hand away, a faint trail of magic remained untouched by gravity. Black Widow kept a close eye on their surroundings as he worked, absorbed in the brightening sphere of runes, though she couldn’t resist occasionally glancing over in curiosity.

Once he finished constructing the spell, Loki motioned Romanov to come closer. “Put your hand in the center,” he instructed, and when she did, he put her hand beside hers. Drawing on his memory, the god began the incantation, and their hands were obscured beneath churning magic. Romanov shifted anxiously by his side, but Loki could not break the rhythm to reassure her. He carried on, and finally, the green light receded, sinking into their flesh and diffusing through their bodies. Solid flesh became translucent, appearing more like colored mist than skin, and Loki stopped chanting.

“This spell will allow us to see ourselves and each other, but we should be undetectable to others unless something hits you,” Loki explained to Romanov, who was clenching her fist with a frown. “It does not actually change your physical form.”

That didn’t seem to comfort the assassin, but she nodded anyway, taking a leap of faith and trusting
Loki’s magic. The sigils dissipated, and Romanov quickly pulled her hand towards her body. “How long can you maintain this?” she asked, glancing down at herself and twisting her torso around to see that everything, from her hair to her clothes, had the same smoky quality.

“Not long,” Loki replied honestly, unable to ignore the ache that was bubbling up from his core. Sometimes, when faced with the nearly endless possibilities of magic, people forgot that there was a limit to how much magic Loki possessed; sometimes Loki forgot he had a limit. But while he possessed a very high threshold, there was a boundary that he could not cross — not if he wanted to avoid his core imploding on itself. “I can at most maintain it for an hour. Any longer and I risk not having enough magic to teleport us back out.”

“We’ll make it work. Doom’s lab can't be that much farther down.”

Despite the fact that they had to travel carefully so as to not make noise or set off traps, Loki and Romanov progressed quickly. They easily circumvented the patrol groups, their passage unheeded. When they had to cut in close to a stationary patrol, Romanov would grip her gun tightly, unaccustomed to being invisible. But every time, no one glanced in their direction, and the assassin would relax once they regained distance.

Without knowing exactly where the lab was hidden but knowing they were close, Loki and Romanov scoured every inch of the rooms they passed in search of secret passageways. Luckily, the castle was empty of civilians, and they were free to search the entrance halls that overlooked the city. Loki couldn't help but pause momentarily as he passed by the wide windows, observing the country that Victor von Doom controlled with an iron fist.

Compared to the extravagant, labyrinthine castle that overshadowed it, the city was humble. Unlike the diversity of Malibu and New York, Latveria was composed of identical brick cottages, each with white stone walls and red clay roofs. Cobble roads wound between the houses, desolate of life except for a handful of roaming guards. Carts of goods lay abandoned in the street and clotheslines billowed unattended; Loki assumed that the city had been placed on lockdown, the citizens barred in their homes to keep the Avengers from finding shelter.

Aware of Doom's technological prowess, the god was surprised at the bleakness of the nation before him. He had not concerned himself with Doom's tyranny, or even his terrorism; Loki was only concerned with vengeance. Had the supervillain not tried to murder Tony, then Loki would have felt no desire to see him stopped. And yet... maybe Loki could find pride in helping to stop Doom, not just because of the revenge he sought. Is that not why Tony did this, protecting others in order to make up for the suffering he once inflicted? Loki could see himself in Doom's place, had things not gone differently. He could see himself alone upon a throne: distrusting, volatile, and merciless. Part of Loki could still see himself there, even after falling into the void and meeting Tony, and the prospect disturbed him more than he cared to admit.

Frowning, Loki stepped away from the window and continued to investigate the room; the grand foyer yielded nothing. It was in a small ballroom, tucked away between a garden and a vast dining hall, that Romanov happened upon a trap door. Hidden behind a curtain, the door was identifiable only by the hairline crack in the wall. A wave of magic temporarily disarmed any sensors, and together, the pair pried to entryway open. They followed a dark stairwell deeper into the castle, leading them to a massive steel door covered in locks and sensors. Romanov turned her headset on, announcing with no small relief, “We've found it.”

Unexpectedly, they received no response even after a minute had passed; Romanov frowned, opening her mouth to try again, but then Barton spoke hurriedly and out of breath. “Sorry, but we're a bit preoccupied right now, so just—” He cut himself off and swore; in the background, something
exploded. “Give me a minute.”

The line went dead. Romanov and Loki shared a concerned look, but the silence continued. Loki couldn't help but worry what was happening; the other group was functioning as bait, after all, drawing fire while he and Romanov located Doom's lab. He strained his ears, trying to pinpoint where the other group was in case they needed assistance, but could not ascertain anything in the chaos.

“They'll be fine,” he said to ease both of their minds. “In the meantime, we should try and figure out how to get pass this.”

Black Widow nodded, accepting the distraction, and they both stepped closer to be dwarfed by the expanse of thick steel. On the right side of the doorway was an array of sensors, some Loki recognized and some he did not. Romanov leaned in to get a closer look at them, and then she swore in Russian. “This is impossible to get through,” she declared, and Loki had a feeling that wasn't something the spy said often. “Retina scan, fingerprint reader, multiple digit codes, DNA scan... No amount of hacking can crack that.”

“Let me look,” Loki said, and Romanov backed up to let him through. The god rested his palm on the door, closing his eyes as he channeled magic through the metal, seeking out where the scanners connected to the door. He mentally prodded the defenses, but it only took a moment to confirm his fears; the door was more complex than even the Doombots. A little magic show would not be enough to force it open. He pulled back and shook his head. “Doom didn't cut any corners with this. If we're getting past that, it's not going to be the usual way.”

“I don't have explosives strong enough for something of that size,” Romanov said, observing the door with a keen eye. “I'd say it's probably three feet thick, with extra support around the edges, and most likely a reinforced steel alloy.” She turned to him. “Think you can get through that?”

Were Loki at full power, he could probably throw enough magic at the door to break it in (and send the rest of the castle down around their heads while he was at it), but with his core so low, he had to shake his head again. “Not like this.”

The speaker in Loki's ear suddenly crackled, and then Barton was saying, “Alright, 'Tasha. I can talk now. You've found Doom's lab?”

“Yeah, we're right in front of the door,” Romanov replied. “But it's a rank nine. We can't get through.”

Loki didn't know what 'rank nine' was supposed to mean, but by the way Barton said, “Well shit,” it couldn't be anything good. “Are there any other entrances?” the archer asked. “A less guarded back door maybe?”

“Didn't look like it. If there is another entrance, I doubt it’s going to be any better for us,” Romanov replied.

As they talked, Loki inspected the door again, this time taking into consideration the walls around it. If the door itself wasn't an option, they could always try to go around. Doom would not be so stupid as to leave the rest of his lab without any defense, but Loki doubted that the entire thing was surrounded by a three foot slab of steel. If that was the case, then the weakest point would be the widest section.

“Do you think there’s a room above the lab?” Loki asked.
“It looked like there was,” Romanov replied hesitantly, not quite sure what he was getting at, at then it clicked. “You want to break in from above.”

“If there’s not a door, make your own. Otherwise, I don’t see how we’re getting in there.”

“I guess nothing says ‘we’re here’ like an explosion,” Barton joked, but the more Loki thought about it, the more certain of the idea he became. Blasting their way in wouldn’t be any more noticeable than trying to hack through the door, and if they failed, they’d just try something else.

Mind made up, Loki headed back upstairs. Romanov went with him, and it turned out she was right; they ended up in a ballroom that stretched hundreds of feet from wall to wall. In the middle of the floor, ironically like a target, was a radial mosaic of the sun composed of yellow and orange tiles. Loki went to the center of the artwork and tapped the ground with his foot, listening to the vibrations. There was definitely steel beneath the regular floor, but it sounded half a foot thick at most.

“This should work,” he announced, turning on his headset. “There’s a ballroom between the garden in the entrance hall. We’ll be entering through there.”

“Sounds fun,” Barton said.

“We’re a couple minutes from your position,” Rogers added more helpfully. “The robots seem to have thinned out since we reached the main floor.”

“Doom could be planning something. Don’t let your guard down,” Loki warned.

“We won’t,” the captain assured, and the tone in which he said it made Loki think that Rogers knew exactly what thoughts had crossed his mind. “We’ll be there soon.” The god could faintly hear the other group moving through the castle, taking comfort in their proximity and the fact that the closest robots were in the opposite direction. History would not—could not—repeat itself today.

Refocusing on the task of breaking through the floor, Loki called up all of the magic he could spare and realized that there wasn’t enough for the spell he required. He faltered, knowing that he had to get through the steel but unsure of how. Conscious of Romanov’s scrutiny, Loki racked his brain for something that would reduce the necessary amount of magic.

The solution he came up with was even less desirable than overexerting his core. Yet he owed his best to the team, so Loki overcame his own disgust and motioned for Romanov to take a step back. Then, with his face deceptively neutral, the god reached past his magic and into the cold truth below. Frost began forming around Loki’s leather boots, and he tried to not think about how the flesh on his legs was turning blue, reverting back to its natural (monstrous) state. He pushed the cold farther, needing more than just a slight chill to make the steel below turn brittle, and Loki’s Jotun flesh spread in response.

The god knew on a rational level that Romanov could not see the flesh that had changed, hidden beneath layers of thick clothing, and yet he felt ashamed. She could not possibly know that the ice was different than his regular magic, but he felt as if her piercing eyes were gazing down into his barbaric heart and judging him.

Feeling his resolve slipping, Loki tried to redirect his internal hatred towards Doom. He dragged memories of everything Doom has done to the surface, focusing on the anger and not the disgrace. The frost gathering around his feet spilled outwards, seeping into the tile beneath him. It wasn’t enough, and Loki forced himself to delve even farther into his Jotun powers. Thin frost rose into spires of ice that crept up his clothes, and the cold pierced down into the steel. His tainted flesh expanded as well, the blue going past his waist towards his chest.
It was consuming him, revealing him. Monster, murderer. Abandoned and never meant to live, let alone have a throne. Poor, wretched Loki, unwanted by everyone, including-

A sudden clatter from below startled Loki from his spiraling thoughts. He heard robots shifting underneath the steel, and the patrol that had previously been moving away drew closer. While Doom could not see Loki, he was bound to notice the ice and figure out that someone was there. Seeing no more need for invisibility, Loki snapped the channel maintaining the spell. The freed magic immediately transformed itself into more ice, and the tiles under Loki creaked with the strain. Romanov stepped farther back as her breath came out in misty white puffs and frost lapped at her boots. Though he wanted to stop, Loki kept going, freezing the metal as cold as he could; blue crawled down his arms and up to his collar bone.

Then, just before the transformation reached Loki’s hands and neck, the god could feel the crystal lattices within the steel become rigid. Wasting no more time, he halted the flow of his magic and shattered the ice that entrapped his legs. Massive chunks tumbled to the floor, splintering into hundreds of pieces that slid across the tiles. Loki took a step back, leaving the center of the chill and letting his skin become pale white once again.

Gathering what little magic he could allow himself, Loki held his palms over the spot he had just vacated. As the energy built up, he heard Tony's group enter the adjoined hall to the east while guards enter the one to the west. Fortunately, the Avengers were closer; they rushed into the room just as the magic in Loki's hands pulsed, concentrating to an explosive level.

“Stand back!” the god shouted as he fought to keep control over the raging energy. Startled, the team skidded to a halt, and once they realized what he was attempting, they backed up to the wall. Even though the roaring magic demanded his attention, Loki couldn’t help but glance quickly over at Tony, needing to see that he was okay. Iron Man's armor was dented and charred, and it appeared that he was favoring his left leg, but most of the damage was superficial.

The magic in Loki’s hands bucked wildly, almost escaping his control. He swore and returned his concentration to it, manipulating the direction so the blast aimed down at the floor. Then, when the magic began to explode outwards, he let it go; the whole room shuddered violently, causing the chandeliers to fall and tiles to smash upon the ground. Beneath Loki’s feet, the floor collapsed inwards, and the frozen steel screeched as magic tore is asunder.

Loki, standing at the epicenter of destruction, tried to step away from the gaping hole before him, but his feet slid against loose tile fragments, causing him to stumble as the ruin spread outwards. Too late he recognized his mistake; the steel supporting him bent downwards and, with a startled cry, he plunged into darkness. Above him, his teammates shouted in alarm, and then their voices were drowned out as Loki and hundreds of pounds of debris collided with the floor.

Dust choked the air, and Loki pried himself to his feet, chunks of cement sliding from his back. He coughed, squinting his eyes against the smoke. Glowing red dots pierced the fog surrounding him, and Loki tensed. Raising his hands defensively, he took a step back—right into the chest of a Doombot.

With no time to think, the god dropped to the ground and lightning crackled over his head. Loki called his magic (which was dwindling rapidly) forward and spun around, shoving his hand up through the robot's torso. The Doombot exploded, shoving the god onto his back and knocking the wind from his lungs. He gasped for air, breathing in the particles that had yet to settle, and stared up at the surrounding Doombots. All of their weapons were pointed at him.

The next thing Loki knew, Tony was between him and the robots, blasting them away. The god blinked, surprised, and then he hastily scrambled onto his feet to lash out at the Doombots that had
been approaching Tony's blind spot. Together, they pushed back against the machines, watching each other's back as they fought.

However, they were vastly outnumbered, and for every robot that went down, two more took its place. Loki was forced to retreat until his back collided with Tony's, and then he flung anything he could—magic, knives, chunks of cement—at the enemy, but they were undeterred. From the hole in the ceiling, the other Avengers attempted to help, but they were preoccupied with the guards that had come from the west wing. A few times, one of them could break away from their own fight long enough to tackle the swarm overtaking Tony and Loki; Barton fired an arrow into a robot that was trying to electrocute Loki, and Romanov shot at a Doombot that had tried to get in between the two. But their efforts were ultimately ineffectual; Loki and Tony were absolutely covered in robots. The god pressed even closer against Tony, doing his best to protect the man even as he struggled to keep upright. His foot slid, and a bullet whizzed past his ear to ricochet off Iron Man's armor.

“Loki! Stark!” Roger’s yelled, throwing his shield into the mass only to have it rebound. Doombots rose into the air, blocking off the rest of the Avengers. Tony swore, and Loki, getting desperate, considered grabbing Tony and teleporting away, abandoning the rest of their team. He was in the middle of debating how much trouble that would get him in—and whether or not he could even stomach making a decision like that—when the glowing hand aimed point-blank at his head abruptly went dark. For one horrifying instant, Loki thought the shot had been fired and braced for the pain. When his brain didn't erupt in blinding white light, the god realized that the Doombot was crashing to the ground, deactivated. A quick scan revealed that the other robots were also shutting down, toppling over like broken marionettes. “...What?” Loki breathed, bewildered. “Why did they stop?”

Tony made some strained, gasping noise, and the god's heart stopped before he realized that the man was laughing. “I didn’t actually think that would work,” Tony said, sounding on the verge of hysteria.

Loki craned his neck to look at the man, making sure to keep the Doombots in his peripheral vision, and was surprised to see that the Dragon Slayer had been shoddily attached to the base of Iron Man's neck. The device certainly hadn't been there when they had arrived, and Loki hadn't even realized that the man brought it with him. The god was about to comment when a slow clap startled him from his thoughts.

Startled, Loki whirled around until he was elbow to elbow with Tony, who raised a glowing palm to illuminate the darkness. They simultaneously tensed as what appeared to be a Doombot stepped into the light, head tilted as it regarded them and continued to applause mockingly; watching it approach, Loki had no doubts that this time they were facing Doom himself.

Doom came to a stop mere feet in front of them, his posture exuding confidence. Rage surged through Loki, and he nearly caved into the blind desire to attack Doom right then — make him suffer for everything he's done — but the god held himself back. Aggravating as it was, there had to be a reason for that confidence, and Loki was all too aware that they were the ones at a disadvantage.

“I, Victor von Doom, must admit you have exceeded Doom's expectations in getting this far,” the supervillain said, making a show of looking Loki up and down in disdain before dragging his gaze to Tony and narrowing his eyes. “Doom was certain he killed you.”

A growl started deep in Loki's throat, and his arms glowed poisonous green. At his side, Tony stiffened. “And I was certain you finally became smart enough to stop using third-person, but it looks like we were both wrong,” the man replied, squaring his shoulders against Doom's glare.
Doom chuckled mirthlessly, his eyes venomous behind his mask. “Doom must admit he expected them to send others to his castle, but Doom shall destroy you all the same. No one can beat-”

Suddenly an arrow whistled through the hole in the ceiling, heading for Doom's eye socket, but before it could sink through flesh, the bolt was intercepted; a crackling field of electricity formed around the villain, flinging the arrow backwards. The expression in Doom's eyes was murderous, and he raised his head to glare at Barton, who was still aiming his bow at the villain's head. Barton swallowed nervously and shrugged.

“I've never been a big fan of villain monologues,” he said, taking a step back and reaching for his gun.

Despite the affront, Doom did not attack the archer; instead, he raised his arms dramatically and said, “You think you can defeat Doom? I dare you to try again.” There was neither a reply nor another arrow; everyone watched the supervillain warily, unsure of what to do next. Trying to take advantage of the lull, Loki scrutinized Doom's armor, searching for the source of the force-field. He found nothing.

“Doom is vastly powerful,” the villain crowed, bolstered at their lack of retaliation. “Underestimate Doom and you will be killed.” Then Doom turned slowly to Loki, and, upon catching the god inspecting his armor, lowered his hands. “And you, wizard,” Doom said coldly, “Doom has been watching you. Do you honestly believe that you are the only one capable of magic?” Loki did not answer, but apparently Doom wasn't waiting for one; he continued, “Doom won't be beaten by pesky parlor tricks,” his glare slid over to Tony, “nor by having his own devices turned against him.” Doom's eyes landed on Iron Man's neck; more specifically, the Dragon Slayer attached there. “You thought that Doom did not prepare for your tricks?”

Doom's tone, threatening and self-assured, caused Loki to bristle, but under his wrath, uncertainty stirred. What was Doom planning? He didn't know, and so while Loki glowed brighter, green magic oozing to the ground, he continued to stay his hand.

Looking from Tony to Loki, Doom said, “The two of you have been a great nuisance. It’s time you learn what happens to those who try to outsmart me. Doom thinks it is only fitting to use magic to reclaim his technology.”

At first, Loki could not comprehend the man’s cryptic words. He frowned when he sensed a foreign magic stirring, but when he spun around to pinpoint the source, there wasn't one; the magic ghosted directionless through the air, tainted with malevolence.

And then, without warning, the energy coalesced. It flared right beside Loki, and, expecting an attack, he whirled around... only to see Tony, looking just as confused as he felt. The god’s eyes fell to the man's neck, and he froze with thick dread pooling in his stomach. The Dragon Slayer, fastened tightly to Iron Man, was seething with unbridled energy.

“What does he mean to you, sorcerer?” Doom’s asked gloatingly, and the last piece of the puzzle slid into place; Loki knew what Doom had done, but by then, he was too late to change anything.

“Tony!” Loki shouted, reaching for the man, but electricity exploded outwards from the Dragon Slayer, lacing through the suit in white hot arcs. Loki’s hands gripped the metal just as it become charged; both he and Tony screamed.

Forced to let go, the god was once again helpless to watch Tony fall.
Shoulder brushing Loki's, Tony remained tense and wary as Vicky spewed some cryptic master plan at them. While the supervillain continued to boast, Tony wanted nothing more than to blast him to kingdom come, but he was unsure if he even could. Barton’s arrow had been useless... maybe if Tony tried something with a bit more fire power?

Iron Man lowered his gaze to the lifeless robots that collapsed around them, and then his eyes rose to take in the vast lab expanding around them. They were trapped in the depths of Doom's 'evil lair'. Accordingly, Tony was certain they needed a more refined plan of attack than just ‘attack’ if they wanted to get out alive.

Loki stood anxiously by his side, skin washed in the light of his own magic. As Doom threatened them, the god grew brighter—almost like a green sun—and Tony tried to ignore the panic settling in. They outnumbered Doom five to one (unless you counted the robots, which made it five versus fifty, but the Dragon Slayer took care of that problem) and had defeated him before. How was now any different?

Apparenty, Tony thought that too soon, because just as Doom finished declaring that he’d turn their technology against them, Loki randomly spun around to stare at nothing. Tony was about to voice his confusion, say something silly to ease his fear, when a warning light flashed onto the HUD. Feeling like he was missing something important, Tony frowned at the notice—'power malfunction'—and Loki spun again to stare at him in terror. No, Tony realized with his heart clambering up his throat, the god was staring at the Dragon Slayer.

“What does he mean to you, sorcerer?”

Blood rushing through his ears, Tony began to reach up for the device, not sure what was happening but knowing without a doubt that he needed to get it off.

“Tony!”

And then there was nothing but agony.

Someone replaced his blood with searing lava, letting it burn through his veins and corrode his bones. Every nerve came alive with unimaginable agony; Tony was writhing on the ground without realizing he had fallen. He screamed and screamed, thrashing desperately to get the inferno out, but nothing eased the pain.

Disembodied voices echoed around him, washed out by the mind-shattering blaze coursing through him. Only the words shouted directly in his ear — “Sir, the suit has reached a fatal level of electricity!” — made sense, then that too became indistinguishable. The pain reached a crescendo, shrieking in his mind and body, until suddenly everything went silent; even his screams, which he could still feel tearing his throat, vanished.

Beneath the arc reactor, Tony’s heart pumped once, twice, and then it too was consumed. His last thought before everything went black was, ‘I don’t want to die’.

For an indeterminable amount of time, Tony didn’t think anything. His mind was gone, lost in a sea of nothingness. But then slowly, so slowly he didn’t notice at first, the world returned with a golden glow. Warmth — this time soothing and not blistering — washed through his raw nerves until the agony faded into nothing more than a dull ache. When the golden light faded, he was left in a limbo between life and death where there was no fear, just peace. He thought that if this was what death felt like... well, he could get used to it. Could use some beer or something, but it wasn’t terrible. It was actually kind of nice...
“Stark! Shit, we need to get him out of this armor!”

“Stark, can you hear me? Tony!”

“Damn it, what did Doom do to him?”

The sensation of drifting was replaced by that of being shaken, and the darkness around him began to crack, letting in streaks of red. The ache in his limbs increased along with the glimpses of color, nowhere near as painful as before but not completely gone, either. Feeling as if he’s had a run in with a pick-up truck — and he would know; it’s actually happened before — Tony groaned loudly, the last of the serene nothingness slipping from his grasp.

“Oh my god, he’s still alive.”

“Tony! Tony, can you hear me? We’re going to get you out of there. Just hang on.”

“I’ve contacted SHIELD. They’re sending an emergency quinjet to us.”

With another groan, Tony pried his eyes open, but all he saw was red. It took him a moment to realize that it wasn’t blood but the inside of his helmet, broadcasting a system overload.

“Tony, are you listening to me?” one of the incessant voices repeated, and this time, Tony's brain attached the sound to a name: Steve Rogers.

“Yeah,” he grumbled in reply, though with his throat raw, the word came out as an unintelligible rasp. Tony swallowed and tried again. “Can’t a man get some sleep around here?”

Rogers laughed tremulously. “We thought you were dead,” he said, relief warring with the lingering terror in his voice. “Doom did something and you... you just started screaming, and Loki—”

Loki. Tony started at the name, sluggish brain kicking into action. “Loki. Where is he?” he asked, trying to sit up, but none of his limbs move. After a brief moment of panic — ‘Oh shit, I'm paralyzed. I'm paralyzed.’ — he realized that it was the suit that had locked up, not his body.

Which was a relief, but he really needed to get up, especially after Barton informed him, “Your girlfriend is fighting Doom right now. He's making quite a mess of the lab, actually.”

Now that Tony was listening for it—he wasn't sure how he had missed it in the first place—he could hear a cacophony of shattering glass, shrieking metal, roaring thunder, and plenty of other destructive sounds that he couldn't identify. But that was all he heard; there was nothing in the chaos that told him if Loki was winning or horribly wounded.

“Jarvis,” he rasped, needing to see what was happening with his own eyes, “Initiate sequence 5882.”

The world abruptly went dark, the eerie red glow of the HUD turning off, and then after a few seconds—which lasted an eternity, especially when an explosion shook the lab—the screen lit back up, this time a soft blue. Lines of code ran across the screen as the system rebooted, and finally Tony regained control over the suit. He instantly lurched forwards, but he only got halfway into a sitting position before black dots danced before his eyes. His arms gave out under him, and his torso crashed back into the ground; above him, Barton and Rogers squabbled and fretted.

As Tony forcefully blinked away the darkness, Jarvis spoke up. “I am glad to see that you are not dead, sir. Your expected survival rate was at zero percent. It seems I made a miscalculation.”

Like a train, Tony's brain screeched to a halt, thoughts smashing into each other until his mind
derailed. Only one thought remained: he wasn't dead. *He wasn't dead.*

In a flash, he remembered burning agony in his veins, tearing his body apart without mercy. He had felt himself die, felt his heart stop beating, so why wasn't he dead?

Memories echoed through his mind: “*With the proper spell, Idunn’s apple can grant immortality to the one who consumes it.*” “*I know my brother did you wrong, but I beseech you not to hate him for it.*” “*Loki made me immortal.*”

*Loki.*

“Shit,” Tony swore, at a loss for anything else to say to describe the war of emotions within. “*Shit.*”

“Sir?” Jarvis asked in concern.

“I'm an idiot,” Tony continued to babble, not listening to the AI. “An absolute moron. I can't believe it took almost dying to- well, yes I can, because he's stupid too, but oh god, I fucked that up.”

“Sir!”

“Not know, Jarvis,” the man said, immersed in an epiphany. Because he nearly died. Not in a 'I got horribly wounded but rush me to a hospital and I'll be fine' sort of nearly died, but the *dead* sort of nearly died. There would have been be no more Iron Man, no more Tony Stark. Pepper would never have seen him again, and he didn't even say goodbye to her. Everything would have been over in that moment, completely and irreversibly over, were it not for the apple — for Loki. For his betrayal.

“Tony, are you okay? Do you need medical help?” Rogers asked, crowding into Tony's personal space, but the man shrugged him off; he had to see Loki, talk to him, and sort out the mess of emotions in his head.

“I'm fine,” he snapped, pushing Rogers' hand away. “Stop acting like my mother.” Steve pulled away, expression hurt, and Tony felt guilty, especially when Captain America didn't defend himself like he normally would (the fact that Tony had almost died was probably responsible for that). “How long have I been out?” Tony asked, softening his tone; it was as close to an apology as he was going to give.

The frown on Rogers' face eased. “About twenty minutes,” he answered.

“What?” Tony shouted and once again tried to get to his feet; this time, the captain reached down to help, hauling Tony up. The man swayed but managed to not collapse.

Twenty minutes Loki had been fighting Doom while Tony just laid around. His eyes immediately sought out the god, and he located him on the other side of the room in the middle of decapitating a Doombot with a massive blade of ice. The entire lab between Loki and Tony was absolutely *destroyed*, with crushed machines spewing plumes of smoke and massive columns of ice melting onto the floor. It was easy to see why; Loki was going berserk, launching himself at robot after robot in an effort to get at Doom, who was standing as far as possible from the pillars and spikes of ice that rained down on his forces.

However, the fight was not one sided, and Tony flinched when Loki failed to dodge a streak of lightning and jolted in pain. “Why is no one helping him?” the man asked, aghast.

Barton actually snorted, and Tony glared at him; the archer lifted his hands in surrender. “Believe me, we tried,” he defended, “but he wasn't having it. I got hit more by that ice of his than I got
attacked by Doombots. Besides, he seems to be handling things well, at least for the most part.”

While Tony could see what the archer meant—Loki was going at Doom with an almost disturbing ferocity, unaware of his surroundings as he rampaged—there was one thing Barton was forgetting: Loki was Tony's friend, and regardless of if he has been pissed at the god, there was no way in hell Tony was going to leave him to fight alone.

He stepped from the corner (they must have moved him while he was unconscious, because the massive hole Loki made in the ceiling was over a hundred feet away) and towards the battle, but a hand shot out to grab his wrist.

“Wait,” Rogers said. “Are you sure you should be going out there? You almost died. Maybe you should sit this one out.”

“I'm fine,” Tony insisted. “You're making it sound worse than it was. The suit just overloaded and I blacked out. No big deal.” Except for that was a total lie and, were it not for that golden glow — the apple — it would have been a huge deal.

“Tony...” Rogers began, clearly not believing a word the man had just said. “I think you should let us handle this. None of us will let anything bad happen to Loki.”

“You're just sitting around,” Tony accused, eyes inevitably drawn to the god, and he watched as Loki continued to fight tooth and nail against an army of Doombots.

“We were protecting you,” Romanov said, speaking up for the first time. Tony turned towards her, but she did not look over at him, instead keeping a vigilant eye on the hoard of robots. “That's why Loki didn't want us to join him and why we listened.” As she spoke, a Doombot veered towards their position, and Romanov lifted her gun in warning. It kept getting closer; she put a bullet in its eye and reloaded for another go. Surprised, Tony glanced over at Rogers and Barton and noticed that they too were prepared to fight, Captain America with his shield raised protectively and Hawkeye with his last arrow drawn.

“Oh...” Tony said, feeling at once annoyed by their protectiveness and touched by their support. But either way, he had to go help Loki. What the rest of them did was their choice. Tugging his arm free of Rogers' hold, Tony said, “You can't keep me here. I'll be fine.”

Another explosion made the floor tremble, and Tony's head darted up to see Loki jumping over the tip of the ice spear he had just impaled into an expensive looking machine. The god's movements resembled a dancer more than a warrior, and he twisted around another pillar to dodge a strike of lightning before slashing at the robot and sending it careening to the floor.

Iron Man began moving in the direction of the battle, not stopping even when Rogers called, “I still don't think this is a good idea!”

“Then stay there!” Tony shouted back as he scoped out the least dangerous route between him and Loki.

He started forwards, and he could hear Barton commenting loudly, “You know, he's pretty bossy for a guy who nearly died.”

Tony just flipped him off and continued forwards, even when Rogers mused, “Does this mean he's not angry with Loki anymore? What was that all about, anyway?”

“Beats me. I think they're both insane. So are you staying over here or...”
Their conversation was drowned out by the rancor of battle, and Tony focused on the Doombots that were splitting off towards him. There were four of them, and Tony braced himself. His repulsor whirred to life, and once they were closer, he brandished his palm and incinerated them.

“Huh,” Tony said, glancing down at his still fizzling palm; he had expected a scanty blast, not an outpouring of electricity.

“Sir, the energy influx restored the suit to maximum power,” Jarvis informed him, and Tony whistled.

“How 'bout that.” He let loose a few more superpowered beams, razing down any machines that happened to survive Loki passing through. He was initially confused to see that there were whole Doombot corpses lying on the ground, left undetonated, and then he realized that Doom probably had more pressing concerns than wasting the downed robots — like not getting his ass handed to him by a pissed off god and, once Tony got over there, a pissed off man in a can.

Tony shot the support column out from under some convoluted device, and a ton of metal rammed through the floor tiles. The boom echoed loudly through the lab, finally catching Loki's attention. The god halted his destruction long enough to look over at the noise. He started when he saw Tony, and relief blossomed underneath Loki's twisted visage of rage. But then the relief was replaced by something darker, something indecipherable, and Loki clenched his jaw; he did not call out to Tony — neither to say he was happy Tony was alright nor to argue with his presence.

Now, though, Tony understood that Loki's silence did not mean he was frustrated with him. That assumption was crafted by Tony's own rage, not the god's actions. No, Loki had stayed his distance because he honestly thought that Tony wanted nothing to do with him. Ashamed of his previous treatment of the god (though it had not been completely unjustified), Tony was the one to extend the olive branch this time.

“What? You're having a party without me?” he asked, and Loki froze as if that was the last thing he had expected Tony to do.

The god opened his mouth to speak, but before he could get a single word out, he had to suddenly twist to the side, narrowly avoiding a lightning arc; multiple Doombots began firing at them, taking advantage of their distraction, and Loki hastily erected a wall of ice. Tony dove behind the offered shelter, escaping the thick of bullets and crouching down besides Loki.

Being at Loki's side — actually by his side and not just standing close because he had to — made Tony realize just how much he had missed the god — his friend — these past two weeks. The chasm between them had sucked the spirit from their lives until Tony had been simply going through the motions, distracting himself from the emptiness. And even though he was still conflicted, still furious that Loki had lied to him, he felt at peace for the first time since learning the truth. The grip of death on his mind sparked an epiphany, a glimmer of hope, and Tony clung to that; he wanted to forgive Loki and have his friend back.

Tony relished in the fact that were it not for the apple, given without permission, he would have died; it was the exact opposite of what Stane had done. This time, there would be no cave, no Afghanistan, no ripping the arc reactor from his chest. All there had been was a warm golden glow, taking the pain away and giving him another chance.

Needing Loki to know that Tony did not hate him, had never really hated him, the man spoke over the sound of crashing and crackling. “I’m still mad that you didn’t tell me first, but... thank you for saving my life.”
Loki, who had been trying to ignore Tony but doing an awful job of it, turned to him. The emotion on the god’s face changed from shock, to joy, to guilt, to sorrow, and ended on a mix of all four. “I am sorry,” the god said once again, and this time, Tony believed him. “And I’m glad you’re not dead.”

A grin snuck onto Tony’s lips. “You and me both.”

Something heavy collided with the ice at their backs, and the impact shoved Loki and Tony to the ground; above them, the wall crumbled, raining frozen crystals down on their heads and revealing a hoard of Doombots. Simultaneously, Loki and Tony rolled to their feet and fired at the robots, forcing them back. When there was a lull in the battle, Tony said, “We’ll talk when we get home, yeah? Right now probably isn’t the best time.”

“Certainly,” Loki agreed, and their conversation ceased, replaced with the heat of battle. Without needing to speak, they came together and began to take down the remaining robots. Ten went down to six, six went down to five, then to three, and then at last there was only one: Doom.

The supervillain stood across from them, glaring out from under his mask, but his confidence was shaken; there was no army to protect him now. However, that didn't stop him from posturing, and he professed, “Do not think you have defeated Doom. You will still be crushed beneath my power.”

“What ‘power’?” Tony asked, stepping forwards with his repulsor raised threateningly. “You mean your little show back there? Because news flash: it didn't work.” Iron Man's mask hid his wince as his nerves remembered catching on fire. “Face it, you've lost.”

“Doom has other plans,” the villain proclaimed, eyes darting nervously around his ruined laboratory. “You will all perish.”

Tired of having death threats made against him, Tony growled, “Screw this,” and his palm flared blue. But before he could fire, Loki was suddenly between him and Doom, his expression murderous. Tony quickly aborted the repulsor blast, and he watched with a frown as the god stood menacingly in front of him.

“You have overstepped your bounds,” Loki hissed, clenching his fist tightly at his side like that was all he could do to not attack right then. “Doom is the one who will perish today.” He stepped forwards, movement like a tightly coiled snake ready to lash out in an instant. “You like grand speeches? Fine. But now I have one for you.” As he spoke, Loki never raised his voice, instead speaking in a low, steady growl. He continued to stalk forwards, and with each step he took, Doom took one backwards.

“I am Loki of Midgard, and you have made a grievous mistake: you tried to kill Tony, not once but twice. So now...” The god grinned, razor-edged and ruthless. “Now I'll return the favor and make you regret ever setting foot outside of your castle.”

Doom retreated farther and farther until he reached the wall, and still Loki continued advancing, neither quickening nor slowing. Beginning to panic (apparently Doom wasn't as good at receiving threats as he was giving them) the villain shot a bolt of lightening from his palm. Loki met the attack with a shield of ice that shattered into snow; he didn't even break his stride.

Watching the god, Tony was torn about whether or not he should intervene. Loki certainly had the situation under control, exuding power with a fierce glint in his eyes, but... There was no doubt in Tony's mind that Loki meant to murder Doom, and that just did not sit right with the man. While the Avengers occasionally killed people in the line of duty, what Loki sought was not justice: it was revenge.
Almost upon Doom, Loki deflected another lightning blast as if it was nothing more than a mere nuisance. Doom, growing increasingly nervous as Loki came for him, made one last desperate bid. “Surely Stark's intelligence is not worthy of a mage of your skills. Join Doom and together-”

That was Loki's breaking point; he lunged the remaining distance, reaching for Doom's throat. Just like before, a force field appeared around the man, but the god ignored it and slammed his palm against the crackling blue energy. Electricity shot through Loki's hand, yet the god's murderous expression showed no hint of pain; with disturbing apathy, he summoned his own lightning, and as the arcing bolts collided with Doom's shield, the energy fluctuated out of control.

Shouting in pain, Doom stumbled back, his force field fizzing out around him. Lightning continued to radiate from Loki's skin, and in that moment, Tony thought he looked more like the God of Thunder than Thor ever had. The god's features, illuminated by the flickering electricity, became even more menacing.

Realizing that he picked the wrong Norse deity to piss off, Doom scrambled to pull a gun from under his cape and aimed it at the god. Alarmed, Tony began to rush forwards, but Loki had already reacted; just as Doom fired, Loki dived beneath Doom's outstretched arm and—with a move that would make Romanov proud—seized the man's wrist. Then the god twisted, snapping something in Doom's arm; the man screamed in both agony and rage, his other arm futilely trying to pry Loki off.

The god was nonplussed by Doom's struggling and grabbed his second arm, holding it still with almost no effort. In one violent, effortless motion, Loki tossed the villain to ground and pulled his arms up behind his back. With Doom forced to his knees, Loki bent down to hiss in his ear, “You are nothing.”

Ice clambered onto Loki's skin, tuning splotches of his flesh blue, and began to creep onto Doom's armor. As the ice built up, a collar freezing around the villain's neck and tendrils reaching up towards his eyes, Tony was disturbed by the scene's familiarity; his mind flashed back to when Loki had fought Thor, driven out of his mind by fury and guilt, and he knew he could not let the god continue.

“Loki!” Tony shouted just like he had on that day, but also like on that day, the ice did not stop.

Tony feared that the god was too far gone in the maelstrom of his own wrath, but then he noticed that the ice had changed course. Instead of trying to suffocate Doom, the ice slunk around the villains joints and froze his limbs in place. Once Doom was thoroughly imprisoned, Loki freed his hands from the ice, the blue fading away. “I wouldn't recommend trying to escape,” the god murmured, mocking and belligerent.

To add insult to injury, Loki then ripped Doom's mask from his face, revealing the scarred flesh beneath. The man snarled at the god, tugging at his restraints but unable to break free. Loki returned his hateful glare, every nuance of his body language screaming that he wanted to do worse, but the other Avengers drew closer, and the god wrenched himself away.

“Nice of you to join the party,” Tony said in greeting, and Barton just shrugged.

“We figured you two could handle it. Beside, 'Tasha and I ran out of ammo. We wouldn't have been much help anyway.” The archer stared down at Doom, a frown on his lips, before glancing around the destroyed lab. “So I take it we're done here? The bad guy has been defeated and his castle destroyed.” He returned to looking at Doom, stepping forwards to investigate the ice restraints that held him to the ground. “Will those actually hold?”

“He can't escape,” Loki affirmed, coming to stand beside Tony. “It’s over.” From the amount of relief in the god's voice, poorly cloaked beneath nonchalance, Tony knew Loki didn’t just mean the
battle against Doom.

Barton either didn't catch the double meaning of Loki's words or chose to ignore it, because he clapped his hands and said, “Sweet. Let's get out of here before anyone else shows up to complicate things.”

The archer glanced over at Loki as if to say, 'well, come on already', but the good shook his head. “I cannot teleport us out of here. I... overexerted my magic fighting Doom.” Loki's tone was dismissive, but Tony, knowing what magical exhaustion did to the god, studied him closely; sure enough, Loki’s limbs were trembling and sweat shimmered on his brow.

“No problem,” Tony said cheerfully, drawing the team's attention away from Loki's fatigue. “SHIELD still has a jet en route, right?” Romanov nodded. “So we'll just hitch a ride back to the Helicarrier. I seriously doubt the castle's anti-aircraft field is still working after all the remodeling we did in here.”

Nodding again, Romanov stepped away from the group and began speaking quietly into her headset, relaying the change in plans. Seeing nothing else that needed to be done, Tony wandered over to a smashed control panel and plopped down against a relatively undamaged section. Now that Loki was safe and his adrenaline was fading, Tony could feel reminders of the electricity's passage through his body: his muscles twinged and, beneath the arc reactor, his heart fluttered strangely.

After a moment of hesitation, Loki sat down less than gracefully beside Tony. With a groan, the god let his head slump bonelessly back against the metal panel. Tony snorted. “I guess we're both a mess, huh?” he asked, settling back to watch the other Avengers mill about the lab.

Loki lifted his head, glancing over at Tony in concern. “Are you still in pain?”

Tony had the feeling that if he said yes, the god would try to heal him right then, regardless of the fact that Loki was absolutely wasted. He shook his head. “Nah, I just feel a bit off. It's going away, though.” The god frowned and scrutinized Tony, but the man wasn't lying; he felt fine, more or less. Placated, Loki let his head fall back again.

“The apple is not perfect,” the god murmured. “If you don’t think you’ve healed properly, tell me.” Then Loki fell silent, closing his eyes as he rested against the metal panel. Tony watched him, and while ire stirred in his mind, it lacked strength. Loki was an idiot, but he wasn't cruel, and that distinction kept Tony from growing furious.

Though the man had expected Loki to continue on the topic of immortality, he didn’t. Whether it was because the god didn’t want to risk ruining their meager peace or if he really was so tired that he couldn’t talk about it, Tony didn't know. Maybe it was a bit of both. Either way, Tony couldn't let the elephant in the room remain any longer. “I understand now why you did it,” he said, and Loki glanced over at him, surprised. “Don't get me wrong; I am furious you betrayed my trust, but…” Tony clenched his fist as he remembered the electricity in his veins, searing him in a way that Loki's betrayal never could. “I understand why you did it.”

“I'm not afraid of dying.” What a load of crap that was. He was terrified of dying.

Compelled to defend his actions, Loki said, “It was never my intention to cause you harm. I hadn't realized...” The god hesitated, and then he admitted, “Pepper told me about Stane.” Incredulous, Tony turned his head to glare at the god, but Loki calmly explained, “She wanted me to understand why you were reacting so badly, and I get it now. You're right that what I did was selfish, and I should have talked to you first.”
“You think?” Tony replied, but while his words were harsh, they lacked the same bite as before.

Silence fell upon them again; Loki had practically passed out against the machine, and Tony alternated between watching the god and checking on the rest of the team. It wasn't until Romanov announced that a quinjet was only a few minutes away that the two roused, though it took Loki considerably longer to open his eyes and drag himself to his feet. Whatever rage that had been keeping the god going had all but left him, and Tony kept close to Loki as he shambled over to where Doom was frozen to the floor.

The villain watched Loki closely, narrowing his eyes when the god put a hand on the ice and shattered the pillars holding him down. When Rogers, who had been hovering on the side and giving both Tony and Loki his best mother-hen look, reached down to drag Doom to his feet, the supervillain spoke for the first time since his humiliating defeat.

“You will be ruined,” he vowed fervently; Loki gazed expressionlessly back at him. “If not by Doom, then someone else. But you will fall.”

“I'd suggest saving the threats for people weaker than you,” Loki replied dispassionately, and Rogers began to pull Doom towards the exit. The man struggled in the captain's grasp, and Romanov pointed a gun at his head.

“Continue resisting and I will shoot you,” she said, and he surrendered with a growl. Captain America and Black Widow escorted Doom through the wreckage, shoving him forwards whenever he slowed his pace.

Tony made to follow them, but after a few feet, he realized that Loki wasn't walking with him. He turned to see the god standing in the exact same spot, looking dead on his feet. Sighing, Tony went back to him and nudged the his shoulder.

“Hey,” he said, and Loki started, raising exhausted eyes to meet his. Beneath the mask, Tony allowed himself the smallest of smiles; they would be okay. “Come on, princess. Let's go home.”
When the Devil Collects His Due

"I'll sing it one last time for you, then we really have to go. You've been the only thing that's right in all I've done. And I can barely look at you, but every single time I do, I know we'll make it anywhere away from here..."

Even if you cannot hear my voice, I'll be right beside you dear... Have heart, my dear. We're bound to be afraid, Even if it's just for a few days, making up for all this mess."

-Run by Snow Patrol

-o-o-o-

Metal clattered as Tony distractedly rummaged through his toolbox while his other hand joined two pipes together. Thick muck oozed around his fingers, dripping down his wrist and splattering on his shirt. He exclaimed in triumph when his hand closed around the clamp, and he tugged it free from the entanglement of tools. Slowly edging his hand back from the split in the pipe, he set the clamp into position. Then he groped around for the wrench he had set down a minute ago and began to tighten a bolt on the other side of the clamp. As he worked, an old rock song blared from the speakers, drowning out the clamor he was making. Tony bobbed his head with the tune, pausing only to check that everything was aligned before continuing. Once the bolt was tightened, he tossed the wrench to the side and began to undo the clamp.

Someone knocked on the hood of the car, the impact reverberating through the vehicle, and Tony started; his hand slipped from the pipes, and black gunk spewed all over him. "Damn it," he swore, trying to close the pipes with slick fingers. His vision was obscured by the oil that fell onto his goggles. There was another knock on the car, taunting him, and Tony scowled. "Give me a minute!" he shouted over the music.

Tony grabbed the filter he had pulled out from between the pipes and tried to reattach it, cursing himself for not cleaning out the pipes beforehand. He just had to try out a new idea right that second and couldn't wait five minutes; now he'd spend even longer than that trying to get the slick out of his hair, and he'd smell like an auto shop for a week.

Finally, the piece slid into place, but when Tony fumbled around trying to find the wrench again, it wasn't anywhere to be found. "Blasted wrench," he muttered, about to say 'screw it' and let the car vomit oil all over his garage, when something hard collided with his head. He yelped, twisting his head around, and the wrench sat innocently on the ground beside him; from the other side of the car, he swore he could hear faint chuckling. Grumbling to himself, Tony snatched the tool and fastened the filter into place.

After he checked that everything was in place and the flow from the pipes ebbed, Tony dragged himself out from under the car with a scowl on his face. He came face to face with bare feet, and when he raised his head, he saw Loki sitting on the trunk of his expensive Audi. The god looked down at Tony with an amused expression on his face. Only the tiniest twitch of the god's mouth betrayed the trepidation that lay beneath the mask.

At the sight of Loki, Tony's annoyance lightened into something fonder. "You're going to crush my car doing that," he stated as he yanked off his filthy goggles. Loki just hummed, making no move to get off of the poor car, and Tony petulantly chucked the dripping eyewear at the god.
Loki caught the goggles and smiled, seeming far more pleased than he should have. “Dum-E!” the god called, and from the direction of the lab, the robot chirped and barreled into the garage. Loki waggled the goggles for Dum-E to see before throwing them back at the engineer. “Tony needs you to clean the mess he made.”

Dum-E squealed and shot forwards, all five hundred pounds of machine bearing down on Tony. The man yelped and scrambled to his feet, clinging to the car's bumper as his feet slipped on the oil. He glared at the god, who chuckled at his predicament. Warmth spread through Tony's chest at seeing the god happy, chasing away some of the lurking ire. It was hard to be angry at the god when he looked at peace for once.

Having mercy, Loki grabbed Tony's arm and teleported them to the other side of the garage. Somewhere between point A and point B, the oil that had covered Tony disappeared as well, and he frowned slightly. “You sure you should be rolling out the magic tricks already? Not that I mind being clean again, but you weren't doing so hot earlier.”

“I am fine,” Loki said, turning and heading towards the lab. “Sleeping restored most of my reserves.”

Jogging to catch up, Tony joked, “You know, you sleep like a brick when you're all magicked out. Mumble to yourself, too. It's a shame you weren't speaking in English by that point.”

“I imagine I wouldn't have made much sense even then,” the god said wryly, and then the grin slipped from his face. “What about you? Are you still feeling strange?”

“Nope. I feel normal...” Tony trailed off, and like a switch, the atmosphere went from playful to serious. “Considering that I should be dead.” He stopped walking, and when Loki glanced back at him, he stared the god straight in the eyes. “Tell me, what can kill me now? If it’s too late to back out of this immortality thing, then I want to know exactly what you’ve gotten me in to.”

Tony felt inexplicably guilty when the corners of Loki's lips downturned, but they could not bury the past. Not this time. Quietly, Loki admitted, “I’m not certain the extent of your immortality. You won’t die of illness or old age, and you can recover from injuries that would be fatal to a regular human... but you are not as durable as I am. If someone chopped off your head, it would probably stay off.”

“Great,” Tony muttered. “I'm basically a vampire then... I won't have to drink blood or anything, right? Because if I start sparkling, I'm gonna be pissed.”

“You know I don't understand that reference,” Loki murmured. “But I assure you, there is no 'catch'.”

Tony sighed and resumed walking, dragging himself to his desk chair. “At least that’s one less thing to worry about. Not that it makes much of a difference.”

Loki remained standing, watching Tony as if the gap between them was insurmountable; with the way the god was acting, Tony began to feel like he was the bad guy, even though he was the one who was lied to.

“Tony, I-” Loki began, eyes wide and honest, but Tony cut him off.

“I know. You’re sorry. You’ve said that already,” he snapped, frustration rising to the surface. Taking a deep breath, Tony reined it back in and continued more calmly. “I’m not going to just forgive you. You know that, right?” Loki nodded with a slow, choppy motion. “I should have listened to your reasoning more before going off on you, but it doesn’t change the fact that you lied...”
“I was wrong.” Loki finished for him, surprising Tony. The man fell silent, and Loki took the opportunity to explain himself. “As I told you in Doom’s castle, I was being selfish. I see that now. And I truly am sorry that I betrayed your trust.” Tony peered intently at the god’s face, searching for any sign that he was dissembling, but Loki meant what he said; unlike before, he was not fishing for forgiveness and saying words that he believed he meant but did not truly understand. “I will not request that you forgive me. If you would hate me, then I shall accept—”

“You’re an idiot,” Tony interrupted, and Loki snapped his jaw shut with a befuddled look on his face; even with the tension in the air, Tony couldn’t resist smiling at the expression.

“I don’t—”

“And that’s why you’re an idiot,” he asserted, and then he muttered, “...I was being an idiot, too, but that’s not the point.” Loki became even more confused, brow furrowed and a frown marring his face, so Tony sighed and clarified, “I don’t hate you, you moron. I didn’t before, and I never will.”

For a moment, the god continued to stare blankly at him, but then Tony could see the weight lifting from the god’s shoulders. Loki didn’t smile, but the life returned to his eyes; he moved forwards and sat in his ridiculously oversized chair beside Tony, and if the god scootched his chair closer than he normally did… well, Tony wasn’t going to complain.

Still, Loki repeated, “I’m sorry,” as if he wasn’t sure what else he was supposed to say — like he never considered that Tony might not hate him.

“I know.” Tony replied again; it wasn’t quite an ‘I forgive you’, but it was getting there. Then the man suddenly remembered something. With a grin, he spun to face the desk drawer, and as Loki looked on, head tilted in curiosity, Tony rummaged through the mess within. He ‘aha-ed!’ when his fingers closed around it, and with a flourish, Tony withdrew a sleek black phone and tossed it to Loki.

The god caught the phone with an inquisitive frown and turned it over in his hands. When his inspection failed to procure any answers, he asked, “What is this for?”

With a pleased smile, Tony explained, “I made it for you while you were on Asgard. It was supposed to be a welcome home gift, but…” But they hadn’t been getting along very well when the god came back, and Tony had forgotten all about it in between fretting over and getting angry at Loki.

“It’s nice,” Loki murmured to fill the silence and turned the phone on.

While the machine hummed to life, Tony added, “It’s connected to Jarvis in case you ever need him for anything.” The ‘or need me’ went unspoken. “There’s also a GPS tracker in there. It’s not quite trans-dimensional, but it’s close.”

Even without stating it, Tony knew that Loki understood the purpose of those specific features: to allow him to protect the god no matter how far away Loki was or what he was doing. But Loki did not protest the sentiment, or say that he could look after himself, or any of the other retorts Tony had worried he might say. Instead, the god bowed his head and whispered, “Thank you.”

Tony watched in silence as Loki flipped through the contents of the phone, knowing when the god came across some extra feature he had added by the way Loki’s lips twitched upwards. He was glad the god appreciated the gesture for what it was and did not interpret it to mean that Tony thought he
was weak. Because while Loki was many things, weak was not one of them; he was damaged and flawed, but part of what drew Tony to the god was the sheer strength of will and conviction that allowed Loki to overcome those factors.

Yet Loki still needed help sometimes, just like everyone else, and Tony would continue to be there for him. It was not a burden looking out for Loki; it hadn’t been when he first met the god and Loki was nothing more than a lifeless doll, and it wasn't now. If anything, the god needed even more help than he did, especially since...

Whatever peace Tony had found dissipated, and his smile came crashing down. **Thor.**

It wasn't that he had forgotten about the deadline, per say, but he had purposely avoided thinking about it these past few days. There was so much going on, he couldn't worry about that too without the stress driving him mad. Now though, with only two weeks left to their deadline, he couldn’t ignore it any longer.

“Loki…” Tony started, voice thick, and the god immediately looked up from his gift. He frowned at the man’s sudden change in attitude and vanished the phone into thin air, focusing all of his attention on Tony's next words. “What do you intend to do about Thor? He's going to come back for you in fifteen days. How are we supposed to stop him from taking you?”

Like a mirror, Loki’s face reflected Tony’s despair. “I do not know,” he confessed. “Thor is… lenient, but he will uphold what he considers justice.”

Which could be anything, and Loki, having just recently recovered from the hell that was the void, may not be strong enough to rise again. Still, there was one reassurance that Tony clung to desperately. “He said he wouldn’t have you executed.”

Loki shook his head. “We both know there are fates worse than death,” he said, and his eyes stared at nothing, seeing horrors Tony couldn’t even begin to comprehend.

“Your brother wouldn’t do that to you,” Tony insisted vehemently. Of that he had to be certain.

“Such confidence means nothing,” Loki refuted, and no trace of his previous lightheartedness remained. His spirit was desolate, and Tony knew then that the god had been ignoring the deadline with even more vigor than he had. Now he was faced with uncertainty (that was, in an ironic twist of fate, the exact opposite of the immortality Tony had feared) and had everything to lose. That was the cruelest factor: only when Loki truly wanted to live, after spending years with a shattered psyche, was he going to return to the start and lose it all.

And for all of his efforts to force optimism, Tony did think that they would lose everything. He had no hope that in two weeks the outcome would be in their favor, but he refused to let Loki know that. If they were going to try and fight against the odds, then they needed to have faith. And if Loki, embittered by the world’s treatment of him, could not provide his own, then Tony would hope for him. Maybe if he continued to say that things would be okay, they would get dealt a winning hand.

Plastering a smile on his face, Tony stated, “Surely there’s something we can do.” His response was a flat, unimpressed glare, but Tony wouldn’t let himself be deterred. “Come on. If we try nothing, then of course the worst will happen.”

Turning away so Tony could not see his face, Loki quietly muttered, “The worst is going to happen anyway.” And then, without another word, he disappeared, leaving behind nothing more than an empty chair.
Tony’s mask broke, and he dropped his head to the table. The impact rattled his skull, and he swore loudly at both the pain and their situation. He would have remained like that — crumpled over in his chair and wallowing in their misfortune — for hours, but concerned chirping behind him and a not-so-gentle nudge to the shoulder made Tony lift his head from the desk. Dum-E peered at him, an oil soaked rag still clutched in his hand, and whirred sadly. He bumped Tony again, and then rolled over to Loki’s chair and dropped the cloth onto it. “Vree?” the robot asked, glancing pointedly between the cloth and Tony.

Getting what the old AI was trying to communicate, Tony shook his head and patted Dum-E’s arm. “No, bud. He went upstairs... He did just go upstairs, right Jarv?”

“Yes, sir. Would you also like a report on exactly what he is doing?” the AI asked in jest, and without waiting for a reply, he continued, “Loki is currently-”

“Right, I get it!” Tony hurried to cut the AI off. “I wasn't trying to stalk him. I just wanted to know where he was-”

“I believe that can be considered stalking, sir.”

“-and now that I know, you can be quiet again,” Tony finished, and although Jarvis went quiet, the man couldn't help but feel like the AI won this round. Sighing in defeat, Tony reached across the desk for his tablet. If his robots weren’t going to let him mope, then he’d just have to set himself to proving Loki wrong. They were going to make it through this.

After creating a text document, Tony worked on making a list of ideas to improve Loki’s political standing in Asgard. Some of the ideas he came up with were pointless and others farfetched, but he wrote them down anyway. When he ran out of ideas, he minimized the program, and later, when he was working on other projects, he pulled open the list to add anything that came to mind.

As the week went by, Tony kept the list going. He’d wake up in the middle of the night to write something down, and one day he even consulted with his lawyer, trying to learn the best way to grant a person political immunity in a foreign country.

Throughout it all, Loki remained convinced that going to Asgard was worse than a death penalty. He fluctuated between depressed and overenthusiastic, attempting to cope with his stress by burying it. But as the days ticked by, the god became less and less able to pretend. He would try his best to interact with Tony, but often ended up just sitting there, staring into space with a blank expression.

And then they were down to seven days, and Tony could no longer think of anything else to add to his short list. He sat at his desk and stared at the document for half an hour with nothing else coming to mind before admitting defeat. Even what he did come up with seemed useless. Still, Tony leaned back in his chair and reviewed their options:

**List of Things That Will Help Loki Not Get Imprisoned For Life**

1. Return whatever old book he stole because gods like their ancient artifacts.

2. Make a fake golden apple and return that too. (Or better yet, return the actual apple.)

3. Get Loki a job to show that he is an upstanding citizen. Job ideas: that pizza place down the road, house maid, work as Pepper's assistant... Does fighting bad guys count as a job? (Ask SHIELD to finalize Loki’s paperwork to make him an official member of the Avengers Initiative.)

4. Have the US government declare political asylum for Loki. (Would take too long.)
5. Fake Loki's death to avoid going to trial. (I doubt this would fool Thor.)

6. Have Loki get married.

7. Get Loki a US citizenship. Or any citizenship. (Would also take too long. Damn politicians never finish things quickly.)

8. Does claiming insanity work in Asgard? (He actually might be able to get away with that one if they do. No offense, Loki.)

9. Destroy the rainbow bridge to buy us some more time. (I contacted a woman named Jane. She said it's impossible, but people also said the same thing about my arc reactor, and I made it with scraps. Ask Loki about this as a last resort.)

10. Escape with Loki to another planet... Does Asgard have space ships?

11. Dress someone else up as Loki and trick Thor into thinking it's actually his brother. (Who am I kidding? This is an even worse idea than faking Loki's death.)

12. Ask if Loki can pay bail instead. (I checked how much money Stark Industries has saved up for emergencies. If Asgard accepts US dollars, it might work out, though I'd get arrested for redirecting funds.)

13. Have people testify that Loki didn't actually commit any crimes and had alibis for all of them. (I've been told that telling obvious lies at a court case looks bad for the defendant... Apparently I have done this before. Note to self: review my old case courses for a list of things not to do.)

14. Should I even bother listing 'commit regicide'?

15. Make someone else Asgard’s ‘public enemy number one’ so Loki can get off easy. Maybe we can ship Doom over there... Except they'd probably kill him in less than a minute.

16. Be honest... yeah, not happening.

17. Hope for the best.

An empty eighteenth slot taunted Tony, and he erased it. Then he spun his chair around to face Loki, who had been reading the same page of his book for even longer than Tony had been staring at the tablet. “Hey,” Tony said, breaking the silence and drawing the god's attention. With a grin that he didn't feel, the man asked, “Want to get married?”

Loki’s brow furrowed in puzzlement. “What?”

In response, Tony held out the completed list, and Loki set his book down before reaching out to take it. He began to read through it, grimace set deep on his face; Tony felt accomplished when the god cracked a tiny smile halfway through, even if it was gone by the end. When Loki finished, he handed the tablet back, trying to hide his dashed hopes by saying, “I’m afraid I’ll have to decline your offer of marriage.”

“Well, it was at least worth a try,” Tony replied, not just talking about item six. “But are you sure nothing else on there might help? I mean, I know the list kind of sucks, but maybe if SHIELD vouched for you or something?”

Loki’s dour pessimism did not budge. “Asgardian politics are much harsher than those of Midgard, nor would they particularly care what I have done here since humans are considered lesser beings.”
“What about Thor? You said he was fond of Midgard, and that Jane chick I talked to said he was a good person despite being a crappy boyfriend. Wouldn’t he care that you’ve been helping Midgard?” When Loki looked opened his mouth to refute that as well, Tony ground out, “Damn it, Loki! I don’t know what else you want me to do! Unlike you, I haven’t just given up. You need to work with me here. There has to be something!”

“But there isn’t ,” Loki insisted, and his mask slipped enough for Tony to see the unbridled fear underneath. “Don’t you think I would be trying if there was?” Then the god reined his emotions back in, continuing quietly, “I thought about this long before Thor even showed up, and the only plan I could come up with that had any chance of success was to run for my life. I’m not going to do that again.”

Tony wanted to shout ‘to hell with pride’ and tell Loki to run anyway, but he held the words back. Not only would constantly fleeing chip away at the god’s mind, but if Loki fled from Earth, Tony wouldn’t be able to see him again. Of course, he’d not be able to see Loki if the god were imprisoned on Asgard, but at least then he would have the selfish peace of knowing that the Loki was alive. The god could easily blank out and get killed somewhere that Tony could not reach, and he’d never know. In lieu of an impassioned cry, though with no less emotion or conviction, Tony said, “No matter what happens — no matter what you chose to do — I’ll be right there with you. You're not doing this alone.”

Loki frowned. “It’s forbidden for mortals to enter Asgard.”

Tony shot him a wry, bitter grin. “But I’m not mortal anymore, am I?”

“No…” Loki murmured. “I guess you’re not.”

-o-o-o-

Their final week passed by in a blur, with each stressful day blending into the next. They jumped between activities in an effort to distract themselves, and (though neither of them said it out loud) since this was to be their last week together, they wanted to make it last. It was like trying to fit an entire lifetime into seven days, but no matter what they did, they could not ease the tension.

On the first day, Tony introduced Loki to a variety of strategy games, and they played until the novelty could no longer hold their attention. Then Loki made a passing comment that he’d like to see more of Midgard, and Tony decided they should travel the world. For the next three days, they teleported from deserts to rainforests to everything in between. The only places they did not explore were those with freezing temperatures, and Tony wasn’t going to ruin their trips by pressing the issue. Their fifth day was lost to stopping an insane scientist from blowing Kentucky off the map, and Tony couldn’t even recall what happened on the sixth day.

The seventh day — their final day — was spent at the house in silence. Neither of them could focus on anything but the impending deadline, and while Tony knew there was so much he wanted to say, the words evaded him. He felt like anything worth saying — “I don't want you to go.” “You made my life worth living again.” “Nothing bad will happen to you. I won't let it.” “I love you.” — had already been said or was so obvious it didn't need to be put into words.

They abandoned the lab after a few hours and retreated to the roof, where they watched the rise and fall of the surf below. Whereas the stillness would normally drive Tony up the wall, he never wanted that moment to end. He soaked it in, relishing in the simple feeling of having the god by his side, and tried to cement it forever in his mind.

While a large part of Tony was glad that they spent the day alone, it made him feel selfish knowing
that Loki had other friends who would miss him. However, anytime Tony brought up the idea of visiting the others, Loki changed the topic or didn't respond at all. The only familiar face they had seen all week was Rogers in Kentucky, and Loki had gone out of his way to pretend that nothing was wrong. He didn't even want to say goodbye to Pepper, who he normally enjoyed seeing almost as much as Tony did, but he would not give a reason why; Tony figured the reason was similar to why he had refused to tell Pep when he had been dying.

Then, before they were ready, the deadline arrived; Tony awoke from fitful sleep to the sound of thunder and a loud crash that shook the house and ejected him from his nightmare. Blinking away images of Afghanistan, Tony tried to disentangle himself from the bed whilst getting to his feet. He ended up tripping to the floor and began to swear fervently. From down the hall, Tony he could hear someone pounding impatiently on the front door. Jarvis helpfully turned on the lights, and Tony pulled himself free of the sheets. He stumbled down the hall, sleep-deprived brain not completely caught up to speed, and turned into the living room.

He froze, and his hand flung out to clutch at the wall when his knees threatened to collapse. The memories that haunted Tony's exhausted mind were overlaid by the very real — very present — nightmare in front of him. Thor stood on the other side of the glass door, fist raised mid-knock. Upon seeing Tony, he aborted the motion into a wave, but Tony did not return it. He stared at Thor in dread, his gut twisting and churning. No. No no no no. He wasn't ready for this.

When Tony made absolutely no move to open the door, Thor's beaming smile fell and he rapped on the glass again. “Man of Metal, are you not going to grant me entrance to your abode?” Like hell he was going to let Thor in; all the god wanted was to take Loki away.

But his mouth betrayed him, speaking the exact opposite of what his mind was screaming. “Jarvis, unlock the door.” The AI, unable to hear the mantra of 'no' inside of Tony's head, obeyed; the door clicked open and Thor stepped inside.

“Tony Stark! It is good to see you again,” the god boomed as he walked up to Tony. He patted the man hardily on the back, nearly making Tony faceplant.

“It's... nice to see you too, Blondie,” Tony lied, stepping away from Thor, but the god didn’t even notice, too busy glancing around the room with a frown.

“Where is my brother?” Thor asked, tilting his head as if listening for something. “He is... awake, yes?” By the tone he was using, Tony knew that 'awake' was a euphemism for 'not-catatonic'.

“Yeah,” Tony replied, but then he paused when he noticed that Loki had yet to show up. Were he around, he would have heard Thor's unsubtle arrival, which meant... “He should be around here somewhere,” Tony continued, and Thor scrutinized him, most likely hearing the doubt in his words. It wasn’t that Tony thought the god had fled, but if he had... well, it’s not like anyone could blame him for trying to escape the situation. “Maybe he’s in the lab. It’s soundproofed.”

“And where is this ‘lab’ of yours?” Thor asked, hand straying to the hilt of his ever-present hammer.

“Woah, hey, no need to smash anything,” Tony exclaimed. “The lab is downstairs. I can show you...” Thor began walking towards the stairwell, chin lifted like a man going to his execution, and Tony sighed before scrambling to catch up — only to crash into the god’s back when he abruptly stopped. Rubbing his now throbbing nose, Tony began to walk around Thor while grumbling, “Why did you-” The words petered off when he saw the object of Thor's fixation. “Oh.”

Loki stood at the top of the stairwell with Coro tucked under his arm. Emotions warred on the god’s face, and he unconsciously took a step back, heel hovering over air. His expression warped from
fury to dread to sorrow with a dozen other unidentifiable reactions in between. Then the mask came
down, leaving nothing but bitterness and resignation.

“Thor,” Loki murmured, stepping away from the edge. “How lovely to see you again.” The
disapproving frown Tony shot the god went ignored; Loki had eyes for no one but his brother, who he
watched like an owl watched a mouse — or the mouse watched the owl. Earlier, they had
discussed how Loki should be civil to his brother, even if only to improve his political standing, but
apparently the god could not bury his wrath. “You certainly did not waste any time. Miss me?”

“Brother,” Thor returned, forcing his tone to be jovial even in the face of Loki’s glower. “You look
well today.”

Well' was probably pushing it; the dark rings around Loki's eyes stood out in sharp contrast from the
sickly pale of his skin, and his long hair was unkempt and tangled. Though the last time Thor had
seen his brother, Loki was nothing more than an empty shell lying upon the cold ground. After
seeing him like that, almost anything would be an improvement.

Despite the honest interest Thor was showing, Loki bristled at his words; his lips twisted into a snarl,
and he reached up to rub Coro's head—which ended up looking more like he was clawing the cat,
considering how tense he was, and Tony had to give respect where it was due; Coro was a saint for
letting let Loki manhandle him when he got stressed—as he hissed, “I'm not your brother. Don't act
like you care.”

In the face of such animosity, Thor's delight at seeing that his brother was (relatively) healthy faded.
He insisted, “You're wrong. I—”

“Stop with the pleasantries,” Loki snapped, his entire body tense. “We all know why you are here.”

Seeing that Thor was about to attempt to convince Loki of his brotherly love, Tony interrupted, “Not
that I don't enjoy hearing the two of you go at it, but I think right now is a fabulous time for a drink.”
A quick glance outside revealed that the sky was still pitch black, the darkness broken only by the
lights on the shoreline. “...Jarvis, what time is it anyway?”

“It is three thirty-two AM, sir,” Jarvis replied, startling Thor; the god grabbed his hammer and
whirled around, only to stop in confusion when nothing was there.

“Jarvis is just a computer, big guy,” Tony said exasperatedly and headed back towards the living
room. As he passed by Thor, he patted the god on his bicep. “I'd appreciate it if you'd stop trying to
attack my house.”

Chagrined, Thor lowered Mjolnir. “My apologies, Man of Iron.” The god frowned at his hammer,
inspected the fountain at the top of the stairs, and then, with a proud grin, he looped the hammer's
strap around the hand of the statue.

Deciding it was far too early to deal with whatever the hell Thor was doing, Tony didn't question the
impromptu decoration of his fountain. He went to his well-stocked bar and pulled out the closest
bottle. Behind him, neither Loki nor Thor moved, so Tony called, “Hey Point Break, want anything
to drink?”

After a beat of silence, the God of Thunder said, “I must decline your hospitality. There is much to
be discussed.” Still, the offer got Thor to move, and he followed Tony to living room. While the man
poured himself a generous glass of scotch, Thor took a seat, looking out of place with his tall stature
and elaborate armor.
It wasn't until Tony — equipped with an entire bottle of mind-numbing magic — sat down that Loki slunk into the room to perch on the couch beside him; it also happened to be the farthest seat from Thor. The tension in the room was so thick it was practically tangible, and Tony wasted no time in downing half his glass. Letting the burn ease his mind, Tony placed his feet on the coffee table and leaned back against the upholstery. Considering that neither of the brothers seemed in the mood to do anything but stare at each other, Tony took it upon himself to get the party started.

“So,” he began with feigned nonchalance, “what exactly are your plans for Rudolph?”

Thor caught onto the nickname game faster than Loki had, because he didn't even bother asking who 'Rudolph' was. He got straight to business. “Loki must return to Asgard.” Focusing his attention on the aforementioned god, Thor entreated, “I do not wish for harm to befall you, but there must be justice.”

“Justice for whom?” Loki asked bitingly. “The people of Asgard? I did nothing to them. You seek to make an example out of me, which only proves that you are as foolish of a king as your father.”

“Our father had his faults, but he always acted with Asgard in mind. I intend to do the same.”

The grin that Loki gave his brother—maniacal and teeth-baring—was one that Tony had learned to fear; it meant that beneath his mask, Loki's mind was splintering. “So you would sacrifice your 'brother' for the sake of your image? How very... noble of you.”

“I would teach my brother a lesson!” Thor boomed in outrage, half-rising from his seat. “I love you, Loki, but you have committed treason and defied our laws! Your actions are enough to warrant execution. The very least you could do is return home and—”

“The least?” Loki hissed, and Coro mewed in his arms as the god clutched him too tightly. Gritting his teeth, Loki forced himself to ease his grip, but when he spoke, his words were still venomous. “I spent seven years in that void, and you dare to insinuate that I was not punished enough? I lost everything! What more would you take from me, Son of Odin?”

Silently watching the heated exchange, Tony downed the rest of his glass. The slight buzz produced by the drink was far from strong enough to take the edge off of his distress. Before he could convince himself otherwise, he reached for the bottle sitting on the table and filled the glass again. Who cared that it was only three in the morning? He has gotten drunk at worse times.

Thor's anger was drowned by Loki's sorrow, and the god lowered himself back into the chair. “I swear on my life that you will never have to experience something like that again,” he said ardently. “Your punishment will be swift and just, and then you can be with us once again. Your family misses you. I miss you.” Thor's eyes glistened with unshed tears as he pleaded, “Come home with me.”

This time Loki didn't just grin: he laughed, a high pitched cackle that shook his entire body, and Tony watched as a tear silently slipped down Thor's cheek. Once he got himself back under control, Loki growled, “You truly are a fool. My only family is dead: I killed him with my own hands. As for Asgard,” the name was spat like a curse, “it was never my home, and it never will be.”

While Thor was the one orchestrating Loki's return to Asgard, Tony couldn't deny that he pitied the god. It was obvious to anyone that he loved his brother, and yet every sincere display of affection was met with vehemence. Loki's heart was walled off, forbidding Thor's affection and obstructing his own. Because no matter what Loki did, no matter how many times he hissed poisonous words, Tony refused to believe that Loki did not also love his brother. Somewhere, beneath all of the scars, Loki cared. He just locked it away because he feared rejection more than he feared being hated.
If he actually thought either of them would listen, Tony would sit them both down and tell it to them straight. However, there were some things that words could not fix, and this was one of them. For all of his grand declarations of love, Thor’s actions contradicted those words, and it was the actions that Loki clung to.

“You would remain here for the rest of your life?” Thor asked. “Alongside these mortals, even when they will all die and you will continue to live? Midgard is no place for a god.”

“What about that mortal girl you were so infatuated with?” Loki countered. “Or did you not really care about her life?”

“Leave Jane Foster out of this,” Thor said quietly.

But the god did not stop. “Why? Is that not what you wanted? To spend your life with a mortal?” Both of the brothers simultaneously looked over to Tony, but their expressions were vastly different. Thor’s glare was accusing, as if it were Tony’s fault that Loki did not wish to return home. And Loki’s… Loki’s said that he already was home.

Turning back to Thor, Loki continued, “Do not deny me that which I have sought my whole life.” There was no need for the god to explain what he desired. Tony, having been in the same situation for most of his life, understood perfectly; Loki yearned for a place to belong, where people wanted him because of who he was and not what he pretended to be. And Tony knew how much it hurt the god to know he might lose that peace because he was on the verge of losing it, too.

And Thor — conflicted, devoted Thor — shook his head as though the action pained him. “I am sorry for all that has happened to you, and I wish that I can change the past so you did not have to suffer, but you must go to trial.”

Loki’s face twisted in rage, and he let go of Coro to dig his nails into the couch, ripping through the upholstery like it was tissue. So great was the god’s outrage that he could not even speak, grinding his teeth in a feral snarl; it had to be taking all of Loki’s self-control to not lash out.

Before Thor could say something to break that tenuous control, Tony spoke up. “What sort of punishment are we even looking at? I mean, are you just going slap him on the wrist and let him off with some bail, or does Asgard go the whole mile and carry out bloody-eagles or something?” The latter suggestion was said half in jest — surely such an old civilization would have moved past that—but by the way Thor shifted anxiously and Loki blanched, Tony realized that he hit the nail on the head.

“Woah, no. No!” Tony shouted, empty cup slipping from his fingers as he jumped to his feet; when the glass shattered on the tile, none of them spared it a glance. “I don’t care what you say — you are not having your brother tortured for stealing! Sacred object or not, that’s ludicrous!”

Thor looked up at Tony from his chair, an expression far too similar to pity in his eyes; Tony didn’t want his damn pity. He wanted Thor to leave them the hell alone!

Far too calmly given the circumstance, Thor replied, “I assure you, Man of Metal…” His eyes darted to meet Loki’s. “And you as well, brother, that I will do everything in my power to ensure you do not suffer whilst still obeying our laws.”

“And if your laws demand my suffering?” Loki asked acerbically.

“I won’t let it come to that,” Thor maintained, unyielding in his confidence. “Have faith in me.”

Another derisive laugh bubbled up in Loki’s throat, echoing loudly in the otherwise silent room. This
time when the god’s cackle fell away, he said nothing. Instead, Loki pried his fingers from where they were impaling Tony’s couch and returned to petting Coro, burying his hands in the fur to hide the way they shook.

Watching him, Tony was hit with an irresistible urge for another drink, and—with his cup laying in pieces at his feet—he grabbed the bottle and chugged the scotch straight up. As he drank, no one said a thing; one way or another, they were all trying to stall the inevitable. But Tony knew that Thor would grow impatient eventually, and the longer they waited, the more likely Loki was to go out of his mind.

Taking one last desperate gulp — the rush of alcohol in his veins ineffectual in masking his sorrows — Tony set the bottle on the table. “You’re making him return with you today, right?” he asked, breaking the silence; both gods flinched imperceptibly. “We don’t get any more time?”

Head bowed solemnly, Thor confirmed, “A month was all the time I could grant. I wanted you to be able to… say goodbye before he joined me.”

“You aren’t taking him to Asgard alone,” Tony stated. “I’m coming with you.”

With a frown, Thor opened his mouth to retort, but Tony took a guess about what he would say and continued, “I’m not mortal now, remember? The ‘no mortal’ rule doesn’t apply to me, and even if it did, I would still follow you.” He was not sure how he’d get to Asgard without the Bifrost, but he didn't doubt that he would try until he figured it out.

“I am not denying you for tradition,” Thor said. “As king, I may allow mortals into Asgard. It is the fact that you are no longer mortal that would have the worst repercussions.”

“Such as?” Tony asked unwaveringly.

Thor’s expression went dark. “They’d kill you.”

“Oh... Well, that is indeed a problem.” Although the threat of death was not enough to keep Tony from considering it anyway, weighing the benefits against the risk. He could not remain here while Loki went to Asgard, but dying wouldn't help anyone... But he couldn't stay home.

That’s when Loki spoke up, ending the back and forth of Tony's thoughts. “Tony will accompany me, and you will introduce him as an ambassador of Midgard.” His tone was authoritative, despite having no power to back up his demands, and Thor was taken aback.

“You would command me to lie?” he asked.

“I would ask of you, as my brother, to allow him to come and hear my sentence for himself,” Loki stated, bending Thor's declarations of love to his favor. “But if you say he’s immortal, even your power as king cannot keep them from executing him.” Something dark, violent, and insane shone through the god’s eyes. “And if that happens, I’ll kill every last one of you.”

Now that was definitely overstepping their bounds, and Tony could not just sit by while Loki dug his grave deeper. He began to protest, “Loki, maybe I should-”

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“Very well,” Thor interrupted, surprising Tony. The god's expression was stern, but Loki met his stare with confidence. “Tony will accompany you as an ambassador of Midgard, but that is all. I will not be manipulated by you.” To Tony, Thor said, “I will allow you a few minutes to make accommodations before we depart.”

Unwilling to test Thor's generosity any longer, Tony nodded and stood. He cast a longing glance at
the half empty bottle on the table, but he had enough common sense to know that right now wasn't the best time to get wasted. “I'll be back,” he said, stepping towards the hall. “Don’t destroy my house while I’m gone.” Tony had only gone a few steps when Loki ghosted past him, moving quickly but silently to disappear around the corner. The man paused, staring where the god's back had just been, and then sighed. “That works too, I guess.”

He started walking forwards again, and this time it was Thor who stopped him. “Wait. I wish to have a word with you alone.”

Tony briefly debated the merits of acting like he didn't hear the god and continue walking, but then he turned around and said, “Go ahead. But you are aware he can hear everything we say, right?”

“I have nothing to hide from him. I just wanted to be able to speak to you, as his brother and not the king, without being interrupted.” Thor stood and bowed at the waist. “Thank you, Tony Stark, for protecting him. Loki cares a great deal for you and you for him. I offer my greatest apologies for doing this to the both of you.”

Stunned by the heartfelt admission, Tony didn't reply immediately; when he did, he said, not cruelly but not kindly either, “If you’re going to take him away, then I don’t want your apologies. I want him to stay.”

Keeping his head lowered, Thor replied, “I cannot do that.”

“Then I guess we're done here,” Tony said and fled from the room, not stopping again until he had a door behind him. Leaning against the wooden frame for support, he let out a ragged breath and was crushed by the unavoidable reality.

There was so much he wanted to do, and their time was up. Everything he and Loki had, the things they had fought tooth and nail for, would mean nothing. Tony would go back to being alone: there would be no one in the lab, no one to make jokes with, no one watching his back. It'd be a repeat of the month Loki spent stealing the tome, over and over again for years. Maybe forever. And forever sounded a lot more daunting without Loki by his side than with the god as his constant companion.

Knees too weak to support his weight, Tony slid to the floor. “Jarvis, I need you to record a message for Pep,” he stated. “Give it to her when she wakes up.” Tony knew she probably wouldn't care if he woke her up—would actually prefer to talk to him—but he was too cowardly to tell her he had been hiding things from her again.

“Certainly, sir,” the AI replied, his automated voice lacking its usual snark. Tony knew Jarvis felt something, whether it be sadness or some unique variant of it, and thought that he wasn’t the only one the god would be leaving behind. Loki might not know many of people on Midgard, but he meant a lot to them. Tony, Pepper, Jarvis, Dum-E, Coro: they were the god’s family now. And the other Avengers were Loki's friends, who could accept the outcast god because they were all outcasts. It was the perfect place for him.

With a hollow voice, Tony began, “Pepper... Loki’s deadline is up. Thor is taking him back to Asgard, and I'm going with them. I should be...” Tony was going to say ‘back in a few days’, but he wasn't sure if that was true. He had no idea what was about to happen; if something went wrong in Asgard, Tony wasn't sure what state he'd be returning in... if he returned at all. Could he even bring himself to leave Loki behind if the time came, especially if his punishment was torture?

“We're going to do what we can. If a week passes before you hear from me, then you can start worrying about me. And...” And what? There was so much he wanted to say, but a mere thank you for all she had done would not suffice, nor could he ask her what he was supposed to do. He was
also aware that both gods were probably eavesdropping, and while he had gotten use to Loki always listening in, he did not want Thor to hear him.

He lamely settled on, “Someone will need to watch Loki’s cat while we’re gone. He loves that thing, but we can’t take it with us.” And then Tony fell silent, unsure of what else to say.

After a minute, Jarvis prompted, “Sir, would you like me to end the recording?”

“Give me another minute,” Tony replied, but even though his mind was filled with ideas, he could not put them into words. Sighing, he said, “Nevermind, just... end the message there.”

Dragging himself to his feet, Tony proceeded to go through the motions of packing; he threw random articles of clothing into a small suitcase, followed by whatever was sitting on his bathroom counter. He was not sure what exactly he had packed, but it didn’t matter; he was going to his best friend’s trial, not on a vacation. Once the case was full, Tony slammed it shut and tossed it at the door before kneeling to reach under his bed. He pulled out the compact Iron Man suit (located there in case there was an emergency and he couldn’t reach the lab) and headed to the door, picking up the other suitcase on his way out.

When Tony returned to the living room, he noticed that Thor had moved to the window, and was looking out across the light-riddled night. Tony opened his mouth, but the god spoke first. “Midgard is beautiful. Not in the same way Asgard is, but... beautiful nonetheless.” His tone was wistful, and Tony had the feeling that Thor’s words were more than just a comment on the view; what the god really meant, though, he did not know.

Walking closer, Tony replied, “Well, that is a million dollar view. It better be beautiful.” Thor didn’t answer, continuing to watch the lights of cargo ships move across the sea.

A meow drew their attention away from the windows, and Loki walked into the room, Coro winding between his legs as he walked (somehow Loki managed to never trip on the damn thing, while it has sent Tony crashing down the stairs numerous times). The cat was begging to be picked up again, but Loki ignored him, his expression blank.

“Hey,” Tony called in greeting, feigning assurance he did not feel, and held up his plain suitcase. “Want to magic this away for me?”

When Loki reached Tony’s side, he reached for the offered luggage, but Thor’s voice stopped him. “I would not suggest doing that, unless you don’t want to see your supplies again.”

“Why not?” Tony asked, cautiously lowering his suitcase. He shot Loki a confused glance, but the god was not looking his way; he stared at Thor with comprehension dawning in his eyes. “Why not?” Tony repeated, this time demanding.

Guilt danced across Thor’s face, and he reached into his armor to withdraw two golden wires. It took a moment for Tony’s mind to click that the circular pieces of metal were bracelets, and when it did, he was dumbfounded. “What’s up with the jewelry?” he asked, tilting his head slightly to get a better look at the thin bands. “They look... flimsy.”

Loki was voice was a mere whisper. “Looks can be deceiving.”

The god ignored Tony’s questioning look, rapt on the bands, and it was Thor who elaborated, “These bracelets were forged with a dragon’s fire. They prohibit mages from accessing their magic and are near indestructible. Once put on, only I will be able to take them off.” Staring at his brother, face distorted in regret, Thor said, “I will allow you to be without chains, but you must
Loki’s dread as he stared at the seemingly harmless bands was palpable, but with a wave of his hands, Loki pulled a thick, dusty tome from the air. Then his entire body glowed as armor formed around him, obscuring the clothes he had been wearing. Loki offered the book to his brother, holding his entire body abnormally still. Thor stepped forwards to take the tome, and when Loki’s hand remained outstretched, he hesitantly set the bracelets onto the god’s palm. Slowly, Loki closed his fingers around the metal bands and pulled them towards his chest. Only with the greatest of will was he able to overcome his fear and relinquish his magic; Loki slipped on the first bracelet, and then the second.

There was an anticlimactic moment in which nothing happened — no explosion or flashing sign saying that Loki had just surrendered his greatest asset — but then suddenly both bands erupted into light. Loki flinched violently, trying to escape, but it was too late to turn back. Tony watched in a mix of awe and terror as the golden bands constricted, wrapping tightly around Loki’s wrists, and sprouted little gold branches; the tendrils expanded illogically, growing without shrinking the rest of the bracelet, and latched onto Loki’s skin. Then, much to Tony’s horror, the strands of metal slipped beneath Loki’s skin, worming deep into his flesh.

Loki’s jaw clenched, and his nails dug into his palms, but he otherwise remained still even as small red drops of blood dribbled down his wrists. Then finally, the metal stopped shifting, and Tony let out the breath he had been holding. His relief ended quickly, however, when he noticed that Loki’s muscles were tense, his arms quivering, and his eyes glassy.

“Loki?” Tony asked, voice thick with concern, and dropped the suitcases to slip in closer to the god. He grabbed Loki’s arms, and besides an initial flinch, the god remained frozen in shock. Tony turned the god’s arm over and examined the bracelet with a frown. The band was burrowed even deeper into Loki’s skin than Tony had thought, and he winced in sympathy. When Tony ran his fingers over the metal, Loki flinched once again, and the man pulled inquisitive fingers away from the metal.

“Is this hurting you?” he asked, afraid to touch the bracelet again if it was that sensitive.

Finally, Tony’s words pierced through Loki’s stupor, and the god blinked before lowering his gaze to where Tony gripped the side of his hand. “No,” he murmured, raising his hand to trace the metal circlet and follow the branches to where they met his flesh; his face was like stone, marred only by lines of pain around his eyes and mouth. “Not like that, anyway. The physical pain is negligible. It is the drain it causes to my magic that afflicts me.”

This time, when Tony let his fingers explore the twisting strands of metal, he itched to rip them out. Whenever Loki overused his magic, he became exhausted and his entire body would ache. The god would try to hide it, but it was obvious in the way he moved that every nerve pained him. To make him go to Asgard and suffer through a trial while he was in such a state... it was cruel.

Tony glared at Thor, who bowed his head in guilt. “There is no choice. I can not run the risk of him fleeing or causing mayhem.” While Thor said this, he raised his eyes to stare at Loki, begging forgiveness for his harsh words, but his brother met the plea with fury. “Without those bracelets, he would have to be chained and under guard. I thought this would be the preferable option.”

Though he did not want to, Tony bit back his retort. Thor was right. As a prisoner, Loki could not just walk free through Asgard, especially when he had already proven that he was capable of escaping. But despite understanding the logic behind it, Tony loathed the fact that Loki had to be in pain.

Hardening his expression, Thor continued, “I can no longer delay our departure. If there is anything
else you must attend to, do so now.”

A dozen excuses to delay jumped to Tony's mind, but he pursued only one of them. Turning to Loki, he asked plaintively, “Are you sure you don’t want to say goodbye to everyone? They care about you, too.”

But like every time before, Loki shook his head. “It would not change anything.”

While Tony still disagreed with Loki's decision, he sighed and let the matter drop. “Then yeah,” he said, each word like a knife in his throat. “I guess we’re ready to go to Wonderland.” Where the Red Queen was waiting to chop off Loki’s head.
Tarnished Gold

"Let me in the walls you've built around. 
We can light a match and burn them down. 
Let me hold your hand and dance 
'round and 'round the flames in front of us. 
Dust to dust.

You're like a mirror, reflecting me. 
Takes one to know one, so take it from me. 
You've been lonely. You've been lonely, too long. 
We've been lonely. We've been lonely, too long."

-Dust to Dust by The Civil Wars

With a flash that illuminated the golden interior of the bridge, the Bifrost spat three bodies out. Loki, with his head pounding, stumbled forwards as gravity was restored. He managed to regain his footing, which was more than could be said for Tony; the man cursed as he toppled gracelessly to the ground, his limbs sprawling and his suitcases sliding across the floor.

As the god recovered from the vertigo, a deep, rumbling voice greeted, “My liege, welcome back.” Loki started, and his eyes darted to Heimdall who, despite his greeting to Thor, was fixated on Tony. When the human realized that they had an audience, he scrambled to his feet and backed cautiously towards Loki.

“Heimdall,” Thor said jovially in return, disregarding the tension on the bridge and was, in turn, disregarded; Heimdall continued to scrutinize Tony with his eerie gold eyes, his already stern countenance deepening. With a flash of fear, Loki realized that to Heimdall, the magic that pervaded Tony's body was a beacon; there's no way the gate keeper could be fooled into thinking that Tony was just another mortal. He could ruin everything.

Yet Heimdall said nothing about Tony, and instead shifted his gaze onto Loki. “Even now when you stand before me, I cannot see you. Why is that?” the gatekeeper asked, and Loki felt like those eyes were picking him apart, revealing the grotesque reality that his beneath his false skin.

Loki grinned, disguising his unease and pretending his wrists did not bear proof of his imprisonment. “You must be a greater fool than I thought if you think I’d tell you.”

“Loki…” This time it was Tony chiding him, glancing warily at Heimdall; he lifted the Iron Man suit from the floor and drew it closer, fingers resting anxiously on the latches. The man's eyes darted around, occasionally pausing on the gear-covered wall in awe or curiosity, but nerves always redirected his focus.

Heimdall — who had never liked Loki, always preferring Thor's witless arrogance — replied without inflection, “Truth is often subjective. Many are blind to their own faults and shortcomings.”
Loki glared spitefully at the guardian, and Heimdall returned his stare dispassionately; a vicious retort came to Loki's lips, but he was kept from speaking by the tattoo of pounding hooves. He look up to see a dozen horses — some carrying soldiers and some not — racing towards them. Thor stepped towards the entrance of the sphere to greet them. The leader of the riders reined his horse back, and the rest of the group shuffled to a halt behind him, horses snorting and settling into place.

