Summary

When Loki was sent to be on the team he had fought a war against as punishment in the aftermath of the Chitariu attack, Loki was positive it was going to be Hel. But when circumstance- a kidnapping- forced him and the annoying Stark to rely on each other, life as an Avenger suddenly became a lot more interesting for the Mischief God.
He didn’t groan when he opened his eyes, but someone else did, and that was what caused Loki to regain consciousness more quickly. *Because he wasn’t alone.* But after turning his head to see who was there, Loki almost felt like groaning himself when he saw the mortal who laid next to him on the floor.

*Stark.*

Said mortal shifted his position, apparently trying to get comfortable as if he were in a bed and not on the floor, and then must have realized the difference because his eyes snapped open and he began to breathe very quickly.

“Stark,” Loki said sharply, “Calm down.”

His words must have had some positive effect because the mortal quieted instantly, although he was still breathing a bit quickly as he looked around their prison and tried to sit up. But he only made it halfway before he groaned, slumping back down to the ground with a weak moan.

Loki rolled his eyes. “You mortals are so fragile,” he complained as he sat up and looked around. “You barely were hit.”

“Yes, well, not all of us can be perfect like you,” Stark snarked as he rose more slowly. “Where are we?”

“On Asgard,” Loki said dryly. “Where do you think we are?”

“In some evil lair where we're going to be tortured and then killed,” Stark sighed, leaning against the wall as he tentatively felt the back of his head. “Well, this sucks.”

“Not a fan of kidnapping?” Loki mused, standing up so he could observe the walls of their prison-like cell.

“No, not particularly. It’s only my third favorite pastime, right after sex and working in my shop.”

Loki rolled his eyes for the second time in as many minutes. “You are going to be insufferable as a cellmate,” he lamented. “Still, I wonder why we were the ones taken and not the others.”

Stark raised an eyebrow. “Gee, I don’t know, maybe it’s because we were together when we were ambushed?” He sighed. “Figures the one time I spend time with you, I'd end up kidnapped. To be honest, though, it’s probably me they're after and they just grabbed you because you would have been an eyewitness.”

“If such is the case, mortals are even more stupid than I feared,” Loki muttered under his breath.
"They should have known that I wouldn’t have cared if you were kidnapped; I wouldn’t have told a soul and simply would have waited for the news to come that you had been killed by your captors."

"Aren’t you kind," Stark said wryly, making a careful effort to stand. "I do have a question though, why exactly haven’t you used your magic to bust us the hell out of here?"

Loki sent him a look. "I thought you hated magic."

"I’m not a fan," Stark agreed, "But I’m also not a fan of being tortured, which is usually a standard practice when kidnapped. So, you know, anytime you feel like getting us out of here...I’m game."

"Oh, you think I would help you escape too?"

Stark shot him a dark look. "Not funny. You know your contract says that you’ll treat us as teammates. I’m pretty sure that means that when kidnapped, you assist your fellow-kidnapped teammate in escaping."

"Does it?" Loki said thoughtfully. "That’s no fun. I wanted to leave you here!"

But he could tell Stark was just barely able to control his panic and if he waited any longer, it was very likely their captors would come for them. Sighing, Loki went over to Stark so he could call his Seidr to teleport them...only for nothing to happen. He froze.

Stark looked at him. "What?" he demanded.

Loki allowed his hand to fall away from Stark’s arm. "My magic...isn’t coming," he said slowly. He could feel only a very small amount of it, the rest of it seemed...sluggish, out of sight, too weak to be called. That was unexpected. And even he could admit that it was a bad sign that their captors had had the sense to suspend his magic by apparently drugging him into submissiveness.

Laughter sounded from around them and both Loki and Stark looked around for the source of the laughter. A moment later, a door opened inward from the rock wall and several men, all armed, entered the room.

Stark eyed them cautiously but Loki just watched them calmly. Magic gone or not, he was confident they couldn’t harm him. He was, after all, a god, and they were only mere mortals.

"Tony Stark," the clear leader greeted, ignoring Loki for the time being. "How are you enjoying my formidable home so far?"

"The decor is a bit dull," Stark responded promptly. "So’s your greeting. Who are you supposed to be, some high-up shot-caller whose ass I’m supposed to kiss?"

The man laughed. "Your reputation does you justice, Stark, you really do have quite a way with your mouth."