“My liege,” the soldier said, crossing an arm across his chest in salute. “We have come to escort you and the prisoner as requested.” He glanced up, seeking out Loki, and hesitated when he saw Tony standing beside him; well-disciplined, the soldier forwent his curiosity and continued, “The path between here and the palace is guarded. No one will slip past our watch.”

Thor nodded and said, “I thank you for your diligence.” Then he strode towards one of the spare horses and mounted swiftly, hands gripping the reins. When Loki made no move towards any of the remaining horses, Thor frowned disapprovingly at him. “Come. Disobedience will do you no favors here.”

Though he was irked at being commanded and afraid to take a single step closer to the city, Loki left the cover of the dock and advanced towards the nimble mare shifting at the edge of the group. He ran his fingers soothingly down the length of her neck before stepping into the stirrup and swinging his leg over. With a kick of the heel, he guided the horse away from the edge of the bridge and the rolling water below.

“Woah, wait,” Tony said, still standing far away from the horses and staring them with wide-eyes. Everyone turned towards him, and he flushed in embarrassment. “Uhh…I don’t know how to ride a horse.”

A few of the accompanying soldiers laughed, and Thor smiled good-naturedly. “Well then, Stark of Midgard, it seems that today you’ll learn.”

Tony glanced over at Loki expectantly, but the god subtly shook his head; horseback riding was a skill all Asgardian children knew, and if Loki helped the man, Tony’d never garner any respect from the people of Asgard. Realizing that he was on his own, Tony groaned and inched towards one of the remaining horses. “Come on, Stark,” the man muttered to himself. “How hard can it be? Just do it like they do in the movies.”

The horse gave Tony a dirty look as he approached, and when the man set his suitcases down to hesitantly reach for the bridle, the horse neighed and yanked its head away. With a huff, Tony tried again, and this time managed to snatch the reins. He edged around to the horse's side, where he then looked between his suitcases and the saddle with a frustrated scowl.

One of the soldiers eventually took pity on the man and guided his horse over. “I’ll take those for you,” he offered, and Tony wasted no time shoving the brown suitcase into the guard's arms. Then he glanced down at the Iron Man suit, drummed his fingers against the red metal, and reluctantly handed it over as well.

Now unencumbered, Tony turned back to the horse, who stared balefully at him. “Cars are so much better,” he grumbled as he stepped closer, cautiously setting his hand on the cantle. Leaning against the horse's chest, he hopped awkwardly in an attempt to get his foot in the stirrup. It took a few tries, but at last he managed to get his foot in and swung his other leg around to the other side; Tony was far too short for the way the saddle was adjusted, and he clung desperately to the horn.

With everyone mounted, the guards began to move, spurring their horses back towards the city. Trying not to dwell on the soldiers crowding him, Loki nudged his horse forwards, falling into line behind Thor. Not too long after, Tony’s horse, trained well enough to compensate for the man’s own
lack of skill, came up alongside Loki’s. As the horses sped up to a brisk trot, Tony shifted clumsily in the saddle, his knuckles white as he clutched the reins.

“You know,” Tony began conversationally, “I think I preferred you as a horse over an actual horse, even if you were a pain in the ass.” When the man shifted again, he accidentally tugged the reins too tightly, and his horse slowed to dart its mouth around and nip at Tony’s jeans. Alarmed, Tony released the reins and kicked his leg backwards, but the horse had already turned its attention back to following the rest of the herd. “Yep, I definitely preferred you. At least you never tried to bite me.”

“And when was this exactly?” Loki asked, though he already knew the answer; he just needed to hear Tony talk and let the man’s words distract him as Asgard’s crowned city grew larger before them.

Tony seemed to understand — or required a distraction of his own — because he began to ramble, “You were a one man zoo those first few weeks. It was quite the adventure, although now I’m just glad you never went all Puff the Magic Dragon on me. A lion doesn’t seem that bad compared to a multi-ton, fire-breathing lizard. I don’t know what I would have told Pepper if you burned my house down, but I imagine she... she...” Tony’s prattling faded into silence as the ocean gave way to the city — a mess of sprawling streets and buildings that stretched for miles. “Wow,” the man gasped, his eyes drawn to the palace that towered above the rest of the town; while it was night on Midgard, it was midday in Asgard, and the sun made the castle’s golden towers gleam.

Beneath the bridge, people bustled through the streets, their arms laden with baskets and wares. A crowd gathered to watch the procession from behind a wall of guards, but most of Asgard's citizens continued with their day; children ran through the streets, friends gabbed on the sidewalks, vendors sold their wares from decorated carts, and drunk men guffawed as they loitered around the taverns. The array of sounds blended into a familiar din, and Loki hadn't realized just how much he had missed Asgard until then. On Midgard, people bustled from place to place, wrapped in the brevity of their lives. Their cities were polluted and crowded, and the symphony of life was drowned out by blaring of car horns and the drone of footsteps. Loki loved Tony’s realm, certainly, but it lacked the charm Asgard had. It lacked the lively marketplaces, the ascending mountain tops, the exotic forests. But more than that, it lacked the magic. In Midgard, the air was not filled with a myriad of colors that drifted up towards the nebulae in the sky; it was desolate.

And yet, Loki could give up Asgard in a heartbeat. It was gorgeous, its beauty unrivaled by any of the nine realms, but it was not home. Home was the sound of the surf crashing against the cliff wall, the reek of oil and whir of gears, late nights spent tinkering in the lab, curling up on the couch while a ridiculous movie played, and playful banter. Home was Tony.

Loki looked over at the man, who was leaning over in his saddle — nearly toppling from the trotting horse — to get a closer look at Asgard. Despite the severity of their presence here, Tony could not quell his amazement, and Loki would never wish for it to be otherwise. That insatiable wonder was one of the qualities that made Tony so much more special than everyone else. His creative, spontaneous, ingenious, chaos-loving nature was exactly what Loki had needed.

Loki led his horse closer to Tony’s, ignoring the way that the guards watched the movement with suspicion while their hands drifted towards their weapons, and said, “This is but a small portion of Asgard. There are more towns farther out, some a week’s journey from here, and marvels more beautiful than any on Midgard.” Places flashed through his mind: the seaport town far to the west, the waterfall tucked between two canyons, the gem-encrusted caverns beneath a vibrant forest. They were locations he'd sometimes travel to with no warning, flying as a bird or running as a horse to escape the boundaries of royalty for a while. He wished he could take Tony to see them, sharing Asgard just as Tony had shared Midgard.
The sorrowful frown he got in response, covered too slowly by an interested smile, told him that Tony knew exactly what he was thinking. “You never know. Maybe you’ll get to show me that one day. The other realms, too.”

Unable to share Tony’s hope, Loki did not reply; they continued to the palace gates in silence. As the horses carried them across the bridge, the already massive palace grew in size until it blotted out half of the sky. Staring at it, a beacon of brightness, Loki felt fear welling within him, and with that fear came the fog. Blankness, all-consuming and unrelenting, crept into his mind; Loki resisted it, focusing on the ache that pulsed through him and the burn of foreign metal beneath his flesh to chase the black away.

Their party came to a stop before the massive gate separating the town from the palace. Thor and the guards immediately dismounted, and Loki, inhaling deeply to lessen his pounding headache, followed soon after. After a moment’s hesitation, Tony slid gracelessly from his mare’s saddle, and his suitcases were returned to him. Once they were all on foot, soldiers poured from the sentry towers and took the horses’ reins, leading them to the nearby stables. More emerged to surround their group, thickening until Loki could not see pass them. He heard the palace gate open with a loud creak, and the guards began to march forwards, sweeping Tony and Loki along with them. The gate closed behind them with a clang.

Tony, who was clutching the Iron Man suit so tight his knuckles were white, edged in closer to Loki. “Are there normally this many guards for one prisoner?” he asked quietly, eyes darting all around them, but there wasn’t a single gap to be found. Everything but the sky was hidden behind glints of gold and silver.

“You forget I grew up here,” Loki replied, not caring that the guards were listening in on every word he said; he had nothing to hide from them. “I know the palace well. It would only make sense for them to be paranoid.”

And paranoid they were: at Loki's words, the guards stepped in closer, acting as if the god had just declared that he intended to escape. While it was true that Loki was constantly churning such plans in his mind—so far he had three escape routes that may work, although they were extremely risky and none would get Tony out as well—he had no intention of fleeing. This was his decision, and even if by some miracle he could actually get away, he’d never get the bracelets off; an eternity spent with depleted magic was a fate worse than death.

The guards arrived at the foot of the palace, and golden spires towered above them, casting a long and dark shadow; Loki stood tall as gilded doors were pushed open and stepped into the heart of Asgard with confidence that he did not feel. With fortified walls entrapping the god, half of the guards broke away, taking stations in the halls while the rest proceeded to the throne room.

Through the space between soldiers, Loki kept a keen eye on their surroundings, but there was no one else in the halls. Not even Thor’s friends, who Loki had expected to be waiting to hound him at the bridge, were present. He had thought his return would be a larger fanfare—with guileless civilians joining together to mock and deride him—but the castle was silent.

Loki stared at Thor’s back, wondering what his brother was playing at. The Thor that Loki knew would have gladly paraded the trickster before jeering crowds to teach him humility. That no one seemed to know of his return... It went against Loki's every expectation.

Stepping into the throne room, more of their guard split away until only two remained, taking Tony and Loki to the base of the steps while Thor ascended to the throne. The God of Thunder sat stiffly in the massive chair, and a servant scurried forwards with Gungnir clasped reverently in his hands. The Aesir offered the spear to Thor, who took it without a second glance and held it as Odin had
held it before him. Watching Thor stare down at them from his pedestal, chin held high with authority, Loki thought everything had come full circle: no matter what he did, the fool still had the throne and Loki had only his shadow.

“Thank you for your service,” Thor said, nodding to the soldiers on either side of Loki. “You are dismissed.” With a salute, the soldiers obeyed, spinning on their heels and marching from the room. When the door boomed close behind them and their footsteps echoed into silence, Thor focused on Loki, his eyes imperious and jaded—the eyes of a king.

But then his stern demeanor faded, replacing the man who was nothing like Loki’s brother—who eerily resembled Odin in his younger years—with the naïve, bumbling Thor. “Is it not good to be home, brother?” the thunder god asked, gesturing to the deceiving opulence that surrounded the rigid throne.

Loki did not look. His head throbbed, and with the pulsating pain came whisperings of a past best left forgotten; his hands trembled softly, and he clenched his fists at his sides to make them stop. “I see no reason to rejoice in being here when you will lock me away once you tire of speaking to me.”

Thor’s hand dropped, and he clutched Gungnir tightly. “Criminal or not, Loki, you are still royalty.” He leaned forwards in his throne as if the proximity would make Loki more susceptible to his words. “Until your trial, you are free to wander the palace so long as you don’t step one foot outside of these walls.”

“A cage is still a cage, no matter how big,” Loki murmured, and though relief coursed through him, he hid it; being thankful to Thor was a weakness, and he refused to show weakness in the wolf’s den. “You are in no position to complain,” Thor said, his frown deepening. Loki couldn’t help but note that the expression on his brother’s face was not angry... if he was being honest with himself, he’d say that Thor was concerned.

No. It was all a lie. There was nothing left for him here. Loki was deluding himself if he thought that Thor—who he had tried to kill twice now—truly cared about him. And the God of Thunder was a fool if he thought that things would go back to the way they once were. That part of their life was over.

Loki squeezed his fists tighter, trying in vain to bury his memories and quell the minute tremors that plagued his muscles. Watching him, the concern — no, not concern; it had to be disappointment, because Loki could never live up to anyone’s expectations — Thor started hesitantly, “Brother...”

The tone in which he said it, like his words would be the last thing Loki wished to hear, immediately clued into God of Chaos into what Thor was thinking. “No,” he snapped. “No, Loki,” echoed in his mind.

“No,” he repeated even harsher, this time speaking to the voices of the past that resounded in his mind.

“But Loki, mother and father miss-”

“They are not my parents!” Loki shouted, the cry tearing through his throat and echoing unforgivingly off of the golden pillars. Shocked, Thor stared dumbly from his throne, his mouth left half-open. Loki panted into the silence, the force of his emotions causing his body to quiver. He took a deep breath that hitched on something buried inside of him, sounding hatefully like a sob (he cannot show weakness. He cannot) and continued, quieter but no less intense, “My parents were
monsters, and they are dead.” Just as he, who was no less vile by blood, should be.

From upon his pedestal of glory, Thor’s face was shattering with sorrow; Loki shoved aside any sympathy he may have felt. Thor was not his brother, no matter how many times he claimed to be; he was too perfect to be related to a Jotun runt. Softly, Thor asked, “Do all those years mean anything to you?”

‘Yes,’ Loki thought before he could stop himself. ‘They do. I remember.’

He remembered running through the palace alongside Thor as a child, playing pranks on the palace staff, and when they inevitably got caught, Thor would insist that the trick had been his idea to keep Loki from getting in trouble; no one would ever believe him, and they would both end up tasked with cleaning the palace floors. The adults would forbid Loki from using magic to clean, saying that hard work would teach them a lesson, but he would do it anyway and sneak off with Thor to explore the town.

He remembered sitting by Odin’s throne, listening with rapt attention as his father explained the nine realms. He would watch as the All-Father carried out his duties, bravely governing trillions of souls, and think how he wanted to be just like Odin. And every night, after the king of Asgard finished tending to his kingdom, he’d take his sons to the training yard and show them the art of battle. Thor was better with a sword, but Loki was a prodigy with daggers, and he had been so proud of himself.

He remembered learning magic from Frigga and excitedly rushing to show her every time he mastered a new spell. She would watch his demonstration in delight, and her praise would make Loki beam before scurrying off to learn something new to show her. Whenever he was having a bad day, she always seemed to know, and she’d draw him out from his bed and let him join her. No matter how busy she was, she’d take the time to show him new things and explain them, and he was always eager to learn.

“They don’t,” he said, and the images running through his mind took a sharp turn, spiraling down into the memories he buried. “It was nothing more than an illusion. A lie.”

He remembered lies and blue. Odious, repulsive blue that overwhelmed him. “What am I?” Sinking into his flesh. Lies. “What more than that?” Drowning in blue. Suffocating in darkness. Agony. He remembered the void, and it was dragging him under.

As the black surged, railing against Loki’s mind, Thor continued to speak, “If you would just talk to them, I’m sure they could explain.”

“We didn’t want you to ever feel different.” Lies, all of it. “You are a good son.”

‘Shut up!’ Loki screeched furiously in his mind, but not even a whimper passed his lips; he suffered in silence.

“Give them a chance, and-”

“Thor,” Tony interrupted. “Stop.”

Thor listened, and the only noise in the room was the clamor within Loki’s head. He was aware that all eyes were on him, pitying and revolting, and he raised his head defiantly; no one was fooled. But Tony pulled the attention back to himself, saying with ill-feigned servility, “Was there anything in particular you wanted to talk to us about, or may we go?”

Despite being a mortal in the realm of gods, talking to the king no less, Tony’s made it clear that he would not take ‘no’ for an answer. And while Loki did not fear the consequences of his own
impudence—what else could Thor possibly take from him?—he knew that if Odin was still king, Tony would no doubt be punished. He tried to find his voice again, to draw Thor's ire onto himself and spare Tony, but it remained locked under writhing black.

But instead of growing angry, Thor slumped back into the throne, his body language exuding defeat. Loki, however, caught the determined glint in the god’s eyes and knew that this wasn’t over yet. Thor was intent upon his hollow dream. “We shall speak again at a later time,” Asgard’s king said, his gaze—filled with unsought compassion—inevitably drawn back to Loki. Clamping down on his mask, forbidding weakness from showing, the god glared back.

’Look at what you’ve done to me,’ his eyes said. ‘Where is your love now? Though you claim to be my brother, what have you but lies?’

Thor averted his gaze, asking Tony, “Do you require separate quarters, or will you be staying with Loki?”

“With Loki,” Tony replied immediately.

Nodding, Thor said, “We shall speak again on the morrow. In the meantime, I shall arrange the details of the trial.”

That was all the dismissal Loki needed; he spun on his heels and hurried—just shy of a sprint—away from Thor, staring steadfastly ahead as the darkness pursued him. He could hear Tony struggling to catch up, but the man didn't ask him to slow down. Loki stalked past the guards without pause, shoving open the heavy doors and continuing down the halls. Even with his mind mired in fog, his feet easily traveled the well-worn path that ten years of absence couldn’t erase; Loki fled to his room with Tony, a handful of guards, and the void snapping at his heels.

When Loki turned around a corner and saw the familiar door, engraved with the branches of Yggdrasill and the wolves Hati and Skol, he finally let himself run, desperate to escape the memories drowning him. He wrenched the door open and darted inside; Tony barely managed to slip in behind him before Loki slammed it closed and slid the lock home. He knew that the guards would take up station outside his door, but as long as they were out there—where they could not see or hear him—he didn't care.

Loki stumbled into the center of the room, exhaling in relief, but that feeling was short lived; he raised his eyes from the floor and was assaulted by the very memories he sought to escape. Triggered by his surroundings—the book shelves that had been tidied even after his theft, the gleaming and polished furniture, the carefully preserved spell supplies—he realized that there was nowhere in Asgard he could flee from his past. The only thing that had changed in his rooms was the lingering scent of his mother's perfume.

The walls defending his mind against the surging darkness chipped and cracked.

“Wow, so this is your room? It's like you have an entire house in here,” Tony began to blather as he milled about, inspecting the skulls Loki had on a table and glancing down the hallway leading deeper into his quarters. However, as he spoke, Tony continually glanced over at Loki, his worry poorly veiled. “It definitely screams ‘this is Loki’s room’. Seriously, every single wall is covered in books. How do you even have the time to read all of that?”

Loki knew that Tony was attempting to distract him, draw him into inane conversation and push the fog from his mind, but it wasn’t working. The walls protecting Loki crumbled under the onslaught, and darkness consumed his thoughts. Reality melded with delusions of the void until Loki struggled to discern one from the other.
But through it all, a part of him was aware that Tony was with him — a constant stream of wordless noise and reassuring touches — and that, more than anything, made the torrent bearable.

-o-o-o-

Loki’s mind rebooted with a jolt, and he gasped as the world suddenly erupted into blurs of colors. He blinked a few times to clear his vision, and then he stared up in confusion. Lying on the carpet and gazing up at familiar murals on the ceiling — colorful depictions of the realms and stories of ages past that he had painted with his own hand — Loki thought he was in the past; any minute now, Thor would be teasing him for sleeping on the floor again.

But then his head throbbed, sending stabs of pain down his spine and through his limbs. He groaned and lifted his arm, brow furrowed as he caught sight of the golden wire entwined around his wrist. The image jolted loose his memories, and the events of the past day came rushing back. Any delusions he held were swept away, and the god let his head drop back to the floor with a thud.

“You back with me, Sleeping Beauty?” Tony asked from somewhere to the right, breaking Loki from his melancholy; he lifted his head again to look at the man, who was sitting against the armrest of the nearest couch with a book held in his hands. When Loki began picking himself off the floor — bending each limb cautiously as his already sore muscles were protesting loudly — Tony said, “Sorry about the whole floor thing. You really do weigh a ridiculous amount despite how thin you are.”

“How long have I been out?” Loki asked when he got to his feet, swaying slightly before the black dots fled from his vision.

“A bit over six hours. Thor didn’t send any summons, if you were wondering, though a guard brought dinner like an hour ago.” Tony motioned to a plate sitting on the side table. “I wasn’t sure if you’d like any of it.”

Loki inspected it and found that everything was highly seasoned, something he would have preferred when he lived here but couldn’t stand anymore. He snatched the lone piece of bread and tore it into pieces; stress rolled his stomach, but he forced the bites down, trying to regain some of the energy that was being drained from him.

Tony watched him while drumming his fingers lightly against the book resting on his lap. “So… what do we do now?”

Ignoring his nausea, Loki finished eating and looked out the window that overlooked the Bifrost. Though it was only the afternoon in Midgard, night had fallen across Asgard, and the city had grown quiet. Loki was too wound up to relax, but he looked back at Tony, who was only mortal, and said, “We should rest.”

The man shook his head. “I don’t think that’s happening anytime soon.” Dark marks underlined the man’s eyes, and his skin had grown pale, but his muscles remained tense; the drumming got louder. “They said you can’t leave the palace, right? How about you give me a tour of the inside?”

Loki frowned. “I don’t know if my brother would take kindly to us snooping about.” Nor was he eager to run into his family or someone who sought vengeance against him. Without magic, he’d be powerless.

“Nonsense,” Tony said, his flippancy a shallow veil for anxiety. “As long as we don’t do anything illegal, they can’t complain.” Loki was about to say ‘no’ when Tony added, “The other option is staying cooped up in here until Thor asks for you. Personally, I think walking around sounds a lot
Loki had to agree with that point; the walls of his rooms were pressing down on him, suffocating him, and he wasn't sure if he could remain there without going blank again. But that didn't ease his nerves, and he warned, “There will be guards watching us.”

Tony shrugged. “I’ve had to travel with bodyguards before. You just ignore them.” Mind made up, the man set his book down and stood. “Lead the way.”

Loki considered sticking to his refusal, but the thought of spending the night with nothing but his memories propelled him to the door. When he stepped from the room, the guards stationed in the hall started. One of them began to lower his spear across the threshold, trying to bar their way.

“What are you—”

“I am free to walk through the palace grounds. If that bothers you, then take it up with your king.” Loki asserted, slinking past the man with Tony by his side. The soldiers bickered amongst themselves for a moment before reaching a decision. They backed down, offering no protest as they trailed behind Loki; just as Tony advised, he ignored them.

“So where are we going first?” Tony asked as they wound through the nearly empty palace halls. The only ones around to gawk at them were servants and guards.

“The library.”

Tony managed to crack a smile at that. “You and books. I should have guessed.”

“The only collection larger than the one in this palace is on Alfheim.” At Tony's uncomprehending stare, the god clarified, “The land of the elves.”

“How large are we talking?” Tony asked. Loki wasn’t sure how much of the man’s interest was genuine, but he didn’t allow himself to dwell on it. This was his only chance to show Tony the beauty of Asgard, and he wouldn’t let anyone ruin it for them.

Loki smiled and reached for the large doors, saying. “See for yourself.” As the heavy doors were pushed open, torches flickered to life within the room, illuminating the rows of tomes across every wall in dancing shades of orange and red. Between the walls were so many book-laden shelves that there was scarcely room to walk between them, and a staircase to their right spiraled up to the other floors where even more texts were held.

“And Alfheim has more than this?” Tony asked in disbelief, wandering further into the room. Despite the fact that the man rarely read print at home, he was eager to explore what Asgard had to offer; Tony plucked a random book from one of the lower shelves and began to flip through it. He had gotten halfway through the text when he abruptly stopped, and, with wide-eyes, thumbed back a few pages.

“Holy shit,” Tony breathed, rotating the book in disbelief. “The picture is moving just like in Harry Potter… Is there a forbidden section, too?” Their escort, loitering in the background but watching their every move, tensed at the question; Tony rethought what he had said and muttered, “Nevermind, don't answer that.”

Loki did anyway, figuring that he had nothing to lose. “There are books that only the king has access to, like the one I stole. But most texts are available here, where anyone can read them.”

Tony put the book back and grabbed another one; it was in a language the man couldn't possibly know, but Tony was intrigued nonetheless. As he continued browsing the shelves, he asked, “Now
so far I've heard of the realms Midgard, Alfheim, Jotunheim, and Asgard, but what are the other five?”

Loki jumped onto the offered topic, and he launched into explanation. “There's Svaltarheim, land of the dwarves, and Vanaheim…”

As they explored the shelves, he continued talking, interrupting himself only to go off on tangents about the library itself. Anything that came to mind he relayed, wanting to show Tony the magnificence of Yggdrasil, and never once did the man grow bored. He listened intently, only interrupting to ask for clarification, which Loki gave with interest. Yet for all of the stories Loki told, never did his words venture towards the reason they were in Asgard. There wasn't anything either of them could do about the trial, so why ruin the moment?

When they had scoured every corner of the library, Loki led Tony to the miniature World Tree in the courtyard. Then be brought him to the council room, and then to the armory (much to the distress of their guards). On and on they traveled, from the towers to the ballrooms, and on and on Loki talked. He only had these few hours to introduce Tony to a world vastly different from—but no less beautiful than—Midgard, and he intended to use them fully.

Only when dawn came and the entire castle—with the exception of the weapon's vault, which no amount of smooth talking could get Loki into—was explored did they stop. Both of them were exhausted despite their anxious energy, and Loki led them back to their room, hiding them away from judging eyes.

“You should rest,” the god insisted once the door closed behind him, eying the way Tony kept rubbing the bridge of his nose and wincing.

But Tony was obstinate, and even though the man was running on nothing, he shook his head. “I'm not sleeping until you do. You look as bad as I feel.”

While Tony was right that Loki was exhausted—the bracelets were almost a punishment in themselves, keeping his body constantly on the brink—the god was in no hurry to meet his nightmares. Besides, there was a huge difference between his endurance and Tony's; he'd be fine. Tony, on the other hand, was only human, and though the god let the matter he drop, he knew the man would cave to his fatigue eventually.

And Tony did not even thirty minutes later; they had been reading together on the couch, and the man's book suddenly slipped from slack fingers, making Loki look up in alarm. But Tony had only passed out against the armrest, the stress lines on his face eased by sleep. Loki watched the steady rise and fall of his chest for a minute, taking comfort in the simple fact that Tony was alive, before returning to his book.

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Midway through the next day, a guard knocked on the door, drawing Loki's attention away from his book and waking Tony. Giving the door a wary look, Loki set down the book and stood while Tony blearily regained his bearings. Dread pooled in Loki's stomach as he approached the door, and when he opened it, a handful of soldiers were waiting on the other side.

“The king requests that you report to the throne room at once,” one of the guards announced. “We shall escort you there.” Loki heard Tony scramble to his feet behind him, and even the god couldn't completely hide his alarm.

“Did he say what for?” Loki asked uneasily. Certainly Thor didn't have the trial set up in only one
It was not my place to ask,” the guard replied, stepping out of the doorway. “Now come.” When Loki glanced over his shoulder at Tony, the man nodded that he was ready. Loki stepped out of the room, and Tony made to follow, but suddenly the guard raised his arm, blocking Tony’s exit. Both Loki and Tony stopped in surprise, and the soldier stated, “King Thor expressed his desire for Loki to come alone.”

“Was it a direct order?” Loki challenged, staring the soldier down. The guard returned his ferocity, and Loki was curious to see hatred in the Aesir's eyes. Now that he thought about it, the soldier was vaguely familiar; maybe he was one of the ones that had been hunting Loki?

But then the guard backed down, admitting what Loki suspected. “Not an order. Merely a request if you are willing.”

“Well I'm not,” Loki snapped. “He’s coming with me. This matter involves him as well.”

“My apologies then,” the guard said, not sounding sorry at all but too disciplined to go against Thor’s orders. He removed his arm from Tony’s path, and the man came to stand beside Loki. Neither of them were ignorant to the condescending looks that were cast their ways — mostly at Tony, despite the fact that Loki was the criminal — and they stuck together as the soldiers escorted them through the palace.

Loki’s apprehension grew with each step, and when they reached the entrance to the throne room, his muscles coiled beneath his skin. The guards stepped to the side, taking up station by the entrance but not passing through the door. At Loki’s questioning glance, one of them explained, “Our orders are to remain outside. You may go in.”

That peculiar instruction was enough to make Loki certain of what awaited him in the throne room, and it did nothing to lessen his unease. He pressed his hands against the gold paint and pushed the door open, but his feet remained firmly outside of the threshold; Loki stared at his family — talking in hushed voices near the throne — with foreboding, and only pride kept him from closing the door and running the other way.

His mother noticed him first, raising her eyes to meet his and trailing off in the middle of her sentence. Her sudden withdrawal from the conversation caught the attention of Thor and Odin, and five blue eyes became fixated on Loki. He stared and them and nearly jumped when a hand gently pushed his shoulder. Tony spoke encouragingly behind him: “Go.”

Against his every instinct, Loki obeyed, stepping into the room and letting the door close behind them. Knowing that if he stopped he’d not be able to start again, Loki forced himself to keep walking — throwing his head back proudly and plastering a mask of fake confidence on his face — towards the throne. However, with each step, the floor grabbed at his feet like sludge in a swamp. He slowed until, halfway into the throne room, he stopped.

It was Frigga who closed the distance left between them. She gathered the skirt of her flowing dress in her hands and rushed down the steps. When she reached Loki, she threw her arms around his shoulders and pressed her forehead into the crook of his neck. “Loki, my son...” She murmured, pulling him close, but he remained stiff in her hold, unable to reciprocate. “I have missed you so.”

Whereas the retort was immediate when directed at Thor or Odin, Loki hesitated before softly murmuring, “You are not my mother.” He stepped backwards so the hands fell from his shoulders
and watched as Odin and Thor walk towards them. As Thor stopped besides Frigga, Loki glared at him.

“You did not listen to me.”

Much to Loki’s outrage, Thor did not look apologetic. “All I ask is that you speak with them.”

“And if I do not want to speak with them?”

“Loki,” Frigga pleaded, her hands clasped nervously before her. “You must understand that we did not hide the truth to hurt you. We just did not want to make you feel different.”

“And what a glorious job you did with that,” he hissed. “All those years you spent favoring Thor... You could never forget the fact that I am a frost giant, could you? Never could delude yourselves into loving me.”

“No,” Odin said, finally speaking up. His voice was gravelly, worn by years of illness, but his tone was stern. Loki had to grit his teeth to keep the screaming inside.

’Why was I never good enough for you? I tried everything!’

“We never thought differently of you,” Odin said. “You are our son as much as Thor is.”

Loki’s control slipped. “Stop saying that!” It wasn't true; it could never be true. Nothing would change what he is or replace the repulsive blood flowing through his veins. “I am Laufey’s son and your pawn.”

“You twist my words,” Odin accused, straightening his back in an attempt to recover his lost regality; his old bones protested, and his face twisted into a grimace as he began to cough. Frigga laid a gentle hand on her husband’s arm, but he waved her off, suppressing the hacks that shook his aged frame. “I’m fine,” he rasped, eye only for Loki. “It does not matter who fathered you,” he asserted. “It never did.”

“Did you decide that before or after you realized I was useless as a bargaining chip?” Loki ground out, trapped between wanting to yell and cry. “Because those are lofty words for someone who manipulated and deceived me for my entire life.”

Although he wanted to feel nothing, Loki could not completely distance himself from the wounded expression on Frigga’s face or the way Odin’s breaths came in ragged gasps and his eye crinkled around the edges in pain. To block out the sympathy, he swathed himself in the truth: they lied to him. There was no forgiveness.

A soft — almost inaudible — voice in his head asked, ‘What about Tony? You lied to him, but he still forgave you. Can you not do the same?’ Loki smothered the voice and the doubt it created.

‘The circumstances are vastly different,’ he told himself.

‘But are they really?’

Not wanting the dwell on these thoughts — to muddle through the churning waves of despair and betrayal and hope — Loki continued spitefully, “If I were to walk amongst you with blue skin, would you insist you love me then?”

With sharp, unforgiving eyes, he watched their reactions, and his masochism wasn’t disappointed. All three of them had their faith waver, the love on their faces overlaid with uncertainty and a hint of
disgust. Neither Frigga nor Thor had ever seen his Jotun flesh; of course they would have no problem telling themselves it didn’t exist.

“Brother, it matters not what you look like,” Thor finally said, speaking loudly to cover up the fact that he had hesitated. “You are Loki and nothing more.”

Fury burned within Loki’s chest, a hideous inferno that consumed everything and turned it to ash. Thor’s words only made the flames erupt further — but not just for the reason Loki expected. His brother’s blatant lies infuriated him, but it was the way Thor swept his Jotun heritage aside that truly made his blood boil.

‘You’re Loki.’ ‘You’re my son.’ ‘You’re just like us.’ Over and over and over. But wasn’t. He was a Jotun. His skin was blue. No matter what they said, that fact would never change. It would never go away, regardless of how deeply he buried it. But not once did any of them say they accepted his heritage; they insisted he was the exception or that it wasn’t important. Their redirection proved their feelings more than their spoken words ever would: they could say they loved him because he didn’t seem Jotun. They did not love him as he was: both Loki and a frost giant. He was right to say that they’d been lying — to him and themselves — all along.

“Do you truly believe that?” he asked. “What if I was to freeze all that I touched? Would you still claim to love me?”

“Of course, Loki. Never have we thought differently of—” Frigga began; Loki cut her off.

“But I am different!” he cried, shocking them into silence. But Loki was not done. For so long, he wanted to be just like Thor and everyone else on Asgard. He wanted to fit in and be appreciated, if not for his unique skills then for the skills everyone else had. Yet his efforts gained him nothing but spite and grief, and he thought that he’d always be the pariah. But then on Midgard, where there were people just as fractured and distorted as him, he was a valued companion. For once in his life, he did not have to lie constantly, and he found peace. The masks he wore grew heavy, and he didn’t want to pretend anymore. Let him be different. He owed them nothing.

Loki began to unravel the shapeshifting that he had clung to since he was naught but a few days old. Before Jotunheim, he hadn’t noticed the cold hiding within him, but ever since the frost giant touched him, he couldn’t forget the feeling of frigid blue skin. It lurked in his mind, seeking release that he was too cowardly to grant. But no longer would he hide. His family claimed his heritage did not matter? Then let them look upon the monster they had brought into their fold. Let them see how vile Loki was beneath the guise his magic bestowed upon him.

With a snap, the magic came undone, and blue consumed Loki’s flesh. As his skin chilled and a light sheen of frost crept across the floor, his ‘family’ reacted, their eyes widening as they took in his appalling form. Loki’s lip curled in disgust. “Can you profess love for me even now?” he asked, spreading his arms wide, willingly baring the marks upon his flesh for the first time. However, he did not bare them out of pride, but self-loathing. “Or is it only acceptable if I hide what I really am?”

Eyes traced upon his distorted features as if he was a stranger, and Loki was torn between vindictive triumph and anguish when his family did not respond. ‘They are disgusted with me,’ Loki thought as their faces filled with misery.

Just as quickly as the foolish plan came upon him, Loki wanted its effects undone. He wanted them to stop staring at his blue, hideous, monstrous flesh. 'Don't look at me,' he screeched in his mind, but they did not obey; like an insect, he was pinned beneath their scrutiny, and he couldn't escape. Desperately, Loki called for his magic, mind shaping the spell to shift back, but instead of a rush of energy, he was met with a wave of pain. For an instant, he was stupefied, his panicking thoughts
unable to wrap around what had went wrong, but then his eyes were drawn to the glowing bracelets on his wrists. He stared at them in horror.

“Loki,” Frigga said, snapping out of her stupor and reaching for him, but Loki flinched away, fearing that she would burn herself upon his foul flesh. Crestfallen, Frigga withdrew her hand and remained distanced, as if there was an invisible wall between them. “I’ll always love you, as a Jotun or Aesir or whatever you choose to be.”

But Loki could not believe her; he could never love this wretched form, so why would he expect someone else to? Again he tried to force the blue away, bury it under the greatest lie, but the strain on his already aching core caused blinding pain to flash across the black gathered in his mind. Even though he felt as if someone had ignited his veins, the blue remained, mocking him.

With a snarl, he tried a third time, but his will could not overcome the effect of the bracelets. As spears of pain shot through his head, his family shifted anxiously. Frigga took a cautious step forwards, but again Loki backed away. Grinding his jaw, Loki was about to throw every ounce of magic he had against the bracelets — an effort he knew would be in vain, but didn’t care because it had to work — when a hand pressed against the small of his back.

Loki flinched violently at the contact, and his concentration snapped as he whipped his head around to see Tony standing behind him. Alarmed, Loki tried to pull away — Tony was just a human; even through the armor, Loki was cold enough to give him frostbite — but Tony stepped with him, keeping his hand right where it was.

“Cut that out,” the man said as if talking to a spooked horse. He took a step closer until he was only inches from Loki, and his hand did not move. Loki’s thoughts raced frantically—’I’m too cold. He’s going to hurt himself. I can’t let him get hurt. Damn his heroics.’ — and he reached out to make Tony let him go, but when his skin was inches from Tony’s, the god jerked to a stop, realizing that he’d only make it worse.

But then Tony closed the distance, brushing his forearm against Loki’s fingers, and the god was staggered when the man did not recoil in agony. “Come on, Smurf. You aren’t that cold,” Tony said, wrapping his fingers around Loki’s bracelet-clad wrist; the man’s skin felt like a hearth, but it wasn’t painful. “You’re not going to hurt anyone.”

The panic that clouded Loki’s mind faded, and he noticed what he hadn’t before: while his flesh was cold, freakishly so, it wasn’t causing frostbite like it had in Norway or forming ice like it had in Doom’s castle. He wasn’t completely rid of Jotunheim’s chill, but he also wasn’t hurting everyone he touched.

Tony smiled at him, squeezing Loki’s arm reassuringly, and opened his mouth to say something else, but Odin’s booming voice stole his words. “What is a human doing in Asgard?”

Heart dropping, Loki turned to look at Odin, whose face was reddening with righteous fury. Whereas it seemed that Odin and Frigga hadn’t noticed Tony when they first entered the throne room, they were now staring at him in shock and — at least in Odin’s case — distaste. And Loki could see the moment that Odin connected the dots between the theft of Idunn’s apple and Tony’s presence, because his eye narrowed and he redirected his abhorrence to Loki.

“You have stepped far over the line, Loki,” Odin asserted. “I thought teaching Thor the extent of his foolery would end these ill-fated dalliances.” Beside Odin, Thor frowned, clearly displeased by the slight against Jane Foster, but he offered no resistance; Loki, on the other hand, could not remain silent in his fury.
He began to retort, jaded words forming in his mouth, but Frigga, quiet but commanding, spoke up. “What do you mean to my son, human?”

Tony, who had been glaring at Odin, glanced over at her. At the sight of her honest interest, his anger cooled, but that didn't keep him from turning back to Odin and growling, “I was there for him when no one else was.”

The thinly veiled barb did nothing to calm Odin's wrath, nor did he take kindly to the insubordination. “The punishment for making a human immortal is death,” he said, and there was the unspoken threat that Tony was also deserving of execution.

“He will not be executed,” Thor stated, unable to hold his tongue any longer.

Odin scowled at his son. “It is the law.”

“And I make the laws,” Thor retorted; it was family pitted against family, and Loki was at the root of it all.

“You would let the very sanctity of our realm be violated?” Odin asked, the force of his words sending him into another coughing fit.

“My love, you are being too strict,” Frigga protested, the conversation derailing into chaos. “Would you not even listen to your son's reason?”

Her words were ignored; Thor and Odin were locked in a power struggle, puffing out their chests and glaring at each other. Thor said, “I would have a heart. He is my brother.”

“Then you are a soft king.”

“But I am the king!” Thor roared, silencing Odin. No one spoke as he breathed heavily, flexing his hand in aggravation. Before he continued speaking, the God of Thunder looked over at Loki, who pulled a burdensome mask tightly over his emotions. “Loki's crimes are my business, not yours, and I will decide what must be done.”

“A weak king will not be able to hold the throne with a steady hand,” Odin replied, his tone the same as the one he used when teaching Loki and Thor politics as children.

Tony snorted derisively. “Yeah, because using your son as an example is the epitome of virtuous,” he said, echoing the rage that Loki felt. Not for the first time, the god was grateful to have Tony beside him so he did not have to face this alone. At least with Tony, Loki could trust that somebody would be by his side even if he made mistakes. Even if he was...

Loki glanced down at his skin, still a vivid shade of blue, and felt sick.

Even if he was a monster.

“Were it not for me, he’d be dead!” Odin shouted, and then was seized by a coughing fit so bad that it shook his body and made his broad shoulders cave. Under the weight of Odin's words, Loki's shoulders also caved, but only for a split second. He pushed back; he would not let Odin’s words break him this time.

“That’s enough,” Thor said, his voice cold. The Thor that Loki remembered would never defy Odin, and he wondered just what had happened in Asgard while he was away to make the thunder god so independent. “I think it is time that you and mother leave. Loki and I must speak about his trial.”
Still recovering from his bout of illness, Odin could only give his son a disapproving glower. Frigga, casting her gaze sadly from one person to another, took advantage of his forced silence and said, “Very well, my son.” She bowed her head and gripped Odin’s arm. When the All-Father remained tense, unwilling to let go now that he’d sunk his fangs, Frigga cajoled, “Leave your children be, love. The throne is Thor’s burden now.”

Odin's eye was smoldering when he looked upon his sons, but his gaze softened as he turned to his wife. She had a sad smile on her lips, but her hand remained unyielding on Odin's arm; the old king sighed and closed his weary eye. When he opened it again, he seemed a thousand years older. “I fear my wife knows me too well that I am so easily swayed by her words.”

Frigga led her husband away, and as Odin walked as stoutly as he could towards the exit, he did not look back once. However, as they passed through the golden doors, Frigga did; her eyes were filled with sorrow and longing, as if she wanted nothing more than to stay by Loki’s side.

And Loki... Loki wanted her to stay. He wanted to call out to her, tell her to come back and that he still loved her. He wanted to tell her that he remembered sitting in her lap as she read stories and standing beside her as she taught him magic. He wanted to say that he had been lying, that he knew she had always supported him and that he did not hate her.

But then she was gone, and he had said nothing, too ashamed of himself and his freezing flesh.

Loki turned back to Thor, hiding his anguish beneath callousness. “Now that pointless sentimentalities are out of the way, what did you summon me for?”
The Trial

"Overcome and completely silent now,
With heaven's help you cast your demons out.
And not to pull your halo down around your neck,
And tug you off your cloud,
But I'm more than just a little curious,
How you're planning to go about
Making your amends to the dead.
To the dead.

Recall the deeds as if they're all,
Someone else's atrocious stories.
Now you stand reborn before us all.
So glad to see you well."

-The Noose by A Perfect Circle

“I do not wish to punish you,” Thor insisted, his eyes earnest as he made the same pointless declaration.

Loki was quick to retaliate. “Then you should not have brought me here.”

Tony, standing behind the god, watched the muscles in Loki’s neck tense; in fact, his entire body went rigid. Any bravado he displayed—from his uninhibited words to the glares he pinned on the king—was merely that: a display. No mask, no strength of will, could fully hide the way Loki shook and flinched. For all of the god's wrath, Tony clearly saw the fright it churned above, and Loki shied away from everyone—himself, Thor, and even Tony. He stood beneath Thor’s scrutiny, yes, but he stood with every muscle tensed to flee.

There was no way Thor could have missed the fear Loki failed to hide, and yet he continued to make demands of the god. “You must make amends.”

Irritated by the constant cycling of their conversation, Tony interrupted, “He is making amends.” Both of the gods shifted their attention to him—one doubting and the other confused—but Tony wasn't deterred. He stepped around Loki, making certain that Thor could no longer ignore him, and insisted, “Maybe not on Asgard or Jotunheim, but on Midgard he is. He's a hero who has saved countless lives. How is that not making amends?”

“That does not right the wrongs done here,” Thor stubbornly insisted, but Tony was just as stubborn in his defense of Loki. While he had been content to stay out of the way as the god spoke with his parents (there were some things that Loki had to do on his own, for his sake, and that was one of them. Tony's job was to protect Loki, not coddle him, and there were things the god needed to figure out for himself) this was not something he could sit by and passively watch.

“What wrongs are there left to fix?” Tony asked loudly, gesturing emphatically with his hands. “Making me immortal? That apple saved my life, and unless you kill me, you can't undo his actions. Stealing the book? He already gave it back. And all of those mistakes he made a decade ago? Do you honestly think that he hasn’t paid for those yet?”
There could have been no punishment more fitting and more horrific than Loki’s time spent in the void; he tried to escape from his problems, and as a result he was left with nothing but those problems. For seven years he had been trapped in empty space with nothing but bitter memories to keep him company. The void shattered Loki’s mind, and if that wasn’t enough to make up for his crimes, wasn’t enough suffering to balance the scale, then nothing was.

Tony could see the weight of his words on Thor, crushing down on the thunder god’s resolve; chasms tore apart the guise of royalty—a guise Tony hadn’t even realized Thor was wearing—and unearthed bone-deep misery. It was in that moment that Tony realized for all he focused on Loki’s anguish, Loki was not the only one who suffered. The malady that afflicted Loki—the loathing so powerful and unbridled that it corroded him from the inside out—was not bound to him alone. Thor, Odin, Frigga: they all endured his sorrow, and his family was falling apart at the seams.

“Thor,” Tony beseeched, “I know you must do something about Loki, but isn’t there some way to uphold justice and not hurt him? Does it have to be one or the other?”

A frown fell upon the god’s face, obscuring the depth of his melancholy, but Tony couldn’t forget the glimpse he had seen. He knew without a doubt that he had to save Loki for all of their sakes. “I do not know,” Thor admitted solemnly. “Asgardian justice is often very... final.”

“There has to be something,” Tony contended, but Thor just looked away, hiding his defeated expression. Desperate, Tony turned to Loki, who was being abnormally silent; the god was watching them with vacant red eyes, his mind trying to detach itself from the situation. “Loki, come on,” Tony begged, reigniting a spark of awareness in the god; Loki twitched, and his empty eyes focused on Tony. “Tell me what to do. You always have a plan.”

However, Loki had already succumbed to hopelessness, and his resignation was no less a foe than Asgard’s laws. The god barely even considered Tony’s plea before shaking his head in defeat, the light in his eyes dimming. Tony grew frustrated. “Are you really just going to give up and roll over? After everything you’ve fought through—after everything we’ve done—you aren’t even going to try?”

Tony was almost glad when Loki whipped his gaze from the floor to glare at him, because at least then he was responding, but the words that followed were harsh, jaded, and entirely beyond hope. “I’ve told you repeatedly: there isn’t anything! After the trial, it’s over!”

“Well it can’t mean that much to you if you're not willing to fight for it!”

Loki met his gaze head-on, but when he spoke next, his tone was softer. “You know that’s not true. That’s... It isn’t...” He choked on his words, and his eyes darted to Thor, all too aware of their audience. And yet it didn’t stop Loki from turning back to Tony and saying earnestly, “I wanted to stay with you forever.”

Hearing those words sent a burst of warmth through Tony’s chest, and he hated it; once Loki was gone, the chill that would settle beneath the man’s ribs would only feel that much colder. More severe than he intended, though at the same time knowing such force was necessary, Tony repeated, “Then do something about it.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Loki retorted, but instead of hissing the words, he said them like a lament.

“So work with me, princess,” Tony said, reaching forwards to clasp Loki’s arm reassuringly; the god started, trying to pull away, but Tony didn’t let go. “Don’t just say there are no options. Take it from the top if you have to. What are Asgard’s normal punishments like?”
Off to the side, Thor grimaced, and Loki blanched. “Your... previous statement about torture was not incorrect.” Loki began haltingly. “Often prisoners are sentenced to be tortured in a way befitting their crime, such as cutting off a thief’s hands or burning the mouth of a liar with hot coals. The sentence can last for thousands of years or until the criminal eventually dies.”

‘Horrified’ couldn't even begin to describe the way Tony felt as he stared wide-eyed at Loki and Thor. Within his mind, memories of Afghanistan rose unbidden: water filling his nose and mouth while cruel hands held him down, his lungs screams for air that they were denied, and merciless voices shouting at him in a foreign tongue, demanding things that he would never give.

“Son of Stark?” Thor asked cautiously, jolting Tony from his memories; he blinked rapidly, and the hot sands of Afghanistan faded into the serene gold of Asgard. Willing his racing heart to calm, the man focused on the two gods before him, and he waved their concern away.

“It's nothing,” Tony said, clamping down on his panic. Loki frowned knowingly, but Thor was baffled by his reaction.

“I will not let such terrors happen to my brother,” the God of Thunder stated, thinking that was the root of Tony’s acute distress. While Thor didn't quite hit the mark, Tony clung to those words to chase the lingering flashes away; Asgard would not become another Afghanistan.

But then Loki spoke up, disrupting his relief. “You can not make such promises with my crimes as they are. Torture would be a light sentence for my treason against the throne.” The god smiled mockingly and berated, “Surely you paid more attention to our lessons than that?”

Thor stared at his brother, and Tony thought that he'd rise to the bait and renew their shouting match, but instead of getting annoyed, the god looked pensive. Yet he did not speak of his thoughts, so Tony filled the silence.

“Right, well.” He let out a shaky breath. “What are the lightest sentences Asgard has? There must be something other than torture and execution.”

“Imprisonment and exile,” Loki answered promptly, his tone no less dark than when he had spoke of torture. “Such sentences often last for a lifetime, and I’d never... I’d not... I...” Suddenly the god trailed off, eyes widening as he stared into space.

Tony and Thor both looked at Loki in confusion, but they were ignored; only the narrowing of Loki’s eyes assured Tony that the god had not abruptly blanked out, but beyond that, he was as still as a statue, completely fixated on something they could not see. When the god didn't snap out of it, Tony became concerned.

“Uhh... Loki? You alright?” he asked, but the only indication that the god heard him was a blink. “Lokes, seriously, you're creeping me out here.” Tony shook Loki's shoulder, and finally the god moved; light returned to his red eyes and a grin split his face—the exact opposite of what Tony had been expecting. “What the hell are-”

Loki's eyes passed over Tony and landed on Thor, and breathlessly he demanded, “Exile me.”

Both Tony and Thor furrowed their brows, bewildered by Loki’s sudden command, and simultaneously asked, “What?”

“You witless oafs, I mean exactly what I said,” Loki said, but the harshness of his words was belied by his eager tone.

“Yeah, uhh... I think that's the part we're confused about, Smurf,” Tony said, and Loki turned to him,
his expression almost hysterical.

“Don’t you understand? It’s perfect!” the god exclaimed, his entire demeanor the complete opposite of before. Tony wasn’t sure if Loki had finally cracked or what, but the lack of despair was a welcomed change. Still, he wished the god would calm down enough to actually explain himself. “Exile will fix everything! I was a fool for not realizing before.”

“Brother…” Thor said slowly, realization dawning in his eyes. “You mean you seek banishment to Midgard?”

“Is it not obvious? Yes, I want to be banished to Midgard! Strip me of my title and sentence me to a lifetime of serving humans!” The words seemed uncharacteristically joyful, but now that Tony understood what Loki was saying, he assimilated Loki’s hope.

“Could you do that?” he asked Thor, mirroring Loki’s mania. “Have him return to Midgard as punishment?” It sounded too good to be true, and yet the idea was enough to snap Loki out of his funk, and Tony could see the gears churning in Thor’s mind.

The God of Thunder nodded slowly. “Banishment is not unheard of, though it is not something done for the crimes Loki committed. Banishing him to Jotunheim would make sense, but not to Midgard.”

“That depends on which transgression you focus on,” Loki said. “I brought the Destroyer to Midgard; base my sentence on that.”

The fact that Loki had committed enough crimes in three realms that he actually had choices made Tony shift uncomfortably, but it didn’t change how he felt about the god. While no one could deny that Loki had screwed up in the past, it should also be undeniable that he had more than made up for it—no matter what Thor or Odin or anyone said to the contrary.

And Tony could see that Thor was realizing that Loki needed to be given a second chance. When the god spoke again, it was not a rebuttal so much as a request for Loki to provide an answer. “That still would not excuse your other offenses.”

Apparently Loki had already considered this, because he pointedly asked, “Do the people know that it was me who let Jotuns into the palace?”

Thor’s expression darkened at the reminder. “No. The details of your treason are known only to those directly involved. As is…” The god trailed off, his eyes drawn to Loki’s vivid blue flesh, and with an unidentifiable expression he amended, “Was your heritage.”

The excitement that had permeated Loki could not bear the blow of his loathing, and he grit his teeth as he glared down at his hand. But then he clenched his fist and lifted his head defiantly. “With the exception of the Jotuns and the Destroyer, my actions were within my right as king. There is nothing to be held accountable for…” Regret flashed in Loki’s eyes, and he looked away from his brother’s face. It didn’t take a genius to guess that Loki was remembering his attempt to murder his brother in New Mexico, and probably the second time he tried in Oregon. “At least not in the eyes of the council.”

Thor’s capacity for forgiveness was astounding, especially for wrongs committed against him; while he frowned at the memory of what Loki had done, he brushed it aside and returned to the issue at hand. “What about your recent crimes? The theft of the grimoire?” Thor jabbed a finger at Tony. “What you did to him? When the apple is not returned, there will be no doubt that you used it.”

Loki shrugged. “Lie to them. Say I used it to further my own power. That’s what everyone expects
of me anyway.”

“I will not lie for you,” Thor declared obdurately. “There is no justice in deception.”

Tony sighed at the god's words, knowing they were going to start backtracking; sure enough, as Loki stared at Thor, a sharp, razor-like grin spread across his face. “What is a mere lie in the face of your brother's suffering? You've already lied once. Doing so again will not harm your petty honor further.”

“I will not handle this like-”

“Like me?” Loki interrupted. “Of course not. Because obviously I am the only one who does so. Obviously Odin has never lied to keep the peace!” Loki clenched his fist and brandished a quivering blue hand. “Or is this not a lie because he did it to 'help' me?”

“What father did and what you are asking are two completely different things. I understand you are angry at him, but-”

“'Angry' doesn't even begin to cover it!” Loki snapped. “He deceived me! Sought to use me! How dare you defend his lies and yet refuse to defend me!”

Enough was enough. “Hey!” Tony shouted, letting go of Loki's arm to stomp forwards, placing himself between the feuding brothers. “Both of you need to seriously calm down!” Loki ceased yelling to stare at him in surprise, and Thor glared at them both. When Loki noticed, he made to retaliate again, but Tony wasn't having it. “That includes you, Sparkles.”

The god closed his mouth, but he mutinously glared at Thor over the top of Tony's head. Whatever. As long as they weren't yelling, it was good enough.

“What do you want, Man of Metal?” Thor asked, visibly restraining himself.

“What I want is for this mess to be over, and that isn't going to happen with you two bickering like children,” Tony answered, and the simple logic of his words made the brothers settle down. “See? Was that really so hard?” Satisfied that he wouldn't be interrupted, the man turned to Thor and began, “Listen, I know you have a lot of duties to juggle as king, but you have to understand that you are the only one who can protect your brother. Saying that you will help can only go so far if you don't actually take the necessary steps. I know you want to be an honest ruler, and that's fantastic, but Blondie, you really need to get off your high horse.”

Offended, Thor opened his mouth, but Tony raised a hand to stop him. “I said listen. You can get mad at me later. Right now, you need to realize that unless you do something, Loki is going to lose everything. And I know you think you need to uphold justice, but I'm telling you, he's already made up for his actions. Torturing or imprisoning him now is senseless. No one will benefit, and I promise you, if you do that to him, you'll never forgive yourself. Never.” Tony didn't need to see Loki's furious expression to tack on, “And he won't forgive you, either. It's not worth it.”

There was a moment of silence that followed Tony's speech, and when Thor realized that the man was done, he was quick to defend himself. “I can not so easily abdicate his actions. Were it just between the two of us, I would allow him to return to Midgard with you. But he has harmed many
with his actions, and if he does not face justice, the people of Asgard and the other realms will believe I rule with too soft of a hand. As the guardian of all Nine Realms, I can not welcome upheaval into my domain.”

“But you said so yourself that many of Loki's actions have already been swept under the rug,” Tony countered. “They would have no reason to expect punishment for events they are ignorant of. If you follow Loki’s plan, everyone would think the punishment is fitting, and no one has to suffer for it. Just please don’t make your own brother into an example. He's been through enough.”

Tony could see that his words were having an effect, chipping away the last of Thor's resolve, so he pushed one last time. “If you must, think about it this way. Back on Earth, Loki is a hero. He's a valued member of the Avengers, and it's thanks to him that we finally defeated one of the worst terrorists in American history. If you lock him away here, he won't be able to help anyone. You may call that justice, or making amends, or whatever, but the fact of the matter is that he's making more of a difference there than he ever will locked away in some cell. You want him to turn over a new leaf? Well he's trying, and right now you're the only one stopping him.”

The words hung heavy in the empty air, and the indignation had fled from Thor's face, leaving only weary contemplation. Tony wasn't even aware he had been holding his breath until finally Thor bowed his head and said, “You are right.”

Air fled the man's lungs in a rush, and he closed his eyes in relief, sending a mental thank you for the merciful twist of fate. When he opened his eyes again, Tony watched as sorrow crept through Thor's defenses as the god's attention fixed on Loki. Softly, Thor asked, “And this is what you want, brother? To be forbidden from ever returning home?”

“No,” Loki said adamantly. “What I want is to return home, and that's what I'm doing. I belong on Midgard, not Asgard.” Although the god spoke with confidence, he glanced over at Tony as if seeking confirmation that his words were true. Tony found himself nodding.

Thor watched their exchange with a pained expression, but he honored his word. “I will do what I can to ensure that happens, then. If you truly want to return to Midgard, I won't stop you. Your trial is set three days from now.”

Tony wanted to ask if the date could be moved closer—Loki was already fidgeting where he stood, his fingers clawing at the ridges on his hands—but he refrained; that Thor was allowing Loki to essentially go free was already a huge benefit, and Tony did not want to push their luck.

So he nodded, and Thor said, “You are dismissed.”

That was all it took for Loki to turn and stride towards the door, not stopping even when Tony did not immediately follow. The man was focused on Thor and the way the god followed his brother's departure with conflicting emotions.

“Thank you,” Tony said before he could convince himself otherwise. Thor turned to him, startled, and while the man could hear Loki pacing anxiously by the door, waiting to leave, he remained where he was; what he had to tell Thor couldn't wait. “I know you want him to stay here, so thank you for letting him go.”

Thor was startled by the show of gratitude, but then he smiled. “You are a good man, Tony Stark,” he said. “There is no one more worthy of my brother's affections.”

“I could think of one,” Tony replied, and then, before Thor could reply, he spun on his heel and made his way back to Loki's side. The god had ceased his pacing and now hovered anxiously by the
door, eyes darting around the room but always landing back on visible stretches of blue flesh. As Tony reached Loki, the god shot him a desperate look, and the man's chest tightened as he realized that Loki was ashamed to step outside and let others see his Jotun heritage.

Nevertheless, they had to get back to Loki's room, and there was nothing that could be done. Tony did what Loki could not and pushed the massive door open, drawing the attention of the guards outside. Their eyes widened when they fell on Loki, and many reached for their weapons. Loki's nails dug into his palm, and he was petrified under their gazes.

Needing to do something, Tony gripped Loki's wrist and tried to tug him forwards, but the god wouldn't budge. “Don't be vain, princess,” Tony joked in an effort to get Loki's attention off of the soldiers' disgust and on to him. “You're still beautiful.”

What he really meant was: 'What does it matter what they think? Look, I don't care what you are, and that's what matters.' And when Loki's blood red eyes finally turned to him, Tony thought that the god understood what he was attempting to say. Still, Loki could not so easily disregard the reactions of those around him, and he only stepped from the threshold when Tony yanked on his arm again.

They moved quickly through the halls, but it wasn't fast enough. Loki flinched every time someone stopped in shock upon seeing him, and while the halls were relatively empty, each person was one too many. Tony knew that Loki had to accept his heritage eventually, but this was not the way to do it. The horrified stares felt like a punch in the gut, and Tony knew that whatever he felt, Loki felt a thousand times more keenly.

That knowledge made the short walk through the palace last an eternity, but even when they reached Loki's room, the tension did not abate. The fact that Thor was on their side could not stop Loki from pacing restlessly, driven to the edge by his own mistake. Tony had no choice but to watch the god suffer within his own skin, and by the time the trial rolled around, he felt as if he had spent a hundred lifetimes trapped in Asgard.

-o-o-o-

“Are you sure I can’t just wear jeans and a T-shirt?” Tony asked as he tightened the buckled straps that attached a gaudy piece of plate mail to his chest. “I look ridiculous in this.”

Loki finished fastening a cloak over his own ostentatious armor—though unlike with Tony, it actually looked impressive on him—and gave the man an unamused look. “You would look more ridiculous in the other clothes you brought. It’s a formal occasion. Dress properly.”

Tony fiddled with the chest piece for another moment before giving up and moving onto the overcoat, which was weighed down with an abundance of straps and silver ornaments. Glaring at the armor, the man muttered, “I can't believe this is the least complex set of armor you have. Besides, I've worn jeans to my own trial before.”

“And how’d that work out for you?” Loki asked, grabbing a gold helmet from its stand (it wasn't his favorite helmet, which was apparently trapped in his storage dimension, but a less extravagant version of it) and putting it on.

“Not well,” Tony admitted; he finally managed to get the coat on, and with a sigh, he collected his own helmet. “I still think I should have just gone with the suit. At least I can move in that.” How Aesir could actually fight in this armor, which weighed at least twenty pounds—and Loki's probably weighed twice that, since he was taller and was parading around in even more layers—was beyond Tony. There was nothing practical about it besides the intimidation factor. Since Loki could look intimidating in sweat pants and a T-shirt, that was a moot point.
“The people of Asgard would not take kindly to you walking around their palace in a weapon,” Loki said, and though he glanced around for something else to tinker with, his armor was immaculate. That's when the god turned his anxious energy towards his hands and began to pick at his flesh, which was covered in half-healed scabs and dried blood.

Though Tony had tried to prevent Loki from scratching at his hands, the god could not stop himself for long. That didn't mean, however, that Tony gave up. “Knock that off,” he said, stepping forwards and taking Loki's hand into his own. Three days later, the god was still flinching anytime his skin was touched, frightened that it would burn Tony. It had yet to, but rationality was not Loki's strong suit when it came to his heritage.

Gently, Tony pried Loki’s hand away from the other, biting his lip as he took in the raw, bloody skin that was uncovered. The flesh began to regenerate before his eyes, but just as a scab was beginning to form, it stopped, and the wound remained. Loki had reassured Tony after he first inquired about it that such a reaction was normal when an injury was reoccurring, but the man still found it unsettling.

“It’s not going to help your cause if you go in there acting like a basket case,” Tony chided, brushing his fingers against the damaged, frozen skin.

Loki chuckled mirthlessly. “I don't think it'd make much of a difference considering I already look like this.”

There wasn't anything Tony could say to that, because the god was right and nothing short of removing the bracelets could undo his rash decision. Instead, he released the Loki's hand and said, for the hundredth time, “It'll be okay. You just need to get through this, and then we can go home and do whatever the hell you want.”

That Thor would do his best to get them through the trial was undeniable, but Tony was more worried about actually getting to that point. Being trapped in a form he despised and then cooped up inside of a palace full of unwanted recollections was doing Loki's sanity no wonders. Tony worried incessantly that Loki would black out or, even worse, lose his self-control and lash out.

“There's nothing is ever that easy,” Loki replied, but he refrained from scratching at his hands. Then the sound of knocking echoed through the hall towards them, and for all of his assurances, Tony felt his heart drop. It was time.

They gathered their nerves and left the armory, heading back to the living room. Loki pushed the door open, and a dozen soldiers were waiting for them on the other side. “Sir, you presence is now requested,” one announced, and Loki stepped into the hall. But before Tony could follow, soldiers swarmed the god and forced him towards the center of the hallway.

Alarm, Tony tried to get to Loki's side, but a spear bared his way. Another soldier was talking to him, saying, “As a representative of Midgard, you are required to enter separately. Follow me,” but Tony was barely paying attention; he was focused on the chains that were being placed roughly around Loki’s wrists, hiding the golden bracelets. The god stood still, letting the guards manhandle him, but the desperate look Loki shot Tony out of the corner of his eye betrayed his stress.

“I thought Thor said he didn’t need to be chained,” Tony protested and shoved forwards, but once again his way was blocked. He watched in outrage as the guards reached up to put a collar—a fucking collar—around Loki’s neck and shouted, “Hey! Let him go!”

But he was ignored, and more soldiers came between him and the god until he could only catch fleeting glimpses of blue. “Sir, please come with us,” the soldier insisted again, herding the resisting man down the hall. Tony had no choice but to keep moving, yet he kept glancing back to where
Loki was until they turned the corner and the god was left behind.

Tony's entourage led him to the entryway of the throne room, and a large clamor spilled from the open doors and into the hall. As Tony was led past the threshold, silence fell across the gathered crowd as they stared at him. He swallowed nervously and kept moving, ignoring the murmurs of 'is that a human?' and 'he shouldn't be allowed here'. The guard led Tony to the back of the throne room where Frigga was standing alone. Odin was nowhere to be seen, and for that Tony was grateful.

“You are to remain here unless directed otherwise,” the guard ordered, and then he vanished into the multitude, leaving nothing between Tony and the judging stares. He stared back, refusing to be cowed, and the Aesir quickly looked away to gossip with the people standing next to them. The volume increased as people's interest in Tony abated, but he remained tense and focused on the entrance as he waited for Loki to arrive.

Frigga leaned in closer, hands clasped regally before her chest and her eyes gazing out across the crowd. “I am glad that you are here. Loki needs someone to help support him. That foolish boy always tries to do things on his own.”

Eyes still locked on the doorway, Tony asked lowly, “Even if I’m a human?” Because it didn't take a genius to figure out that mortals were objects of contempt in Asgard, and Odin's reaction no longer seemed fanatic when the thinly veiled whispers around Tony were just as spiteful.


Tony glanced at her in surprise and was about to reply when a sudden hush fell over the rooms. He and Frigga both turned towards the door, though Tony had to stand on his toes in order to see past the tall Asgardians. They watched in silence as a dozen soldiers entered the throne room, and in the center was Loki, the blue hue of his skin standing out sharply. Each step Loki took was accompanied by the clatter of chains, and yet the god's chin was raised proudly. Tony tried to meet Loki's eyes and let him know that he was there to support him, but the god stared straight ahead. He and the guards came to a stop at the base of the steps, and the crowd exploded into pandemonium.

“The rumors are true: he really is a frost giant.”

“I don't see why they let such a barbaric creature into Asgard.”

“Quiet your tongue. He's still a member of the royal family.”

“He's a thief and a liar. That he's Jotun only explains why.”

“What was Odin thinking making one of their kind royalty? It's absurd and a stain upon our realm!”

Over and over the Asgardians uttered such petty words, and Tony had to forcibly hold his silence lest he shout out exactly what he thought about them. Amidst the uproar, Thor rose from his throne with Gungnir clasped in his hand. When the people didn't silence, he pounded the base of his spear against the floor, and the clamor gradually petered off. There were still a few pockets of noise spread throughout the room; Thor rapped the spear again, and this time the resulting silence was absolute.

“Loki Odinson,” Thor began, and his brother defiantly met his gaze. “You are summoned here today to face judgment for your crimes. These allegations including the theft of a forbidden text, the theft of Idunn's apple, and the needless destruction of a Midgardian city.” Whispers began to fill the throne room once again, and Thor boomed, “Silence!” Reluctantly the crowd quieted, and Thor returned his attention to Loki. “For these transgressions, how do you plea?”
Thankfully, Loki seemed to have decided that now was not the time to argue with his brother. He replied, “Guilty,” and nothing more.

Again Thor had to silence the room, which was abuzz with ill-gained excitement, and then he calmly declared, “As by the laws of our people, the punishment for the crimes which you have committed is execution.”

Tony started. 'Execution'? That wasn't the plan! What the hell was-

“Incorrect,” Loki stated, and the room exploded into noise. Over the clamor, Loki continued with confidence, “Only using the apple to grant a mortal immortality is punishable by death, and I have not done that.” The lie passed smoothly from the god's lips, and though Tony looked, he could find nothing in Loki's body language that betrayed him.

Upon the raised platform, Thor also wore a perfect mask. With the countenance of a disbelieving king, he asked, “If you have not used it, then where is it?”

The fact that both Loki and Thor were improvising as they went—they had to be, since Tony hasn’t left Loki's side since they got to Asgard and not once did he and Thor have time to plan this—was impressive. There was never any doubt that Loki would make a brilliant con artist, but Thor hadn't seemed like the type. Apparently, being able to improvise was a necessary skill when one was the God of Mischief's brother.

“I never said I didn't use it.” Loki began to gesture with his hands, but he was stopped by the chains binding his wrists. Taking the clanging in stride, the god didn't falter as he continued, “But do you honestly believe that I would waste such a prize on a mortal when I could use it on myself?”

A few people glanced surreptitiously at Tony, but he ignored their suspicions. Loki repeatedly assured him that only skilled mages would be able to tell that magic flowed through his veins, and even then, they would have to be touching him to discern where the energy originated from. And while Tony had no reason to doubt Loki, it was also true that both Odin and Heimdall had discovered his immortality anyway. However, since no one started shouting and pointing viciously at him, Tony assumed the lie held.

“Even if your claim is true, you have still stolen two ancient relics, one of which you can not return, and broke our three millennia old pact with Midgard. The sentence for these crimes is not light.” Loki made no objection, so Thor continued, “As king of Asgard, I am responsible for deciding the punishment of your theft. As for the destruction of Midgard,” he turned to Tony, “I have welcomed a diplomat to speak on Midgard's behalf.”

This time every eye in the room fell on Tony, and he forced himself not to fidget nervously. Unsure if he was supposed to wave or say something, the man remained still, waiting for Thor to give him a cue. “Tony Stark is from one of the ruling families of Midgard,” Thor continued, and while Tony wasn't sure if Thor actually believed that or was just making stuff up, he went with it and gave the audience his best shit-eating grin, “and it was a city under his protection that Loki ruined. He has come to our realm to seek justice for his people.”

Thor gestured to him expectantly, and Tony gulped, realizing it was his turn to continue this farce. Meeting the eyes of the gathered Asgardians, Tony was thankful that he let Loki bully him into wearing armor. Otherwise, he really would look a fool. “My name is Tony Stark, and...” And he sounded pathetic. For once in his life, he didn't have his reputation preceding him; to the Aesir, he was an ant. Getting his game together, Tony puffed out his chest and proclaimed, “And I'm here because Loki not only destroyed an entire town as collateral, but he has been causing havoc on Midgard for the past decade.” Tony glanced at Thor, checking to make sure he hadn't gone too far,
but the king made no sign of displeasure. Making stuff up was one of Tony's many skills, so he boisterously continued, “The leaders of America have already enacted a sentence for Loki's crime, and we want him to continue to serve us. As punishment for his actions against the people of Midgard, he has been tasked with repairing the damage he has caused until we deem it satisfactory.”

When Tony finished, the crowd began to murmur with mixed results. Some were pleased with the idea, thinking it would suit Loki's arrogance to be a slave of Midgard, while others thought the sentence was too mild. They demanded that Loki be stripped of his magic or banished back to Jotunheim. One of the more vocal protestors was baying for 'that Jotun scum' to be executed immediately.

Thor slammed the spear into the ground with a roar and glared at the uproarious crowd—especially the man baying for Loki's blood. The man quieted down with the rest of the spectators, shrinking away from the king's disapproval, and Thor returned his attention to Tony. “You would desire we return the prisoner to your country? What if he runs amok once again?”

“We won't be caught unprepared a second time,” Tony vowed. “If he steps out of line, we'll kill him.” He had to resist the urge to check that Loki wasn't taking his words personally; their act required him to be harsh in order to be convincing, and it was better to hurt the god's feelings than risk the alternative.

“If that is the punishment that Midgard desires, than I shall accept your terms.” People began to speak, and Thor held out a hand to silence them. Turning to Loki, he said, “By my power as king, I hereby banish you to Midgard for the rest of your years, where you will obey the will of the humans who live there.”

And then Thor hesitated minutely, and Tony understood why when he said, “That is your sentence for the misuse of the Destroyer. For the thefts you have committed, I, Thor Odinson, strip of your right to the throne and your family name. From this day forth, you are no longer a son of Odin or a citizen of Asgard.”

The words rang final, and the onlookers expressed their pleasure with the outcome. Despite that, Tony thought that Loki's punishment wounded Thor far more than it did his brother, and he was reminded why he hated politics with a vengeance. This whole show, from bringing Loki here to publicly disowning him, was just so the people would trust Thor's rule and didn't dissolve into anarchy. But all it truly accomplished was grief.

“You have until the sun sets to gather your possessions and leave,” Thor stated. “After that point, you will be forbidden from entering Asgard and shall be killed on sight. Am I understood?”

Loki bowed his head. “Of course.”

“If you attempt anything nefarious, Heimdall will know, and you will be held accountable,” Thor warned, and then he hit Gungnir against the floor. “This trial is adjourned. Guards, escort Loki back to his chambers.”

The two soldiers closest to Loki stepped forwards and gripped his forearms, tugging him back towards the exit. Loki tore his arms free with a snarl, but he let himself be led away without any other complaint.

Tony took a step towards where Loki's figure was being engulfed by the crowd, but Frigga stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. He shot her a confused glance, and she smiled at him. “Wouldn't want to seem too eager, now would we?” she asked quietly, glancing pointedly at the mass of civilians carefully watching him and Loki. “Such concern from an angry ambassador might seem...
suspicious.” Then her eyes fell on her son's retreating back, and her knowing smile became somber. “He'll be fine for a few more minutes.”

While Tony wanted nothing more than to go check on Loki, Frigga's warning could not be ignored. He forced himself to stay where he was, impatiently taking in the commotion around him. Now that the main attraction had left, it didn't take long for people to start flooding out the open doors. Some curious Asgardians drifted towards Tony, intent on speaking to human in their midst, but Frigga's unyielding presence scared even the most sturdy away.

Eventually, all of the civilians had been shepherded out, leaving beyond only guards, some uppity looking old men, and four Asier that Tony recognized from the footage of New Mexico. The one female in the group, with long black hair and a stern scowl, wasted no time in marching up to Thor and demanding, “You’re going to let your brother off that easily? After everything he’s done?”

Thor's eyes darted to the four old men (who were, judging by their clothing that was ostentatious even by Asgard's standards, the 'council' Thor and Loki spoke of) and frowned. “My brother’s crimes fit his punishment,” he defended. “Loki has not done anything worthy of death.”

Except he had, and Tony was living proof of that. One of the councilmen glanced over at Tony with a curious, almost predatory glint in his eyes, and Tony swallowed nervously. Then the others also looked his way, eyes narrowed and suspicious, and Tony decided that he had waited around long enough. He nodded at Frigga—who was watching the proceedings around her with calculated serenity—and strolled towards the exit, trying to not show how nervous he actually was. The sound of Thor arguing with his friends followed him.

When Tony passed through the doorway, a guard came up alongside him, but Tony waved him off. “If you aren’t required to join me, don’t bother. I can find my way.”

The soldier hesitated but eventually nodded. “As you wish, sir.” He returned to his post, allowing Tony to walk the halls alone. Not that he was actually on his own; the front halls were cluttered with civilians who had come to the trial, and many gestured at him while gossiping shamelessly with their peers. Tony did his best to ignore them, walking briskly towards the more secluded sections of the palace. Yet even when the throngs of civilians were replaced with servants and guards, the incessant staring did not stop.

Unnerved, Tony quickened his pace and kept his mind occupied with remembering the twists and turns of the near-identical corridors. He had to double back twice, but he at last arrived at the hall bustling with guards. There were two soldiers posted at each end of the hall and another two stood the door, but when Tony approached, they stepped aside to let him through. Not bothering to knock, Tony shoved open the door and scurried in.

After firmly sliding the bolt shut, locking out all of the derisive stares, Tony turned towards the room, expecting to see Loki packing. However, when he stepped forwards, he saw that Loki was sprawled out on the couch and fiddling with an empty goblet. The chains that bound him had been removed, leaving behind only the bracelets that were revealed as Loki repetitively tossed the goblet into the air and caught it. Tony drew closer, but the god made no move to speak or even look at him, so he circled the couch to sit by Loki's feet. The god obligingly shifted so his legs were no longer in the way, but he remained focused on his game.

“You alright?” Tony asked, unsurprisingly receiving no reply. Annoyed (and more than a bit worried) the man waited until Loki had flung the cup into the air again to reach out to snatch it. Loki’s dark red eyes finally flickered to Tony’s face, then to the cup, the ceiling, and ended up glaring at his dark blue hands.
Then whatever self-control Loki had snapped, and he suddenly growled, “I want these bracelets off,” while reaching over to claw at the aforementioned metal. His nails dug into his skin, tugging at the wire and creating bright red streaks on the expanse of blue. “I went them off, and I want my magic back.”

“Thor’s taking them off right before we leave, right?” Tony asked, trying to reassure the god. “It’s just a few more hours.”

But his words fell on deaf ears, and Tony could see blood welling up around the bracelets while Loki muttered furiously, “They have to come off. Need my magic... I shouldn’t look like this. Shouldn’t be this.”

Tony sighed and stood up. When Loki momentarily lifted his fingers to find a better angle in which to harm himself, the man darted forwards to wrap his hand around the god's bleeding wrist. Loki flinched, startled by the obstruction, but with Tony's hand in the way, he was forced to abandon his inefficacious efforts. The god let his arms drop, redirecting his gaze to the intricate painting that spanned the ceiling.

Content that Loki had stopped, Tony let him go and stepped back. The god heaved a sigh and rolled off the couch, landing smoothly on his feet. He glanced around the living room and murmured, “I guess I should prepare for our departure.” Despite his words, Loki remained rooted in place. In the four days they’d been stuck in Asgard, Loki barely stepped foot into his other rooms, let alone touched any of his old possessions. It was as if there was a barrier between the past and the present, and the things that Loki once valued were now nothing more than someone else's memories.

When the god still hadn't moved after a minute, Tony tentatively asked, “Loki?” The god started, as if he had forgotten Tony was even there, and turned to the man with a frown. Mirroring his expression, Tony urged, “We’re running out of time. If you want to take anything back home, you need to get moving. Surely there are books or ingredients or something you want to bring with you?”

The way Loki pressed his lips together said that he would rather that his possessions remained where they were, but then he nodded and glided past Tony to the bookshelf. He didn't speak as he began to rifle through the contents, tossing books he didn't want haphazardly to the floor and piling the approved ones on the coffee table.

Figuring that Loki would be alright on his own, Tony drifted towards the hall leading to Loki's other rooms. As he walked from room to room, he kept his ears open for the sounds of Loki rummaging around, but the distraction was adequate in keeping the god from gouging his wrists. So Tony turned his attention to exploring what little bit of Loki's past he could before they were kicked out forever. Loki had given Tony free rein, which the man eagerly put to use. He ventured through every nook and cranny, and it was strange to see how much Loki's life had changed while still being so similar.

The room that had fascinated Tony the most was Loki's casting room. It bordered the living room, and each wall was covered in runes and indecipherable scrawls. Scrolls of parchment were stacked on the three tables in the center of the room, and while Tony couldn't read anything on them, he was fascinated nonetheless. This room, while vastly different in appearance from Tony's own lab, was one and the same; here was the very core of Loki's knowledge, merely focused on magic and not physics. And yet, much to Tony's surprise, Loki only entered the room once in order to retrieve a small, hand written journal. The man had thought Loki would be eager to regain his old notes and the information the void tore from him, but clearly he had been mistaken.

Much to Tony's disappointment, the rest of the god's rooms were not quite as interesting. He had a small library, a study, a massive bathroom with a bath the size of a small pool, an armory (which looked more like a closet with some daggers and swords thrown in), and a bedroom.
It was to Loki's bedroom that Tony's feet brought him now, and he meandered around the spacious room, scooping up interesting looking baubles and trinkets before setting them back down. Though asked, Loki refused to explain the importance of the items covering his shelves and tables beyond assuring Tony that cursed items were securely locked in a chest elsewhere (which Tony had found more disturbing than comforting, because he hadn't even thought the objects could be dangerous). So without any information to go off of, Tony decided to make up stories of his own.

For example, the small dagger he held in his hands, with a worn leather grip and skillfully engraved blade, was Loki's first weapon. And the chipped mixing bowl placed beside the knife was a mortar given to him by his mother. The pelt on the bed, rife with tears and missing patches of fur, was his first kill. Or perhaps it was Thor's, given to his brother as a gift.

On and on the stories went, some simple and others complex. There were objects that Tony couldn't even identify, and he assumed they were magical, from a different realm, or both. Those he thought of as trophies from defeating a dragon or rewards from an elven king. And then there were things that Tony wasn't sure how to start a story for, like the green and gold dress hidden behind a large wolf sculpture.

As he rifled through Loki's stuff, Tony debated whether or not he should bring some things home—maybe Loki would change his mind in a few years and regret leaving so many treasures behind—but in the end, he decided that if the god wanted the past to remain the past, he would respect his wishes. However, there was one thing that Tony did take, though he wasn't quite sure why the one item caught his attention out of everything else in the room.

Laying on Loki's bedside table was an old book with a scuffed leather cover and torn spine. Tony had carefully opened it to find stained pages filled with colorful, moving images and dancing letters, and he realized with surprise that it was a children's book. Mindful of the loose pages, Tony flipped through the book, unable to see what made this one book so much more special to Loki than the rest. On the inside of the front cover he found it: there was a short, handwritten letter, and the only words Tony could decipher were Loki's name at the top and Frigga's at the bottom.

Deciding right then that he couldn't allow the book to rot or be destroyed like everything else, Tony carefully closed it and left the room with it clasped tightly in his hands.

When Tony returned to the living room, he found Loki still sorting through the shelves, but the way the god absentmindedly flipped the pages without scanning the content showed that he had long since lost interest in the task. However, with nothing else to do, he kept at it, and Tony took advantage of Loki's distraction to place the children's book in his suitcase.

Then Tony made his way over to Loki and glanced out the window. "How much longer do you think we have? Until, you know, you're a fugitive of the state and all that?" It was still light outside, and the town seemed as busy as ever, but Tony had learned not to judge time in Asgard by Earth standards. With the realm flat and the Aesir hardly requiring sleep every night, such observations held little meaning.

Loki paused in his book sorting and glanced at Tony before switching his gaze to the window. "Frowning, he chucked the book he had been staring at into the discard pile and stepped around the mound to stand beside Tony at the window. After a moment of studying the view, he announced, "We have approximately half an hour before Thor sends for us."

Tony sighed, not sure if he was glad there was so little time left or not. On the one hand, he was happy this was over, but on the other... He studied Loki's expression unabashedly, but as the god continued to look out over Asgard's golden city, his thoughts were concealed behind an impassive mask. Regardless, Tony knew that Loki would miss Asgard, no matter how much he tried to tell
himself otherwise. The man could hear it every time Loki talked about the realm, in the whimsical tales the god told fondly. There were some things Loki was eager to escape from and would gladly never look back on, but there were others that Tony knew the god would never be able to forget.

Sighing again, Tony bumped his shoulder against Loki's. The god glanced over at him, and Tony said, “I know Earth will never quite be the same as Asgard, but it's special in its own ways. When we return home, I'll take you wherever you want with no deadline. You don't need to feel like you've lost anything.”

Loki searched his eyes, but Tony meant each word, and eventually the god smiled softly. “Thank you. I will be glad to take you up on your offer.” Then he turned back to watching the bustle of Asgard below, and even though his smile faded, a sense of peace remained.
"With our backs to the wall, the darkness will fall.  
We never quite thought we could lose it all.  
   Ready, aim, fire...  
And empires fall in just one day.  
You close your eyes and the glory fades....

Off in the distance, there is resistance,  
   Bubbling up and festering...  
A man on a mission, changing the vision.  
   I was never welcome here."

-Ready, Aim, Fire by Imagine Dragons

Not even five minutes had passed after Loki finished speaking before there was a knock on the door, startling them out of their reverie. They turned around in confusion, and when Tony glanced at Loki, the god was frowning. “No one should be here yet.” Loki murmured in response to the unspoken question. He pushed away from the window and began to navigate through the piles of books strewn across the floor, but when he reached the door, he paused. Another knock, louder than the first and far more impatient, echoed through the room. Loki warily opened the door.

To Tony’s surprise, it was Thor standing on the other side and not a platoon of guards. Loki was unamused by his brother’s presence, and when the thunder god made to enter the room, he did not budge. “You're early.” Loki started to close the door until only a sliver of Thor was visible.

With a scowl, Thor placed his hand on the doorsill, preventing Loki from shoving him out. “I know. That’s not why I am here.” He tried to enter again, but Loki obstinately held the door in place. With a groan, Thor asked, “Would you please let me in, brother? I don’t have time for your games.”

Reluctantly, Loki stepped from the doorway, and Thor slipped inside. As Thor closed the door, Loki retreated back towards where Tony stood in the center of the room. The god scratched idly at his hands, but thankfully ceased the action when Thor noticed, his blue eyes narrowing at the scabs that littered Loki’s arms.

Thor opened his mouth to speak, but Loki cut him off. “If you're here to talk to me about the wonders of family, you’re wasting your time. No matter what you say, I won't change my mind.”

“I’m not here because of that either. You’ve made your… displeasure quite clear,” Thor's dispassionate words were betrayed by the clenching of his jaw. Stepping farther into the room, he announced, “I have come to speak to you about the situation in Midgard.”

“Then speak, Blondie. You’re the king here.” Tony flopped down onto the couch, knocking some stray books to the floor. When Thor just continued to frown at them from across the room, the man sighed. “We don’t have all day, you know. Loki and I have things to get home to—like a ‘thank god that didn’t go worse’ party with lots of alcoholic beverages and science.”

If anything, Thor’s hesitation intensified, and his voice was laced with confusion as he said, “I must admit that I underestimated the bravery of Midgard’s warriors. Your resolve itself is enough to grant you entrance to Valhalla, and that may be just what every soldier needs, given the circumstance.”
“Uhh… thanks?” Tony replied, unsure what the god was talking about. He assumed Thor came to talk about Loki's banishment and maybe make some more demands, not talk about the afterlife. He looked up at Loki, wondering if maybe Thor was just referring to something else, but the god was just as befuddled.

“Circumstance?” Loki asked, standing rigidly beside Tony.

“Yes, that's what I've come to talk to you about,” Thor said, apparently missing the fact that his audience was completely out of the loop. “You've been informed, certainly. While I am saddened that you won’t be staying in Asgard, I believe it is for the best that you are able to assist Midgard. They will need all the help they can get as he approaches, and your knowledge is a great boon. Asgard will offer help as well, of course, but—”

“Woah, Point Break,” Tony said, interrupting the rambling god. Thor stopped, appearing as befuddled by the disruption as Tony and Loki were by what he was saying. “Start from the beginning. What the hell are you talking about?”

“I speak of the rise of the Mad Titan...” At Tony's blank look, Thor hedged, “I told the men in black about Thanos's coming months ago. You are aware… right?”

Loki gasped, and Tony started, half-rising into a sitting position before he even knew what Loki was reacting to. The god blanched, his skin turning pastel blue and frosting over, and he stared at Thor with dread. “Thanos? He is... actually alive?” Loki asked haltingly, as if he could hardly fathom the words, and it only took a moment for Tony to connect the dots.

Thanos was the extraterrestrial threat that Fury had informed them about forever ago: the one that they had dismissed because Loki was certain it was a false alarm. The one that Fury had continually pestered them to investigate but they never did for a number of excuses. The one that was apparently a very real threat, meaning...

“Oh shit,” Tony swore, scrambling off the couch. “Aliens are going to attack Earth?”

Their reaction alarmed Thor, and he hurried to say, “I thought you were aware of the situation and were preparing.”

“We didn't think it was actually going to happen!” Tony exclaimed, regretting every time in the past few months that he and Loki had chosen not to investigate Thanos.

Though he was a bit more level-headed than Tony, Loki began to pace. “How do you know he’s coming? How far away is he?”

“Heimdall felt something stirring beyond the Nine Realms, and when we scryed for the source, we found the Mad Titan on the other end. Unfortunately, no one can deduce how far away he is, but his forces are moving quickly towards us.”

“And how quickly is that?” Tony asked, suppressing his initial fear and trying to think rationally. “Like, the Earth will be in ruins when we get back,”—he desperately hoped that wasn't the case—“or will it be twenty years before he arrives?”

“We are not sure,” Thor repeated. “It could be anywhere from a few weeks to a few years. That is why I alerted you when we first learned of it, as Midgard will be his first target.”

“Do you have the scrying pool still active?” Loki asked, and Tony was glad that at least now the god wasn't freaking out about his skin color... Though that it was because a creature even gods feared was coming to Earth probably wasn't an equal trade-off. When Thor nodded, Loki demanded,
“Show me. I need to see this threat for myself and determine what your incompetent mages couldn't.”

“But it is almost sunset-”

“Then it is best we hurry. Otherwise you'll be forcing us to fight Thanos blind. Midgard does not have enough latent magic to see so far beyond the branches of Yggdrasil.”

Thor hesitated, and he searched his brother's face for any signs of deceit or manipulation. Though there were none, the thunder god still warned, “If you even think about stealing anything in the vault, I will not sit idle.”

“I have no need for any of Odin's war trophies,” Loki replied, and while Thor still seemed uncertain, he turned to the door; Loki and Tony followed close behind.

The guards stationed in the hallway snapped to attention as Thor left the room, but he waved them down. “I will escort Loki myself.” Though they were confused, the guards raised their fists to their chests and remained where they were.

Thor, Loki, and Tony walked briskly through the halls. They journeyed deep into the castle, past where Loki's impromptu tour had ended, and ended up before a towering gold door guarded by a dozen soldiers.

“My lord, what-” one of the Aesir began, breaking rank to meet them, but Thor impatiently raised a hand to silence him.

“By my authority as king, I grant Loki and Tony Stark temporary access to the weapons vault. Step aside.”

The guards hesitated just as Thor had, and they shot Loki suspicious glances. Tony couldn't really blame them, considering Loki's recent track record, but he had faith that the god wouldn’t start another political incident so soon... at least he was ninety-nine percent sure Loki wouldn’t; whoever gave Loki the title 'God of Chaos' was not mistaken in their observation.

Nonetheless, they were in a hurry, and Thor brandished Mjolnir. “This is no trick. There is an urgent matter I must tend to. Let us pass.”

“Yes, sire,” the guards chorused, and with a salute they stepped aside. Thor stormed through the double doors and took a sharp left turn, leading them down a short stairwell and past displays of weapons and talismans. Thankfully, Loki stayed by Thor's side, not even glancing at the weapons that surrounded them.

After a few more turns, the exhibits ended, and they reached a nondescript door. The first thing Tony noticed upon entering the small room was the colors being cast across the ceiling and walls. The murals of light originated from one of six basins in the back of the room. Loki increased his speed towards the stone bowl, and when he looked over the rim to whatever was shone within it, his red eyes widened and he cursed. Tony, following closely behind the god, reached the edge of the basin and stared down at the radiant image. It took a moment for the sight to register, and then his response mimicked Loki's.

“We are so screwed…” Tony breathed, gripping the sides of the stone bowl and leaning in closer to the shifting contents of the bowl. It was like a scene straight from a sci-fi movie: monstrous ships blotted out the backdrop of stars and nebulae, each one illuminated by an eerie red glow. The light, originating from bottom of the vessels, flickered across silver metal as the spaceships shifted back
and forth, their speed apparent only from way space seemed to fly past them. With the carriers nearly touching wing to wing, it was impossible to discern the exact number of ships in the mass, but the number was astronomical. While the largest spaceships appeared to number only in the twenties, there had to be hundreds of smaller ships, and they circled around protectively. As the ships passed through the sheen of red light, the guns mounted on their hulls became apparent before fading back into darkness; they were equipped for war.

Loki abruptly reached forwards and ran his fingers across the surface of the screen, which misted around his fingers in a state caught between liquid and gas. The image rippled from his touch and began to change. The ships blurred as the scene rotated and zoomed in, piercing through the thick to focus on an asteroid hovering between the ships.

At the bizarre sight, Tony frowned and asked, “How in the world is that keeping up with the ships?” He tilted his head and peered closer, but the asteroid was poorly lit. Still, he could discern what looked like a staircase and a... throne? on the surface. “What's the deal with the space rock?”

He glanced at Loki, but the god, riveted by the scene, didn't respond. He gripped the basin tightly, and a thin sheen of frost spread from his hands to coat the stone. Surprised by Loki's response, Tony returned his attention to the image, trying to see what it was that he had missed. One of the carriers passed over the asteroid, and the red light shone brightly on the rock's surface. Tony felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise as he got a clear glimpse of what was indeed a massive throne, decorated with a plethora of skulls and twisted bones. However, it was not the sight of the throne itself that unnerved Tony, but the person who sat upon it.

The humanoid figure towered in his throne of death, almost as large as one of the small spaceships, and his skin shown a bright purple in the ambient light. Yet it wasn't the creature's strange appearance that unnerved Tony but the sense of power he exuded as he sat on an asteroid in the middle of space. There was something inherently wrong about him.

“So that's Thanos...” Tony muttered; it wasn't a question. Even without hearing the stories of the Mad Titan, just the sight of him sent a thrill of fear through Tony's veins. “He looks...” Adjectives flashed though Tony's mind — terrifying, dangerous, murderous — but he settled with a nervous swallow and, “Imposing.”

“I had thought you were already making preparations to fight him,” Thor repeated, sounding guilty even though it wasn't his fault Tony and Loki couldn't follow orders. “Forgive me for my assumption.”

“You really think any amount of time will make a difference?” Loki asked caustically. “Midgard cannot stop Thanos. The Nine Realms cannot stop Thanos.”

Ever the optimist, Thor said, “Thanos was defeat once before. There's no reason we can't do it again.”

“But they didn't defeat him, now did they?” Loki refuted. “He nearly obliterated the Nine Realms, and all they managed to do was delay our demise.”

“There isn't anything we can do but try.” Thor's eyes were drawn to the image in the basin before he averted them. “Can you tell how long it will take his army to arrive at Midgard?”

Loki twitched as he pulled his gaze away from Thanos, as if he had lost himself in the aura of malevolence that the very image of the Mad Titan exuded. With a frown, the god ran his fingers across the rippling surface once again, and the menacing throne was obscured by hundreds of battleships. After a minute of peering closely at the ships, occasionally muttering to himself, Loki
claimed, “They're moving quickly, but a fleet that large will have to stop and refuel often. It'll take them maybe a year to reach Midgard's solar system, but not much longer.”

A year. Tony let out the breath he had been holding. They had a year to prepare for the end of the world. It wasn't much, but they could work with that... right? “We can do a lot in a year,” Tony said, pushing away his own doubts. “If we notify SHEILD immediately, they can start contacting agencies around the world, and the Avengers won't sit idle, either. We'll be ready for Thanos when he comes.”

“If only it was that simple,” Loki said, and as he continued to stare at the fluid image, a glint of determination flashed in his eyes. “Either way, we won't go down without a fight.” He traced his fingers across the contours of one of the larger ships before withdrawing his hand and clenching his fist.

Then Thor spoke up, drawing their attention from the basin. “Brother, it is nearly sunset. You cannot remain in Asgard any longer.”

Loki grimaced and roved keen eyes across the scrying pool before reluctantly stepping away. Abandoning the portent of death, they allowed Thor to lead them back through the weapons vault and to Loki's quarters. When they arrived, Thor waited outside with the guards as Loki and Tony finished packing in near silence. It only took them a few minutes, and their pace was quickened by the darkness falling outside.

Then they were escorted through the palace to the Bifrost, where they stood before Heimdall with the bridge to Asgard in front of them and the cosmos at their back. What was meant to be a ameliorating occasion was marred by the images of warships that flashed through Tony's mind, and the guilt-laden realization that they could have known Thanos was coming over a month ago.

“Loki, give me your wrists,” Thor instructed, and the god complied without enthusiasm. In a process that was just as disturbing as having the bracelets put on, Thor pulled the golden bands away from Loki's flesh. As the tendrils receded, blood dribbled down the god's hands and splattered on the metal flooring below. When the second bracelet was removed, green mist accompanied the blood, and Loki winced as pale flesh struggled to overcome sapphire blue.

Though he was once again concealed in the guise of an Aesir, Loki was not relieved. The grimace remained, and his eyes were haunted. Tony swore to himself that once they had informed Fury about Thanos, he would chase that darkness away. Loki more than anyone deserved a break, and while their time was limited, Tony would ensure that he got one.

“I will journey to Midgard within a fortnight to speak with the men in black about Thanos,” Thor announced, dragging Tony from his thoughts. The God of Thunder was burdened with grievances of his own, and though he kept his distance for the sake of their audience—a squadron of guards who were stationed outside of the dock and watched the interaction with piercing eyes—it was impossible for Thor to disguise his love and his sorrow. “Midgard will become a battle ground when the Mad Titan arrives,” Thor continued, his voice lacking its usual boom. “He is a foe unlike any we have ever fought before. I apologize that right now, I can offer you little more than my blessing in your endeavors, but I have faith in your abilities.”

That was the closest Thor could come to saying 'I know you are strong, but please be safe', and Loki frowned at the admission. However, the god did not immediately reply with a bitter response as Tony had come to expect; rather, Loki gazed at his brother with an emotion akin to regret.

Without a word to Thor, Loki turned to Heimdall and said, “We are ready to leave.” Heimdall glanced over to Thor for confirmation, and the god nodded reluctantly. Sword in hand, the guardian
turned his attention to the pedestal in the middle of the bridge and raised the weapon above his head.

Just as the sword's blade struck home, Thor said, “Farewell, Loki.”

And as the Bifrost swept the world away with swirling colors, Loki quietly replied, “Goodbye, brother.”

-o-o-o-

In Loki's experience, speaking with Director Nicholas Fury was often unpleasant, especially when delivering bad news. However, the god found that none of those times were as unpleasant as informing Fury about Thanos, because this time he had no excuses. Loki didn’t need Fury yelling at him—“Do you know how much time we have wasted because you two never do what you’re asked? And then you run off without any warning! SHIELD wastes time and money keeping the two of you out of trouble. Was one spell really too much to ask?”—to regret his months of noncompliance.

Loki wasn’t the only one embittered by guilt, either, and Tony tried in vain to curb Fury's legendary anger. “But you do have something in place for an alien invasion, right?” he asked when the director paused to take a breath. “It wasn’t a complete waste of time.”

Fury glowered at them with his one eye, not placated by Tony's words. “Oh, we prepared alright. We prepared for fighting about a hundred aliens like him.” The director pointed harshly at Loki. “What we didn't prepare for was an entire fleet of warships from a different galaxy.”

“If we start preparing in earnest now, we might still have a chance,” Loki said with feigned optimism. His mind was running through a list of things that will have to be done if they were to have any hope against Thanos. A year wasn't enough time—not even close to enough time—but if they started immediately, maybe it would make up for the few months he was responsible for wasting.

And yet, while Loki’s mind churned, his body resisted. His muscles ached, and Fury’s shouting had only aggravated his pounding headache. Before Thor destroyed their ignorance, Loki thought that when he and Tony left Asgard they’d have a few days to lounge around and recuperate. Ever since Tony nearly died in New York, they had been plagued by stress or deadlines, and Loki thought that for once, they'd be free to enjoy themselves. It was a naïve wish, but he wanted it all the same.

Instead, they had no choice but to report directly to the Helicarrier after the Bifrost deposited them in New Mexico. Loki had teleported them to the conference room he had been brought to months ago—the one where he had first learned about Thanos and erroneously wrote off the threat as a hoax—and set off multiple alarms, prompting the irritated director to come down and investigate. Of course, his ire then was nothing compared to how he reacted once he learned of their folly.

“And here I thought we'd sit around playing cards while aliens took over the world,” Fury said sarcastically, reaching up to and turning on his headset. “Agent Hill, we are now operating under code 7448. Assemble the Avengers immediately. ...I am aware that Romanov is in the middle of an operation, and I'm ordering her to withdraw. I want all of them on the Helicarrier within four hours. We don't have time to delay.”

Agent Hill acquiesced, and Fury lowered his hand, returning to glowering at them. With a tone that booked no argument, he said, “Before they get here, you are going to tell me everything you know—no matter how insignificant it may seem—about Thanos and his army.”

“Wouldn't it make more sense to wait until everyone is around?” Tony asked, his tone not so much
obstinate as it was tired; Loki was not the only one in desperate need of a break.

Fury glared at him. “Stark, I believe it’d be in your best interest to do exactly what I tell you. Now start talking.”

Although neither of them wanted to do anything but curl up and sleep, they obeyed. Loki went first, recalling anything and everything he had learned about the Mad Titan and his first invasion. He told Fury about how, a very long time ago when Yggdrasil was nothing more than a sapling, Thanos came to the Nine Realms. Obsessed with Lady Death, he sought to please her by destroying everything. He came to Midgard with the six Infinity Gems and used the planet as a gateway to wreak havoc upon the other realms. He brought ruin to everything—slaughtered the people and reduced the land to waste—before the mightiest of each realm banded together to defeat him. It was only by tricking Thanos and using the power of the gems against him that they were able to subdue the Titan and scatter the gems across the realms. Thanos himself was fatally wounded and flung into space, where everyone assumed he had finally met his mistress.

Despite being able to relay the tale of Thanos's rise and fall, Loki knew next to nothing about the Mad Titan himself. All he knew was that Thanos coveted Death above all else, and sending lives to his mistress was both his method and motivation. And while such information certainly was better than nothing, it was the most important details that Loki lacked. He could not answer Fury's questions of 'what are his weaknesses?', 'does he have any infinity gems now?', and 'how did they trick him before?' with anything other than, “I don't know.”

Frustrated with that unsuccessful line of questioning, the director began demanding details about the warships they had seen. Tony handled the majority of those inquiries, and did his best to describe vessels the like of which Midgard had never seen before. They were undoubtedly massive ships, though there wasn't a good comparison point in which to judge their full size, and almost all of them were visibly equipped with weapons. It did not appear that they had nuclear bombs, but it was also possible that such weapons were held in the interior of the spacecrafts or were merely unrecognizable. Yet even without nukes, the ships were outfitted with enough fire power to raze every city on Earth to the ground. As for what species Thanos had recruited or where they had come from, neither Loki nor Tony could answer that. All they knew was that whoever their enemy was, they were clearly ready for total warfare.

Though they offered up everything they could, the information wasn't enough to satisfy Fury. “There’s nothing else you could figure out?” He looked between them in disapproval. When they didn't speak up, he continued to interrogate, “What about weak spots on the ships? Can they be boarded, or will we be required to shoot them down? What is their fuel source?”

Tony groaned and lifted his head from the table to reply, “I don’t know, alright? We only saw them for a little bit, and they aren’t even in the same galaxy. Can we please leave now? I swear we've told you everything.”

Fury obviously didn't believe them—or maybe making them talk in circles for hours while they were worn-out was his way to punish them for not doing their job sooner—but they were saved by an incoming call from Agent Hill. “Director, the Avengers are now all present and accounted for. They are waiting for you in the west conference room.”

“Inform them that we're heading over.” With a pointed glare at Tony and Loki, Fury spun on his heel, exited the room, and stormed down the hall.

Sighing, Tony grabbed his suitcases and wobbled to his feet. Loki was no more enthusiastic about getting up—a migraine had built up beneath his temples and each beat of his heart made his head feel like it was going to split open—but Fury was right that they did not have time to waste. The sooner
everyone was on the same page, the sooner they could prepare to fight for their lives. If anyone had a chance at stopping Thanos, it was Fury's rag-tag team of heroes.

Said heroes were sitting around the conference table when Loki and Tony trudged in, and their conversations quieted as Fury, with an even more dour face than normal, stalked to the control panel in front of the room. With all eyes on them, Loki and Tony made their way to the two seats in between Banner and Barton and sat down. Well, Loki sat down; Tony sort of toppled into the chair while his suitcases crashed to the floor.

The Avengers stared at the man in varying degrees of concern and confusion, and Barton looked Tony up and down before asking, “What the hell happened to you? You go out of town for less than a week and you come back looking like you belong at a Renaissance festival.” At those words, Loki belatedly realized that Tony had never changed out of his ceremonial clothing; he had ditched the helmet at some point, but layers of silk, leather, and metal still weighed the man down. By the way Tony glanced at his clothing with a frown, fingers idly tracing the embroidery of his cloak, it was clear that he had managed to forget as well.

“Yeah, well, I figured I might as well look the part,” Tony murmured, then let go of the fabric to tiredly rub at his face. “But trust me, it's as uncomfortable as it looks.”

Barton frowned and tilted his head, but this time he studied Tony's face instead of his clothing. “Jeeze, do you even sleep anymore? You look like crap.”

Tony scowled at the archer and tried to look more alert, putting his hand down and straightening his back; no one was convinced by the act, and when the man noticed everyone's scrutiny, he snapped, “What are you all looking at? Last time I checked, you weren't called here to criticize my sleeping habits.”

There was a shuffle as a few of the Avengers turned away, pretending to be interested in Director Fury as he set up files on a holographic screen, but Rogers and Romanov kept glancing over at Loki and Tony. Barton didn't even bother hiding his curiosity, and he continued talking.

“Does that mean you two know why we're here? Because no one else does. Though it figures that you nutcases are at the center of it.”

“If you'd stop talking, Agent Barton, then I could inform you why you're here.” Fury stepped away from the control screen and drew the group's attention. The director crossed his arms behind his back and stood rigidly. When Barton remained silent, Fury reached over to bring an image onto the screen, and the back wall was covered in surveillance footage of Thor.

Without farther delay, Director Fury began the briefing. “A few of you may recognize this video and what it means. For those of you who don't, this is footage from about four months ago, when Thor of Asgard brought us news of a potential galactic threat. As we were unable to confirm this claim, minimal resources were put into a plan of defense.” The director glared at Tony and Loki, and while some of the Avengers looked on with confusion, they remained silent, caught in the seriousness of the moment. “Today, we received confirmation that the threat exists, and is not only en route to Earth, but possesses enough fire power to obliterate the human race. As of now, the Earth is at war against an alien race.”

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Tony had been completely exhausted before Fury began to speak; by the time the director finished—almost four hours after Loki and Tony had first arrived at the Helicarrier—Tony could barely form a coherent thought. If someone held up three fingers right then and asked him how
many, he would probably have guessed seventeen and thought that that was the answer.

“Tony?” Loki asked, sounding far away. “Are you ready to leave?” The man blinked rapidly, trying to get his sluggish mind to work faster. He raised his head to look into concerned green eyes. Loki was leaning over his chair, one hand on the arm rest and the other on Tony's shoulder. Tony hadn't even noticed that the god had been shaking him.

“What?” he asked unintelligibly, then yawned and tried again. “Is Grumpy done talking? I think I remember him dismissing us...” Tony glanced around the nearly empty room, with only he, Loki, and Bruce remaining. The physicist was looking a bit jet lagged as he unobtrusively typed away on a laptop.

“Fury ended the meeting almost fifteen minutes ago.” Loki tightened his grip on Tony's shoulder. “Are you alright?”

“I'm good...” Tony mumbled, waving the god's concern away. “Just a bit tired, that's all.” He found his gaze drawn back to Bruce and noticed the man watching them with a soft smile. Tony perked up slightly, and with a goofy grin he said, “Hey, Big Green. Long time no see. What'cha hanging around here for?”

“I'm helping SHIELD with some radiation data, remember?” Bruce turned his laptop towards Tony, and the engineer leaned forwards to get a better look. But even if his vision wasn't blurry, the sequences of equations made no sense to his tired mind. He frowned at the screen, and Banner chuckled lightly. “We can talk more about it later. You should go home and sleep.”

“I'm gonna hold you to that,” Tony said, though his tongue felt like rubber and the words came out slurred. “You're a science bro too, ya know, and nerds got to look out for other nerds. Fellowship of the Nerds... Catch my drift?” Judging by the patiently amused look Bruce was giving him, the answer was 'no', and Tony groaned in defeat.

With far too much effort, the man dragged himself to his feet — only to topple into the table. He planted his hand on the polished wood and regained his bearings before stepping away, far too exhausted to even consider being embarrassed. It had been over two days since he'd last slept, and even longer since he'd slept well. If anyone had a problem with how he was acting, they could fuck off.... Wait, that wasn't true. Loki had to stay. Tony still needed him to take them back home.

“And here I thought you liked me for more than just my magic, Stark,” Loki murmured into Tony's ear, and the man realized he had been rambling out loud. He shook his head, as if that would remove the exhaustion, but he was beyond lucidity. Beside him, Loki sighed and grabbed onto his arm, keeping him from slumping over. “I think it's time we leave.”

“Yeah, that'd be good...” Tony began, but then he remembered something and backpedaled. “Wait. Your magic. It's super low, right? You said it was. Will you be okay teleporting us?” Because while he wanted nothing more than to go back home, and probably couldn't walk five feet, let alone to a quinjet, there was no way he was letting Loki overtax himself. Just teleporting them to the Helicarrier made the god clutch at his chest in agony.

Dismissing his concerns, Loki said, “I should have enough to get us home.” And then, before Tony could understand what was wrong with that statement and protest, they were suddenly in Malibu. The spell deposited them in the middle of the living room, and when Loki's grip slackened, Tony sunk to the floor. A moment later, Loki slid down beside him, his eyes scrunched shut.
“Hey,” Tony said worriedly, clumsily reaching out to shake Loki’s shoulder. “You okay?”

The god cracked his eyes open, and he covered his grimace with a smile. “I’m just tired,” he parroted. “It’ll go away in a bit.”

Tony stared at Loki for a moment, and then, inexplicably, he began to laugh. It started as a soft chuckle, and then, when the god gave him a bewildered look, it became an all out guffaw that made his eyes water and his sides burn.

“What in the Nine Realms are you laughing about?” Loki asked incredulously, but when Tony tried to answer, he ended up laughing even harder and fell onto his back. While Loki remained dumbfounded by the man’s sudden burst of hysteria, he smiled softly as he watched Tony clutch at his sides and continue to cackle wildly.

Finally, Tony managed to get himself back under control, and in between wheezing breaths, he asked, “Did you ever think you’d end up here? I don’t mean ‘here’ like ‘on the floor here’ — I’ve done that plenty — but in this situation? Like, so much shit has happened lately, and now it’s like, ‘Oh look, alien invasion!’ I mean, who does that even happen to?”

“I fail to see how our situation is humorous,” Loki said flatly.

Grinning widely, Tony replied, “Me either.” He was aware on some level that it was his over-exhaustion talking, but at the same time, he didn't care; Tony chuckled again. “But seriously, you have to admit that it’s ridiculous. At least I’m never bored.”

With an expression torn between exasperation and fondness, Loki rolled his eyes and shifted his gaze to the room around them. Tony tilted his head slightly to get a better look at his friend, and he was pleased to see that Loki had relaxed slightly, and the harsh lines on his face had faded into an amused twitch of the lips. Yet when the god turned his attention back to Tony, he became somber. “I am grateful that you journeyed to Asgard with me. You did not have to.”

Tony sighed and reached over to pat the god’s arm; he ended up hitting Loki’s foot, but he figured it was good enough. “That’s what friends do, princess. It’s not a big deal.”

There was a moment’s pause, and an unidentifiable emotion flittered across Loki’s face. “You are a good man, Tony Stark,” the god said sincerely. “I am glad the fates brought me here.”

Tony grinned doltishly at Loki, but then the exhaustion tugging at him grew too strong to be ignored; his mumbled a random series of words that were intended to be a reply as his eyes slid close and his thoughts drifted.

For a few minutes he floated in the peaceful state between sleeping and waking, and when Loki spoke again, it sounded as if the words came from the other end of a long tunnel. “You shouldn’t sleep on the floor.”

“Too bad... I’m gonna...” Tony mumbled in reply, too far gone to even consider getting up and walking to his bedroom. Besides, the floor was oddly comfortable, and he felt as if his body had fused with the tile.

Tony was practically asleep when the god spoke again, startling him and pushing back the blanket of nothingness. “Where is Choronzon?”

“Hmm?” Tony hummed, rousing his muddle brain in an effort to answer Loki. It took a moment for the strange word to register, and when it did he slurred, “Oh, Coro? I dunno.” The lack of attention-demanding yowling meant the little monster was probably not in the house. “Pep probably has him.”
Problem solved, Tony let himself slide back towards unconscious, hoping Loki would stop asking questions; he had no such luck. “What should-” Loki began, but Tony groaned loudly and cut him off.

“Shut up and go to sleep,” Tony muttered, lifting an arm to cover his eyes as if that would block out Loki’s voice. “We’ll deal with it later.” ‘Later’ being when he wasn’t so tired, the floor wasn’t so cozy, and he wasn’t fading out...

Distantly, Tony registered that Loki had shifted position to lay down beside him, and the man mumbled something that might have been an attempt at ‘goodnight’ before he finally succumbed to sleep and was completely dead to the world.

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“Sirs?”, someone said, their voice originating somewhere beyond the veil of sleep. Loki, who for once was not plagued with nightmares, tried to ignore the noise and cling to the peace of unconsciousness. However, the British voice continued to pester him—“Sirs, Director Fury is requesting to speak with both of you.”—and Loki found his mind stirring against his body’s will, bringing with it an unwanted recollection: a fleet of warships that flew through the cosmos with the intent to raze everything he held dear, and with them, the scourge of the Nine Realms.

Jolting back into consciousness with a gasp, Loki’s eyes flew open and his muscles tensed for a fight. But the only thing that greeted him was the bright morning light, blazing through the massive windows to reawaken the god’s lingering headache. He squeezed his eyes shut, and after a moment, he cracked them open to see that Jarvis had dimmed the interior lights, making the brightness barely tolerable.

Beside him, Tony mumbled something and rolled over, his arm smacking into Loki’s chest. Loki smiled fondly at the man, but then he became aware of just how uncomfortable the floor actually was now that he was no longer overcome with fatigue. He debated the merits of getting up, but with Tony’s arm still slung across his chest, he wouldn’t be able to without waking the man, and Tony seemed content to continue his impromptu nap on the floor. While Loki could very easily shove the man off, he didn’t feel like it; Tony deserved the rest, and Loki himself craved the respite.

Regardless of the god’s preference, that decision was taken out of his hands; “Sirs?” Jarvis repeated. “If you do not get up I will be forced to use the Wake-up Protocol.”

Loki didn’t know what the ‘Wake-up Protocol’ was, but the threat of it was enough to make Tony stir again; he rolled off of Loki and grumbled, “I'm up, I'm up. Just give me a second.”

Without the excuse of waking Tony, Loki could no longer ignore his responsibilities and clambered to his feet. Sleeping on the floor had done him no wonders — he stretched out the soreness in his muscles with a groan — but he at least felt recharged and had magic stirring in his core. When the last kinks were worked out, Loki glanced down to find that despite Tony’s words, he had yet to move.

“Come on,” Loki said, nudging the man with his foot. “We’ve wasted enough time.”

Tony lifted his face from the floor to glower at Loki, but the god continued to poke the man until Tony smacked his foot away. “Fine, I'm getting up.” He began the arduous task of picking himself off the floor. While Loki himself had been by no means graceful, Tony was even less so as he pried himself from the tile, grimacing every time he shifted.

As Tony started to shake out the numbness in his limbs, Loki glanced out the window and frowned;
it appeared to be midmorning already, and while he wasn’t sure exactly when they had passed out, it
couldn’t have been that late. “Jarvis, how long were we asleep?”

“Twelve hours and twenty-seven minutes, sir,” the AI promptly reported.

Tony, who was finally alert and standing but not looking happy about it, said, “Huh... I don’t think
I’ve ever slept that long without being on morphine or something in... forever.” Then he shrugged
and, with a grin, clapped Loki on the back. “I can’t believe you actually slept on the floor with me.”

“Sirs, the director is requesting to speak with you and is getting impatient,” Jarvis announced.

Tony sighed, and his good humor dwindled. “I guess our break is over now, huh? Alright, Jarv, put
Fury through.”

The director didn't waste any time on pleasantries. “The council is requesting that you speak to them
directly about Thanos. You and Loki are to answer their questions as well confirm what you saw for
various agencies. Report to the Helicarrier immediately.”

“Woah, wait,” Tony said incredulously. “Can't you at least give us some time to eat? You know, that
important thing that people need to live?” The man scrunched up his nose and added, “I also am in
serious need of a shower. When I think I smell bad, it has definitely been too long.”

There was a pause in which Loki thought the director would demand they come in anyway, but
eventually Fury snapped, “You have one hour, and one hour only,” before disconnecting.

“He certainly sounds stressed,” Tony commented as he headed towards the kitchen. “You hungry?
I'm hungry. You should make me something.” Loki followed behind Tony, unable to ignore his own
body's needs, and watched as Tony opened up the fridge only to find that it was practically empty.
The man scowled, but a quick search through the cabinets revealed that they were in the same state.

“And how do you expect me to do that?” the god asked, joining Tony on the hunt for food. “There's
nothing here that's edible.” His eyebrows raised in disgust as he pulled out a moldy... something from
the depths of the pantry, and he threw it towards the trash can.

“You're smart. I'm sure you'll figure it out. I don't even care if it's bland.” Tony gave him a cheeky
grin, almost hiding the stress lines around his eyes and mouth, and swiped a tablet off the counter.
“While you're working on that, I need to call Pepper.”

As the man sat down at the table, Loki continued the search for food, but the effort remained futile.
He ended up grabbing half a box of dried pasta and some frozen vegetables and threw everything
into a saucepan. While he waited for the water to boil, he leaned against the counter and watched as
Tony called Pepper's number. The dial tone echoed through the room, and the phone rang once
before the call was picked up.

“Tony!” Pepper exclaimed in relief. “Oh thank god you're back. Are you alright?” Then her tone
became panicked. “What about Loki? What happened to him?”

“He's okay. Loki came back with me. We're both fine,” Tony placated. He glanced up at Loki, and,
in an overly cheerful voice, he asked, “Right, Lokes?”

“We are both unharmed.” Loki agreed, which, considering their lives,
was all they could really ask
for. As long as they were both alive, they'd make things work.

“I'm glad you're both okay,” Pepper said. “When I heard your message, Tony—you and I really
need to talk about this whole last minute notice thing, by the way, because it's getting ridiculous—I
thought the worst. But it's over now, right? They won't make you go back to Asgard?"

“Nope, we're all clear,” Tony confirmed. “And I'm sorry for not telling you sooner. It just... It's kind of a long story. I promise I'll tell you later, but... we don't have the time right now.” At those last words, the stress Tony had been trying to hide leaked into his voice, and Pepper noticed.

“Tony, what's wrong? Did something else happen that you're not telling me?” When Tony didn't respond immediately, she continued, “Loki? What's going on?”

“Like Tony said, it's a long story,” Loki deflected. “But I assure you both of us are okay.”

Pepper sighed. “I thought that by having the two of you together, I'd have a better chance of learning what's going on, but both of you just get more tight-lipped. It's okay letting other people share your problems, you know. That's what friends do.”

“I know,” Tony said, “but there isn't time right now. We'll probably stop by New York today or tomorrow, and I swear I'll tell you everything then.”

“I'll hold you to that,” Pepper replied, though judging by her tone, she didn't put much stock into that particular promise. Then she switched topics and said, “Loki, I have your cat. I wasn't sure how long you'd be gone so I brought him to New York.”

“Thank you,” Loki said, but then he paused, unsure if he should say he'd take Choronzon back. While he wanted the cat with him, they'd be busy for the next few weeks, and he wasn’t sure if he’d have time for Choronzon.

“We'll pick him up when we swing by Stark Tower,” Tony said, and when Loki shot him a questioning look, the man’s expression clearly said, ‘I know what you’re thinking, but if you want him here then he’s damn well going to be here.’ “Anyway, we have to go now, but I’ll talk to you later, okay? I’ve missed you, Pep.”

“I’ve missed you too—both of you. Please don’t do anything stupid.”

Tony grinned wryly. “When do we ever?” he asked, and then he disconnected. Silence fell over them as Loki drained the pasta and Tony became lost in thought. The man absentmindedly trailed his fingers across the tablet screen, a frown setting deep in his face, but then he shook off the worry and slid the tablet to the side. “So, what’s for breakfast?”

Loki set a plate down in front of Tony and sat across from him. The man gave the food a skeptical look, and Loki said, “You were the one that asked me to cook. It's all we have, so eat it.” The god followed his own advice, and while the food wasn’t good, it was edible. With a shrug Tony followed his lead, and they ate quickly, going through the motions until all the food was gone.

Casting a woeful glance at the empty pot, Tony stood and deposited his dish into the sink. Then he scowled at himself and announced, “I’m going to go take a shower and finally get out of this damn armor.” The god nodded, and Tony grabbed his suitcases and retreated to his room. After clearing the table, Loki copied the man and went to his own quarters.

He stood under the spray of warm water, letting it chase away the lingering memory of frozen skin. As his mind cleared, temporarily free of worries and constraints, he found himself thinking, ‘This is it. This is the life I will have, from now until I die. No more Asgard. No more golden palace. No more exploring magical places beyond the city walls. The culture I had been raised with, the world I am most familiar with, I'll never see it again. All that’s left is Midgard...’

‘And I'm okay with that.’
Because Midgard was home: Midgard was where his family was. Loki could spend eternity here and still be content. Exploring Asgard was only so entertaining when he was alone, but each day spent here with Tony was new and exciting. Even if it meant Thanos would kill them when he came, Loki would rather be on Midgard until the end.

With the last of his doubts burned away, Loki turned off the shower and adorned a more formal set of armor. Unlike Tony, the god was not bothered by the weight of his traditional clothing, but he decided that if he was going to remain on Midgard, he should eventually acquire more suitable attire. Right now, he only left the house on official Avengers business where no one could care less that he wore full sets of armor, but one day that would change.

Tony's shower was still running, so Loki teleported into the lab to wait for him to finish. Their absence was apparent in the abnormal tidiness of the room, and though the god looked, Dum-E was nowhere to be seen.

“Dum-E!” Loki called as he walked deeper into the lab. “Tony will be displeased if you broke something while we were away!”

His suspicions were confirmed when there was excited beeping from the garage, followed by two loud crashes. Loki sighed (though his lips were upturned in amusement, and he felt the knot of stress in his chest ease) and went to go see what the robot had gotten himself into. Dum-E’s eager chatter hadn’t stopped as the god approached, but it didn’t sound like the robot was getting closer; Loki saw why when he turned the corner.

Dum-E had somehow managed to overturn himself, and his treads revolved uselessly in the air as he laid on his side. Next to where he had fallen, the door of Tony’s newest car was smashed in and the front windshield shattered. Judging by the cleaning rag that was impaled on a broken shard of glass, the scene before him was the destructive aftermath of an failed attempt to wash the car.

“I’m sure Tony’s going to be thrilled to see what you’ve done,” Loki said amusedly, moving to assist the robot who was flailing around in an effort to right himself and greet the god. Pressing a foot against Dum-E’s base, Loki reached down and shoved the robot over. When Dum-E was upright, he squealed and wheeled around to face the god, nearly knocking himself over again in his exuberance.

“I take it you missed me?” Loki asked with a grin, and Dum-E bobbed his head. “Tony and I should be spending more time in the labs soon. Then you can have something more...” He glanced over at the wreck the robot had made of Tony's 'darling'. “Productive to do.” Dum-E took in the effect of its handiwork and bowed it's arm, vroo-ing sadly. “Don't worry about that. It's not a big deal.” Tony would probably disagree, but he wasn't there, and Loki despised cars. “Come. Let's go to the lab.”

The robot trailed behind Loki and they returned to the lab, where the god busied himself with browsing through the books he brought home from Asgard. As he searched for anything that might help them in the coming year, the robot rolled around him and picked up the books he discarded, making a pile of them on the table. It hadn't been more than ten minutes before the god heard the door open, and he glanced up to see Tony entering the lab.

“I figured you'd be hanging out in here,” the man said in greeting, and Dum-E rolled over to say hello. “You behaving yourself?” Tony asked the robot, who nodded enthusiastically. “Good. Keep it that way.” Then he draped himself over the back of Loki's chair, reaching forwards to flip through the pages of the book the god had been reading. “Have you found anything interesting?”

Loki shook his head. “Not yet.” He closed the book and ducked under Tony's arm to rise from his chair.“Are you ready?”
“Ready as I’ll ever be.” Tony held out an arm for Loki to grab onto. The god complied, and in a heartbeat they were back inside one of the Helicarrier's conference rooms. Unlike when they appeared yesterday, the walls didn't start blinking red and wailing at them, and they proceeded unescorted to the bridge.

As expected, Director Fury was there, speaking to an agent in hushed tones. He lifted his head when they came in and dismissed the agent before sweeping towards them. “You took your sweet time coming here.” He came to a stop in front of them, hands clasped behind his back, but when Tony made to speak, Fury motioned for him to be silent. “The council is waiting to speak with you. Follow me.”

They were led to a dimly lit room adjacent to the bridge whose only distinguishing feature was the four large screens on the back wall. Each panel showed the dark silhouette of a person, and as the door slid shut behind them, sealing with a click, Tony scowled.

“Dramatic much?” he quipped loudly, ensuring that the four people on the screens heard, and came to a halt beside Fury in the center of the room. Curiously, the director himself seemed equally displeased with the council, and his rigid posture emanated distaste and not respect.

“I have brought Tony Stark and Loki as you have requested,” Fury said, and even though the faces on the screens were obscured, their displeasure was clear. “They'll answer your questions from here on out. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a job to get back to.”

Fury turned and went back to the door, putting his hand on a scanner and stalking out into the hall. The door closed behind him, leaving Loki and Tony alone under the callous inspection of the council. Even before they started speaking, Loki decided that he despised them.

“So you are the two who cry wolf,” the woman on the far right panel said. “Forgive us if we do not believe you.”

Tony scowled at her. “If you refuse to listen to the truth, ma'am, then I think that's your problem.”

“You will prove to us that your words are true,” the man second from the left asserted. “On the off chance that you are speaking truthfully, we will allow SHIELD to act accordingly. But if you are lying, the consequences will be severe.”

“Then I guess I have nothing to worry about,” Tony retorted, “seeing as how I don't know why anyone would lie about this.”

“It would not be the first time Tony Stark has made a scene to get attention.” The contempt in the woman's voice so thick that it was almost tangible. Though her attitude towards Tony riled Loki, he held his tongue; if these four humans held control over SHIELD, it would be in his best interest to not unduly anger them.

“Tell us what you know,” the man farthest to the left demanded.

“Ask nicely, and maybe I will,” Tony said uncooperatively, but before the situation could escalate, Loki stepped forwards.

“We have seen Thanos's army with our own eyes. He comes with a fleet of hundreds, and if you do not take this threat seriously, Midgard will be destroyed.” The god held his head high under the disgusted stares of the councilmen. He would not be belittled by mortals.

Finally the councilwoman backed down. “Go on.”
Again they recounted what they had seen on Asgard, and somehow, the council managed to ask more questions and make more demands than the director had. As precious hours wasted away, Loki grew more and more annoyed. His responses grew curt, and Tony's sarcastic retorts increased in frequency. The council was a group of fools, and Loki could not see why anyone would entrust them with the safety of their nation.

At last, the man on the left said, “I think that is enough. We will review what you have said,” and the screens abruptly shut off, leaving Loki and Tony in darkness with equally annoyed expressions on their faces.

“I hate politics,” Tony growled as he stomped over to the door, but when he tried to open it, it was locked. Vexed, he pressed his hand against the scanner, but it remained red. With a scowl, he turned to Loki. “Want to get us out of here?”

Just when the god was about to step forwards, the door slid open and Fury stormed in. The director stood imposingly in the threshold, blocking the exit so Tony couldn't sneak around. “You aren't finished yet. There are others waiting to talk to you. You're going to remain here until everyone is up to speed and willing to cooperate.”

“You're just punishing us for not finding out about Thanos sooner,” Tony protested.

“And whose fault is that, Stark? If you had obeyed my orders when I first gave them, we'd not be here right now.” Fury was unmoved by Tony's objection. It was their fault for not finding out sooner, and they weren't the only ones working demanding hours. Fury had on the same uniform from yesterday, and Loki wouldn't be surprised if the man had yet to sleep. “We have the commander of the United States army waiting in line. After that, the European sect also wants verification.”

Tony sighed, but when Fury stepped further into the room, the man returned to where Loki was standing and watched as the director typed a passcode into a holographic screen. Three of the panels activated, and this time the people were not obscured, though Loki didn't recognize anyone either way. Apparently Tony did, because his expression brightened a bit. “Hey, Rhodey. Long time no see.”

'Rhodey', a man with a crisp military uniform and a stern face, smiled in return. “Tony,” the man said amicably, “I should have known you would be at the center of this.” Then Rhodey's eyes wandered to Loki, and his expression became neutral. While Loki had never met Tony's other friend—the two times he had come over, Loki had been out of it—Tony would mention him fondly. But they both had demanding jobs that kept them separate, just like now.

“General Rhodes, you may speak to your friend later. Right now we have urgent matters to tend to,” the woman in the center chastised, and Rhodes nodded.

“My apologies, Ms. President.” The atmosphere reverted back to seriousness.

“Mr. Stark, the threat you have announced is a serious matter,” the president stated. “We ask that you explain the situation to us fully so that we may handle it appropriately.”

For the third time, they began to explain, and once the United States government was satisfied, they had to speak for the fourth time. Then the fifth. That was how they spent their day: talking to anyone who had questions or concerns, no matter how inconsequential or redundant. A few times, either Loki or Tony would complain (generally after speaking with a particularly idiotic politician), but they continued to do as they were asked until the screens went dim and stayed that way.

When it looked like they were done, they breathed a sigh of relief, but then Fury said, much to
Tony's displeasure, “There's one last thing before you leave.”

“You can't be serious,” Tony said irritably. “We have talked to like, every single person there is. What more can you possibly want?”

“SHIELD has a different, more important task for you now,” Fury announced, and there was something about the way he said it that made Loki tense and Tony frown. “We need you to return to making weapons.”

Tony's eyes widened, and the blood drained from his face, making him appear ghostly in the dim light. Then he grit his teeth, infuriated. “No.”

Fury was not surprised by the rejection, but he did not accept Tony's answer. “We have respected your wishes for years, but now-”

“No. I meant it when I said it, and my mind hasn't changed since. I will not make weapons for other people to abuse.” Tony's hand reached up to touch against the center of his chest, and Loki could hear the soft clink of the arc reactor beneath. “Never again.”

“We aren't asking you to return to war profiteering. What Stark Industries does in your business. But that doesn't change the fact that you were the best in the industry,” Fury stated harshly. “If Thanos is going to come down our heads with an entire armada of ships we've never even seen before, we'll need everything we can get, and that includes you.”

“I won't do it.” Tony clutched at the fabric over his arc reactor before yanking his hand away. “And you have some nerve asking for me to.”

“I am asking because it's necessary,” Fury said without a hint of sympathy. “We have our own means of fighting against Thanos, but our progress is limited. The simple fact of the matter is that you're the best in the field, and we need your talents. Are you really willing to risk the end of the world as penance for events that happened a decade ago?”

“I won't make weapons for you,” Tony repeated, but Loki had stopped paying attention as Fury's words stirred up an old memory. It was coated in a vagueness associated with blanking out, but Loki snatched it and his eyes widened.

“Listen here, Stark. This is-”

“You have the Tesseract, don't you?” Loki asked, and the director whipped his head around to stare at him. His surprise quickly warped into suspicion.

“How do you know about that?” Fury's expression was thunderous.

The accusation fell on deaf ears; information was churning in Loki's mind and details fell into place. The Tesseract was an Infinity Gem. It had enough power to rival Thanos, and the Mad Titan would no doubt be seeking it and the others to rule the universe. That Loki had forgotten about it—fog or not—was ludicrous.

“Do you even even know the Tesseract's potential?” he asked. “It has enough raw energy to power your entire planet... and to fight Thanos.” The more Loki thought about it, the more he realized that armed with an Infinity Gem, they might actually stand a chance.

“The Tesseract is none of your concern,” Fury growled. “SHIELD will utilize it as we see fit.”

“Tesseract?” Tony joined in with a frown. “That’s what was found with Capsicle, right? I thought
SHIELD deemed it too unstable to use.”

“Of course it’s unstable, and yet they had the audacity to try and tame it,” Loki said sharply, and Fury’s eye narrowed further. “Infinity Gems are beyond the stretch of your science. You’ll never be able to use it to its full potential.”

“And you think you can?”

“I know I can,” Loki replied confidently; honestly, he has never worked with an artifact that old—the closest being the Casket of Ancient Winters, and he had sequestered that away and never touched again—but he had no doubt that he could learn faster than any human scientist.

“Do you honestly believe I would entrust the Tesseract to you? While I'll admit you've behaved yourself these past two years, it is never wise to give power to those who seek it.”

“Nor is it wise to doom your people due to unfounded doubts. I am not asking that you hand the Tesseract over — only that you let me help harness its power.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Fury replied, blinded by his lingering doubt. Loki grit his teeth, frustrated with the director's idiocy, but Fury ignored him and turned to Tony. “I am not finished with you. Think about what I've said. We could really use your skill set.”

“Obviously you can’t need it that much if you're willing to ignore Loki's assistance,” Tony retorted.

“I have better things to do than argue with you all night, but don't think that this is over. Even if you don't want to do it, Earth needs you to.” Tony met the statement with a defiant glare and the clench of a fist. Fury growled, “If you’re not going to cooperate, then get out of here,” before stalking out the door and letting it slam shut behind him. The click of a lock echoed through the room, and when Tony tried to open the door, it wouldn't budge. He pounded on the steel door, but it was clear that they had overstayed their welcome until they were needed again.

Even so, Loki could find not fault with Director Fury's actions towards Tony. They were on the brink of war—of annihilation—and needed every advantage they could get. The desires of one were not worth the end of all. Yet as Loki watched Tony smack the door and fume, calling Fury every foul word he could think of, he did not challenge the man's decision. It was both parts cowardice—he could not have Tony angry at him, not again—and compassion—because he understood what it meant to have demons and had no desire to reawaken Tony's.

After a few minutes, Tony exhausted his ire (and his insult repertoire) and slunk back towards Loki. “Well this has been a fun day,” he muttered, hand once again reaching up towards his chest, but before the man's fingers touched the reactor, he let his arm drop. Tony shook his head and took a deep breath. “Do you really think the Tesseract will help against Thanos?”

“I did not lie: the Tesseract possesses unimaginable power. It is the best chance we have. Director Fury's refusal if foolhardy at best.”

While Fury's demands of Tony did not irk the god, his obstinacy with the Tesseract did; if Fury wanted to save his realm, he should have listened to Loki. The god considered stealing the Tesseract, taking matters into his own hands, but then he thought better of it. If he created a rift between him and SHIELD, which was the undoubtable outcome of his theft, it would only make the situation worse. They would pursue him as Asgard had pursued him, and Tony would be trapped in the middle. No, it would be better to wait and convince the director to change his mind. They didn't have the time to repair the consequences of a rash decision.
“We'll think of something,” Tony said. “Fury is paranoid bastard, but he's also a practical one. Besides, now that you've mentioned it, I'm pretty sure Bruce has been working on the Tesseract. Maybe he'll be willing to share some information.”

“It is worth a try.” Loki shook the vestiges of theft from his mind. “For now, we should go home. It's been a long day.”

Of course, he would be returning to the house just to search through his books and start preparing spells; he was far too anxious to rest. But Loki had to remember that Tony was only human, and the man still hadn't recovered from running himself to the ground in Asgard.

Tony, however, liked to forget that he had limits. “Take us to New York. There's some stuff I have to do there, and you can pick up Coro. I'm sure he misses you.”

“That can wait. I think you should take care of yourself for once,” Loki insisted, but Tony shook his head.

“I'm not tired.” His lie was betrayed by the dark circles around his eyes. “I'll just grab a bite to eat at the tower, and then we can get to work.”

Loki frowned, but knew that if he argued, it wouldn't change Tony's mind. Even if he took Tony back to Malibu, the man would still push himself too hard. Besides, neither of them had the time to waste. “If that is what you want to do...”

Tony nodded sharply. “It is.”

The god sighed. “Then I will teleport us to New York.” For both of their benefits, he grinned and joked, “I guess it is better this way. If we went to Malibu, you'd see what Dum-E did to your car.”

He grabbed Tony's arm, chuckling softly, and Tony incredulously shouted, “Loki!” as they were whisked away in bright green light.
"If I could just see it all,  
Just like a fly on the wall,  
Would I be able to accept what I can't control?  
And would I share what I saw?  
Or just sit back and ignore,  
Like nothing never happened?  
I haven't seen you before.

I'm on the run from a thief,  
I let into my head.  
I know, I hold the keys, so don't be scared."

-Fly on the Wall by Thousand Foot Krutch

The burning desert sun glinted off of miles of sand, interrupted only by the silver wings of a quinjet. In the shadow of the plane, six people stood: one with long blond hair and a red cape, one with a suit of metal armor, and one with a long black trench coat who was flanked by three similarly dressed agents. Thor’s boisterous voice was carried by the wind, rolling across the expansive flat.

“Asgard will help your people in any way we can, and we are currently negotiating with Alfheim and Vanagheim. You will not be without support. The other realms will help defend Midgard and Yggdrasil’s branches.”

Fury, standing farthest from Thor with his back ramrod straight and arms crossed behind his back, glowered at the god. “What exactly does this support of yours entail? Weapons? Soldiers? Funds? Or will you wait until half of Earth is in ruins before you intervene?”

Thor ignored the director’s jibe, for it was not the first time the irate man had spoken harshly nor would it be the last. “A portion of Asgard’s army will be dedicated to your cause. Our best warriors will be yours to command, and I assume the other realms will do the same.”

“How large is a portion?” Tony asked, calculating their chance of success with an army of Aesir. There was a lot of ground that would need to be covered, and a minimum of two-hundred soldiers would be enough to assign one or two to critical cities. If they had even that much, it would significantly boost their defensive power.

“As long as nothing else happens in the realms, I can dedicate four score to your cause,” Thor said, and Tony had to run the words back through his head to make sure that he heard right, and then his eyes narrowed in disbelief.

Echoing his sentiment, Fury growled, “Eighty soldiers is all you can offer?”

“Asgard is not as populated as Midgard, and our army is not as plentiful as yours,” Thor defended. “Ever since the Bifrost was destroyed and upheaval erupted across the other realms, Asgard’s army has been spread thin in order to maintain the peace. But one Aesir is as powerful as a hundred men, and the other realms will certainly have their own forces to contribute.”

Though Thor’s explanation made sense, it did not keep Tony from being discontent with Asgard’s
lack of support. While he did not agree with Loki's bitter assessment—that the people of Asgard were beyond selfish and couldn't care less about the people of Midgard as long as the threat did not reach their realm—he had thought that Thor would do more. Aesir or not, there was only so much ground they could cover with eighty soldiers.

“What about mages?” Tony asked. “Are they all going to be running around with swords and shields, or will there be some like Loki in there, too?”

Much to his disappointment, the God of Thunder shook his head. “Loki is... Loki has a unique skill set, and very few in Asgard are as proficient as he in the art of magic. If it is magic you seek, I can grant you a few, but Alfheim is where spellcasters dwell.”

The director was even less pleased than Tony, but he didn't voice that displeasure beyond a frustrated sigh. “When should we be expecting these soldiers of yours to arrive?”

“I will send them before Thanos attacks. Until then, they are needed where they are. I trust this will work for you?”

It really didn't, but apparently that was as good as they were going to get. That was the same conclusion Fury reached, and he said, “As long as they actually show up, I don't care if it's two days before, but they better know what they are doing. I don't need uncoordinated 'gods' hampering the chain of command.”

“My people are well seasoned in the art of war,” Thor assured with pride. “They will listen to your orders and carry them out to their greatest ability. Such is an Asgardian's honor.”

“Do you have any other information for us?” Fury asked, unimpressed.

Thor's face dropped. “I regret to admit that I have no further tidings of Thanos's advent. The last time I gazed into the scrying pool, the Mad Titan's army was still in transit.”

“If even one of his ships is out of line, I want to know immediately,” Fury demanded, and Thor nodded.

“Should the situation change, Heimdall will make sure you are informed.”

With an arrangement agreed upon, Fury turned back towards the landed quinjet while motioning for the SHIELD agents to follow. They jumped into motion, removing their hands from where they had discreetly hovered above their handguns, and moved onto the plane. Once they had boarded, the hangar door slid closed and the engine rumbled to life. Thor and Tony stepped back as the jet's turbines stirred up sand, and it began to rise into the air. Distanced from the ground, the blades shifted vertically and the ship rotated, pointing back towards the west.

After the quinjet had become nothing more than a shrinking speck on the horizon and the sand had settled, Thor turned to Tony, paying full attention to the man for the first time since arriving in New Mexico. “Man of Metal, I am glad to see you are well,” the god said sincerely. Then, after a moment's hesitation, he asked, “My brother did not wish to join you?” When Tony didn't answer immediately, Thor's frown deepened. “He is well, is he not? He has not become catatonic again?”

“Oh, no,” Tony said before the god could freak out. “No, he's fine. He just...” Didn't want to see Thor and refused to meet with the god no matter how much Tony tried to convince him otherwise. “He's busy working on some protection spells he thinks will help against Thanos.”

Thor gave him a sad smile. “You do not have to lie for my sake. I am aware that my brother wants nothing to do with me. But I am gladdened to know that he is well.” Thor's pensive silence said he
was not as unaffected by Loki's dismissal as he claimed to be, and Tony felt obligated to distract the
god from his sibling quarrel. “So how are things back on Asgard? Your parents doing good?”

To his bewilderment, Thor became even broodier. “My father is... not well,” the god divulged. “He
is bedridden often, and my mother fears he only has a few months left before his soul journeys to
Hel. She barely leaves his side.”

“Oh...” Tony said awkwardly, mentally cursing himself for asking. While he could have honestly
said that he felt no fondness for Odin, that didn't mean he felt no sorrow for Thor. It seemed as if the
god was losing his family one member at a time. “I am sorry to hear that.”

“My father has lived a very long, fulfilling life. He has served Asgard well, but eternal sleep comes
for even the mightiest of warrior.” Tony wasn't sure if Thor's words were meant to console him or
the god, but before he could ask or say something insensitive, the thunder god continued, “I must
return to my station. I have faith in your strength. Midgard is a young realm, but it is also a hardy
one.”

“Oh, thanks.” Tony watched as Thor walked to the center of the symbols scorched into the still
sands. He remained a safe distance away as the god stared up at the sky, raising his hammer above
his head.

“Heimdall, open the Bifrost!” Thor called, and then he lowered his gaze back to Tony. “Hopefully
we shall meet again, Tony Stark.” Then a ray of seething colors pierced the sky and crashed down
around him, distorting his image. Thor disappeared, and the pillar of light collapsed in on itself.

With a sigh, Tony slid his mask back into place and activated his repulsors. He rocketed into the air
and let Jarvis take control of the flight system. The estimated time of arrival in New York was almost
two hours, making Tony wish that Loki had joined him if only for the convenience of teleporting.
But what he had told Thor wasn't a complete lie; the god really was busy, scouring tome after tome
for anything that could protect their planet from the Mad Titan's fleet. And he wasn't the only one;
everyone was up to their neck in work these days.

While the pace wasn't quite as breakneck as it had been those first two weeks, there was still a sense
of urgency permeating everything they did. It was strange how people around them went through
their lives as if nothing had changed, ignorant of the alien invasion making its way to their doorstep.
Only the governments of well-developed nations—one's that would be able to provide sufficient
firepower and could be trusted to keep their silence—and organizations related to SHIELD had been
informed. Beyond that, the world was to be kept in the dark until the invasion was upon them.

Tony wasn't sure how he felt about deceiving billions of people, but there was no better way to do it.
If people were aware that they might die in a year, they'd panic, stewing in their fear and lashing out
unpredictably. Hell, Tony was one of the people spearheading the anti-Thanos effort, and there were
times that even he felt like breaking windows and running rampant through the streets. Just because
the invasion was estimated to be eleven months away didn't keep stop the anxiety, and he knew it
would only get worse as the year mark approached.

The thing that stressed Tony out the most wasn't the fact that he might die soon (though that too was
an unsettling thought) but the fact that if he failed, the entire planet would die; Pepper, Loki, the
Avengers, Rhody, Happy, and countless other people that Tony knew would be dead. The weight
of the world was on his shoulders, and failure was not an option.

Yet the one thing he could do that would change the tide of the invasion was the one thing he feared
most: designing weapons and taking up the title 'Merchant of Death'. His heartbeat sped at the very
thought, and he forced his thoughts to redirect, though the questions that came to mind were not
better: Even if he did make weapons, would it be enough? While they might win in the end, how much of the planet would be destroyed before then?

That was the weight crushing Tony, causing his sleep to become restless and his appetite lacking. To endure eleven more months of this seemed unbearable.

When Stark Tower finally came into view, Tony put more power into the repulsors, eager to distract himself from his thoughts. He landed roughly on the roof, and the second Jarvis dismantled the suit, he rushed into the penthouse. Tony had expected Loki to be inside, and he had to quickly school his features when he instead saw Barton and Romanov lounging in the living room. The two spies were in the midst of cleaning out their weapons, which were scattered all over the coffee table and couch, and paused their conversation when Tony entered.

“Hey,” Barton greeted as he wiped down out the gun he was holding. “How'd your meeting with Blondie go?”

“Fine. He said Asgard will send eighty soldiers, and some other realms might bring more.” He glanced around the room, but while there was a pile of spell books on the floor and Choronzon was lounging on the seat of Loki's chair, the god himself was absent. “Where'd Loki go?”

“He said he had to go pick something up in Malibu.” Romanov paused in he repairs long enough to scrutinize Tony’s face before continuing, “He should be back in a few minutes.”

Tony plopped down into the chair next to Loki's and grabbed the god's tablet, opening Jarvis’s server and uploading his Iron Man project files. As he tinkered with his latest suit (one designed to operate in the thermosphere), he had to shove aside the insistent voice that said that what he was doing with the suit was no different than making a Jericho missile.

Fingers drummed against the armrest as Tony began to spiral deeper into anxiety, but thankfully it wasn't long before he saw a glimmer of light from the corner of his eye. Loki appeared out of thin air, and Barton and Romanov jumped, still not accustomed to the god's preferred mode of transportation. They both had guns in hand before their minds caught up with their instincts.

Tony meanwhile smiled and raised his hand in greeting. “Yo. What did you have to go get?”

Loki’s eyes fell on him, and the god perked up, his grin widening. “I forgot some of my books,” he replied as he returned to his chair to scoop Coro up and, after a moment's consideration, deposit the feline on Barton's lap. Then, ignoring the archer's protest, Loki twisted his hands, and at least a dozen massive books dropped onto the table, which creaked piteously.

“Do you really need all of those?” Barton asked, reaching around Coro, who took the archer's cleaning rag and was chewing a hole in it, and pushing his bow out of the way of the precariously leaning tomes. Eying Barton's hand, Coro dropped his prize and swiped at the archer, who yelped and lifted his hand out of reach. Barton scowled at the cat. “Get off me, you twerp. Go bug Loki.” He prodded Coro off of his lap, and the cat meowed at him from the floor before climbing onto the back of Loki's chair, claws impaling the upholstery as he scrambled up.

“Clearly you underestimate the complexity of magic.” Loki reached up to scratch Coro's head as the cat nuzzled his neck. “These books hold naught but a sliver of information. Of course, I would not expect one such as yourself to understand.” He smirked at the archer, who huffed in return.

“Whatever. I've read Harry Potter—that's enough magic for me. Though I feel cheated that you don't use a wand.”
“Why would I?” Loki asked, completely missing the point of the reference. “They are poor conduits. Only the most talentless of mages would use one.”

“Way to ruin my childhood,” Barton muttered. “I bet you would have been sorted into Slytherin.”

Unaffected by the archer’s attempt to insult him—though even if the god knew what Barton was talking about, he’d probably take it as a compliment—Loki shrugged and went back to his books, shuffling through his new additions until he found the tome he required.

A companionable silence fell over the group as they worked, broken only by the occasional, “Can you pass me that?” or, “Hey princess, what do you think about this?” The current atmosphere was not uncommon; the penthouse living room had become an unofficial gathering spot for the Avengers when they were off duty. Tony didn’t mind sharing his space, though his original intent had been for them to use their own floors. It was because of Barton that they all decided to congregate in his section of the tower.

Three weeks ago, the archer had emptied out his fridge and couldn’t be bothered to restock it, so he had snuck into the vents to steal from someone else. With the penthouse directly above his room, Barton had snuck into Tony’s kitchen, and Loki, the little shit, heard him come in but didn’t bother informing Tony. The man nearly had a heart attack when he went to get a snack and found Barton sitting at his table, munching on leftovers and drinking his scotch. Though Tony had chased him out, the archer was back the next day with Romanov. After that, any attempt to keep the Avengers out was in vain.

However, Tony found that it was nice to have people around who were going through the same hardship and didn’t ask anything of him. While it was impossible to totally escape the tension of the impending invasion, it became an unspoken rule that they wouldn’t mention Thanos in the living room unless it was urgent. This allowed them to have some semblance of peace lest they all go mad.

“Alright, I’m going to bed,” Barton announced as he got to his feet, disturbing the placidity. His guns were polished and in a row on the table, and he slipped them back into their holsters before carefully placing the arrows back into the quiver. With everything accounted for, he said, “Goodnight, ‘Tasha,” before turning to Loki and Tony. “And you too, idiots.”

Tony wasn’t going to let Barton get in the last jibe, and as the archer headed towards the elevator he called, “Make sure you don’t get lost on the way out, Birdbrain!”

“Shut up, Stark! That was one time, and I was drunk!” Barton replied, his voice fading as he rounded the corner.

Romanov finished reassembling her handguns shortly after, and it never ceased to amaze Tony how she could fit everything into her tight body suit. Once the weapons had disappeared, she stood up, and Tony asked, “I take it you’re leaving too?”

She nodded. “Clint and I have to do recon tomorrow morning. Goodnight boys.” She disappeared down the hall, silent as a ghost. After she left, Tony glanced out the window to the dark skyline littered with lights.

He sighed, closed his blueprints, and tossed the tablet onto the table. “How much do you bet that we’re going to have to wake up at some godawful hour tomorrow to deal with a deluded criminal mastermind?”

Loki looked up from his books and shrugged. “I wouldn’t be surprised.”
“Neither would I, so I'm gonna go try and get some sleep.” 'Try' being the operative word there. Tony stood from his chair, stretched his arms over his head, and yawned. When Loki didn't make any move to follow, Tony frowned and asked, “Are you going to be working on stuff all night?”

“At least for a few more hours,” Loki confirmed as he leaned over to write something in his book. “I slept a few days ago. I'm not tired.”

There were dark smudges forming under the god's eyes to betray his lie, yet Tony did not contradict him. “Well, when you do decide the turn in, how about you sleep in your own bed this time? It's hard enough to get comfortable without you and that furry abomination stealing my pillows.”

The corner of Loki's lips twitched in a poorly suppressed grin. “It was Choronzon's idea, but I assure you it won't happen again. I would hate to cause you discomfort.”

“Uhuh,” Tony said, not trusting the mischievous light in the god's eyes or the way he proudly patted Coro's head.

Sure enough, when he awoke the next morning—roused by a blaring alarm signaling for the Avengers to assemble—there was a tawny colored cat sleeping on his chest while a smug black cat was sprawled out by his head. Loki blink languidly at the man, and Tony scowled at him before reaching for a pillow—jostling Coro off of his chest—and throwing it at Loki. The black cat hissed at him and slunk off the bed, replaced a second later by a humanoid Loki that sounded far too amused. Tony threw another pillow at him before leaving to get suited up.

-o-o-o-

Two months after they learned of the impending invasion, Tony finally agreed to make weapons. Not because he had succumbed to Fury's manipulative arguments, but because he couldn't ignore the guilt.

“Tony!” Loki shouted, running to catch up to the man, but Tony did not slow. All he could think about was getting away away away. “You couldn't have possibly known!” Loki insisted when he caught up. He reached for the man's arm and dragged Tony to a stop. “What happened was an accident! It's not your fault!”

Heart racing, Tony whirled to face the god, and while Loki's face was devoid of condemnation, Tony drowned in his regrets. “Not my fault?” he asked sharply, and screams echoed in his mind. “Then whose fault is it?”

“It was an accident,” Loki repeated earnestly, but as the god spoke, Tony eyes unwittingly rose to stare at the billowing plumes of smoke over his shoulder. His stomach twisted and the sight, and before Loki could stop him, Tony stumbled out of his grasp and fled once again.

Though the god shouted answer him, Tony could not stop. Guilt bit at his heels, forcing him to go faster and faster, but he could not outrun the images that flashed through his mind. Over and over he saw the repulsor blast — his repulsor blast — bore a hole through the wall, demolishing the building's foundation and sending the top floor crashing down. Worse than that, he could hear the panicked screams coming from inside, almost drowned out by the roar of crumbling stone, silence abruptly.

Damnit, he should have known. He should have done something — anything — differently. Then maybe those people would have survived. If only he had distracted their enemy better, or distanced himself from the evacuation zone. But he had been cocky and reckless, and now there were corpses under a ton of brick that he put there. It didn't matter that Tony had no way of knowing the android
would deflect his attack into the side of the building, or that the building had even been occupied. It was still a blast from his repulsor that killed them, and it was still his fault.

Eyes locked ahead, Tony continued to flee from his actions. He did not know where he was going, nor did he care. All that mattered was escaping from the crumbled stone and glimpses of flesh, clothing, and blood. Yet no matter how far he ran from the scene, it followed him; there was no fleeing his own mind. He killed those people. It hadn't been his intent, but it was his weapon — because in the end, that was all Iron Man amounted to: a weapon — that killed them.

Voices filled his helmet, overtaking the horrified silence. “Stark, where are you going?” Barton asked breathlessly. “We're outnumbered here!”

“Tony,” Rogers said, “whatever happened, it isn’t your fault!”

And Loki, still running behind him, finally grew tired of being ignored and shouted, “Listen to me, damnit!” Again the god grabbed Tony's arm, yanking him back, and this time he didn't let go; Tony's armor crunched beneath Loki's hand. “Tony! Stop this!”

Though Tony struggled to free himself, Loki was more unyielding than a steel trap, forbidding him from wrenching free. But Tony couldn’t remain here, surrounded by the reek of blood and fire. “I need to get away,” he gasped, hoping that Loki would understand and let him go.

The god only pulled him closer, raising his other hand to grip Tony's shoulder. Holding the man in place, Loki stared into his eyes and said insistently, “We can't leave. I know you want to go, but people need you here, Tony. You can’t run away.”

There was no denying the truth in Loki's words; a fiery roar shook the air, and the ground rumbled as concrete and brick came crashing down. Smoke hung thick in the sky, and bits of ash fluttered like perverted snow. Panicked cries echoed across the city, accentuated by Barton shouting orders into his headset.

“Two drones have broken through the left wing. All agents in sector four need to focus on protecting the evacuation routes. Shit, another one had broken through on the right! Stark and Loki, what the hell are you doing? We need every man on board! There’s a drone approaching your position!”

While Tony heard the frantic commands, he remained detached from the situation; Loki, on the other hand, tensed and stepped away, searching for the enemy. Even when a massive robot — eerily similar to the Iron Monger, another mistake that Tony had allowed to happen — appeared around the corner of a building, the man felt as if he wasn’t really there.

The robot noticed them and veered in their direction, its rocket launchers leveled at their heads. Loki's muscles were taut, and he stepped between Tony and the android, his hands glowing. With a bang, a missile shot towards the god, but he flung a bolt of magic to intercept it. Then he followed the attack with a streak of lightning that crackled pitifully towards the machine; Loki had been using copious amounts of magic long before this fight even began, and their opponent only stumbled before stomping closer, the asphalt splintering beneath its feet.

Torn between switching to the offensive to effectively combat the machine and defending Tony (who Loki apparently thought couldn't protect himself) the god remained in front of the man, hands raised to deflect projectiles. Loki's assumption about Tony's inability, while aggravating, was probably right; when Tony aimed a blast at the robot, his body moved like a marionette whose strings were under someone else's control and the shot went wide, pulverizing an evacuated building.

Thunderous screams resounded in Tony’s mind, and he jerked back in horror, held in place only by
Loki’s grip on his arm. The god hesitated, eyes darting between the approaching android and Tony, before coming to a decision. “Stay where I put you,” he commanded, and Tony blinked in surprise as magic swept across him, blurring his view and sinking into his armor. The HUD blinked frantically at him, and Tony screwed his eyes shut against the light. When he opened them again, he was surrounded by snow and darkness.

Discombobulated, Tony spun around, nearly tripping over a rock concealed beneath thick snow, and his breath came out in ragged gasps. He didn’t recognize where he was. “Loki!” He pulled his feet free and attempting to traverse the snow drift. “Loki, where the hell are you?” Tony squinted his eyes against the inky night, aided minimally by the waxing gibbous and shining stars. However, the god was nowhere to be seen in the expanse of white; it was just Tony and the mountains that towered in the distance.

“Loki, what the hell did you do with Stark?” Barton demanded, his voice distorted by static. “Both of you are needed on the front!”

“Tony wasn’t going to be much help like that,” Loki replied calmly despite the distant rumbling and shouting overlaying his voice. “I’ll handle his end.”

“You were struggling when it was still the two of you,” Barton contradicted.

“I’ll handle it,” Loki repeated, his tone clearly stating that it was not up for debate.

“Damn arrogant gods…” Barton muttered, beginning to sound more annoyed than outraged. Still, he said adamantly, “Stark, if you’re still listening, we need you back here. Casualties happen. That’s just how our job is. But we need your firepower.”

“Clint, maybe Loki’s right.” Rogers said tentatively. “Stark isn’t safe if he’s compromised — no offense, Tony.”

“No, he needs to listen. Stark, you can beat yourself up afterwards. Right now we need-“

A burst of static drowned out Barton’s voice, creating a chaotic mess of shouts and snaps. Through the clamor there was a near intelligibly command: “A group of drones have penetrated the center of our defenses! I need back up here!”

Hearing his friend in danger made Tony’s guilt double. He had abandoned his team. Unable to ignore their plight, he activated his repulsors regardless of Loki’s order. Snow was displaced as he rose into the air, and the GPS in his suit recalibrated, pinpointing his current location. Tony was in Norway.

He swore and increased the power going to his flight system, but an instant later, the HUD began flashing. “Sir, the power level is less than five percent,” Jarvis reported, and Tony frowned; he could have sworn the suit had been at almost half power. Mayhem was still coming across the communications system, prompting him to ignore the warning. But as he rose higher, the repulsors fritzed, causing the suit to drop, abruptly jerk to a halt, fly a few feet, and drop again. Despite Tony’s best efforts, the suit kept descending until he was barely above the snow covered ground. His proximity to the compacted ice was what saved him when the repulsors gave out completely and he plummeted.

With a shout, Tony crashed into the snow, flipping and rolling until he slid to a stop a couple feet away. Lying on his side, half-buried in snow, he groaned and pried himself out of the miniature crater. Shaken and bruised, he rolled onto his back and stared up at the sky as he regained his breath.
Watching the stars shine against the black backdrop, Tony couldn't help but wonder what the night sky would look like when Thanos's fleet arrived. Where there were now pinpricks of light, there would be gargantuan spaceships blotting out the horizon. Earth would be cast in red light and the skyline marred by fire. In less than ten months, what he saw now would be hidden from view, perhaps forever.

“Stark, we need you to come back here, now,” Barton commanded, redirecting Tony’s mind back to the present. He knew that he could not stay out in the middle of nowhere, though at the same time he loathed going back to the gnawing guilt and the sharp metallic reek of blood.

Nonetheless, duty dictated the he turn his microphone back on, and Tony shouted at the one responsible for shorting out the suit. “Loki, what the hell did you do?” Wincing, the man dragged himself to his feet, the suit resisting his motions. The HUD continued flashing — barely above one percent power — and the repulsors wouldn’t even activate. “I can’t stay here!”

“I told you to stay put,” Loki said impassively. “You’re a risk to yourself and others.”

“I can help!” Tony insisted, and as he spoke, the stream of upheaval from Barton’s headset abruptly went silent. Alarmed, he pleaded, “I won’t mess up again. You can trust me.”

“Loki, maybe you should bring Tony back,” Rogers said between gasps of breath. “And Tony, it’ll be okay. No one blames you for what happened.”

Steve's attempt at reassurance had the opposite effect, and at the reminder that everyone knew of his fault made Tony’s stomach crawl. He squeezed his eyes shut, unable to block the images. ‘It won’t happen again’ he promised himself. ‘I’ll protect everyone. I’ll stop Thanos and make up for my failure.’ Thinking about the Mad Titan, however, only put him under more duress. Guilt compounded with anxiety until it was nigh unbearable, and Tony’s breath hitched in his throat.

“I trust you absolutely, but this isn’t about trust,” Loki said softly, but his words were firm. “You're panicking, and as such can not be expected to act rationally. Staying there, away from the fight, is in your best interest. Take the time I've given you to think things through.”

“I can't.” Tony listened to the sound of distant explosions. His friends were in danger, and he was thousands of miles away. “Loki, please.”

“Turn off your headset,” was the god's unmoved reply. “I’ll come and get you when the battle is over.”

Tony's frustration began to morph into anger. “Damn it, Loki, you can't make these decisions for me! I'm not a child!”

“I know you aren't, but I'm telling you—as both your friend and your teammate—that you need to take a break. If you come back now, you'll only make things worse. Now have Jarvis turn the headset off.”

Unwilling to obey Loki’s order, Tony tried again in vain to activate the repulsors. The snow at his feet hissed as the boots heated up, but other than creating a small puddle, the suit did nothing. There was nothing else he could do: it would be hours before the suit had recharged enough to fly across the ocean, and Loki was steadfast in his decision.

With conflicting emotions, Tony said, “Jarvis, disconnect us from the server,” and was abandoned to his thoughts in the accursed silence. Weighed down by the failing suit, the man fell backwards into the snow, and a chill crept through the metal to soak into his bones. He shuddered and at last
surrendered himself to the tempest in his mind.

Tony laid there, staring sightlessly up at the dark night sky, for what felt like hours. Unfettered thoughts ran rampant through his mind — a mix of both recent regrets and past mistakes that he had hidden deep in his psyche — and cycled in circles. They went from today to Thanos to Afghanistan, churning and twisting and driving guilt through his chest like a spear. With each repetition came the harsh reminder that he was, down to the very core, a weapons designer. Though Stark Industries had stopped manufacturing artillery, Tony had never stopped making the blueprints. He deluded himself into thinking that everything he did was simply an extension of the Iron Man suit, and as such was exempt from the crimes of his past. He didn't make weapons that had his name written boldly on the side, weapons that killed young soldiers right before his eyes and buried shrapnel into his own chest, and as such he was forgiven. But what he did make, his beloved Iron Man, was nothing more than his greatest weapon yet, and it, like any other, inevitably killed people.

That was the farthest Tony had ever allowed his thoughts to wander: that he was a murderer. But now, with nowhere to go to escape the machinations of his mind, cracks began to appear in his guilt, and a different type of recollection leaked through. Tony remembered all of the people he has saved in the past decade, from the families he protected when he first used the Mark II to the civilians he rescued today. Though his actions had caused the death of multiple people, there were countless others that would have perished were it not for him. He recalled a man who had thanked him breathlessly after Iron Man saved him from a falling bridge and the children he guided out of a burning schoolhouse. Without the creation of the suit, those lives would have been forever lost. That's why cheers arose when he landed in the midst of an active combat zone—because to them he was a hero, not a murderer.

That was what Tony had set out to do, wasn't it? He sacrificed himself day in and day out to help people. Did those actions not outweigh the transgressions that he was also responsible for? The past could not be undone, but he tried to rectify it. Would more people have died today if he had not come than those who died because he did?

As he allowed these questions to appear and followed them to completion, Tony realized that even if something went wrong, even if his weapons were misfired or misused and people died, he would still save more lives in the end. It was just as everyone had been saying—what he had known all along, to some degree—but could not accept out of fear.

He was Iron Man first and foremost, but there was no denying that who he was now started as the Merchant of Death and would always retain some piece of that reckless, dangerous mind. Yet Tony had learned his lesson and was proud of who he had become. By mindlessly avoiding weaponry to avoid regressing, he was belittling everything he had been through. Tony Stark was a changed man, and creating weapons to save the Earth would not undo that.

Tony's scattered thoughts coalesced, and with a sigh, he picked himself out of the snow, finally feeling the chill that had settled in. His visor slid open, letting the frigid air nip at his skin, and he watched as his breath misted with each exhale. Coming to an understanding did not completely eliminate Tony's remorse, but it granted him enough closure to keep moving forwards. While his failure today hung heavy in his mind, he vowed to set things right.

“Are you ready to go home now?” Loki asked out of nowhere, startling Tony, and the man swore. Spinning on his heels, he peered out into the veil of darkness and frowned when he saw Loki sitting in the snow not even a hundred feet away, his head resting on his palm. The god's skin, a mural of warped white and blue, was illuminated by the moon, but Loki only had eyes for Tony.

“When did you get here?” Tony headed towards the god.
Loki stood, brushed snow from his armor, and pushed wet hair behind his shoulder. “About an hour ago. I didn't want to disturb you.” Then he scrutinized Tony, staring into his eyes before looking him up and down, but besides the ice dusting the crevices of Tony's armor and the small bruise that was sure to be developing on his cheek from the rough landing, he was unharmed. However, it wasn't the physical ailments that the god was concerned with, and he asked, “Are you alright?”

“No,” Tony said honestly, because if being alright meant he had forgiven himself, then he hadn't. At least not yet. “But I'll make up for it... I've decided that I'll make weapons to fight against Thanos.”

Loki's eyes widened in surprise, though Tony noted that there was no pleasure in the god’s expression. Loki had wanted him to design weapons just as Fury had, and while he had not been demanding about it out of respect for Tony's choices, the man thought the god would be glad to hear he had changed his mind. He must have underestimated Loki’s regard for him, because instead of praising his change of mind, the god frowned. “Are you sure that's what you want to do?”

“It's no different than what I'm doing now,” Tony admitted, and it didn't feel as much like a punch in the gut as he thought it would. “At least now I can feel like I'm doing something to stop Thanos.”

Loki nodded. “We will need every advantage we can get in order to halt the Mad Titan's rise, and...” The god trailed off, watching Tony's expression closely in preparation for his next words. “While something similar to what happened to today may occur, it's better to have collateral damage than to have no planet left at all.”

“Yeah...” Tony would rather not have to face that consequence at all, but Loki was right: it was inevitable for things to go wrong, and every hero had to understand that it was impossible to save everyone. The world just did not work that way. And yet Tony still tried his damnedest to, because that is also a part of being a hero.

Loki smiled as if he could hear Tony's conviction and offered an arm to the man. “Ready to go back home?”

Tony stared at the offered hand. Then he looked up at Loki's face, which lacked anything but compassion, and nodded. “I am now.”

-o-o-o-

The Tesseract sat before him, so close and yet so far, and the bright blue eddies on its surface mocked him. Naught but a small cube, no more than four inches on each side, the Tesseract seemed harmless, yet the power hidden beneath that innocuous guise was enough to destroy the world—or to save it. But right now, Loki couldn’t access it to do either.

He sighed and pulled his gaze away from the live footage of the Tesseract, focusing instead on Dr. Banner. “Have you tried adjusting both the frequency and wavelength of the current? If either of those isn't exact, the magic won't resonate properly.”

“We've tried everything in the range you gave us, and the Tesseract didn't respond to anything.” Bruce pulled his laptop closer, navigating through folders of data until he found the most recent tests. Graphs covered the screen, blocking out the tantalizing swirls of the Tesseract, and Loki leaned in closer to study the numbers. As he scanned the data, confirming Banner's assessment, the physicist wearily said, “I mean, I could run the tests again in case we missed something, but that'd take days. We don't have that sort of time to waste if it's just going to give us the same information.”

“No, you're right.” Loki reached over and scrolled through the lists. “These results look accurate. I doubt anything would change if we tried again. Try overlapping frequencies for the next round. Most
magic functions in just one dimension, but the Tesseract is old. It might work differently.” One of the lines of data caught the god’s eye, and he stopped scrolling to point it out to Banner. “This one. Try combining other wavelengths with this one.”

“Sounds easy enough.” Banner opened a new spreadsheet, transferring the information. “Though mind telling me what’s so special about that wavelength?”

The god’s hesitation was minute enough that Banner didn't notice, and then he replied, “That’s what my magic operates on.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Banner said, unaware of the significance of the data he had just been given; by knowing the wave pattern of a mage's magic, a person could block or impede their spells, rendering them useless. It was a display of trust for Loki to share that information, and Banner's response did not disappoint. The physicist was curious, though, and asked, “So is just the wave itself magic, or is there something fundamental that makes it work differently?”

Figuring the information would expose him to no further harm, Loki explained, “The wave is the current the magic goes upon, and each mage’s will very slightly. That’s why the color is different and each leaves a distinct signature. But it’s the energy from Yggdrasil—you recognize it as a form of radiation—that creates an effect.” The god gestured to the number sets generated on the screen. “Once you acquire resonance, we can worry about the other elements.”

Banner took note of what Loki had said in the file. “It’s a shame Fury won't let you work on the Tesseract himself. We’re making more progress with your advice than we did in the past year.”

Loki’s lips curled at the reminder; for three months he has been trying to acquire access to the Tesseract, and for three months he has been foolishly denied. No matter how much evidence Loki provided to prove that he could help, Director Fury was adamant he didn't come into contact with the Tesseract. That Loki was assisting Banner anyway just made Fury more certain about keeping him away. He maintained that if Loki could help without touching the Tesseract, then there was no need to risk its theft. It infuriated Loki; Fury had asked for his help yet denied him the one chance to save them. The director's hubris would kill them all. The humans could not save themselves without Loki’s help.

“Fury’s fears are unfounded,” the god snapped, digging his fingers into the desk until the metal started to warp under the pressure.

Banner held up his hands in a calming gesture. “You don’t need to convince me. We can use all the help we can get, and you understand that thing in a way I never can.” When the god finally relinquished the desk—now marred with finger-shaped dents—Banner let his hands drop. “Though it is fascinating the way your magic overlaps with physics. Maybe when this mess is over we can create something that utilizes magic through scientific means.”

Aware that his brief display of rage had made Banner nervous, Loki forced his hands to still and replied, “I've told you before, magic is science.”

Banner cracked a small grin. “You know what I mean. I’m not going to get into that debate with you again.” Then the physicist grew excited. “But the different ways your magic manifests itself is mind blowing. I’m also fascinated by how magic manifests in the body. Tony gave me a blood sample four months ago, and it was unlike anything I had ever seen before.”

“When Thanos is defeated, I will explain anything you want,” Loki said, but once he considered his words, he frowned; defeating the Mad Titan was an 'if', not a 'when'. 
Banner noted the change in the god’s mood and anxiously looked away. “We should run through some simulations,” he said, bringing them back to the original, safer topic.

“Start with the higher frequencies first.” Banner opened another window, connecting his laptop to SHIELD’s laboratory. In order to work with Loki, the physicist had to be off-site and have the data sent to his computer. There were other scientists near the Tesseract to ensure it did not malfunction and run their own tests, but it didn't allow Loki the depth of information he required.

Once Banner initiated the first test, all Loki could do was study the numbers that filled the screen. He became absorbed with analyzing the energy spikes, fervently hoping they would synchronize with the Tesseract, but five minutes later the fluctuations were still erratic, and Loki sighed. Sharing his dismay, Banner ended the test, adjusted the frequency, and started again.

They were on their twenty-sixth test—still without the desired results—when something crashed in the garage, startling them from their work. Loki turned towards the sound with a frown, but relaxed when the heard a litany of swearing fill the silence, closely followed by eager beeping and angry shouting. The noise steadily grew closer, turning into distinct words: “-don't look at me like that! No! Go sit in the corner and think about what you did!”

Tony entered the room, and Loki barked out a laugh at the sight. Indignant, the man shifted his glare from Dum-E (who had slunk in behind him, arm bowed in shame while the fire extinguisher trailed across the ground) and said, “It's not funny!”

“Actually, it is pretty funny,” Banner said, pushing his glasses up higher on his nose with an amused expression on his face.

“Hey, don't you encourage him,” Tony scolded. “Loki's bad enough on his own.” Then a glob of foam slid down the man's cheek and into his mouth. Tony gagged, his face twisting in disgust, and rubbed the back of his hand across his face. The action only served to smear more foam and ash across his skin. Tony was filthy, covered head to toe with the contents of a fire extinguisher. Beneath that was a layer of soot, and the sleeve of Tony's shirt was singed. The man's expression was thunderous.

Loki laughed again. “I warned you not to cut corners, did I not?” He rose from his chair and headed towards the man.

“It would have worked,” Tony protested, giving up on scrubbing at the mess with his hands as it trickled down his forehead. He searched desperately through the first-aid cabinet with his eyes screwed shut and yanked out the first towel he found. The man wiped his face clean, and sighed in relief when he was no longer at risk of consuming film forming fluoroprotein. “If Dum-E hadn't been trigger happy, I could have fixed it. It was just a minor explosion.”

“If explosions are minor, I think you're doing something wrong,” Banner said, and Tony's lips quirked up until he hid his pleasure under a playful scowl.

“Why don't you stick with your radiation tests and leave me to weapon engineering, huh? Trust me, I know what I'm doing.”

“What went wrong?” Loki asked, and with a wave of his hand, he banished the foam sticking to Tony's skin and clothes. The man had been in the middle of futilely cleaning his shins (his towel was sodden and only spread the mess around) and paused in surprise when the persistent white smudges disappeared. Shrugging, he tossed the dirty fabric into the corner where Dum-E was sitting in punishment.
"I made the casing too thin, and it leaked gun powder into the core. I'm actually surprised it didn't blow up worse than it had."

As if to mock him, as massive boom shook the house, toppling chairs and causing the lights to flicker. Wafts of smoke drifted in through the open door, and Dum-E chirped eagerly, bumping the fire extinguisher against the ground. Tony sighed. "Nevermind. Now it definitely isn't salvageable." He turned to his wayward robot and motioned to the garage. "Have at it. It's not like you can make it any worse." With a squeal, the robot vanished into the thick smoke, and Tony rubbed his forehead with a groan. "So much for that plan."

"...Isn't that dangerous?" Banner asked. "What if you had been in there when it exploded?"

Tony shrugged. "I take proper precautions. Besides," he grinned, "I haven't been killed yet." The men walked over to Banner and, much to Loki's vexation, took the god's seat. "So, what have you two been working on?"

"We're running frequency tests on the Tesseract. This round we're using the wavelength of Loki's magic as the base," Banner answered.

"And how's that going for you?" Tony asked, placing his feet on the desk and observing their data.

"Our progress is miniscule," Loki said, giving up on his chair and pulling the one from Tony's desk over. He sat on Banner's other side and gestured to the energy readings that were still flashing across the screen. "The Tesseract isn't responding to anything. I'm not sure if it's because we aren't using enough wavelengths, or if it requires contact with Yggdrasil, or even if it operates like my magic at all."

"Sounds fun. Well, while you two nerds are working on that, I'm going to revise my schematics." Tony activated the holographic screens, and the framework of a missile launcher hovered over the desk.

Reluctantly, Loki returned to their unavailing tests, and their chatter fell away. For the next few hours, they rarely spoke, and if they did, it pertained to what they were working on. Banner and Loki quietly murmured in dissatisfaction when test after test passed and there was only one promising blip which, after a second trial, turned out to be nothing more than a fluke. The Tesseract was unyielding in its secrets, and Loki grew short-tempered as hours wasted away.

They were doing everything they could to prepare for Thanos, and yet it felt like nothing was getting done. There was not enough time in a day, and Loki pushed himself to the end of his endurance to make up for it; nearly a month has passed since he last slept, and though he promised Tony he'd eat once a day, four days have passed since he had more than a glass of water. Yet Tony also failed to follow the rules he set; stress ate away at the man, and though he said he wanted to design weapons, it clearly was not an easy choice; Loki heard him toss and turn at night.

The god averted his attention from the computer—it was a failed test, anyway—to look at his friend, observing his sunken cheeks and the unhealthy paleness of his skin. Tony noticed the god watching him and smiled reassuringly. Loki turned away, feeling guilty for allowing the man to waste away. But he couldn't tell the man to stop, and so he busied himself with numbers to chase away his worry, hunger, and exhaustion.

Not even an hour later, Jarvis said, "Sirs, Rogers is requesting back up in Tennessee."

The activity in the lab ceased, and Tony sighed. "I'm going to assume that if he's actually asking for help there's no backing out of this." Turning to Loki, he asked, "We depart in five?"
The god nodded. “I'm going to need a place to land.”

“I am bringing up news feed now,” Jarvis reported, and a holographic screen materialized before Loki with four different sets of footage. The god zoomed in on the highest quality one and watched as hundreds of civilians were being evacuated from the critical zone. In the center of the mess, Rogers battled with a man who was literally on fire. Captain America was being forced to act on the defensive, and he raised his shield to intercept jets of flame. But his opponent brought both of his hands together, and the fire licked around the edges of the Vibranium disk, forcing Rogers to retreat backwards and leap for cover. Their fight wasn't contained either: the entire block was burning, and the wind caused the sparks to spread and ignite.

Loki pinpointed the safest spot to teleport to and stood from his chair. The familiar weight of metal and leather encased him, and as Loki waited for Tony, he slipped daggers into his boots and vambraces. It didn't take long for the man to join him, stepping down from the bridge adorned in armor of his own.

Before leaving, Tony turned to Banner. “You want to join us, Rage Quit? We could always use a big green monster on our side.”

Predictably, Banner shook his head and stammered, “I- I don't think that's a good idea. He's bad on a normal day, and I'm not... It isn't a good idea.”

“The area is evacuated, and we'll be there if something gets out of hand,” Tony cajoled, but like every time before, Banner remained unconvinced. In Loki's opinion, Tony was lucky that he even managed to persuade the nervous man to stay in their Malibu house for a few days. But Tony didn't see it that way. “How are you going to understand the Hulk if you never let yourself be the Hulk?”

“I'd rather not know him.” Banner kept glancing uncomfortably back to the computer and eventually reached over to type something in.

“You're missing out on a lot of fun. When was the last time you got your adrenaline pumping?” The more Tony asked, the farther he pushed Banner away, and Loki knew he had to stop the man. He didn't know if he supported Tony's efforts—sometimes monsters were best left buried, where no one would ever see them again—but either way, they had to go.

“Tony,” Loki murmured, drawing the man's focus back to him. “We shouldn't make Rogers wait.” Tony frowned, glancing back at Banner, who was now ignoring the both of them in a pretense of working, but then he relented.

“Right,” he sighed. “Don't want the old man to get even older, huh?”
Conscious Nightmares

"I want to face you, erase you.
I need to feel my inner force.
You are a fighter and you’re fearless.
Tonight we fight without remorse...
Your fists are bleeding but you’re reckless.
This is the place we need to be- we’re fighters.

I want to crush you and grind you,
I want to put you into rage.
My veins are pulsing like an engine,
By now I run on adrenaline."

-Fighters by Voicians-

“Finish what you’re working on. We’re going out,” Pepper announced as she entered the lab, her voice carrying over the hiss of flame. Loki and Tony looked up in surprise, and at the sight of Pepper—dressed in a flowing blue dress with her hair freshly styled—the engineer frowned and turned off the welding torch. He lifted his visor as she reached the desk, but she didn't notice his baffled expression, too busy staring at the runes scrawled over every wall with an eyebrow raised.

“Pep, what are you doing here?” Tony asked, drawing her attention back to him.

“Exactly what I said: we’re going out. Put your toys away and let’s go.”

Tony made no move to take off his visor or welding gloves. “Go where?”

Pepper sighed in exasperation and gave him a look that said she thought he was being purposefully dense. “Out to dinner, Tony. You know, where you dress up nice and eat fancy food? Our table has already been reserved for seven.”

“'We're a bit busy right now.” Tony gestured at the disassembled weapon; Loki’s fingers were covered in a thick, tar-like paint, and he was meticulously painting symbols onto the interior of the steel casing. Two of the pieces that the god had already painted were half-welded together, beginning to resemble a miniaturized rocket.

His excuse was dismissed with the wave of a hand. “You say that every time, which is why I won't take ‘no’ for an answer.” She then turned to Loki and grimaced at the sight; the god, like Tony, was filthy, and the bottom of his long hair was clumped with paint while his arms were smeared with it. “We can leave after the two of you take a shower and look presentable.”

“We don’t have time to go out to eat,” Tony resisted, glancing at Loki for support, but to his disbelief, the god was nodding along with Pep's silly plan.

“You haven’t taken a break all day. We’d need to stop soon anyway,” Loki explained when he noticed the man's displeasure. Then the god’s hand were suddenly clean, and he started cleaning up the desk, ignoring Tony's protest just as Pepper was. The man couldn't help but feel betrayed.

There were only six months left until Thanos brought death and ruin to their doorstep, and as the end approached, it became harder and harder for Tony to relax. There were times that he tried, when he
just could not physically or mentally handle the pace demanded, but he was spurred on by worry and fear. It didn't help that Fury kept piling tasks onto him: make weapons, oversee production, provide secure transportation, teach militaries how to use the weapons—the list went on.

“Then we can grab a quick bite,” Tony said, unwilling to back down. “We don’t need to go to some fancy restaurant.”

“You say that, but when was the last time you actually stopped to eat?” Pepper asked pointedly. Her question was met with silence; Tony was unwilling to admit that the last time he ate something was yesterday. “It's okay to take time to care of yourself, and we'll only be gone for two hours. As soon as you two put something nice on, we can head out. I have a car waiting for us outside.”

“Car?” Loki and Tony asked simultaneously, and Pepper sighed again.

“Yes, a car. We’re driving to the restaurant like normal people. You two freak people out when you randomly show up places.” Their looks of distaste remained unchanged, and she frowned. “I expected that reaction from Loki, but really Tony? You love driving around.”

She wasn’t wrong; Tony adored cruising around in his sports cars, but it had been months since he last did that. It had been just as long since he had driven for any other reason, as he often employed the far more convenient Loki Express. If teleportation wasn't an option, he'd fly in the suit or get picked up by a quinjet. Nothing as time consuming as a car. But Tony knew that even if he complained about Pep's chosen mode of transportation, she'd just ignore whatever point he made. She was dead set on making them leave the lab.

Making one last stand, Tony asked, “Do we really have to do this?”