Stark now eyed the man suspiciously. "My bedfellows would agree but unfortunately you will only get insults and snark from this mouth."

"That will prove to be very painful for you," the man warned. "Now, I’m assuming you would like to know why you are here?"

Stark turned to Loki. "He still hasn’t said what his name is! What horrible manners. I’m going to call him ‘Bob’ so I suggest you do the same so we both know who we’re talking about. Okay? Okay. Alright, Bob, hit me with it. Why are we here?"
“You are here to make magical weapons,” the man, Bob, answered. “Missiles, more specifically, and Loki here is to use his magic to make them more powerful.”

“No.”

Stark nodded at Loki. “It’s a no from me as well, darling. Sorry not sorry to disappoint.”

“I’m afraid you are not going to get much say on the matter,” Bob said. “I’m sure you’re familiar with the term ‘waterboarding’ already so I’m going to get right to the point. We’re going to start small and get increasingly worse the longer you refuse to do what we want.”

At the mentioned method of torture, Loki noticed Stark tightened his right hand into a fist. “Well, I’m sure you’re familiar with how waterboarding and torture didn’t work on me,” Stark snapped. “They asked me to make weapons too and they had their asses kicked when I made my armor and escaped.” *They? What were they talking about?*

“We plan to monitor you more closely but only after you have been sufficiently broken down,” Bob informed him. “Oh, and as for Loki…” He turned towards two men and nodded at them, who approached Loki swiftly.

Immediately on the defense, Loki waited until they were arm’s length away and then lashed out, breaking the first man’s arm and the second one’s collarbone before a startled cry caught his attention. Loki looked up and found Stark struggling to fight Bob, getting free in time to once again yell Loki’s name.

But there was a sharp sting in the back of Loki’s neck and he turned just to see a man pulling a long, large syringe out of his neck. There was another one in his arm on the opposite side and Loki growled, pulling that one out as he knocked the two offenders unconscious. He was about to advance towards Stark when he stumbled, feeling weak, and then the world went black.

When he opened his eyes, the first thing he became aware of was the desperate gasps of a man struggling to breathe and receiving no air. But the sounds were quickly silenced and Loki lifted his head from his chest to see Stark thoroughly bound, his head being held underwater in a tub that was no doubt filled with ice and water.

He wanted to tell them to stop, to make them leave Stark alone but his mouth was dry and he found himself unable to form the words that he wanted to say. So he watched until Stark’s head was pulled out of the water. And even shivering with water soaking his hair and face, Stark still found the energy to hiss “go to hell” to their captors before he was once again forced under water.

A man knelt down at Loki’s side and grabbed his hair, lifting his head so they were looking at each other. “Are you willing to do as we say?” the man demanded.

“Like Stark said, go to Hel,” Loki smirked weakly at him.

He felt another prick in his neck and he knew no more.

The next time he awoke, it was to the sounds of quiet sobbing. Loki listened for what felt to be ten minutes, gathering his strength and coherency before he mumbled, “Stop crying like a child.”

The room fell silent. Then there was a raspy, “Shut up” from the Avenger that Loki could just make out as curled up in a ball in the corner of the room.

Loki raised an eyebrow, groaning as he slowly rolled onto his side. “It’s just a little water, Stark.”
“You’re an ass,” Stark muttered, but he didn’t sound as in tears as he had only a moment earlier, so Loki counted that as a victory.

“Perhaps, but at least I’m not the one who is sniveling in the corner like a scared child,” Loki countered. “You haven’t agreed to help them, have you?”

“Actually, I have, that’s why I’m over here in a puddle of water, drenched and freezing like I was stuck in Cap’s ice,” Stark fired back.

“Touché,” Loki muttered. “Tell me, how long have we been here?”

“Nearly a day. You’ve been conscious for probably five minutes of it, congratulations. On the bright side, they’re not going to waterboard me tomorrow.”

“They’re not?”

“No, they are going to waterboard me and starting beating the crap out of me. But they can’t hit my head or hands at least, not if they truly want me to build anything for them.”

“And they drug me so I can’t use my magic to help us escape,” Loki mused. “But if I were to say yes…”

“They’d leave you aware enough to do whatever the hell they want you to do without being able to teleport,” Stark said wearily, coughing. It was a wet cough, one that left Loki cringing by the time the mortal was done with his coughing spell and was only wheezing instead.