Pepper nodded immediately. “Yes, you do.” Tony's shoulders scrunched in defeat, and she smiled, clapping him on the arm. “Stop moping. You'll be fine. Now hurry up or we'll miss our reservation.”

Giving in, Tony checked that their project was secure before walking upstairs with Loki at his side. Before they split, the man petulantly asked, “Do you think she’ll get mad if I bring a tablet with me and work on some schematics?”

“I doubt she’d let you keep it with you if you did bring one,” Loki said matter-of-factly, and then his expression lightened. “If we have to take a break, try to enjoy it. You’ve earned one.”

“Yeah…” Tony murmured, unconvinced, but Loki had already moved towards his room, leaving the man with his doubts. He ran his hand through his hair, scowling when his fingers got caught in greasy knots, and turned to enter his bedroom. He beelined to the shower where he tried to scrub off the accumulated grime, turning the water that pooled at his feet dark gray. When the water finally ran clear and he began to feel human again, Tony reluctantly turned off the warm spray and dried himself off. Then he moved towards the sink, but when he caught sight of his reflection, he paused.

The past half-year hadn't been an easy one, and it showed. The face looking back at him, worn down by stress, seemed as if it belonged to a stranger. It was too pale and gaunt, and his once immaculate Van Dyke had grown scraggly. His hair was long and uneven, the stringy wet strands plastered to his forehead, and dark marks had formed under his eyes. The man in the mirror resembled a recovering drug addict more than it did the affluent Tony Stark, and yet no one could tell him to stop and take a breather because they too were busy. Loki struggled right beside Tony, working when he was and working when he wasn't. Together, they were practically one entity—the beating heart of the lab that tried to design a way to defend the entire planet.

Tony sighed and did his best to recover his image; he trimmed his facial hair and dried his hair,
running gel trough it to disguise the uneven locks. Then he returned to his room and put on his nicest suit, smoothing down the fabric and straightening his tie. His efforts didn’t remove the evidence of long days spent cooped up in the lab, nor the proof of many restless nights, but it made him look a bit less like a stranger.

Tony left his room and went to rejoin Loki and Pepper. He could hear them talking down the hall, and when he entered the living room, their conversation ceased as they glanced towards him. Tony was surprised to see that Loki was also wearing a tuxedo—an actual, normal tuxedo, with an emerald tie, dress shoes, and frivolous handkerchief. “Don’t you look dapper,” he commented as he crossed the room. “When did you get one of those?”

“A few weeks ago. Pepper kindly offered her assistance in picking one out for me.” Loki reached up to adjust his tie. Tony found it amusing that the god felt the need to fiddle with a tux, but if you stuck him in forty pounds of Asgardian armor, he was as happy as a clam.

“Are you ready to go, Tony?” Pepper asked as she looked him up and down, nodding with approval.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” Pep’s face fell at his tone, and the man felt a jolt of guilt; he hastily plastered a grin on his face and finally she said, “We’re going to Per Se, and both of you are going to act like you’re excited to finally get out of the basement.”

“There was a tense moment of silence where Pepper studied his face, not buying into his falsetto. Tony tried to make his smile more real—for her sake—and finally she said, “We’re going to Per Se, and both of you are going to act like you’re excited to finally get out of the basement.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Tony saluted, and to his relief, Pepper smiled again. They walked outside to where Ricardo was waiting with the car, and Pep went around to the passenger seat while Tony slid into the back. Loki was not as cordial about getting in. He hesitated, a grimace onto his face, and only suffered to sit next to Tony when Pepper noticed the delay.

As they pulled out of the driveway and Loki glared out the window, Tony said, “I can’t say I understand why you hate cars so much.”

“Cars are miserable, inefficient creations,” the god replied, glancing over at him. “I imagine it is much like why you don’t enjoy riding horses.”

“Right, because horses are the epitome of efficiency. But I guess anything seems pointless when you can teleport there in seconds.” Tony was about to ask why Asgard didn’t build teleportation devices for the non-mages and be done with horses when he noticed Ricardo’s curious glance in the rearview mirror. Realizing that he had an audience, Tony closed his mouth; while Loki’s magic was common knowledge, the fact that he came from Asgard was not. Fury was adamant that the existence of extraterrestrial lifeforms was kept quiet until they had no other choice, as they never knew who might use the information to cause a scene.

Redirecting the conversation, Tony asked, “How has work been treating you, Pep?”

“It’s been a hectic couple of months, but Stark Industries is thriving,” she answered, happy to make small talk. “We’ve installed four new arc reactors in the last three months, and there’s a whole list of companies asking for them. The Stark phones have also been a big hit, and we’re working on expanding that branch. To introduce our new line of consumer holographics, we’re donating a hundred systems to local schools.”

“I’m glad you’re not feeling overwhelmed.” Tony remembered how hard of a time she had managing the multinational corporation right after he screwed it over. “You’re doing better with the company
than anyone else did. But I don't know how you can attend so much meetings. I hated meetings.”

“And that's why you aren't the CEO,” Pepper teased. “Though with how much you're working now, it's clear you actually can apply yourself. I had started to think you were incapable of being serious.”

“Yeah, well... It's a bit different now, huh? Not quite the same as skipping out on a finance report,” Tony said vaguely; his eyes darted up to Ricardo, who was professionally pretending that he didn't hear them talking. Yet there was no way he could miss that they were hiding something, as the other occupants of the car tensed.

There was an awkwardly long silence before Loki spoke up. “It's different because now have me keeping you on task. I am not quite as lenient as Miss Potts.”

Pepper laughed, shattering the solemn atmosphere that had fallen on them. “You're definitely better at babysitting him than I was. But that's because he likes you.”

“Aww, Pep, you know I like you too.” Tony grinned. “Besides, I thought you enjoyed hounding me down to do paperwork, and who could forget all the fun you had changing out my arc reactor? Admit it: I made your life more interesting.”

“My life was interesting enough without nearly having heart-attacks because of you, Tony,” Pepper replied, and then she quieted as the car pulled over to the curb. Tony glanced out the window at the crowded restaurant and fought the desire to turn back. Loki didn't waste anytime in jumping out of the back while Ricardo got out to open the door for Pepper, and Tony chuckled as he followed the god.

The three friends headed into the building as Ricardo drove away from the curb, and Tony made sure to keep an amiable expression on his face. The table Pepper had reserved for them was located in a secluded part of the restaurant, and after the waiter was out of earshot, they were able to speak freely.

“How are preparations coming along?” Pepper asked quietly. “I noticed the garage is filled with machines. Is that everything you've been working on?”

“That's just the more recent stuff,” Tony replied after double-checking that there was no one listening. “Most of the designs were too complex for me to build alone so I sent them to SHIELD, and they have development teams working on them. It's the stuff I have to run trial tests on or have Loki enhance that's in the garage now.”

“Are you sure it's safe to keep those in the house? What if something explodes or there's another break in? It has happened before, and now it's even more risky.”

“Don't worry, I have that part under control,” Loki said as he disinterestedly flipped through the short menu. “There are wards throughout the lab to contain any explosions, and anyone foolish enough to attempt entry will find themselves thoroughly trapped. The garage is more secure than anything SHIELD can offer.”

Approaching footsteps made them go quiet, and it wasn't until they had ordered their food that Pepper said, “So will you have everything ready in time? Or...”

“I don't know,” Tony replied honestly. “We're making a lot of progress at the pace we're going, but it just isn't enough. Thanos has... he has more ships than you can even imagine, Pep. We'll need everything we have to stop him.”

“I worry about you two sometimes,” Pepper admitted. “Actually, I worry about you a lot. Both of
you are terrible about looking after yourselves, and if the stakes weren't so high, I'd lock you both out of the lab. What you're doing isn't healthy. No one should have to operate under that stress.”

“No one else can do what we do,” Loki stated as if to reassure her. “SHIELD knows that, and so do we. Our well-being is but a minor concern.”

Pepper just shook her head sadly. “It shouldn't have to be.”

Pensive silence overcame their table, and a few minutes later, a waiter delivered their drinks. Then as Pepper sipped at her wine, she said, “We shouldn't talk about that now. This is your break. Kick back and relax.”

“I think that's a bit easier said than done,” Tony muttered, but he did his best to take her advice.

As the night wore on, they didn't mention the impending invasion again. And with each additional glass of wine, Tony felt his mind calm and his muscles relax. His smiles became natural and his laughs unfeigned. The stress that constantly weighed on him lifted, and for a short while, he didn't feel like he was pushing his limits. By his side, Loki was the same; the angry lines around the god's mouth and eyes disappeared, and he appeared to be genuinely enjoying himself. And while Tony hated the thought of wasting time, he had to admit that he didn't regret coming. It had been far too long since he got to just sit down and talk to Pepper, and it felt nice to be outside of the lab. Maybe he really did need a break. His thoughts had started to stagnate, but now he felt rejuvenated. When dinner was over and they had to return home, he felt like he'd be ready, armed with a fresh mind and a full stomach.

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Rage boiled beneath Loki's skin, the force of which causing his clenched fists to quiver and his lips to curl. The din of the room faded, and its occupants faltered in their work, their eyes locked on to the wrathful god. As Loki took another step forwards, thick leather cloak swishing around his legs and metal ornaments chiming in the otherwise hushed bridge, the gathered agents unconsciously shied away. Yet there was one person in the room who was unbowed by Loki's display of aggression—the very person he sought to intimidate. Director Fury spared the god no attention, regaling him only with the view of a black eyepatch, and Loki bristled at the insolence.

“Your obstinence will doom us all,” he hissed, ascending the steps to the director’s metaphorical throne.

Fury refused to face the accusation head on and continued to analyze reports on his screens while. “You can threaten me all you want. My decision won't change.”

Loki’s teeth ground against each other, and bolts of green magic fled his fingertips. His display further unnerved the people around him, and all eyes were on him. He didn’t care. Let them watch. He had nothing to hide; he was right. “What reasons have you to deny me? For years I have been on Midgard, and in that time I have done nothing to betray the trust of your people. I am no more a threat than any of your agents.”

Finally the director turned to look at the god, but his eyes were cold. “You want to know why I won't let you have it? This is why. You're unstable and unpredictable, and when something happens that you don’t like, you lash out. Do you know how much work we’ve had to do to cover up your temper tantrums these past few months? I will not entrust the Tesseract to a psychopath.”

‘Psychopath.’ Monster. The word hung in the air, ringing in Loki’s ears, and for a split moment, his anger directed inwards. But then he registered the other words, and it spiraled outwards with even
greater force than before. It was not his fault that Midgard was run by buffoons or that it took weeks for them to grant him permission to protect their cities. He sacrificed himself for strangers—forsaking pleasure and sustenance to meet their absurd demands—and this was how his kindness got repaid?

“I am doing everything I can to defend this planet against the greatest evil known to the Nine Realms. If Thanos kills us all, you will be the one at fault.”

Glowering at the god, Fury countered, “And is it my fault that you did not listen to my orders and afford us more time? Or that you insist upon wasting the time of everyone here?”

“Grant me access to the Tesseract, and it will save us more time than that which I now spend correcting your error. A mere hour with it would divulge more information to me than an entire month of collaborating with Doctor Banner.”

“That Doctor Banner is disobeying my direct order and sharing information with you is enough of a security breach. You can make do with that you are given. I won't give you the Tesseract.”

Then Fury returned to his duties, pointedly ignoring Loki. Unsatisfied, the god continued to rage at the director’s back. “What I am given utilizes but a fraction of the Tesseract’s power! I could harness it in ways you cannot even fathom, yet your ignorance blinds you!”

Loki’s raving was met with silence, and any farther arguments he had seethed noislessly within his lungs. He glared at Fury and anyone who dared look his way, challenging them to speak up. No one did. It quickly became apparent that he had overstayed his welcome, so Loki spat, “This isn’t finished,” before teleporting away.

He appeared in a tempest of green on the roof of Stark Tower, and with wrath coursing through his veins, his magic reacted in turn; lashing tendrils of acidic light dripped from his skin, echoing the cacophony in his mind. Coupled with Loki’s stress and exhaustion, the repeated denials—so utterly foolish that the god could hardly fathom Fury’s reasoning—snapped something in his mind, unleashing a beast that he could not contain. It took everything Loki had to not send Tony’s beloved tower crashing down around him.

Gallingly, the penthouse was not empty like Loki had been expecting. Barton was sitting on one of the couches, bow in his lap and sandpaper in his hand. He looked up upon hearing the terrace door open and greeted, “Hey, Loki, how are...” The archer trailed off when he noticed the apoplectic sparks surrounding the god. “Let me guess: you had a shouting match with Fury again?”

Not bothering to deign the human with a reply, Loki stalked through the living room towards his private quarters. He wrenched open his bedroom door, and the resulting slam rattled the walls and caused the thick wood to creak. Tony outfitted his room with a reinforced door for that very purpose, as Loki had broken two in half already. The god breathed in deeply, attempting to calm himself, but peace of mind eluded him.

With a growl, Loki began to pace the length of his room. While there was work to be done, he was too agitated to work alone in the labs. Without Tony—who was installing anti-spacecraft defenses and would be gone for another week—the expansive design rooms lacked the same calm, and without a doubt, something would get destroyed if the god went down there now.

At the same time, he knew he could not waste time pacing. Thanos was coming to kill them all. Loki had to prepare, but because of Fury’s irrational claims—that Loki was a monster; that he was unstable — the god could only do so much. He could create a magnificent weapon, one unrivaled by any other in the Nine Realms, and could save them. But he was denied, regardless of that fact that the director’s claims were beyond ridiculous; they were heretical, spineless fabrications.
The tenuous grasp Loki had on his temper slipped, and before common sense stopped him, he flung a burst of magic at the wall; plaster smashed inwards, and chunks fell to the ground as dust choked the air. On the bed, Choronzon leapt up in surprise, arching his spine and hissing.

“Sir, might I remind you that Tony asked for you to not cause damage to the building,” Jarvis chimed in, and while the god strove to control himself, the upheaval created by his magic was not so easily quelled. As his power coruscated, Loki decided that if it wanted to be used, then he'd use it. Forcing himself to a halt, he dragged a stone basin from the air. It was far smaller than the ones in the weapon vault, but it would work all the same. He set it carefully on the floor and went to his shelves, where he grabbed glass vials full of dried plants and pure metals. Ingredients assembled, Loki returned to the basin and sat on the floor.

The spell was fresh in Loki's mind, and he began to pour the contents of the containers into the stone bowl. First he filled the basin nearly to the brim with purified water, and then he added the plants: aconite, belladonna, silverbush, and wormwood. He ran a glowing finger through the mixture in a circular motion, and when he pulled his hand back, the water continued to churn. Uncapping a bottle of mercury, Loki poured the living silver into the middle of the small whirlpool, and veins of metal ran through the bowl. Then the god began the incantation, and within the confines of stone, the solution started to heave. There was a sizzling noise as the dried plant shriveled into ash and blended with the quicksilver, swirling beneath shifting water vapor.

Magic poured from Loki's hands as he gripped the sides of the bowl, and within the embrace of Yggdrasil, the god at last felt calmness descend upon him. Even when the revolving liquid started changing color, becoming pitch black with bright glimmers of distant galaxies, and he could feel the sickening aura of the Mad Titan brush against his conscience, Loki remained enthralled.

But then he tried to latch onto Thanos's location, and his magic screeched in resistance. The spell backfired, exploding outwards from the basin and splattering across Loki and the walls of his room. Loose energy ricocheted back into his palms, and the god yanked them away from the storm he had created. His steady cadence died with a hiss, causing the magic to calm. The basin was left empty of both liquid and stars.

Loki's anxiety redoubled, and with it came his ire. He slashed his hand through the air, vanishing the contents of the spell. Six times now he has tried to cast a scrying spell. It didn't matter that Loki had done everything right; the Mad Titan was too far away. No magic Loki could muster was enough to tie a spell that far from Yggdrasil. What he needed was the Tesseract. Only then would he have enough power to see the farthest cosmos.

Instead of calming the god, the botched attempt pushed him closer to the edge, and he ineffectually wished that Tony was there; when all else failed, the man’s presence was always enough to subdue the rioting in his mind and quell the rage. But Tony was busy, and Loki refused to bother him for such an inane reason. So, with his magic crawling like a living thing beneath his skin, the god teleported from the tower while anger contorted his form. Scales and spikes sprouted from his flesh, twisting and piercing, and his nails became wicked talons. Scapulae jutted outwards, allowing a new set of bones to spring from his back, connected by leathery tissue. Spine elongating, the jagged tip of his tail finished forming just he appeared atop the Washington Monument.

Loki gripped the stone with his claws, winding himself around it and flaring his wings. Beneath him, people screamed, but Loki drowned it out with a vehement bellow. Continuing to roar, releasing the anxiety bottled up within his chest, the god unwound himself from the obelisk and launched into the air. The wind caught in his wings, and Loki banked towards thin pillars of smoke in the distance. Rogers had left to handle a minor security threat hours ago, and as far as Loki knew, the situation had yet to be resolved. Whoever was assaulting the city, the god would make them rue ever being
The tablet screen blurred before Tony's eyes. He squinted at his blueprints as he flopped over the armrest of the couch, but no matter which way he turned the images, they still didn't make sense. That was what he got for working on the design between restless tossing and turning and tormented dreams, he supposed. But he still needed them, and so he shifted again as if holding the tablet above his head would make it easier to understand.

Loki smacked his knee and absently commanded, “Stop squirming.” The god readjusted his book on top of the man's legs; Tony was sprawled out across the entire couch, including Loki, and every time he moved, it made the god accidentally scrawl a line across the pages. Tony wasn't quite sure what Loki was working on. It had sounded like a shielding spell or something when he had asked, but magic jargon made less sense right now than it normally did.

“You could always get up,” Tony grumbled, shifting again as the armrest began to hurt his neck. He peered closely at the tablet, its surface practically touching his nose; was that line supposed to be there, or— oh. Suddenly the convoluted mess of squiggles made sense. He had drawn the wiring on the wrong layer.

“I can't. You're sitting on me.” Loki scribbled something in the book, only to stab his pen through the thin pages when Tony shifted for a third time. For a second Loki's face was twisted by a hideous scowl, and Tony froze, but then the expression fell back into mere annoyance.

Still, Loki took his pen and jabbed it into Tony's leg, and the man winced. “Yeesh, princess You know, you could always make me move.” Tony rubbed his smarting thigh. Despite his words, the god hadn't actually poked him that hard, especially considering what Loki was capable of. His outbursts of rage had already claimed quite a few victims, from doors to chairs to one unfortunate car. Tony's thigh was only a minor casualty.

“Will you two be quiet over there?” Barton groaned from the other side of room. The archer was slouched similarly to Tony in his own armchair, but instead of holding a tablet, he was pressing an icepack to his forehead with one hand and supporting a mission briefing in the other. “You sound like an old married couple.”

“Clint, don't encourage them,” Natasha said; she had commandeered an entire couch to herself and was occupied reading her own copy of the briefing. There were bruises lining her arms and a particularly nasty looking one on her cheek, though unlike Barton's, they were days old and yellowing.

Fury had been working the two agents to the bone, sending them on long missions one after another. The details of their outings were kept hushed, but Tony knew that SHIELD had them spying on key terrorist organizations that may hamper the war effort. And if they weren't busy risking their lives, then they were sent in to ease the political scene. Any down time they had they spent in the tower, where they caught up on reports and cleaned their supplies for the next round.

“Who sounds like a married couple now, Clint?” Tony teased as he finally settled into a comfortable position and started correcting his blueprints. With a few backtracks and layer splits, he at last had something that looked vaguely like a force field projector.

From his lonesome chair across the room, Bruce spoke up, “You both do, and it’s obnoxious.” The physicist had his is laptop—though Tony tried to convert him to the wonders of tablets, Bruce remained loyal to the old clunker—resting on his knees and had been concentrated on his
calculations until their banter vexed him.

Everyone was busy with something or another, most of which required high amounts of focus. That, of course, meant that Tony was obligated to keep talking. “You're just jealous you haven't found your bickering partner yet. That’s okay, Rogers is the same. You can keep each other company when he gets here.”

“Tony, I think it'd be in your best interest to shut up,” Loki said, though the god looked more amused than not. Still, Tony groused half-heartedly before going quiet, redirecting his energy towards repairing the errors in his latest machine.

The gathered Avengers worked in varying degrees of exhaustion with 'I feel like I'm on the verge of passing out' on the more mild end of the spectrum. Tony himself began to drift off a few times despite his best efforts, but flashing images of spaceships beneath his eyelids startled him awake each time. He’d blink rapidly to chase the sleep away and returned to his blueprints only to repeat the same process in a few minutes.

Rogers broke the cycle when he arrived at the tower thirty minutes later, the ding of the elevator breaking the hush that had enveloped the room. He trudged into the penthouse covered in sweat and grime, his shield clasped loosely in one hand, and paused when he found five pairs of eyes staring back at him.

“I wasn’t aware we were having a party,” Rogers said, overcoming his surprise and walking towards them. He set his shield up against the wall then looked around for a place to sit, but each couch was full. When Natasha didn’t seem intent on freeing up the second half of her couch—currently covered in dismantled guns—the captain sighed and redirected himself to the kitchen. “Is there any food leftover in here?”

“Feel free to make something,” Tony said, roused by the thought of food. He half-lifted himself from the couch (much to Loki’s displeasure) to watch Rogers search the fridge. “I'm starving.”

But the fridge was empty and so were the cabinets. Exasperated, Rogers asked, “When was the last time you stocked your kitchen?” Tony didn’t answer; once it became apparent that the soldier wasn’t going to procure food anytime soon, he lost interest and got back to work. Rogers was not so quick to abandon his plan, and he pulled a cellphone from his pocket as he headed back towards them.

“I'm ordering pizza. Who's hungry?”

Everyone immediately raised a hand, and Rogers dialed the local pizza parlor. The Avengers listened in as he made their order, but the captain had their preferences memorized down to the extra peppers on Romanov’s pizza. Then he asked for their order to be expedited (it was one of the few times Captain America took advantage of his celebrity status) and ended the call. To the room full of hungry superheroes, he announced, “The pizza should arrive in forty-five minutes.”

This time when Rogers approached the couches, Romanov was feeling far more agreeable and relocated her arsenal to make room. The soldier gratefully took the opening and dropped to the cushion with a groan. Tony, once again distracted from his blueprints, snickered.

“You sound like you're a hundred when you do that, old man” he said, and to his pleasure, Rogers took the bait.

“So says the man who looks older than I do,” the soldier countered, and then he gestured to Loki, who was ignoring them in favor of his book. “Besides, isn’t he like ten times older than I am? I don’t hear you calling him an old man.”
Tony chuckled. “Yeah, well, I don’t really want to wake up with my eyebrows missing or something.”

“You’d be missing more than just your eyebrows,” Loki said flatly.

“See?” Tony exclaimed. “He’s scary. When he makes threats, I believe them. You, on the other hand, are perfectly harmless.”

Barton was apparently finished with the packet he had been reading, because it set it down on the table and joined in the conversation. “It’s unfair that you look younger than everyone but are over a thousand years old,” he complained to Loki. “I’m already getting gray hair, and I’m only thirty-eight.”

“That’s because proportionally I am younger. It is not my fault your species is so short lived.”

“What about Tony?” Barton asked, kicking his feet up onto the coffee table. “He’s the oldest besides Cap. Are you saying-”

Realizing that Barton’s comment was heading towards a sensitive topic, Tony hastily cut him off. “Dude, get your shoes off my table. They’re filthy, and we’re going to place the pizza there in a bit.”

Thankfully, Barton was too tired to notice he was being redirected and huffed, “It's not like we'd set the pizza slices straight on the table.” At Tony's side, Loki's pen began to move again, but a frown had found it's way on the god’s face. Tony sighed in defeat—nine months later, and it was still a sore subject—and Barton luckily misunderstood. “Fine, I'll move my feet.” He slipped his boots to the floor and left chunks of dried mud in his wake. “I just wish the pizza would get here sooner. I'm famished.”

“Tell me about it,” Tony said, replacing his mixed emotions with displeasure at the fact that his stomach felt like it was imploding.

Thankfully, the pizza arrived on time, and a receptionist from the ground floor delivered it to the penthouse. The heavenly sent of tomato sauce and grease permeated the air, and the Avengers abandoned their projects to stare at the ten boxes being set on the table.

“Thank you for bringing this up for us,” Rogers said to the secretary, who smiled at the soldier before returning downstairs.

Tony found his portion of the order quickly and set about to devouring his box of pizza. He barely even tasted the first three slices and didn't start to feel satiated until the sixth; he honestly could not remember the last time he ate more than just an energy bar or sandwich. The others shared his enthusiasm, and they dug in voraciously. Loki had started on his second box of pizza before Tony was halfway through one, and Rogers was tying the god in slices consumed.

Then there was a meow from down the hall, and Coro darted into the room, pupils blown wide. The cat's eyes locked onto the food, and he jumped onto Loki's lap. After sniffing the pizza, he walked into the box and began licking at the sauce. “Uh, Loki, I don’t think that’s sanitary,” Barton said around a mouthful of food. Loki shrugged and moved the cat off the cardboard before tearing off a piece of bread for the feline to nibble on.

“It matters not. He likes it,” the god replied, and as they ate, he continued to slip Coro morsels of food. Before long, they had managed to get through all ten pizzas with any extras going to the bottomless pits that were Steve and Loki. The sun had long since set outside, and Tony felt bogged down by the sluggish, post-meal feeling.
He flopped back down into a lying position, half of his chest on Loki's legs while the tablet rested against the armrest, and returned to his blueprints. But the exhaustion he endeavored to avoid was persistent, and when his eyes closed, he couldn't find the energy to open them again.

Tony sunk seamlessly into a dream; one moment he was on the couch, and the next he was locked in the Iron Man suit, flying straight into the sky. He rose higher and higher, going far beyond where he had ever gone before, and above him, massive ships loomed. Their wide hulls and expansive wings blotted out the stars as far as the eye could see, casting the world in darkness. Missiles rained down on Tony, crushing the suit and battering his body, but even as red lights blared in the HUD—warning of imminent system failure—he kept going. He ignored to spaceships crowding him, intent upon only one thing: Thanos.

The Mad Titan's throne floated at the epicenter, cast in the light of warships. Shimmering scarlet oozed from the seat of ivory bones, and the congealing blood coated Thanos's arms and legs. Yet the titan sat insouciant, his head resting on his palm as he watched Tony's advent with hollow eyes. Acute fear threatened to paralyze Tony, but the hatred searing through his veins kept him moving forwards. He landed harshly at the base of the asteroid, crunching stone beneath his mangled boots. Silence stretched around him as the enemy ceased firing, and the only noise was the pounding of Tony's footsteps as he approached Thanos's throne. But when he reached the steps, the expected clank did not sound, replaced instead by a wet snapping.

Under the Mad Titan's merciless gaze, Tony tilted his head to stare in horror at the ground; where there was once rock there was now a ledge built of flesh and blood—the torn remains of his friends: Pepper, Steve, Rhodey, Bruce. Nausea churned Tony's stomach, and he could taste bile on the back of his tongue. With jerky steps, he forced himself to keep going, trying not to think about what—who—he was stepping on as he approached the weeping throne.

At last the stairs gave way to blood soaked stone, and the Mad Titan towered before Tony. But even as Iron Man raised his hand, repulsors charging to full power, Thanos didn't move; he didn't even blink as Tony screamed in rage, letting loose the blast of energy. The man's aim was true, but with the flick of a wrist, Thanos deflected the attack into the dark nothingness. Terror once again consumed Tony, but there was no going back.

His glowing palm was extinguished as an invisible force seized the suit. The metal crunched inwards, crushing Tony's chest and expelling the air from his lungs. He cried out soundlessly and tried to move, but his limbs were trapped. Were it not for the rigid grip holding his body upright, he would have fallen to the ground.

"Your courage is wasted, mortal. You should have fled when I gave you the chance," Thanos said with a voice like knives, piercing the air itself to tear through Tony's ears and cause blood to dribble down his neck. Then the pressure on Tony's chest increased, and black dots danced across his eyes.

For a moment, Tony thought that this was it: he would die here, unable to avenge a single one of his friends. It was the end; Thanos was unstoppable. The Mad Titan was going to win.

But just as abruptly as the pressure appeared, it vanished, and Tony collapsed, gasping desperately. Oxygen filled his aching lungs, and once the dark haze lifted, he dragged himself to unsteady feet.

"I will kill you," he swore, tears pricking at his eyes. His hand raised, its soft blue light a stark contrast to the bleeding red. "Never again will you take the life of someone I love."

A wicked grin split Thanos's face, and the sudden display of emotion sent a trill of fear down Tony's spine. "Someone you love?" the titan quoted tauntingly. "Of course not—because I already have. Every last one of them I've killed. You have-"
“Shut up!” Tony shrieked, firing at Thanos again and again and again. The titan let the blasts fall upon him, yet even when they struck his chest and head, he remained unmoved. He did not flinch nor lift a hand in opposition, and it wasn't until Iron Man's suit ran out of power that the attacks stopped. Tony's body shook as he breathed in shuddering, shallow pants, and at the sight of Thanos—sitting serenely upon his fetid throne without a scratch on him—the man unconsciously stepped back.

“You have no one left,” Thanos finished, as if Tony hadn't just tried—and failed horribly—to murder him. “Everyone you have ever loved, Tony Stark, is dead. Who else is there left to kill?”

Tony forced himself to not turn and look back at the stair steps composed of mutilated remains, and instead he clung to the last of his hope and cried, “Loki and I will stop you!” There had to be a way to stop the Mad Titan; as long as Tony and Loki were alive, they could do something.

“You mean the little godling?” Thanos asked, once bored eyes now alight with madness. The titan grabbed something from the crown of the throne and threw it to the soiled ground. Dented and mangled, Loki's helmet collided with Tony's foot, and the man stared at it in dread. Though the dull metal had picked up another layer of coagulating blood, there was no doubt in Tony's mind that the russet brown stains underneath belonged to his dearest friend. “He can't help you anymore.”

No. It couldn't be true. “What have you done to Loki?” Tony demanded, his voice rising in panic. No no . “Give him back to me!”

It shouldn't have been possible, but Thanos's grin grew wider, like a chasm in his face that revealed naught but insanity and depravity. “You want him back?” Thanos said, his voice dripping atrocity, and Tony cravenly wanted to say 'no'. He didn't want to see the god—to know what had happened to him. He didn't . “Very well.”

Where there was moments ago empty space was now a body, broken and lifeless, splayed at the foot of the Mad Titan's throne. Soulless green eyes stared into the marred sky, and blood trickled from the corners of a mouth parted in mid-scream. Tony took a stumbling step back, but he could not avert his eyes from the gaping wound that nearly split the god in two or the unnatural twisting of his limbs. Nothing obstructed the view of Loki's chest, still in deceptive serenity, or the tortured expression on his face, forever preserved in death.

The horrific sight burned through Tony's eyes and mind, breaking his very spirit. He screamed in unbridled anguish, the cry tearing though his throat and echoing off the distant warships, and fell to his knees. The sting of splitting skin was drowned out by the desperation clambering from his throat, and with quivering hands, Tony reached out towards Loki's broken, desecrated body. Dead eyes devoured his hope.

Tony jolted awake, heart hammering within his chest, and nearly flung himself from the couch in his disorientation. The only thing that kept him steady was the hand clasping his shoulder, anchoring him as horrific images haunted him beyond the veil of sleep. Terror brimmed within his lungs, clawing for release, and the only thing that kept it locked away was the soft voice murmuring in his ear.

“Tony, calm down. Your enemies are not here.”

Willing his racing heart to calm, Tony took in Loki's face, tarnished only by worry; there was no blood or agony. The man latched onto reality, and the panic slowly began to fade. As it did, he became aware that he was still in the living room, and he focused on his surroundings in order to push the last dredges of his nightmare.
Someone had placed a blanket over him—now half-thrown to the floor in his panic—while he had slept using Loki's lap as an impromptu pillow. There was a book on the other side of the god, tossed haphazardly to the side with its pages bent. Across the room, Banner was illuminated by the soft glow of his laptop. The physicist was watching Tony in concern, and the man gave him a shaky smile before his eyes drifted over towards Romanov, who also studied him closely. Yet when he met her eyes, she bowed her head slightly and returned to her report, granting him privacy. The remaining person in the room was Barton, passed out in his chair. Rogers was nowhere to be seen.

Aware that he still had an audience, Tony forced his breathing to even out and his trembling limbs to settle. But the nightmare had ruined any chance of him falling back asleep, so he retrieved his tablet from the floor and sat up. Tony opened a file and quietly got to work, trying to pretend that nothing had happened. After a moment, he could feel worried eyes leave him, appeased by his facade.

Yet fear still gripped his heart: fear that what he had seen would one day become reality. As he worked through the night and early morning, Tony made sure that some part of him—a knee, an elbow, a shoulder—was brushing against Loki. He had to assure himself that the god was still alive and that he wasn't alone. They still had a chance. Thanos would not win.

I really liked the scene of Loki being Mr. Grumpy-pants on the Washington Monument, so I ended up drawing it. He doesn't look quite like I was imagining- I think Loki would be a lot more spiky and his top horns a lot longer -but it works.

Loki as a dragon

Larger version can be found on my DA [here](#).
Puppet to Heroism

"You're just a faker, no miracle maker.
Holy behavior won't make you a savior.
If we want a martyr we'll come and find you.
Come and find you.

Done before you started, you're dead in the water.
Walk on a farther out to sea, you're done before you started.
You're dead in the water."

-Dead in the Water by 10 Years

Loki was in the midst of reinventing a spell when he felt the first snap. The sensation, an abrupt splitting like a taut rope being cut, echoed through his pounding skull, and he froze. The pen in his hand cracked as his muscles tensed, and the two other Avengers in the room — Banner, who was working on his laptop with tired eyes and sipping tea to calm his anxious nerves, and Rogers, who was reading something SHIELD had sent while, for once, freshly showered and not in uniform — started at the sound. Taking note of the god's distress, they frowned, and Rogers tentatively asked, “Loki? Are you alright?”

The captain's question went unanswered. Loki lost himself in his mind, searching for the root of the thread that had broken. Then there was another snap, flashing out across the god’s mindscape, and accompanying it was a distant rumbling. Drawn to the sensation, Loki finally isolated the broken strands and scrambled to his feet with a curse.

“Loki, what-”

Heart racing, Loki rushed towards the terrace just as Jarvis began to sound an alarm; the runes protecting Manhattan had been destroyed. For an instant, the god was overwhelmed with mind-numbing terror. He thought that Thanos had arrived, regardless of the fact that they would have noticed the Mad Titan’s fleet before he got in range to attack. He thought that the invasion was upon them. But when he reached the glass panes and looked into the sky, there was neither cloud nor warship blotting out the sun. However, a siren continued to screech in his ears, and Rogers was futilely asking Jarvis for details that the AI could not supply. Loki stepped outside to distance himself from the blaring alarm, focusing in its place on the city below. The wind blew faint screams to his ears, and when he turned towards the noise, he saw smoke billowing into the blue.

Frowning, Loki tried to discern the cause. Was it just an accident, like a gas pipe exploding, or something more foul? He received the answer when another explosion sounded behind him, intermingling with the shrill whine of police cars. Loki whirled to stare at gushing flames while a third rune vanished with a jolt.

‘Definitely not an accident,’ he thought, his jaw clenched in irritation. He didn't have time for this… this idiocy. Thanos would arrive in three months, and there was still countless hours of work to be done. Yet some dullard presumed to attack mere blocks from the Avengers headquarters, taking their preoccupation as an invitation to set Loki’s progress back a week. The spells he had meticulously dispersed throughout the city to shield against aerial barrages were ruined, not designed to withstand direct damage, and the god’s core was all but spent.
But he couldn't stand idle while Manhattan was attacked, and with a snarl, Loki teleported to the second explosion. From a rooftop, he observed the pandemonium. Civilians scramble through the streets below, fleeing the clutch of flames. Many were wounded, either burned or cut from the blast, and people who had been on the sidewalk rushed to assist them. Then there was the eye of the storm; out of a nondescript van came black-cloaked men, armed with guns and grenades. They were the only ones calm amidst the chaos, and with cold precision, they raised their weapons to the crowd. People screamed, trying to find cover, but there was nowhere for them to run. Bullets rained down on them only to be intercepted by a wall of ice.

Loki's palms were shoved against the concrete, both to give birth to the shield and to keep him from toppling over. He breathed heavily, shaking away the creeping ache, and glanced back at the humans he was protecting. Some had paused in surprise at seeing him, but then recognition dawned and they began to shout in relief. A few tried to take pictures, and Loki scowled. “Get to somewhere safe,” he snapped, the gunfire against the ice suspiciously going quiet. “There's more than one group of attackers, and I can't defend you here.” In accordance with his words, Loki had to leap away from his shoddily built wall as a grenade collided with it. The explosion shook the ground and shattered his defenses, leaving them exposed once again.

Bullets whizzed by, and those that had stopped shrieked in terror. They finally listened to the god and fled, leaving Loki to face the men. Dredging up his magic, he summoned another wall, giving the civilians a safe retreat. Then as Loki leaned against the wall, one of the men shouted, “Come on out, Wizard! We are here to rebuild this country, and you will not stand in our way!”

Anger bubbled over Loki's weariness. They wanted to fight him? Then he would give them a fight.

Taking a deep breath, Loki flung himself into the air, gripped the top of the ice wall, and vaulted over. He landed behind the men who had been shooting at him, and without mercy he, slammed a fist into their heads. The roar of gun fire ceased as the men slumped forwards, one last moan coming from their lips. Loki was in motion before their guns hit the ground. Metal crunched beneath his fingers as he grabbed the hood of the van, and the man driving it screamed as Loki lifted the vehicle into the air and threw it against the burning building. Then the two remaining men were dispatched in the same way as the first, and the street went silent.

Fight over as soon as it started, Loki surveyed the area before teleporting back to Stark Tower. With his magic low, he held himself stiff to keep Steve from fussing over him. However, the captain was nowhere to be seen. The only one in the penthouse was Banner, anxiously looking out the window at the smoke and rushing police cars. Without turning towards Loki, the man said, “Rogers went to put on his armor.” His voice was tense, and Loki frowned; they had all been warned — both by Fury and Banner himself — that the man did not handle stress well, and as Thanos got closer, Banner became more and more unstable. He had yet to lose control, but everyone was aware that it wouldn’t take much to push him over the edge.

“Are you alright?” Loki asked cautiously. They didn’t have the energy to fight the Hulk right now, and — for Banner’s sake — it was best he didn’t lose himself. “I can get you out of here.”

But the man shook his head, wrenching his gaze from the menacing smoke. “I can keep him down... I think. You don’t have the magic to spare, right?” Despite Loki’s better judgment, he accepted Banner’s contention. The man was right that Loki would be hard pressed to teleport him far enough away from the city and still have enough for the return trip, and the man did have an awe-inspiring amount of control. But as Loki took the elevator down to Rogers’ floor, he had the feeling that he’d soon regret his decision.

When the metal doors slid open, Captain America was adjusting his gloves and reaching for his
shield. Loki checked that the soldier was ready to go and then stalked forwards to grab his arm. “I’ll take you to the front,” he said, and at Rogers’ nod, he brought them near the initial explosion. The area was now crawling with policemen that were surrounding two more groups of terrorists.

Rogers moved forwards to leap into the fray, but when he reached the edge of the roof, he glanced back; Loki hadn’t followed him. “Loki? Are you coming?”

The god blinked. “No, I… I’m going to lend my assistance elsewhere.” At least he would once he mustered enough energy to teleport from the roof. Rogers eyed him dubiously, but Loki ignored his concern. He started to channel a spell, but the soldier interrupted him.

“Wait, Loki.” Rogers stepped back towards him. “Shouldn’t you put on some armor?” He gestured to the sweats that the god had been running around in, now stained with blood and ash. Loki scowled down at himself, but there wasn’t anything to be done; he had to choose his spells wisely, and against such weak foes, armor was not a priority.

“It's fine,” he deflected, and then his head shot up when another gust of wind brought the sounds of terror to his ears. Not allowing Rogers’ good-intentions to get in his way, Loki yanked his magic forth and went towards the danger. He landed a block away from the clamor and jumped from the roof to run through the streets. Then he turned the corner only to come face to face with the barrel of a gun.

Loki skidded to a stop in surprise, but he was not overly concerned about the man threatening him. His attention was drawn to the five other men in black ski masks corralling people, viciously prodding them with guns. Their fingers were taut on the triggers, ready to fire at a single hint of resistance, and Loki had no doubt that if he fought back now, they would shoot into the crowd.

The gun brandished at the god's face pushed closer, and he made his decision. Loki skied back from the weapon, and the man stepped forwards confidently. “Where do you think you're going, pretty boy?” he asked, his voice rough and heavily accented. Loki didn't answer, acting as if fear had stilled his tongue. He held his hands up in surrender as he was pushed towards the cowering mass.

Glancing up at their approach, one of the other masked men asked, “What do we have here?”

The man with Loki grinned. “I found him running towards us. Maybe he thinks he's a hero.”

The second man laughed. “He's crazy, more like it. Doesn't even have shoes.”

With one last barbarous gesture, Loki was shoved towards the terrified civilians, and the guffawing men returned to their stations. Not recognizing who they had just brought into their fold, Loki was quickly forgotten about. However, the people at the god's back were not so ignorant. Whispers started up, and people stared blatantly at him, pointing him out to those around them. Loki assumed that they were intending to use their hostages as leverage to keep the police under control.

But they were arrogant, and as the murmuring behind Loki grew louder and more excited, they spared the crowd but a glance. The god was far more attentive, and he watched his quarry closely as he angled his head towards the person closest to him. “Tell everyone to run at my signal,” he said quietly, and then he waited patiently as the order ran through the gathering like wildfire.

It wasn't until the air of fright turned into one of tense anticipation that the terrorists closest to them realized that something was wrong. They lifted their guns higher and stepped closer, glancing
uncertainty at each other. “Hey, what’s going on here?” One of them—the man who had called Loki crazy—shouted, and the chattering behind the god abruptly ceased. “Answer me!”

Taking that as his cue, Loki took a step forwards, and all three guns whirled towards him. Unperturbed, the god kept moving forwards, drawing attention away from the vulnerable civilians. “Stop right there!” Another man shouted, but Loki didn't listen. “Stop or I'll shoot!” The god went another foot, and fingers started to press down on the triggers. That's when Loki reacted.

“Move!” he shouted, and that was all it took to break the dam; people scurried in every direction, and the terrorists hesitated in their surprise. They turned their weapons to the fleeing people then back to Loki, torn between maintaining control and defending themselves. The god, on the other hand, had no such qualms. He lunged into the fray and wrested the gun from the man in front of him. The weapon fired, bullet shattering the pavement at their feet, and then Loki gained the upper hand; he twisted the man's wrist while kicking him in the head, and with a cry the man fell. Loki had but a split second to fling himself out of the gunfire of the other two attackers with the pilfered gun in hand.

After a moment of fumbling with the weapon, Loki returned fire, mentally thanking Romanov for teaching him how to use firearms. The god's aim wasn't perfect (one man clutched at his shoulder and the other his stomach), but both had dropped their weapons in pain. Loki made to kick the guns away when there was a shout and a bullet smacked into his temple. The force of the blast made Loki’s head snap to the side, but then dented metal clattered to the ground and the god slowly turned to look at the man who shot him.

The commotion had drawn the other three terrorists back towards him, and they looked between him and the ricocheted bullet in bewilderment. Then the one holding the smoking gun backed up, leveling his weapon to fire again. Just as the bang sounded, Loki ran forwards. He dodged the spray of bullets and systematically struck down each assailant. Three bodies hit the ground, and Loki wiped the trickle of blood from his cheek.

Sirens were approaching his position, so the god discarded his purloined gun and headed in the opposite direction of the police. But where he wandered now, the city was clear. As he walked over shards of glass, the only terrorists he saw were those lying dead in the streets, and there was no one requiring assistance he could offer. Loki erroneously began to think that the attack was winding down to a close when a huge explosion—strong enough the he could feel the concussive aftermath from a few blocks away—went off behind him. He spun around to stare in horror and the target of the attack: Stark Tower.

The skyscraper gushed smoke through shattered windows, and the god was thankful that neither Tony nor Pepper were inside. Still, hundreds of people were, and Loki started running just as he heard a loud, misplaced roar. He frowned in confusion. The noise sounded as if it had come from the top of the tower...

Banner.

Cursing the fates, Loki gathered his magic and teleported to the penthouse. When he appeared, he was nearly beheaded by the granite and metal counter that was thrown in his direction. The god dropped to the ground, and when the dust cleared, he froze at the sight of the green creature tearing up Tony's living room. The Hulk was preoccupied with throwing a couch—Loki and Tony's favorite—through the opposite windows, and the god stared at him dumbly. Then as the giant reached for another chair, he noticed Loki standing there and stopped, his eyes narrowing.

Adrenaline racing, Loki scrambled to his feet and backed up towards the edge of the terrace. He ransacked his mind for everything he knew about Banner's alter ego, but the sparse information did
nothing to keep the Hulk from huffing angrily and moving closer. The giant's heavy footfall pounded a crater into the floor, and the tower shuddered violently. Though the building was strong, its foundation was already damaged by the bombs, and Loki had no desire to test the limit of its endurance.

In an effort to stop the Hulk, Loki ceased his retreat and held his hands up in surrender. He remembered what Tony had said about the Hulk: that maybe he wasn't just a mindless rage machine. As the mutated human advanced on the god, his steps shaking the ground beneath their feet, Loki hoped that Tony's idealism was right. “Banner, I don't know how much you understand, but you need to stop! You'll destroy the tower if you continue this!”

For a moment, it seemed like Loki's words reached Banner. The Hulk paused, tilting his head curiously, and the ground stopped quaking. But then there was another explosion from the city below, and the onset of screams broke the giant's control. He roared and barreled forwards, and Loki reacted by instinct. A spear of ice formed in his hands, and he hurled it into the Hulk's chest. With a bellow, the Hulk toppled backwards, and Loki's heart stopped. Had he accidentally wounded Banner?

But he underestimated the giant's power, and the monster shook off the blow and rose to his feet, flesh unbroken. Before the Hulk could recover, Loki darted forwards and grabbed his arms. It took more magic than Loki had expected to teleport both of them, and when they showed up in the middle of an evacuated street, he hunched over as pain shot from his core. While the god breathed raggedly, the Hulk regained his wits, and with a bewildered roar, he flung his arm outwards. Loki was sent flying, and his back crashed through the windshield of a van.

There was a person on either side of where Loki laid half-way through the glass, and they swore vehemently. Before Loki could move, there was a gun being held to his head. “You've got the be joking...” he muttered to himself; the Hulk had sent him flying into one of the black vans that were responsible for the assault on Manhattan. To make matters worse, said green monster was loping towards them, and the men Loki had been flung into screamed obnoxiously. They started firing at Hulk, enraging him further.

There was shifting from the back of the van, and someone shouted, “What's happening up there?” The back doors open, and Loki took that as his cue to leave. With the last of his energy, he extracted himself from the windshield and — right before Hulk's fist smashed into him — teleported to the top of a nearby building. As Loki crumpled forwards, holding his chest in pain, he vehemently cursed the terrorists for picking now of all times to attack. On a normal day, he'd be able to handle the fools with ease, but he had spent his magic inscribing runes throughout Tokyo that morning. And now, instead of recuperating, he had to deal with the Hulk.

The sounds of shouting and tearing metal echoed from below, and Loki dragged himself to his feet. Banner was his responsibility now that he may have inadvertently set him upon the unsuspecting population. The police could deal with terrorists, but the Hulk was surely beyond their firepower. Right now, he may even be beyond Loki's.

Cautiously approaching the edge of the roof, the god peered down to see the green giant clobber two gunmen that were frantically trying to defend themselves. Their bullets were nothing more than gnats to the Hulk, and he grabbed one of them by the ankle and smashed him into the other man. Both of them went flying into the wall. The van was lying farther up the road, ripped in half and mangled beyond repair. Only one of the men stayed standing, and Loki watched dispassionately as the Hulk chased the terrorist down and slammed him into the ground.

No enemies remained, and the giant whipped his head back and forth, searching for another target.
Loki ducked out of sight, hoping that the lull would cause Banner to revert back into a human. He didn't. The Hulk roared and took off towards the ongoing skirmishes, causing Loki to swear and chase after him. The god didn't have enough magic for even the simplest of spells, and so he jumped across rooftops while trying to stay out of sight.

Like a raging bilgesnipe, the giant tore through the street and all too quickly came upon a squadron of policemen in a stand-off with four terrorists. The black-cloaked men were holding a family hostage, and having the Hulk bear down on them did not ease the tension. Loki cursed again as his poorly conceived plan slipped out of control, and before he could do anything to intervene, the Hulk launched himself into the middle of the deadlock.

Civilian, criminal, and cop alike scattered in fear, and when the green giant tossed one of the terrorists into the wall, both armed parties started to shoot at him. The Hulk bellowed and shielded his face with his arm, shambling towards the retreating criminals. One of the hostages had fallen in between the monster and his quarry, and Loki prepared to jump from the roof, unsure if he'd be able to save the collapsed woman in time. The Hulk completely ignored her as he pursued the gunmen. Loki hesitated, unsure if it was a coincidence or something more, but watching the giant, the god realized that Banner wasn't attacking as blindly as he had initially thought. But that could easily change once the current threat was eliminated.

“Stop firing at him!” Loki shouted down at the gathered policemen, and the few who heard him looked up in surprise, their fingers wavering at the trigger. “Stop firing or you'll direct his attention towards you!” the god repeated with authority, and this time he was obeyed. The policemen backed down, urging those around them to do the same, and Loki leapt from the roof to land amongst them.

“You're Loki, right?” one of the men asked. At Loki's nod, he continued, “Is that big fellow over there?” the man gestured to the Hulk, who was tearing apart a building to get at the man who had thought to hide inside, “on our side?”

“More or less. Unless he starts attacking you, remain neutral.” The police around the god flinched as the Hulk finally found his prey and dragged him from the building; Loki's reassurances meant little to them when the giant—once again without a suitable target—lumbered towards them with an aggrieved scowl. They tensed and many started lifting their guns.

“Don't shoot,” Loki reiterated, keeping his tone artificially calm; the last thing he needed was someone panicking. “Listen to my orders. If you disobey, you'll have more than the Hulk to worry about. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir,” the police chorused, and they reluctantly lowered their guns as the Hulk drew closer. Loki desperately hoped that he wasn't mistaken and about to get all of them killed.

“Step back. Don't intervene unless I say so.” At their nods, he started to walk forwards with his head held high. Loki maintained that air of confidence even when the Hulk towered over him, squinting his eyes and panting heavily. The god stood firm, the only thing between the police men and the Hulk, and said, “The enemy is gone, Banner. I thank you for your assistance, but there is no one else here for you to fight.” His response was a disgruntled chuff, and the giant reared back to his full height. He stared at the police, making them shift anxiously, and then turned to survey the rest of the city. It was as Loki had said: the explosions had ceased, and the screams had all but faded. “The danger is over,” the god repeated, and the Hulk looked back down at him.

Suddenly the giant's hand shot towards Loki, and the bystanders shouted in worry, but the god forced himself to not flinch. 'Tony said to trust the Hulk,' he thought. 'So I will trust him.' He felt the Hulk's massive hand wrap around his chest, and he contained his panic as he was lifted from the ground. While Loki did not think the Hulk could kill him, getting slammed into the pavement would
undoubtedly be excruciating.

But the Hulk did not smash him. The giant lifted Loki closer to his face, peering curiously at him.
“Puny human,” the Hulk said while tightening his grip. He wasn’t squeezing the god hard enough to hurt, but Loki was all too aware how quickly that could change, and his arms were pressed uselessly into his sides.

“I’m not a human,” he said, keeping his voice level. “I’m a... a god.” Loki’s mind scrambled to find an escape route if things went wrong—surely someone would call Rogers in if the Hulk went ballistic?

“Puny god,” the Hulk amended, and then he grinned. Loki let out the breath he had been holding.

“It certainly may seem like that you,” he joked, hoping that doing so would keep the Hulk calm. But what he really needed was for him to revert back into Banner. “Do you think you could put me down now? I’m afraid you're making the people over there nervous.” The Hulk glanced at policemen, and Loki studied him closely for any sign that he wanted to attack them, but the giant stayed amiable. He gently lowered Loki to the ground and released him. “Thank you. Now can you-”

The god didn’t need to finish his request. Before his eyes, the Hulk’s form distorted, shrinking into itself and fading to tan. Then the now-human form collapsed face first to the ground, leaving no trace of the monster that had once stood there other than one half-naked Bruce Banner.

Loki exhaled slowly, taking a moment to appreciate the fact that he was still in one piece. Then he turned towards the shocked policemen and asked, “Do any of you happen to have something for him to wear? ...And if you'd be so kind, we are in need of a ride back to Stark Tower.”

-o-o-o-

The king of Wakanda sat at the head of the table, his back rigid and his eyes cold. With an aura of authority, he said, “I shall be brief: Vibranium is an extremely limited resource. For what reasons should we give over half of the world’s supply to you?”

Tony sat across the table from T’Challa, his posture equally tense. He glanced at the four men standing behind the king’s chair, arms crossed behind their backs and chins lifted. When they shifted, the glint of a guns become apparent from behind their clenched hands. Swallowing back his nerves, Tony asked, “May I assume that this room is secure and that I may speak freely?”

“I do not entertain the protection of spies,” T’Challa replied, interpreting (rightfully so) that Tony was questioning the loyalty of his bodyguards. “And you would do well to not doubt my country’s honor. We ensure secrecy just as any other.” Realizing his caution had caused insult, Tony made to placate the king, but T’Challa waved him silent. “Save your flattering words for your own politicians. Tell me: if the situation is as dire as you say, why should we surrender so much of our Vibranium? And to SHIELD no less? Your diplomacy has always been in question, and your dealings with Latveria exemplify this.”

“SHIELD handled the situation with Latveria with as much mercy as we could. Victor von Doom overreached his bounds, and it was in our right to retaliate,” Tony countered. “I would ask you to remember that there wasn’t a single civilian casualty, and we returned control of the government back to the people after Doom's trial was concluded.” The man's tone had grown too biting, and he reigned his emotions back in. “However, we both know that Doom's incarceration is not the problem here. Through the GDO, the US and Wakanda are connected by treaty. Even if we weren’t, we have no intention of harming your people. The Vibranium is necessary to protect everyone, and I am
willing to negotiate the terms and conditions of that use.”

“And if I deem the materials more efficient when left in the hands of my people?” T’Challa’s words were cutting and his face inscrutable. “Forgive me if I do not trust you will protect my brethren with the same urgency as your own.”

Tony could feel the argument slipping away from him, and he tried harder to make the autonomous man listen to him. “The weapons we make will be used where they are needed the most, not just in the United States. Wakanda and its neighbors are already included in our plans, and if you want us to further that protection, we would accept such terms.”

Though Fury had not specified how much Tony was allowed to promise T’Challa, the director had essentially told him he could do whatever it took to order to acquire the Vibranium. SHIELD’s negotiation team had already tried and failed to strike a deal, and they could not take no as an answer; the rare metal was an essential part of the aircraft they were building.

“Is the use of Vibranium so important?” the king asked as if he had read Tony’s thoughts. “I often hear of your renowned intelligence. Certainly you could find a way to alter more abundant elements to your needs.”

“We’ve spent the last seven months trying to design an alternative, but the fact is that nothing else compares,” Tony said, latching onto the opening. “Vibranium has three times the impact absorption as platinum and is the only known element that is able to evenly disperse an impact no matter how powerful. Those factors make it a crucial part of the ships we have designed, and if we substituted another metal, it would leave both the ship and their pilots too vulnerable.” A thoughtful expression flittered across the king’s face — the first indication he had made the whole time that he might accept Tony’s proposition — and the man continued eagerly, “Each of the aircraft I designed are extremely lightweight and agile for their size, composed of the most dynamic metals on Earth. But in order for the interior to be made thin enough, the exterior shell needs to be able to divert the impact or the ships will be crushed. Vibranium is the perfect material for the job: it’s both light and powerful.” Then Tony made one last statement he thought would drive the deal home. “All we need is Wakanda’s approval, and SHIELD is willing to pay however much you want.”

Like a switch, T’Challa’s intrigue dissolved into distaste. “You Americans are always convinced that money is all people seek. I have heard enough. I will take your other words into consideration and will summon you when I have reached a decision. Until then, you are a guest in my country, and if you need something, we will do the best to accommodate you.”

The dismissal was clear, and Tony weighed the benefit of continuing to argue with the risk of overstaying the king’s welcome. In the end, he decided that it’d be better to do as the king asked and rose from his chair, bowing at the waist. “Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. SHIELD will respect whatever choice you make.”

T’Challa rose from his seat as well, his embroidered robe touching down to the floor. He lifted a bangle-clad arm and gestured to one of the guards standing behind him. “Dejen will lead you to your room.”

The bodyguard stepped forwards. “Please follow me, sir,” he said, moving towards the door.

However, Tony didn’t follow him immediately. “Actually, can you take me back out to the courtyard?” he asked, glancing surreptitiously at T’Challa to make sure his request wasn’t met with indignation; the king’s face was unreadable. “I need to meet with one of my colleagues.”

Dejen also looked towards T’Challa, seeking permission. The king nodded subtly, and the guard
bowed before returning his focus to Tony. “I will show you to the courtyard, then.” Tony followed
the guard through the palace, struggling to keep up with Dejen’s longer strides. They moved too
quickly through the labyrinthine halls for him to remember the route, and that was most likely the
intention. In fact, Tony thought they had doubled back a few times before the hallways spat them out
into the spacious courtyard in front of the palace gate.

“Thank you for your assistance,” Tony said, and Dejen nodded in acknowledgment, but the
towering man made no move to leave. Sighing, Tony resigned to T’Challa’s paranoid
practices and attempted to ignore his guard. He surveyed the courtyard then pulled out his phone,
snapping a picture of the far side. Once the picture was sent, he fiddled with his phone as he
anxiously waited for a reply. When one minute became five, he started to pace between scraggly
trees under the sharp scrutiny of his guard. At last there was a quiet ‘ding’, and Tony glanced down
at the screen to see ‘I’ll be there in a minute.’

He smiled and ceased pacing. To Dejen he said, “My friend will be here in a bit. Please don’t shoot
him when he appears. All it does is piss him off.” Tony took it as an accomplishment when the
guard’s stoic guise faltered. A few seconds later, Dejen’s eyes widened in shock as Loki appeared on
the other side of the courtyard. The soldier reacted on instinct, reaching towards the gun strapped on
his waist, but luckily the man heeded Tony’s words and only ensured he could draw the weapon
quickly if needed.

When Loki caught sight of them, his eyes were inevitably drawn to the guard fingering his gun. He
didn’t move forwards until Dejen calmed down, then he walked cautiously towards them. “What do
you need?” Loki asked as he drew closer, mouth twisted into a grimace. “I assume it’s something
important if you couldn’t just talk to me on the phone about it.”

“Aww, Lokes, you don’t like seeing me anymore?” Tony asked with (mostly) feigned upset. The
god was unamused. Chuckling to fill the emptiness, Tony continued, “I need to stay in Wakanda
while T’Challa considers my proposal, but I want your help with a few things. I figured it’d be best to
do that in person in case the phone line is tapped.”

Raising an eyebrow, Loki asked, “You doubt Jarvis’s capabilities?”

“It’s not that. I just don’t want to take any chances. Besides, you’d be equally busy even if we did
talk on the phone. At least this way you’re out of the house.” Loki’s dour expression persisted, and
Tony cracked a bitter grin. “It’s our last two months to live. You might as well enjoy it.

Loki’s frown deepened, but he relented. Surveying the area, he said, “Surely this is not the location
you had intended for us to talk? This is less secure than your phone.” The majority of Loki’s distrust
was directed towards Dejen, and while Tony trusted T’Challa to pick loyal bodyguards, he also
knew that meant anything they said would be relayed to the king.

“Nah, I was thinking we could walk around the city, maybe find a diner or something to hang out
at.” Loki grimaced, and Tony threw his hands up in the air. “Oh come on. I know you have spells
for that sort of thing. Disguise us or something. No one is going to expect us to be talking at a coffee
shop in Wakanda.” Then Tony remembered that he was in the middle of an important negotiation,
and he turned to Dejen to ask, “I am allowed to leave the palace property, right?”

“T’Challa has made no restrictions on where you are allowed to go. You are a guest in our country,”
the soldier answered, bowing his head slightly. “However, I’d advise you to not keep him waiting
once he wishes to speak with you.”

“I’ll be back within two hours,” Tony promised and then gave Loki a cheeky grin. “Now that that’s
all sorted out, work your magic on me, darling.” The god scowled at him, but beneath the weariness
and strain, mischievousness stirred.

With a wave of Loki’s hand, Tony was enveloped in green mist, and when it cleared, he blinked down at himself in disbelief. The object of his dissatisfaction was not his skin (which had turned a rich brown) but the garish tunic and hideous boots that replaced his tailored suit. “Loki, what the hell?” he began to complain, but when he lifted his head, his words trailed off.

In front of him stood another Wakandian man, and Tony had to blink a few times to register that it was still Loki. The god had kept his hair long, though now it was coarse and in small, tight braids, and his robe was green and gold. Otherwise, it looked like a completely different person. Then Loki grinned, and any doubts that it was someone else disappeared. “This is what you wanted, is it not?” Loki asked. “No one will recognize you now.”

“I don’t exactly look subtle,” Tony complained, and when he reached up to run his hand through his hair, he was horrified to find that the god had made him bald. In reality, nothing on him had changed and it was just Loki’s magic playing with everyone’s senses, but the sensation was disgruntling nonetheless.

“Nonsense. It simply looks like you have an lively taste in clothing,” Loki said unrepentantly, and before Tony could argue further — which he had every intention of doing; he looked like a Christmas tree covered in teal tinsel. And he was bald — the god switched topics. “We should get going. There isn’t time to waste.”

“Don’t think I won’t get you back for this,” Tony threatened, but Loki just waved the words away. Peeved, Tony made a mental note to dye Coro’s fur pink or something when he got home next week. For now though, the god was right, and so he nodded at Dejen—who got respect points for only looking surprised by Loki’s magic and not freaking out—and led Loki towards the city proper.

As they exited through the palace gates, they received only cursory glances from the men stationed out front. Despite Tony’s claims to the contrary, he blended seamlessly into the masses of brightly clothed people. The city had a festive atmosphere and was decorated in vivid tapestries and fronds; nothing was without a splash of color. Such exuberance was embodied in the citizens of Wakanda, and people talked loudly as they strolled down the street and browsed the many shops. Since Tony couldn’t read most of the signs, he had to follow his nose to a small restaurant a block from the palace. The front door was propped open due to the nice weather, and the scent of fresh spices permeated the air.

Tony pushed aside the strands of beads dangling across the the threshold, and the woman behind the counter greeted them. She spoke in a language Tony didn’t understand and waited for a reply. He just stared at her blankly. Thankfully, Loki spoke for him, and foreign words fell so easily from the god’s tongue that it was hard to imagine he wasn’t native. He gestured towards Tony as he talked, and the woman nodded in understanding and give him a sympathetic smile.

While Tony didn’t know what was being said, he had a feeling it was insulting, and he gave Loki a dirty look. The god ignored him and continued to converse with the woman, and the only bit that Tony understood (or at least thought he did) was that she introduced herself as Tanesha. Beyond that, he had no idea what was going on and watched as the woman gestured to a menu while Loki frowned and asked a series of questions.

After a few minutes passed and the conversation continued to drag on, Tony grew bored and started inspecting the strange painting over the door. When Tanesha began leading Loki to one of the back tables, he nearly didn’t notice and had to scramble to keep up, which just prompted another pitying glance. Once they were seated, the woman smiled warmly at Loki before heading back to the kitchen, and Tony felt completely lost. “What was that all about?” he asked incredulously.
“What's what about?” Loki replied, being purposely dense. “I ordered us the daily special, by the way.”

“And that took five minutes?”

Loki just shrugged dismissively. “Not everyone is as brusque as the denizens of New York. Certainly you learned that in your travels this past year.”

“Well, yeah, but I always figured the delay was because it took so long to go back and forth with a translator,” Tony said, feeling petulant; why did Loki get the cool language ability? He didn't even use it that much, whereas Tony had to scrape by with either Jarvis or a linguist to bridge the language gap.

Loki’s lips turned up in a smirk, but he continued as if he hadn't heard Tony's complaint. “Besides, it is advantageous to be polite. I told her we have important things to discuss, and she promised to keep the tables around us clear. We can discuss more securely here.”

Though the table had Loki's approval, Tony double checked their surroundings anyways, but the clamor from outside made it so he could barely hear the other occupants of the restaurant. Still, he propped his elbows on the table and leaned forwards, speaking softly. “I met with SHIELD before I came here, and we've run into some diplomatic problems.” Loki's lip curled, and Tony sighed. “I know, it's a pain in the ass. But the point is, you and I have been denied access to some of the countries we were going to outfit with some shiny new guns.”

“If they do not want our protection, then why bother?” Loki asked acerbically. “They can fight Thanos alone and face the consequences of their actions.”

“You know it doesn't work like that. We can't just let entire countries get wiped off the face of the planet. Not only is it wrong,” Tony said this with a pointed look, but to his displeasure, the god didn't seem too bothered by the idea, “but we need to be able to attack Thanos no matter where he ends up landing. The last thing we want is to give him a safe spot because we're too busy killing each other in the process.”

“Then what do you propose we do about it? I thought Fury was against me forcing my way into other countries.”

“Yeah, well, he doesn't care as much when he's the one who sanctioned it. We have undercover teams inside most of the disputed nations. You and I will join them and set up some defenses. Then we'll at least have some footing against the invasion until the legal mess can be worked through.”

A family entered the restaurant, and Tony paused talking as they headed towards one of the tables near them. But before they got too far, Tanesha intercepted them and herded them towards another table. She glanced over towards Loki on her way back to the counter, and the god nodded his thanks.

They wanted until everyone was settled, and then Tony continued, “Since you have the most mobility, Fury figured we'd let you figure out a plan to get in and out. We'll be moving about half a ton of metal to each location and have to be able to set up the weapons in relatively public locations. Some of the stuff can stay behind until later, but anything requiring tuning needs to be done promptly.”

“And if we are caught doing this?” Loki asked, though Tony could see that the god was already turning ideas over in his mind.
“At best, we'd create a political scandal and lose both our and SHIELD's credibility. At worst they might try and kill us.” Tony laughed humorlessly. “Can't have fun without the risk of dying, right?”

“I'll see what I can come up. Though I'll require more details, such as where we'll rendezvous with these other groups and which weapons I should take into account for teleporting.”

“That second part is actually what I need to work out with you,” Tony said just as Tanesha headed towards their table, a steaming plate in each hand. She set their lunch down in front of them and said something to Loki, which he replied to with a charming smile. They spoke for a minute while Tony stared suspiciously at his food, and once Tanesha left, he poked at it with a frown.

“What exactly did you order?” It smelt good, if not a bit strongly, but Tony didn’t recognize half of what was beneath the thick red sauce.

“Spiced vegetables,” Loki answered while spearing something that vaguely resembled a pepper on his fork. Then the god made to take a bite, setting off dormant alarms in Tony’s mind.

“Woah, wait!” he exclaimed hurriedly, and Loki immediately tensed, searching around for an enemy, before tilting his head in confusion and staring at Tony. Now that the god was actually looking at him, Tony paused, realizing that what he was going to say sounded kind of stupid. But Loki was getting impatient, so the man hedged, “Uh, are you sure you're good with eating something like that? It's going to be a lot stronger than what we normally eat.”

True to Tony's expectations, Loki looked at him like he was an idiot. “Tony, I am well aware of what I ordered. It's fine.” To prove his point, the god took a large bite while staring defiantly at him; Tony didn’t trust his words at first, but though he studied Loki’s reaction intently, the god remained unaffected.

Tony held his hands up in surrender. “Alright, I get it. I worried for nothing.” He turned to his food, but a moment later, he couldn’t resist looking back up. He smiled fondly at Loki, though the god didn’t see it, too busy inhaling his food. It seemed like such a small thing — was such a small thing, really — but to Tony it meant so much more. Even now, when Loki seemed so normal that it was hard to tell what he had gone through, Tony could never forget what the god was like years ago. He knew how badly Loki had been fractured, remembered how everyone feared he was beyond repair, and that made moments like this all the more special.

“What weapons are you intending to bring?” Loki asked, and when he looked up, Tony realized that he had been staring at the god unabashedly. Then a second later he realized that he didn't care, and his goofy grin remained. Loki sighed at his antics. “Tony, stay focused. You said we needed to work something out?”

With a nod, Tony took a quick bite of food and said, “I was thinking that it would be really stupid to give countries that hate us a Jericho or something of equal firepower, but they still need something. So I thought that we could give them some electricity-based weapons.”

“The range on those isn't enough to provide ample protection,” Loki immediately shot down. “If that's all you intend to give them, you might as well not take the risk.”

“Which is why I wanted to know if you could help me increase the range. I did some calculations, and if we improved the storage within the unit—use opal maybe, like you did with my suit?—it could discharge exponentially farther.” Tony fished his phone out from his pocket and opened his project folder. Sliding the device over to Loki, he asked, “Would you be able to do something like that?”
The god flicked through the contents, and then he frowned. “Your calculations are off.”

“Then fix them,” Tony said with a shrug. “That's why you're here in the first place.” That, and Tony wanted to spend time with him again. And even though they spent the next two hours pouring over equations and bemoaning the existence of politicians, the man’s good mood remained. He didn't even care that Loki was often too terse with him. That was something he had gotten use to months ago as stress ate away at the god's patience. Tony was just happy to see his friend.

When their time ran out and Tony had to report back, he was reluctant to have Loki leave. “We could continue working within the palace,” he said, but the god shook his head.

“I have to return to what I was doing.” And true to his word, after Loki escorted Tony to the palace courtyard and removed the glamor, he vanished in a swirl of lights without even saying goodbye.

Tony shook his head, pushing away his hurt and disappointment—Loki was busy, just like he was—and slowly climbed the palace steps. He was quickly intercepted by Dejen, and the guard announced, “T’Challa is requesting your presence now.”

Tony sighed. “Lead the way.” He braced himself for the bad news. The warm glow that had burned into his chest had disappeared, and in its place was anxiety, ever-present and constricting.

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Obscured by shifting sands, in the heart of the desert sat a deceptively small warehouse. Its tan roof and worn stone exterior made it barely distinguishable to Jarvis’s sensors, and had he not the exact coordinates, Tony would have flown right over it.

His feet sunk into loose-packed sand, and as Iron Man stepped towards a concealed doorway, the howling wind chipped away at his footprints. There was an eye scanner besides the dented overhead door, and Tony removed his helmet as he stepped towards it. He shielded his face with his arm as a red laser scanned his face, and then the light blinked green. The door shifted upwards without a sound, and Tony ducked inside the dimly lit facility.

“You're late,” a voice greeted, and Tony looked up to see Rhodes walking towards him with a stern expression on his face. The general came to a stop, standing stiffly, and then he grinned. “It's good to see you, Tony.” The man stepped forwards and pulled Tony into a one-arm hug.

“You too, bud,” Tony replied, clapping his friend on the back before pulling away. “Sorry for the delay. I got held up with some paperwork.” He glanced around the room, taking stock of who else was there. Two guards were standing unobtrusively in the shadows, monitoring the security cameras, and Simon Marshall—an intelligent SHIELD agent assigned to weapons management—stood by a row of quinjets.

Tony nodded his head towards the agent in greeting and started heading in his direction. “I don't have a lot of time to waste here, either,” the engineer announced. “You ready to get this show on the road?”

“Everything is ready for your review,” Marshall said. “If both of you would please follow me, I'll take you to the development floor.”

The agent guided them farther into the shoddy facility. Overhead, the fluorescent lights flickered and buzzed, casting the walls in shifting shadows. But the darkness was intentional, disguising the hairline crack of a hidden door. Marshall pressed the ID card around his neck to the wall, and with a click, the locks on the other side began to disengage. What once appeared to be a solid cement wall
slid sideways, revealing a small passageway.

Tony and Rhodey followed Marshall into the cramped space, and the entrance sealed shut behind them. The three men preceded cautiously down a steep stairwell, their progress watched by security cameras mounted on the ceiling. Then, about two hundred feet in, the crude quality of the stairs abruptly changed; filthy steps were replaced by smooth concrete, and dull lights grew bright, reflecting off immaculate white walls. Their pace quickened, and eventually the passage came to an end at another door. Marshall swiftly entered a code into a panel beside the thick steel, and then he leaned forwards to scan his eye.

When the door slid open, the murmur of conversation and clang of metal poured into the hall, and the three men stepped into the cavernous production facility. The walls stretched for hundreds of feet in either direction, encompassing hundreds of people. There were engineers, technicians, builders, and SHIELD employees, all rushing back and forth as they carried out their jobs. However, the main feature of the room was not the workers but the airships that they were building.

There was row after row of gargantuan planes in varying degree of completion. Those farthest right were nothing more than bare metal frames upon which men crawled with welding torches. The ones in the center were messes of wires and engines, equipped with almost everything but the casing. On the left were impeccable silver ships, gleaming in the artificial light. Their wings were folded towards the ceiling, and their hulls towered over the technicians inspecting them. Right now the machines slept, but they could be roused to battle at any moment.

Tony walked farther into the room, observing his blueprints coming to life. Ten months ago, this warehouse had been practically empty, used as nothing more than an overflow storage for SHIELD. But now it was one of the most important locations in the US, rivaled only by the other three such bunkers; each of them was filled to the brim with weapons of war.

“How many have been finished so far?” Tony asked, turning away from the hectic work to regard his companions.

“There's a total of thirty-four Stargates and nine Fireflies built as of this morning,” Marshall answered promptly. “If everything goes as planned, another four Stargates and one Firefly should be finished by the end of the month.”

“That still isn't going to be enough...” Tony muttered, more to himself than to them, and returned to frowning at the barely assembled frames.

The SHIELD agent heard his comment and said, “I can ask if we can acquire more workers, but right now we are building at maximum capacity.”

“It's not the workers that's the problem though, is it?” Tony asked rhetorically. The teams they had hired were actually performing far above Tony's expectations. Each Firefly had been expected to take a year to assemble, and yet they managed to finish the first batch in only five months. Their feat was made even more impressive by the fact that they had to custom make the majority of the parts within the ships, an effort that had been hampered by the need for secrecy.

But while everyone was working hard, their progress was still sorely lacking. These were the ships that Tony had designed to fight Thanos's fleet. They were expected to take on massive carriers and hundreds of battleships. Yet there were only forty-three ships completed, and though they were unlike anything built before, Tony knew it wasn't enough.

As he passed by a half-finished Firefly, the engineer ran his fingers across the ship's nose. The plane was impressive in its own right, weighing in at nearly eighty tons, and was outfitted with the highest
quality missile launchers and machine guns ever designed. The extra weight it carried did nothing to diminish its controls either; the test flights they did last month confirmed that the Firefly flew like a gem, able to accelerate rapidly and make sharp turns.

In spite of that, cynical thoughts slipped into Tony's mind. 'These ships are going to get shot down in minutes. They are nothing compared to the army we saw.'

The Fireflies would be dwarfed by Thanos's ships—they couldn't be more than a tenth of the size—and the Stargates were at even more of a disadvantage. They were barely larger than a F-16 and weighed only eight tons a piece. Tony tried to make them similar to the battleships they would be fighting, and against those they should be able to hold their own. They were compacted fire power, and their key feature was the altitude they could fly at. If they were going to fight spaceships, they had to be able to reach the enemy first.

"The United States Air Force is contributing fighter planes as well," Rhodes piped up. "It took a bit of negotiating, but I have clearance to commandeer idle ships."

"And how much will that amount to?" Tony asked, unconcerned about anyone eavesdropping. He was standing right next to Rhodes and could barely hear him over the racket. Were someone able to hear them in the first place, everyone in the facility had been sworn to secrecy and was kept under close monitoring.

"There's a bit under three hundred I can acquire immediately. After that, it'll take a bit more convincing to get the rest off duty. Though once Thanos has arrived, it shouldn't take long for them to decide that fighting him takes priority."

Tony hummed noncommittally, running the numbers through his mind. His next query was directed towards Marshall. "How are the numbers looking for other countries? What's the total amount of ships we have?"

It was testament to how much time the agent spent handling these facts that he could confidently say, "The Global Defense Organization has accumulated 6,219 aircraft for fighting Thanos, although only 2,092 of them meet your minimum requirements. Those that are close will be remodeled, adding an estimated two hundred to that amount."

"And what about the pilots? We can't have unskilled people flying these things. They'll be shooting down moving planes that have unknown weaponry. On top of that, they have to be responsive to ground forces or they could get caught in anti-aircraft fire." As Tony talked, he unintentionally began raising his voice, and he gestured wildly with his hands; the image of menacing, blood-cast ships played through his mind.

"Tony, man, calm down," Rhodes said, clapping him on the shoulder, and Tony abruptly became aware that his hands were raised mid-motion and his breath was coming out in harsh pants. Embarrassed for losing control, he pressed his arms in close to his sides with a sheepish grin, but his friend didn't judge him. Rhodley patted Tony's back before continuing as if nothing had happened. "I can't speak for other countries, but the US is doing everything we can to train our pilots. There's no way we can completely prepare them, but we've been running a wide variety of practices and simulations. Those that have the best result will be chosen to fly your ships."

"That... That's good," Tony said, and then as they wandered into the next row of ships — the ones that were barely started — he slowed a stop, eyes roving the metal mess before him. The wiring was just being put in, and it wrapped around the aluminum alloy like vines around a tree. Evidence of Tony's blueprint, made over several sleepless weeks with some of the best aerospace engineers SHIELD could find, was reflected in each twist of the wires and bolt in the frame.
Seeing his work be created had yet to stop creating a swell of emotion in the engineer. A part of him felt sick that the deadly machinations of his mind were once again free and able to harm others, but now the majority of him felt indomitable conviction. This was his contribution to the battle. This was his way of saying that the Earth would not fall while he was still alive.

“These babies will have quite the kick to them,” Tony stated with a hint of pride in his voice as he continued to browse down the aisle. “They're unlike anything your pilots have flown before.”

“Once the need for secrecy is gone, the pilots that qualified will run real-time simulations in these,” Rhodey said. “Since the interface is almost the same, it shouldn't take them long to adjust.”

Nodding, Tony switched to the next topic. “How are we doing on the anti-aircraft fields, Marshall? Are they going to ready on time?”

The agent hesitated slightly before speaking, and Tony knew he wouldn't like what he was about to hear. “There's over two-hundred cities left on the list for weapons installation, but we only have twenty-eight units completed. We're weeks behind schedule and unfortunately falling farther behind each day.”

Tony cursed, a sentiment that was echoed by Rhodey. Twenty-eight was way below the desired count, especially when they had been considering increasing the number of cities to safeguard. It was impossible to protect everyone (despite how much Tony wished otherwise) but certain locations were critical to their success, either for military or economic reasons. Those cities had to have a line of defense or they’d be easy targets for Thanos's assault.

Seeking statistics that would make up for the dire news, Tony asked, “And the portable missile launchers? Jerichoes? How are the numbers for those?”

The answer he got was also far from satisfactory. “We ran into a Palladium shortage three days ago, and the Vibranium you secured won't be enough to build anything but the ships. I'm afraid that we have only built a third of what you requested.”

A wave of hopelessness crashed over Tony, and he rubbed at his face with trembling hands. While he knew that the amounts he had requested were farfetched, he thought they’d be able to get at least more than half of it finished. They had less than two months — and that was a predicted date; for all they knew, Thanos could show up tomorrow — and at the pace they were going, it felt like nothing was getting done. In comparison to the threat they were facing, Tony felt like Earth's resistance was negligible. Maybe if they had a few more months they'd be able to get on track, but wishing for more time wasn't going to change anything. Thanos would not wait for them, and if they weren't ready, he'd kill them all.

It took a moment for Tony to get the strength to pull his armor-clad hands from his face. The chill of the suit provided a small relief against his feverish skin, and he scrunched his eyes close to keep the bright lights from heightening the incessant pounding in his skull. He prayed that he wasn't getting sick. There wasn't time for that, either.

It was Tony's pride that forced him to move again. He couldn't have a breakdown in front of the people who were relying on him. He lifted his head and blinked rapidly, pushing aside his anxiety. “Alright,” he said. “Take it from the top. Tell me how much we have of which weapon, and we'll plan accordingly.”

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Thirty-two days to the predicted year, Thanos’s fleet became visible to NASA’s telescopes. The
agency had a team assigned to the detection of inter-stellar ships, and they notified SHIELD about an anomaly at the edge of their telescopes’ range. Fury had sent Loki to verify, as it wasn’t the first time they received a false alarm, but the ‘anomaly’ really was the Mad Titan’s army. The ships were approaching rapidly, making them hard to lock on to, but they were undeniably there. The time had come.

With the spaceships now visible from Earth, SHIELD decided to inform the public.

“I'm Kathryn Allen with Fox News, and I'm here in front of the White House where a large mob has gathered. Riots like this one have been popping up around the world in response to a global announcement made this morning. A congregation of world governments, calling themselves the Global Defense Organization, officially reported an impending alien invasion nine hours ago. Since their announcement, the world has been gripped in an intense debate: is the threat real, and if so, why have they been hiding the truth from us?”

“Why are you watching this?” Loki asked, striding into the living room and coming to a stop behind the couch. Tony was slouched into the fabric, his fingers resting limply on the remote as his eyes bore unblinkingly into the screen. “Are there not more important things to do?”

Without averting his attention, Tony blandly replied, “I'm pretty sure this counts as important.”

With a frown, Loki turned his attention back to the TV. Behind where the newswoman was monotonously restating facts, massive crowds had congregated in the streets. They were hollering and chanting, holding picket signs and posters with messages ranging from ‘don’t trust the government’ to ‘the end of the world is upon us’. More courageous and zealous protestors stood on benches and walls, preaching down to the crowd and working them into a frenzy. Outside of the thick, children clung to their equally frightened parents who demanded answers from anyone that passed by. Between the raging crowds and the White House doors, police were standing in a row with ballistic shields, and on the fringes of the mob, more officers were attempting to gain control. However, for every one of them, there were at least ten angry civilians, and they struggled to keep order without using excessive force. Fights were breaking out between the groups, and Loki watched in horrified awe as humans savagely turned on each other, beating people to the ground without restraint.

“Is this... normal for Midgardians?” he asked, dragging his eyes from the mayhem to look at Tony. “Surely your people have dealt with adversaries before?”

At last the man turned his head towards Loki, and the god's heart dropped at the unhealthy pallor of Tony's skin. It highlighted the hollows of his cheeks and the dark smudges around his eyes, and when he tried to grin, it came out as a grimace. “This?” Tony asked, gesturing to the violence on the screen. “Oh yeah, this is what we expected. People don’t like finding out that the government has been hiding information from them.”

“On Asgard, such news not met with such...” The god's attention was drawn to a man yanking a poster out of a young woman's hands. He was red with rage and held a lighter under the poster, setting it ablaze. But before the man could throw the burning cardboard onto the nearby bushes, four police ran in and tackled him to the ground. “Panic. Is everywhere like this?”

“At last the man turned his head towards Loki, and the god's heart dropped at the unhealthy pallor of Tony's skin. It highlighted the hollows of his cheeks and the dark smudges around his eyes, and when he tried to grin, it came out as a grimace. “This?” Tony asked, gesturing to the violence on the screen. “Oh yeah, this is what we expected. People don’t like finding out that the government has been hiding information from them.”

“Pretty much.” Tony changed the channel, and Loki, fascinated and disturbed by what was on the screen, leaned in closer. This time, the footage showed the inside of a grocery store where people were shoving each other over in their haste to grab food from the emptying shelves. The focus alternated to the parking lot, and there were cars everywhere, brimming out of the allotted spaces and onto the medians and sidewalks. Shopping carts laid overturned in the lanes, abandoned and left for others to swerve around. There was barely any room to drive, and people screamed at one another
while cars honked loudly.

“Why do people not do anything about this?” Loki asked.

Tony sighed. “They're trying, but what else is there to do? Everyone is terrified. They've had to call in the military, but it’s just too much people to contain.”

“Is S.H.I.E.L.D not doing anything? Are they not going to ask the Avengers for help?”

“They'll probably ask us if things start getting real crazy, like if people start bombing stuff. But until then, they're trying to use as little force as possible. The idea is to reassure people, not give them something else to protest against.”

Tony flicked through the channels again, stopping at one that showed Captain America standing in front of a crowd of reporters. The soldier was in the middle of a speech—“...taken every precaution we can to protect this nation and its people. The brightest minds have gathered to match the threat, and I can personally say that the Avengers will be on the front line. We won't go down without a fight. This is not the...”—but his audience was not being receptive.

One of the reporters in the vying crowd grew impatient and yelled, “How long has the government known about this threat, and why hadn't they told us before? We had the right to know sooner!” Everyone else took that as their cue to start yammering as well, and Rogers faltered, overwhelmed. He sent a desperate look to the agents in the background, and they attempted to rein in the situation.

“The United States government acted with the people's best interests in mind,” Rogers said over the clamor; his claim only made the people more agitated. He spoke louder. “If everyone follows the plan the government released this morning, it'll help us better insure your safety. I ask that everyone please keep calm and review it so we can keep the situation under control.”

“Yeah, so you can lie to us again!” another person exclaimed, and that was the tipping point. The conference dissolved into chaos. Tony grimaced and continued to flip through the channels, ending back up on Fox News, where the situation had dissolved into anarchy.

Loki watched for another minute before shaking off his curiosity and pushing away from the couch. He had wasted too much time as it was, especially if riots were going to set them back. “Is this going to stop soon? We can't fight Thanos with this much turmoil. It would ruin our efficiency.”

“That's why we decided to do this a month beforehand and not at the last minute. This way they can freak out without having enough time to organize rebellions against the government, and people need to have a chance to prepare themselves for the invasion. Just wait, it'll blow over in a few days.”

Tony's approximation of 'a few days' ended up being too generous. The rioting and looting continued around the world for two weeks. It escalated to the point that the Avengers had to be called in, and they scattered across the country. Tony went to clear up the bloody riots in Texas, while Loki assisted the SWAT teams in Washington DC. Eventually they and the other Avengers made progress is calming the crowds, and people settled down.

Well, 'settled' was a relative term; stores were stripped bare, banks were emptied, and mobs continued to spring up. But the problem had lessened enough that the Avengers could once again turn their attention to Thanos, and just in time, too, because it was sixteen days to the predicted year that the fleet entered the solar system.

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Tony paced back and forth through the bridge, his limbs shaking. Each time he spun back towards
the center, he could see Thanos's fleet staring back at him, distorted by pixels but no less menacing. He ran his hand through his hair, tugging on the long strands while he shouted, “So, what? They decided to just camp out on Saturn? How the hell are we supposed to fight them there?”

Tony wasn't the only one stressing. Fury stood rigid in the center of the maelstrom, and his one eye hadn't left the live footage for the past ten minutes. It was one thing to hear about the army coming to kill them all, and it was another to see it outside your door. The director's voice was terse. “All we know for certain is that they haven't moved from the planet's gravitational field for fifteen hours. From everything we've seen, they're setting up base on the moons.”

“That's just great,” Tony muttered, removing clawed fingers from his hair to rub harshly at his forehead, but the action did nothing to quell his headache. Every rapid beat of his heart sent daggers through his brain, and the man hasn't quite regained his breath since he first heard Fury announce Thanos's arrival. It didn't matter that the Mad Titan was still three planets away; that distance was easily surmountable by his spacecrafts. War was on the horizon, and Earth wasn't ready.

With a shuddering breath, Tony forced himself to stop pacing and stand by the director's side. He stared unblinkingly at the threat, memories of events yet to pass — that he will never allow to pass — flashing through his mind. The spaceships were deceptively still, and Tony knew that somewhere in the swarm was Thanos upon his macabre throne. “Any idea when they are going to make their move?”

“That isn't enough. Thanos can use magic, and we're looking at alien technology. For all we know, they can teleport directly above us and we wouldn't know until the city is burning.”

“Or it could just lure us into a false sense of security,” Fury replied, but when Tony made to argue, the director held up a hand. “I'm not saying we won't use this spell of his to its full advantage, but we need to be ready for anything. Loki may understand Thanos more than we do, but even he doesn't know what to expect. It's my job to keep us from backing into a corner.”

“Loki was setting up a scrying spell when I left,” he said, trying to find something positive in the storm of uncertainties. “If it works, we'll be able to see what Thanos is doing. Loki could tell if he's planning to use magic to attack.”

“None,” Fury growled, finally snapping his gaze to the agents that were working furiously on their computers while yelling out orders and relaying information. “We have no way of predicting Thanos's actions, and no one can decide what to do about it. However, we can't do much until he moves, and when he does, we'll know immediately. Every telescope and satellite is calibrated to those ships. If a single one of them gets out of line, we'll know.”

Tony shook his head. “That isn't enough. Thanos can use magic, and we're looking at alien technology. For all we know, they can teleport directly above us and we wouldn't know until the city is burning.”

“If that's the case, we'll handle it is it comes. But otherwise, there's little we can do.”

The truth of the words was hard for Tony to stomach. He hated this feeling of helplessness, of being at the Mad Titan's mercy. “Loki was setting up a scrying spell when I left,” he said, trying to find something positive in the storm of uncertainties. “If it works, we'll be able to see what Thanos is doing. Loki could tell if he's planning to use magic to attack.”

“The weight of the world crushed down on his shoulders. A part of him wanted to shout, 'I'm not a soldier. I don't know what I'm doing', but he kept
silent. He was expected to fight, and so he would. The past year led up to this moment. There wasn't
time for him to doubt his abilities.

Fury glanced over at Tony, and for a moment it seemed as if the director could read his thoughts. He
frowned, and underneath that was the tiniest hint of sympathy. Then it was gone, and Fury turned
away. “Return to Stark Tower for now. I'll summon you if something changes. Otherwise, Jarvis has
access to any files you need.”

Tony nodded again, and he spun on his heels, stalking out of the bridge on legs that didn't feel like
his own. Nothing felt right. It was like he was trapped in one of his nightmares, and this time he
knew that he wouldn't wake up. The short flight from the New York Harbor to Stark Tower passed
by in a blur, and Tony walked into the penthouse to see the coffee table shoved to the side. In its
place, Loki sat cross-legged on the floor with a small stone basin in front of him, its contents pulsing
and receding in sync with the god’s chanting.

Tony came to a stop a few feet away, and as the pace of Loki's words increased, so too did the
amount of magic saturating the air. The coruscating green light was blinding, and Tony was forced to
advert his eyes as Loki spoke the last harsh, ringing words. Then the energy imploded, collapsing
into the basin and replacing green sparkles with a soft glow. Loki grinned in triumph.

Deeming it safe to approach, Tony went forwards and leaned over the god’s shoulder. He frowned
when the misty surface showed only stars. “Where are the spaceships?” he asked, hand
unconsciously reaching up to clutch the god’s shoulder. “Where's Thanos?”

“It's not calibrated yet,” Loki replied as he touched his fingers to the rippling surface. With his brow
scrunched in concentration, the god delved the basin for something that Tony could not sense. Then
with a triumphant ‘aha’, he jerked his hand clockwise, causing the stars to spiral out of focus. Like a
roulette wheel, the spinning stopped on an asteroid that rested upon a moon’s surface.

The grin on Loki’s face slipped at the sight of the Mad Titan. Thanos sat imperiously on his skull
throne, his dark purple skin illuminated by his fleet’s faint cores and tarnished starlight. Tony leaned
in closer, and he and Loki watched as their quarry frowned and shouted, summoning a humanoid
creature to the throne.

Tony curiously studied the alien as it ascended the stone steps. Its rough, wrinkly skin was slate
colored, which made its lipless red mouth — the only part of its face that was visible beneath the
shroud and wire muzzle — stand out in sharp contrast. When the alien gestured viciously, its six
fingered hand shone in the bloody light. “What species is that?” Tony asked, but Loki shook his
head.

“I do not know. There are many species from distant galaxies that I have not heard of.” Then the god
quieted, focusing all of his attention on Thanos. The Mad Titan had a near-euphoric expression on
his face, and it made Tony’s skin crawl. He half-expected the army to start moving, to rain death
upon the earth, but after a few minutes, the Mad Titan dismissed his servant and returned the staring
out at his army. His pleased grin remained.

With a frown, Loki skimmed his fingers across the misty surface. The view zoomed out, encircling
the majority of the ships. Despite Thanos’s change in temperament, the ships themselves bore no
difference. They remained suspended around Saturn’s moon, engines dim and lifeless. It wasn’t
enough to assuage Loki’s suspicion, and he continued to adjust the scrying spell, attempting to peer
into the ships and spy on the crew. The few glances they saw contributed little, and the aliens outside
of the ships were no more revealing.

Frustrated, Loki shifted the scene again and again, but no matter the angle, the results were the same.
Tony frowned. “What do you think they're waiting for?” Loki didn't answer. Tony wasn't sure if the god had even heard him. But Loki's will could not change the situation, and with a sigh, Tony stood and squeezed his shoulder. “Sitting there messing with it isn't going to fix anything. If something changes, great, but otherwise we need to focus on our other plans.”

After two more useless twists, Loki sighed and pulled his fingers from the basin. The image stilled in false serenity. He stood, taking the basin with him, and dragged the table back into place. With one last examination, the god sent the bowl down and sat stiffly in the couch. Redirecting his attention, Loki asked, “What did Fury have to say? What is the plan now?”

“Fury gave me permission to command our section of the resistance,” Tony replied as he sat down next to the god. “As for the plan...” He kneaded the bridge of his nose with his fingers. “We don't really have one. With Thanos using Saturn as a home base, we can't predict his actions. He could attack anywhere, and we don't understand his tactics enough to counter them. Hell, we don't understand him at all. All we can do is try and safeguard major cities and send in extra forces where needed.”

“Thanos may not attack the cities you think he will,” Loki cautioned.

“I know, but we have to have something in place, even if just to keep people calm.” Tony tugged at his hair, fighting the urge to tear it and scream out his frustrations. “SHIELD has a lot of plans in place in case something changes, but since you and I are managing a large portion of the advanced weaponry, we need to be able to travel anywhere instantly. Hopefully he doesn't decide to hang around North Korea or something. The last thing we need is getting shot at from the people we're trying to protect.”

One would think that an alien invasion would be enough for people to set aside their disputes and fight for the common cause, but no. They had to bicker and quarrel, fighting over resources and making it so no one had the materials they needed. Some even threatened to start wars despite the fact that no one could afford the distraction.

Tony couldn't help it; he groaned again and dropped his head in his hand, shielding his eyes from the jumble of information. No matter how much he worked, there was always more to do, and it was too much. He was just one person, damn it, not a soldier or a god. Even then, no one could be expected to do this. It was insanity, and now Tony understood why Fury was so angry all the time, if this is what he went through day after day, year after year.

“Tony...” Loki started, but then he trailed off without offering a single word of comfort. Tony pettishly wished that he would. He wanted Loki to tell him that everything would be okay, regardless of the fact that it'd be a lie. He wanted Loki to say, ‘It’s okay, you can take a break.’ He wanted Loki to ease his mind so he could sleep in a bed, even if just for a few hours, without feeling anxious and guilty. He wanted to not wake up to nightmares of Thanos killing everyone he loves or torturing him in Afghanistan, where he’d escape from the cave only to come face to face with an entire fleet of spaceships.

Tony wanted his life back.

But Loki would not say those things, and Tony would not listen even if he did. There were seven billion people relying on them, and Tony could not let his own needs get in the way of that. So even though it hurt, Tony lifted his head and pushed aside the ache. One way or another, this would all be over soon.

“Right,” he said, injecting false energy into his voice, “so we already know that the Avengers will be primarily stationed in the US, since they can't travel as fast as us, and when Thor's people finally
decide to show up, we'll divide them accordingly. That's it as far as land troops go, and then we have
the Fireflies and Stargates. Those I am letting Rhodey distribute, since he knows his pilots better than
I do, which leaves you and I to assist with ground cover. However, not every country is willing to
grant us free reign, which means...”

O n and on Tony went, laying out the groundwork for the initial response. At some point, Jarvis
switched the lights on as night fell, but otherwise they were ignorant of the passage of time. The only
clock they were constricted by was that of Tony's exhaustion; his words slurred, and the tablet screen
blurred in and out of focus. Even then he forced himself to keep going, reaching his limits and going
beyond them.

But in the end, it didn't matter how much willpower Tony had. Sometime in between going over the
UN's ceasefire agreement with the Middle East and reviewing possible points of resistance, he had
succumbed to his body's needs. The next thing he knew, he was slumped over the armrest of his
chair with a high pitched squeal in his ears.

Tony jerked awake in surprise, stumbling from the chair and nearly tripping over the coffee table.
The room was pitch black, and the insistent screeching in his ears wasn't making navigating any
easier. He didn't recognize what the siren — loud and insistent and disorientating — was meant to
signal, nor why he had even been sleeping in the first place. Hadn't he been talking to Loki just
seconds ago?

The silence following the alarm was just as jarring, and Tony tripped again, this time over the rug.
His palms and knees hit the floor, and his eyes squeezed shut as the overhead lights pierced the
room. Then Jarvis spoke, his usual sangfroid replaced with an emotion Tony would almost classify
as 'panicked'. “Sir, there is an intruder in Loki's room.”

Even with the discord in Tony’s mind, the implications of Jarvis’s words did not take long to register.
Fear shot through the man’s heart, and an instant later, he was sprinting down the halls. As he drew
closer to the god’s room, it became clear that something was wrong. There was crashing followed by
a shout, and green light flashed across the floor and walls through the crack under the door. Then
there was a voice — deep and rasping and definitely not Loki’s — saying, “Foolish godling. Did
you really think he wouldn't sense you watching?”

If Loki replied, Tony didn't hear it. The whole floor shook and groaned, causing the lights to flicker
throughout the hall. Not dwelling on the fact that he was unarmed, Tony forced himself to go faster.
He had to reach Loki, and then he could worry about how he was supposed to help the god. The
sound of something shattering coming from the other side of the door only made him more intent,
and when he reached the door, he threw it open without a thought.

It only took a split second for Tony's racing mind to register the sight before him, and when it did, he
froze in shock.

Wrapped around Loki's throat were six scaly blue fingers, and the god's feet hovered inches off
the ground. Pale hands clutched at the attacker's wrist, trying to pry the hand loose, but despite the god's
phenomenal strength, it only took one hand to pin him to the wall like an insect. The attacker's other
hand was occupied with a bladed scepter, its glowing center angled towards Loki's chest. The god
stared at the weapon with wide, frantic eyes and gathered magic on his skin, but the green sparks
dissipated into the air without doing a single thing.

Then the door collided with the wall, and two pairs of eyes whirled towards the sound. The alien's
expression was shrouded by his hood, but Loki's reaction at seeing Tony was horribly clear. “Tony,
run!” the god shouted, fear plastered on his face. He fought back with renewed vigor, clawing at
the alien's arm and flaring his magic to no avail.
And Tony… Tony stood stupefied in the doorway, watching but not intervening. His heart thundered in his ears, and his weary limbs shook, but he did not move. Terror and helplessness paralyzed him, and he did nothing even when the hand around his best friend's throat tightened, causing Loki to lash out with his feet. He kicked and writhed and gouged, using everything in his power to get away, but the alien was impervious.

Turning dismissively from Tony, the creature stepped closer to Loki, pinning the god's legs down. “Your struggles cease to amuse me,” he hissed. “Were it not for my master's orders, I would kill you here. But he has use for even one such as you.” With mockingly slow movements, the tip of the scepter rose to rest against Loki's chest, and the sight of a blade hovering over the god's heart, Tony was at last propelled into action.

“Loki!” He shouted, moving forwards. He didn't know what he intended to do, but he had to do something.

But Loki, powerless and ensnared, wrenched his gaze from the scepter and shouted at Tony, “Stop!” Without thinking, the man obeyed the desperate command; he slid to a halt a few steps in, meeting Loki's wild eyes. The god thrashed and screamed, “You idiot! Get out of here!”

Foolish words of loyalty and love jumped to the tip of Tony's tongue, but before he could utter a single one, the alien — growing bored with their resistance — growled, “Silence. You belong to me now.” The gem at the tip of the spear pulsed, and chromatic tendrils reached towards the god's chest. Tony stared in horror as the Loki's eyes were consumed by black, and when his irises were visible again, they flickered bright blue.

The grip on Loki's throat slackened, but to Tony's disbelief, the god did not continue to fight once his feet touched the ground. Loki stared impassively at him before shifting his unnatural eyes to the alien. Unnerved and confused by the sudden change in demeanor, Tony took a hesitant step forwards. “Loki?” The god ignored him, reaching out to clasp the alien's wrist with glimmering hands, and Tony's eyes widened. “No!” He shouted desperately, lunging forwards with his arm outstretched, but he was too late.

Tony's hand passed through empty space; Loki and the other were gone.

Here's a wonderful fanart made for this chapter by the fabulous xHowlingWolfx.
Loki fighting the Other

Larger version can be found on their DA [here](#).
How to Make Things Right

"I'm sure of your ability to become my perfect enemy. Wake up and face me. Don't play dead 'cause maybe, Someday I will walk away and say, 'You disappoint me.' Maybe you're better off this way.

Leaning over you here, cold and catatonic, I catch a brief reflection of what you could and might have been. It's your right and your ability, To become my perfect enemy."

-Passive by A Perfect Circle

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No. This couldn't be happening. “Loki!” Tony shouted, stumbling farther into the room and spinning on his heels as he searched desperately for another glimmer. “Loki!” But there was nothing; the god was long gone, kidnapped by a servant of Thanos.

Shock crumbled away into a soul-deep terror as Tony started to realize exactly what that meant: A broken body at the foot of Thanos's throne. Blood stained bones and a dented helmet. Dead green eyes.

He was racing from the room before his mind caught up to him, stuck replaying his every nightmare with haunting clarity. As Tony’s body moved on autopilot, driven by adrenaline and fear, his stomach twisted and his chest heaved. Each breath felt like it wasn’t pulling in air, and tears pricked at his eyes, but Tony couldn’t stop to think about himself.

‘Loki. I have to find Loki.’ (A gaping wound, oozing onto a throne of skulls.) ‘Thanos is going to kill him.’ (A sharp, predatory grin, devoid of anything but insanity.) ‘Thanos is going to torture him.’ (Face contorted with agony.) ‘I have to save him.’

Falling to his knees, Tony clutched at the steps of the landing dock. The darkness of night embraced him, yet down in the city below, clubs and bars teemed with life, ignorant of the tragedy playing out above them. The cool air brushed against Tony’s sweaty forehead, and he felt feverish as he rasped, “Jarvis, I need the suit. Get me the suit.”

“Sir, I do not believe it is safe for you to leave at this time.”

Tony frantically shook his head. “No. No, I'm good. Give me the suit. I just need the suit. I need to find him.” Tony attempted to get his breathing under control, to prove to the AI that he could handle this, but all he managed to do was cause his lungs to hitch and shudder; all of the stress and exhaustion from the past few months had finally caught up to him, amplifying his anxiety until he could no longer contain it. This was the tipping point, and everything was spiraling out of control.

“I’m sorry, sir, but by your own orders, I am not to let you operate a suit while you are in such a condition,” Jarvis reiterated, only increasing the overwhelming powerlessness that had seized Tony. He felt like it was strangling him, causing his heart to beat wildly, and as Tony climbed to his feet, he could not stop shaking.

“Give me the suit.” His voice was nothing more than a choked whisper. Tony didn’t know what
having a suit would accomplish, but he needed it. If he just got the suit, stopped feeling so helpless, then everything would be okay. He could fix this. He could get Loki back.

But for all of the times that Tony operated the suit while drunk or wounded, Jarvis chose now to follow the protocol. “Sir, I have requested for someone to assist you, as I believe you are experiencing a severe panic attack. Please remain where you are.”

Tony didn’t even consider following Jarvis’s advice; he stumbled back towards the sliding door, left ajar in his flight, and moved blindly towards the elevator. If Jarvis refused to help him, then Tony would acquire a suit on his own. He didn’t need the AI; he could operate the armor manually. He could do this. He could save Loki.

“Everyone you have ever loved, Tony Stark, is dead. Who else is there left to kill?”

“Tony?” A voice—not the one that Tony needed to hear—asked worriedly, sounding both too close and too far. “Jarvis said there was an emergency. What’s?” Careening around the corner, Tony crushed into something solid and began to topple as the world spun sickeningly. Hands shot out to catch him. “Woah! Hey, what's wrong?”

Tony didn't answer, floundering to get his legs back under him, but his body felt numb and his feet kept slipping on the tile. The pounding of his heart reverberated through his entire body, each pulse bringing with it unceasing terror. ‘No,’ Tony thought desolately. ‘I have to keep moving. I have to. But I don't know what to do, and I can't breathe. I can't breathe.’

“Tony? Tony, calm down!” Someone lowered him to the floor, leaning his back against the wall, and Tony no longer had the strength to resist. His eyes twisted shut, as if it would shield him from the horrendous images clawing through his head. Over the sound of loud, ragged breathing echoing in his ears, a calm and steady voice said, “You're hyperventilating. Just calm down, alright?”

That was easier said than done; Tony drew in another empty breath, and the lack of oxygen scraped raw his already frazzled nerves. Through the tumult, one hysterical thought slipped through: 'So this must be how Loki felt.'

But just like how Tony had been there to help the god, he also wasn't alone. “Come on, Tony. Breathe slower. Do it with me, okay? Breathe in.” When Tony didn't, the hands gripped his shoulders tighter. “Breathe in.” At last Tony managed to suck in a shuddering, rasping breath that soothed the burn in his lungs. “There you go. Now breathe out.” He did so, and with the voice's guidance, he developed a steady cadence of inhale and exhale. As the air returned to Tony's brain, the world began to refocus, and the blur of red, white, and blue became Steve, crouched down worryedly before him.

“Hey, you alright now?” the soldier asked, not moving his hands from Tony's shoulders. And while Tony felt anything but fine, he nodded and continued to gulp air into needy lungs. Anxiety bayed at his walls, but he managed to resist it.

Once Tony had enough breath to speak, he said, “Loki. Thanos has Loki.” Steve stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending, and then a look of horror dawned on his face.

“What?”

“Thanos. He...” Tony struggled to explain, partly because he barely understood it himself and partly because saying it out loud would make it more real. “There was an alien—one of Thanos’s minions—in Loki's room, and then they disappeared.”
“There was an alien in Stark Tower?” Steve asked, already reaching towards his shield. When Tony nodded, causing the world to blur around him, the soldier tensed and surveyed the hall as if expecting another to appear. Tony hadn’t even considered that more aliens may break in, but why wouldn’t they? Given how wrong everything was going, he wouldn’t be surprised if the entire army invaded, and he would be powerless to stop them just like he had been powerless to stop the one who had taken Loki.

For the sake of his sanity, Tony shoved those thoughts away. He couldn’t handle an invasion right now. First he had to get Loki back, and then he would worry about the rest of Thanos’s army. To keep his mind from dwelling on horrid ‘what ifs’, Tony forced himself to make a plan with more substance than just ‘get the suit’. “Jarvis, contact Fury,” he said, pulling his legs up towards his chest and placing his head on his knees. He still felt dizzy, and panic was still present, but he tried to breathe through it. Loki needed him. “Tell him its an emergency.”

“Yes, sir.” As the AI carried out his request, Tony continued to take in measured breaths. Steve watched him, though his shield was lifted and he kept shifting his head to the side to watch for enemies. But when Tony’s breath hitched, Steve decided that the man was more important than a possible attack. He kneeled back down and, after a moment’s hesitation, placed his hand on Tony’s shoulder.

“Hey, everything is going to be okay. Loki is strong. He’ll get away.”

If Tony had the energy, he would have laughed at how ludicrous the statement was, but now he didn’t even lift his head. “I don’t think it’s that easy. Loki was... I don’t know.” Tony’s nails dug into his calves. “His eyes changed colors, and he just... gave up. He was the one who teleported them out of the building.”

“And you said he went to Thanos?” Tony’s silence was answer enough, and Steve came to understand why Tony felt so hopeless. He sat heavily on the ground across from Tony, and his head bowed. While Tony had hoped that the soldier would offer support even after learning the truth, Steve said nothing. There was also no answer from SHIELD, making Tony wonder if the Helicarrier had been attacked as well.

The quiet became too oppressing, so Tony said, “I’m going to search for Loki.”

Steve frowned. “I’m not trying to say you can’t, but... Tony, if Thanos really has Loki, there’s no way you can follow them all the way to Saturn.”

“I’ll think of something,” Tony said, but he knew that wasn’t true. If Loki really was on Saturn, there was nothing he could do. There was nothing anyone could do.

“I don’t doubt you could if there was more time, but-”

“Steve,” Tony ground out, and the man’s jaw clicked shut. “I know you are trying to be helpful, or want to keep an eye out for me, or whatever, but please stop talking. You know I have to try something. If you were in my place, you’d do the same. Hell, I’ve read your file. You did do the same when it was your friend behind enemy lines.”

At those words, Steve flinched, and he turned his head to the side, attempting to hide the way his jaw clenched and his lips turned downward. Then Jarvis finally reached Fury, and the sharpness of the director’s words was not belied by the hoarseness of his voice. “What is the emergency, Stark?”

Tony didn’t waste time on a preamble. “Thanos has Loki.” His voice cracked as he said the god’s name.
The declaration was met with stunned silence, followed by a tense, “What happened?”

“I don’t know.” But he knew that wasn’t enough, so he tried his best to explain those frantic moments that were burned indelibly into his mind. “An alien came, and… he did something. I don’t know what. But Loki couldn’t fight back, and the alien had this staff that he used. It changed Loki, made him different. His eyes turned blue, and he just teleported from the Tower.”

His explanation was lacking, but he wasn’t sure how else to describe what had happened. It was magic he had never seen before, and Loki wasn’t by his side to clarify. All he knew was that whatever had been done to Loki was horribly wrong. And while he didn’t think SHIELD would have a better understanding of what occurred, Tony said, “Jarvis, send SHIELD the surveillance clip of the attack.”

In the background, Tony could hear Fury shouting out orders, assigning a group of agents to analyze the footage. Then after a moment, there was a sound that was definitely not the director: a panicked yell sizzled through the speakers, distorted through the multiple channels yet unmistakably belonging to Loki. Tony flinched away from the sound, loathe to relive that moment of utter helplessness.

“Have there been any changes in Thanos’s army, sir?” Rogers spoke up, distracting Tony from the faint whispers of desperate cries.

“As far as our telescopes can tell, no. And were I not watching it with my own eyes, I never would have believed that one of them managed to get to Earth.”

“Loki warned us that the Mad Titan was powerful,” Tony said, wishing now that he had taken those words into closer consideration. But even Loki hadn’t known what to prepare for. “He must be able to teleport others across such a long distance.”

“It was Loki’s job to make sure Thanos couldn’t pull something like that,” Fury said.

“He had a scrying spell set up.” Tony defended. “We could see Thanos, and….” The man trailed off as previously disconnected events fell into place: the alien’s timing, its pointed question, its audience with Thanos, and the shattered basin on the floor of Loki’s room. “The scrying spell. They found Loki through his scrying spell.”

“Can they use it to get there again? Is Stark Tower compromised?”

“It's... definitely a possibility.”

“I’m going to send agents to monitor the building. You need to move any weapons stored there to a secure facility and evacuate civilian levels.”

A trill of alarm went down Tony’s spine. He couldn't do that. He had to search for Loki. “Wait, I-”

“I’ll handle that, sir,” Rogers interrupted. “I have more experience than Tony in both transporting secured goods and leading evacuations. I think his time would be better spent searching for Loki.”

“Do you really think he’s going to find him?” Fury asked. “Because from what I heard, Loki got a one-way ticket to Saturn.”

Tony opened his mouth to speak, to restate his hope that Loki had gotten away and was waiting somewhere, but the words caught in his throat and came out as nothing more than an indistinct rasp. He swallowed before trying again. “I at least have to try.”

“Stark, I don’t want to be the one to say this to you, but there’s more important things to do than go
on a wild goose chase. Not only do you have your own job, but you’re the only one who has some understanding of what Loki was doing. Earth can’t afford you wasting time.”

While Tony knew that Fury was only doing his job, the director’s ploy—guilting him into giving up on Loki—only served to infuriate the man. “What Earth can’t afford is to lose Loki. Just because he doesn’t like to listen to you doesn’t mean we don’t need him. We can’t just abandon him to Thanos!” Already they were wasting too much time. Each minute that passed reduced the possibility that the god was still on Earth—or even alive at all.

“And how do you expect to find him? Or save him when you do?” Fury demanded. “Neither of you could stop a single alien in your own tower.”

Tony ignored the jibe, if only because he was tiring of the constant back and forth. “I’ll search the locations Loki has been recently,” he said, and then in a flash of hope he remembered something he had forgotten. “Jarvis, activate the tracker on Loki’s phone.”

As the AI carried out Tony’s order, the man's pulse boomed in his skull. He would either be able to confirm that Loki had somehow gotten away, and he could find the god, or... “My apologies, sir,” Jarvis said reluctantly. “It appears the device is out of range.”

Or all it would do is confirm that Tony had been deluding himself. Still, he demanded, “Eliminate any possible interference and run it again.”

“I'm sorry, sir. There is nothing more I can do.”

“Damn it...” Though Tony tried to summon rage—to force away the sorrow before it drowned him—he was just too tired. “Damn it,” he repeated quietly, placing his head back down on his knees, as if covering his eyes would hide reality.

“There's still a chance Loki is alive, isn't there?” Steve asked. “If Thanos wanted him dead, wouldn’t they have killed him outright?”

“I- I’m not sure. The alien had said that they wanted Loki for something, but…” But Tony couldn’t shake the feeling that Loki was suffering wherever he was now. And if the Mad Titan coveted death, what’s to say he wouldn’t decide that Loki made a better offering than tool?

“Stark, you need to report to the Helicarrier,” Fury said. “If Thanos can send his army over without having to relocate his ships, we are now in a state of high alert. You are required to oversee weapons deployment.”

“Let me at least search for Loki first.” Tony was unwilling and unable to let his friend go. “Maybe the signal is just obstructed by magic.” Fury began to object, and Tony hastily added, “I’ll report back to you in a few hours, and if something comes up, I’ll respond immediately. Just... I have to do this.”

Either Fury understood that trying to convince Tony was pointless, or he found some semblance of compassion within his jadedness, because he said, “You have six hours, but if we fall under attack, I won’t tolerate delay.”

“If Thanos comes, I will be there,” Tony swore; if the Mad Titan’s army made a move, then Loki may be with them.

Fury sighed, and in that moment, the director sounded exhausted, as if he too had reached the end of his limit. Then that moment of weakness was gone, and Fury ordered, “Contact SHIELD immediately if the situation changes. We’ll keep you updated to changes on our end.
Romanov has been called back in. She’ll assist you with securing the tower.”

“Yes, sir,” the captain said, and Tony took that as his signal to go. He took a deep breath and uncurled himself. He used the wall to help him climb to his feet, and though he stumbled on his first step, the one after that was steady. He didn’t get far before a hand softly grabbed his arm, and he turned to Steve in surprise. There was still a melancholy expression on the man’s face, and Tony regretted putting it there.

“I’m sorry,” he began, but Steve shook his head.

“You were right. I have no right to keep you from searching for Loki. Who knows? The odds may be in your favor, and I hope they are. But...” Steve hesitated. “If you cannot find Loki, no one will hate you. This isn’t your fault, and Loki would agree that your safety is just as important. Please don’t be reckless out there.”

Tony nodded, and then he pulled free. He stepped towards the elevator, intent on getting the suit in the lab, but Jarvis made that unnecessary. “Sir, might I suggest using the dock on the roof?”

“I thought you weren’t going to help me,” Tony said, but he had already started jogging in the other direction. The voices of Steve and Fury faded into the distance.

“It appears I have changed my mind,” the AI said, a hint of his snark peeking through. When Tony exited onto the terrace, the dock was already whirring. Tony ascended the steps, and metal fell around him. Once the helmet clicked over his head, he shot into the sky.

Tony scoped out the city below as he flew in wide circles. Once, he flew down to check a raven-haired person sitting on the sidewalk below; it was just a drunk guy talking on his phone. Crestfallen, Tony angled back upwards, but no matter which street he went down, there was no sign of the god. A few minutes passed this way before Jarvis piped up, “Should I set a flight path, sir? I think you would benefit greatly from a plan. The chances of Loki frequenting a nightclub at this time are negligible.”

“Then where would you recommend searching?” Tony circled back towards the Tower to see a quinjet visible on the horizon, banking towards the large building. Out on the street, Captain America was escorting overworked scientists and frazzled secretaries from the building, glancing between Tony and the approaching plane.

“I have all of Loki’s recent locations saved in my database. Chances of finding him at one of those are significantly greater. I would also recommend checking places he frequents.” As Jarvis spoke, a myriad of red dots appeared on a map on the side of the HUD. They stretched across the US and onto other continents in overwhelming numbers, and Tony frowned.

“How recent are these?” He estimated that it would take at least two days to visit every location.

“These are locations Loki has visited in the past two weeks.”

“Change it to past four days.” Over half the dots vanished, leaving just a few scattered around Asia and Europe. Most of the other points were focused around major US cities, but there was still too much to check each one in the time Fury allotted. “Get rid of any location he hasn’t visited more than once.” Only nine dots remained, eight in the US and one in Europe. “Alright, take us to each of these.”

“Yes, sir.” The suit turned on its own, pulling Tony away from Stark Tower and towards the east. The repulsors were on full power, and Iron Man shot across the sky, barely able to make out any
details on the ground as he flew by.

Their first destination was in North Carolina, where one of SHIELD’s warehouses was located. Tony landed inside the fenced off area, but when he looked around, the only ones around were the two security guards that were walking towards Tony with their eyes alert but guns lowered. “Can we help you, Mr. Stark?” one of them asked, coming to a stop a few feet from Iron Man.

“Yeah, you actually can.” Tony glanced around the brightly lit complex. “Have you seen Loki come by in the past two hours? He’s the tall skinny guy with long black hair. You know, the one that likes to randomly appear in the middle of nowhere?”

“No, sir. You’re the only one who has randomly shown up tonight. Should we be expecting him?”

“No, it’s just…” Tony trailed off, and then he shook his head. “No. If he’s not here now, he won’t be. Jarvis, where’s our next location?”

“San Antonio, Texas, sir,” the AI replied as he activated the repulsors, and Tony flew from the complex without another word. But though he searched the next city for the god, Loki wasn’t near any of the wards he has constructed. Nor was he in New Mexico, or Ohio, or any other state that Tony flew to. And as the hours ticked away, so too did the meager amount of sleep Tony had; his vision blurred and his mind stuttered.

“Sir?” Jarvis inquired. “Sir, wake up. We have arrived in Malibu.”

“What?” Tony asked, shaking his thoughts free of the mire they had fallen in. He looked around himself in surprise. Where there had just been thick forests, there was now an expense of sand and ocean. “Jarvis, when did we leave Oregon?”

“Forty-five minutes ago, sir.”

“Shit,” Tony swore; he hadn’t even realized he had fallen asleep. “Did SHIELD call while I was asleep? Have they found anything?”

“No, sir. But I am obligated to remind you that you have now been searching for Loki for five and a half hours.”

Had it really been that long? It felt as if Tony had only just begun. Yet the mansion was coming up before him, overhanging the cliff and gleaming in the rising sun, and there was no denying the increasing exhaustion he felt with each passing minute. Fury’s orders or not, Tony didn't think he could keep up this pace for much longer.

Jarvis landed them on the roof, and Tony didn't bother removing the suit. He glanced out across the ocean — he remembered sitting out here with Loki, so long ago, and talking about the future. He had never guessed that something like this would have happened — before heading into the house. The elevator spat Tony out into eerily still halls, and the suit clanged loudly as he strode towards the living room. Feeling the need to fill the emptiness, Tony gathered his fear in his lungs and called, “Loki! Loki, are you here?”

But the silence of empty houses was absolute. Not even Jarvis spoke up to remind Tony that his search was foolish. The AI could see everything within the house; Loki wasn't there. Regardless, Tony went from room to room, throwing open the doors and shoving around furniture. He continued to call out, louder and louder — “Loki, where are you? Answer me, damn it!” — not willing to admit defeat. He left chaos in his wake, leading him down into the labs.

Dum-E rushed to greet Tony when he came in, and that more than anything made it clear how he
hadn't been home in a long time; the robot was normally only this wound up when Loki was around. And part of that may have to do with the fact that the god indulged Dum-E, whereas Tony only patted the robot absentmindedly as he pushed farther into the lab, searching around for something he would never find.

“Loki, are you in here?” When he spun on his heel, he stumbled, hitting the desk with his hip. A bowl that had been resting at the edge tottered dangerously, and when Tony scrambled to right it, he knocked it over the rest of the way. Tar-like paint splattered all over the floor and Iron Man's shins. “Damn it.” Tony backed away from the shattered clay. “This is why we put our stuff away, Loki! So it doesn't get ruined!”

The man's shouts filled the lab, and he held his breath in anticipation of a response. This was when Loki would make a sarcastic comment, coupled with a magic trick that would make Tony torn between annoyed and impressed. They'd bicker, much to the annoyance of anyone working with them, and in the end, once they both had their fun, Loki would just magic back together whatever it was that had gotten smashed.

The memory was so strong that for a second, Tony thought that Loki was right there, and he turned, expecting to see him standing on the other side of his desk; there was nothing but wet sigils painted on the far wall. Tony let out the breath he had been holding in a whoosh, staggering back into Loki's chair. He lowered his head into his hands, not moving even when Dum-E rolled up to him, poked his shoulder in concern, and whirred pitifully.

“Sir, it has been six hours.”

Tony groaned. “Give me a few minutes, alright Jarv? …Just give me a bit.” The AI obediently went quiet, and Tony just focused on keeping himself together, trying to not think of the half of him that was missing, or the monumental task still left before him. But just like the past year, Tony didn't get the time he needed.

“Oh, there is an incoming call from Miss Potts,. Would you like me to put her through?”

Even though Tony wanted nothing more than to lessen the burden placed upon him, self-condemnation got in the way. He had allowed Loki to get captured. He couldn't find the god. After all this time, he still wasn't good enough to protect the ones he loved, and he didn't want to have to face Pep knowing that. “Send her to voice mail.”

Tony rose to his feet, pausing as black dots swam across his vision. Once the vertigo disappeared, he climbed the stairs and made one last trip through the quiet house before letting Jarvis take him back to New York. As he flew across the country, a picture of Pepper continually blinked at him from the corner of the HUD, alerting him to incoming calls, and each time, Tony was too craven to answer. And the call he was both anticipating and dreading — one telling him what had happened to Loki — never came. SHIELD was silent, and Tony wasn't sure if that was a good thing. He at least took it to mean that he had time to stop at Stark Tower one last time before going to the Helicarrier, despite the fact his time was up. Maybe he would find some evidence left behind that would give him the answers he sought.

What Tony wasn't expecting to find, however, was that Pepper had been waiting for him. No sooner had he landed on the terrace and had Jarvis strip him of the Iron Man did she appear, her expression unexpectedly furious and her cheeks marred with tears. “Pep, what are you doing here?” Tony asked, but his baffled words were drowned out by her shouting as she drew closer.

“Anthony Edward Stark, do you know how worried I was? I kept calling you, and you couldn't even pick up the damn phone once!”
Tony swallowed, suddenly ashamed. "No, listen, it's not-" he began, but the second he reached the bottom step, Pepper suddenly lashed out and gripped his collar, making him yelp in surprise.

She pulled him closer, glaring into his eyes, and he watched in stunned silence as she exclaimed, "How dare you! Do you think none of us are worried, too? Do you think this only affects you?" Her face was twisted by emotion, and her chin quivered. "What if something had happened to you?"

Tony opened his mouth to say something, but any excuse would have sounded foolish. He closed it and stood still as Pepper gripped his shirt tighter, her body shuddering. "You're a selfish, selfish idiot," she accused. Then, just as quickly as she grabbed him, she let go of his shirt to throw her arms around him and pull him close. "I'm so glad you're okay. I don't know what I'd do if you disappeared, too."

Tony, exhausted beyond belief, allowed himself that one moment; he relaxed against Pepper, raising his arms to hold onto her tightly, as if she were the only thing keeping the world upright. And then as the last of his adrenaline finally slipped away, she really was the only thing keeping him upright. She staggered under his weight, nearly getting dragged down with him, before Tony righted himself and pulled away from her to stand on his own.

"Tony..." Pep began, but this time Tony was the one to interrupt.

"Pepper, what are you doing here? It's not safe." Loki's frighten face flashed through Tony's mind.

"I wouldn't have had to come here if you had just talked to me."

"You can't be here," Tony insisted, gesturing emphatically towards where she had come from. "What if that alien returns? The Tower isn't secure anymore."

"I can take care of myself, Tony," she said, and then she reached for him, resting a hand on his arm. That one soft touch unbalanced Tony, and he had to catch himself before falling over. "You're the one I'm worried about."

"And what about Loki?" Tony's words were harsh, but he wasn't intending the anger for her. She knew that, though it didn't keep her face from twisting in sorrow.

"There's nothing I can do to help him. I watched what happened, Tony. I know that what you two are up against is greater than anything you've faced before. All I can try to do is make sure that nothing happens to you, too."

Her words chipped away at something inside Tony, the thinning layer of denial he had clung to even as his chances of finding Loki alive whittled away, and his composure broke. "He's dead, Pep." Tony covered his face with his hands as if that would spare his friend the sight of his weakness. "If not now, then he will be once Thanos is finished with him, and there's nothing I can do to reach him."

"You don't know that. As long as the two of you are still alive, there will always be a way to fix things."

"How? He's not even on Earth anymore."

"By having faith." Tony pulled his hands away to stare at her, to see if she really had the confidence to back up her words; she did. "You'll figure something out. And if not, then trust that Loki will. You know he'll do everything in his power to get back to you."

The way Pepper said it made it sound so easy, and yet strength of will could only get them so far.
Though Tony had every intention of continuing forwards, his body could not keep up with him. Bursts of panic became less and less effective against the pull of exhaustion, and every time he blinked, it became harder and harder to force his eyes back open.

“Tony, when was the last time you slept?” Pepper asked in concern, tightening her grip on his arm when he swayed again.

“What’s with people asking me that? I’m fine,” Tony said, but Pepper eyes bore into his own, exposing his lie. He looked away. “I don’t have time to waste.”

“Taking care of yourself is not a waste.” Pepper stepped back, but her hand remained on Tony’s arm, bringing him towards her. “You’re still human, no matter how much you like to think otherwise, and you need to take a break.”

“But Loki-”

“You’re no good to Loki if you make yourself sick,” Pepper said, brutally honest. She continued to tug on him, and he had to follow her to keep from falling. They entered the living room, and Tony realized for the first time the penthouse was teeming with SHIELD agents. The ones posted around the room watched them as Pepper guided Tony towards his room.

Before they entered the hall branching off from the living room, one of the agents stepped forwards. “Ma’am, the Tower still isn’t safe. Neither of you should be here.”

Mournful or not, Pepper could still project an air of stern authority. “As I said before, you do not have the right to deny me access. If you are concerned for our safety, then maybe you should focus on doing your job instead of harassing me.” Then she continued down the hall, her shoes clacking loudly on the tile, and left the flummoxed agent behind.

“He’s right, you know,” Tony said. “You shouldn’t stay here. It’s not…” Tony trailed off, his attention drawn to mass of agents congregated at the end of the hall where Loki’s room was. They were talking rapidly amongst themselves and scouring the room. Tony thought he saw Banner in the mix until Pepper inserted herself between him and the room.

“Don’t worry about that right now,” she said, and though he resisted, she easily corralled him. And while Tony did not want to stop, the rest of him agreed with Pepper; he barely remembered entering his room, and he could not recall how she had managed to convince to lie down. But she did, and the next thing he knew, he fell so deeply into nothingness that he didn’t even dream about starships and bleeding moons.

Darkness engulfed him, pressing in on all sides, but Loki only had eyes for the shrouded figure on the throne that towered above him. His knees dug into the harsh, frozen surface, and his lungs breathed in only nitrogen, but he did not rise. This was his duty.

Thanos leaned forwards in his throne, watching the god with unconcealed triumph. “You will bring the Tesseract to me,” the titan said, his voice booming across the barren moon and towards the sleeping ships.

Beneath the blood red glow, Loki's first thought was to obey. He would get the Mad Titan the Tesseract so they could raze Midgard. Humans meant nothing, and Loki had been a fool to lower himself to their level. And yet...
Beneath the hot-rod red glow, the god replied differently—defiantly. “I do not know where it is.”

The grin on Thanos's face warped into a snarl, and Loki had no time to brace himself before his mind erupted into agony. He felt as if his very essence was being flayed. His shoulder collided with stone, and he could not contain his screams as he clutched desperately at his head. His legs lashed out, trying to strike at the unseen force tearing into him, but nothing he did could make it stop.

As quickly as it had happened, the pain was gone. Loki was left panting on the icy ground as Thanos demanded ruthlessly, “You will find the Tesseract, and you will bring it to me. Fail, and I will make you long for Death.”

“I will not fail,” Loki promised, crawling back onto his knees; whatever piece of him that had resisted—whatever errant idea that prompted such foolish rebellion—vanished. “The Tesseract will soon be yours.”

Thanos’s smirk was cold, freezing Loki down to the very core, and the god tensed when the titan waved his hand. Thankfully, the Mad Titan was just motioning for one of the Chitauri, the same one that had shown Loki the truth of just how weak he had allowed himself to become. The Other stepped forwards with the scepter in its hand and, at Thanos's command, offered the weapon to Loki.

The god cautiously rose to his feet, and when he was not smote down, he grabbed the scepter and pulled it close. Intoxicating power flooded his veins, pushing out the lingering twitches of pain. Loki bowed before the throne. “I thank you for your generosity. You will not be disappointed.”

In response, the Mad Titan buffeted Loki with a blast of magic that deconstructed his body. There was a too long moment in which everything ceased to exist, and Loki became one with empty space. Then, as quickly as it started, it ended; the god was rebuilt on Earth, armed with the scepter and single-minded conviction: find the Tesseract.

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...shouldn’t wake him. He needs to rest.”

“There’s no time. If anyone knows what’s going on, it’d be him. We have to talk to him.”

Words snuck through the thick fog coating Tony’s mind, latching onto his sleep-riddled thoughts. He tried to shake them and return to floating in nothingness, where his limbs were unresponsive and his worries nonexistent. The voices did not retreat. Instead, they grew louder, closer, and began to drag him back towards the waking world.

“Can’t you give him a few more hours?”

“Pepper, I don’t want him hurt any more than you do, but this is an emergency.”

“Stark needs to know what’s going on. You can’t protect him from this.”

There was a sigh, the creak of an opening door, and approaching footsteps. A hand fell on his shoulder, and darkness’s hold slipped in turn. “Tony, I’m sorry, but you need to wake up now.” He groaned in reply and rolled over, clinging onto easy peace, but the person was insistent. They shook his shoulder again. “I know you’re tired, but you have to wake up.”

When all he did was mumble incoherently and clumsily bat the intruding limb away, someone else spoke up. “This is taking too long. Stark, get up. We have information on Loki.”

Loki… Tony’s sluggish mind caught on the word, and his brow furrowed. Loki. There was
something there, a mix of emotions hidden right outside of his grasp. Something important… Memories breached the veil of sleep, tearing down its walls and pouring through every corner of Tony’s mind. He jolted into a sitting position, nearly slamming his head into Pepper’s as he weathered the onslaught: Loki, the alien, the staff. Thanos.

“Loki!” His eyes darted around the room, observing nothing but the glaring lack of the god. After that proved ineffective, he turned frantically towards Romanov, holding onto her promise of information. “Where is he? You know, don’t you? Is he safe?”

The agent's face was grim, and Tony twisted his fingers into the bed sheet as he glanced towards Pepper and over to Rhodey. They met his stare with the same severity. “Did... Was he…” Tony started, but he couldn't bring himself to ask if Thanos had killed Loki.

“It's complicated,” Romanov said, which did nothing to ease Tony’s mind. “We need you at the Helicarrier now.” Then she turned to leave as if she expected him to follow her without knowing anything. He stayed where he was, frozen by the implication that something horrible had befallen his friend.

“What’s going on?” He asked. “What happened to Loki?” Pepper was frowning sympathetically, her eyes red and watery, and it only made Tony more agitated. “Why aren’t you telling me anything?”

“It’s alright, Tony. Just calm down.” Pepper tried to placate him with a hand on his shoulder. And Tony would be calm down — if one of them would just tell him what the hell was going instead of dodging his questions.

“Like hell it’s alright! Where is Loki?”

“Loki attacked the Helicarrier less than an hour ago,” Romanov said, stepping back towards him. “We don’t know where he is now.”

“What?” Tony stared dumbly at her as her words refused to make sense. Loki attacked them? What the hell was that supposed to mean? Because while Loki did some pretty crazy stuff sometimes, he would never turn on his comrades. “That isn’t possible,” Tony denied, shaking his head. “Loki wouldn’t do that. You have to be mistaken.” But at the same time, Tony hoped that she wasn’t, because in order for Loki to turn on them, he had to at least be alive and in one piece.

“Stark, Loki is my teammate too, but I was there. I saw him kill people,” Romanov stated, her mouth in a tight line.

“I don't understand,” Tony said. “I know Loki. Nothing would make him do that.”

“We have to consider every possibility, Stark. Including him betraying us. However ,” she emphasized the word when Tony grit his teeth at her accusation, “from what we have seen, we do not think Loki is acting under his own volition. We believe he is being influenced by the alien that ambushed him.”

“But he isn't hurt?” To Tony's relief, Romanov nodded, but beyond that, he wasn’t sure if the news about Loki’s potential brainwashing was an improvement from what he had feared or just an unexpected twist on it. Before he could make up his mind, his attention was diverted to another anomaly. Rhodey shifted in the doorway, dressed in full uniform and looking out of place in Tony's bedroom. The sight sent off warning bells in Tony's head. While Rhodes was an important general, an attack against SHIELD’s Helicarrier shouldn't have been cause enough to summon him. “Please tell me Loki didn't attack somewhere else,” Tony entreated, and his friend shook his head.
“He didn't. I'm here because Fury requested to speak with me as well.” Rhodey paused for a split second — Tony wouldn't have noticed were it not for the concerned look the man also gave him — before continuing, “He thinks you'll need assistance in assimilating Loki's tasks.”

“But Loki isn't dead,” Tony stated, feeling betrayed. “He doesn't need to be replaced.”

“You can tell Fury that yourself once we get to the Helicarrier,” Romanov interjected impatiently. “We're wasting time here. Right now, our biggest priority is stopping Loki before he can cause any more damage—to us or himself—and we need your input.”

The mention of Loki getting hurt was enough to make Tony ignore his own uncertainty, and he nodded briskly. Romanov stalked from the room, leading the other three through the occupied halls; Tony slowed just slightly as he surveyed the SHIELD agents scurrying through Loki's room and the rest of their home. There were armed guards at every corner, turning the penthouse—the one location that had served as a refuge from the stress of the impending war—into a military hotspot.

There was a helicopter perched precariously on the terrace, but Romanov didn't seem to care that the Tower was not designed to accommodate one. She slid into the cockpit and put her headset on while deft fingers flicked on switches. Tony and Rhodey clambered into the cabin with less ease and began to strap themselves in.

Despite the fact that ever nuance of her body language said she wanted to follow, Pepper remained outside the metal hull. Once he was strapped in, Tony leaned out the open door towards her. “Pepper, I don't know what's going to happen next, but it's not going to be pretty. I need you to promise me that you'll stay safe.”

“If I do, tell me that you'll do the same.”

“I'll try.” Pep’s frown only deepened, so Tony added, “Things are going to be rough for a while, and you know I can’t just sit back and watch. But I'll do everything I can to make it to the end, okay? This isn’t goodbye.”

The propellers of the helicopter began rotating, but Pepper didn't step back and Tony didn't close the door; this might be the last time he gets to see her for a long while. “If things start getting out of hand, call me, alright? Don't try to do everything alone.”

“I won't. I promise. And when I get Loki back, we'll both call you, okay? But listen, I need you to go somewhere safe.” His tone booked no argument. “Stay out of the Tower until this blows over. In fact, stay out of any major city. Go see your parents or something. I can't lose you too.”

Pepper nodded, reaching up to brush the back of her hand across her eyes. “I will. And Tony, I'll be waiting for that call. Don't....”

The roar of the blades had heightened to the point that Tony could barely hear Pep's voice, and from the front of the chopper Romanov called, “Stark, we're taking off. Close the door!”

Hastily, Tony said, “When this is all over, I swear I'll do better about talking to you. I really missed you this past year, and-” The plane started lifting into the air, and Pepper stumbled backwards; she tried to reply, but her voice was swept away. Air tugged at Tony, and he knew he really should close the door, but there was one last thing he had to tell her: the one thing that he didn't say often enough. “I love you, Pep!”

At first he wasn't sure if she heard him, but then he saw her mouth the words back, and he allowed himself the tiniest of smiles before the door slammed shut.
There was a disturbing sense of calmness as Loki mowed down scores of people, a certainty at odds with the brutality of his actions. The mayhem following in his wake only served to heighten the incongruity of what was and what should be, and the reluctance of the agents to fire was not reciprocated. The god barely even glanced their way as he blasted them with magic or swung the end of that damned scepter into their skulls. With bodies paving his way, Loki ascended from the depths of the Helicarrier. Each carefully measured step was one of someone who knew they were invincible. Even when a blaring alarm went off and red light flashed across the walls, the god did not falter. Only when he had stormed into the bridge to stand before the barrels of a dozen guns did he stop, but his lax muscles taunted those assembled to stop him.

Though the events occurring on the screen had long since happened, Tony desperately wished he could intervene. While there was something cold — something terrible — about the blue-eyed god, it was still Loki. And even though Tony knew Loki had to be stopped, knew that Loki was killing people… he could not stand to watch him be shot down. Not like this.

He observed with bated breath as Loki directed jaded eyes towards Fury and ordered, “Surrender the Tesseract.”

“You think attacking my agents is going to make me change my mind?” The director stood in the center of the room with his own handgun pointed at the god. When Loki took a step forwards, the agents around Fury tensed, shifting closer to him. Only one agent moved in the opposite direction. Behind the ranks, Natasha slunk around the edge of the room, keeping low to the ground while her gaze remained locked on Loki's position. Either the god didn't notice her movements or chose to ignore them, because he kept his head held rigid, staring straight ahead.

“You will give it to me, or I will take it by force,” Loki declared, and Tony could hardly believe that the person he was watching was the same one who had lived alongside him for almost three years. They appeared the same, talked the same, and yet it was so wrong. It was as if someone — 'Thanos', Tony's mind supplied with a hiss — had reached inside the god and scooped out his heart, leaving nothing behind but calculated madness.

Fury had to be aware that they were outmatched against Loki, but he remained steadfast. “The answer is no. Now I think you ought to put that spear down and explain what the hell you are doing.”

That was when the first hint of genuine emotion crossed Loki's face, but it wasn't outrage as Tony had expected. It was a subtle scrunch of his eyebrows and thinning of his lips: it was a flinch of pain. Then it was gone, and Loki growled, “I gave you a chance, and you denied my mercy.”

No one had time to react before green magic exploded outwards from the god's hands, sending people flying. Haphazard bullets embedded themselves into the ceiling and allied flesh. Numerous agents cried out in pain. But there were a few who kept their wits, even after being shoved to the ground or against the wall.

Fury lifted his head from the ground and held his gun with both hands, leveling it at the god. “Drop the weapon, Loki!” Loki just waved his hand, and a burst of magic sent the gun flying from the man's hands and his body sliding across the floor. As the director clutched his head, one hand gropping about for the fallen weapon, Romanov stood up behind the god. She paused, hand on the trigger, and then shifted her aim from Loki's head to his shoulder before firing.

The sight of a bullet burrowing through Loki's armor burned itself into Tony's mind, and he shot Romanov a horrified look. But the assassin—sitting across from him in a meeting room that stank of
gunfire and blood, both scents poorly concealed beneath a wash of chemicals—met his stare unrepentantly. Tony saw why when he turned back to the screen; the bullet slowly slid out of Loki's shoulder, its tip marred with only a touch of blood, and tumbled to the floor.

Straightening his back, the god twisted his head to regard his teammate. This time, she did aim the gun at his head. But instead of attacking her, Loki looked away, and Tony thought he saw the god flinch again before walls of jagged ice rose from the ground. The crystalline structure obscured Loki from view, and when a few agents fired at it, the ice encased the bullets and grew back around them. The agents could do nothing but watch as a green glow spread through the structure, flashing and pulsing around the black blur.

Then, without warning, the screen playing the footage went black. Everyone in the meeting room stared at the empty expanse, lost in their own thoughts and stipulations. It wasn't until Tony started asking questions that the solemn atmosphere shifted. “Do you know how he managed to hack your system? Did he use any technology, or was it purely magic based?”

Fury sighed, his expression one of resignation. “As far as we can tell, he didn’t actually hack our computers. Everything he accessed reports that he had the password.” The director scrutinized Tony. “There’s only a handful of people who know the codes he used, and you’re one of them.”

“I didn’t tell him any of SHIELD’s codes,” Tony refuted. “I mean, I would if he had asked, but he had no need of them…” He trailed off as he realized that while Loki didn’t have access to SHIELD directly, he happened to have complete access to Jarvis, and none of the files were encrypted. The man shoved his chair back and frantically patted down his pockets, much to the confusion of the other people in the room. But after turning all of his pockets inside out, Tony still couldn't find anything. “Rhodey, give me your phone,” he demanded, stretching his hand out across the table. When his friend didn't move fast enough, staring at him in concern, Tony waggled his fingers impatiently. “Hurry up, man. This is important.”

At last Rhodes pulled out his phone and slid it across the table, and with shaking fingers, Tony dialed Jarvis. The AI responded promptly. “How may I assist you, sir?”

“Jarvis, has Loki been to either the house or Stark Tower since he was captured?” he asked, and comprehension dawned in his audience.

“I have not seen Loki in the past twenty hours. If I had, I would have reported it to you immediately, sir.”

“I’m not trying to insult you, Jarv, but Loki has fooled your sensors before.” Tony drummed his fingers against the back of the phone. “I need you to check everything: back logs, security footage, external servers. There should be something indicating that he’s viewed the SHIELD files.”

This time it took longer for the AI to reply, and as Jarvis searched for signs of a data breach, Fury said, “If Loki is compromised, we need to assume that everything he knows our enemy knows as well. How much have you told him?”

Tony rubbed the bridge of his nose and admitted, “Pretty much everything.” At Fury’s patronizing scowl, he defended, “I wasn’t expecting it to be a problem, alright? He’s our ally and a strategist. You said so yourself that I could tell him as much as I had to. How was I supposed to know he’d get brain-snatched?”

When the director didn’t seem inclined to shift the blame, Romanov spoke up in Tony’s defense. “Stark is right. Nothing he did was outside of the protocols SHIELD has established. No one suspected that Loki could be compromised, and we cannot undo that oversight. What we need to
focus on now is counteracting his actions and preventing future attacks.”

“Sir, I believe I have found what you are looking for,” Jarvis said suddenly, sounding abnormally concerned. “I am forwarding the footage to your phone now.” Tony glanced down as a blurry image filled the screen, and his knuckles went white.

There was Loki, blue-eyed and armored, standing in the lab at at Malibu. He was tracing runes along the walls with one hand and holding a bowl of paint — the same one that Tony had knocked over earlier — with the other. The bladed staff rested on a nearby table, never more than a few feet from the god. Then Jarvis fast-forwarded to when the spell Loki was crafting had finished, and holographic screens sprung up around the room, each one offering critical data to the god.

Tony’s mouth felt dry, and he asked with a strained voice, “Jarvis, when was this taken? What camera is this?”

“This footage was uploaded from external camera TS13A.” It took a moment for Tony to place why that particular sequence felt so familiar, and when it did, he clutched the phone even tighter. Dum-E.

“When?” Tony demanded.

“Approximately eight hours ago, sir.”

“Damn it,” Tony whispered, his fingers slackening as his eyes screwed shut. Eight hours: that was just before Tony had arrived in Malibu. He had been so close to Loki. If only he had gone there first, if only he hadn’t spent so much time searching for the god in Texas. He could have gotten to Loki before he reached the Helicarrier. And yet... what would Tony have done, confronted with this mockery of his friend? Could he have made a difference? Or would Loki have turned on him, too?

“Sir... while I have extensively searched the surveillance cameras from this time frame, I could not find anything showing either Loki or Dum-E in this location. My data is inaccurate.”

“You didn't see anything?” Tony had a hard time accepting the fact that the AI could be so easily bypassed, Loki or not. “Not even a glow?”

“I'm sorry, sir, but there is nothing else I can find.”

“Damn it,” Tony repeated, and were it not for the five eyes locked on him, he would have chucked the phone across the room. It wasn't supposed to happen this way. But he restrained himself, and it was with great reluctance that he ordered, “Jarvis, I need you to treat this like a code red security breach. Encode everything and lock it down. No one but me is allowed into your database unless they have the override, and restrict server access to the Iron Man suits only.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tony hated that he had to isolate the AI, but it was their only choice; they could not let their enemy have unrestricted access to their every plan. The phone disconnected, beeping plaintively at Tony until he turned it off and passed the now useless device back to Rhodey. Turning to Fury, Tony said, “I assume you've already tightened the security of SHIELD's network.”

The director folded his hands and set them heavily on the table, his mouth fixed in a permanent frown. “We managed to get the system back online an hour ago and changed the codes, but it's impossible for us to completely shut it down. But that isn't the main problem. Our concern now is the information that Loki already has. The location of the Tesseract was kept in a subserver to protect it from potential hacks, but even without the exact complex, Loki has enough information to hunt it down. At the speed he travels, we don't have much time before he narrows down his options, and
that's if he doesn't make a lucky guess first.”

“Why don't you just relocate the Tesseract?” Tony asked. “It can't be that hard to move a tiny box.”

“Do you think I'm an idiot, Stark?” Fury snapped. “We don't have that option. Due to the Tesseract's radioactive nature, we can not keep it docile without the proper equipment. If it reacts, it could create an explosion rivaling that of a hydrogen bomb.”

Tony's mouth formed an 'o' and he winced, beginning to understand just how much of a disadvantage they were at. “Then what are you going to do? We can't let Thanos get his hands on that much power.”

“Our only substantive plan at the moment is to station agents at each applicable facility. He's bound to show up at one of them, and we'll catch him when he does.”

That made Tony perk up. “I'll go too. Maybe I can talk some sense into him and get him to return to normal.”

Fury didn't even pause to consider his input. “You’re staying here, Stark.”

“What? Why?” Tony demanded belligerently, smacking one hand against the table. “Not only is my suit superior to your agents, but I understand Loki better than you ever will. I can talk to him. Help him. I have to go-”

“You will stay here,” Fury repeated, finally raising his voice to a shout.

“You can't-” Tony protested, but this time he was cut off instantly.

“I can and I will. In case you haven't noticed, there is an army of aliens waiting to attack Earth. You have to be ready at a moment's notice.”

“And what about Loki’s part in this? Are you just going to ignore all the work he has done? We need him.” 'I need him.'

“And if we spend all of our time capturing him only to find that we can't undo whatever that alien did to him? What do you intend to do then?” Fury asked acerbically. “There isn't any leeway to make mistakes just because you refuse to accept what's happening right before your eyes. You will do whatever you can to continue the work Loki was doing, and General Rhodes will assist in managing your spacecrafts.”

Again Tony felt the keen sting of abandonment, like he was the only one left that actually cared about what happened to Loki. Of course he wanted to win this war, but victory wouldn't be the same without the god by his side. Across the table, Romanov met his eyes, and Tony felt like she was reading his mind when she said, “Tony, we’re going to do the best we can to get Loki back, but this is beyond the two of you. Throwing away everything now would just be playing into the enemy’s hands. Do your job, and we'll do ours.”

It went against Tony's every desire to back down, and yet Romanov's point couldn't be ignored: the more time they spent debilitating over the issue, the less time they would have to fight back against Thanos—and that included their efforts to rescue Loki. So even though it felt wrong, he conceded, but not without one final stipulation. “If the situation gets worse, you have to let me help. I don't care what else is going on. You know as well as I do that we can't win this war without him.”

“I'll make that call if the situation calls for it,” Fury said, which was as much of an agreement as Tony was going to get. “But for now, you and General Rhodes have work to do.” Rhodey nodded,
signaling that Tony’s chance to argue had come to an end, and the director turned to Romanov. “Gather everyone who’s not busy and get them into position. The Tesseract must be protected at all costs.”

“Yes, sir.” Romanov rose swiftly from her chair, and as Tony watched the assassin depart from the room, he already rued his decision to not join her. The curt nod Romanov gave him before turning into the hall was only a negligible comfort, and then she was gone, leaving Tony trapped in the Helicarrier.

The next few hours were spent in terse debate as Fury, Tony, and Rhodey futilely tried to adjust their plans to accommodate any knowledge Loki may have leaked. In between devising new plans—only to realize they too weren’t viable—SHIELD agents kept them updated with a steady stream of information on Loki.

The god had appeared in the San Diego complex: one dead, and Loki teleported away before he could be apprehended. Half an hour later, he appeared in the Washington complex: four dead, and he teleported away. Eighteen minutes, and he appeared in the New Mexico complex: six dead, half the complex destroyed, and once again Loki escaped their hold. On and on it went, like a game of Battleship but with far greater consequences. Loki continued to guess where the Tesseract was located, and each time he made a move, an agent would call out his position. Even though the god had yet to sink their ship, both Tony and Fury became increasingly anxious. Nothing SHIELD tried stopped the god’s advance, and the spaces left to choose from were quickly diminishing. All they managed to do was rack up the casualties, and Tony was finding it difficult to focus when he knew that a shade of Loki was out there wreaking havoc and killing their comrades.

The tipping point came in the form of a distressed agent who rushed into the meeting room, shouting as if the world was ending. “Sir, we’ve lost all communications with our Pennsylvania complex!” For a moment, Tony thought that that had to be the facility with the Tesseract—why else would this attack be any different than the rest? — but when he glanced over at Fury, the director didn’t seem worried enough for that to be the case.

However, just because he wasn’t ‘worried enough’ didn’t mean that the director was unfazed by the news; his mouth was in a tense line, his brow was furrowed, and he demanded, “Have you also lost contact with Agent Romanov?”

“That’s part of the problem, sir,” the agent said hurriedly. “We only have a blurry shot from the surveillance before it went offline, but it appears she’s been compromised.” There was a clatter as both Tony and Fury shoved upwards from their chairs, and Rhodes looked between them in surprise.

“Compromised?” Tony parroted. “You mean like what happened to Loki?”

The agent nodded sharply, and Fury barked, “Show me,” as they swept towards the exit. Outside of the secluded room, the state of emergency became obvious; the halls were swamped with agents that raced back and forth, and the crowd only got thicker as they approached the bridge. It sounded as if everyone was shouting and snapping at one another, nearly drowning out garbled audio.

And yet, no matter how much interference there was, when the distorted voice carried over to Tony, he had no doubt it belonged to Loki: “I knew I’d come across one of you eventually.” The man sped up and turned the corner with his heart in his throat, eyes immediately drawn to the splotchy image of the god playing across every screen in the room.

Mesmerized by the scene unfolding before him, Tony slowed to a halt. There was another figure with Loki, and though there was a spear pointed at her heart, Romanov’s aim did not waver. The barrel of her gun stared into Loki’s eye, and her fingers clutched the trigger. In an instant, she could
have put ten grams of metal into the god's skull, and while Loki was durable, Tony didn't know if he was that durable. Who knew — maybe that was what it took to kill a god.

Romanov did not shoot. She had every chance to as her defiant eyes locked with Loki's vivid ones, but she hesitated. That was the opening Loki needed. He grinned savagely, and there was no hint of remorse as he rested the tip of the spear against her sternum, letting its magic creep into her veins. Green eyes mutated into twins of the god's, and the gun that pointed at Loki's face moved, aiming up at the security camera. The bullet was fired, and the screen went dark, taking with it the sound of alarmed cries.

Then the clip looped back to the beginning. Unsuspecting agents stood guard in between glistening state-of-the-art machines, guns clasped loosely in their hands. But within seconds, the scene abruptly changed; coruscating lights spread across the ceiling, and a god, with twisted horns and an apathetic visage, dropped to the ground. By the time the agents had reacted, pointing their guns at the intruder in their midst, an agent laid unconscious — maybe dead — on the floor at Loki's feet.

The god rose to his full height, seeming to tower over the people around him, and even the usually silly head tilt he did failed to diminish Loki's aura of danger. “So it isn't here, either,” the god said almost to himself, eyes roving the ranks of agents and the facility behind them.

Natasha stepped forwards, drawing Loki's attention to her. “Loki, put the spear down.” She kept her gun pointed at the floor, but whatever had been done to Loki obliterated his bonds, and words had no effect on him. He approached her with measured steps, taking advantage of their caution. “Loki, put the weapon down,” Natasha repeated, the barest hint of tension in her voice. “We are not your enemies. We can help you. But you need to stop.”

Loki did not stop, and in choosing not to shoot, Romanov doomed herself; Loki raised the spear to her heart. “I knew I'd come across one of you eventually…”

“Damn it,” Fury hissed, storming into the center of the bridge and parting the throng of agents. Amidst the wreckage of his platform, he bellowed out orders. “I want a squadron down there now! Notify each team we have on the field! If they have a chance to fire, they damn well need to!”

“You can't do that,” Tony said, struggling to be heard over the din. He ascended the dented steps towards the director, and when Fury fixed him with an intense stare, he repeated, “He's our ally. You can't attack him.”

“Ally or not Stark, he's killed thirty-two agents in less than a day. We can't afford to let this continue.” Fury turned away, as if Tony would just accept his decision. “Has Loki resurfaced since the attack?”

“No, sir,” an agent to their right answered immediately, her hands moving quickly as she shuffled through the data crossing her screen. “Though it's too soon to say he won't. The average time between sightings is twenty-six minutes. It has only been twelve.”

When Fury made to ask another question, Tony snapped, “Hey, I'm not done talking to you. You can not give your agents free reign to try and kill Loki.”

“Then what would you have me to do Stark?” Fury asked harshly. “In case you haven't noticed, there's an entire army of aliens waiting out there to kill us, and they happen to have control over one of the most dangerous individuals on Earth. If Loki continues to attack us — if he tells the enemy our plans — Earth is screwed. I don't like making these calls anymore than you like hearing them, but
right now, I don't have a choice. Seven billion lives are at stake.”

“And what about the agents Loki will kill before someone gets a lucky shot in?” Tony shot back, crafting his words to bring their audience onto his side. “Do you really think it's as easy as just throwing people at him until something gives? You're accomplishing nothing. Let me go.”

“What makes you think you'll have a better chance at stopping him than one of my most skilled agents? You don't have the nerve to fight him.”

“But I know how he fights,” Tony said, trying to project more certainty than he felt, “and I have a set of armor designed to withstand magic. If it came down to it, I could stop him long enough to give us more options than just shoot to kill.” Though if things went the way Tony hoped they would, fighting wouldn't be necessary. Loki — the real Loki, and not this monster walking around in his skin — had to be in there somewhere. Tony intended to bring him back to the surface.

“Even if you can stop him, how do you expect to find him? He’s attacking our locations at random.”

“I'll lure him out. Make a fake report saying you’ve moved the Tesseract, and I'll wait for him there.”

“You think he’d be stupid enough to fall for that?” Fury asked dubiously, but Tony knew that in questioning him, the director was actually taking his harebrained plan into consideration.

“I think he'd be confident enough to fall for it. Brainwashed or not, he's acting similar to how he normally does. He’d know it was a trap, but if he thinks he’ll have the upper hand and may find something… then he’d go.”

There was a moment of silence as the director thought about Tony's proposition, and then he said, “Stark, we are on the verge of intergalactic war. You better be sure that you can get Loki back on our side without getting the both of you killed.”

“This is our only choice,” Tony stated so he didn't have to make a promise he wasn't sure he could keep. But of his claim he was certain. “With his magic, we'd be hard pressed to contain him, and we can't let him run amok like this. If we don’t stop him now…”

Fury sighed, but at last he gave in. “You have one try, Stark. That is all we can afford.”

“Don't worry,” Tony said. “I won't fail.”
Prove That You Love Him

"Would you mind if I hurt you?
Understand that I need to.
Wish that I had other choices than to harm the one I love.
What have you done now?

I know I'd better stop trying.
You know that there's no denying.
I won't show mercy on you now.
I know, should stop believing.
I know there's no retrieving.
It's over now. What have you done?"

-What Have You Done by Within Temptation

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Sitting on the steps in an underground labyrinth, the bustle of operatives blurred into the background as Loki’s mind was swept from his body and forsaken on Titan’s hostile surface. Unbidden, the god’s gaze drifted towards the throne towering above him, but before he laid eyes on the Avatar of Death, a sibilant voice crashed through his head, scouring his mind like knives. “Obey, godling, or you will find my master’s mercy a fleeting gift.”

Clutching the scepter tightly in his hands, Loki forced the pain from his expression as he turned towards the Other. The alien emerged from the gloom, mouth bared in a hiss, and at his approach, Loki insisted, “Nothing I have done goes against Thanos’s orders.”

“Lies,” the Other accused, smacking his hand against the raised rock. “The Tesseract could have already been ours had you not hesitated! You think we do not see what you are doing? Do not hear your insurgent thoughts? Were you truly serving the master, you would have wrought destruction upon the humans.”

Again Loki’s eyes drifted up towards the Mad Titan, and this time he caught a glimpse of the powerful being sitting on his grotesque throne. What he did not expect was for those cold, blood-red eyes to meet his own, and a jolt of dread paralyzed the god. He did not fear the Other—did not believe the Chitauri capable of that which he threatened—but Thanos…

“I did what I had to,” Loki insisted, not looking away from the massive figure. He tried to instill a sense of sincerity in his voice, and yet he could not stop his thoughts from pursuing a niggling of doubt and betraying him.

If his words were true, then why did he continue to pick plans that were doomed to fail? Time after time, the opportunity presented itself for him to acquire the Tesseract: he could have used to scepter to pry the information from Fury’s mind. He could have turned Romanov to his side sooner and, after it became apparent that she did not have the information he sought, used what she did know the pinpoint where SHIELD had hidden the Infinity Gem. And if he did none of those things, then at the very least he could have killed them where they stood. So why didn’t he? Why did he always stop or ruin his plans before they came to fruition? Why did he allow the Tesseract to remain in the hands of an inferior species? Why did he ever think they were worthy of his protection?

...When did he decide that they weren't?
Resistance began to stir in the depths of Loki’s mind, climbing to the surface of the backs of unwanted questions — ’I am Loki! I am a god! My mind will not be taken from me! I will not be controlled’— but before the sensation could solidify, the Mad Titan’s eyes narrowed, and a solid wall of agony shoved every thought from Loki’s mind. It lasted only an instant, but it was more than enough to stop the stream of questions. However, Thanos was not finished, and his voice thundered through Loki’s mind a hundred times louder than the Other’s. “I know what it is you fear the most, runt. I have gazed into the Void from which you crawled, and I can easily throw you back in.”

Memories crept insidiously into Loki’s mind, untempered by time: endless darkness, suffocating emptiness, vile black. They clawed at him, and though Loki flinched away from the Mad Titan’s gaze, severing their connection, the awoken images remained in the forefront of his mind. They weighed on him as Thanos spoke again, making a promise the god had no doubt that he would keep: “Bring the Tesseract to me, or I will ensure that you suffer in that infernal place for the rest of your miserable life.”

Before Loki could speak again, his psyche was thrown brutally back into his body, and he jerked into awareness. It took him a moment to comprehend that he was still sitting in the abandoned station, scepter gripped tightly in stark white hands. The terror instilled in him by Thanos raced through his veins, but when he noticed the humans stopping and staring, he clamped down on such senseless emotions.

“You were not hired to gawk,” he snapped, rising to his feet and staring down at them. Obediently, the SHIELD agents that Loki had coerced returned to their work, and after a moment, the criminals the god persuaded to his side followed their lead. There was only one person who wasn’t so easily cowed; Romanov stood a few feet from Loki’s side, one hand near her gun in case someone tried to take advantage of his momentary lapse. From the corner of her eye, she scrutinized him.

“Why are you not doing your job?” Loki asked as she turned to face him fully, vivid blue on blue. “I gave you orders. Obey them.”

The agent was unfazed by the god’s foul attitude. She stood her ground, asserting, “Each task you assigned me has already been completed, sir, and I assumed you would appreciate not being attacked by our allies. The Avengers are responsible for killing or capturing many of their comrades. I would not consider such actions beyond them.”

“They pose no threat,” the god said dismissively. “It is a matter of priority: killing us is not as sweet a victory as destroying SHIELD’s prized citadel.”

Though Romanov did not know where the Tesseract was — it seemed Fury's paranoia knew no bounds — she by no means lacked value. Aided by Loki's magic, she sought out the embittered remnants of Hydra. Now composed of nothing more than a handful of zealots displaced from their original ideals, the organization could never have hoped to attack SHIELD on their own. All it took was some dead agents and the promise of further revenge to lure them into the fold. To them, it did not matter that SHIELD was trying to keep Thanos from incinerating the world; they clung to a glory long since passed.

“You of all people should know better than to doubt the mettle of men with nothing else to lose,” Romanov stated. Then her head snapped towards the scarred man strolling towards them, a red kraken emblem displayed prominently on his chest. When he drew closer, the Black Widow started to slide her gun from its halter while making sure the other soldier saw it.

Presumptuously ignoring the clear threat, the man walked right up to Loki and dared to address him
as if they were equals. “Our ships have been prepared and my men armed,” he said with a thick German accent. “All that is left is for you to hold up your end of the bargain.”

Loki glared down at the impudent mortal. “You would do well to remember who you are speaking to,” the god hissed, his magic itching to wipe the smirk off the man’s face. But as long as he required Hydra's assistance, his words were nothing more than an idle warning. The man knew that, and he flaunted what he perceived as power.

“Ja, you’re a coward and a fool. Were you Hydra, I would have you executed for treason.” When Romanov tensed at the god's side and Loki grew angrier, the German's grin got wider. “However, there is use for your unique skill set, traitor or not. Hydra is prepared. We can depart on your order.”

The last statement was enough for Loki to forgo his ire, and his chest thudded in anticipation. “Tell your men to get in position. The first squadron heads out in ten minutes.”

After giving Loki a mocking salute, the criminal turned back to his soldiers, shouting commands at them. Once he was out of earshot, Romanov said, “I request to accompany the vanguard, sir. Hydra cannot be trusted.”

“Joining the vanguard will amount to your death. There is more use for you than a suicide mission. You will accompany me to the Nevada complex.”

Romanov raised an eyebrow. “I did not think you would fall for SHIELD’s trap.”

“It is not a trap if entered willingly. SHIELD is preoccupied with the idea of stopping me, and that will serve as their downfall.”

“Forgive me for contradicting you, sir, but would it not be a better option to pursue Doctor Banner?” Romanov asked. “He knows where the Tesseract is located, and once SHIELD knows you are after him, their forces will be even more divided than they are now. It would accomplish both of your goals.”

The agent’s sound advice made Loki hesitate, and an echo of Thanos’s voice whispered through his mind, commanding him to find the Tesseract. Taking down the Helicarrier was a secondary goal. He needed to acquire the Tesseract and return it to its rightful master. But there was something that Loki himself sought, something that called to him more than the Tesseract. It lured him with whispers of emotions — the same ones that the Mad Titan had sought to wipe from his mind — and flashes of red. The nature of that which he desired eluded his mind’s grasp, but the call was nonetheless strong enough to delay his search for a while longer.

Indecision would only invite the Other back into his mind, so Loki forcefully repeated, “We will teleport to Nevada once Hydra is in the air.”

Romanov bowed her head. “Yes, sir.

-o-o-o-

Time moved slowly for Tony until he was actually standing in the warehouse waiting for Loki. After the god brain nabbed Natasha and every agent with her, he completely dropped off the radar. SHIELD waited in tense anticipation as it seemed that the plan they devised—which took over half an hour of arguing to get approved—would never be utilized.

During that time, Fury got in contact with Agent Barton, who was busy securing defenses in the Middle East. Clint was upset by the news, to say the least. He had spent a solid minute cursing, and then another five shouting at the absent god. Only when his cover was nearly blown did he quiet,
and then he swore to return to the Helicarrier as soon as his mission was complete. Were it not for the fact that other agents were relying on him, Tony thought that Barton would have come immediately.

Then they tried to get in contact with Thor, but that didn’t work out as well. Since cross-realm phones didn’t exist, some unlucky agent had to stand in the middle of a desert in New Mexico to try and catch Heimdall’s attention. That method was deemed useless considering that they didn’t even get a shimmer of lights for their effort. Either that, or Thor had revoked his offer of help. Tony didn’t think the god would do that, especially not without some warning, but Thanos was three planets away, Loki was running amok, and Asgard sent no one.

Six exhausting, mind-wracking hours later, Loki finally showed himself by storming through one of the remaining five complexes to capture or kill every agent there. But it wasn’t a complete loss; the god halted his assault when he noticed a screen left lying on a nearby desk, positioned as if someone had been reading it before he arrived. On it was the fake report they had concocted, redirecting Loki’s attention to the lab where Tony now stood backed by a dozen SHIELD agents.

Just looking at their setup was enough to show how much faith everyone had in this ‘talk it out’ plan, Tony included. ‘Only as a last resort.’ What a joke. Each agent on the ground had a ballistics shield and shiny new gun; in the rafters above, half a dozen snipers laid hidden with their rifles pointed at the expanse of empty space. And Iron Man was no better; he wore the most deadly suit he owned, one designed for the very purpose of killing a god.

“Stark, Loki left the Detroit facility almost seventeen minutes ago. Following his previous pattern, he should arrive there in less than ten,” Fury said through the com link. “Quinjets with reinforcements are a mile from your position. If he shows and the situation gets out of hand, I will send them in. Understood?”

“Right,” Tony said, trying in vain to push down his growing unease and steel himself to the thought of fighting Loki.

“And Stark...” the director began. “Good luck. You're going to need it.” Then the feed clicked close, leaving only the sound of Tony’s heaving breathing to fill the helmet.

The next ten minutes ticked by agonizingly slow, and when there was still no sign of Loki, the man found himself hard pressed to remain in position. Was he wrong? Would Loki not actually take the bait? Anxiety, his all too familiar friend, chewed on his nerves and filled him with doubt. To keep sane, he ran their (farfetched and hopeless) plan through his mind: Get Loki to come. Talk to him. Convince him he's being a stupid homicidal maniac. Stop Thanos together. Live happily ever after.

By the time green lights danced across the ceiling like the aurora borealis, the sound of fingers tapping against metal paneling filled the otherwise quiet warehouse. Loki fell towards the ground, and the jittery tempo was replaced by the sound of safeties clicking off; guns aimed where Loki landed. But what they weren't expecting was for another person to land beside him and point a gun right back. Romanov rose out of a crouch to stand proudly by Loki's side. Her eyes darted around the room, and Tony noticed her picking out all but one of the snipers hidden in the rafters. She shifted sideways until she was guarding the god's back and said, “I told you that they would be waiting for us.”

“Loki-” Tony started, but then the god's gaze passed over him, taking in the rest of the agents assembled to stop him. Seeing Romanov standing against them unnerved the SHIELD agents far
more than the sight of Loki did; Loki was always distant from them, and the few times that they interacted with him was when he was fighting, furious, or both. It was nothing they couldn’t distance themselves from. But Romanov was their ally, their friend, and they hadn’t expected her to place herself between them and Loki.

Surreptitiously, Tony motioned for the agents to withhold fire. Black Widow noticed, and she made a gesture of her own to Loki. A wide grin spread across the god’s lips. “You humans think you are so clandestine, but I have yet to find another species so predictable. Such a trite plan you have come up with.”

“And yet you fell for it,” Tony said, taking a step forwards; the god’s eyes darted towards him, but just like before, they slid away after a second. “Hey, stop ignoring me!” He took another step forwards, but Romanov wasn’t having it. She matched his step, pointing her gun at him while her fingers reached back for one of the small explosives on her belt.

Then, like a gnat buzzing in his helmet, Fury spoke up. “Stark, keep your distance. We can’t afford to lose three Avengers at once.”

Ignoring the pessimistic director, Tony proceeded to take another step, and this time, Loki tracked his movements from the corner of his eye. “Why did you come, Loki? You knew there was nothing here. What is Thanos making you do?”

At last Loki turned to face Tony, but the victory of the god’s attention was undermined by the furious snarl his grin had contorted into. “You presume many things.” The SHIELD agents hefted their guns higher in response to Loki’s taut muscles. “Thanos makes me do nothing.”

“You presume many things.” The SHIELD agents hefted their guns higher in response to Loki’s taut muscles. “Thanos makes me do nothing.”

“Bullshit,” Tony snapped, and Loki’s eyes burned bright. Tony was aware that he was playing with fire and knew that he should be charging up a repulsor in case Loki lashed out, but some part of him just could not fathom that the god would harm him. He continued to speak brusquely, relying on a wish for protection. “You’ve used the staff — you know what it does. Or is the whole glowing eye thing just a fashion statement? Because babe, you looked a hell of a lot better without it.”

Said glowing eyes narrowed, and Loki’s hand flared acidic green. “I have been given the truth and power beyond your imagining,” he hissed. “Do not think me as weak as you.”

“Sir,” the agent standing to Tony’s left (Agent Derkhaunt, if he remembered correctly) started, keeping her aim locked onto Loki’s eyes as pre-brainwashed Romanov had done. “Loki is becoming increasingly hostile. Do your orders still stand?”

In ordering the agents not to shoot, Tony understood that he was endangering their lives, and yet he was confident that if Loki attacked, he could protect them. He didn’t need people firing just because Loki was making a threat display, especially with Romanov there. With Loki they had some leeway, but one stray bullet was enough to kill the Black Widow, regardless of how skilled she was.

“Hold your fire until I saw otherwise,” Tony said, and while no one relaxed their guard, they nodded. Then Tony focused on Loki and Romanov; the latter was watching everything play out with otherworldly indifference while the former seemed ready to explode at any second. Fighting either of them was not what Tony had set out to do, but they didn’t seem keen on listening. That didn’t keep Tony from trying. “Loki, look at what you are doing! This isn’t you! Thanos is controlling you — both of you!”

“I am not being controlled,” the god replied, bristling, and Romanov said nothing, content to let Loki take the lead.
“Yes, you are,” Tony said, and when that seemed to be making no headway, he changed his approach; raising his hands in peace and lowering his voice, he insisted, “Look, we aren’t your enemy. I’m not your enemy. I know you must be confused right now, but let us help you.”

“I do not need help, Stark.” The magic concentrating on the god's skin continued to thicken, inching up his arms and seething under the fluorescent lights. “Especially not from you.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you say, princess.” Tony kept his arms spread wide despite the god's increasing instability. “You don’t need me, fine. That’s up to you. But please, put the staff down. Put the staff down, and—”

That was the last straw for Loki's patience, and he flung his hands outwards, releasing the mass of roiling energy. But unlike what Tony expected, the attack was not aimed at him; it was aimed at the agents beside him. Iron Man had only a split second to throw himself in front of the blast, which collided with the center of his chest plate and forced a breathless groan from his lips. The impact sent him skidding backwards, boots shrieking loudly against the concrete, until his back brushed against the agents' ballistics shields.

Loki went rigid, his hands freezing mid-motion with another blast of magic gathering on them. It wasn't just Tony's interception itself that surprised him; the god's eyes were drawn to the runes etched into red paint, pulsing from the magic they had just absorbed. “You remember making this, don't you?” Tony asked as the lights dancing across the surface of the suit died down. “You did this to protect me, so why are you attacking me now? Huh? What do you think has changed?”

“I was weak before. But now you and your beloved planet are of no use to me.”

Were it any other situation, hearing those words from Loki's mouth would have hurt. But now, Tony couldn't even begin to feel upset; everything Loki said was so obviously false—constructed by whatever magic was fucking around with his brain—that it meant nothing. The only thing Tony felt as Loki continued ranting—“Mortals are nothing more than ants under the heel of a boot. You shall be crushed, and your resistance meaningless. Midgard will fall.”—was sorrow for the god himself, because the scepter had mangled Loki's perceptions so severely that he could no longer feel what he once had.

And with that sorrow came the fear that no matter what Tony did, he might not be able to restore Loki's heart. Those worries he pushed aside; right now, his goal was simply to make Loki stop. “But can't you see? That's what Thanos wants, and you're right: you don't serve him. So what do you want? What is this going to gain you, Loki?”

“I will gain power and a throne. I will have what was taken from me,” the god sneered as he glared into Tony’s eyes. His magic writhed like snakes. “And you will not stand in my way.”

This time Tony reacted too slow; fangs of augmented ice lashed outwards, slamming into his side. He was thrown from the ground as if the suit weighed nothing and crashed into the shield of Agent Derkhaunt. They were both sent sprawling. Tony's head rang from smacking into the ground, but that didn't drown out the perturbed shouts of, “Don't move! Put your hands in the air!”

Tony groaned, clambering to his feet. Through the throng of agents that had rushed to cover them, he met Loki's vivid eyes. His magic writhed like snakes. “And you will not stand in my way.”

Either way, there was no follow up attack, and Tony tore his gaze away from the god to check on Derkhaunt; she was lying dazed on the ground behind him, both her gun and shield having slid from
slack hands, but after a moment she met his gaze with a nod. “I’m okay.” Another agent was making his way back towards them, gun still fixed firmly on Loki. He leaned down to offer his help. Derkhaunt gathered her weapons and got back on her feet, wiping the blood off her brow with the back of her hand.

“Stark, whatever you are doing, it isn't working,” Fury said as Tony returned his attention to Loki, who had relaxed his stance and didn't seem to be in a hurry to go anywhere. By the god's side, Romanov brought her free hand up to her ear and tilted her head as she listened to unknown chatter.

“Really? I hadn't noticed,” he retorted while the agents parted to let him through; this time, Tony's palms were glowing. “Don't you have something better to be doing? Like managing the Helicarrier?” In hindsight, Tony shouldn't have tempted fate like that; all he managed to do was take a few steps forwards, the god's name on his tongue, before shit hit the fan.

Out of nowhere, a high-pitched screech filled Iron Man's helmet and he flinched in surprise. Thinking that there was something wrong with Jarvis, Tony snapped, “Jarv, knock that off, man!” The sound didn’t stop, and then Tony noticed that he wasn’t the only one affected; agents were reaching up to grab at their headsets with a wince. It didn't take long for Tony to connect the dots.

“Fury, what the hell are you doing?” he shouted over the blare, but there was no reply. “Fury!” Then Tony’s eyes fell on Loki. A multitude of expressions flitted across the god’s face, moving so quickly that Tony could hardly identify them, but there were two that stood out: triumph and regret. Shifting the blame, Tony demanded, “Loki, what did you do?” just as the screech in his ears became deathly silent.

Face settling in cold satisfaction, Loki said, “I did what I had to do.” He turned to Romanov and spoke loudly, inviting them to listen. “Is the raid progressing as planned?”

“The Helicarrier has been boarded and their servers shut down,” Romanov confirmed while meeting the eyes of her old comrades, as if to say that even in knowing Loki's plans, they were powerless to stop him.

“Shit.” Tony's heart hammered in his chest. “Fury, are you there? SHIELD, do you copy? Does anyone from the Helicarrier copy?” Just as before, there was no reply; the HUD flashed ‘disconnected’ back at him. Other agents were also attempting to reach Fury, but from the sound of it, they too failed. Loki seemed content to watch them scramble, like the cat that got the canary. Even when an agent finally got a line through, the god did not react besides letting a lazy grin spread across his lips.

“Mr. Stark, while the Helicarrier is still disconnected, we’ve reached the stationary troops. They have requested to move towards our position and apprehend Loki,” one of the agents said, pitching her voice low as if the god wasn’t hearing every word that came from both her mouth and headset. “What are your orders?”

Tony had a sinking feeling in his gut. “They can’t help here. Send them to the Helicarrier.”

His command was strengthened when Romanov turned to Loki and said, “Sir, the first wave has experienced more resistance than expected. SHIELD is recovering the Helicarrier.”

Loki’s triumphant grin slipped, and he growled, “All of them are useless. Utterly useless. If they can’t do it, then I will.” His hands began to glow as he reached out to touch Romanov, and Tony’s stomach clenched. No. Not again. Not this time. He lunged forwards faster than he even thought possible, and just as the spell reached its peak, Tony’s hand gripped Loki’s shoulder. The world was wrenched away.
When Tony crashed back down into reality, his body slamming into unyielding metal, nausea churned in his gut and his muscles trembled. “Fuck,” he gasped before rolling onto his elbows and dry heaving. Never before had teleporting felt like this — like his guts were ripped from his body and then thrown haphazardly back in.

He wasn’t the only one suffering from errant magic, and as Tony regained his bearings, he lifted his head to see both Loki and Romanov sprawled on the floor. To his surprise, Loki was not the first to recover. In fact, the opposite seemed to be true; pale fingers twitched spasmodically on the scepter’s ridged surface, alternating between letting go and clutching the metal like a lifeline. Loki’s helmet had somehow gotten knocked loose, and long black hair fanned out in disarray. The sight recalled old memories of a broken god lying on the dented hood of a car, appearing to be nothing more than a skeleton dressed up and cast away.

Romanov shook her head and climbed to her knees. Then she made to stand up, but before she did, her attention was drawn to Loki’s shuddering form. Frowning, she leaned towards him, and her expression darkened when her eyes followed the god’s arm to the staff he now held in a death grip.

Just as the agent reached towards Loki, the god flinched as if struck by lightning. Romanov jerked back in surprise, and Loki twisted away from her, flying to his feet. His chest was heaving in what Tony thought was panic, but then the god turned towards him, and Tony realized that it was rage.

“You fool.” Loki took a threatening step forwards; any thought that Tony had about the god being vulnerable disappeared. “Do you know what you have done?”

“Uhh... Hitched a ride on magic express?” Tony hastily got to his feet and backed away from the irate god. Keeping an eye on Loki, he turned his head to discern where they were; it was the Helicarrier, no doubt, but not anywhere he had been before. Massive crates stacked in long rows were interspersed with hanging walkways and massive pipelines. From above, the faint sounds of shouting and gunfire echoed.

“I would have left you alive had you remained where you were,” the god snarled. “But now you have worn out my patience.”

Tony was going to answer — try and placate the god before he brought the entire ship down around them — but he was distracted by Romanov; the agent had decided that Loki could look after himself and was slipping off towards the exit, presumably to join the battle upstairs. Afraid that if he did not stop her she’d do something stupid like get herself killed, Tony stepped forwards, but Loki grew incensed at his dismissal. The god forced him back with a bolt of magic. “You want to stop me? Then fight me.”

Ice protruded from the ground in a sweeping arc, and Tony had to rocket into the air to avoid being impaled; out of the corner of his eye, he saw Romanov escape from the hull. Then another wave of ice was sent towards him, and he didn't have time to worry about the assassin as one of the spikes caught his leg and sent him spinning into the ground. A second later, the floor just inches from his face was ripped asunder. Rising to his feet, Tony desperately shouted, “I don't want to fight you!”

“Why? Do you think me unworthy?” Loki stalked forwards; Tony backed farther into cavernous room. “Forever the weak little godling that fell into your mercy?”

“No! I'm not fighting you because you're my friend!”

“Sentiment,” Loki scoffed. “We were never allies. Never friends.” This time the god's onslaught got alarmingly close to gouging out a chunk of Tony's thigh, and the man knew that this game of cat and mouse could not continue. Instead of winding down, Loki was working himself into a frenzy. “I
used you. Nothing more.”

“Do the past three years really mean nothing to you?” Tony ducked to avoid a split pipe that was swinging towards his head. Once metal stopped raining down on him, he continued, “This isn't you, Loki! If you'd just stop to think, you'd realize that Thanos is screwing with your brain!”

Just like before, Loki did not appreciate the insinuation that he wasn't in control; he lunged for Tony, and even without a shitload of metal encasing his limbs, the man was no match for the god's uncanny speed. He managed to deflect a punch, but a second later he careened into the crate behind him with a boot-shaped dent on his chest.

Gasping for air, Tony knew that he had passed the point of talking Loki down. The god was still advancing on him, void of the compassion he once had. Whatever had been done to his mind would not relinquish its hold so easily, and right now, Loki was intent on hurting—possibly even killing—Tony. If Iron Man did not fight back, he would not escape unscathed. But harming Loki when he was innocent was the last thing Tony wanted to do. Even as he flared his repulsors, he pleaded, “Don't make me fight you, Loki.”

The god's response was to fling more ice at him, but before the the twisted spires hit, a repulsor blast shattered them and sent chunks sliding across the floor.

“Jarvis...” Tony started, hating the words that were about to be said. “Activate all systems to full power.”

While Jarvis's 'yes, sir' was subdued, the AI pulled no stops in activating the suits defenses; the HUD came alive along with slumbering runes, and energy crackled through the wiring. At the sight of the vivified sigils, Loki at last halted his march. He eyed the armor warily, but Tony couldn't delude himself into thinking that the god had given up; once Loki devised a plan, he'd dismantle Iron Man piece by piece.

“I'm sorry,” Tony said even though he knew it would not matter to this Loki. But when his Loki — witty, mischievous, brilliant Loki — came back, then maybe his apology would excuse what he was about to do; he raised his palm and fired straight at the god's heart.

For all that Loki preached that there was never a bond between the two of them, he certainly seemed shocked that Tony actually attacked him. The god barely leapt out of the way in time, but once he recovered himself, Loki sent a blast of magic in return. Tony spread his legs and raised his palm; the magic hit with a bang, jarring Tony's shoulder, but the suit held his limb in place as the energy sunk into the runes.

The energy that rocketed from the repulsor was twice the size of the one absorbed, and this time Loki had no room to dodge as it bore down on him. He was knocked to the ground, and Tony couldn't help but flinch. However, not even a second passed before Loki climbed to his feet, bristling with indignation. “Are you so weak that you must use one of my own creations to fight against me?”

“Hey now Edison, don't go taking credit for things you didn't do. This suit is eighty-percent my baby.” Tony prepared himself for another shot. “And I think we both know you'd do the same. It's called being practical.”

Overhead, the lights suddenly began to flicker. At first Tony thought that Loki was causing it, but then he heard the distant cries grow louder and more agitated; the ceiling shook and rained dust down upon their heads. Taking advantage of Tony's distraction, Loki hissed out a spell and traced his fingers through the air. Tony realized his mistake and fired at the god, but he was too late. Five Loki's scattered throughout the passageway, and Tony quickly lost track of which one was real. He
took a random guess and fired at the clone keeping its distance, but that Loki grinned and dissolved into green shimmers.

Lightning streaked over Tony’s head, and when he spun towards the source, he found two Loki’s standing on a crate to his right. Iron Man focused on them, and the missile slots on his wrist popped open. The HUD locked onto each of the images and the suit fired. As the projectiles neared, one of the Loki’s didn’t even bother dodging and dissolved upon impact. The other teleported out of the way, reappearing on the other side of an overhanging walkway.

Convinced that he had found the real Loki, Tony erroneously disregarded the shades coming up behind him. He blasted his repulsor at the walkway just as Loki flung a blast of magic at him. A wave of green came over Tony as the walkway shuddered, but to his disbelief, the attack was just a farce; it glittered insubstantially into his armor. His eyes widen, and he jerked his gaze to where Loki had just been on the walkway. No one was there.

Had Tony reacted an instant later, Loki’s scepter probably would have gouged out his eye. The god appeared directly behind him, swinging the bladed end of the spear at Iron Man’s mask. Tony recoiled, but the blow still landed on the side of his visor. Runes smolder as they tried to mitigate the damage, but they were overcome. The metal dented inwards, slicing into Tony’s cheek.

Loki’s other hand followed the attack with twisting, screeching lightning. This time, Tony was able to intercept the god as he aimed for his heart. The bolt flew into the mass of wires overhead, causing the lights to explode. Glass and sparks fell down around them, and the room was cast into darkness. Both Loki and Tony stood out in the swathe of black—Iron Man glowed soft teal while Loki’s eyes and staff emitted a piercing cerulean.

Utilizing the stark light, Tony grabbed for Loki’s scepter while he kept his other hand wrapped around the god’s wrist. Loki’s eyes widened as the suit’s hand locked around the golden rod, and he tried to tear the spear away. Tony refused to budge.

“Let go,” the god hissed; his hands sparked belligerently.

“Why are you protecting it?” Tony demanded while twisting his wrist, trying to wrench the damn thing away. “It did this to you!”

“It's mine,” Loki replied, sounding far too much like Gollum for Tony’s comfort. Then the god sent another blast of lightning at Tony, and the electricity raced through the man’s armor and sung through his veins. Tony flinched violently—he remembered searing anguish racing through every nerve and seizing his heart—and accidentally released his grip on Loki and the staff.

The god retreated a few feet and started to create even more lightning, and while Tony knew it was foolish — knew that this suit could not reach a fatal charge — he could not shake the panic that welled in his chest. Attempting to bury his fear beneath a confident facade, Tony goaded, “What do you expect to do with that, huh? We designed this armor to fight your brother, remember? Your little light show isn’t going to cut it.” Once the words left his mouth, however, he realized how stupid they were; why did he think it was a good idea to bring up Thor and then offer the enraged god advice on how to better kill him?

Loki snarled, and the electricity he was gathering doubled, arcing wildly across his skin and zapping nearby metal. Despite his assertion that the lightning could not harm him, Tony immediately lunged out of the way of the crackling bolt and followed its trajectory with wide eyes. When the lightning dispersed into faint arcs, Tony turned back to Loki in time to see the end of the god’s transformation: pale flesh turned ebony, and bones warped. Then the massive hound (‘hound’ being a very loose description, seeing as how the last time Tony checked, dogs did not have six legs) rushed Iron Man.
Loki’s fanged, slavering maw snapped close mere inches from Tony’s head, and the man yelled as he staggered back. When the beast reared onto its hind legs, Tony raised both hands to its panting chest; the repulsor blast overturned Loki, and scything claws slashed at empty air in an attempt to regain balance. The floor shuddered as the god went down, and before the hound could get back up, Tony shot him again. Loki howled.

Hearing the agony in the god’s voice made Tony hesitate. That too was a mistake. Rows of serrated teeth clamped down around his left arm and viciously yanked the limb upward. This time it was Tony who cried out as his shoulder was nearly dislocated and fangs crunched the suit. Then the protection spell triggered, and magic discharged into Loki’s face. Lacerations across the god’s muzzle gushed with blood, but Loki did not let go. He started to overpower the suits fortifications, and Tony grit his teeth as what started out as mere pinpricks of pain became daggers.

The unibeam seared Loki’s chest, and the resulting shriek made Tony's head ring. Claws and teeth scraped against his armor, and the god was blasted loose to roll three times before coming to a stop. Tony hoped that this time it was enough, that they could stop fighting, but the massive form picked itself up off the ground and glared at the man with insane blue eyes. Loki slammed into the base of a storage crate when Tony fired the unibeam again, and it toppled over his back, obscuring the telltale blue glow from view. Tony waited for the god to reappear, but a minute passed and Loki still did not come around the corner of the crate.

Worried that he had gone too far, Tony used his repulsor as a flashlight and inched closer to where the hound had vanished. “Uhhh.... Loki?” He crept around the edge of the mangled storage bin, half expecting a gaping maw to clamp down on his head, but when he pivoted around the corner with his hands outstretched, there was nothing but a puddle of blood on the floor.

Once again Loki caught Tony unaware; he leapt down from the shrouded walkway and wrapped his hand around Tony's throat as he fell. Iron Man was shoved to the ground and pinned by Loki's absurd weight. Right above his mask, the tip of the scepter glared down at him. “Fuck,” was the most eloquent thing Tony could think to say. He craned his head away from the spear and lashed out with his arms, but Loki refused to relinquish him. The god removed his hand from Tony's throat to shove down one arm while his knee pinned the other.

“You're weak,” Loki said, and as he spoke, the deep gashes across his face stretched grotesquely; fresh blood oozed slowly towards his chin. If Loki didn't look deranged before, he certainly did not. “You always were. I was a fool to think there was anything special about you.”

In an effort to diffuse Loki's rage—or at the very least buy more time—Tony joked, “Aww, you thought I was special? That's-” He gasped as Loki shoved down on his chest. “Damn, princess, do you really have to straddle me like that? I mean, I know I'm hot, but you weigh a fucking ton.”

His words did nothing. Within the scepter's blades, the blue gem began to collect energy. Tony’s bravado started to slip away. His eyes darted towards the unibeam's loading bar, but he had used too much power; it was barely at thirty percent.

“Loki, let me go,” Tony ordered while putting every bit of strength he had into escaping, but the god's hold was impervious. The blue got brighter, and Tony’s heart thundered. Supposed immortality or not, he had no interest in seeing what would happen if half of his face was incinerated. Abandoning his pride — what good would it do him if he was dead? — he said, “Loki, please, don't do this. I know you are somewhere in there. Please.” The staff was now almost too bright to look at, and Tony futilely jerked his limbs one last time. “Loki, stop.”

Not expecting his final plea to have any effect, Tony twisted his eyes closed and braced himself. But a second went by, then two, and his head was still in one piece. Tony cautiously peeked his eyes
open, and then they widened when he took in the sight of Loki staring down at him. The staff was still in the god's hand, roiling and flaring with magic, but his entire body was rigid; beneath a creased brow, Loki's eyes alternated between bright blue and dull green.

“Loki?” Tony asked breathlessly as the flickering slowed, staying predominately green. “Loki, are you in there?”

Loki started to respond, but the words got caught in his throat as the blue started creeping back then faded.

“Come on, Loki,” Tony encouraged. “Don’t let them control you.”

“I'm not...” Loki began haltingly, but his words no longer held confidence, and he trailed off. The god's hold started to loosen, and Tony thought the Loki had done it; he cast off the monsters controlling his mind.

But then Loki suddenly went rigid, his eyes roving towards empty space while his hand tightened around the staff. Pain and terror contorted his expression, and Tony shouted, “Loki!” His words came too late; the green seared bright blue again. Wrath overcame the hurt and confusion. The spear pulsed.

There was no time to think; the unibeam reached full charge, and Tony fired it point blank an instant before Loki's spear did the same. As the god flung backwards, seething magic bore into the ground mere feet from Tony's head. Layers of thick steel were torn apart, revealing light from outside, and the floor bucked. Tony faced away from the concussive blast, feeling it buffet his armor.

Over the sound of the eruption, Tony heard another bang, this time accentuated by the crack of bone. He pried his head from the ground in time to see Loki, his chest smoking, fall to the ground. The god landed in a heap, and the scepter rolled from his limp fingers.

“...Loki?” Tony asked nervously. The god didn't stir. Tony scrambled to his feet, ignoring how the armor aggravated his wounds. “Loki, come on dude! I didn't hit you that hard!”

Finally, to Tony's immense relief, Loki began to move. One of his hands lifted to clutch at the back of his head, and the faint whisper of a groan made its way to Tony. Concerned, the man immediately headed towards the god, but after a few steps he remembered that the last time he thought he hurt Loki, the god ambushed him. Slowing down, he called out, “Alright, princess, I'd really appreciated it if you didn't attack me again. Maybe we could talk this out, get a drink, and-”

Beneath Tony's feet, the Helicarrier shuddered violently. His words were drowned out by roaring metal, and the next thing he knew, the ground was no longer supporting him; everything slanted at a forty-five degree angle, and gravity dragged Iron Man down. His feet slid out from under him, and with a cry, he tumbled towards the edge of the room. The massive storage crates also began to move, and Tony's eyes widened as one careened towards him. He struggled to right himself, but the second he activated his boots, the ship tilted even farther, and he accidentally propelled himself into the crate behind him.

Just as a ton of steel was about to make an Iron Man pancake, a jet of green slammed into the side of the descending crate. The impact knocked it off course, and with a screech, the crate rolled into a nearby walkway support. But that was only the beginning, and as the Helicarrier continued to plunge and cant, Tony could hardly tell up from down. Chunks of loose metal pummeled the suit from all sides, and more than once the man found himself flung into a crate or wall.

Yet there was little he could do to aide himself. Even if he knew where the exit was, there was no
way he could reach it. To make matters worse, he was not alone in the falling ship; countless agents were in the upper levels, and Loki's presence was punctuated by the occasional burst of magic that rippled through the air. Still brainwashed or not, Tony hoped that the god would flee; otherwise they would all be smashed into smithereens.

Then, mere moments before impact, the Helicarrier miraculously began to level out. Tony stopped flinging all over the place, and he clutched at the ground with sprawled limbs. He took a few deep breaths before all of the air was once again pummeled from his lungs; the Helicarrier groaned and lurched as it skidded to a stop.

Once the world finally stilled, no longer tilting and shuddering beneath him, Tony laid panting on the ground. Adrenaline trilled through his veins, and he could hardly believe that he was still alive. Everything had gone dark around him; the red exit lights had blinked out, and the gaping wound Loki had torn into the hull was engulfed in darkness. Only the faint light from his suit remained, and even that was fading.

Tony dragged himself to his feet with a wince, and the HUD began to fritz. When Jarvis spoke, his voice was garbled and distorted. “Sir, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm... I'm good. Somehow.” Squinting into the darkness, Tony tried to activate the repulsor, but it flared for just an instant before dying with a crackle. “Jarvis, what’s wrong with the suit?”

“The circuitry sustained damage in the fall, sir,” the AI replied, his voice becoming more indistinct every time Tony shifted. “I would recommend removing the suit at your earliest convenience.”

“That’s just great.” Tony muttered. Metal grated when he flexed his arm, digging the torn sheets into his skin, and he sighed. Jarvis was right; he couldn't keep the suit on for long.

Through cracked lenses, Tony surveyed the caliginous hull for any sign of Loki. When he saw nothing, he cautiously walked forwards, keeping his muscles tense in case the god decided to ambush him again. Though he tried to be quiet, he bumped into three crates and tripped in a puddle of water before he finally found what he was looking for; there was a faint blue glow on the other side of the room. But upon getting closer, Tony realized that the light was originating from under a mountain of twisted steel, and he picked up his pace. “Please tell me that isn’t Loki…”

Then out of nowhere, a hand grabbed onto Tony's shoulder, yanking him to a halt. Shouting in surprise, the man barely heard a tired voice ask, “What isn’t Loki?” as he reacted on instinct. Iron Man spun around, wrenched his arm free, and punched the person attacking him as hard as he could. There was a crunch and Loki ‘oomf’-ed, staggering back a step while clutching at his nose. Tony was about to punch the god again when his brain finally caught up to his fist. He stopped and stared at Loki, who was shoving his broken nose back into position with a groan, with his mouth hanging open.

“Uhh…” Tony said ineloquently, arm still raised mid-punch. “Loki?” It was hard to make out the god in the gloom, but that only drew his attention to the most important detail: Loki's eyes weren't glowing. Admittedly he still looked pissed, but more of in the 'Tony Stark, you are an insufferable idiot' kind of way and not the 'I'm about to blast your head off' way.

“Who else would it be?” the god asked, rubbing the bridge of his nose before pulling his dripping hand away. “I'd really appreciate it if you'd stop hitting me in the head.”

Despite his caution, a grin was starting to spread across Tony's face. Were it not for the fact that Loki might have killed him if he tried, he would have hugged the god. “Don't go grabbing people in the dark then. Fuck, I thought you were trying to kill me.” He laughed for a moment, and then it dropped
off awkwardly. “…You weren't trying to kill me, right?”

“I assure you, I am once again in my right mind.” Loki said. Then his hands suddenly brightened, and Tony flinched, his mind immediately concluding that Loki was attacking him despite the god's words. But just as he started activating his repulsors, he realized that Loki hadn't moved; the god watched him with a guarded expression while his magic pushed back the darkness.

Feeling ashamed of overacting to Loki's improvised flashlight, Tony automatically began to apologize. “Sorry, I....” He trailed off when he finally got a good glimpse of Loki's face: long gashes went across his cheeks, their exact location obscured by a mix of fresh and congealing blood, and the god's eyes were crinkled against the light. When said eyes met his, Tony could see the uneven dilation of his pupils, a clear sign of head injury. “Damn, princess, you look like shit.”

“I am no worse off than you,” Loki said while looking away. His gaze inevitably drifted towards the scepter's pulsating light, waxing and waning against the walls like a beckoning tide, and without another word, he veered towards it.

The sight of Loki walking single-mindedly towards the weapon, the moth to its flame, unnerved Tony. “Loki, what are you doing?” He rushed to catch up to the god. Loki didn't answer, and while Tony felt guilty for it, he couldn't stop the practical part of his mind from getting suspicious. “Are you sure you're not being controlled at all? I mean, I guess if you were still brainwashed, you could always lie about it, but...

Loki finally responded, slowing down and glancing sideways at Tony. “I do not believe Thanos still has access to my mind, but beyond that, there is nothing I can say to ease your doubts. You just have to trust me.”

The god made trust sound so easy, but Tony had noticed Loki's hesitance when he mentioned Thanos — saw the way he shuddered at merely speaking the name — and there was no ignoring the fact that he also hadn't stopped; Loki drew closer to the undulating light, picking his way around fallen metal and skirting around the deep pool of water that was rapidly filling the center of the hull.

Each step Loki took made Tony more anxious, and he considered forcing the god to stop. Yet step after step went by and he did nothing. It was cowardly of him, and he may regret it later, but Tony was loathe to start another fight. All he did was ask apprehensively, “Can’t you just leave that where it is?” as they reached the mound under which the scepter slept.

Grabbing hold of the mangled walkway that had ensnared the spear, Loki replied, “I do not want to risk the Other getting a hold of it again.” Then he shoved the twisted mass aside, and the blue light doubled its brilliance. Slowly, Loki reached down towards the unearthed scepter, which continued to brighten as he drew closer as if it was calling to him.

“Then destroy it. Loki, you shouldn't-” Tony began, stepping forwards with an arm extended, but the god had already wrapped his fingers around the gold rod. Loki lifted the weapon into the air, and any doubt Tony had to whether or not he was still under its control vanished; instead of gazing at the scepter with reverence, Loki held it far away from his body with a glint of fear in his eyes. The gem at the tip of the spear flickered, and the god flinched imperceptibly.

Coming to a decision, Loki shoved the scepter towards Tony. “Destroying it isn't an option. Take it.”

More than happy to get the wicked thing away from the god, Tony didn't even complain about having something handed to him. He snatched the weapon from Loki's hands before he could reconsider, and the second it lost contact with the god's skin, the gem dimmed. Tony turned the scepter over in his hands, surprised that he couldn't feel any malevolence from it. After the way Loki
was treating it, he thought it would do something... more. But for him, it was nothing more than an odd looking spear.

Loki broke Tony out of his reverie. “We should check what’s happening upstairs,” he said, and though Loki aimed for his words to be neutral, Tony knew him well enough to detect the regret in his voice.

Immediately he tried to curtail that doomed vein of thought. “It’s not your fault. You weren’t in control of your actions.” But even as the words were leaving his mouth, Loki shook his head.

“It’s not as simple as that,” Loki said, which Tony thought was ridiculous; he had watched the god struggle against the scepter’s control and knew that if Loki had a choice, he never would have let any of this happen. He intended to say as much, but Loki cut him off. “Regardless of where the blame lies, the damage is already done. All that’s left now is to try and put things right.”

With that being said, Loki spun on his heel and, after stumbling slightly, stalked towards the exit. Scepter in hand, Tony hurried to follow with a dozen declarations on his tongue. But looking at Loki—disheveled, exhausted, and haunted—he wasn’t sure which ones would be suitable. Should he offer words of comfort and insist it wasn’t his fault or make an optimistic comment and joke to ease the mood? Or should he listen to Loki and let it be?

It was true that what Loki did could never be undone, but not for a second did Tony blame him. Even when Loki was about to kill him, he never thought that it was the god’s fault. But he wasn’t the only one Loki wronged while under Thanos’s control. Should he bring up the memories, remind Loki of all the people he did manage to kill and put words to the fact that he was used as a weapon to strike the Helicarrier from the sky?

In the end, Tony kept quiet. Clearly Loki wasn’t in the mood to talk about it; the least Tony could do was give the god a few minutes to collect his thoughts before Fury scavenged his mind.
"I think I'm lost. I think I'm broken.
It's not what I wanted.
The verdict won't change.
I've gone off the razor's edge.
Thought it would be different.
Was treading the water 'til it took me under.

Quick retreating, so stuck in these feelings.
I'm taking the beating.
It won't let me go, go, go."

-Razor's Edge by Digital Daggers

Suspicious eyes shadowed Loki as he and Tony slogged through wrecked halls; he ignored them, just as he tried to ignore the dead and wounded agents who had yet to be relocated. SHIELD was in shock, their renowned fortress infiltrated and brought down, and to the agents who shouted for help, holding broken comrades in their arms, Loki was to blame.

Stumbling across the buckled floor — twisted and rent by a grenade and painted with ash and blood — Loki maintained a constant mantra inside his mind: ‘It's not my fault. I didn't do this to them. I am not to blame.’ But it was hard for him to believe himself when he could remember so vividly wanting to kill them, thinking that SHIELD, the Avengers — Tony — were nothing more than nuisances that required elimination. It didn't matter how such ideas now seemed ludicrous, or that he had at times resisted; the sickening fear Loki had felt in Thanos's presence clung to him, dragging down his resolve.

When they finally reached the infirmary—guided by the flow of wounded soldiers and pained cries—Loki stepped in only to be met with the barrels of guns. He came a stop, and Tony, distracted by the chaos around them, stepped into his back. The man staggered and, seeing the weapons pointed their way, raised his hands with the god in surrender. "You can put those down, you know. He's not brainwashed anymore," Tony said for the dozenth time, waggling the Other's scepter for emphasis. "We just need to consult with Director Fury. We were told he was in here."

The agents' suspicions were not so easily assuaged; they had learned their lesson on trust the hard way. Loki resisted falling back on anger to ease the frantic voices within him, and he forced his tone to remain neutral as he asked, “Is Fury still here, or should we search elsewhere?”

Before anyone could reply, someone screamed from a nearby cot. His comrade rushed to soothe him, but the man did not quiet. Loki could not help but follow the sounds, and he was greeted with the sight of mangled flesh in the place of a leg. Blood pounded through his ears — 'This isn't my fault. It isn't.' — and he clenched his fists as a medic rushed to the dying man's aide. At last the cries subsided, but judging from grim expressions, it was not an improvement.

“Director Fury left a few minutes ago,” an agent said, breaking the tense lull and drawing Loki's eyes from the rows of gore. “However, he should return soon in order to debrief Agents Romanov and Barton.”

“Romanov?” Loki repeated just as the man finished talking. “She's here?” Not waiting for an
answer, the god extended his senses, focusing on the stretch of compartmentalized rooms. His raging headache reasserted its presence with vengeance, but Loki was more concerned with the two hushed voices coming from a room down the hall to the right.

He started moving forwards, and this time the guns brandished at him lowered. Tony hurried to catch up with a wince, clearly favoring his right leg despite his effort to conceal it. They reached the sealed door, and Loki immediately punched in one of the codes he had memorized to invade the Helicarrier. The pad blinked red at him. He frowned and tried again.

The voices on the other side quieted, and footsteps approached the door as Loki was once again denied. He heard the lock disengage, and when the door swung open, Barton was already saying, “You're back early. Is something wro—” He stopped when he noticed Loki, and as the god had now come to expect, a gun was pointed at his head.

But this time, he didn't have to defend himself. From within the room, a tired voice said, “Barton, let them in.”

Initially, it seemed like the archer would argue, but then he peered closely at Loki's eyes. Barton sighed, his shoulders slumping as heholstered his gun. “Right, sorry. It’s been a long day.” Hestepped back, signaling to the other agents that the situation was under control, and let Loki and Tony into the room.

The god immediately sought out Romanov, fearing the worst. She was resting on the cot, her back propped up into a sitting position. One hand was holding an icepack to a growing bruise across her brow. Her other arm was strapped tightly to the frame of the bed, and upon closer inspection, Loki noticed that her ankles were also tied down. But she was alive and, other than the mild head injury, unharmed.

Romanov met his eyes, this time green on green, and Loki bowed his head. “It is good to see you again,” he said, knowing that the assassin would hear the apology in his words. There was also a plea for forgiveness and reassurance. For her to understand that though he was conscious of his every action, he had been powerless.

She out of all people understood what it was like to have foreign thoughts assert themselves in her mind, blotting out everything until only obedience remained. What it was like to be a puppet of someone else's design. “I could say the same to you,” Romanov replied, scrutinizing him not in accusation but in concern. When she was satisfied that neither he nor Tony were badly wounded, she closed her eyes and sunk back into the pillow.

Loki frowned at the display of vulnerability, thinking it meant her headache was a lot worse than it looked, but Barton didn't seem too concerned; he returned to the chair by Romanov's bedside and slouched into it, sticking his feet on the edge of the cot. “So, what happened to you two?” he asked, gesturing to their damp, filthy clothes. “I take it Tony was the one to get the princess's brain back in order, but did you go for a swim afterwards?”

“The lower level of the ship is flooding,” Tony answered. He grabbed the other chair, dragged it out of the corner, and plopped down with a weary sigh. “We did our best to seal off the storage area, but it's only a matter of time before the water spreads. That's part of why we need to talk to Fury.”

“He's trying to ascertain the damage to the Helicarrier and the planes in the hangar,” Barton said. “We were hoping that if we fixed the rotors, we could fly the few miles back to the coast.”

Tony snorted derisively. “Yeah, that's not going to happen. I've not seen the rest of the ship, but you have my word as an engineer that it's nothing more than floating scrap.” Then Tony glanced back to
Romanov, focusing on the icepack she had pressed firmly to her brow. “What did you mean by getting Loki's brain back in order?”

Prying her eyes back open to regard her teammates, the assassin answered, “Cranial recalibration. Clint smacked me in the head with his bow a few times—”

“It was only twice,” the archer protested.

“-and when I woke back up, I was myself again.”

“So... what?” Tony asked, his brow furrowing. “All it took to undo the staff's voodoo was a solid smack to the head?”

“That's what worked for 'Tasha, and I'm assuming for Loki as well?” Barton glanced at the god, and he nodded. The archer frowned, his arms folded tightly across his chest. “But... it wasn't that easy with the other agents that were brainwashed. They were... They had no regard for their own safety. Most are dead or missing, and of the three that got recalibrated, only one is not in critical.”

“How many casualties are there?” Tony asked, his gaze drawn to the door; while they could not see the mayhem on the other side, they could hear it.

“With communications down, we don't know for sure, but... last I heard, the count exceeds forty.” Barton pulled his feet down from the bed and rested his elbows on his knees. Forehead pressed against interwoven fingers, he stated, “We were lucky. If one of the engines hadn't been recovered, the ship would have been obliterated upon impact.”

“And what of Hydra?” Loki asked with his heart burning beneath his ribs. “Do they live?”

“Hydra is dead,” Barton said with cold finality. “Those bastards won't be coming back again.” He made to say something else, but then the door slid open. They looked up as Fury stepped inside.

The director was just as filthy and battered as the rest of them. He had shed his thick overcoat, and the sleeves of his shirt were sliced and torn. On his upper arm, a bandage was slowly seeping red. The bruise around Fury's eye (which Loki was personally responsible for) had grown livid, adding to his glower. Crimson streaks crossed his face like war paint.

At the sight of Loki, the director tensed, but then he—unlike other agents who lacked common sense—paused to take in the lack of violence happening in the god's immediate area. His eyes drifted towards the scepter that Tony was surreptitiously trying to keep as far from Loki as possible, and then to his two prized agents that were neither glowing-eyed nor panicked.

“How nice of you two to join us,” Fury said imperturbably. Then he turned to Barton, who rose from his seat immediately. “The Helicarrier needs to be evacuated. All able agents are to report to the bridge and begin helping the wounded onto the surviving quinjets.”

The archer glanced back towards Romanov, who gave him a slight nod. He returned the gesture, reached down for the bow leaning against the wall, and shouldered his quiver. He opened the door, welcoming in sounds of upheaval, and hesitated again. “Contact me if something changes,” he said, and Fury nodded. Only then was Barton satisfied, and he gave them a halfhearted wave before rushing to the aide of his comrades.

Resuming his scrutiny of Loki, Fury stated, “We don't have much time, so I'm going to get straight to the point: I want to know everything you know about Thanos and everything you told him.”

While Loki knew that Thanos and the Other no longer had access to his mind—nor would they as
long as he kept his distance from their cursed scepter—he could not shake the misgiving that they were there, waiting to drag him back into the depths of the void. Any reassurances he provided himself seemed to fall flat in recollection of the Mad Titan's power. But at the same time, he knew that he could not let such foolish fears paralyze him. Loki summoned his courage and answered as best he could, “Thanos sent me for the Tesseract only. He had no interest in our plans, nor in telling me his. But his army is ready, and I do not think he will take this slight to his person kindly.” The god suppressed a shudder. “The Chitauri will come.”

“Chitauri?” Tony interjected. “That's what those alien things are called?”

Loki nodded, and Fury asked, “How long until they head for Earth?”

The god thought back to the hive of aliens stirring impatiently within metal confines and Thanos's insatiable appetite for suffering; he answered without doubt, “A few days at most.”

Loki's answer came as a surprise to no one, but it also was the last thing they wanted to hear. Fury wearily massaged his forehead. A congealing cut on his palm smeared blood across his skin. “Do you know anything else? Like where they might attack first?”

Contrite, the god shook his head. Fury eyed him suspiciously, likely thinking that Loki knew more than he let on, but in the end the director relented. “We’ll work with what we have, but if you remember anything, tell me immediately.” Then to Tony he said, “General Rhodes is preparing his pilots as we speak. He has requested that you are there to ensure everything runs smoothly.”

Getting back up didn't seem high on Tony's priority list, but he nodded and turned to Loki. “Do you have enough battery to get us to New Mexico?”

“Loki is staying here,” Fury stated before the god could answer. “You can hitch a ride with the next group of evacuees.”

“But he just said he didn't know anything else. Why would you-” Tony cut himself off, and then he groaned. “You still think he's brainwashed. How many times do I have to tell you people he's fine? Hell, you can see it for yourself.”

“It isn't about trust,” Fury said. “It's protocol. I'm keeping Romanov under surveillance for the same reason.”

That did nothing to reassure Tony, especially with the way said agent was tied down to the bed frame. Loki sighed, aware that they were on the verge of another argument (it seemed that no one was capable of a civil conversation these days) and he asserted, “You need to leave. Thanos must be stopped.” Tony shifted his incredulous stare to him, but Loki returned his gaze unwaveringly. The god made it clear that while he may be wounded and shaken, he was in no way helpless. In trying to defend him, Tony was insulting his capabilities.

Thankfully, the man realized that without any dramatics, and he stood with a sigh. “Alright, fine.” The scepter in his hands received a disdainful glare. “Hey Eye-patch, what do you want me to do with this?”

Fury narrowed his eye, and then he said, “Agent Hill should be at the bridge. Give it to her and tell her to find a secure location to store it. We'll figure out a more permanent solution later.”

Loki was not ignorant to the fact that his input had been excluded, yet he could not find that to be a bad thing; though he thought he was in control, he did not trust himself with the staff any more than they did. Tony at least shared the god’s desire to be rid of the foul magic, and he didn't challenge
their plan.

“Loki, do you still have your phone?” The god nodded; he had nearly destroyed the device due to the tracking device inside of it, but for some reason had chosen not to. Now he understood why. “Text me when you’re done here, and I’ll give you a location to teleport to.”

With nothing left to say, Tony reluctantly maneuvered out of the cramped infirmary and into the hall. Loki hadn’t realized how stressed the scepter’s presence was making him until it was gone, and he breathed out slowly, unclenching his fist; on the cot, Romanov did the same. Then Fury cleared his throat, a sure sign that they were about to be bombarded with questions and demands, and Loki trudged over to one of the vacant chairs, steeling himself for an undoubtedly unpleasant conversation.

-o-o-o-

Behemoths of steel and Vibranium hefted themselves into the air, their roaring engines displacing sand in waves. Raised hands shielded eyes from the swirling particles until the ships blotted the sky and the ground settled. The Fireflies halted their ascent directly overhead, their forms cast in a myriad of silvers interrupted only by the streaks of paint adorning the sides of each ship. Unlike the Chitauri’s gargantuan, jaded spaceships, the ones flying above the desert were smooth and compact, illuminated minutely by their arc reactor cores.

“Run flight sequence alpha,” General Rhodes ordered, and the Fireflies started to drift apart. Their movements were slow and carefully measured as they separated and reconvened in groups of three. Watching them, Rhodey pressed his lips into a tight line. “Increase your speed and repeat the formation.”

This time, when the ships pulled apart and attempted the same routine, their flaws became obvious; turning took almost a minute, and when they assembled in squads, they overshot their positions. One of the ship’s wings screeched against the paneling of another, and in an effort to correct the problem, the pilot lurched out of formation.

Frustrated, Rhodes began to berate the aviators, and Tony allowed his attention to drift. He wandered up the crest of the dune and gazed down at the rows of Stargates lying beyond it. The pilots were getting a lecture by their superior officer; faint barks of ‘yes, ma’am’ drifted up towards him. But eventually that too failed to keep Tony’s attention, and he anxiously reached into his pocket and fished out his phone. ‘No new messages’ glared back at him.

Sighing, the man dimmed the screen and put the device away. He stared at the Stargates for another moment, and then he turned and shuffled back down the dune. Above him, the Fireflies had started another run, this time without bumping into one another. Rhodes watched them with a satisfied nod. Tony returned to his friend’s side without a word, keeping his eyes directed upwards and his thoughts channeled towards the coming battle. At least they had been, until Rhodey randomly said, “He’s good for you, you know.”

“Huh?” Tony turned towards the man. “You mean Loki?” His friend nodded, and Tony cracked a wry grin. “I don’t know about that one. I’ve had more near-death experiences with him around than the rest of my life combined. The guy’s a danger magnet.”

“So says the idiot who almost got shot down by the air force,” Rhodey jested. “But I mean it, Tony. Crazy aliens aside—hell, even with a war coming—you are happier with him around. And you drink less, which I hadn’t thought was possible. I know I said I didn’t trust him before, but I think it’s good that he stuck around.”
Thrown by the sudden admission, it took Tony a moment to respond. “Well, Loki takes a bit of getting used to. He’s a bit... intense.” Despite his words, Tony smiled fondly. “But you know, I guess I needed some intensity.”

From the other side of the dune, there was a loud huzzah. Tony and Rhodes’ conversation fell away as the Stargates’ pilots break rank. While the aviators placed on their helmets and boarded their vessels, the officer that had been speaking to them turned and started climbing the dune. “First Lieutenant Fielding,” Rhodes greeted when the stern woman stopped in front of them.

“General Rhodes,” she said with a nod. “We are ready to begin the Stargate flight routine for your evaluation.”

At Rhodey’s command, the Fireflies left their formation and began to land, buffeting the three below. Once the last ship's motor quieted, Fielding gave a signal to the waiting pilots below. Sleek and fierce, the Stargates darted into the air far more deftly than the Fireflies; they quickly became mere specks, rocketing back and forth in a formation Tony didn't know.

After a few runs, whose success bolstered Tony's waning optimism about the fleet's ability to combat Thanos's, Rhodes ordered, “Fireflies, join the Stargate formation, one ship per three fighters. Then await further commands.” The hulking ships leapt back into action, and Rhodey passed a headset to Tony. “Here. You get the red team.”

Securing the device around his ear, Tony inquired, “Red team?”

“We're running a battle simulation with three teams. The targets were set up before you got here.” Rhodey pointed towards three faint lumps spread far across on the horizon. “The goal is to destroy an opposing base with the Fireflies. So we don’t risk destroying anything, the Stargates may only use the guns we’ve equipped with paint shells. Any ship with paint in a critical location must remove itself from battle.”

“So we're basically playing paintball. Sounds fun.” Tony switched the headset on. “Hey red team, looks like you're flying with me. You guys ready to kick some ass?”

“Yes, sir!”

The man grinned, but it was shallow; no matter how exhilarating it was to see his designs in action, he could never forget the reason for which they were built. This wasn’t a game. The pilots he spoke to now — young, bright-eyed, and exceptionally talented — were going to die. For their sake, Tony tried to keep his tone jovial, treating this training as just another practice flight and not a rehearsal of their death march. Once the match started and each team started firing at each other, Tony refused to let himself dwell on how, in a few days, they would be using actual bullets. When he underestimated Fielding’s cunning and one of his Stargate’s was coated in black paint, he didn’t think about how he had just gotten his pilot killed.

The mock battle continued past when the sun started to dip beneath the horizon, and the ship’s cores stood out like bright stars. It became harder to direct the pilot’s towards the targets, which had been swallowed by the night, and Tony’s already lax formations grew chaotic. In the end, it was Fielding who brought the simulation to a close; her remaining Firefly swooped in low, evading both Tony and Rhodey’s Stargates, and dropped a missile on the target. The explosion painted the night like a second setting sun.

At General Rhodes’ command, the surviving ships began to land, and Tony removed his headset with a sigh. He rubbed his throbbing temples, absently wishing for some fries and a drink. And a nap. Or ten. Then he noticed Fielding coming towards him, and he stood straighter. “Good game,”
she said, offering her hand. Tony shook it.

“I could say the same to you. You’re quite talented.”

“First Lieutenant Fielding is one of the best strategists we have,” Rhodey said, walking over to join them. “She led one of the riskiest assignments we’ve had in years and got everyone back in one piece.”

“Thank you sir, but we had months to prepare for that mission. I only wish I could promise the same results now.” Her words were met with thick silence, and their eyes were drawn to the soldiers congregating below, who clapped each other on the back in congratulations. When Fielding spoke again, her voice was subdued. “It was a pleasure working with you, Mr. Stark. I’m certain we’ll be doing so again in the near future. Now if you’ll please excuse me, I must speak with my pilots.”

She strolled towards the congregation, and after she started talking, voice carrying faintly on the wind towards them, Tony turned to Rhodey. “I called Marshall on my way here. There are three sets of anti-aircraft systems ready to be installed. Want to join me for an all-nighter?”

“I’m needed back at the Pentagon,” Rhodey said apologetically. “But if you need assistance, I could get you some help.”

Tony shook his head. “SHIELD will supply people for the labor. It’s just…” He ran his hand through his hair. “When this is all over, you need to come over and have a beer with me. We can watch football, or go to the beach. You know, whatever it is that normal people do.”

Rhodey smiled. “I’d like that.” Then he checked his watch and swore. “I have to go. If you have time, we’re doing another test run in the morning.”

Though Tony doubted he’d be available then—or even conscious; the toll of the past few days was quickly catching up to him—he nodded. Rhodey bade him goodbye and hailed the quinjet on the runway. It coasted towards him, and then the man disappeared behind sheets of steel.

Alone and surrounded by darkness, Tony allowed himself one moment of weakness; his shoulders slumped, and he clutched at his bandaged arm that had been throbbing steadily for hours. Then he grit his teeth and let go to fish out his phone. There still wasn’t any messages. Tony briefly debated calling Loki and see what was taking so long, but then he told himself to stop worrying. If something was wrong, someone would contact him. With that in mind, he hunted down someone to fly him to Massachusetts where Marshall was waiting.

-0-0-0-

“He was sleeping in here the last time I checked.”

Loki peered around the agent into the conference room. Sure enough, there was a red lump lying in the corner next to a sideways chair. With a sigh, the god entered the room. His heavy steps did nothing to stir the man, and that more than anything spoke of his exhaustion; before they learned of Thanos, Tony had been a light sleeper, awakening at the smallest sound. Now he slept like the dead.

Nudging the man with his foot, Loki said, “Tony, get up.” The man groaned and Loki kicked him harder, making the metal clang. That at least got a response, but all Tony did was mumble something that sounded like, ‘No, let me go. I won’t do it.’ The god frowned. “Jarvis, wake him up please.”

Normally the AI would happily oblige and play an obnoxious song right in Tony’s ear; this time, Loki’s request was met with silence. His frown deepened. “Jarvis?”
Though Jarvis still did not reply, Tony had roused himself with a groan. Loki backed up as the man rolled over, and masked eyes slowly looked up at him. “What is…? Oh, hey Loki.” A second passed, and Loki thought Tony would fall back asleep, but then the man jolted into a sitting position. “Loki. Shit, you being here isn’t a bad thing, right? Where’s Thanos? I knew I shouldn’t have fallen asleep.”

“Thanos’s army has yet to mobilize,” Loki said, cutting off Tony’s panic. “The delay is in part my own fault… I asked for the Tesseract not even ten minutes after you had left.”

Though Loki hoped his words would be met with a playful tease, or at the very least indifference, Iron Man’s helmet lifted to reveal suspicious eyes. “The Tesseract? ...Are you sure you're feeling alright, princess?”

Offended by Tony’s lack of faith and the patronizing nickname — and loathe to consider the fact that Thanos was still influencing his mind — Loki curtly changed the topic. “A report came in that Thor has come from Asgard and an army is amassing in New Mexico. A quinjet is on its way, but Fury wants us to ensure that Thor does not move his troops before then. Any further delay would be unwise.”

“Right...” Tony said, thrown by Loki’s irritation. “I guess I’m ready to go then.” He glanced down at himself in displeasure. “Would have liked to eat first, but whatever...”

That Tony was feeling unwell enough to complain out loud — he often thought that having limits made him unforgivably weak — caused Loki to pause in his aggravation. He stopped thinking about how stressed he was and saw the exhaustion in Tony’s eyes, coupled with purpling bruises on sallow skin. Suddenly ashamed of his response, of filling their last days with scathing words and vexed silences, Loki said, “After we have spoken with Thor, we will stop at the Tower. You can eat there.”

Tony looked surprised at the allowance, as well as conflicted about accepting the offer, but in the end he smiled. “Great. Then let's hurry up and get this meeting with Blondie over with.”

Despite his previous words, Loki was far from eager to see his brother. Though a year had passed, it seemed like only yesterday he was being exiled from Asgard, and a day before that he had let go of the spear. Still, he took a deep breath and reached forwards, teleporting them to the Bifrost gate. The twisting light of the bridge cut through the air a few hundred feet before them, and at the junction of the desert and the sky, scores of warriors stood. Hulking Aesir, with thick black armor, golden shields, and double-bladed swords, crowded the empty stretch; their uproarious voices carried over the hiss of the Bifrost, far too jovial for the coming storm. But to Loki’s disbelief, there were also other figures; the Alfar — with vibrant skin and pointed ears, clothed in billowing robes and ornaments of bone — and Dvergar — short and stout, with heads full of braids and shoulders clad in furs — stood by the Aesir, and with each pulse of the Bifrost, more joined their ranks.

It took a minute for Loki and Tony's presence to be noted, but when it was, the news spread through the crowd like wildfire. Only when a lone figure broke from the ranks did they quiet, and the roar of Loki’s heart drowned out the dull murmur. Red cape snapping out behind him, Thor ascended the dune towards them. When he was mere feet away, the lines of burden on the king's face dissolved into a smile. “Brother,” he greeted. “Though the situation is grim, I am glad to see you faring well.”

Loki let his glare speak for him; at his side, Tony sighed. “Hey, Point Break. Good to see you too. Though honestly, I would have been a lot happier to see you a few days ago. You know, when we were having a bit of a situation.”

“My apologies, Stark,” Thor said, though he was not looking at Tony. Loki bristled beneath the stare, well aware that his face was branded with fading scars, and he loathed the thought of Thor
knowing what happened to him. Grinding his teeth, Loki dared his brother to speak of his weakness against Thanos and the Other.

However, Thor lowered his chin and continued, “There was an incident in the Nine Realms requiring Asgard's full attention.”

“But you're still supplying the troops you promised, right?” Tony leaned around the thunder god to observe the amassing army, though the amount of troops pouring from the Bifrost had already begun to slow.

“I gathered as many of my soldiers as I could spare. Including both the elves and dwarves, our numbers fall just short of eightscore. I am sorry that I cannot offer more.”

Tony blinked. “...Dwarves? You brought dwarves with you?” The man squinted his eyes against the sun, and at last he noticed the shorter figures interspersed with the large. “Oh. You did.”

Mistaking Tony's fascination with displeasure, Thor said, “Though small, the Dvergar are skilled craftsman and hearty warriors. They will fight valiantly against the Mad Titan.” Then there was a lull in the conversation in which Thor’s attention was inevitably drawn back to Loki. The thunder god’s brow creased as he prepared to speak again; Loki had no interest in what he was about to say.

“Agent Hill is on her way. She is serving as a liaison between Asgard’s troops and SHIELD,” he said, keeping his tone diplomatic and nothing more. “Once everyone has been given a headset and understands SHIELD’s protocols, your ranks will be divided accordingly.”

Although Thor continued to regard Loki with poorly concealed regret and sorrow, he thankfully did not say whatever it was he had wanted to. Instead, he said, “My presence is still required in Asgard. Until I return, Sif will act in my stead. I trust this will be acceptable?”

Loki lifted his lip into a snarl while Tony nodded. Ignoring Loki's reaction, Thor beckoned to Sif, who stood at the edge of the stagnating congregation. The warrior immediately headed towards them, armed with her sword and a glower. Upon reaching them, she greeted spitefully, “Loki. Mortal.”

“Yeah, the name’s Tony, sweetheart,” Tony said, plastering a see-through grin on his face.

“Sif, I know you are not fond of my brother, but you must put your differences aside,” Thor asserted. “Midgard — Nay, all of the realms rely on Asgard to end the Mad Titan’s reign before it begins. Your obligation to defend Yggdrasil comes first.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sif conceded, but not without giving Loki one last seething look that he gladly returned. “Of what did you wish to speak?”

“The warriors of SHIELD shall be here shortly. Do I have your word that you will treat their commands as if they were my own and keep order in our ranks?”

Sif rolled her eyes. “Who led the campaign in Vanaheim and secured victory though the odds were against us?”

Thor cracked a grin. “I do not doubt your valor, Lady Sif. There is no other I would trust more... Save maybe Fandral.”

Huffing at the jest, Sif said, “You have my word. Your army will be well looked after.” Then her eyes darted upwards, and her shield rose; the others followed her gaze to see five quinjets emerge from the horizon.
Thor took that as his cue to leave, but he could not resist meddling at least once. “Brother… I am glad to see that your exile has not done you ill, though it pains me that you can never return home. Asgard's halls are dull in your absence.”

“Then maybe you should hire better servants,” Loki scorned. “Clearly they are not cleaning your palace well enough.”

Sif bridled at the slight; Thor just seemed sad. “I will tell mother that you are well,” he said. “She worries about you.”

Then before Loki could snap again, Thor stepped back. He strode towards his soldiers, and when their king drew near, the Asgardians hurrahed. At first Thor did not react, but when the cry continued, he lifted his chin and shouted back; the unease had disappeared from his boisterous voice. With words alone, Thor rallied the spirit of his people, raising their voices into a thunderous chant.

“He'd make a good motivational speaker,” Tony commented absently over the clamor. Loki didn’t reply, and it wasn't until the Bifrost rent the sky and consumed Thor that he shifted his attention. The quinjets banked towards them, casting long shadows across the ground, and the zealous shouting Thor initiated died out.

When the planes landed and the sand settled, Agent Hill appeared, shielding her eyes against the midday sun. Sif stepped forwards to greet the disembarking agents, and once she had their attention, she bowed. “I am Sif of Asgard, at your service.”

Agent Hill nodded. “Maria Hill of SHIELD. Are you the one in charge?”

“For now. Thor has entrusted...”

The plebeian exchange wore down the last of Loki's patience; he turned to Tony, and the man knew what he wanted without a single word needing to be exchanged. “Hey, Hill,” Tony called out, interrupting Sif. “We’re heading out. Does Fury need us for anything else?”

Hill glanced over at them and shook her head. “There's nothing that you aren't already aware of. Just keep posted.”

With a nod, Tony offered Loki his arm. The god teleported them to the Tower, and they accidentally appeared mere inches from a SHIELD agent; both the guard and Tony jumped in surprise. But then the comedic scene became less amusing when the agent's shocked expression became one of mistrust, which in turn rankled Tony.

“Seriously? How long are you guys going to look at him like that?” the man asked harshly. “He was under Thanos's control for like two days. It's over now.”

“My apologies, sir,” the agent said, easing out of a fighting stance. “We are just doing our job.”

Tony glanced towards Loki like he was expecting the god to defend himself, but Loki could not fault them. Not when Tony reacted the same way—scrutinizing Loki when he thought the god wasn't watching and flinching when he moved too quickly—and certainly not when Loki could no longer trust himself. How could he, when murdering his comrades had at times felt not only natural, but enjoyable?

Irritated by Loki's lack of comment, Tony snapped, “Fine, suit yourself. I'm going to get something to eat.” The man took two steps towards the kitchen before stopping and spinning on his heel. “Actually, food can wait. I want this damn thing off.” Tony shoved open the sliding door and disappeared around the bend, leaving Loki to slink alone down the hall... well, not quite alone; a
dozen eyes followed his every move, but he told himself that it didn't matter. Regardless, Loki walked faster, eager to get a door between him and the agents. What he didn't expect was for his bedroom door to have been removed from its frame, or for the interior of his room to be gutted and covered in plastic.

'It does not matter,' Loki repeated emphatically, stepping inside to search for his spell books. He eventually found them stacked crookedly beneath his other possessions that had been crammed into the closet. Shoving piles of boxes out of the way, not caring when something shattered, Loki grabbed the massive stack and backed out into the room. He was about to drop the books to the floor to work on them when his eyes were drawn upwards.

Though SHIELD diligently removed any trace of the Other's presence, Loki could never forget the moment he had appeared. There had been no warning; one moment the god had been gazing into the basin, scouring for any trace of activity, and the next into ruthless eyes while a hand wrapped around his throat.

Something moved out of the corner of Loki's eye, and he whirled around, dropping his books to raise a glowing hand; nothing was there. Ragged breaths caught in the god's throat, and his eyes darted around, but he was alone.

Nonetheless, it took another minute before Loki let the magic on his hands fade and for him to cautiously gather his books. Then he abandoned his room and retreated down the hall. The door to Tony's room shut firmly behind him, and he dropped his tomes in the corner farthest from the door. Only then—with a clear view of the entire room and a readily available escape route—did Loki start to relax.

He wasn't sure how much time he had spent sorting through the books before something banged into the door. Loki twitched and prepared to stand, but the door creaked open to reveal Tony with a quarter of a bagel stuffed in his mouth, a glass of scotch in one hand, and a tablet in the other. The man shuffled into the room and nudged the door shut with his foot. Then he noticed Loki and blinked.

Swallowing the bagel, Tony said, "Oh, hey. I didn't think you'd uhh... be in my room." He shrugged and set his drink and tablet on the nightstand. "Whatever. I'm going to take a shower. You can just keep doing whatever it is you are doing."

Tony disappeared into the bathroom with a handful of clothes, leaving Loki to stare blankly at his books. He reached for the next one in the pile, but after flipping through a few pages, he suddenly grew angry at the overwhelming pointlessness of it all and threw the tome across the room. It smacked into the wall with a satisfying thump. Then Loki stood up and reached for Tony's tablet, intending to review SHIELD's plans for Thor's meager army.

Thanos's fleet filled the screen, and Loki froze in shock. He watched as the massive ships churned above Titan's surface, their revived cores painting a bloody picture. Inexorably, the god sought out the bone throne upon which the Destroyer of Worlds sat. To Loki's relief, a carrier blocked the Mad Titan from view. And yet... his skin started to tingle, almost as if someone was watching him.

A few minutes later—during which the god stood rigid as if caught in a web, only moving to lift the device closer—Tony emerged from the bathroom. The man tossed his dirty clothes onto the floor, and Loki glanced over at him. Tony's skin no longer bore traces of dried blood, and his eyes shown with rekindled energy. But those details were missed as Loki became fixated on the bruises and gashes that the man's short-sleeved shirt revealed. They peeked out from beneath the fabric, winding up towards Tony's throat and down his arms. The splotches were darkest on the man's left arm, especially around the scabbing gashes where Loki's fangs had sunk into flesh.
Tony didn't notice Loki's stare, but he did notice the tablet the god was holding. Dragging a hand through damp hair, the man stepped closer and said, “Fury thinks we have less than a day before they start moving. After that, we don’t know how long it will take them to reach Earth. Maybe another day, but that’s all we have left. Once they get here, everything is going to change.”

The phantom sensation of being pinned beneath heartless red eyes intensified. Loki swallowed and asked, “Do you have hope?”

“Yes,” Tony answered without hesitation, but then after the ships parted to reveal the gleam of bone, he amended, “No. Maybe. I had thought that we could do it, but…” He sighed. “Knowing that a battle is right around the corner is different than knowing it will happen in months. I kept telling myself we’d be ready, or at the very least would make it work, but… No one is ready for this.”

Loki intended to make a foolishly optimistic comment, but the oppressive sensation creeping along the back of his neck became unbearable. He shoved the tablet into Tony's hands, hoping it would alleviate the anxiety flooding his veins; it didn't. Thanos's taint remained.

In an effort to distract both of them from the portentous scene, Loki said, “We should go to SHIELD’s new headquarters. I need to speak with Fury.”

“About the Tesseract?” Tony asked. Loki nodded. “You know he isn't going to let you have it. Especially not after... you know.”

“He has to. That’s the chance—the only chance—we have of defeating Thanos.”

“Are you certain?” When Loki nodded again, Tony groaned. “Okay, that's... Okay. I'll do what I can to convince Fury. But if he still says no...” The man stared down at the agitated swarm. “Then I guess we need to start looking for a miracle.”
This Is War

"And the walls kept tumbling down,
   In the city that we love.
Great clouds roll over the hills,
   Bringing darkness from above.

   But if you close your eyes,
Does it almost feel like nothing changed at all?
   And if you close your eyes,
Does it almost feel like you've been here before?
How am I gonna be an optimist about this?"

-Pompeii by Bastille

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From the very beginning, their time limit was too short; one year was never going to be enough. Then time began to slip away. That year became half a year, then three months. But still they weren’t making enough progress. The closer the final day came, the faster the clock seemed to tick. Six weeks. Twenty days. Four days.

Now the screen broadcast a new number: 0:15:45. As Tony watched, it became 0:15:44. Less than sixteen hours remained until the planet was engulfed in war; every second was crucial, every extra minute a blessing. …And yet here they were, with mere hours remaining, arguing back and forth and deaf to their own words.

“Sir, despite your reservations, Loki has proven himself.”

“'Tasha, he was just under the control of a madman! He killed our allies! How can you be okay with this?”

“The scepter is no longer controlling either of us, and I trust Loki on this matter.”

“Thanos sought the Tesseract because he knows it is the key to victory. That's why it’s crucial-”

“I believe I’ve already made my decision clear.”

“Could you all please quiet down-”

“You’re outvoted. Just let us work on the Tesseract.”

“I wasn't aware that this was a democracy, Stark.”

“Guys, can you-”

“Oh, so that's how it goes? We’re a team up until someone makes a decision you don't like?”

“He's the director. He doesn’t need to listen to you.”

“He’s jeopardizing billions of lives. He will listen, and-”

“Quiet!” Banner shouted, leaping up from his seat and slamming his hands against the table. The noise made everyone jump, and their eyes darted to the trembling figure; Banner’s shoulders were
tense, the bulges of his muscles visible through the fabric, and his breathing loud in the stunned silence. When he dragged his gaze up from the table, his skin was rippling green. They shoved their chairs back and reached for their weapons.

Even when Bruce shuddered, the ominous shade fading from his skin, and his muscles eased, no one dared to make any sudden movements. Fear of the Hulk—of setting off a disaster when they already had enough on their hands—kept them in line, giving Banner the opportunity to say, “This is getting us nowhere. Make up your minds and stop bickering.”

Loki was the first to speak again, the others too wary of inciting the Hulk’s rage. “We need the Tesseract,” he insisted with forced calm. “Only it has the power to stop the Mad Titan without sacrificing the Nine Realms. You don’t need to trust me to see that we have no better options.”

On the expansive screen behind the god, an army moved. Four of the carriers dominated the view, their shells cold in the darkness of space. Hoards of battleships lurked in their scarlet light. It was not the entire army, probably not even an eighth, and Thanos did not accompany them, but it was an army all the same. They moved in rigid formations, rapidly closing the distance between their artillery and human lives.

The clock in the corner changed to 0:15:39.

Fury scowled, but his head tilted up to take in the coming invasion. Grudgingly he said, “I will consider your proposition, but this matter is no longer up for debate. There are more important things that need to be done.”

The dismissal was clear, and with Bruce sitting stiff in his chair, no one argued. With sharp nods, Natasha and Clint stalked from the room, followed closely by Rogers. Bruce wearily rubbed his eyes and put his glasses back on before rising too, though the tension around him had yet to fully dissipate. “I’m heading to Boston,” he announced. “Tony, if you have time, the defense system needs to be checked out. It has been experiencing a lot of interference.”

At this, Bruce glanced nervously towards Loki, but the god didn’t notice; he was locked in a glaring match with Fury’s eye patch. The director, however, was ignoring the god in lieu of conversing with Agent Hill through his headset. “I’ll try to fit it in, but Marshall has a list of systems that need to be set up,” Tony said, and Bruce nodded. When the physicist had left, Tony sighed and turned to Loki. “Princess, let it go. We have other stuff to worry about right now.”

“The Tesseract is the most important thing right now,” Loki said obstinately.

“Then humor me. What else do you need to work on?” When Loki didn’t supply an answer, Tony continued. “They are having some problems in Stuttgart. How about we head there first?”

At last Loki seemed to get it into his thick skull that the force of his stare alone was not going to change Fury’s mind. “There are spells I must finish. I can provide you transportation, but that is it.” He rose from his chair with his lips pressed in a thin line.

“I guess that’ll have to work.” Tony groaned as he stood, beginning to regret wearing the Iron Man suit everywhere as it chaffed his skin and pressed on forming bruises. “Find us a place to land near the German embassy.”

It took Loki only a minute to pinpoint a clear location with his phone, and they teleported to an alleyway across from the SHIELD building. “Contact me when you’re ready to travel elsewhere,” the god said as he searched for another location to teleport to.
“Yeah, I will.” Then Tony hesitated, unsure if he wanted to confide in the god. Eventually he began to say, “Hey, Loki, do you think—” but when he turned to look at him, the space was already empty. “Never mind then,” he muttered, habitually moving to run his hand through his hair only to hit his helmet. He headed towards the embassy where he was quickly intercepted by a SHIELD agent.

“Mr. Stark! Thank god you are here!” The man fell alongside Tony as they ascended the steps. “Something went wrong with one of the Jerichoes last night. The entire system is offline.”

“And you couldn’t find another engineer to fix it? No, don’t answer that. If someone else couldn’t fix it, the problem is probably with the runes. I’ll see what I can do.” While Tony didn’t have much hope in his ability to fix the system, the problem ended up not being as bad as he thought it would be. Were the runes destroyed, he would have had to call Loki back, which—given how quickly the god had left—would have been unpleasant at best. But upon opening the missile chamber, he found that magic was still pulsing from the symbols; they were simply out of alignment.

Of all the projects Marshall had for Tony to finish, that was the easiest to complete. The others required hours of careful attention, placing the anti-aircraft systems in critical locations and syncing the systems. He worked as quickly as possible, but he knew that he would never finish everything in time; every time he checked the footage of Thanos’s fleet, they had traveled millions of miles in an impossibly short amount of time. The occasional SHIELD chatter in his headset became more and more tense.

Too quickly did the hours on the clock change to minutes. One moment Thanos’s fleet was passing Mars, and the next they were slowly spreading out around Earth’s orbit. Tony’s headset became abuzz with orders and reports. Combat units from Mexico to New York to Britain confirmed they were prepared to move out at a moment’s notice. The Air Force sent fighters into the air. Rhodes called in; the Stargates and Fireflies were waiting for further commands.

Within the basement of a SHIELD laboratory, Tony didn’t see the advancing ships with his own eyes, but his phone was filled with news broadcasts. As dawn lightened the sky over the US, the backdrop of stars was torn away, leaving harsh black spots in the place of soothing white. Civilians panicked, and the military’s response was not much better. But even though they were not close to ready, they took hold of the situation, ordering cities beneath the approaching ships to evacuate and the rest to remain on lockdown.

“Mr. Stark, it is imperative we finish installing the additional defenses,” a SHIELD engineer said, drawing Tony’s attention back to force field generator lying in six separate parts. “We cannot afford for this facility to be attacked.”

“Right…” Tony reluctantly placed his phone on a nearby desk and reclaimed the welding torch. While he and a team of engineers assembled the device, other scientists scurried in the background, Bruce Banner among them. Though Tony did not have the time or energy to confirm his suspicions, as the physicists shouted back and forth, the thought crept upon him that there was something here crucial to SHIELD. And the only thing that Tony could think of that met that requirement was the Tesseract.

Then the last second on the clock fell away into zeros; a voice came across the intercom: “Kuwait is under attack. I repeat, the Chitauri have attacked Kuwait.”

It took all of Tony’s self-control to not reach for his phone and demand that Loki pick him up so he could fight in Kuwait. But in the end it didn’t matter, because not even ten minutes later, the floor beneath him rumbled and a siren went off. Another voice followed the first: “Chitauri are invading Boston. All available units dispatch at once.”
As the technicians around Tony froze, looking entirely out of their depth, Iron Man leapt into action. He hurried towards the exit, needing to see what was happening for himself, and SHIELD agents followed him; to Tony’s surprise, Bruce was among them. They rushed through the labyrinthine complex, and when it spat them out, they stopped, eyes drawn to the massive warship dropping bombs on the city proper. But when the ground stopped rumbling and the ‘bombs’ began to defy gravity, Tony realized that it wasn’t just explosives leaving the carrier.

“I need my suit,” he told no one in particular, backing away from the entrance and tearing his eyes from the wisps of gray already drifting towards the sky. Then he turned and ran through the crowded halls, his heart pounding in his chest as the sounds of battle followed him.

The date was August 4th, 2018, and the end of the world had just begun.

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“All citizens must head to the nearest evacuation point! Do not bring any belongings!”

Fleeing steps shook the earth; bodies clogged the streets, people shoving and pushing as unending streams flooded from offices and apartments. Terrified cries pierced the air; children were torn from their parents, families were rent by the fleeing crowds, and friends were lost in the mayhem. Voices called for each other as they ran, growing more and more frantic as the warship cast scarlet light on towering spires of glass.

Someone rushing past Loki tripped and smacked against the concrete. The man tried to rise, but the crowd was moving too quickly, forcing him back down. Shoving against the current of panic, Loki reached down to yank the man back onto his feet. “Keep moving,” he ordered in Arabic, pushing the gasping man in the direction of the evacuation planes.

“Thank you,” the man replied breathlessly, straightening his gutra and turning to follow the crowd. Once the man was out of sight, Loki shifted his gaze back towards the sky, ignoring the people who knocked into him in their haste; the Chitauri carrier was upon them, its hull almost touching the top of the Al Hamra Tower.

“The vessel is in range. All systems lock your aim.” Metal hit metal, and the eminent building chipped away. “Fire!” Projectiles burst from rooftops and alleyways, seeking out the ship’s core just as the bottom of the carrier slid open. Guns lining the underside of the spacecraft intercepted the missiles, and once the explosions lulled, small cruisers manned by Chitauri slipped out of the carrier and descended towards the streets. People screamed and tried to move faster, resulting in more bodies getting shoved to the ground and trampled.

As Loki shifted his form, bullets rained down on the city; a crackling force field intercepted the shots, dissipating them, and runes thrummed within the god’s mind. He flew past the glimmering dome and veered for the nearest cruiser, dodging both ally and Chitauri fire. The small ships were agile, and Loki missed his target the first time he lunged, receiving a spray of energy blasts along his spine. But when he lurched towards the cruiser again, he managed to wrap his talons around the handholds.

Without mercy or hesitation, Loki tore off the head of one of the Chitauri. The weapon it had dared to aim at him fell to floor. Black blood dripped from snarling lips as the god towered over the second loathsome creature. It scrambled for its gun, but Loki was in control now. He snapped bones between his jaws, the sensation infinitely more pleasurable than being forced to kneel before the Chitauri—than being seen as nothing more than a tool.

Two fresh corpses slid from the cruiser, crashing into the side of a building as they descended towards the ground. The ship itself remained clutched tightly in Loki’s claws as he beat his wings
against the air, rising to meet another squad of Chitauri. He flung his trophy into a second cruiser, removing them both from play, and lunged at the aliens shooting him.

However, Loki's rage was not enough to win a war; he was soon surrounded and could only watch as the aliens breached his shield to attack the civilians below. People screamed, attempting to dart out of the way, but there was nowhere for them to hide. They fell to the onslaught. Loki threw himself into battle, clawing anything that got in his way, but he was not moving fast enough.

Thankfully, it wasn't long before he heard the roar of jets, and Kuwait fighters appeared on the horizon. There were five of them, and two split off towards the city while three came to assist Loki. They managed to get half of the Chitauri out of the way, and the god took care of the rest. He flared out his wings, knocking over a cruiser while dropping onto the nose of the ship in front of him. When the enemy tried to attack the membrane of his wings, Loki shapeshifted back and vaulted over the handrail onto the cruiser. A roundhouse kick sent one of the Chitauri flying, and then Loki released a dagger from his vambrace to stab the other in the back. He shifted the blade upwards, intending to cause more damage before pulling it free, when the cruiser lurched in response to his action.

Curious, Loki twisted the blade in the other direction, and the ship obeyed again. With a grin and blood on his hands, Loki guided the half-dead Chitauri towards the other two cruisers. A bolt of lightning shot from his palm to burn alien flesh. The Chitauri trying to cut him off screeched, raising its hands to its blackened face. The ship drove into the side of a skyscraper.

The next ship to fall was the one Loki had commandeered. He attempted to swerve out of the way of an energy blast aimed for his head, causing it to instead to hit the metal ribbing protecting the engine. Loki was launched from the sky, and he fell down to a nearby rooftop. After rolling to a stop, the god scrambled to get back on his feet. When he turned back to fight the Chitauri that attacked him, he found that it had already been killed by one of the fighters.

Then a shout filled Loki's headset, blaring over the sound of explosions. “The carrier is retreating!” The god immediately looked towards the massive ship, its underside still being peppered with missiles, and found the words to be true; the door to its hull had closed and it was rising upwards, leaving its soldiers behind to return unharmed to orbit.

Watching the carrier retreat, a thought crossed Loki's mind: What if the Other was on board that ship? What if the one who had captured him, used him, controlled him in the name of his master, was right there and Loki was letting him escape? The god's fists clenched. If the Other was there, then Loki would kill him. He refused to live in fear that he would be taken again. He refused to think that he was not strong enough to protect himself.

Ignoring common sense, Loki teleported blindly above the ship; he overshot, appearing a hundred feet above the wing, and crashed down onto it. The impact knocked the breath from his lungs, and when he tried to reclaim it, he found that the air was too thin. That didn't stop Loki from rising to his feet and hissing, “You were fools to try and rule a god.”

Magic slammed into the metal beneath him, the recoil strong enough to send Loki back a step, but the shell barely dented; whatever ore went into the Chitauri vessels, it was far stronger than Midgardian steel. Furious, Loki yanked more magic forth and concentrated it to a fever pitch beneath his skin. The ship only shuddered when he smashed it the second time.

The only thing raging through Loki’s mind at that moment was the desire to make the Chitauri burn; he didn’t think about the people that would be crushed by the falling carrier. All he thought about, all he remembered, was kneeling before Thanos’s throne. His chest was an inferno as humiliation filled him; the Other had forced him, a god, to kowtow before wretched creatures. They had tortured him
before uncaring eyes.

“Loki, where are you?” A voice fizzled in the god’s ear. “The enemy is trying to attack the evacuation ships. We’re outnumbered. Return to ground. I repeat, return to ground!”

The command was ignored; over and over the god slammed his fist down into the metal, skin seething with magic. The pain in his knuckles blurred with the torment he had endured on Titan. But though the wing was bending with each hit and the ship canted, sending Loki sliding from his perch, he knew it wasn’t enough. The culmination of his suffering was a mere inconvenience to the massive carrier.

For all of his magic, Loki felt powerless. His chest heaved; there was no air. “I know what it is you fear most, godling.” He needed a spell. A weapon. Anything to stop the suffocating helplessness. But when his mind provided him with a solution, he balked.

Never has Loki forgotten the vile little box with the ability to strip lies from the truth, to show the monster under the veneer. It lingered in his mind, a haunting reminder of all that had been, but never had he enough cause to use it. Not when it was a relic of beasts; a coffin of dreams; the lifeblood of a race whose lives he wanted to end.

The question was not if he had a weapon, but whether or not the weapon was worth it. Clinging to the back of the Chitauri carrier with battleships clustered in the sky, Loki was selfish enough to ask if saving mortal lives was worth showing the world what a monster he really was.

The frantic shouts from Loki’s headset grew louder, and as he raised his eyes to look beyond the wing’s horizon. Chitauri had burrowed under his barrier to lay waste to the defenseless, firing into the crowded streets. They choked the exits with corpses. Though the battle had just begun, casualties were already mounting, stacking upon the numbers of those Loki had killed in service to Thanos.

Loki knew then, watching the military try to end the slaughter with missiles and jets, that sitting there and doing nothing was no different than dancing to the Mad Titan’s design. Flesh was not the only factor that decided villainy.

He drew in the thin air and released his grip on the ridge to rise unsteadily to his feet. The slick metal frosted over as the Casket of Ancient Winters fell into the god’s hands, tainting him. But as the abhorrent stain spread through Loki flesh and bone alike, so too did the Casket’s power. Endless winter bayed to be released, seething like the rage in Loki’s chest; he yearned to set it loose upon his enemies.

But before he could, a blast of energy sizzled past Loki’s shoulder, charring strands of his hair and darkening silver metal. He whirled around to see a battleship coming down towards him, the tip of its wing scything through wispy cloud. More beams of energy shot towards him, and Loki stumbled backwards as he tried to dodge. The lack of sufficient oxygen was making him dizzy. Leaden arms raised the Casket to form a jagged wall.

Too quickly did the structure crumbled, forcing Loki back one step and then another. The ship beneath him quaked, and his heels were mere feet from the edge. Though Loki was loathe to let the Chitauri escape him, to admit that he was not strong enough, brittle ice failed to take root. If he stayed, he would be risking his life for nothing.

A well-aimed blast hit Loki’s thigh, forcing the decision for him; his leg crumpled, and he rolled from the carrier’s wing with the Casket clutched tightly in his hands. Air whistled around him, and Loki grit his teeth as the carrier quickly grew out of reach, its unbroken light taunting him. Then, at the behest of the overtaxed voices in his ear, he turned from the carrier towards the Chitauri still near the
ground. The carrier might be lost, but there were others with which he could satiate his need for vengeance.

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Tony slumped back against the stone wall, his head angled upwards to watch the Chitauri ships become mere specks in a sea of blue. His breath echoed loudly in his helmet, but it could not drown out the sirens and screams. With a pained groan, he looked away from the sky to the ruin before him; smoke poured from shattered windows, the glass of which littered the streets, and cars laid on their sides, their frames mangled by bombs. Worse than the fate of the infrastructure, though, was that of the people who were caught in the invasion. Most had been evacuated, gone before the carnage truly began, but far too many had been trapped inside the battlefield.

Iron Man had fought not even a hundred feet from where people had collapsed into the road, mowed down by the Chitauri cruisers. Though he did everything he could to protect them, he had been overwhelmed. All he could do was keep going, protecting the ones who cried out as their loved ones were taken from them.

“Tony, are you alright?” Tony turned to see Bruce walking towards him, nervously glancing towards the swarms of soldiers and police trying to reinstate order. He was wearing an ill-fitting SHIELD uniform; his regular clothes had perished as his body became nine feet tall and acid green. The man stopped a few feet from Tony, shifting his eyes to the blackened dent on Iron Man’s left side. “Did you get hit?”

“I’m fine,” Tony automatically deflected, and to prove his point, he grabbed the top of the short cement rail and heaved himself up. His helmet hid his sharp exhale. “It’s not as bad as it looks, trust me.”

“What happened?”

Tony laughed derisively. “I thought I could take down one of the carriers on my own. It didn’t go as well as planned.” He tilted his head back to peer into the sky, but the spaceship that he had thrown himself at was long out of sight. With a sigh, he turned away and stepped forwards, clapping Bruce on the shoulder. “So, Rage Quit, what changed your mind about fighting with us? You fought splendidly, might I add.”

Bruce tugged on the too-tight collar of his shirt. “I hadn’t… It wasn’t my intention to, but the other guy got anxious, and the base was under attack, so I… let him out.” He shook his head. “It was stupid, I know, but back when I lost control in New York, Loki told me that the Hulk only went after the enemy. I wanted to stop the Chitauri.”

“Then why are you saying it was stupid?” Tony asked. “The only ones the Hulk hurt were the enemy, and I’m pretty damn sure that it was worth it.”

“Yeah…” Bruce glanced around at the destruction—only a negligible amount due to him—with uncertainty, then to the civilians sitting shell-shocked but alive down the street. “I guess it was.”

“Mr. Stark! Dr. Banner!” A SHIELD agent hurried out to them from the crowd. “The quinjet is ready for departure.”

Banner nodded, but Tony hesitated. “Don’t you need help cleaning up here?”

“We have the situation here under control,” the agent said. “Director Fury wants all Avengers available in case of another attack.”
“Right...” Though he relented, as they boarded the waiting quinjet, Tony paused in the threshold. He turned to observe the damaged city, a frown stuck on his face. It was not the first time the Avengers had left a city in ruin, and yet... There was something different about this time. Normally when they left, it was in triumph. The destruction was mitigated by the neutralized threat and the promise that tomorrow would be better. Today was not a victory; it was their first loss, and certainly not the last.

When Tony arrived at the Triskelion, the evidence of their struggle only became more obvious. There was a large map on the command room wall, its surface marred by dots that represented Chitauri ships within a hundred miles of Earth. Around those were wide circles that indicated an attack. There were four: Kuwait, Russia, Mexico, and the US. While he watched, the one in Russia changed from an angry red to green.

“You are injured,” a voice said from behind Tony’s shoulder, and he turned to see Loki scrutinizing his banged up armor.

“So are you.” Tony gestured to the dried blood that coated the god's forearm. “Or at least you were. Kuwait, right?” The god nodded. “How'd that go?”

The corners of Loki’s mouth twisted downwards. “We were outmatched.”

“It was the same in Boston. No matter how much we fought, they always had more to throw at us. It only ended because they pulled back. And to think that what we fought is merely a sliver of his army...” Tony sighed, running his hand through his hair, and on the map before them, the circles in Kuwait and the US changed to green.

“The army is not our main concern. It's Thanos that-”

“Oh, good, you're both here.” Loki and Tony turned to see Maria Hill stalking towards them. “Director Fury wants to speak with you in his office. Follow me.” Then, without waiting for them to respond, she passed them to head towards the back elevator, barking out orders in her headset.

Tony glanced towards Loki, but the god was already moving to catch up with Hill. He hurried to follow, leaving behind the command room and winding through crowded halls. They ended at a large meeting room that overlooked DC, the desk in the back of the room cluttered with paperwork. Fury, however, was not at said desk; he was standing before the expansive windows, watching something far on the horizon. When Tony stepped farther into the room, he realized that the black speck was a Chitauri carrier, deceptively small in its distance from them.

Hill closed the door behind them, and Fury, keeping his gaze on the monstrous warship, said, “Earth is going to need everything it can get to stop this invasion. Playing it safe isn’t going to cut it anymore.”

When Loki perked up, an almost predatory expression on his face, Tony understood exactly what the director was getting at. “You're giving us the Tesseract.”

At last Fury turned towards them, though he did so only to scrutinize Loki; the anticipation on the god’s face was quickly hidden beneath a mask, though he did a poor job of it. Fury's eye narrowed. “Don’t think I’ve made my decision because the two of you pressured me into it. If I did not think it was necessary, Loki wouldn't be getting within a thousand feet of the Tesseract.”

“Certainly,” Loki replied, smug like the Cheshire Cat.

Before Loki’s attitude could make Fury change his mind, Tony said, “The Tesseract is in Boston, right? I was just there, and that facility isn't looking too pretty.”
“That's why we're relocating it. Humanity can't risk having that much power in an area crawling with the enemy.”

“I take it Stark Tower isn't where you're moving it to.”

“Stark Tower is still compromised,” Fury confirmed. “The Tesseract is being taken to an unused facility. It'll be safer there, and if you two screw-up, it won't jeopardize an entire city.”

“When can we start working on it?” Loki asked. Fury stared at the god—green-eyed but still eerily obsessed with the Tesseract—like he was regretting his decision already.

“The move will take a few days. Hill can give you more details and keep you updated. But until then—and even after you start working on it—I expect the two of you to report to any summons. You fight as Avengers first and foremost. Am I clear?” They nodded. “Good.”

Then the director turned back to the window, where the carrier had gotten larger and was now surrounded by smaller dots. “While you're waiting, my advice to you boys would be to get some rest. It's going to be a uphill battle from here on out.”

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“Stargates, assume formation C. Gain altitude and cut the carrier off. Don't let it out of range,” Fielding commanded. A Chitauri battleship swooped in to disrupt the gathering ships. “McCarthy, get that Firefly in position!”

Missiles sought out the battleship's engine, and it shook, spewing flames as it fell. Iron Man launched himself out of its way and fired a repulsor at a cruiser, forcing it away from the retreating carrier that the Stargates were attempting to surround. They flew in and out of sight around the warship's massive wings, firing whatever they could at its weak points.

“Tony, I could use some help up here!” Loki called, drawing the man's attention to where the god was clinging to a battleship that was half covered with ice. There was another battleship coming down towards him, and Loki twisted around in an effort to freeze it too. Bullets destroyed the crystalline pillars.

In seconds Iron Man was there, placing himself between Loki and the second battleship. The god returned his attention to trashing the first; it was soon coated in feet of ice. There was another battleship coming down towards him, and Loki twisted around in an effort to freeze it too. Bullets destroyed the crystalline pillars.

Loki and Tony paused in their assault when a voice countered, “I have an opening!” They looked up to see that a Stargate had broken rank to fly under the carrier, immersing itself in the middle of three battleships. Immediately the Stargate’s Vibranium shell came under heavy fire, but the pilot continued to guide his ship through a gap in the enemy's defenses.

Fielding didn't reply for a moment, and then she ordered, “All Stargates, move to protect Schuler. Get him to that engine.”

When the ships hurried to obey, Loki and Tony joined them, throwing themselves into the thick to protect the lone ship. Everyone held their breath as the Stargate maneuvered through the last of the blockade, giving it clear access to the carrier's engines. With an opening that no one else had managed to secure, the Stargate unleashed everything it had into one of the warship's main engines.

Though the Chitauri focused all of their artillery at the Stargate, their resistance was too late; fire erupted in the carrier's engine, and as the barrage continued, the sparks spread until the red glow was
replaced by an inferno. They had thought it impossible to stop the metal behemoths, but now one was dying before them. It started to tilt while coughing smoke into the sky.

However, the enemy was not going to let them win without taking a ship in turn. Trapped within the circle of battleships and under siege, the pilot could not pull the Stargate out to safety. Before their eyes, bombs fell from the carrier's hull and struck the cornered ship. In an instant, the Stargate became nothing more than a mass of twisted Vibranium.

Tony could feel the backlash of the explosion from hundreds of feet away. He didn't move as his eyes tracked the descent of the pulverized ship, searching for any hint of life within despite knowing it was impossible for anyone to survive that. But he had to hope; he had known the pilot, even if just barely. Mack Schuler had been on Tony's team during the mock battle.

When the shattered metal hit the ground, Tony knew nothing born of flesh and blood survived the detonation.

The Chitauri carrier started falling faster and faster, one of its wings hitting a battleship and bringing it down with it. When another Stargate narrowly avoided a similar fate, Fielding shouted, “All ships pull back now! That is a direct order!” This time, there were no heroics; her words were obeyed, and the ships cleared the way as the carrier descended at an angle towards the harbor. The tip of its wing skimmed the surface until another explosion rattled it. Metal crumpled and tore as it sunk beneath the water and skidded against the seabed. Black liquid oozed from the torn remains, diffusing in the jagged waves and tainting them.

Tony watched the sinking carcass until his distraction nearly got him killed. The Chitauri were enraged by the loss, and from the sky, another carrier came; Tony had a feeling this one would not be joining its brethren anytime soon.

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“Something needs to change,” a general said, gesturing sharply to the screen. “Casualties are mounting, and yet for every one of them we kill, seven more take its place. At this rate, we will lose the war as quickly as it started.”

“That’s because it’s not a war,” Tony stated, slumped forwards in his chair with his crossed arms resting on the table. “It’s an extermination campaign. Thanos has no need to avoid collateral.”

“Then why does he not attack us all at once?” someone else inquired. “Clearly that would be more efficient than letting us fight back.”

“Maybe he wants us to fight back,” Tony said, and at their confused stares, he explained, “Loki said he worships Death, right? Well, why does it have to be just us that he wants dead? Maybe he doesn’t care what happens to his troops as long as we still die in the end.”

“Whether or not your hypothesis is true, that does not change the fact the people are dying. We’re losing, and neither the Avengers nor a few measly ships are going to be enough.” The general turned his beady eyes to Fury. “Director, you promised the US military significantly more weapons and soldiers than you have delivered.”

“SHIELD isn’t an army,” Fury said. “While we’re trying to set you up with what you need, my agents are stretched thin just like everyone else. Perhaps if you spent your time carrying your own weight and not pestering me, you’d get more done.”

Mr. Self-Important’s face turned a ruddy color as he raised his chin, affronted, but when he opened
his mouth to complain, Marshall cut him off. “I have already discussed the distribution of weapons with you, sir. We have numerous units still in progress, but the United States is not our only priority. SHIELD is a global organization, and we are trying to protect as many lives as possible.”

“You think we haven’t noticed how much weapons you’ve exported to Wakanda?” the general asked angrily, his shrewd eyes narrowed. He did not seem to understand that no one had the time for his bigotry. “You value to lives of foreigners more than you do.”

The old codger’s grating voice was amplifying Tony’s headache, reminding him once again why he loathed politics. If only he could have claimed that he was busy working on the Tesseract like Loki, then he wouldn't have to be here. But fact of the matter was that right now, Tony was useless on that front. So instead, he was left to interrupt; “I promised those weapons to Wakanda in exchange for the Vibranium we required to build our spaceships. Had you read the report I painstakingly wrote, you would have known that. The real question we should be asking is what we intend to do about those idiots wanting to nuke the Chitauri’s ships.”

“The idea has merit—” Another person began, and Tony—honestly having no clue who they were or what their rank was—cut them off just as quickly.

“It’s a dumb as fuck idea, and if you spent even a second thinking about it, you’d realize that,” Tony said harshly, pulling himself upright to stare down anyone who looked like they were about to oppose him. “The last thing we need is to fill the atmosphere with radiation, and that’s all nuking a spaceship is going to accomplish. Not to mention that if they are close to the ground, we have other weapons to fight them. There’s no need to risk nuclear fallout when the fighters we’ve designed are capable of handling the problem.”

“Though your faith in those ships is flattering, Mr. Stark, the fact is that they can’t handle the Chitauri on their own,” Fielding said. She was a part of the small group of military personnel that Tony both recognized and didn’t despise, and so at her refutation, he paused to listen. “You were there when we brought down the first carrier. It would do you well to remember that it was Schuler’s own initiative that made that victory possible, and he lost his life for it. His tactics are neither advisable nor repeatable given how limited our resources are.”

“Wasn’t another carrier brought down last week?” an officer asked, leaning forwards in her chair. “In Malaysia?”

“There was, but our ships weren’t responsible,” Fielding answered.

"The Alfar brought down the second ship," Hill input. "Seven of them ascended the standing Petronas Tower and used their combined magic to tear the carrier's wings. Two of them died before they could flee from the retaliating Chitauri. As Fielding said, these tactics are not sustainable."

“Then what tactics are suitable?” asked the man standing in for the President; the President herself was busy trying to lead a country that was falling apart at the seams. “If Stark's technology isn't enough and our allies continue to suffer high casualties, how are we expected to win?”

While their minds churned, no one could answer him. With no solutions forthcoming, Fury rose from his seat. “There's no point in wasting time sitting here. This meeting is adjourned.”

Some of the higher ranked politicians and commanders met the dismissal with ire (the whole ‘SHIELD is outside the system and therefore likes to walk all over rank hierarchy’ didn’t sit well with them) but the majority of those assembled listened without complaint. They said their goodbyes and filed out, leaving the others to get over themselves. When Mr. Grumpy walked past with a glare, Tony gave him a cheeky wave, and the man hefted his chin into the air in disdain.
Once the meeting room was nearly empty, Tony fished out his cell phone and texted Loki. ‘You picking me up?’

‘Five minutes,’ the god replied.

Too anxious to sit in place for that long, Tony stood with a groan. He left the conference and meandered down the hall. With the Helicarrier down and local SHIELD branches destroyed, the Triskelion was a hive of activity, filled with relocated agents. Tony intended to visit the command room, but his attention was redirected as he passed by the mess hall. The scent of fresh food—actually food, and not just energy drinks and power bars—was too strong to resist; Tony slunk into the room and made for the unattended buffet. His plate was piled high with pasta and bread when his phone chimed. ‘Where did you go?’

‘Food,’ Tony typed back as he scarfed down half a roll; the more he ate, the more famished he realized he was. By the time Loki wandered in, Tony was already heading back for a second plate.

“We need to go,” Loki said, giving Tony and his plate a dirty look. “The Tesseract cannot wait.”

“Give me a few minutes.” Tony sat down at the long table and stabbed the lukewarm pasta with his fork. When the god stopped on the other side of the table, his arms crossed and lips thin, Tony grabbed some bread and offered it to him. “Want some?” he asked with his mouth full.

While Loki’s expression did not change, he snatched the food from Tony’s hand; the roll disappeared in record time. Then the god leaned over the table and took two more from Tony’s plate. But once they too were devoured, Loki repeated, “We need to go.”

Reluctantly, Tony finished the last of his food and stood to leave even though hunger still stirred within him. The god took them back to where the Tesseract was, a decrepit little facility nestled between some mountains in the middle of nowhere. Fury had called it a ‘secure facility’, and the only reason Tony could see for it being secure was the fact that no one was going to think the cramped, barren building had anything besides cockroaches and rats inside. It contained only the technology they needed and things that Tony had rescued from his house in Malibu. The lab didn't even have a working fridge, and their living quarters consisted of two cots shoved in the corner. Tony had thought SHIELD would have other scientists work with them, but it seemed that Fury had finally given up any hope on the Tesseract. Frankly, Tony shared his doubts.

Loki sat down at a desk buried under papers, books, and tablets, and when he lifted one of the pages, his scowl deepened. When Tony pulled up a chair next to him, he had a similar reaction to the load of rubbish they had compiled. “This isn’t getting us anywhere, you know.”

“It will,” Loki insisted, tossing away the page and procuring another one to frantically scribble down runes; he only got a few lines down before he stopped, crushing the pen in his frustration. “There has to be something that will work.”

“Let’s run some more tests,” Tony suggested in lieu of a better option. “Maybe it’ll give us a better idea of where to start.” But though they ran countless algorithms against the Tesseract, hours passed with no progress. Even the solutions that had sounded promising fell through, and there was nothing to show for their work. At the rate they were going, they’d have more luck using the Tesseract as a rock and trying to bash Thanos’s head in.

Tony was slumped over the desk, his head pounding, when Loki rose from his chair and stalked towards the Tesseract. The man pried his head from his arms to gaze tiredly at the god, who stopped in front of the Infinity Gem with his eyes narrowed. Then, without warning, Loki reached into the billion dollar setup to wrap his fingers around the cube. With an exclamation of surprise, Tony shot
up from the desk. “Hey, you’re not supposed to touch that.” The god yanked the Tesseract free of its holder. “Damn it, Loki, are you listening to me?”

Clearly the god wasn’t, and Tony watched as magic flared up around Loki’s hands and siege against the Tesseract. “Oh hell no,” Tony said when the energy rebound violently. Right now, the backlash was only as strong as a gust of wind, but the bruises still covering Tony’s back were proof of what could happen if Loki continued. “We are not doing this again.” Because Loki seemed to have lost all common sense or concern for their well-being, Tony took matters into his own hands. He stormed across the lab, bracing himself against the raging energies, and reached for Loki’s wrist. But Loki shifted his hand at the last second, and Tony’s fingers brushed against the Tesseract.

Blinding light flared from the cube, searing Tony's eyes, and he yanked his hand back in shock. Loki did the same, and the Tesseract clattered to the floor. They both stepped back when the cube continued to pulsate, tendrils of light creeping out towards them—towards Tony.

“Oh my god, what is it doing?” Tony clasped his hand that had accidentally touched the Infinity Gem; it felt like he had touched boiling water. He took another step back, Fury's warnings of radiation and nuke-like power fresh in his mind. “Loki, make it stop. ...Loki?” A grin was slowly spreading across Loki's lips, the complete opposite of what Tony was feeling. It made him stop his retreat, and then he took a step forwards when Loki reached down to pick the Tesseract back up. “Uh, Lokes? Are you sure you should be doing that?”

“It won't hurt me,” the god said absently, staring into the swirling blue that was finally quieting down. Then he looked back up at Tony, and the triumphant expression solidified on his face. “This is our path to victory.”

Magic always had a way of making Tony feel completely out of his depth, and this time was no different. “I don't understand. What just happened? It has never flared like that before.”

“It wasn't me the Tesseract wanted,” Loki stated simply. “I should have realized sooner that such a thing would have taken years—if it was possible at all.” When Tony stared incomprehensibly at him, adrenaline still surging and his tingling hand held to his chest, the god explained, “I am attuned to Yggdrasil. The Tesseract is its own power source. I could not bridge the gap between us because I am already connected to the World Tree. But you have never used Yggdrasil's magic before. There is nothing blocking the Tesseract from you.”

“You can't be serious,” Tony said, shaking his head.

“I am.”

“But I have no idea how to do magic. Hell, you told me it was impossible!”

“It is impossible for you to interact with Yggdrasil's magic. You were never born with that ability. But the Tesseract is an independent power source. It chooses who to interact with.” Then, to Tony's continued disbelief, the god offered the Tesseract to him. “Take it.”

Despite his completely valid hesitations, Tony reached for the cube. When his skin touched the warm surface and the Tesseract flared again, he flinched. But the reaction was not as strong as it had been, and he slowly lifted the gem from Loki’s hands; energy thrummed across his palm like a heartbeat. “I still don't know what you expect me to do with this.”

“Use it.”

“How?”
“Call it forwards.” Magic coated the god's hands and he reached forwards to grip the Tesseract with Tony. He lifted their hands until the gem was at eye level. “You need to make a connection with it. Meld your essences together. There should be no boundary between you and its energy.”

Loki’s instructions made no sense, but Tony tried to listen. He closed his eyes, focusing on the beating of the Tesseract in his hand and the indistinguishable murmurs sweeping across his mind. He pictured magic flowing through his veins, coruscating green like Loki’s own. After a minute had passed and he didn’t feel any different, he peeked at the Tesseract, hoping that something had happen. The cube sat unaffected in their hands. He frowned. “It’s not working.”

“You aren’t trying hard enough,” Loki stated, magic flowing from his skin as easily as he breathed.

“I am trying,” Tony defended. “I did what you said, but nothing happened.”

The only advice Loki could offer was, “Then try something else.”

Tony scowled at the god’s lack of assistance. If Loki couldn’t figure out how to work the Tesseract, even after working with magic for a thousand years, then how could he expect Tony to do it in ten minutes? But despite his doubts, Tony found himself attempting to connect with the Tesseract again, this time his way.

If magic really was just another form of science, then he would treat it like technology. If Iron Man could become one with a metal exoskeleton, then he could become one with an alien cube. Tony imagined that the Tesseract clutched in his hand was nothing more than a repulsor. He understood how it worked because he had built it from scratch. When he shifted the muscles in his arm to fire, it would listen because that is what he had designed it to do.

The Tesseract grew hotter in Tony’s hand, and the man twitched as a sensation too close to electricity started to surge in his veins. He nearly let go, convincing himself it would never work and afraid of that which he really did not understand, but Loki’s hand stopped him. “Keep going,” he ordered with a feverish look in his eyes. “Whatever you are doing, it’s working.”

Tony frowned, but he clamped down on his nerves and sought the inkling of a connection he had felt. The Tesseract was a tool. He was an engineer. His hand started to burn, and his skin tingled, but he did not let that deter him. He was in charge. A faint blue glow began to seep out from the cracks between Tony and Loki’s fingers, slowly but surely cementing into a beam. Holding his breath, Tony thought, ‘Fire.’

The following blast was not powerful by any means, and the magic dissipated into the air mere feet from the Tesseract, but it worked. It worked. Tony’s eyes widened and Loki grinned with relief.

“Again,” the god said, pulling his hand away; Tony had already started channeling the magic. This time the Tesseract listened quicker, and what it produced appeared no different than a small repulsor blast. It hit the wall and sizzled, leaving behind a small black smudge.

Tony lifted the Tesseract and glanced between it and the meager mark he had made. “You really think I can defeat Thanos with this?”

“Yes,” Loki said confidently.

-o-o-o-

Sadly, Loki’s confidence had only gotten them so far. Sweat dripped down Tony's brow. 'Obey.' His teeth ground together. 'Obey.' His muscles quivered. 'Obey!'
The Tesseract did not obey.

“Concentrate,” Loki ordered.

Tony snarled. “I am concentrating! Hell, I don't think I've ever thought this hard about anything! But. It. Isn't. Working!” To prove his point, he flung out his palm and tried to channel the Tesseract through the armor shell surrounding it. Like every single time before, nothing happened, and their success from the previous week now seemed inconsequential.

That was the limit of Tony's patience; he shoved open the pressurized locks, tore the armor from his skin, and let the pieces crash into the tile. Once the gauntlet was removed, he directed his ire towards the Tesseract, slamming it down against the table with a vehement, “Fuck this!”

Of course, Loki was quick to protest even though he wasn't the one doing all of the work. “Tony, you have to—”

“Shut up!” Tony whirled around to glare at the god. “I understand what's at risk—you've made sure to tell me every five minutes—but give me a second, alright? I'm not like you. Magic doesn't just come to me. And unless I've got a death grip on the damn thing, it refuses to listen to me. It's hard. It doesn't make any sense. And I don't care that you said it's safe, because I swear to god it's giving me radiation poisoning!”

Silence followed Tony's outburst, and Loki watched the man warily as he continued to breathe heavily, covering his face with his hand. After he calmed down a bit, Tony pulled his hand away and said, “Look, when I started this whole superhero gig, I thought all I would have do to is shoot bad guys. I didn't sign up for a war. I don't have the credentials for this. What the hell am I supposed to do with a little box against an unstoppable giant that can control people's minds? I can't do this.”

Loki met his eyes for a moment, and then the god bowed his head, stepping towards where the Tesseract sat abandoned on the desk. He pried the cube from its harness and stared into its whirling depths. Then he turned to Tony, grabbed his hand, and put the Tesseract in his palm; the gem shined at the contact, and, without taking his own hand away, Loki said, “Do you think you are the only one who is confused? Who is out of their depth?” The gods hand tightened on the cube, the tendons in his fingers pushing against taut skin. “But there is nothing else we can do. There is no middle ground. There is no room for doubt. We must try—we must succeed—or we will be killed.”

It was not the intensity of Loki's stare alone that made Tony certain the god was speaking the truth: It was the way Loki has been unable to sleep (even more so than normal) ever since he returned from Mad Titan's clutches. It wast the way Loki tensed at shadows and jumped when someone accidentally snuck up on him. It was the way Loki reacted to the Chitauri, with loathing and outrage heaped upon fear. It was the way Loki became more and more convinced they would lose but tried to hide his doubts beneath speeches and empty words.

And even if these signs did not exist, Tony had seen the truth for himself; he had seen it in the madness of blue eyes and blood on the pavement. “I know,” he muttered. “But I can't—”

“You can,” Loki stated, staring at him until Tony began to feel ashamed for his uncertainty. “You are Tony Stark.” The god released the cube, his other hand curling Tony's fingers around it. “Don't accept failure.”

Feeling the Tesseract thrum in his hand, no longer obstructed from him by layers of metal, Tony said, “Okay. I'll try it again. Maybe we can adjust the halter so its touching more skin. If not, we can—” An alarm wailed from the man's pocket, cutting him off. Confused, Tony set the cube down and fished out his phone. When he read the flashing message, his stomach dropped. “No...”
“What is it?” Loki asked, stepping towards him to peer at the screen. Tony angled the phone towards him, revealing the words ‘Chitauri activity near Grand Falls, Nebraska.’

When the god still seemed confused, Tony said, “Pepper is in that town.” That was all the clarification Loki needed to summon armor around himself, and Tony hurried to grab his suit. The metal took forever to fall into place, and then Loki could teleport them to the battlefield; they left the Tesseract lying on the table.

When they appeared at the edge of the city, it was to the heightening wail of police sirens. The suburbs were in the process of evacuating from the ships descending upon the city—ships that, when Tony looked into the sky, he could not believe what he was seeing. There were dozens of them, more than he had ever seen in one spot. Battleships were spread out for miles, and the four carriers cast large shadows on the ground.

“I'll keep them back.” Loki stepped forwards as a battleship listed in their direction. “You go make sure Pepper is safe.”

At Tony's nod, the god launched into the air, heading straight for the enemy. Tony mirrored his actions towards the suburbs. Streets were already filled with people fleeing in panic, taking their children, pets, and anything they could grab with them. The chaos made it harder for Tony to find the house he was searching for, and he circled around twice as nothing looked familiar. But then he found the right street and landed, forcing his way against the crowd to scan the house numbers.

To his relief, none of the homes were damaged yet, but that wasn't enough to calm the racing of his heart. Tony stopped in front of her house, the front door left ajar and lights still on. While he doubted she would still be inside, he hurried across the overgrown lawn and pushed the door open. “Pepper!” He called, inspecting the empty house. “Is anyone still here?”

He received no answer. The front door shut behind him as he ran back towards the street, scanning for any sign of Pep or her parents. But when he felt the earth shake as the carriers began to drop bombs mere blocks away, he doubted he would find her loitering around. Tony called her name one last time. “Pepper!”

Then he heard a faint shout: “Tony?” He whirled towards the sound, scanning the crowd. “Tony!” At last his eyes fell on fiery red hair, and he breathed out in relief. Tony hurried to meet Pep as she maneuvered through the cluttered roads.

When she got close, Tony grabbed her arm and looked her over. “Are you alright?”

She nodded, copying his actions to ascertain that he bore no damage. “I'm fine. My parents are heading towards the evacuation point. I stayed back to help out.”

“Don't play hero, Pep,” Tony pleaded. “This place is about to go up in flames, and you don't want to be stuck here when it does. I've seen what happens to the people who don't get out fast enough. Don't put yourself in that position.”

“I won't,” Pepper said, her eyes rising towards the merciless ships raining death upon the city and the smoke curling back towards them.

When she looked back towards him, Tony knew what she was going to say, and with a false grin she couldn't see he said, “Don't worry about me. It'll take more than a few measly aliens to bring down an Avenger.” Another explosion made that grin fade, and he glanced back over his shoulder at the onslaught. “I need to help them, and you need to get out of here. Think about your own safety.”
Pepper nodded, though Tony had a feeling that, despite his warning, she’d still try and help others. They were not so different in that regard. “You and Loki better stay safe,” she said, taking a step away from him.

“We already promised we would, didn't we?” Tony said, but then he could no longer remain with her; his headset fizzled with requests for reinforcements, and the shaking of the ground was near constant. Even with the suit’s filter, he could smell ash on the wind. “Go to the evacuation point.” He activated his repulsors and, at her nod, rushed to assist his allies.

Streaks of ice and magic across the horizon broadcast Loki's position, and Tony headed for him. Anything that got in his way was taken down until he got closer to the carriers; the battleships swarmed, and he had already seen that attempting to breach them was suicide. He fell in beside Loki, and they fought together against the invasion.

Despite the large number of Chitauri, the rhythm of battle remained the same: dodge, shoot, destroy, repeat. He and Loki methodically attacked the battleships protecting the carriers in an effort to clear they way for the Stargates, and they slowly made progress. Everything was going smoothly until Tony saw something massive flying past him from the corner of his eye.

Initially, he thought it was Loki—the god was constantly transforming into monstrous creatures at the blink of an eye—but then he noticed that Loki was still standing on top of the battleship with wide red eyes locked onto something behind Tony's shoulder. That was when Clint decided to announce his presence with an eloquent, “What the hell is that?”

When Tony turned to see what had caught everyone's attention, he felt his jaw go slack as his mind struggled to comprehend the... thing in front of him. It wasn't necessarily the gargantuan size of the beast that unnerved him (though that too was a factor) but the fact that it somehow defied physics and swam through the air to bull into the side of a skyscraper. Its fins sliced through glass and metal with ease, and, to make matters worse, there were Chitauri clinging to the space whale's side. They detached from dips in its shell and propelled themselves to the ground.

Suddenly there was a second beast in the air, barreling at Tony while he was distracted. The man swore and rocketed backwards, but the creature followed him. It shoved down against the air, and repulsor blasts barely left a scratch on its metal casing. Tony had to dive out of its way, nearly getting hit by its fins. Mere seconds later, a nearby battleship fired into his side; Iron Man's armor crunched and he spiraled through the air. “I could use some help here!”

In answer to his shout, Loki dropped down onto the creature's back, flaring out his wings as he dug his talons into metal ridges. When that did nothing, the god stretched his neck to snap at the beast's right eye. Tony followed Loki's example and flew beneath the scaled body to shoot its other eye. It took multiple blasts, but eventually thick blood welled to the surface and the creature thrashed wildly, tossing Loki from its back. The god landed on a building down below, and Tony dropped towards him.

“You're a big fan of alien monsters. Care to share what that is with the class?” he asked, gesturing to the beast flying blindly through the air. It shook its head side to side while making sharp turns, conveniently smashing a Chitauri battleship with its tail.

Loki shapeshifted back. “It's a leviathan. They're not native to the Nine Realms, but according to what I've read, they're are used as living transports in other civilizations.”

“Your books didn't happen to mention how to kill one, did they?” The god shook his head. “Figures.” As they watched, the wounded leviathan got too close to a Firefly; its spines knocked the ship sideways, breaking the formation. “I guess we'll have to figure it out ourselves then. It's too
dangerous to leave like this.”

Together they returned to the air and bombarded the leviathan with whatever they had. Loki froze its flesh, slowing it down, and Tony shot repulsors into the brittle spots. It took almost a dozen well-aimed shots, but eventually the blasts burrowed beneath the skin. The leviathan writhed in pain and veered towards the ground; its forehead collided with the side of a building and its body flipped over the roof of an apartment complex. A minute passed, but the beast remained grounded, its fins jerking in death throes.

The second leviathan had begun to attack evacuees, and Loki disappeared from Tony's side, teleporting across the expanse to lure the beast away. Iron Man moved to follow him when everything went wrong. A startled cry screeched through the air and chilled his blood: “Clint!”

Tony jerked to a halt and automatically spun around to seek out the building upon which the archer was stationed; he had never heard Natasha sound so terrified. It was not hard to find the reason, and at the sight, Tony felt that same horror: there was a figure tumbling from the rooftop, bow slipping from slack hands. As gravity yanked Clint down, dull crimson painted his chest. That same stain coated the tip of a Chitauri's spear as the alien stood triumphantly at the edge of the roof.

There wasn't time to stop and think. The two Avengers who saw their comrade falling leapt into action. Natasha flung herself over the head of a Chitauri, stabbing it as she passed, while her eyes remained locked on Clint's limp body. Tony activated his repulsors and shot down, moving faster than he ever had before. They were still too late. Natasha had barely crossed the street, and Tony had just passed the roof—vindictively grabbing the head of the Chitauri and shoving it forwards—when the archer hit the ground.

Wide eyes stared at the sky while slack lips dribbled red into a growing sea. Only then did Tony land beside him, and as blood spread out across the sidewalk, he could not believe what he was seeing. The body remained motionless even as Natasha frantically slid to her knees by his side, calling his name to no avail. “Clint! Clint!” She leaned her body over his, one hand reaching for the veins in his neck and the other pressing down against the gash in between the archer's ribs that gurgled with blood. Neither of them cared that the Chitauri responsible hit the ground a few yards away, tar-like liquid spilling from its corpse in mockery of its crime.

“Come on, come on...” she murmured desperately, searching for a pulse. “Please, Clint. You can't be dead.”

When the archer's hand twitched minutely, Tony initially thought that he had imagined it. But then Clint shuddered again, his eyes squeezing shut as a wet groan slipped from his lips. Natasha whispered a fervent pray in Russian, her eyes filling with hope. “Hold on, Clint,” she ordered, keeping one hand pressed on his wound while the other moved to her headset. “This is Agent Romanov. We need a medic on the corner of 18th Street and North Broadwell. Agent Barton is in critical condition. I repeat, we need a medic on the corner of 18th Street and Broadwell.”

While they waited for a response, Romanov used a dagger to tear off her sleeve, leaving a hairline cut on her upper arm. She pressed the fabric against the gaping wound. Clint gasped, and his eyes opened to rove back and forth. When Natasha leaned over him, begging him to look at her, he stared blankly at nothing.

At last a voice came across their headsets. “This is Agent McKinley. We are attempting to get a medic out to you. Please remain where you are.” Natasha nodded sharply, pressing down harder on Clint's chest. The strip of fabric quickly became sodden with blood. Romanov sliced off her other sleeve. But no matter what she did, the flow did not ebb.
As Tony watched the blood—so thick it was almost black—creep farther and farther from its source and saw the unnatural angles that Clint's bones were twisted in, he thought that the archer would not live long enough for a plane to reach them. Natasha must have known that, but she still pleaded, “Clint, you need to just hold on a little bit longer, alright? Help is coming, but I need you to stay with me.”

Clint's lungs made a squelching noise as he took another faltering breath.

Then an explosion shook the world, reminding Tony that they were still on the front line. He and Natasha jerked their gazes to the sky to see an ice-covered battleship crumbling right above their heads. Reacting quickly, Tony shot a repulsor at the severed wing descending towards them, knocking it off course as smaller shrapnel clattered around them. Loki dropped from the sky with the wreckage, the Casket clutched tightly in sapphire hands and a cut splitting his forearm.

“You're not safe here,” he said, panting heavily, and then his gaze fell to their broken comrade. Loki's breath caught in his throat.

“You said magic can be used for healing,” Tony began, trying to ignore the grim certainty in the god’s expression. “Can’t you help him?”

But as he had guessed, Loki numbly shook his head. “His injuries are beyond my caliber. There is nothing I can do.” Then the god’s head darted to the right, and Tony followed his gaze to see four Chitauri skulking through the rubble-strewn street. They raised their weapons, preparing to shoot; Loki didn’t give them the chance. With one last look at Clint, he leapt forwards and froze the aliens solid.

Tony was torn between joining the god in avenging Clint or remaining with Romanov and offering what little support he could while her partner bled out beneath her hands. After a leviathan swerved through the air down towards them, its sides bulging with Chitauri troopers, Tony chose the former. But before he left, he tried to comfort Natasha with words he didn’t believe: “He’s going to be okay.”

The assassin glanced over at him, her eyes wet, and nodded; she didn't believe him either.

When Tony launched into the air and started blasting repulsors into the leviathan and its cargo, he thought that maybe killing would ease the pain, but his vengeance felt hollow; no matter how many Chitauri corpses he made, the gaping hole within him was not filled. Causing the enemy suffering would not knit Clint’s flesh together. It would not save his life.

He heard Natasha's strained voice through his headset. “Agent Barton is in critical condition. What is the ETA of that quinjet?”

This time, the other agent responded promptly. “We are doing our best, Agent Romanov, but the nearest plane is ten minutes out.”

“He's not going to last for ten minutes.”

“I'm sorry. There's nothing more we can do.”

Romanov didn't reply, and minutes ticked by with no help arriving. A speck eventually appeared on the horizon, but swarms of Chitauri slowed its progress. Loki and Tony tried to help, doing everything in their power to clear the way, but each second was a second too many. The quinjet was still blocks away when Clint died.

There was no anguished cry, or even any words at all. Had Tony not been watching, he wouldn’t
have seen the moment when Natasha gently pressed her forehead to Clint’s, her hand falling from his chest before she slowly rose to her feet. For a moment she just stood there with her head tilted down and fists clenched. Then, as a Chitauri broke past Loki’s perimeter and rushed towards her, a dagger appeared in her hand. Natasha flung herself at the alien, knocking aside its spear and wrapping her legs around its torso. Her blade pierced through leathery flesh.

The creature shrieked, but its agony did nothing to deter the assassin; she yanked her dagger out and shoved it into the Chitauri’s throat to the hilt, cutting off the unearthly sound. But even after she dealt the creature a fatal wound, she continued to hack at it until it crumpled to the ground. Natasha stood over the body, her head raised to stare at the other Chitauri that advanced towards her. Her face was speckled with blood, both crimson and ebony, and the only clean spots were where tears had washed the grime away. But while she cried silently, the assassin’s eyes were narrowed in rage. Gore flicked from her knife as she stepped forwards to bring an end to the invaders.

Blinking rapidly to clear the blur that had welled in his eyes, Tony turned away from the rampaging assassin to the body lying on the ground surrounded by a stagnate sea of ruby. Warmth streamed down his face and, with a roar, he too threw himself back into the battle. The Chitauri were ruthlessly crushed, their leviathans and cruisers torn apart on the ground, and the siege ended. But no matter how many people they had saved, Tony would never consider that day a victory.
What You're Willing to Sacrifice

"I'll keep you safe, as safe as I can,
When all of the elements around us have other plans.
I pray we don't break, in unsteady hands.

I swear if you call I will come, so quick I am at your command.
As long as I live, as long as I'm breathing, you will be safe.
As long as we're dreaming.

Just close your eyes; everything's gonna be just fine.
You can peek on the other side."

-Close Your Eyes by Digital Daggers

Silence devoured words as the Avengers sat around the table with eyes locked on the past. They saw devastation that no walls could hide, not when proof of what had happened followed them: Romanov’s pants were stiff with blood, her sleeves torn and replaced with pink smears from a sodden cloth, and Director Fury sat in Clint’s rightful place.

When the Director spoke, his words lacked their usual harshness, but he did not coddle their sorrows. “This is war. People die. There's nothing we can do for him besides keep going.”

Though Romanov nodded, it was clear that Fury’s words meant nothing to her. How could they, when she had felt Clint’s warm blood on her hands? When she so keenly knew what it was like to have someone she loved bleed out in front of her while she could do absolutely nothing? New York or Nebraska, Doom or Thanos, it did not matter; the helplessness was the same.

Fury seemed to deflate as he sighed, no longer an indomitable figure standing at the head of the table. “Romanov, I know this is hard for you, but it's necessary that you team up with someone else. Agent Derkhaunt has a skill set similar to what you're used to working with.”

At last Romanov reacted, her eyes refocusing on the room around her and the concerned stares sent her way. She ignored them and her eyes narrowed. “I don't need another partner.”

Her answer was not unexpected, but Fury tired again. “Natasha-”

“I'll work alone,” she stated with fire burning in her eyes.

Loki recognized that fire. It was the same one that has smoldered in his chest ever since the Other took him and forced him to remember what it meant to be powerless. It was the one that could only be put out by death—either that of the enemy or his own. And, perhaps hypocritically, Loki did not want Natasha to be consumed by the flames.

He was about to speak when Tony made the foolish offer for him. “Natasha, maybe you can work with Loki and I. We could use eyes on the ground.”

Natasha was quick to shake her head, and Rogers was just as quick to say, “Then you can join me.” The captain leaned forwards, smearing the ash on his sleeves across the table; he had returned from the front lines only to hear the news of his comrade's fall. “Clint wouldn't want you to fight them alone.”
Those words were the water on hot coals; the fight went out of Romanov. She slumped in her chair and raised her hand towards her matted hair, but then she froze, her eyes darting to the faint remnants of blood on her skin.

“Sir, requesting permission to leave,” she said tersely.

“Not until you agree to accompany someone else on missions or remain off the field,” Fury asserted.

“I will join Rogers on his assignments.” Natasha rose from her seat. “Now may I leave, Director? I would like to clean myself up.”

Fury was not the only one who winced at the dried gore on the assassin, and he conceded, “Go take care of yourself. I'll see you in my office in an hour.”

Romanov disappeared into the hallway, but she hadn't gotten far when Rogers hastily stood. The man hurried out the door, giving Fury a quick nod to excuse the disrespect, and called out, “Natasha!” Loki heard her come to a stop, and Rogers words were muffled by the walls. “I'm sorry about what happened to Clint. I know how hard it is to lose a friend out there. And I know nothing I say is going to make it easier for you, but... I'm not trying to replace him, and you don't need to pretend that you're okay for our sake.”

Loki turned his head away from where they stood, as if that would keep him from hearing the quiet reply; it was not his place to intrude. Instead, he focused on the choppy tempo of Tony’s fingers against the table top until Romanov’s footsteps faded and Rogers reappeared in the doorway. His mouth was pressed in a thin line as he rejoined them at the table. When Tony sent him a searching look, unable to hear what had been said in the hall, Rogers only shook his head.

Fury looked as if the weight of Clint’s death was crushing him, but that didn’t stop him from being pragmatic; to Loki and Tony, he said, “We need to change our strategy if we are going to win this war. Have you made any progress on the Tesseract?”

The question invoked shame that sludged through Loki’s veins; he hated that he had nothing significant to say. All he could offer to lessen the embarrassment was, “We can only use it under specific circumstances — it is not reliable enough to fight with.”

“I broke a dozen rules to give you the Tesseract,” Fury said. “You promised that you could make use of it. If we had used it today, then maybe we wouldn’t have lost so many people. Maybe there wouldn’t be an Avenger lying in the morgue.”

His words were a low blow, and Tony flinched as if he had been slapped. “Do not blame us for what happened,” the man said, but his words lacked conviction. Loki could see the doubt under the surface, the guilty questions that filled his minds. He knew because he thought them too: Wasn’t it their fault that the Tesseract was not ready? That Loki wasted so much time trying to figure out what should have been obvious and that Tony couldn’t grasp basic magic? Weren’t they to blame for Clint’s death?

Their self-blame must have been apparent, because Fury sighed again. “What happened today was no one's fault but the enemy's. That is why I want them taken down now, before I lose any more agents.”

Loki, unsure if he was trying to offer reassurance or merely improve his standing, responded, “You have my word that we are trying everything we can think of. We just need a bit more time.”

“Right now, all everyone needs is ‘a bit more time’. But time is something we don’t have,” Fury
stated. “The two of you are dismissed. Hopefully you can figure something out. Rogers, you and I need to have a quick chat.”

As Loki and Tony rose slowly to their feet, the soldier said, “Yes, sir.” But before the two disappeared, Rogers motioned to get their attention. “Good luck.” He nodded to offer some semblance of unity in this new world of chaos. They returned the gesture and were enshrouded in magic.

The second they touched down in the empty facility, Tony lost the strength to maintain his mask. He roared in rage and pulled out of Loki's grasp. His attention was on the Tesseract, sitting obediently on the table. They were lucky it hadn't wiped the whole building off the map or brought the Chitauri down upon it. But that small mercy wasn't good enough, and when Tony reached the table, he lashed out with his foot. The table toppled over and the Tesseract slid across the floor.

As Tony raged, Loki did nothing. Even when Tony grabbed one of his books and threw it, causing pages to rip upon the ground, he did not intervene. Instead, he let Tony swear for him, let the man’s shout of, “I want this damnable war to be over!” to be his own. It was fitting, he thought, that such an expression of grief be taken out of his hands, for was he not powerless in every other aspect of his life?

Then taking his frustration out on inanimate objects was no longer enough for Tony, and he spun to face Loki. “How can you be so calm about this?” the man shouted, his face warped by sorrow. When Loki still did not react, he continued, “How can you just stand there? Clint is dead. I know you didn’t care that much about him, but...”

Just as quickly as it had come, the fight went out of Tony. He covered his face with his hand, his tendons standing out sharply, and let out a shuddering breath.

That’s when Loki moved, but instead of going to Tony, he stepped to where the book laid torn on the ground and picked it up. Smoothing down the bent pages and tracing the tears with his fingers, he said, “You’re wrong.”

“What?” Tony snapped as he raised his head. He met Loki's eyes, but the god did not give fuel to his ire.

“About me not caring. You’re wrong,” Loki said. “It’s true I was not as close to Clint as some of you were, but he was still my teammate, my shield brother, my friend. And you are wrong to imply that I do not care about his death.” Tony looked away, clenching his fists — though Loki knew the anger was no longer directed at him. “The only reason I am not out there right now, making those monsters pay for what they have done, is because I know we need the Tesseract to succeed.”

They turned towards the gem on the floor, and Loki did not miss how it brightened under Tony’s gaze in an effort to call the man to it. In that regard, the Tesseract was no different than the scepter, and Tony viewed it with the same wariness.

After a moment of silence, the man asked, “Do you really think I can do it? That I—just a man in a can—can stop Thanos with the Tesseract? That I can save people?”

With every ounce of honesty he possessed, Loki replied, “There is no other I think more capable.” Then he made his way towards Tony, setting the book down on the table and veering to lift the Tesseract from the floor. With the cube in hand, he returned to Tony's side and offered it to him. “The Tesseract does not have to listen to you. It chooses to, and there must be a reason why.”

“I didn't think you'd be into the whole destiny thing,” Tony said, but he took the cube nonetheless.
True to Loki's words, the Tesseract came to life in his hands and his hands alone. The man pointed the cube at the wall; a thin beam of magic breached the distance, singeing the concrete.

With a frown, Tony said, “I can't fight Thanos like this. If I went into battle holding the Tesseract in my bare hand, it'd get taken in an instant. So how am I supposed to use it?”

“I'm not sure,” Loki admitted, his brow furrowing. Tony had a point that they couldn't carry the Tesseract into battle—such a tactic would amount to nothing more than delivering the Infinity Gem to their enemy on a bloody platter—but the man struggled too much with magic to relocate it. The only place better at conducting magic than hands was the core itself, and there was no way for them to stick the Tesseract in Tony's chest. Unless...

Loki's eyes drifted to the faint glow of the arc reactor visible through Tony's shirt. “Can your arc reactor be powered with anything other than Starkium?”

“Uhh, yeah,” Tony answered, thrown by the change in topic. “I mean, I had Palladium in there initially, but it wasn’t suitable for long term use.”

Loki looked between the Tesseract and the arc reactor with a hum. “Then it's a good thing you won't need to use it long term.”

“What are you…?” It clicked, and Tony stared at him, aghast. “Hell no. We are not sticking that infernal thing in my arc reactor. We don’t even know if that would work!”

“Why wouldn’t it?” Loki countered; the more he thought about his plan, the more convinced he became. “Within your chest is as close of a place to your core as you can get. Hands conduct magic, but near your heart… You could access the Tesseract without limitation.”

“Loki, I think you’re missing a huge point here.” Tony raised his hand to shield the reactor from view. “This isn’t just some fashion statement. Mess up my arc reactor and I die.”

“You forget that Idunn's apple protects you. It will not let you die so easily.”

Tony was quick to call out Loki's lie. “You said so yourself the Tesseract has more concentrated power than a nuclear weapon. I don't think your little spell is going to help if my heart gets incinerated. And what about the shrapnel? Does your apple protect against that?”

“It won’t kill you,” Loki insisted.

“You’ve said a lot of things about the Tesseract that have turned out to be false. Are you really so willing to risk my life on this?”

The fact that Tony's accusation wasn’t completely unfounded hurt Loki more than the words themselves. When the god answered with, “You know the answer to that question already,” it was to bury any doubt about his motivations beneath Tony’s faith.

“Then why would you even suggest it?” the man demanded, doing nothing to assure Loki that the decisions he were making were the right ones. But the god had come too far to let the paradise he had made for himself vanish with no trace that it had once existed. He did not crawl out of a living hell to lose everything in life he had come to enjoy. And if he had to risk that which he loves the most in order to save it... Loki would take that risk.

He knew how Tony thought, and as such, he knew exactly what to say to manipulate the man into risking his life. There was no room for guilt as the god asserted, “The one thing I do know is that the war we are fighting, the war that took Clint’s life and can very well take ours, is merely foreplay for
Thanos. He does not need an army. Unless we act now, when Thanos bores of this game, we will die. Not just us, but Pepper, Natasha, Steve, Bruce, and everyone else you care about. If we do not do something, he will destroy Midgard and Asgard and every realm in between.”

Just as Loki intended, his speech stopped Tony's opposition in its tracks. It played on the man's guilt-complex and foolish heroism, leaving him with no choice but to listen. When Tony pointed out, “The Tesseract won’t fit inside my arc reactor,” his resistance was half-hearted at best.

Having already considered that problem, Loki was quick to say, “The Tesseract's current form is not its only one. In the legends, Thanos had the Infinity Gems as jewels on a gauntlet.”

“In the legends. Right. That sounds convincing. And do you happen to know how Thanos changed its shape?”

That the god didn't know, and once again he despised his own lack of knowledge. More than that, he worried that maybe he used to know and it was the void that had stripped the knowledge away. The void that, once Thanos came, he would throw Loki back into.

“We'll figure it out,” Loki said with a shrug, hoping that Tony, in his mourning, would not notice how fake his nonchalance was.

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Runes and equations swam before Loki’s eyes, and no amount of blinking made the information clearer. He ran his fingers against his throbbing forehead, obscuring the bright screen, and sighed. Unless a miracle happened, he wouldn’t be making any more progress today. What he really needed was some sleep, or at the very least a hot meal, but…

Something behind Loki rustled, and he couldn’t keep himself from flinching. Even when he turned towards the sound and saw that it was (like every time before) just Tony twitching in his sleep, the adrenaline refused to fade. He scrutinized the other side of the lab where the lights had burst, half-expecting a figure to emerge from the darkness. When he saw nothing, his focus drifted to the man passed out a few feet away.

For once, Tony had made it to the bed without Loki having to haul him there, half-conscious, from the desk. However, the man didn’t even make it under the sheets before exhaustion dragged him down, and now those sheets were on the floor; Tony’s fingers clenched and his legs lashed out as nightmares plagued his mind. Beneath greasy, untrimmed hair, the man’s face contorted into a grimace.

The thought crossed Loki’s mind to wake Tony, but he dismissed it. While Tony could operate longer than most humans without sleep, his mind was not impervious. After thirty hours, he was useless, just as Loki, after thirty days, was becoming useless. But the god could not sleep. There were times he had tried, when migraines wracked his mind or his magic was depleted, but the moment he let down his guard, he could feel Thanos's presence in his mind. It didn’t matter that the feeling was a byproduct of his paranoia; he would jerk awake each time with his heart thudding in his chest, and sleep became unattainable.

Loki didn’t even bother trying to rest now. Instead, he searched through the reports on his cellphone for anyone requesting backup. There were at least a dozen cities in need of assistance. He ended up choosing London, and the necessary footage loaded onto the screen while armor materialized around him.

But before he left, Tony groaned, and the god glanced over to see the man roll over, still sleeping but
in obvious distress. Unbidden, Loki’s feet brought him to Tony’s side, and he frowned as the man’s lips silently repeated the word ‘no’ over and over.

Sleeping spells were not Loki’s forte, but he nonetheless reached forwards to trace a rune lightly on Tony’s brow. His magic sunk beneath the skin, and after a moment, Tony’s noiseless protest ceased while his tense muscles went slack. For the first time in a long time, Tony Stark was completely at ease.

“You just need to hold on a bit longer. One way or another, this will all be over;” Loki told the unconscious man as he bent down to grab the bunched sheets; as the god put the thin cloth back over Tony, he swore that the man would not be the one dying. “No matter what happens, I won’t let Thanos hurt you. Trust me.”

After everything that Loki had done to Tony, after everything he has made the man do and will make him do in the future, he wasn’t sure if Tony did trust him. That’s why he couldn’t bring himself to say such things when Tony was awake. But though the situation was tense and they often fought, Loki never stopped caring. He just hoped that when this was all over — when Thanos was dead and his army obliterated — that Tony would remember that and things could go back to how they used to be.

With one last look at Tony, Loki teleported thousands of miles away. By the time he arrived in London, the city was already under heavy siege; leviathans, battleships, and cruisers wreaked havoc upon the ground while the carriers remained in the upper atmosphere. It was the first time Loki had left the lab to fight since the Chitauri had killed Barton, and time had done nothing to dull his rage.

Snarling, Loki retrieved the Casket and aimed it at a cruiser passing overhead. The frozen Chitauri shattered against the pavement. When nothing else came into range, Loki marched through the destruction — which somehow managed to look even worse than it had on his phone — in search of a more worthwhile target. He found what he wanted on the other side of a military barricade a block away. A group of dwarves were hacking away at dozens of Chitauri ground forces, their axes covered in tar-like blood, while leviathan continued to add troops to the mayhem.

It was as Loki was scoping out a roost from which to fight from that he discovered dwarves weren’t the only ones present. Thor had returned from Asgard two weeks prior, and had Loki known that the king would be here, throwing his hammer through the wing of a battleship, he would have gone somewhere else. But now that he had seen the destruction firsthand, it was too late for him to back out. Loki just hoped that the other god wouldn’t notice him as he teleported to the top of a nearby apartment building.

Not even ten minutes passed before Thor noticed his presence. Loki was in the midst of fighting a leviathan, grappling with it in while trying to snatch the Chitauri on its sides, when lightning shot past his head to blacken the chitin shell. The unexpected attack caused Loki to lose his grip on the beast’s flesh, and he rolled off of it. Thor was quick to join him, held aloft by that damnable hammer.

“Brother! You have grown most skilled at shapeshifting — I almost didn’t recognize you!”

A growl reverberated through Loki’s reptilian body, and he propelled himself upwards, attempting to regain the position he had lost. He had just managed to tear off one of the metal plates guarding the leviathan’s vulnerable flesh when more lightning came down around him. The bolts focused on the weak spot Loki had created, and the beast thrashed wildly. Loki released the dying leviathan to land on the streets.

A scowl was on his face as he transformed back. “Must you bother me? There’s plenty for you to fight elsewhere,” the god snapped.
However, his temper wasn't fully directed towards Thor; Loki's eyes were drawn to the carrier that had started to descend towards the city. He had no doubt that within its hull were dozens of explosives waiting to be released.

His gaze was followed, and when Thor saw the carrier, his stupid smile fell. But then when he looked back to Loki, it returned just as brightly. “Fight it with me, brother! It will be just like when we were younger.”

“Yes, it'd be exactly like when we were younger—with your arrogance nearly getting the both of us killed,” Loki said caustically. “Do you really think you are any match for an entire warship?”

Thor, of course, was entirely unaware of his own limits. “How hard can it be?”

He began to spin his hammer above his head. Loki cursed the god as he shot into the sky, heading straight for the thickest part of the battle. Then Loki cursed himself and, against his better judgment, rushed to attack the leviathan veering for the God of Thunder.

When Loki barreled into the creature, Thor beamed at him. He glared in return. Then he slammed into the leviathan again, keeping it and everything else out of Thor's way as they ascended towards the gargantuan warship. The higher they got, the thinner the enemy's ranks became, and far too quickly did they enter the carrier's attack radius.

Foolishly, Loki had believed that Thor had a plan in mind, but as missiles came down upon them, he realized that this was the plan. An enraged roar emerged from Loki’s throat — why did his brother have to be such a idiot? — and the trickster god lunged forwards to save Thor’s life. Talons pierced the red cape as Loki pinpointed the thick door leading to the maintenance stairwell. With a powerful beat of his wings, he hurled them through the rockets and into the metal.

To his relief, the door gave way, and they sprawled into the narrow stairwell. Their abrupt landing disorientated Thor, but with bullets still coming at their back, there was no time to let the god recover. Loki shapeshifted back, yanked his brother to his feet by the collar, and shoved him forwards.

“Move, you fool, or you’ll get us both killed.”

Once Thor’s skin had knitted back together and he regained his footing, he ran after Loki without protest. “Where are we going?”

“The engine room.” If Loki's approximations were right, the stairwell should take them directly to the right turbine, but they had to move quickly. The Chitauri undoubtedly knew they had boarded the ship, and such trespassing would not be taken lightly.

Thankfully, the stairwell was not designed to prevent intruders, and within minutes, they reached another door. Mjolnir tore the metal from the wall, revealing a cavernous room covered in wires and whirring machines. In the center of the technological mess was a cylindrical pillar that produced the engine’s red glow.

Eying the machine, Thor asked, “How do we shut it down?”

“We do what you always do — smash it.”

Loki unleashed a maelstrom of ice and concentrated magic into the room, tearing wires from the ground and fragmenting the light. Thor joined in, and his hammer bore through layers of metal and glass.
As they attacked the engine, Loki could hear Chitauri stir within the ship. Their footsteps grew louder each second, and it wasn’t long before the far door flung open; over a dozen aliens flooded into the engine room with their guns pointed at Thor and Loki.

Thor immediately shifted his focus to the threat, flinging Mjolnir into the thick, while Loki stepped backwards towards the exit. However, he didn’t stop his onslaught, and the engine shuddered and hissed in protest. A squad of Chitauri ran towards him just as a machine exploded, engulfing the aliens in fire and creating a barrier between the gods and their enemies.

The intensity of the flames singed Loki’s blue skin, and he at last let his hands fall. “We need to get out of here,” he said, continuing to back away towards the exit as the main engine started smoking. “This whole place is about to go up in flames.”

Thor didn’t need any further prompting; he called Mjolnir back to his hands and ran towards the stairwell. Loki moved to follow his brother and escape the unbearable heat when a familiar figure amidst the Chitauri caught his attention. The god’s eyes went wide, and he stumbled into a control panel.

“Brother!” Thor shouted in warning, but Loki was too busy fighting down memories to react fast enough. The engine exploded, blinding Loki and flinging him backwards. He could feel the fire on his skin, and then the next thing he knew, he was falling through the sky.

Loki struggled to pry his eyes open, and when he did, it was to see tons of metal coming down towards him; he was surrounded by the carrier’s ruin. But before he was crushed between the wing and the sidewalk, a flash of red cut across his vision and an arm wrapped around his chest.

The wind was knocked from Loki’s lungs as he was pulled to safety, and with a tremendous roar, the severed wing collided with the ground. Shrapnel flew everywhere, and flames billowed towards the sky.

High above the destruction, Loki dangled in his brother’s hold, but his attention was on the rest of the warship and, more importantly, the smaller ships fleeing from it as it fell. There was no way he had been mistaken; the Other had been on that ship, and Loki was not so optimistic as to assume that he had died in the explosion. His suspicions were confirmed when he saw a squad of cruisers fly out from the burning carrier; there was a cloaked figure on board the middle ship.

The formation began to rise towards a second warship, and Loki felt nothing but rage. “Let me go,” he snarled as the arm around him remained tense.

“Loki, what-”

“Let me go!” The end of Loki’s shout was distorted by his shifting form, and the hands tugging at Thor’s arm became claws that shredded through his vambrace. With a pained grunt, Thor released Loki, whose lips twisted and receded to reveal rows of jagged fangs. The god chased after the cruisers with single-minded intensity.

The Other’s entourage shot at Loki as he approached, but their weapons were not enough to deter him; his forehead collided with the underside of the middle cruiser, knocking it out of position. As the ship righted itself, the outrage in the Other’s expression was mere annoyance compared to the fury that consumed Loki. The god screeched as he dived for the cruiser again, this time gripping onto the metal with his teeth it dented.

One of the Chitauri aimed a gun at Loki’s face. The god closed his eyes and threw his weight to the side. A thin gash appeared under his cheek as both he and the ship were dragged towards the
Right before they collided with the pavement, the Other grabbed the second Chitauri and used its body to absorb the impact. Loki, on the other hand, hit the ground directly, and he dazedly regained his feet as the Other rolled off the smashed corpse. Before Loki could attack or make himself a smaller target, the alien scooped an energy gun off the ground and fired it. The god's fanged maw stretched wide with a bellow.

It happened in an instant; one second Loki was shapeshifting, and the next he found himself with a hand wrapped around his throat. His cry was cut off as he was shoved to the ground, landing harshly on his forearms. The Other crouched over him, his eyes glinting coldly from the shadows of his hood.

“Do not underestimate me, godling,” the creature hissed as he tightened his grip.

“Get off,” Loki gasped, one hand rising to clutch at the wrist on his throat. The other he pointed at the Other’s face, preparing to blast his smug expression away. But when Loki summoned his magic, nothing happened. It was the Tower all over again; he was powerless.

Panic blotted out the god’s mind, threatening to throw him back into memory; there was no air. He was on Titan, and there was no air. They were digging into his mind, devouring his essence and replacing it with pain and darkness. There was no air. He was in the void -

Suddenly, the Other was thrown away from Loki, and Mjolnir filled the empty space, its surface still crackling with lightning. Images that had previously been corroding Loki's mind faded into the background as Thor landed in front of him.

“You dare to harm my brother?” the god shouted, and the alien had to dodge another enraged swing.

As Loki scrambled to his feet, he stared at the Other’s blackened skin in confusion. Then his eyes lowered to where the alien’s right arm was hanging limply, its wrist crushed. Loki had done that. But...he remembered how it had been impossible to harm the Other over a month ago. Nothing he had done — magic or otherwise — left a mark. So why was now any different?

When Loki slowed down long enough to think about it, the answer was obvious: Thanos's magic had protected the Other. And, if the Other’s avoidance of Thor’s attacks indicated anything, the spell had not been infinite. Thor glanced towards Loki when the god drew even with him, but Loki continued past him. He would not stand behind his brother. This was his fight, and he would not lose again.

“You are weak,” he told the Other with conviction. “Without Thanos, you are nothing. I’ll make you suffer for what you did to me.”

Magic suffused from Loki's skin and snapped viciously in the air. From the corner of his eye, he could see Thor shift anxiously, erroneously thinking that his little brother needed protection. But when Chitauri cruisers came down towards them, the God of Thunder backed off to meet the threat.

Loki faced his demons alone, and his steadfastness made the Other angry. “You think you can harm me?”

“I know I can.”

The air was saturated with electricity because of Thor, and Loki easily turned his magic into lightning. Vivid streaks breached the distance between the god and the Other, but the alien possessed
uncanny speed. Each bolt diffused into the ground, and, despite Thor's efforts, Chitauri came after Loki. His next blast of lightning was wasted on a cruiser, and the one after that on a missile.

Though Loki wanted nothing more than to go after the Other, the attacks upon him were getting to the point that he couldn't ignore them. Cruisers buzzed in the air like flies on carrion, and battleships had disengaged the Stargates to protect Thanos's second in command. Most of Loki's focus went into dodging bullets and throwing lightning back at the drones. Monitoring the Other's position was almost impossible, especially when explosives choked the air with rubble and dust.

Shielding his eyes, Loki retreated from the fire, but when he lowered his arm, it was to see that the Other was mere inches from him. Loki reacted on instinct. There wasn't a destination in mind as he teleported—only the strong thought of 'I have to get away'—and when Loki's body rematerialized, it was with his arm half inside a stone wall. Foreign atoms intermingled with those that made up 'Loki', and agony raced through the disjointed limb. He teleported again before the first spell had even finished.

Loki clung to the wing of a battleship with his good hand and winced as he moved the other. He was lucky it wasn't worse and that all of his fingers were still present and in working order. But it hurt.

However, there was nothing he could do for it here, so he grit his teeth and pushed the issue from his mind. He grabbed hold of the wing with both hands and hauled himself up.

Thor landed beside him and was quick to ask, “Brother, are you alright?”

“I had been until you showed up.”

“Let me fight with you,” Thor beseeched as he raised Mjolnir.

“You want to be of use?” Around the wing of the battleship, Loki could see the Other boarding another cruiser. Loki snarled; his quarry could not escape. “Do your job and keep these ships out of my way.”

Without waiting for a reply, he leapt from the ship and collected electricity around himself. Thor did the same, knocking back a leviathan that had its sights set on Loki. The instant the god's feet were on the ground, he flung lightning at the vessel trying to take the Other to safety. The creature was forced backwards as the cruiser sizzled and electrocuted the Chitauri piloting it.

“You are mine,” Loki snarled, hurling bolt after bolt at the wretched creature. Though the Other was fast, he wasn't fast enough to avoid each strike; slate was tarnished to black, and confidence became uncertainty. It pleased Loki to see the fear he had felt reflected in the eyes of his would-be oppressor, and even when the distance between them closed, he stood his ground.

Lightning struck the Other's chest when he was only a few yards away, causing the alien to stagger on the pavement. Another blast was about to follow when the Other abruptly lunged forwards. Loki's blast went wide, and he raised his arms to protect himself as the alien collided with him. It's momentum sent them tumbling, and Loki's back hit the ground.

But this time, the god did not let it stun him. His hand searched out the creature's throat, and once it was in his grasp, he squeezed. It did not matter that the spell to neutralize his magic remained. He did not need magic to squash an ant.

Wheezing, the Other attempted to force Loki off, but the god did not budge. The alien procured a blade from his cloak and slashed down at Loki. The god knocked the blade away, and then, without
mercy, he snapped bone; the scream that bubbled up in the scaly throat never made it to the surface.

When the Other spoke, its voice was faint: “Thanos... will...”

A hand through the chest silenced those words once and for all.

Black liquid flowed down Loki's arm and dripped from his elbow as he rose to his feet. He shoved the corpse away. It hit the ground with a thud, and Loki stood, observing the lifeless eyes and growing pool of blood. It looked the same as when Clint had died, but this time, the death was deserved.

When dozens of Chitauri swarmed the god for a chance at vengeance, Loki stepped on the body as he went to meet them; he wore the Other's blood as war paint.

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With fingers ghosting across the holographic screen, Tony paused. “So... Remind me again what the possibility is that we kill ourselves and everyone around us.”

Loki didn’t glance up from where he was putting the final touches on his spell, a convoluted thing that ran up the side of emission generators and covered the ceiling. His expression was hardened, with his eyes locked on the goal and his jaw set firm. When he answered, it was without passion.

“Considering we're a few miles from the nearest town, outside casualties should be nonexistent. Now hurry up. We can start when you're finished.”

The god magicked his hands clean and stepped down from the table, leaving a sweeping mural behind. Reluctantly, Tony returned to calibrating the systems, unsure if he was helping to stop Thanos or merely hastening his own death. But it was too late to turn back now, and once the generators pinged online, Tony followed Loki towards the cerulean sheen. They stood on either side of the Tesseract, and when Loki looked at Tony, the man swallowed down his fears and lifted his hand towards the cube.

Just before his fingers touched the glassy surface, Tony hesitated again. His eyes slid over to the other member of their group, protected from the ambient radiation — that, no matter what Loki said, Tony didn’t believe was safe — by a large glass pane.

“Hey Bruce, you doing okay over there?” he asked while ignoring Loki’s impatient jittersing. “You can still leave if you want to. You’ve already done your physics homework for the day, and if this goes badly... Well, let’s just say we won’t need your medical expertise anymore.”

“I think it’s better that I stay,” Bruce said, fidgeting with the sleeve of his suit. “Between the glass and the other guy, I should be safe. And if you two get hurt, you need someone who can tell the paramedics what happened.”

“Tony,” Loki interrupted. “We need to begin. I can’t hold the spell forever. Banner has made his decision—now make yours.”

While Tony wanted nothing more than to delay further in hopes that a better solution would spontaneously appear, he couldn’t ignore the thin layer of sweat appearing on Loki’s brow or the dark circles under the god’s eyes. Magic swirled in the air, growing thicker every second, and the effort of containing it was taking its toll on Loki’s sleep-deprived body. The sight reminded Tony that he wasn’t the only one risking his life, and if Loki was willing to die for a planet that wasn’t even his own, then the least Tony could do was try.
“Sorry… I do the same thing I did before, right?”

At Loki’s nod, Tony finally let his hand fall upon the Tesseract; it flared, bringing with it a soft crooning that flitted through his mind. Despite his every instinct, he latched onto the foreign presence and dragged it to the forefront as the machines around them flicked to life. Amidst the whirring and rhythmic beeps, Tony pictured the diagram of the arc reactor they had made.

“No… I do the same thing I did before, right?”

The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back with echoing roars in his head. The ceiling lights flickered, but the darkness was abated by the Tesseract’s seething.

“Just do it, Loki,” Tony ordered.

But before Tony could move towards him, Loki forced his muscles to uncurl and raised his head. When his eyes landed upon the Tesseract, he scowled. “That should have worked.”

“Maybe you did the spell wrong?” Tony asked. He stepped back to the table and frowned down at the fading sigils.

“My magic was not wrong,” Loki denied angrily.

Holding his hands up in surrender, Tony placated, “If you say so, princess. But it doesn’t change the fact that it didn’t work.”

Loki ground his teeth together. “We’ll try it again.” He placed his hands on the runes, and Tony did not miss the god’s wince as his right hand touched the cool metal. Though Tony had noticed Loki favor that arm, he never had the time to ask what was wrong.

This time was no different; the moment the spell had rekindled, the god snapped, “Hurry up.”

Once again, Tony placed his hand upon the Tesseract, and the noise in his head grew louder, threatening to drown him out. Loki had said Tony needed to listen to the cube, but it was like white noise in his mind. And when he tried to speak back to it — ‘Obey me. You are mine, and you will shift your form to what I desire.’ — he received no evidence that his voice was heard.

Then, before he was ready, Loki warned, “Brace yourself,” and magic pummeled them from all sides. But this time, as Tony was shoved down by Loki’ spell and the Tesseract seared in response, he felt something click. He shouted at the Tesseract, and for the first time ever, it called back; as he was blasted away, he felt the gem’s surface contort.

The pounding in Tony's head was inconsequential. He scrambled to his feet in record time and lurched towards the stand with a grin spreading across his lips. On the table, the cube had disappeared, and in its place was a small blue chip. Tony grabbed it without hesitation and turned it over in his hands, peering into the unnatural depths.

“We actually did it…” he breathed. “Loki, come look at this! We did it!”

There was a pained moan from the floor as Loki rolled onto his knees, and Tony's relief diminished at the sound. He lowered the Tesseract to watch as the god used the edge of the table to haul himself
up, his eyes squinted against the light. “Loki, are you...?”

“Give it to me,” the god ordered, uncurling his right arm from around his chest and reaching out for the Tesseract. Tony handed it over, and as Loki inspected it, his expression morphed into one of relief. “It actually worked,” he murmured, trailing his fingers along the smooth edges. “The shape is flawless.”

Tony hadn't noticed that Bruce had joined them until the physicist was by his side, peering curiously at what they had accomplished. “I have to admit, I didn't think it'd actually work.”

“You and me both. We should start a club,” Tony joked. “‘I can't believe that actually worked’ can be our motto.”

But then his smile dimmed as he remembered what their success meant for him. As he moved to touch the glass hiding beneath his shirt, he wondered if he would have preferred that they failed.

Following the gesture, Bruce asked, “Are you sure you still want to do this? No one will think less of you if you don't.”

That made Loki look up from staring at the Tesseract, but Tony didn't need the god guilt-tripping him to know what the right decision was. “No, I need to do this.” He forced his hand down from his chest. “I just wish I grabbed some scotch from Malibu when I picked up the robots. This isn't something I want to do sober.”

However, controlling the Tesseract wasn't something he wanted to try drunk either, and there was nothing he could do besides fetch the arc reactor he had made. Loki relinquished the Tesseract, and Tony made quick work of taking off the glass and metal plate to reveal the empty slot within. The Tesseract fit perfectly.

Then came the hard part. Though Tony inspected the arc reactor for flaws, trying to find any excuse to not put it inside his chest, there was nothing wrong with it — other than, of course, the chance that it may kill him. But that wasn't enough to keep him from giving the device to Bruce with a cheeky, “Ready to get your hands dirty, Doc?”

Without waiting for a reply, Tony turned and marched to the dusty chair he had dragged down from an upper floor. He shed his shirt, tossed it onto the table, and set stiffly on the pleather.

“What are you waiting for?” he asked when neither Bruce nor Loki moved.

“You should get an actual doctor to do this. If you go into cardiac arrest, I don't know what you expect me to do,” the physicist said.

“Then hopefully I don't go into cardiac arrest.” Tony's nails dug into the chair. When Banner continued to hesitate, he ordered, “Do it.”

“I hope you know what you're doing...” the man muttered as he and Loki made their way over. They took up positions on either side of Tony, Bruce to get a better view of the arc reactor and Loki to offer some semblance of moral support.

Tony wanted to think that he had the situation under control, but the second Bruce was finished inspecting his chest and moved to twist the reactor free, he gasped and pressed his back against the upholstery. Vivid flashes of sand and blood filled his mind, and for a second, he thought he could hear harsh voices demanding his compliance.

“Relax,” Loki murmured, leaning over the back of the chair and watching Bruce's progress; Tony
fixated his gaze on the ceiling lights.

“That’s easy for you to say,” he said, trying to keep his mind off of what was happening. He wasn’t in Afghanistan. He wasn’t in Afghanistan. He wasn’t in Afghanistan. But his mantra couldn’t erase the keen sensation of the reactor sliding free, exposing the wire that connected the core to the magnet. “Oh fuck.”

Painful bursts went through Tony's chest as Bruce tugged on the wire, and his hand instinctively lifted to make it stop. Loki caught him before he could disrupt Bruce’s concentration.

“Relax,” the god repeated, holding Tony still. There was a squelching sound when Bruce slid his hand into Tony's chest and began to poke around. “You’ll be fine.”

“I’m almost finished,” Bruce said. “Just have to thread this through the frame, and... There.”

Every muscle in Tony's body jerked as the Tesseract screeched within him. It was an inferno, a tempest, a maelstrom, a hurricane — it was destruction itself — it was drowning him — it was burning — it was -

“Tony? Tony, are you okay?” Bruce gripped Tony's head in his hand, angling the man's eyes towards him; Tony stared back blankly. Loki's grip on his hand tightened. “Do you need me to remove it?”

Apparently Tony didn't reply fast enough, because Bruce started to disconnect the Tesseract and Loki didn't stop him.

“No,” Tony choked out, grabbing Bruce's wrist with the hand that was not getting crushed. “No, it’s okay. It’s…” He didn't know what it was; it was fire and ice and lightning, but at the same time none of those. It was euphoria soaked through every vein. What had once been a whisper was now an opera.

“Is this what magic normally feels like?” Tony asked incredulously, leaning his head back to regard Loki. “It's... It's amazing.” He could feel the vibration of atoms and the bonds of matter. He could feel the disharmony in Loki's hand and the way the cells were torn and interrupted by foreign molecules. He could feel everything.

The god’s death grip loosened. “I am not quite sure the degree of what you are feeling, but more complex spells do invoke a euphoric sensation in the wielder. Considering how much energy the Tesseract has, such a response is understandable.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Bruce said, “but Tony, if you're keeping that in your chest, then you need to let go of my wrist. You're starting to leak fluids everywhere.”

Tony slowly uncurled his fingers, and Bruce immediately set to work wiping away the liquid that had gathered. Then, when the path was clear, he started to screw the new arc reactor into Tony's chest. The aching around Tony's heart began to fade, and he finally allowed himself to look down. For some reason, he had expected the arc reactor to appear monstrous, but it was nearly identical to the reactor now sitting on a nearby desk. The Tesseract shone brighter than the Starkium, and the metal filling was rectangular instead of triangular, but otherwise... It seemed no different.

“Try it,” Loki said, releasing Tony's hand and stepping back. He motioned for Bruce to do the same.

With numb legs, Tony rose from the chair. His palm raised to face the far wall, and he began to focus on the sensation of firing a repulsor. Before images had fully formed in his mind, energy blasted from his palm. The recoil made Tony stumble backwards, and he caught himself on the arm of the chair as
he stared in shock at the gaping hole in the concrete.

“I... didn’t mean to do that.” He glanced towards Loki in confusion. “I didn't tell it to fire.”

Then the Tesseract reacted again, this time completely against Tony's will; magic slammed into a desk, cleaving it and half and sending both parts flying. Bruce stepped back in alarm, and Loki placed himself between the two.

“Tony, you need to calm down and give the Tesseract clear instructions. Magic is a creature of emotion. If you do not reign your thoughts in, you will lose control.”

Tony had already lost control. Magic coated his hands, firing off randomly into whatever was near him. Loki had to duck as a blast headed for his head. Whatever connection Tony had made with the Tesseract was now gone, and of the two of them, the gem's voice was louder. It grew brighter inside him, and feelings that were once wondrous had now become terrifying and invasive.

'Stop it,' Tony thought desperately; the magic felt like lightning running through his veins. 'You're supposed to listen to me. Stop. Stop it.'

"Stop!"

Like a switch had been flicked, the magic disappeared from Tony's skin. He held his hands away from him, fearing the lull wouldn't last, but after thirty seconds had passed and nothing happened, he and the others let out the breaths they had been holding. Tony sunk down to the ground, his heart galloping under the new arc reactor.

“I take back what I said. I don’t like this idea anymore.”

-o-o-o-

Two months had passed since the first Chitauri warship entered the atmosphere, and Earth was barely scraping by. The economy was in ruin. Getting food and water was a struggle for even the most affluent; no amount of money could buy what didn’t exist. Sprawling cities were reduced to rubble. Countless homes were destroyed, and each time people fled, they left more and more of themselves behind.

But somehow, despite the crippling losses and overwhelming adversity, they persevered. Somehow, Earth's forces began to whittle away Thanos's army, taking down ship after ship until only a fraction of the invasion force remained. It was hard — almost impossible — but what humanity's resistance lacked in numbers, they made up for in ingenuity and desperation. Risks were taken, aerial maneuvers were perfected, and superhumans came out from hiding to protect their homes. Tony hadn't realized just how many of them existed, but he was right when he had said that the world was never going to be the same. Shadows were brought to light, and it was those shadows — cast out from society and viewed with skepticism or contempt — that pushed back the invasion.

Then there was the Tesseract: it could raze down ranks of Chitauri soldiers, leaving nothing but smears of black behind, and blast battleships from the sky. It was their boon, their victory. With it, they could neutralize a threat in mere hours, saving countless lives.

But there was no forgetting that the Tesseract was a double-edged sword with the power to destroy them just as easily as it saved them. Far too many times had Tony's allies been hurt by their proximity to him, especially Loki, who refused to leave Tony behind no matter how many times he was taken down. And damn it, Tony didn't want to hurt him — to hurt anyone besides the bastards invading his planet — but the Tesseract would not listen to him. It wasn’t just a tool; it was a living weapon that
reacted to Tony’s every nuance of emotion. And if Tony wasn’t paying attention, if he did not control it with every fiber of his mind, the Tesseract would respond in the way it was most accustomed: with violence.

When Tony accidentally dropped something after a long day fighting, the Tesseract gouged away the floor. When Tony got stressed talking to other people, the Tesseract shoved them away. When Tony had a nightmare, the Tesseract mangled the bed and he’d wake up on the floor. And the more times these things happened — getting him banned from war meetings and making fitful sleep even harder to come by — the worse the responses became. Tony didn’t know if it was because the connection between him and the gem was stronger, or because he was more anxious than ever. All he knew was that he never should have put the Tesseract in his chest, especially when he could feel it poisoning him.

It hard started out subtle: the random twinge in his chest as he attacked or a shortness of breath that he had ascribed to fighting. But as the symptoms persisted, he knew things couldn’t be that simple. Once, when he had used the Tesseract to bring down a carrier on his own, the Tesseract felt like it was burning in his chest, and his heartbeat pounded irregularly in his ears. When they got back to the lab, he had accidentally bumped into the desk; a massive bruise formed on his thigh, and it had yet to fade.

But Tony did not tell Loki his fears. The god was convinced that their plan would work. He focused on victory with blind hope and did not want to see the price they were paying to take down the Chitauri. And honestly, Tony did not fault the god for it. Loki was terrified. And if remaining ignorant to the fact that their last hope was killing Tony let Loki rest a bit easier, then... Tony would not say a word. Not until the last Chitauri warship sat in rubble.

So he kept going, trying everything he could to get the Tesseract under control while Loki did his damnedest to help. Eventually, they weren’t just leveling the playing field; they were tipping the scales against the Chitauri. For the first time, they discussed plans for reconstruction. Hope for the future shown through the bleakness of warfare.

That was when Thanos made his move.

For months, the Mad Titan sat passively while his soldiers killed and were killed in turn. Not even the simultaneous destruction of two carriers was enough to draw his ire. He remained on his throne, red eyes staring into empty space, while the war unfolded like a poorly written play. Only when the bloodshed began to slow did his rigid seat move, bringing with it the remnants of his army. The final battle was upon them, and Tony… Tony was nowhere near ready.

His eyes were fixated upon his tablet screen and the gruesome throne hanging in the sky. Thanos was a speck in the swarms of battleships and cruisers that demolished anything standing in their way, and yet there was no doubt that he dominated the scene; the Chitauri kept a spherical opening around his thrown, and when one of the Stargates entered the dead zone—either to shoot at the Mad Titan or to fight the leviathan nearby—both the ship and pilot soon ceased to exist.

“Tony, we need to leave now ,” Loki said while he too remained focused on Thanos’s imposing figure. The god was already in his armor, sans the excessive helmet, and his fists were clenched so tight they trembled. “One way or another, this has to end.”

As Tony shook his head in denial — as if that would make Thanos disappear — the Tesseract fed upon his anxiety; a wave of blue magic crackled out from his skin to rattle the desk and buffet Loki.

“He has to go back. I can’t fight him yet. Not when I can barely control the Tesseract.”
“But you can use it. That will have to be good enough.”

“And if it isn’t?” Tony turned desperate eyes to the god. “Do we just go out there and die? Because that is what’s going to happen. Thanos will kill-”

Loki spun towards Tony, grabbing his arm tightly and resisting the Tesseract’s efforts to shove him back. “You won’t die,” the god ground out. “You hear me? I’m not going to let him kill you too. And even if I fail…” Loki yanked Tony closer to splay his other hand against the center of Tony’s chest, blocking the vivid glow. “Even if I do not have the power to protect you, the Tesseract will not let you die. Thanos’s magic cannot touch you.”

Tony stared down at where thin fingers clutched starkly against black fabric. He frowned as he asked, “Then what about you? You keep saying I won’t die, but what about you?” When Loki didn’t answer, Tony urged, “If Thanos is as strong as you say, then let’s make something to defend you. There has to be a way.”

Loki was shaking his head before Tony had even finished speaking. “There isn't time.”

On the pixelated screen, Chitauri battleships laid waste to buildings, causing stone to shatter on the sidewalks below. A tank was crushed along with a squad of soldiers.

“Then promise me you'll stay away from Thanos.”

Countless nightmares of Loki’s death played in Tony's head, each one bringing with it images more horrific. He couldn’t stand for those dreams to become reality.

“You can’t reach him alone. I need to go with you.” Tony made to protest, and the god grinned, pulling his hand away to hide the way it quivered. “Don’t worry about me; I’ll be fine.”

But Loki’s eyes were wide, and when he stared upon the Mad Titan, erroneously haloed by the sun, he clenched his fists to the point that his palms bled. The god lied.
The Last Stand

"All this feels strange and untrue,
And I won't waste a minute without you.
My bones ache, my skin feels cold,
And I'm getting so tired and so old.

The anger swells in my guts,
And I won't feel these slices and cuts.
I want so much to open your eyes,
'Cause I need you to look into mine.

Get up, get out, get away from these liars,
'Cause they don't get your soul or your fire.
Take my hand, knot your fingers through mine,
And we'll walk from this dark room for the last time."

-Open Your Eyes by Snow Patrol

-0-o-0-

Heaven-reaching towers fell, and those that remained bore wounds of shattered glass that effused smoking blood. That smoke drifted into the flaming sky, creating clouds of ash which flickered with lightning. Through the dark tempest, spaceships fought; missiles dented metal, immense wings were disfigured, and vessels crafted of Vibranium hurtled towards the earth like scorched moths. There were no runes left to protect the ground below; asphalt was crushed upon impact, and bullet holes peppered the sidewalks. Wrecked cars, tanks, and fighters were left abandoned in the streets.

San Francisco lay in ruin; the proud city had toppled, and above it floated Thanos’s unholy throne.

The headset in Loki’s ear crackled with spatters of words: “-requesting back up at-” “-anyone copy? We need-” “-Rogers, I copy-” “He’s just sitting right there-” Someone screamed. “Do not engage Thanos! I repea-” “Fall back! Where’s our backup, damnit-”

Their voices were swallowed by an explosion; a Chitauri carrier had blasted through the Stargate’s blockade, and destruction was unleashed from its hull. SHIELD’s defenses weren’t strong enough. The roar dissolved into white noise.


He received no response, and after a minute, Loki reached up to turn the headset off. It took Tony longer to give up on reaching their comrades, but when his shouts generated nothing but static, he too closed the line.

When they spoke after that, it was only to alert the other of an approaching enemy. Their attention went into navigating the desolation; they climbed over the remains of a carrier and maneuvered through the rubble. The closer they got to their destination—to ground zero—the worse the damage became and the more Chitauri they encountered. Every foe that crossed their path was ruthlessly shot down. There was no thought of sparing alien lives; if they did not attack first, they would be killed. It was that attack first, think later attitude that led them to nearly kill three of their allies.

“Lord Stark!” an As called out, rushing through the street towards them with a Chitauri spear held in
his hands. Behind him, another Aesir and an elf followed, also armed with pillaged weapons. Tony’s palm continued to seethe, and as their allies grew closer, he directed the blast — too strong for him to abort — into the side of a flipped car. Loki too lowered his hands, but his magic did not fade as he scanned their surroundings for hostiles.

“Lord Stark, Thor has ordered that we protect you at all costs,” the first As stated as he drew even with them. “Both of you.” At this, he glanced towards Loki, but if he had qualms with the god, they were ignored in favor of a larger problem. “We will get you to the Mad Titan.”

“Great.” Tony lifted his head to stare at the black speck drifting towards the city. At the rate the Mad Titan was moving, they had at most thirty minutes before the throne hit the ground. When it did, a lot of people would die. “Lead the way.”

Their new comrades snapped into position, with the warriors taking the lead and the mage joining Loki in the rear. “I’ll guard our left,” she told the god, her hands flaring red instead of green. Loki nodded, and he turned his focus to the right, trusting her to watch their backs. Despite the fact that he had more power than all of them combined, Iron Man was at the center of their formation; it was essential that he reached Thanos unharmed or the mission was lost.

As they pushed farther into the battlefield, it became harder to ensure that protection. Around the outer edge of the city, the Chitauri had been few in number, but as they closed the distance to Thanos, the amount of enemies rose exponentially. They were pursued by battleships and cruisers, and on the ground, swarms of soldiers came from alleyways and rooftops. There was no hiding their presence, and the Chitauri were determined to stop them.

They were still a mile away when the Alfr shouted, “Leviathan from the left!”

Their party came to a halt, and Tony raised both palms. The jet of energy narrowly missed the beast's side as it glided behind a building. Cement and steel tumbled down, blowing ash and dust into the air. The leviathan swooped through the cloud and passed over their heads, Chitauri troops dropping from its sides. The Aesir immediately rushed the aliens while Tony took aim again. This time, the leviathan screeched into the ground.

A Chitauri shot at Loki, and the god retaliated with a storm of jagged ice. The next alien that tried to kill him disintegrated into nothingness courtesy of the Tesseract. But as two battleships came towards them, darting in and out of Tony's range, they were overwhelmed.

There was a pained shout, and Loki spun to see one of the Aesir doubled-over, a spear shoved through her stomach. The Chitauri at the other end of the shaft slid to the ground, its head a yard from its body.

Tony immediately shifted his attention to protecting the wounded warrior, letting the battleships crowd in above. By Loki’s side, the Alfr weaved spells against the ships with enviable speed, but it wasn’t enough. Coming to a decision, Loki raised the Casket of Ancient Winters above his head and ice exploded from cerulean hands. The shield that formed was immense, stretching high above them and across the intersection.

With a roar, the female As grabbed the spear pulled it out; bright red gushed around the bronze metal as it fell to the ground. Her flesh knitted together as the others eliminated the remaining Chitauri, but with the shield above them under assault and another leviathan bringing troops, the battle was far from over.

Loki was the first to point out what they were all thinking: “We can't keep going like this. There's too many of them.”
“We don’t have much of a choice,” Tony said, but he looked doubtfully at their companions. All three of them bore half-healed wounds, and the one's stomach was still slowly weeping blood.

Noticing his stare, the As straightened her torso. There was but the barest hint of pain on her face as she insisted, “It is our duty to get you to Thanos. We shall not fail King Thor.”

That was when the world trembled. Not just where they stood, but for miles, stone split and glass burst. Through the gaps in the ice, Loki saw the source; Thanos’s throne had at last delved beneath the skyline, and as it came to rest on the ground, anything in its way was obliterated. In a last ditch effort to stop him, a Firefly flew straight for Thanos. When the Mad Titan was done with it, not even a husk remained. Then the throne passed from sight, and the earth shook harder before going still.

In Loki’s distraction, his shield weakened; a bullet pierced the ice and dug deep into the god’s shoulder. His arm went numb, and the Casket clattered onto the ground. The shield cracked apart overhead, and the sky became more bullet than air.

Realizing that they were vastly overwhelmed, Loki shouted, “Run!”

But even as the others retreated towards safety, Loki remained where he was; he clenched his jaw against the pain and reached for the Casket while bullets continued to pierce the earth around him. When Tony noticed that Loki hadn’t moved, he split off from the group and returned to him just as an explosion tossed the god back, his fingers barely missing the iced surface.

“Loki, we need to move!” A hand wrapped around the god’s arm and started to drag him away from both the Casket and the bullets.

“Wait,” Loki shouted, straining to reach the weapon; his skin had already washed white. Another bomb fell where he was reaching, and even Tony couldn’t shield him from the waves of unbearable heat.

“Leave it!” The man tugged on him again, and Loki had no choice but to listen. They ran, leaving behind both the Casket their allies. When the fire died down and Loki looked back, he could no longer see either.

They kept moving: through alleyways, around mangled cars, and across rubble. The Chitauri did everything they could to stop the two from advancing, but Tony—the Tesseract—was unstoppable. And, despite Loki's craven wish that they would never have to fight Thanos—an act that he knew would be tantamount to his own suicide, if not Tony's as well—they were closing the distance to the throne. The only thing that kept him going was the magmatic lust for vengeance that grew within him each time they passed the body of an ally and the knowledge that if he did not protect his new family, they would all meet the same fate as Clint.

Then an anguished cry — familiar to Loki despite the fact that he had only heard it once before, when his hand released the spear and gravity pulled him into the void — rose into the air: “No!”

At once, the god was racing past Tony and leaping over a fallen car. He sprinted towards the end of the road, shoving past a squad of Chitauri and spinning around the corner.

That was when he came into view of Thanos, who sat imperious in a wasteland surrounded by a ring of blood. Outside of that ring, Loki found the source of the cry: Thor was crouched over a limp figure, his blood-drenched hands clutching at torn armor while his body trembled. Sif’s head lolled, and her eyes stared at nothing. Blood painted the ground in splotches, originating from the base of the Mad Titan's throne, passing by a crumpled blade, and ending where Thor now cradled the body.
With a sob that warped into a furious roar, Thor set down his beloved friend and hefted Mjolnir into the air. Wrathful eyes were turned to Thanos, who stared back without inflection.

“Thor!” Loki shouted as he rushed forwards — that idiot was going to get himself killed. Didn’t he realize that he was nothing compared to Thanos? — but he didn’t make it far before he was forced to stop; a battleship was firing at him, the shots missing his head only by inches, and he had to turn towards it. A blast of magic tore off the turret, and the ship retreated, but when Loki saw his brother again, the too-courageous fool was throwing himself at the Mad Titan.

“Thor!”

Mjolnir swung at Thanos's head, bringing with it lightning from the sky. The Mad Titan lifted his hand, and the hammer collided with his palm. The impact thundered through the city, and electricity cascaded around both Thanos and Thor. It singed the skulls on the throne and burnt through the red cape. But Thanos was unharmed, and Thor flipped around backwards, his heels digging into the gravel. Undaunted, the God of Thunder kicked back off the ground and summoned even more lightning.

This time, Thanos did not just block; he retaliated. With a sharp twist of his hand, magic snatched Thor from the air and flung him back like a rag doll. A shout clambered from Loki's throat, and he staggered forwards as his brother smashed bonelessly through the side of a distant skyscraper. The building's already unstable foundation shook, and Thor was buried beneath tons of rubble.

As the chunks of concrete rolled to a stop, Loki stared in horror. There was agony in his chest, swelling alongside the fire, and the world blurred until all the remained was the wreckage. It felt like a nightmare—Thor couldn't die. He was reckless, but that's why Loki was there; Loki was supposed to look out for his big brother. Thor couldn't die—but he wasn't waking up.

'Get up,' Loki thought, both to himself and Thor. But the devastation remained, and only the wind stirred the dust. 'You're a god, aren't you? Get up.'

Thor did not get back up.

Some part of Loki — a part he had thought long since buried — was screaming inside of him. He stepped towards where his brother had fallen, wanting the noise to stop and the ache to go away. He didn't even realize that he was under attack until Tony shouted his name and blasted the battleship out of the sky.

“Loki, what are you doing?” the man asked harshly as he landed beside him. “You're going to get yourself killed!”

Loki blinked and was surprised to find that his eyes were damp. “I...” He turned to Tony, as if he could get rid of the voice growing louder in his mind. “Thor is...”

Tony followed his gaze back to the ruin. “Are you sure? I've seen you get thrown through walls and come out just fine.”

“Not by Thanos.” What Loki could not say aloud still filled him with grim certainty: 'He's dead.'

With Iron Man's mask in the way, Loki could not see Tony's expression, but the sympathy was clear in the man's voice. “Lokes, I'm... I'm so sorry.”

'Sorry' wasn't going to fix anything, and neither was revenge. But the latter was all Loki had left, and when Chitauri got in his way, he murdered them. He didn't allow himself to think as he pushed forwards, cutting a path to where Thanos sat, so confident in his power over them that he didn't even
Tony joined him and didn't bring Thor up again.

They were still hundreds of feet away from the grisly throne, fighting tooth and nail to get through the final resistance, when a red, white, and blue shield knocked down a line of Chitauri. The weapon then shot back in the direction it had come, and Rogers leapt up to catch it. Another throw cleared the way between him and them.

“I'll get you closer,” the soldier panted, wiping sweat and blood from his brow.

“Glad you could join us, Cap,” Tony said, sounding anything but. “Is it just you?” He peered around the super-soldier, but the only living beings they could see were Chitauri and handfuls of Thor's army. “Where's Natasha?”

“I don't know,” Rogers answered. “I got separated from her back on Main Street.”

There was nothing but empty buildings and crashed spaceships in that direction. Loki tried to reassure himself. 'Natasha is resourceful,' he thought. 'She'll get herself out safely.'

Their concern now was the monster that observed the carnage with lazy confidence. With Rogers' help, they swiftly advanced towards the Mad Titan. No matter the upheaval surrounding them, Tony stood out like a beacon in the ash-shadowed city; heartless red eyes locked on them as they entered the ring of blood. Ancient bones were crushed beneath purple hands.

Then Thanos stood, and Loki suddenly couldn’t breathe. It had been so long since panic had actually choked the breath out him that he at first thought he had been hit by a spell, but then he understood: it was terror. Pure, unbridled terror. But he was the only one who froze; Tony and Rogers continued towards the Mad Titan, ignorant of the limitless suffering he could bring them — would bring them if they made a single wrong move.

“Stop,” Loki ordered, but it came out nothing like the powerful command he intended. They didn't listen. Chances were they didn't even hear him.

Tony growled, “Show time.” His palms filled with light as the Mad Titan approached; Thanos watched that light with rapt desire.

“You have something that belongs to me, human,” the titan boomed. “Hand it over.”

“Not today,” Tony said. “Not ever.” Then the dam holding back his fury broke, and the Tesseract was unleashed on Thanos. But when the piercing light faded, Thanos was standing completely unharmed. A second blast of magic was also diffused by the force field that cocooned the Mad Titan.

Rogers took that as his cue to enter the fight. He threw his shield at Thanos without any hesitation or fear in his expression. When the shield rebounded, Captain America moved closer to try again. To Loki, it was like watching Thor fight all over again, and he knew how it would end.

The next time Rogers flung his shield, Thanos didn't ignore it; he plucked the weapon from the air, idly inspecting it even as Tony continued his futile assault.

Loki could see in psychotic red eyes what the Mad Titan intended, and it was the promise of death that snapped him out of his terror. Praying that he would not be too late, the god shapeshifted as he bounded forwards. Hooves pounded against the pavement, and Loki hit Rogers just as Thanos threw the shield back at the soldier. It moved faster than even Loki's eyes could see, narrowly missed his flank, and embedded itself deep into the sidewalk.

Rogers fell onto the black horse's back, clutching desperately at the long mane while Loki continued
to run. The god’s eight legs flew across the ground as he switched directions. He ran for Tony, not slowing even as the man raised his hands and fired the Tesseract straight at him — no, not at him. Loki could feel the magic collide with something over his shoulder.

Only when he reached Tony did he stop, and not because he wanted to. Tony’s efforts to block Thanos’s spells failed, and beneath their feet, rock Imploded on itself. The three Avengers tumbled into the crater, and Loki hit the ground on his side. Rogers gave a strangled gasp as the god’s momentum sent him rolling over the soldier.

It took Tony only a moment to recover, and then he was marching up the sloping earth. Loki climbed after him, shapeshifting to grab Tony’s shoulder with his hand. “Wait,” the god ordered when Tony did not stop, pulling him forwards. “Tony!”

“Why?” the man asked without looking at him; his eyes, like Loki’s, were locked on the Mad Titan. Two Stargates had engaged Thanos and were firing at him from hundreds of feet away. With the wave of a hand, one of the ships crushed inwards. The other dived out of the way and continued to attack.

A pained groan was the answer neither of them had expected, and they turned back the crater. Rogers was on his knees, and an alarming amount of blood stained the left side of his uniform. With a quick glance back towards Thanos, Tony pulled free of Loki’s hold and rushed to their comrade’s side.

“Steve?” He crouched down. “What happened? Where are you hurt?”

“It’s nothing,” Rogers gasped, but that was obviously a lie; he was clutching his arm to his chest, and it continued to bleed onto the ground. When he shifted, Loki could see a glimpse of white beneath the crimson.

Tony must have seen it too, because he said, “You can’t fight like this.”

However, the fight was coming to them; pieces of warped steel and red-speckled Vibranium came down from the sky.

“Shit.” The man stood, placing himself between Rogers and the Mad Titan, who was less than two hundred feet away. “Loki, you need to get him out of here. I’ll handle Thanos.”

“Alone?” Loki shook his head. “Tony, you can’t.”

“Weren’t you the one who said that I could do this?” Tony asked, starting up the incline with his entire body seething blue. “Don’t make yourself a liar now, princess.”

“You need a plan.”

“I have a plan. Attack.” And that’s exactly what Tony did; he activated his repulsors and shot into the air, directing the Tesseract’s energy into Thanos. It hit the force field surrounding the titan with a shriek, and the very air exploded.

“Damnit,” Loki swore, but he leaned down towards Steve. “Come on. We need to get you somewhere safe.” He wrapped the captain’s good arm around his shoulder and they stood slowly. It was clear that Steve’s arm was not the only thing that got damaged; the super-soldier leaned heavily against Loki, not putting weight on his left leg. When he limped forwards, the muscles in his jaw were taut.

They had barely cleared the edge of the crater when Tony let out a startled cry. Loki had tried to not
look back, aware that if he did he wouldn’t be able to leave, but he couldn’t ignore the fight happening behind him.

He glanced over his shoulder to see Tony get slammed into the ground, and — true to his expectations — Loki could not take another step away. He could not leave Tony to fight Thanos alone, even if it meant putting Rogers at risk.

When Loki turned desperately to the soldier, he was surprised to see that the man was already nodding. “Go. I can take care of myself.” To prove his point, Steve released his grip on Loki. He swayed but remained standing. “Thanos has to be stopped.”

Loki didn’t need to be told twice. He went against everything he had learned on Titan, every bit of pain that had been engraved into his mind, and ran towards Thanos.

He reached the battle just as the sidewalk under Tony's feet burst upwards like a volcano of concrete, and he saw the Mad Titan preparing to attack while Iron Man was knocked off balance. Green magic shot at the Thanos's head only to be diffused by the force field. However, it served as a distraction to let Tony fly out of range of the bucking ground.

Red eyes slid towards Loki, and the god quickened his pace; Thanos's spell narrowly missed his head.

'I'm not afraid,' Loki told himself. But then he had to skid to a halt as the earth in front of him became a tsunami. As he defended himself from falling stone, Tony sheltered him from Thanos.

'I am afraid.' Loki corrected as Tony landed beside him. 'But I won't run.'

“What about Steve?” Tony asked, glancing to where the super-soldier had taken shelter behind the ruins on a store. His arm was still tucked around his stomach, but his eyes were alert as they darted between Thanos and the Chitauri fighting against Aesir farther down the block.

“There's nowhere safe for me to take him. Not with Thanos here.”

“Know any way to destroy whatever is protecting him?” Tony asked while placing himself in front of Loki; his armor flared as a wave of magic collided with it, and his feet skid backwards. “I can feel the spell with the Tesseract, but I don't know how to unravel it.”

“I'll see what I can do,” Loki said, and then they both were forced to move when Thanos's attacks grew stronger.

The god raked his mind for everything he knew about force fields while Tony tried to keep Thanos on the defensive, or at the very least from going after them. The information he pulled up was not perfect, but it was something.

“Watch my back,” Loki said, procuring a dagger and running it across his palm. Blood welled to the surface, and he coated his fingertips.

“Already doing that,” Tony said as Loki began to hastily paint runes on the ground. “Let me know when you're finished.” Then he launched himself back at Thanos, landing one hit for every two that he took.

Loki worked as quickly as he could, taking a diagram he remembered from the grimoire and replicating it on the shuddering ground. From the corner of his eye, he could see Tony and Thanos clash. Each time Iron Man got back up, frustration grew in the titan's previously smug expression. Loki was sure he had expected to take Midgard with little resistance, and yet here was a human and
Jotun runt standing in his way. Once Loki's spell finished, that anger would only grow.

“Tony!” Loki called as he rose to his feet. The man veered down towards him and landed outside the semi-circle of runes, stumbling slightly as he did so. “Fire at the runes. Now.”

“But won't that damage-”

Thanos narrowed his eyes at them. His arm raised to attack.

“Just do it.”

Tony did, and the red sigils were consumed by the Tesseract. Then the magic reflected off the ground, not at Thanos—who would never be stupid enough to step into a trap—but at Loki. He was the second half of the circle, and the marks he had made on his arms started to singe as they were activated. It was a risky loophole, turning himself into the spell, but miraculously it worked; he channeled the teal energy straight into Thanos's chest.

Just as the spell defending Thanos shattered, the Mad Titan clenched his fist, and the building behind them was cut in half. They fled in different directions, accidentally letting a wall of rubble separate them. Loki was left alone and completely exposed.

The god tried to rejoin Tony, moving towards the sound of clanging armor, but he only made it a few steps before the way was blocked by a towering figure.

As Thanos took a step towards him, Loki was too startled to even cry out; all that left his lips was a gasp. He backpedaled, feet crunching in the stone. The Mad Titan followed.

“Worthless little god. I have let this go on long enough. Have you forgotten the price of your failure?”

No. Loki never forgot. Not even for a second. But he had tried to, just as he now tried to fight back. Over and over he blasted Thanos with magic while retreating, but this wasn't like his battle with the Other. There was no opening to exploit, no pain to cause. Each attack was deflected, leaving behind nothing but an indomitable monster.

From beyond the wreckage, Loki could hear repulsors activate. 'Tony, hurry. Please,' he thought frantically; his voice was trapped where not even the stars shone. 'Please.'

“Your friend cannot protect you now,” the Mad Titan said as Loki's foot caught on the uneven ground. He fell backwards, catching himself on his palms, and stared up at the titan. Thanos had always dwarfed the god, but now... Now he was a giant, and Loki was an ant. “I will return you to the nothingness from which you crawled.”

Then there was a body between Loki and Thanos, standing proudly despite the fact that he too was dwarfed. Steve shifted into a combat stance, raising his one good arm while the other hung limply at his side.

“You know, I never could back away from a fight,” the man said with a stubborn grin.

This time, though Loki knew what Thanos was about to do, he could not stop it. Right as Tony came into view, a star rising out of the emptiness, Rogers lunged at Thanos. Blood splattered across Loki's face.

“Steve!” Tony cried, rocketing towards them, but he was too late. The body crumpled to the ground, and the world was stained scarlet. There was no movement from the blue-clad chest.
Thanos stepped over the broken hero, but Loki did not look away from the corpse. He could feel Steve's blood on his skin, in his hair, on his lips. It dripped down his chin and coated his armor. It reddened his hands. Even when Tony shouted again, his anguish palpable, and Thanos pointed his fingers at Loki, the god did not move. It would not matter. This was his execution.

"Lo . . ."

Everything went dark.

-o-o-o-

"- ki !"

Thanos’s flesh singed as seething energy collided with him. Another blast shoved him away from where Loki sat motionless on the ground, a thousand-yard stare pointed where Steve laid. There was no point in checking if the super-soldier had survived; there was blood everywhere. It drenched Tony’s boots when he landed, and the reek of iron pervaded his mask.

Thanos let Tony force him farther away, but there was triumph in his eyes: cold, merciless triumph. It was that expression that gave Tony pause despite his furious adrenaline. That, and the fact that Loki had yet to move. Tony had thought he acted in time to save him—that he hadn’t failed Loki in the same way he failed Clint and Steve—but now… There was horror dawning in Loki’s darting eyes, but not once did the god look at Tony or Thanos.

“Loki?” Tony asked, his voice rough as it pushed past the breath caught in his throat. “Loki, look at me.”

When Loki still did not acknowledge him — when he began to breathe heavily and his eyes squeezed shut — Tony’s relief faded. There was no wound, at least not one that he could see, but something was horribly wrong.

“What did you do to him?” Tony demanded, turning on Thanos. The Mad Titan was just standing there, watching his machinations unfold with a grin.

“Death is too sweet a reward for his failure,” the titan said, his voice rumbling like thunder. “The godling has been given what was promised to him.”

At first, Tony did not understand what the Mad Titan was referring to, but when he watched Loki, he knew. There was nothing else that caused the god such terror: Loki shook, and his lips moved with fervent whispers.

“No. This can’t… This isn’t… He doesn’t have that power. He doesn’t. It’s a trick. This isn’t the void. It’s a trick.”

But trick or not, wherever Loki’s mind was right now, such words weren’t enough; he screamed.

The Tesseract surged, incinerating the ground and shaking the air. The Mad Titan raised his hand to block the energy, but this time, the magic was stronger than him; flesh flayed from bone. Thanos’s grin vanished.

With his entire body trembling in rage, Tony vowed, “I will kill you.” It didn’t matter that Thanos was already healing. Tony was done watching his friends die. He was done with the suffering. He was an Avenger, and that was exactly what he’d do.

Beneath Tony’s feet, the earth itself cried out. Pulverized rock split, and a chasm tore through the
cement and pavement. Within his chest, rage and magic ran unfettered, amplifying one another until the line between ‘Tony’ and ‘Tesseract’ disappeared. All that remained was one need: destroy Thanos.

Repulsors shrieking to life, Tony lunged at the titan. From the corner of his eye, he could see Loki's arms give out, sending the god into a puddle of Rogers' blood. If Tony had thought he could save the god, he would have gone to Loki then. But he knew that what had been to Loki was beyond his understanding. All he could hope was that once the spell-caster was dead, the effect would fade.

As Tony's fist collided with Thanos's head, a shockwave burst from the suit to meet Thanos's magic. The forces were equal, and Tony had to lunch himself over the titan's head when a massive arm lifted to snatch him from the air. Metal boots dug into dirt, giving Tony only a second to propel himself away from a spell. Then he returned the favor, pushing them both away from where Loki lay and towards the throne. Failure to dodge sent Iron Man flying into the unholy seat, and decrepit bones were crushed beneath his armor.

Over and over they clashed, obliterating everything in their path and carving up the earth. But when Tony was thrown backwards for the dozenth time and rose only to see purple skin repair, he knew that whatever power he had now wasn’t enough. The Tesseract was barely defending itself, and it took all of his attention to not get crushed. And as the fight progressed, exhaustion crept up on Tony. He grew sloppy. When he should have retreated, he didn’t.

A massive hand wrapped around his arm. Above Tony's heart, the Tesseract became a scorching ember as it tried to repel the pressure. Metal was dented beneath the ungodly force, and the bone underneath threatened to snap.

A blast straight into crimson eyes slackened the grip enough for Tony to yank his arm free. He propelled himself backwards, and sizzling, blackened strips of metal broke away from his forearm. But it wasn’t the broken armor that concerned Tony; it was the way he could see his veins pulsing with magic beneath bruising flesh.

Once Thanos’s eyes were repaired, they narrowed as they were drawn to the exposed patch. “The Tesseract is inside you?” Then he looked at the center of Tony's chest, where the gleam of the arc reactor was visible. “So it is. No matter. I shall tear it from your corpse.”

The ground beneath Tony opened wide and swallowed him whole. He fell into the chasm, glancing off the walls and smacking into the ground. Rocks hit his suit, shoving the air from his lungs, and he laid there in a daze. Mindless rage relinquished its hold, and for a second, Tony wasn’t sure if he could get back up. His heart sputtered and struggled, both literally and figuratively.

“Sir, your opponent is approaching,” Jarvis said, sounding uncharacteristically subdued. “I would advise putting power to the repulsors.”

Just a Tony shot from the rocks, Thanos imploded the space where he had just been. But when Iron Man rocketed out of the chasm, he was sent hurtling into the side of the building. Obscured by the dust, he gasped, “I can’t win. He’s… He’s invincible.”

Jarvis didn’t reply immediately — given the multiple warnings flashing on the HUD, he probably agreed with Tony’s assessment — but then he said, “Giving up is unlike you, sir.”

Before Tony could reply, the roof above him caved in and a mocking voice asked, “Are you dead yet, mortal?” Footsteps approached the ruin.

“Damnit.” Tony rolled to his feet, aware that his legs were trembling beneath him. “Come on, Stark.
You can do this,” he muttered. “You’re a genius, aren’t you? Figure something out.”

Though he spoke without any real hope, when he launched himself into the air, a miracle happened; he caught sight of a blue gleam in the debris. Jarvis obligingly zoomed in, revealing the Casket of Ancient Winters lying halfway under an overturned car.

Tony stared, hardly believing that he could be so lucky. Not only was the weapon so close, but Thanos walked past it, none the wiser. The doubt that had threatened to defeat Tony abated; he grinned.

“Winter is coming.”

Tony shot into the sky, hoping to draw Thanos’s attention away from the Casket’s location. The last thing he needed was to give the titan a greater advantage.

As he rose, the city panned out beneath him. To the west, a fire raged with little resistance. On the opposite side, the military had called in reinforcements to keep Chitauri from spreading. Tanks blocked the roads while fighters joined the few remaining Stargates. And directly below Tony was a wasteland, void of activity other than a small skirmish near the edge. Chitauri were swarming two Dvergar. There was also someone else there, between the dwarves...

It took all of two seconds for Tony to realize that the one the dwarves were protecting was Loki, and then he cursed his foolishness in leaving the god unattended. He was about to rush to their aid when Thanos grew impatient.

Something latched onto Tony’s right leg and yanked him downwards. He yelped in surprise, the sound lost in the wind as he rapidly approached the ground. His repulsors activated, but then the right one went out with a bang. An Iron Man shaped hole marred the pavement.

Head ringing, Tony shakily reached towards the edge of the crater only to have his arm snatched by the invisible hand. He was lifted from the ground in an arc, crashing down to make another hole. Then another. And another.

His armor was torn away piece by piece, and his heart raced beneath an unbearable inferno. When he used the Tesseract to free himself from Thanos’s magic, his chest screamed.

Tony had no doubt that if the battle continued like this, he would end up dead—either from the Mad Titan or his own weapon. When he crawled to his feet, it was to desperately search the wreckage for the Casket. To his immense relief, Thanos had actually thrown him towards it and not away.

Standing tall to shield the box from view, Tony said, “You know, I’m really disappointed with how humanoid you look. ” Thanos took a step forwards and Tony took a step back, keeping an eye behind him. He’d only have an instant to carry out his plan. “If not you, then at least the Chitauri, but apparently the universe isn't all that creative.”

A few more steps and Tony’s back brushed against the car; he was practically on top of the Casket. All he had to reach down and it’d be his.

Tony dived for the box just as Thanos attacked. Man and car were thrown backwards, but when Tony landed, the Casket was clutched between his hands, its glowing surface similar to the Tesseract. Iron Man stood, and Thanos’s eyes locked on to the new addition with something akin to apprehension.

Tony felt vindictive satisfaction as he said, “Game over.”
With the Tesseract guiding him, Tony reached down into the Casket and drew the coiled winter to the surface; frigid winds burst forth, their strength increased exponentially by the Tesseract, and buffeted Thanos.

At first the titan fended off the frost, causing it to sweep around him, but when Tony increased the power, Thanos's arm, exposed to the fury, was coated in jagged layers of ice.

A horrid snarl twisted the titan’s face and, as the ice spread, was frozen there. Thanos's last ditch attack knocked Tony's feet out from under him, but the man didn't let up. He was assaulted again, and this time, the Tesseract rebounded the energy at the titan. There was a loud snap, and a rift appeared above Thanos's elbow. His arm crumbled, and his hand shattered against the street.

Fighting against the ice, the Mad Titan looked at his severed arm in disbelief. The rest of the limb, still frozen, did not regenerate. Thanos turned back to Tony, his expression even more murderous than before.

“I am immortal,” Thanos growled, his voice distorted by the ice smothering him.

“Yeah? Well so am I.” The Mad Titan jerked his other arm in Tony’s direction, twisting his hand in preparation to attack; Tony froze that arm too. “Turns out immortality isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“I am Lady Death’s champion. She won’t come for me,” the titan stated even as his other arm was torn off. Both the Casket and Tesseract surged, their combined energy overpowering the Destroyer of Worlds. Ice flourished across the giant's skin. The titan's final denial of, “I will never d-” was cut off as his entire body became a solid chunk of ice.

With the vitreous cage around Thanos completed, Tony at last lowered the Casket. His heart galloped beneath his ribs, and his arms went weak. The box slipped from his hands, but he wasn’t finished yet. Tony raised his hands and stared into Thanos’s eyes — forever bound in stunned disbelief — as he called the Tesseract forwards. Cracks appeared in the ice, reaching all the way down to the titan’s bones. As the jet of magic continued, Thanos’s body — brought to the point of absolute zero — began to tear apart. Billions of shards exploded outwards, and the Mad Titan became nothing more than a November storm.

Then a figure appeared out of the corner of Tony’s eye, and he flinched, whirling on it. He stopped. There was a woman standing a few feet from him, robed in a thick black cloak. A hood was pulled over her head, obscuring part of her face.

From the shadows, solemn eyes focused on something invisible to Tony. When she spoke, her voice was a whisper on the wind: “You have brought enough death to this world, Thanos. The balance has been set. Come, return to my realm. Join me forevermore.”

Lady Death reached out, as if beckoning for someone to join her, and began to fade. But before she disappeared, she angled her head towards Tony, revealing the other half of her face; rotting flesh fell away to reveal a hollow skull. The empty eye socket stared into Tony’s soul.

Then she was gone, leaving Tony standing amidst Thanos’s glacial remains. The fragments of ice were a myriad of colors, from white to red to purple, that dazzled in the sun. If Tony didn't know what monster they were born from, he might have said they were beautiful.

However, he knew better, and he remained tense, half-expecting for the pieces to rejoin and the fight continue. But the Mad Titan stayed dead, and adrenaline seeped from Tony’s body. In its wake crept pain: now he could feel every hit, every spell. His chest ached fiercely as his breathing slowed from rapid inhalations.
It was over.

Tony could hardly believe it. Sixteen months his life revolved around the invasion. Every moment, both waking and not, was consumed by the spaceships coming for him. But now those ships were retreating, and Chitauri littered the ground in droves. Sixteen months and it was finally over. They had won.

A laugh bubbled up inside Tony's chest, exultant and nigh hysterical. 'I did it.' The sound tore from his chest, echoing off the rubble and the earth torn wide open; after a few seconds, his laugh sounded more like a sob, yet he could not stop. 'It's over.'

The next thing he knew, he was running. The battlefield flashed by him, ruin remaining despite Thanos’s death, but the images barely registered. When he slipped against loose rock, he climbed back onto his feet and kept going — away from the crushed throne, the bits of frozen flesh and blood that looked like diamonds, the bodies in the wreckage. Away towards Loki. There was nothing Tony could do for those who had died, but at least he could save the god. And he had. He won. The spell should be broken.

However, as Tony ran towards where he had last seen Loki and the dwarves, a cry rang across the desolation. It was familiar and not at all what he wanted.

He ran even faster, practically flying across the ground, and spun around a corner to see the stout figures of dwarves sheltered beneath an awning. There was another person with them, one of the Aesir that he and Loki had been separated from earlier, but Tony's attention wasn't on him: it was on Loki, who was thrashing on the ground.

The shouts that had drawn Tony in became distinct: “-where are you? Tony! Tony! Get me out of here! Let me out! Thanos, I will destroy you! I will rip you apart! I will end you! I will... I will...”

Then Loki abandoned words and roared in sheer terror and rage. One of the dwarves attempted to hold him down and stop his limbs from slamming against the ground, but the god refused to stop fighting. Even after Tony killed Thanos and won the war, Loki was suffering.

As Tony took a faltering step forwards, he barely even noticed the second body on the ground; between the As and second dwarf laid the battered and bloody — but still breathing — body of Asgard's king. All that circled Tony's mind in that moment was one horrifying fact: the spell was not broken.

The Tesseract reacted to his dread, and as it flared, something inside of Tony’s chest ruptured. He gasped, falling down to one knee, and clawed at the armor covering the arc reactor. Lava leaked through his chest, devouring his heart and flooding his veins. He felt sticky warmth drip from his lips, his eyes, his ears.

“Lord Stark! What’s wrong?”

The arm holding him up collapsed, and Iron Man fell against stone. Someone was flipping him over, tearing off his mask, but when he stared up, the blurry figure leaning over him was all wrong. There was brown in the place of black, blue in the place of green.

“Lord Stark!”

The last thing he heard before the world went black was Loki’s furious scream.
When the Pain Ends

"Things we lost to the flames,
Things we'll never see again.
All that we've amassed,
Sits before us, shattered into ash.
These are the things, the things we lost.
The things we lost in the fire, fire, fire...

Do you understand that we will never be the same again?
The future's in our hands, and we will never be the same again."

-Things We Lost in the Fire by Bastille

-0-0-0-

...Beep. ...Beep. Beep. Beep.

Incessant noise filled Tony's ears, the pace quickening as he drew closer to consciousness. With a groan, he shoved one of his ears against the pillow, hoping to block out both the sound and the searing light that lurked behind his eyelids. His shifting caused something to rub against his face, and his nose itched. Head stuffed with cotton, Tony sluggishly lifted an arm to remove the irritant. But then there was a similar sensation tugging on his hand, and with a confused frown, he stopped moving.

Braving the fluorescent lights, Tony pried his eyes opened and blinked at the white ceiling wavering above him. His eyes watered, and still that damn beeping continued. Thinking he was back at the shoddy lab — Loki must have dragged him to bed again — Tony mumbled, “Loki, whatever you're doing, knock it off.”

But Loki didn’t respond, not even to tease him, and the rustling he previously mistook for the god morphed into unfamiliar voices and dozens of pacing feet. It took Tony a moment to understand his error: he wasn't at the lab. He was at a hospital.

Forcing his body to move despite the weight of drugs holding him down, Tony lifted himself into a sitting position. Then he saw why he was swimming in narcotics; bruises covered every inch of skin, ranging from a deep black to a faded yellow. His joints ached when he bent them, and when the minor exertion made his heart race, there was pain deep in his chest.

Through the half-open door, Tony watched in confusion as doctors rushed back and forth. No one seemed to notice that he was awake or that he needed answers. Just when he opened his mouth to get someone's attention, his view of the hall was blocked by a familiar figure. She was talking hurriedly on the phone, though her voice was quiet, and a cup of coffee tilted perilously in her other hand.

“I don't think a new headquarters is our biggest concern,” she said, turning towards the door and pulling it shut behind her; coffee splashed across her wrist “Yes, I know. But we can't spend that kind of money right now. Paying wages comes first. Tell Mark that” Her eyes moved to the center of the room, at last landing on Tony; she froze, mouth still half-way open. “Rebecca, I'll... I'll call you back.”

The second the call was disconnected, she exclaimed, “Tony! Thank God you're awake!” and strode across the room. Her phone and coffee were abandoned on the bedside table. “The doctors were
starting to think that you'd never-” Pep cut herself off. “Nevermind that. What are you doing sitting up? You need to lie down. Your body's still recovering.”

She placed her hands on his shoulders and guided him back down. He didn't resist, a fond smile on his face. He felt like it had been forever since he had last seen her. But she frowned, fingers brushing against the livid marks uncovered by the hospital gown.

“I should get a doctor in here,” she said and took a step back.

Tony's hand latched onto her wrist, weakly pulling her back. She let him stop her, but when she asked gently, “What is it, Tony?” he wasn't looking at her; his chest throbbed again, and when he stared at it, he was greeted with a faint blue glow.

His brow furrowed. Wasn't it supposed to be... brighter? He tentatively prodded the reactor, and when his fingers fell too heavily on the glass, another bolt of pain stole his breath.

There was no doubt now that something was horribly wrong. Tony had thought that maybe there had been an accident in the lab, but that didn't make any sense. Something was missing.

“Pep...” He raised his head to look into her eyes. “How long have I been here? What happened?”

“You've been here for a week and a half,” she answered, clasping his hand between hers. There had been a time when Pepper would never have left her house without her nails perfectly manicured; now they were chipped, and her hands were rough with callouses. “...You don't remember?”

“No, I...” He delved into memory and flinched when Clint’s death was the first thing that came to mind. But he knew that was only the tip of the iceberg. He remembered the war and how the fighting never seemed to end. He remembered the Tesseract.

His fingers scrunched the fabric over his arc reactor. That's what he had noticed before; the Tesseract was no longer inside of his chest.

But he had fought with it. Fought the Chitauri. Fought Thanos.

Everything came back to him at once: the destruction of San Francisco, Steve’s death, Loki’s terror. He almost wished he could go back to sleep so he didn't have to face reality, but he had to know.

While Pepper knew exactly what he had remembered, she offered no words of comfort. No 'Tony, it's alright. He's fine. The spell went away,' or, ‘Calm down. We'll figure something out.’

“How bad is he?”

“How's...” Pep bit her lip. “He's hanging on. It's not pretty, but... He's hanging on.” Her eyes became unfocused, and Tony all too vividly remembered how Loki had looked, screaming his lungs out in a world of dust and blood. “Tony, what's wrong with him? The doctors couldn't find anything, and yet...”

“He’s not responding to anything you do, right?” Tony asked, and Pep nodded. “It's a spell. Thanos did it. He said... He said it's the void. Or at least that's where Loki thinks he is. I don't know the specifics.” Magic had never been Tony’s strong point, and the past three months did nothing to change that. But maybe if he saw Loki something would come to him and he could fix it.

He lifted himself from the bed again, moving to swing his legs over the side, but the combination of wires, Pepper, and flaring white agony made him stop. When he gasped, doubling over, Pep rubbed soothing circles on his back.
“Tony, you need to slow down. The Tesseract nearly killed you.”

“That’s not a surprise,” Tony muttered, squeezing his eyes shut as the pain refused to leave.

Thinking that her actions weren’t helping, Pepper removed her hand from his back. “I’ll go get a doctor. Don’t move.” She slipped free of Tony’s slack grip, and his hand, void of anything to hold, curled in on itself and trembled as he gripped it tighter.

He wasn’t left alone for long; after a few minutes, Pepper returned with a middle-aged man who wore a lab coat and a polite smile. “Mr. Stark, it’s good to see that you’re awake. Miss Potts told me you are in pain?”

‘Pain’ didn’t really sum it up. A magic artifact had tried to liquify his heart, and one of his closest friends was dead while another was no better off. “What do you think?” Tony asked caustically, half-expecting for a burst of magic to accompany his words. It didn’t.

Ignoring his patient’s poor attitude, the doctor reached over to fiddle with the IV. Tony’s ire was soon eased by the haze of pain killers. He didn’t even protest when the doctor made him lie down and checked that his moving hadn’t pulled anything out.

When the man was finished, he patted Tony’s arm in a way the genius found patronizing and said, “You should try to rest, Mr. Stark. You have experienced quite the trauma.”

The doctor stepped back, and Pepper took his place. She held Tony’s hand in hers, and he frowned when he could feel the faintest of trembles in her normally unwavering grip. He wanted to say something, but whatever the doctor had given him was definitely more than just pain meds; exhaustion hit him like a tidal wave.

When he spoke, his words slurred. “Pep, I beat ‘im… ‘spose to be fine now. ‘spose to be fine.”

Despite the intelligibility of his words, Pepper smiled for him. “Hush, Tony. Don’t worry right now, okay?” Her hands squeezed harder, and Tony thought he could see tears glistening at the corner of her eyes. But then she blinked, smiling even wider, and the tears were gone. “Things will be better when you wake up.”

“Promise?” Tony asked, and then the drugs pulled him into unconsciousness, where he could at last escape the pain in his body and mind.

-o-o-o-

With no end in sight, the darkness consumed Loki. It took everything —light, touch, sound—and left him with nothing but a chasm so deep that he could never climb from it.

There was a part of him that knew he was not actually in the void and that wherever he was now was only an imitation of it. However, when the torment he endured now was even worse than the original, he found that the name did not matter. What did matter was that no matter how much time passed, he remained trapped in a world where there was nothing but pain to distinguish himself from the emptiness. Pain and insidious thoughts.

‘They’re dead,’ his mind said in between snatches of agonizing silence. ‘Everyone you know is dead. That’s why no one has come for you. Thanos has won and you will never escape.’

“No!” Loki screamed at the words. He twisted and thrashed, throwing everything he had against Thanos’s spell. All that happened was the spell clamped down harder on his magic and burrowed deeper inside of him.
'They're dead,' his mind repeated, and terrible images flashed before him, many of which required no imagination to concoct: Clint bleeding out on the ground as Romanov tried to desperately save him despite knowing it was too late, that his spine had broken and his lungs were filling with blood. Thor getting thrown into a building, as if he was nothing more than a sparrow, and his bones getting crushed by falling stone. Steve gushing red as his limbs twisted in unnatural directions, forcing Loki to taste putrid copper.

And while Loki had not seen Tony die, those images were present as well. Not just one scene, but a hundred, all more disturbing than the next. From Iron Man’s suit collapsing in on itself until nothing of the hero inside remained to Thanos tearing Tony limb from limb and ripping the arc reactor from a still beating heart, Loki watched them all. But none of those scenarios were worse than the one where Thanos cast the same spell on Tony as he had on Loki, mutating Loki’s gift of immortality into an eternity of anguish.

‘Accept it: you’ve lost,’ the darkness crooned, but Loki didn’t want to accept it. After all of their work, all of their sacrifice, how could they lose? How could this be fair?

But life was never fair, and as time passed — an hour, a day, Loki didn’t know anymore — his thoughts grew disjointed. Cracks appeared in the walls he had painstakingly built, letting in a hollow sea. His mental cries faded into nothing; blankness greeted him like an old friend.

He drifted back to himself slowly, struggling to differentiate consciousness in the complete lack of sensation. What made him certain that he was awake was when he began to think, ‘Is this death? Is this what humans call Hell? An existence of nothing but suffering?’

‘…Is this what I deserve?’

“It’s not,” he protested faintly, rallying his spirit against the darkness. “I saved people. I fixed my mistakes.”

Reaching down into his mind, Loki fought memory with memory. He forced himself to see the good that he had done and the people that he had saved. He forced himself to see the peace and happiness he had found on Midgard — found with Tony.

“I don’t deserve this. I am not a monster. I’m not.”

He fought harder, refusing to bow to Thanos’s machinations. This was not the void, merely a horrid clone of it, and he would not let it defeat him. Until he freed himself or Tony came for him—because Loki refused to believe that the man had lost—he would use every vestige of his strength to repel the black. Loki would not give Thanos the satisfaction of breaking him.

-o-o-o-

The wheelchair clattered down the hallway, passing by countless hospital rooms filled with the sick and dying. Any time one of the doors was open, Tony couldn’t help but peer in. Sometimes he was pleasantly surprised, and inside the room would be a family that managed to survive. Other times — the majority of the time — he would be glad that Pepper moved quickly, because inside those rooms were tragedies with scripts far too similar to his own. Outside of this hospital, he may be Iron Man, the untouchable hero, but here he was just another person whose life had been torn apart by the war.

Pepper brought them to a stop at the end of the psych ward, where the clamor was muted and the rooms in disuse. Plastic tarps covered the broken windows and plaster warped where the pipes leaked. The door they stopped in front of had a sign that said, 'For your own safety, do not enter this room without proper authorization.'
The fact that Pepper didn't immediately open the door indicated that she was still trying to shield him from what was inside, so Tony sighed and asked, “Why is there a sign on his door and no one else's?”

Resigning herself to the fact that Tony would find out the truth no matter what she did, Pepper answered, “Loki tore through his restraints a few days ago and accidentally broke a nurses arm. They don't want to take any chances.”

While the fact that Loki had hurt someone was unfortunate, Tony wasn't surprised by the news. He had been at the wrong side of the god's panic before, back when Loki hallucinated and had frequent nightmares. And Pepper had to know that the god's violence wouldn't disturb him, which meant that there was something else that she didn't want him to see. But Tony was tired of being treated like a child; just because he looked like he got in a fight with Godzilla and lost did not mean his brain had suddenly stopped working.

Gripping the rim of the wheels, Tony maneuvered himself to the door and shoved it open. The room must have been soundproofed, because a fevered litany immediately spilled into the halls, and Tony clenched the arms of his chair as he listened.

“You'll be okay. This is fine. Someone will find you. Tony's still alive and he will find you. Don't panic. You'll be fine.”

Tony didn't know how, but he had to make those awful words stop. He rolled into the room, barely noticing when Pepper closed the door behind them. His attention was on the metal restraints clamped around Loki, holding his twitching limbs in place. They contrasted heavily with the unnatural paleness of Loki’s skin — he looked as ghostly as he had when he first appeared in Tony’s garage — and accentuated how gaunt the god had become. But Tony knew that neither of those things were recent developments; Loki had looked like a living skeleton for months, and Tony had done nothing to stop his decay.

“Damnit, princess,” he murmured as he reached the god’s side, trying to meet roving eyes. “Why didn't you tell me you were getting so bad?”

Though Loki’s response was only to continue muttering, Tony knew the answer. But Thanos was dead and the invasion over; they didn’t need to sacrifice themselves anymore.

When Loki’s arm jerked against the restraint, making the bed screech against the linoleum, Tony reached forwards to push the limb back down and traced the quivering tendons towards the god’s hand. Then he paused; there was a dark purple splotch on the other side of Loki’s wrist that branched out along his veins.

“He had a reaction to a sedative they gave him last week,” Pepper explained when Tony leaned closer to inspect the ugly bruise. She had taken a seat in the plastic chair on the other side of the bed and was watching both of them closely.

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“Then I guess it's a good thing I never tried giving him Tylenol,” Tony commented as he wondered how severe the reaction had to be for a mark to still remain. He never got around to asking, because in that moment, a violent spasm went through Loki’s body and the god bucked against the restraints.

Tony flinched, and when the struggling did not cease, he couldn't help but call, “Loki!” and half-rise from his seat. Fatigue tried to pull him down, but he ignored it. “Loki, calm down. It's alright. You're safe.”

Up until that point, Tony had foolishly held onto the hope that his presence could change something;
that, like a fairytale, his love would be enough. However, as Loki’s words were lost to hyperventilation and his expression twisted with fear, Tony had to discard his wish.

Still, he pleaded with Loki, unable to stand seeing him like this again. “Loki, please. You’re not in the void. You’re on Midgard. It’s over. We won. I killed Thanos so he can never hurt you again.” Tony’s muscles quivered under his weight, and his chest ached. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair. “Please don’t do this to me. I’ve already lost two friends. Don’t make me lose you, too.”

Miraculously, Loki began to calm down. He bit back his loud cries, and the racket of metal striking metal vanished. But Tony knew that his words were not helping the god. Loki was standing up for himself.

“I am not a monster. This is not what I deserve. I deserve... I deserve to be happy, and once I escape, I will be. I won't stay here. Thanos will not win.”

With Loki’s fit over, the strength left Tony’s legs, and he fell back into the wheelchair. The exhaustion he felt now was a far cry from the sheer energy that had once surged through his body. With the Tesseract, he had always felt wired. Now... Now he just felt wasted.

After a few minutes had passed, in which Tony stared vacantly at Loki, Pepper drew him back into conversation. “Will the spell on him fade?”

Tony thought about it for a moment, and then he reluctantly shook his head. “I don’t think so. I mean, I hope it does, but... I had been convinced killing Thanos would stop it, and you can see how that turned out.” Then he changed the topic, because otherwise he would start to think too hard on what would happen to Loki if the spell wasn't broken. “You said Thor was here, right? He made it? What about Romanov?”

“Romanov is fine,” Pepper assured him. “As for Thor, he's recovering. Though if he doesn't wake up soon, they are going to bring him back to Asgard. Apparently, their medical science is more advanced.”

For Tony, hearing that the god still lived was enough. If something else was wrong with him, they could fix it; his heart just had to be beating.

“You hear that Loki?” Tony asked. “Your brother isn't dead. He's going to be okay, and so are you.”

Tony's mind then wandered to the one person—if you could even call him that—that he did want dead. “What about Thanos? He hasn't been resurrected or anything, right? Because he was hard enough to kill without being a zombie.”

Though his words were joking, his tone was scathing, and Pepper matched his expression. “SHIELD is certain he's dead for good. You won't have to fight him or his army ever again. The Chitauri are gone.”

“So it's done,” Tony said. “We really did win.” And if Loki had not been lying before him — if Steve and Clint were still breathing — those words would have been ecstatic. Tony wouldn’t be holed up in a hospital; he would be out celebrating, drinking because he wanted to and not because sorrows needed drowning. He never imagined that victory would taste this bitter.

“I know that this doesn't make up for what you’ve lost, Tony, but you're a hero.” Pepper made sure that she had Tony’s attention before continuing, “You and the Avengers helped save so many people, and even though you’re grieving, I want you to remember that.”

Her words put a smile, both fond and somber, on Tony’s lips. “That sounds like something Steve
would say. He always was good at making speeches.” Steve was good at a lot of things, but he never demanded attention for it. That was part of why Tony used to hate him, and eventually why he had come to appreciate the man inside Captain America.

“They haven’t had his funeral yet. Natasha and Bruce were adamant that you were given the chance to attend.”

Tony nodded, but his mind had already gone elsewhere; their conversation fell into silence. Pep sat with him for hours, not leaving until an orderly hunted them down and made Tony return to his room for a check-up, and Tony was infinitely glad for her presence.

-o-o-o-

“Unhand me! I must see my brother!”

“Sir, you are still recovering. Please stop!”

Shouts and thuds progressed down the hallway, and Tony sighed. He leaned back in the uncomfortable wheelchair and propped his feet on the edge of the bed as the chaos grew closer.

“You know, you and your brother are a lot alike,” he told Loki as another voice joined the mayhem in the hall. They were adamant that Thor wasn't allowed in the psych ward, and the king of Asgard's response was less than pleasant. “You're both ridiculously stubborn.”

There was a shout right outside the room, and then the door flung open. Thor stormed inside, clad in a loose hospital gown. Two nurses and a doctor hurried after him, but their protests trailed off when they noticed Tony watching them. Thor also stopped, but for a different reason, and the expression of his face leeched away Tony's scant peace.

“Loki,” Thor breathed as he went to his brother's side. Loki was—for now—blessedly silent, though Tony knew he hadn't blanked out because the god would occasionally flinch and jerk his head to the side. Loki's eyes were also open, but that wasn't a good indicator of consciousness; Tony didn't think Loki actually knew what his body was doing by this point.

“Oh Loki. Brother.” Thor brushed his hands against the steel bands holding Loki down. “What cruelty has the world thrust upon you now?”

“Sir...” One of the nurses hesitantly stepped forwards. “You shouldn't be—”

“He's fine,” Tony interrupted as he rolled his wheelchair back to give Thor more room. Then he rose to his feet. “I don't mind if he's here, and right now, I don't think Loki does either. Forcing Blondie to leave is just going to cause more problems.”

“I understand, Mr. Stark, but we are concerned about Mr. Odinson's health as well.” The doctor turned to Thor, but the god completely ignored her even as she said, “Sir, you must allow your body the rest it needs.”

Tony could see why they were so intent on getting Thor to return to his room. If it had been a human sporting the pitch black marks that twined around the god's limbs or the rows of jagged stitches peeking out from pink tinged bandages, he would have agreed with the doctor. Hell, he might have agreed with the doctor anyway, because for Thor to have just woken up and still not be fully healed meant that his injuries had to have been horrendous. But over the course of the war, Tony had seen the Aesir survive some crazy shit. Since Thor hadn't keeled over yet, he wasn't going to.

When Thor continued to ignore the well-meaning medical personnel, too preoccupied with trying to
get Loki to look at him—an effort that Tony knew from experience was both futile and heart-wrenching—Tony continued speaking on his behalf. “I’m sure you guys have noticed that Blondie’s a superpowered alien. Hanging around down here isn’t going to make him any worse.” At least not physically; seeing Loki’s distress wasn’t easy on anyone. “But you have my word that if he does get worse, I’ll give you a call so you can drag him back to his room.”

They stared dubiously at the yellow bruises covering every inch of Tony’s body, no doubt thinking that he wasn’t fit to look out for anyone, let alone himself. The man presented them with a cocky grin.

“You can take it or leave it, but if you want to drag him out of here by force, you’ll need at least a dozen people. Probably more.”

That little tidbit was enough to override the doctor’s worry for Thor, and she sighed as she checked her watch. “I’ll send someone down to check on the both of you in an hour. But if they say you need to leave, I expect full cooperation.”

“Of course,” Tony lied, and with a nod, the doctor and nurses left. Once the door closed, Tony let out the groan he had been holding and massaged his aching chest; standing made it feel like an elephant was sitting on him. The wheelchair beckoned, and he obligingly sunk back into its pleather embrace. Then he leaned his head on the edge of Loki’s bed to tiredly watch as the god’s fingers jerked back and forth on the other end of the restraint.

“He does not know I am here,” Thor said at last, “does he?”

“Nope,” Tony confirmed, not bothering to lift his head. “He’s completely trapped inside his mind.”

“And Thanos is responsible for this?” When Tony nodded, Thor’s fingers curled around empty air as if he was gripping Mjolnir’s handle. Tony wasn’t quite sure where the hammer was; probably still in the pile of rubble that the god had been extracted from. “If the Mad Titan was not already dead, I would slay him myself.”

Tony frowned. “How much do you know of the situation? Given your… lovely attire, I take it you’ve only just woken up?” He debated offering the god a pair of sweatpants that Pepper had been kind enough to bring, but in the end, he decided it didn’t matter.

“I may have left my room preemptively,” Thor admitted, embarrassment coloring his cheeks. “Maria Hill was informing me of the situation, and when she mentioned Loki… I had thought the worst.”

Whether or not what Thor found was ‘the worst’, Tony didn’t know. Chances are that if he had come down when Loki was in the middle of a full-blown panic attack, it would have been more horrendous than anything the god could imagine. If Tony could, he would spare Thor the sight; the war had caused them enough pain to last a lifetime.

“Can’t Asgard do something to help him?” Tony asked, lifting his head. “I mean, it’s a spell, right? Surely there’s a mage out there that can fix this. He helped me defeat Thanos. He deserves better than this.” Even if Loki hadn’t helped, he deserved better.

“While I am not as knowledgeable about magic as my brother, I do not believe a spell of Thanos’s design is one easily broken. But,” Thor said when he saw Tony’s face darken, “there must be some Alfar left on Midgard. I’m sure they would be willing to help. Sif probably knows where they-”

The god cut himself off when he realized what he just said, and while Tony hadn’t liked the stern warrior, he felt he owed it to Thor to say something. “SHIELD recovered her body. If you want to
see her, I'm sure something can be arranged. I mean, I know it's not much, but..."

"Thank you, Stark," Thor said, the pained lines around his mouth easing slightly. "She and the others who gave their lives will be returned to Asgard for a proper funeral. Their sacrifice will be honored for ages to come. But tell me, how many of my kin still live?"

"I don't know. Sorry. They aren't telling me much right now."

Thor nodded curtly. "What about your realm? I have seen the damage. But despite it, you managed to do what the other realms could not. We were wrong to doubt your strength."

"I don't think any of us thought we would win, honestly," Tony said. "Were it not for the Tesseract, we probably wouldn't have." Compulsively touching his chest had become normal these days, and when he did, it sent needles of pain through his heart.

Thor noticed his wince. "Are you-"

He didn't get to finish his question; Loki screamed at the top of his lungs and yanked his arm hard enough to bend the steel bands. "No! Get out! I'll kill you! Thanos! You hear me? I'll kill you!"

Tony winced at the sound, but it was nothing he hadn't heard before. Thor, on the other hand, had a pitiful look on his face. "Loki?" the god asked, tentatively touching his brother's arm. Loki slammed his arm upwards again, shaking off Thor's hold and breaking the restraints. "Loki, stop."

Tony watched passively as Thor tried to calm his brother. He didn't bother telling the god it was pointless. If it made him feel better, then why bother? Thor would figure it out soon anyway. And when he did, Tony looked away, letting the cacophony of Loki's rage and confusion drown out the sounds of grief.

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The roar of guns filled the air: once, twice, thrice. But then it was over, and tense muscles eased beneath Tony's skin. For so long the sound of gunfire had been a herald of war and death. It was almost unnerving to hear the familiar reports and not have to fight or kill in order to stay alive.

Today, however, the gunshots represented the opposite. They were to honor the body in the flag covered coffin, because it was sacrifices like his that allowed them to stand there unharmed. It was because of him that the only weapons they needed were those belonging to the seven riflemen, and the empty guns now pointed at the ground.

Six honor guards stood on either side of the casket in sets of three. As a gesture to Captain America's military service, they had tried to compose the guard with soldiers from the 107th infantry regiment. However, that unit had long since been disbanded and, in the wake of the war, none of its previous members could be found. The men and women standing around the casket were instead soldiers who had fought alongside the Captain and wanted to show their respect.

They weren't the only ones who had come to honor Steve; the cemetery was overflowing with people dressed in somber shades. The crowd remained silent except for the occasional sob as the flag was lifted from the casket and meticulously folded. Once the thirteenth fold was made, three shell-casings were slipped into the flag, and one of the soldiers held it steady as he stepped towards the Avengers. Then the man kneeled, presenting the straight edge to Tony.

Receiving the flag was an honor meant for the deceased's next-of-kin, but Steve had no one—at least, not on paper. For all intents and purposes, the Avengers were his family. They teased each
other, looked out for each other, and understood each other. Was it perfect? No. But it was all they really needed.

That's why, when Tony had tried to pass on the honor of receiving the flag because he felt unworthy, Romanov had gotten angry with him. She hadn't stormed up to him or raised her voice, but when he had tried to convince Bruce that someone else should take the position, her mouth had pressed into a thin line. When she spoke, her words were quiet but sharp.

“If it was Steve who had failed to save you, you wouldn't have thought any less of him. Why do you think now is any different? He made his choice so you could live, not so you could wallow in guilt. The funeral isn’t about you; it's about Steve, and Steve would want you to accept the flag.”

Tony had stared at her, mouth partly open with a protest he would not say, because she was right; feeling guilty helped no one. So now he stood before the flag while the honor guard recited, “On behalf of the President of the United States, the United States Army, and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one’s honorable and faithful service.”

When the speech was finished, Tony took the fabric into his hands, feeling the embroidered stars against his skin. A lone bugle began playing Taps, and as it did, Tony stared at the coffin before him. Without the flag draped over it, the box’s simple design was apparent. Given the state of the world, there hadn’t been a lot of options, but Tony thought that the modest coffin suited the courageous boy from Brooklyn. The sheer number of people who showed up to his funeral would have meant infinitely more to him than how much his coffin had cost.

The last note of the song faded into silence, and then the gathered crowd stirred. The first person to approach the Avengers was a woman whose face was gaunt, eyes tired, and hair unevenly cut close to her skull. Both her and her son — who appeared better fed though no less exhausted — were clean and well dressed, an action that conveyed not vanity but respect. She brushed tears from her eyes before speaking.

“I wanted to thank all of you for what you have done for us, and I'm so sorry for your loss. Captain America saved James' life a month ago. I had wanted to thank him in person. I couldn’t believe it when I heard that he had passed away. He was a true hero.”

“Thank you, ma'am,” Romanov said, though to Tony it sounded as if her mind was elsewhere; they had heard the same words two months ago when they had buried Clint. “I know Steve would have been glad to hear it.”

“He was a hero,” the woman repeated before her eyes were drawn to the coffin. More tears streamed down her face as she stepped towards it. “Come on, James. Let's say our goodbyes.”

She left, but more well-wishers quickly took her place. Many had stories similar to hers, of a loved one that wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for Captain America, and they came from all over the country because of it. Even if they had to walk or use what little gasoline they had, even if their eyes were haunted by their own losses, they traveled to Brooklyn for the man whose heart was too big to contain.

However, as the sun lowered in the sky, the air grew cold, and dark clouds overhead promised snow before morning, the crowd dissipated. The only ones left behind were those who had known Steve personally, and even then they started to depart. Tony wanted to stay longer, but his legs were numb beneath him and his eyelids felt far too heavy. They had offered him a chair before the funeral began, but he had refused for both parts pride and reverence. His body was now regretting that decision.

“Tony. Tony.” Bruce stressed the name in a way that indicated it wasn't the first time he had said it.
Tony shook the fatigue from his mind as the physicist scrutinized him. “The quinjet is ready to depart.”

“Right...” Tony tightened his grip on the flag in his hands—though not enough to rumple the pristine folds—and said, “Give me a minute, will you? I need to tell the old man goodbye.”

Bruce nodded, and Tony made his way to the coffin's side. He freed a hand to brush it along the ridges of the wood.

“I've never believed in the afterlife, but if there is such a thing as Heaven, you deserve to be there.” Then he felt a tiny smile tug at his lips as he thought back to the time he had spent with Steve. “You know, a few years ago I never would have believed that we could be friends. I had thought you were an insufferable goody-two-shoes. …Well, okay, you were a goody-two-shoes, but it wasn’t a bad thing.”

He clapped the edge of the coffin. “Say hi to Clint for me, will you? It'll be a while before I join you.”

There were others wanting to take Tony's place, so he walked back towards Bruce and Natasha. Someone tried to intercept him, offering words of comfort and praise, but Tony was beyond tired; he nodded absently at what they were saying until Romanov stepped forwards to redirect them.

Bruce leaned closer to ask, “Are you alright?”

“I'm fine,” Tony murmured as he rubbed his chest, hating the sensation of cold metal beneath his shirt.

“Does it still hurt?” Bruce asked, and Tony shook his head.

“No really. It's just... This is the second time my arc reactor has nearly killed me. It's unnerving, ya know? I heard you were the one who told them to take the Tesseract out, by the way. Thanks for that.”

“You should never have put it in to begin with.”

“No, I shouldn't have,” Tony agreed mildly. “But at the end of the day, Thanos is dead and I'm not. I don't regret it.”

Then he continued walking, and they rejoined Romanov at the exit of the graveyard. As they passed through the iron gate, Tony looked back one last time to see the cemetery managers approach the grave site with the tools to bury Steve six feet underground. Though Tony knew that Cap would be no more dead surrounded by dirt than he was now, he didn't want to watch the coffin be lowered into the ground; he kept moving, leaving the wooden box and stone marker behind.

The quinjet waited for them in the park across the street, and the engines switched on while the Avengers settled in the back. They began to rise into the air, and over the roar, one of the pilots asked, “Mr. Stark, we're taking you back to the hospital on Buchanan, right?”

“Yeah,” Tony answered as he tugged the loose sleeve of his suit from where it had gotten caught in the buckle. When he last wore this suit nine months ago, it had fit like a glove; now it hung awkwardly around him. Pepper kept telling him that he needed to eat more and regain the weight he had lost.

“When you are feeling better, Fury wants to speak with you.” Natasha leaned forwards in her chair and rested her elbows on her knees. “There's a lot of repairs that need to be made, and civilians need
someone to give them hope.”

“I’m not taking Steve's place,” Tony refused immediately. “If all Fury wants is a poster boy, then he can find someone else.”

“There's not much for him to choose from,” Natasha said softly, her voice devoid of the irritation that Tony had expected. Like a knight, a visor shielded her expression, but it was easy to see through the cracks when Tony had the same look on his face. He was all too aware of the empty seats around them, and the fact that the three Avengers who remained were down-trodden and weary. If they were meant to be heroes, they certainly didn't seem like it now.

The hush that had settled around them started to thicken; Bruce cleared his throat to break the tension. When Tony turned to him, the man tentatively asked, “How is Loki holding up? Is he better than the last time I saw him?”

“He's a bit more lucid, I think,” Tony answered. “Either that, or I've just started to tune out his rambling. But he definitely screams less.” Tony's ear drums weren't the only things thankful for that; he could handle Loki talking to himself, and he could handle Loki blanking out, but when the god started to breakdown... Tony couldn't stand to watch.

“Do you have a plan, or...” Bruce trailed off.

Tony's fists clenched, and when he said, “No,” the word tasted vile on his tongue. He spoke again to rid himself of the flavor. “But I'll figure it out. I won't leave him like that.”

“If you need any help, don't hesitate to ask. I learned a bit about magic from working with you two.”

Tony nodded, and then his gaze was dragged towards the window and the city below. Pockets of life had started to sprout in the destruction, like shoots of grass in an ash-ridden forest. Clothing and rations were distributed in makeshift markets, and people ventured back into cities to reclaim what had been lost. Things were in ruin, and yet... Life moved on. No matter how horrible the war had been, people picked themselves back up and recovered. The past would never be erased, but as long as they kept moving, it could be overcome.

-An Alfr stood at the side of the bed; her head was bowed, and her hand rested on Loki’s damp brow. As her magic — pastel orange in color — pooled around the god, her skin grew slick with sweat. A faint grimace flittered across her face, and then she opened her eyes. Her hand drew away from Loki. Tony knew what she was going to say before she said it.

“I am sorry, but there is nothing I can do to help him. The curse is too strong for our magic to break.”

“But surely there's someone who can do something?” Tony asked desperately, but the elves shook their heads, and he had to turn to Thor. “Your father is powerful, isn't he? Can't he do something?”

“My father passed away months ago,” Thor said tightly. “Even if he was alive, I do not know if he could. Few things rival the Mad Titan's power. Not even Mjolnir was a deterrent .”

Judging by the god's expression, such powerlessness was a rarity. It must have burned to be cast aside so easily, unable to exact vengeance. But unlike him, Tony did have the power to rival Thanos; he just lacked the skill to accompany that power.

“If I gave you the Tesseract, could someone figure out how to use it?” It didn't matter to him that handing over the gem would be violating SHIELD protocols. If that was what he had to do to get his
friend back, then he would break the law a thousand times over.

Although the Alfar perked up at the mention of the Tesseract, the female elf hesitated before speaking. "We will search our realm for anyone that might be able to help you, but the Infinity Gems are not native to Yggdrasil. The chance of someone being able to utilize it in the way you require is slim."

"It can't be that hard," Tony protested even though he had seen the struggle they spoke of; Loki and the Tesseract had been like oil and water, and the only time the god got a reaction from the gem was when it lashed out against him.

"I truly am sorry I cannot offer you more," the elf said, and the others tilted their heads in agreement. "Your actions have saved my people; Alfheim is in your debt. But though I wish it was otherwise, I do not think we can help him."

It was far from what Tony wanted to hear, but he nodded anyways. Then one of the elves frowned, and when he reached towards his ear, his hair parted to reveal a headset. "Calemireth," he said, drawing the female elf's attention. "We are needed elsewhere."

Calemireth acknowledged she had heard before turning back to Tony. Without prompting, she bowed deeply at the waist, causing her braids to slide across her dark skin. When she rose, her arm crossed her chest — the same salute the Asgardians gave Thor.

"You have my thanks," she said, and then she and her kin vanished into the air.

A sigh passed Tony's lips as he let his mask slip away. "I'm sorry, Loki," he said. "I really am trying."

Thor watched him for a moment, his brow furrowing, and then the god said, "I am required to return to Asgard, but I beseech you, Tony Stark: do not give up hope. Our magic and your science are not as dissimilar as you may think. If anyone can figure out how to help him, it will be you."

"Yeah, sure," Tony said, not really believing the god. But after Thor had left, the god's speech kept circling his head. "Magic is science..."

The man rolled the familiar words on his tongue. After using the Tesseract, he knew it to be true; magic and science were just different ways of interacting with elements already present. Tony would never be able to do what Loki could, but at the core, what they did was the same.

"Magic is science," Tony repeated, his voice growing stronger, "and I'll be damned if I let you stay like this when all I need is a few equations."

He rose from his chair, helplessness replaced with determination. Loki's eyes were closed and his body motionless, but Tony squeezed the god's arm as he promised, "Don't worry, Sleeping Beauty. I'll figure this out, and you'll be back on your feet in no time."

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Rock skidded across twisted steel, and Tony grunted when the piece of stone got caught. His suit whirred as his heels dug into the ground; slowly the rock moved again, revealing sheets of metal beneath where it had fallen. He dropped the slab and kneeled down to inspect the metal, but when he grabbed the corner, it bent easily in his hands.

With a sigh, he stood back up and dragged the steel into the ever growing pile of scrap metal. He was about to set out again when Rhodey called, "Hey, Tony, they've found another one!"
The man was standing precariously on a pile of rubble, and when he knew he had Tony's attention, he gestured towards something Tony couldn't see. Iron Man activated his repulsors and went to Rhodey's side. Below, a bulldozer was shoving mountains of debris off the dulled silver of a Stargate's wing. The ship had been buried for weeks, and yet the wing looked no different than the day it had been blasted out of the sky.

“This is the second one, right?” Tony asked. “Out of how many?”

“Four,” Rhodey replied. He wiped his sweaty brow on his forearm. “At this rate, it looks like we'll be here all day. Not to mention we still need to move the Chitauri ships.”

“Isn't today supposed to be your day off? I thought you said you were tired of working.”

“I said I was tired of paperwork,” Rhodey answered with a shrug. “Besides, this is me taking time off. I'm spending the day with you, aren't I?”

“Salvaging ships isn't what I meant when I said we should hang out afterwards.”

The bulldozer came to a rest, and one of the workers below caught sight of Tony. They motioned to him, and with a nod to Rhodes, Tony flew down to help. In order to begin reconstruction, the wreckage had to be cleared away, and hundreds of people answered the call. SHIELD, the military, civilians: they were all there. And when Iron Man began to drag the wing (the rest of the ship was nowhere to be seen) towards the waiting transport, they were mingled to the point that he couldn’t tell which was which.

Once the Vibranium shell was secured, one of the men said, “Thanks for the help, Stark. We got it from here.”

“What about the other half?” Tony asked.

The man shrugged. “We couldn’t find it.” He turned to the gathered crowd, half of which were sitting on the ground taking a break and half waiting for instructions. “Come on, folks! There’s still work to be done!”

People stood with a collective groan, but Tony wasn’t looking at them; he frowned at the broken Stargate, wondering despite himself what had happened to it and its pilot. While the city had already been swept for survivors and (more commonly) corpses, they still unearthed rotting remains. Chitauri corpses were handed over to the government, and the rest were brought to a morgue for identification. It wasn’t pleasant work by any means, but it at least offered closure.

Shaking himself free of his thoughts, Tony joined the others in their hunt. They had unearthed the russet-stained cabin of a Firefly and a whole Chitauri cruiser when Jarvis piped up.

“Sir, I have finished the data analysis you requested.”

Tony paused, letting a concrete slab slip back to the ground; there hadn’t been anything under it anyway. “Did you find anything that looks promising?” he asked, trying to keep his hopes from rising in case it was a false alarm.

But Jarvis sounded pleased with himself as he said, “Many of the results are consistent with what you requested. Would you like to review the information now?”

“Hey, Stark! We’ve found the second half of that Stargate!” the man from before shouted at Tony.

“One second!” Tony replied, and then to Jarvis, he ordered, “Show me.”
Immediately the HUD was flooded with numbers and equations, and Tony took them in like water to a dying man. As the information settled, he started to smile.

“Are the results to your liking, sir?”

“They’re perfect, Jarv,” Tony said, at last allowing hope to flourish within his chest.

“Stark? You coming?” the man called again, shielding his eyes against the afternoon sun.

“Sorry, but you’ll have to manage on your own,” Tony shouted back. “Something else came up.”

He left the recovery team in search of Rhodey, and he found his friend cautiously skirting around a carrier that had demolished an entire block. Rhodey had a gun in his hand — there had been a few instances where an alien had miraculously survived both the crash and the weeks spent trapped inside a spaceship — which he holstered when Tony landed beside him and flipped his mask up.

Rhodes raised an eyebrow in question, and Tony announced, “I’m heading out. Something came up with Loki.”

Normally those words meant that something had gone wrong, but Rhodey didn’t miss Tony’s almost giddy expression. “Have you figured out a way to help him?”

“I think so. Jarvis ran some tests on the Tesseract, and it matches what Bruce said exactly.” He grinned widely. “This might be it, Rhodey. This could break the spell.”

“That’s great,” Rhodes said, but he was frowning slightly.

“…What’s wrong?” Tony asked. “If you think it won’t work, I checked everything twice and-”

“It’s not that,” his friend interrupted. “But Tony, the Tesseract? Last time you used that, you were in a coma for ten days.”

“Well, yeah,” Tony said, his smile faltering. “But it’s the only thing that has the power to fix what Thanos did. Besides, it isn’t like I’m putting it in my chest again. That was...” Horrifying, painful, and unbelievably stupid. “I had no other choice then. This time will be different.”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t try. Just... please don’t end up half-dead in a hospital again.”

“I won’t,” Tony promised. “Though if I did, at least there I had a private room. I can’t believe I forgot how much I hated living in dorms. Who’d of guessed that Tony Stark would end up homeless?”

“If it bothers you so much, buy a new house,” Rhodey said, his apprehension fading in the face of Tony’s humor; it had been a long time since he made jokes for the sake of joking and not out of stress. “I doubt you’d have to wait long. People love you.”

“Of course they do. I’m Iron Man.” At his friend’s unimpressed look, Tony shrugged. “I’ll worry about that later. I’m sticking with SHIELD right now for Loki’s sake. He needs supervision and I need technology. Which...” Tony really should be heading back there to discuss his findings with Bruce. If this was the answer they needed, then it was cruel to make Loki wait any longer.

Rhodey noticed the shift and sighed. “If you think your plan is going to work, then get out of here, man. Just tell me if something changes or you’re about to do something stupid, alright?”

Tony nodded as the mask closed back around his face. “Sure thing.” Then he rocketed out of the
ruin and into the sky, angling west to where Loki was waiting for him.

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“You're getting too light, princess,” Tony said as he hefted Loki into the air. “I guess both of us will need to eat more after this, huh?”

Loki’s response was to mutter fevered words from pale lips: “Just hold on. You're a god. Thanos cannot defeat you. You will get out of this. Somehow, you will get out of this.”

“You've got that right,” Tony agreed. He walked with Loki towards the ring of generators, their motors humming softly in the otherwise empty room. “Today's your lucky day—I'm finally going to break the spell on you.”

The god offered no resistance as he was laid down in the center of the room, and before Tony stood, he studied Loki’s sallow skin and glazed, frightened eyes.

‘Never again,’ Tony vowed. ‘Never again will I let this happen to you.’

Then he stood and stalked back towards the machines as he called, “You ready to go, Bruce?”

“All systems are engaged and ready to go,” the physicist confirmed. “We can begin when you're in position.”

With a nod, Tony reached for the safebox that took up over half of the desk. He did not hesitate to place his hand on the scanner, and the locks disengaged with a click. When the door swung open, blue light poured out into the room.

Now Tony did pause, but only for a second; he slid the Tesseract from its cradle, not fooled by how meager it looked compared to the technology surrounding it. However, his knowledge of how destructive the gem could be did not keep him from wrapping his fingers around the chip and seeking it out in his mind. The Tesseract greeted him like an old friend, but outside of his chest, it could not overpower him.

There was a platform just outside of the generators that was connected to the other machines by a series of wires. Tony stepped onto its translucent tiles; they brightened under his feet. The hard edges of the Tesseract dug into the underside of the man’s fingers, and then, with one last look at Loki, he started to channel the energy.

Magic swept through the platform and raced through the wires. The Tesseract obeyed Tony's orders, and the machines around him filled with fluttering energy.

“Double check the frequencies,” Tony ordered as the generators neared full capacity. “We can’t afford any errors.”

Bruce flicked through the holographic screens, carefully analyzing the contents. “Everything looks correct,” he said, and Tony nodded.

“Then let's end this.”

The reactors finished charging, and Tony shifted directives. Right now, Loki’s core—the radioactive pocket surrounding his heart that allowed him to use Yggdrasil’s energy as his own—was tainted. It vibrated on two separate frequencies; one belonged to the god, its numbers easily stored on a computer but its capabilities unimaginable, and the other was the final remnant of Thanos. It created discord within the god’s body, choking off his power and locking him in nothing.
Tony was going to tear that remnant out.

Amidst the buzzing and snapping, the Tesseract crooned in his mind. There were no words, but the intent was clear. 'Now?'

'Now,' Tony agreed, and the energy exploded. It seared his eyes, forcing him to look away, and rung in the air like a thunderclap. Nor did the effect stop; it grew stronger and stronger, and when a scream was added to the upheaval, Tony almost missed it. He pried his eyes open, forcing himself to look into the eye of the storm, but the air was too saturated with magic to see anything.

“Bruce, can you tell what's happening?” he shouted, but he could barely hear himself over the screech of magic. The reply was garbled, though Tony heard enough to know that no, Bruce couldn't see what was going on, but everything appeared to be working as intended. Even if something was wrong, Tony doubted he could do anything about it at this point.

Thankfully, intervention wasn't required; thirty seconds later, the pseudo-spell calmed and left jarring silence in its place. Tony blinked to clear away the dots crowding his vision. Then he froze. With the ringing gone, he could now hear the rapid breaths coming from the center or the room.

The Tesseract dropped from between Tony's clammy fingers as he dashed from the platform. “Loki!”

The god was curled up on the ground, each breath shaking his body. In the background, Tony could hear Bruce curse and rush towards them, worried that something had gone wrong. But when Tony got closer, he knew their fear was for nothing; they had succeeded.

Loki began to uncurl, revealing his face. He was blinking rapidly, and his expression was torn between bewilderment, panic, and joy as he propped himself up on one elbow. Eyes darted back and forth, taking in everything whilst seeing nothing. They passed by Tony at least twice before Loki paused, his jaw going slack, and slowly brought his gaze back to stare at him. The man kneeled beside the god as Loki’s breath stilled in shock, his lips silently forming Tony's name.

A truly happy smile stretched across Tony’s face and lifted away the darkness. There were a million different things he could say, but as he watched Loki’s lips tremble and relief overcome the fear, all that came to mind was, “Hey, Lokes. Merry Christmas.”

Loki continued to stare at him with wide eyes. Tony waited patiently for him to get his thoughts in line, and when a hand wrapped tightly around his wrist, as if Loki feared he would disappear otherwise, he didn’t complain. The gesture was returned, and in that moment, nothing else existed. Not the war, not the strife, not the recovery; it was just the two of them reunited at last.

“Tony,” Loki breathed, and then he stopped, looking surprised at the sound of his own voice. “Tony, what is…? Is this real?”

“It's real.” There was an inkling of doubt in green eyes, so Tony clasped Loki's arm tighter, drawing him in. “This is real. I'm real. You're safe now. Thanos isn't going to hurt you again.”

Mentioning the Mad Titan shattered the illusion that the world beyond them didn’t exit. Whereas Tony’s wounds had a month to heal, Loki’s had a month to fester; he flinched even as a snarl warped his smile, and then, with their arms still clasped together, he tried to rise to his feet. He only got up halfway before losing his balance, but Tony caught him before he could fall.

“Loki!” Tony called, trying to bring the god back to the present; Loki’s eyes were searching desperately for an enemy long since defeated, and the grip on his wrist was strong enough to bruise.
“Loki, Thanos is dead.”

Unlike when Tony tried to calm the god earlier that month, his words got through to Loki. Confused eyes turned to him, and the death-grip loosened.

“Dead?” Loki echoed. “But he... he was just alive. He had...” The god’s eyes glistened in the fluorescent light. “He killed them: Thor, Rogers, Sif. He killed them, and I-”

“Loki,” Tony repeated, his tone forceful but not unkind. When he had the god’s attention, he explained, “The things you remember happened a month ago, okay? I killed Thanos that day, and he isn’t coming back. As for the others... Loki, Thor didn’t die. He’s still alive.”

“But he...” Loki’s brow furrowed, and Tony could see the memories churning in his head as he tried to distinguish reality from nightmare. “I saw Thanos kill him, didn’t I? I saw it. And Rogers, too.”

There was hope brimming in Loki’s eyes — perhaps he thought that if he had been wrong about Thor, he had also been wrong about Steve — and Tony reluctantly said, “Steve didn’t survive. He... We had his funeral two weeks ago. But your brother is okay. He went back to Asgard.”

Tony wasn’t sure if it was relief, sorrow, or a mix of the two that made Loki’s muscles go slack. He slipped the rest of the way to the ground, his head coming to a rest on Tony’s shoulder. They sat that way for over a minute, in which one of them (Tony honestly couldn’t remember who) pulled the other closer and the action was copied. All of the stress from the past month — from the past year — leaked out from Tony, and he could have happily remained like that for hours.

There was a shuffling sound behind them, and Loki lifted his head to look over Tony’s shoulder. The man followed his gaze, and he saw Bruce watching them with a soft grin. When the man noticed them staring, he waved and said, “Hey, Loki. It’s good to see you again.”

Loki nodded dazedly, and then he moved to inspect the rest of the room. After a moment, he asked, voice still rough with disuse, “Where’s Romanov?”

“She's helping with reconstruction, but she’s safe,” Tony answered. “We’re all safe, including you.”

“Because Thanos is dead,” Loki said, like he could hardly fathom the sentiment. It was a feeling Tony could sympathize with; some days he woke up convinced that he had failed, that Thanos would piece himself back together and the nightmare would begin again. But no matter how much time went by, the frozen shards that SHIELD had collected remained lifeless.

“And... the Chitauri have failed?”

“Yeah,” Tony confirmed. “Loki, it’s over. We won.”

A smile broke through the exhaustion and fear clouding the god’s expression as he finally believed Tony’s words. There was no villain to defeat, no battle to endure. They no longer had to make sacrifices, or struggle to hold the world together. It was over, and they were free.
Epilogue

"We sing, fight, we cry.
We slide, slide, we slide into the light.
Maybe we're sealed in silence, and maybe we feel a guidance.
Maybe your own devices will keep you afraid and cold, well.

Pull out the fear of silence.
Put out the need for guidance.
Put out your own devices.
And don't be afraid of the cold.
Afraid of the cold, afraid of the time.
You've got no where to go but here."

-Growing Old is Getting Old by Silversun Pickups

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“-in a few more months, New York will look as good as new, don't you think?” Tony asked as he studied the plans for reconstruction on his tablet. “We won't need to worry about buildings falling on us, and shopping won't be a circus. The construction for Stark Tower is set to begin next week, too. Though I'll kind of miss this apartment...” Tony trailed off, not because there was an interruption but because there wasn't one. He glanced up from his tablet. “Loki?”

He saw immediately why the god wasn't talking; Loki, still clad in armor and covered in dust from lifting massive chunks of stone single-handedly, was passed out on the arm of the couch. Though perhaps 'passed out' wasn't the best way to describe it; one of his hands was brushing against the carpet while his hair had fanned out around his shoulders in dirty tangles. When Coro batted at the locks and bit Loki's fingers, the god didn't even twitch.

Tony scooped up the little hellion, who mewed at him unhappily. “Yeah, yeah. I get it. But annoy him when he isn't blanked out, okay? It's a lot more satisfying then.” He placed the cat on his lap, but apparently he wasn't as interesting as Loki; Coro immediately jumped off the couch and scurried from the room. “Whatever,” Tony muttered. “Not like I wanted to pet you anyway.”

Then he turned his attention back to Loki, and his brow furrowed. “How long was it this time? Two weeks? That's an improvement, but I guess finding that Chitauri set you off, huh?”

Even months after the invasion, it wasn't uncommon to find corpses in the rubble. It was, however, rare to find one intact, and while Loki had hid his surprise well when he uncovered the iced alien, the sight must have rattled something in his mind. Cities weren't the only things that needed repairing after Thanos's invasion; everyone came away burdened with loss, and though time has passed, the wounds were still healing. The friends that had given up their lives left gaping holes, and the destruction left indelible images that rose up in moments of vulnerability.

However, that didn't mean they weren't moving on. It took time, and what they experienced would never truly leave them, but life was returning to some semblance of normality. Though Thanos's spell
had cut Loki deep, he was not broken. He was, just like the rest of them, healing. Soon, there would be nothing keeping him from saying, 'I'm okay.' Whether it was in a few months or a few years, it would happen, and Tony would be there to help him if he needed it.

As the man leaned over to shove Loki further onto the couch, he thought about the first time he had to keep Loki from falling. More than that, he thought about how far they had both come since then, and if Yinsen could see him now, he would be proud of what Tony has done.

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They appeared at the edge of the park under a wide oak tree whose branches drooped beneath the weight of snow. Beyond the grass, towards the city, they could hear the ever-present thuds of hammers and beeping of bulldozers. However, as they walked forwards, the noise of reconstruction gave way to respectful silence. The park was filled with people, but while the Avengers' presence would cause a stir on a normal day, today no one bothered them.

Loki and Tony stopped before the large statue in the center of the park. The two bronze figures towered over them, forever frozen in valor. Captain America was making a salute in the direction of the city while his shield was held loosely in his other hand. Hawkeye stood by his side, bow pointed at the sky, as a constant sentinel between the city and what lurked behind the stars. At the foot of the statue, a plaque said:

*In memory of two great heroes and even greater men.*

*Their sacrifice will never be forgotten.*

*Clint Barton: March 21, 1980 – September 7, 2018*

*Steven Rogers: July 4, 1918 – November 26, 2018*

On the marble ledge above the plaque, dozens of gifts had been left in honor of the two heroes. Normally there were just a few items, but today there were action figures left by well-meaning children, trinkets meant to represent Clint and Steve, flowers of every color imaginable, and newspaper articles that showed how many people the Avengers had saved.

“It doesn't feel like four years have passed, does it?” Tony asked, glancing over at Loki. The god was staring at the effigies of their friends, lost in memory, and only slightly; his eyes remained fixed on their faces as if he was trying to refresh his memories of them.

Tony copied his actions, and they remained quiet for a long time. Occasionally, people would come up alongside them, either to leave gifts or read the plaque, but after a few minutes, they would move on. Children that recognized Loki and Tony grew excited and were herded away by their parents that softly scolded them, saying that the Avengers were there to honor their friends and not to play. It was a somber ritual, standing there, but it also drove home the fact that their comrades didn't die in vain.

Eventually, after the sun had switched sides of the sky and the cold gusts of wind started to pierce through Tony's coat, he stepped away from the monument. But he wasn't ready to leave quite yet; he wandered towards to the marble slabs that ringed the statue. There were millions of names etched into those stones, and while Tony did not read them all, he skimmed the list as he walked slowly around the park. Only when a familiar name appeared, emboldened to distinguish it from civilians, did he stop: Alonya Derkhaut, Agatha Fielding, and Mack Schuler were among those he recognized.
Snow began to fall from the sky, adding to the thin layer that crunched underfoot. Loki had, at some point, joined Tony and moved by his side like a shadow. Now the god spoke up, drawing him from his reverie. “We should go.”

Brushing his fingers against the freezing stone, Tony nodded. He stepped back so Loki could teleport them away, but he knew that next year, and each year after that, they would be back. It was the least they could do for those who had died in Thanos's invasion.

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The ring of stitches on Tony's chest brushed unnaturally against his fingers, and he pushed down harder. “Ouch,” he muttered, continuing to prod at his new sternum.

“It wouldn't hurt if you stopped touching it,” Loki said from the other side of the sofa. He was absently flicking through movies, though nothing seemed to catch his interest. Loki liked to blame that on the fact that Tony had 'deplorable taste in entertainment'.

“But there's nothing else to do,” the man griped as he pulled his hand away. When he shifted, he could feel the skin pull. “I thought a few incisions would be less obnoxious, but no. I'm starting to want the arc reactor back.”

“No you don't. That's just the painkillers talking. Now will you please shut up and watch the movie?”

Tony did shut up, at least for a few minutes. But as the movie played, he continued to pick at his chest. He had never thought that he would be rid of the reactor. It seemed more like it would kill him before technology was advanced enough to pick the shrapnel from his chest. But now, with magic running through his veins, they were able to take away both the shrapnel and the metal cage with only minor complications. The arc reactor was gone, he wasn't dead, and his friends were being overbearing as usual.

Deciding that their caution was excessive, Tony rose from the couch, tripped on the corner of the rug, tried to saunter to the kitchen, and bumped into the other sofa. By the time his wobbly legs got him to the kitchen, he was desperate for a drink, but then he turned the corner and saw that the room he arrived at wasn't the kitchen at all; it was a bathroom.

Tony cursed his drugged mind. They had lived in this house for months, and it had been years since he lived in Malibu—that house was sitting in ruin at the bottom of the sea—but he still got confused whenever he was tired. He slammed the door shut and started walking down the hall to where the kitchen actually was.

Loki called after him, “You aren't going to find any alcohol in the house! Pepper and I already took care of it!”

Not believing Loki—he had genius hiding spots, though it was rare that he had to resort to using them—Tony continued to search the house, but four empty stashes later, he was forced to admit defeat. He shambled back to the couch with a scowl and a throbbing, empty hole in his chest. In protest of Loki's actions, he put his feet on the god's lap when he sat back down and said, “You suck.”

“You'll get over it,” Loki replied, and Tony huffed, his eyes moving to the screen while his hands prodded tender skin. But Loki was right; no matter how weird his chest felt, he didn't miss the metallic clang beneath his fingers.
Loki's hands darted up to block the punch aimed for his head, and then he leapt over the leg heading towards his ankles. As he landed, Natasha flipped to her feet. She caught Loki's leg when he kicked at her, and throwing all of her weight into it, she shoved him off balance. He stumbled, and she jump-kicked his knee to make him fall the rest of the way. However, just when Natasha made to pin Loki down, he grabbed onto her foot and knocked her down onto the mat. She scrambled to get back up, but Loki already had her limbs pinned. He grinned triumphantly.

“You've improved,” Natasha said between pants. Loki released her so she could rise to her feet and wipe the sweat away from her eyes.

“You say that like I don't win every time.” When the assassin shot Loki an unimpressed look, he grinned.

“Hitting you is like punching a brick wall,” she defended. “We both know that if you were human, the outcome would be different.”

“Whatever you say.” Though his tone was sarcastic, Loki agreed with her; while he physically could best the average human, he wasn't so vain as to think that meant he was always more skilled.

Then, figuring Natasha was done for the day, he released his ponytail and offered her the hair tie. She took it and nodded towards his shoulder-length hair. “I like how it looks now. So,” she smirked, “why'd you cut it?”

Her expression was mischievous, and Loki raised an eyebrow as he answered, “Tony wouldn't stop badgering me about it. He kept calling me Rapunzel until I agreed to make it a more reasonable length.”

Romanov began her stretches, feigning disinterest in his words; that lasted for about thirty seconds before she couldn't hold back whatever it was she knew. “So... are you telling me that the mutant squid trying to drown you by your hair last week had nothing to do with your decision?”

With a groan, Loki asked, “How did you learn about that?”

Her smirk grew wider. “Parker told me. He found it amusing. Couldn't stop laughing, in fact.”

“I wasn't aware he had noticed,” Loki muttered; he made a note to himself to remind Parker why people called him the God of Mischief.

“The new group seems to be doing well,” Natasha commented. “That other newbie—Kamala Khan? I like her.” She finished her stretches, padded over to where Loki had perched himself on the bench, and took a seat beside him. “You've finally assembled a full team.”

A nostalgic look found its way onto her face then, and it was an expression that Loki copied. It had been a long time since the war—almost a decade—and the losses they endured no longer burned in their chests. They missed their friends, certainly, and Loki knew Clint's death meant more to Natasha than anyone else, but the wounds had scarred.

A hush fell over them, but it was not uncomfortable; Natasha gulped down a water while Loki contemplated the best way to get back at Parker. When she spoke again, the wistfulness had vanished from her tone. “Since the team is back running again, I'm going to retire from the Avengers.”

Loki glanced at her in surprise. “Now?”
She nodded. “SHIELD needs me to help train new recruits, and in addition to that, Hill wants me to take the council position that's opening. I won't have the time to run around the country fighting bad guys.”

“If time is the problem, you know I can always teleport you to the mission sites,” Loki said, but Natasha was already shaking her head.

“I'm getting old, Loki. I can't jump across buildings and tackle things like I used to.” She stood up and tossed the empty water bottle over her shoulder; it landed perfectly in the trashcan across the room. “But don't worry, I'll still drop by to visit. I can't have you getting lazy in my absence.”

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Cameras flashed, and the crowd vied to get close to the podium. Their questions were barely discernible as they shouted over one another, but one of the closer reporters was loud enough for Tony to make out the words: “Mr. Stark, can this discovery be used to stop degenerative diseases? Is Stark Industries going to explore medical science?”

“I've already told you, it's not a discovery,” Tony answered. He clutched at the podium, blinking against the flashing lights with a scowl on his face. “It's a spell, and no, Stark Industries is not going to try and replicate the effect.”

“But Mr. Stark, is Stark Industries not dedicated to improving lives?” another journalist demanded. “Why would you withhold an innovation that could help billions of people?”

“Because it's not an innovation!” Tony snapped. “It's a spell, and it’s impossible to recreate.”

No one seemed to care about that particular fact, and they continued to harass him until he reached the end of his patience. With a growl, Tony turned to look at Loki, who had an equally annoyed expression. “You want to handle this?”

Tony stepped aside as Loki marched up to the podium. At the sight of the god, who also didn't appear to have aged in the past two decades, the crowd became even more rabid—at least until Loki flicked his wrist and magic exploded over their heads. People screamed, but when they saw Loki's hand glow in preparation for another blast, the noise fell into nervous silence.

“Tony Stark is not responsible for his longevity,” he stated, making sure each word was clear and final. “I am.” Someone took that as their cue to speak, and Loki glowered at them until they slunk back. It was admittedly a tactless way to manage the crowd, and Pepper would no doubt scold them for it later, but threatening the crowd allowed Loki to continue, “There is no way for me to recreate the spell, nor would testing on Stark provide a solution to human mortality. With that being the case, I believe this conference is over.”

Even the (mostly) empty threat of Loki's magic was not enough of a deterrent to keep the reporters quiet after that. They started shouting out questions again, but Tony was beyond caring; when the god glanced over at him, he nodded, and they left the conference in a wash of green.

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The key twisted back, killing the ignition, but Tony didn't pull it out. He turned to Loki and asked, “Are you sure you’re ready to do this?”

Loki didn't speak at first. He gently ran his fingers through wiry fur, no longer as thick and soft as it had once been, and felt the bones lying underneath. “Delaying it won't change anything.”
“I know, but... We could wait a day if you need to.”

In response, Loki cradled Choronzon to his chest and unbuckled his seat belt. When he stepped out of the car, the cat blinked slowly at the change in light and lifted his head as if it weighed a hundred pounds. Loki continued to stroke the twenty-two year old cat until Choronzon decided that curiosity was not worth the effort; his head dropped back down and his eyes closed.

The door on the other side of the car slammed shut, and Tony walked around to join Loki. Together, they walked up the steps to the small animal clinic, and inside, a man sat in the waiting area with a puppy while a woman watched them enter from the front desk. Judging by the sympathetic look she was giving them, she knew exactly who they were. Loki knew Tony had been calling the vet a lot in the past few weeks when he thought the god wasn't around, trying to find any better alternative than what they had come to do.

But even the combination of their intellect and Tony's money couldn't prevent the inevitable. “I'll inform Doctor Hobbs that you've arrived,” the veterinary assistant said, and Tony nodded.

As they sat in the waiting area, neither of them spoke, and for that Loki was glad. While he knew that he was making the right decision, it did not keep doubt from cluttering his mind. He worried that if he spoke, it would break his resolve or make him feel like he was betraying Choronzon more than he already was. So instead, he remained silent as he continued to comfort his friend, taking care to not jostle his sensitive joints.

And when the vet, the same one that had diagnosed Choronzon with severe arthritis years ago, opened the door and called, “Loki Stark,” the god knew it was time to say goodbye.

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Dark red wine filled their glasses. “May I get you anything else?”

“No thank you.” Pepper reached for her drink and the waiter nodded. Tony watched him walk away with a frown, and when he lifted his glass, he tapped his fingers against it. Thoughts raced in his mind, constantly switching between 'say it' and 'it's a stupid idea'.

He had only gotten a few seconds into his poor rendition of 'Ode to Joy' when Pep grew impatient and asked, “What is it?”

Her prompting was enough for him to temporarily get over his uncertainty, and in a rush he said, “I've been thinking about designing a spaceship. I know Stark Industries has some prototypes made, but those are too basic. I want something even better than what NASA has been working on.”

“Then do it,” Pepper said dismissively. “I'm sure if you need ideas, Loki will be happy to help.”

“That's the thing: I don't want to make a ship just for the hell of it. I want to make one so Loki and I can leave Earth.”

Pepper had been about to take a sip of her wine, but at his admission, she slowly set her glass down. “You want to leave?” Tony nodded, inexplicably feeling ashamed even though Pep's expression remained neutral. “For how long have you wanted to?”

“I don't know. I mean, it has crossed my mind a couple of times over the years, but I never seriously considered it until Coro passed away. It's just... I guess I never noticed that time was passing, at least not in a way that mattered. But after that, it sort of hit me that Loki and I, we're... We're static. Everything around us keeps changing, people are aging, and we just don't.”
While Pepper didn't understand what it was like to be frozen in time, Tony knew she understood how disconcerting it was; she experienced the same problem, just in reverse. “When?”

“No for a long time. Even with the Chitauri ships, it'll take a while to recreate their warp drive, and I'm not leaving you guys. It's just an idea for... afterwards.”

Pepper hummed. “You haven't spoken to Loki about this, I take it.”

“No, not yet. Like I said, it's just an idea, but I did talk to Thor last time he visited. He said it wouldn't violate Loki's exile if we toured space, since technically it is still a part of 'Midgard's branch'. Though if you ask me, I think he's just stretching the definition for us.”

Pepper pressed her lips together. “If you've already asked Thor, it sounds like it is more than just an 'idea'. What does he think about the two of you leaving?”

“You mean how upset will he be if Loki travels light years away?” Tony shrugged. “He won't like it, but I doubt he'd stop us if that's what Loki really wants to do. You know how he is. The big softy just can't tell his brother no.” Then Tony frowned. “I'm more worried about how Loki would react to being in space. I don't want him to feel like he's trapped in the void again.”

“So ask him if he thinks he can handle it, and let him decide. He hasn't had problems in years.”

“I know that, but... I can't help worry about it. You know how it is, and I don't want to make it worse by pressuring him into it. Really, it's just a silly idea-”

“Tony Stark,” Pepper interrupted, and he snapped his mouth shut. “Clearly you have given this a lot of thought, and if it's what you want to do, then go for it. You're underestimating him again. He's going to do what makes the two of you happy, and if you want to leave, then you know nothing is going to stop him.”

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“Hey princess, can you come over here and hold this for me?” Tony called from the underside of a large metal ship; his muscles were quaking with exertion as he supported a wide sheet of steel.

“Of course I can,” Loki stated, but he made no move to approach. Tony could hear rustling as the god flipped through a book. “Just as soon as you stop calling me that ridiculous nickname.”

“Hmm... Nah, I don't think I will. 'Princess' is perfect for you,” Tony teased, and then he grunted as the weight shifted, intent on smashing him.

“Then I am sure you can handle whatever it is on your own.”

“Whoa, wait,” Tony cried as his elbows started to buckle. “Seriously, Lokes, I need your help! This thing is about to crush me!”

The god sighed, but he set aside his book and walked over to Tony. He crouched down to peer under the spaceship-to-be, and when he realized that Tony hadn't been joking about the whole getting crushed thing, he slid under the ship. Pushing Tony's hands out of the way, Loki effortlessly held the metal in place. The reprieve had Tony's muscles singing in relief, and he massaged feeling back into his hands before starting on the bolts he had mistakenly unscrewed.

“What are you working on this time?” Loki asked.

“Spaceship. Admittedly, it's a miniature model, but I need to test the warpspeed on something
disposable before making anything larger.”

There was only two bolts left when Jarvis announced, “Sirs, there is an incoming phone call from the Avengers.”

Curious, Loki shifted away from Tony while slackening his arms. The metal sheet groaned and started sinking out of position. “Hey, I'm not done,” Tony said, and then to Jarvis he shouted, “Tell them to hold for a minute!”

“Dr. Pym insists that it is an emergency.”

Tony tightened the bolts as fast as he could while Loki said, “Put him through.”

“Thank God you two are there,” Hank said in a rush. “We're experiencing a problem down in Kentucky. There's this megalomaniac—Tech Lord or something like that—and... You two should probably come see for yourselves.”

“We'll be there in a minute,” Tony said as the last bolt was put in position. Once it would no longer twist, he motioned for Loki to slowly lower his hands; this time the piece stayed in place. They crawled out from under the bus-sized ship, and without needing to be prompted, Jarvis offered Loki footage of the battleground.

They teleported to the outskirts of the small town, and Loki plucked an Iron Man suit out of the air and handed it over. Janet noticed them and darted forwards, ducking under one of the many metal tentacles that occupied the street. Tony raised an eyebrow at the mayhem.

“Well, this looks like it's going to be fun.”

“Undoubtedly.”

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“It isn't fair, you know,” Rhodey complained. “You're seventy-three, and yet you still have people fawning over you like you're thirty.”

Tony finished signing his autograph with a flourish and grinned at the young boy. “Don't listen to him. Fawn over Iron Man all you want.” The kid beamed back at him, but then the boy's father led him away. Once they were out of earshot, Tony turned back to Rhodes. “You know, I wish I did look thirty. I'm really not digging this mid-forties thing. It makes me feel old.”


Tony knew that the words were intended as a joke, but that didn't stop him from studying his friend. Time had changed him like it did everyone else; his facial hair was sparse and grey, skin wrinkled and dry, and without his glasses, he was practically blind. Compared to Tony, who was only a few months older, he did look ancient.

Realizing that he had taken too long to respond, Tony went ahead and admitted, “Loki and I got in a fight the other day.” His friend looked at him in surprise—concern, even—so Tony tried to lessen the impact by joking, “You should have seen our neighbors' faces.”

Rhodey didn’t take the bait. In fact, it just made his brow furrow further. “Man, the closest people to you are like half a mile away. What in the world were you arguing about?”

With a huff, Tony said, “Jeeze, you’re going senile. This.” He gestured to his body that had barely
changed in two and a half decades. “I’m mad about this.”

“But I thought you forgave him years ago. Did he do something else?”

Tony shook his head, but he didn't answer beyond that. He wasn't sure how to put in words the anxiety he felt as the effect of his immortality became clear. Everyone he knew, with the exception of Loki and Thor, had grown old. Rhody, Pepper, Natasha, Bruce... they were all nearing the ends of their lives. They might not die this year, or even ten years from now, but it was going to happen, and Tony wasn't changing alongside them. He watched, but he could neither stop it nor become a part of it.

“Hey,” Rhodey said, snapping Tony out of his reverie. “We aren’t dead yet, alright? Look at me: I’m still young!”

Tony snorted, pushing aside the bad mood; if their time was limited, he didn't want to waste it brooding. “Don't kid yourself. You’ve got one foot in the grave, old man.”

“Oh yeah? Then let’s get suited up and this old man is going to kick your ass. I think it's time I used the old War Machine for more than collecting dust.”

“You really want to use that? It's more outdated than you.” Tony grinned. “Alright, have it your way. But don't come crying to me when Mark 256 turns it into scraps.”

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Though it had never worked before, and sometimes he wasn't even sure why he did it, Loki ignored Thor when the god came to visit. There was no scorn—at least not anymore—in the action, but Loki persisted in doing it. He always caved, of course, and would talk back, but not after a long-winded, one-sided discussion. Were Loki to think about it long enough to find an explanation, he would say that he did it because he feared that one day, Thor would stop visiting. If that happened, Loki didn't want to grow too attached, because otherwise he would miss the few hours he gets to spend with his brother.

Despite Loki's trepidation, Thor continued to visit. Sometimes he came only once a year, and other times he came every few months. But no matter how much time had passed, the fool would eventually come knocking. Tony would invite him inside, the three of them would stand idle for a few minutes, and then Tony would come up with a ridiculous excuse to leave the room. Like now.

“I have to go down to the lab,” Tony said, shuffling towards the stairwell. “Dum-E’s cleaning, and you know how that goes.” He grinned at Loki. “Bye.”

Then he was gone, leaving Loki alone with his brother. Thor's smile was blinding. “How have affairs been on Midgard? Your planet looks a lot healthier than it used to. You have tales of grand battles, no doubt. Your Avengers are a mighty force indeed.”

Loki rolled his eyes and let out an annoyed—or perhaps 'amused' was a better descriptor—huff. Without answering, he walked from the house and into the surrounding woods. Well-worn paths wound between the dense trees, and it didn't take long before the house was obscured. There were times that Tony missed living on the beach, but Loki loved the seclusion of their home.

Undaunted by the lack of reply, Thor continued, “My friends and I went on a glorious hunt the other day. There was a dragon terrorizing the eastern provinces, and I have never seen a larger beast! Its wings turned the sky to night, and its snout down to its tail stretched from one mountain to another! It was a fierce battle. The Lady Sif would have enjoyed it, and you as well, brother. We could certainly
have used both of your blades.”

As Thor enthused over his journeys, he continued to make similar comments: 'Had Sif been there, I doubt we would have fallen for their trap,' or, 'I saw one of those plants you often use in spells, and I regret not taking some of its leaves with me.' They weren't said with sorrow, merely as a matter of fact, and while Loki griped to himself about how noisy the god was, he was glad that Thor was happy.

Though when the story ended and Thor, in an effort to keep the conversation going, begin to list in boorish detail every meeting he attended in the last year, Loki decided enough was enough. “You have grown too fond of your own voice,” he said, and Thor had the audacity to look happy at the interruption.

“Then I will gladly hear what you have to say, brother. Tony mentioned your new allies last time I spoke to him. Tell me about your adventures.”

“I would hardly call them 'adventures','” Loki said as he kicked a rock off the path; it embedded itself halfway through a tree. But when he glanced up at Thor's hopeful expression, he sighed and thought back to their last mission. It had been an interesting one, to say the least, and when he started to talk, a smile had replaced his scowl. “We were called in to contain a toxic leak that mutated the cells of everything it touched. By the time we arrived, there was already...”

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With magic coating his skin, Loki hesitated. “Are you sure you don't want to join us? It would help take your mind off of her.”

Tony shook his head. “No, it's... it's fine. I have stuff I need to do here anyway.” The light surrounding the god faded, and Tony knew Loki was going to offer to stay even though voices were calling for him through his headset. “Go. I'll be fine, honestly. I just need some time to myself.”

Loki relented, but before he disappeared, he said, “Call me if you need anything.”

Then Tony was alone in the kitchen, and he sighed before turning to look out the window. At the edge of the house, the ground fell away into a cliff, giving a perfect view of rolling hills and thick trees. He had come to love the scenery, especially at sunrise, but after five minutes of staring blankly at it, the tightness in his chest hadn't faded.

Once upon a time, this would be where Tony ran to the fridge and grabbed a beer (or ten). However, it had been a long time since he resorted to such methods, and he felt that if he did it now, it would be disrespectful to her memory. Spending time with friends was another activity that helped, but Loki was out with the new Avengers, and the others...

“Sir, would you like to work on a project?” Jarvis asked, rousing Tony from his self-pity. He had thought that maybe it would get easier, but it never did.

“Sure. Pick whatever you want.” He rose from the table and meandered down the hall towards the massive basement. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, Jarvis had already pulled up the holographic screens. Tony went to them, expecting to see blueprints for the Iron Man suit (he couldn't remember how much he had designed by this point), but instead, the screens were covered with a project he hadn't opened in years.

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Tony froze, staring at the words 'Iron Dragon' written boldly above complex equations and diagrams. “Jarvis, why'd you open this?” he asked, automatically reaching to close down the window.
However, he could not stop his eyes from taking in the years of hard work and the painstaking details that had gone into planning the spacecraft.

“You said you were making it for when you were ready to leave, sir,” Jarvis said. “Based on my observations from the last few weeks, I believe you have reached that point.”

The hand that had been about to hit 'close' lowered; Tony's mouth went dry. “Do you really think I should leave, Jarvis?”

“I think you should do whatever makes you happy, sir. I would just appreciate if you did not leave me behind.”

“Don't worry, bud. I don't know what I'd do without you nagging at me.” Tony continued to stare at the plans—originally abandoned because there had still been people tying him and Loki to Earth—and came to his decision; the plans were projected across the entire room, and in the center was the scaled down frame of the ship. As he worked on fleshing out the plans, he did his best to not think about why he was ready to leave now when he hadn't been five years ago.

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As he set the hydrangeas and peonies on the ground, the wind blew, causing the petals to brush against the engraved words. It didn't matter that the splashes of color obscured the grey; Tony knew each letter on the stone by heart. When he stood back up to rest his palm on the granite, which had started to chip despite how carefully it was maintained, the spot he touched was unusually smooth.

Taking a deep breath, he told the stone, “I've decided that it's time to leave. I thought I could stay longer, but it's not the same anymore. I think he's ready, too.” A small, fond smile crept on his lips. “God, you should have seen him last week. I don't know why he was so wound up, but he and that new kid—have I mentioned him before? Miles Morales? He took Parker's position. Anyway, the two of them completely trashed a theme park. I thought Carter was going to have a fit.”

He chuckled at the memory, but when the sound died down, a frown had somehow found its way back onto his face. “I don't know if leaving means I'm running away,” he confessed, “or if it means I'm moving on. It's not that we aren't happy here, and the new Avengers are great. But... It always feels like something is missing. When I look at myself in the mirror, it's like nothing has changed, but it has. And I know that the longer we stay here, the more friends I outlive, the worse that feeling will become.”

Another breeze swept through the grounds, and Tony pulled his coat tighter around himself. It was late autumn, and the sun had risen less than an hour ago. However, he didn't mind the cold, as it meant that less people would be around. It let him talk as loud as he wanted to without needing to worry about who was listening, and it gave the illusion that he was talking to more than just a slab of carved rock.

“Sometimes I don't know what I'm doing anymore. That's why I know we need to get out of here, even if just for a few years. Besides, can you imagine how much fun it'd be to visit whole new planets? I was reading one of Loki's books, and it makes sci-fi look boring. And the best part is that most aliens don't actually look humanoid. That's just the races who share a common origin with the Nine Realms. The rest are crazy weird, and...”

Tony talked until the sun rose higher into the sky and other people arrived. It wasn't until a family came to visit a grave a dozen feet from him that he said, “I have to go now, but I promise to visit one last time before we leave, okay?”
There was, of course, no answer, but Tony could picture Pepper's smiling face and imagined that if she was there, she would tell him that it was okay to move on. His hand fell away from the stone, and he grinned.

“Thanks, Pep. For everything. And... I miss you.”

Then he turned and walked back through the rows of graves towards his waiting car.

-o-o-o-

AC/DC played quietly on the stereo as the car wound through the countryside, only passing another vehicle every twenty minutes. The sound leaked out through Tony's open window, and crisp winter air blew in. Overhead, not a single cloud was in sight.

There was a grin on Tony's face as he took the car around a particularly tight curve. The man had insisted on bringing his oldest car—the only one he has owned since before he met Loki—and its engine hissed as the gas pedal was pushed down farther. Loki shared the car's attitude when it came to Tony's driving; they turned again, and the book he was trying (and failing) to read slammed against the door.

"Is it really necessary that we drive? If you had let me teleport us, we could have been there hours ago.”

“Cool your jets, Sparkles. We're almost there.” The road straightened and they hurtled past a logging truck. “Besides, this is part of your present.”

“I fail to see how driving for hours is meant to celebrate the day of my birth,” Loki griped as he leaned his chin against his palm. His elbow was resting on the lip of the window, and he stared out at the mountain ranges towering around them. “It's droll.”

“You're such a killjoy,” Tony said, but his tone didn't support his words. “It's supposed to build up the suspense. Aren't you dying to know what your present is?”

“Not really.” However, as the land flattened into long stretches of field, Loki perked up. He scanned the horizon for any indication of why they were out in the middle of nowhere, and his interest didn't go unnoticed. With a laugh, Tony returned his focus to the road, and the world raced past them.

A few minutes later, a building appeared on the horizon. Its slated metal roof gleamed in the afternoon sun like a beacon, and the car accelerated towards it. They veered off the road onto a gravel driveway, and Tony slowed down as they came around towards the front of the building. There, hidden amongst the tall grass and invisible from the road, was a small landing strip.

The car jerked to a stop, and Tony wasted no time jumping out. When Loki took more than a second to open the door, the man impatiently called, “Come on, slow poke! Your gift is inside.”

Though Loki made a show of sighing, an amused smile tugged at his lips. His book vanished into the air, and he stepped from the car. Tony was jittering in place by a massive overhead door, but even when Loki joined him, he didn't make any move to open the garage.

Catching on, Loki said, “You are too theatrical. Just open it.”

“So says the princess,” Tony countered, but he nonetheless typed the code in a flourish. However, all that revealed was a retinal and fingerprint scan. Loki raised an eyebrow, and Tony shrugged. “It'd really suck if it got stolen.”
When the door at last lifted and the steel wall behind it slid to the side, Loki could see why the extra security was necessary. He blinked in surprise, and Tony asked, “What do you think? You like it, right?”

Loki stepped into the brightly lit hangar, his fingers reaching out towards the dark grey, almost black, metal. Keeping his hand on the spacecraft, he began to walk around it, feeling the seams of the Vibranium and the ridges of the gold and green accents. On the side of the hull, the words 'Iron Dragon' were painted in white.

“This isn't one of the spaceships you were making for Stark Industries.”

“No, it isn't.” Tony confirmed. “It's one of a kind, and no one could make a second one if they tried. That shell is made from three quarters of the world's Vibranium supply. It took a lot of negotiating to obtain.”

Loki hummed in response as he continued to inspect the ship. Its wings stretched to the ends of the massive warehouse, nearly touching the equipment shoved to the side; platforms, storage crates, cranes, and metal sheets were all left over from construction. There was no doubt in Loki's mind that Tony had spent years, possibly decades, planning to make this spaceship. It wasn't a spur of the moment gift.

“You want to leave Midgard,” Loki stated as he ended back at Tony's side.

“Yeah. It's time, don't you think?” the man asked, looking away from the ship to meet Loki's eyes. “With this, we could finally go somewhere new. We don't have to stagnate.”

It was clear that Tony was itching to leave, and Loki understood; people he had known what seemed like yesterday were dead today. In Asgard, such a thing was never a problem, but now... Now they looked the same age as some of their friends' grandchildren, and with each generation that passed, he and Tony became less and less involved.

Which is why when Loki asked, “What of the people here?” Tony was quick to reply with, “What about them? They'll manage without us.”

But then Tony's excitement slowed, and he added, “You don't have to make a decision now. I mean, I understand if you don't want to leave-”

“I want to,” Loki said, interrupting Tony's nervous chattering. When the man had the gall to look surprised — as if he thought, after all of these years, that Loki wouldn't follow him past the end of the world — he repeated, “I want to leave. You're right: we're not getting anywhere staying here.”

The relief on Tony's face was immense. “Good.” He reached up to pat the nose of the spaceship. “I was starting to think that I had built this thing for nothing.”

Loki followed the action, and he took in the impressive sight that the Iron Dragon made. It was vastly different from their home right now, but he was sure that it wouldn't take them long to adjust. In fact, he looked forwards to the adventure.

Turning to Tony, Loki asked, “Where will we go first?”

Tony smiled. “Anywhere.”
...Oh my god, it's over. That's it. I had thought I'd never reach the end, and yet, here we are. Holy shit. And I wouldn't have been able to finish were it not for all of you lovely people. To everyone who has read my story, favorited, reviewed, or followed: thank you so much.

To see what else I'm working on, come check out my Tumblr. Also, I would appreciate feedback. What was your favorite chapter? Least favorite? Why, and how can I improve? Any constructive criticism? Things you really enjoyed? This information will help me improve my writing for later works, and... damnit, I worked my fucking ass off on this. Just leave a beautiful review telling me it was worth it.

But seriously, you guys are the best. Thank you so much for reading. :D

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!