“You’ve swallowed water,” Loki realized grimly.

“Have I really?” Stark snorted. “It happens when people decide to see how long you can last underwater without breathing. I’ll be happy if I don’t get pneumonia from this considering I can guarantee you I already have hypothermia.”

Groaning to himself, Loki crawled over to where Stark was curled up. He placed his hand on Stark’s arm which made the avenger flinch, but he didn’t comment on that as he tugged on the man’s arm, making Stark move out of the puddle of freezing cold (for anyone who wasn’t a Frost Giant) water.

“What are you doing?” Stark snapped irritably.

“I’m going to help you warm up,” Loki replied like it was obvious. Which it was. “Take your shirt off.”

Stark turned his head limply to stare up at Loki. His eyes were rimmed red and his eyes were dark in traumatic memories but his voice was stronger as he demanded, “What?”

“Your shirt is soaked, you’ll never warm up if you stay in those clothes,” Loki pointed out. “My outfit is completely dry, therefore, I will give you my shirt.”

“Okay…”

“And then we are going to share body heat because you’re shaking badly enough that you even have me fearing for your life.”

“Gee, thanks. And where exactly did this newfound care about whether or not I live come from?”

“Your team. They’d murder me if I simply let you die in this forsaken place. And I would rather Odin didn’t find a reason to extend my punishment. Now, come on, shirt off.”
Stark sighed but took his shirt off, laying it out to dry away from them before he pulled on the shirt
Loki had just taken off and given to him. He then laid on his side facing away from Loki and was
quiet. Sighing to himself, Loki took it upon himself to be the responsible one and carefully moved
closer, arranging himself with his chest pressed to Stark’s back so his body heat (albeit not much, but
some was better than none) could transfer to the mortal. He then draped his arm over Stark’s waist so
he could keep the mortal where he was.

And they were silent, waiting for morning to come.

Loki was drugged again and then once more during the night, as they this time connected him to an
IV bag that simply required replacing the bag instead of having to be right next to Loki in order to
drug him. He was in and out of consciousness after that but he did hear a few words said back and
forth between Stark and someone else.

The next time he was coherent enough to understand his name and where he was, he found their
prison was silent. He laid there listening for any signs of life and thought maybe he could hear
yelling but it wasn’t clear. An unknown amount of time passed. And then the door opened and there
was a thump, followed by a groan.

Loki opened his eyes and tried to turn his head. In succeeding to do so, he found Stark collapsed on
the ground by the door. “St-ark?” Loki struggled to say.

But he didn’t receive a response.

Fear flashed through Loki for the first time and he struggled, using all of his might and strength to
raise himself enough to pull himself across the floor and over to where Stark lay unconscious.

He placed a weak hand on Stark’s chest and sighed, relieved, when Stark’s chest rose slowly. The
mortal was still alive. He was not yet aware enough to determine what injuries Stark had but he
could hear the way Stark’s breath was rattling in his chest and knew the man was not only very
injured, hence why he was unconscious, but was also ill from the water he had swallowed.

He needed to figure out a plan of escape. Stark clearly was struggling and...and…

After that, he knew very little. He remembered being coherent one last time and being awake enough
so to laugh when their captors tried to abuse him as they had Stark, but he also remembered the way
Stark’s body was folding under their continued blows, the way his breathing was weak and his body
growing weaker with each passing minute.

He had to do something. So, the next time they were going to take Stark for their torture session,
Loki fought. He pretended he was unconscious instead of trying to soothe Stark in the downtime
between sessions and then when they came to pick him up, Loki attacked. He was still quite weak
but he did manage to put up a fight and killed three guards before he was finally subdued.

And then he knew no more. He was pumped with drugs continuously to keep him unconscious and
he thought maybe he had heard Stark’s voice at some point, pleading with him to not die, and then
he was truly, completely unconscious. There was a momentary flash of fear of dying but before he
could question as to why that was, there was nothing but darkness.

Chapter End Notes
This story will follow the 100 Ways to Say I Love You prompts- each chapter will use 5 prompts in numerical order, with each prompt depending on the previous prompt. This will be a slow burn story, with each prompt being used directly or indirectly as Tony and Loki go from enemies to reluctant allies to kinda friends to friends to friends who mutually pine for each other (oblivious idiots) to lovers.

And a huge thanks to Rel, who read this chapter when I was uncertain about it and provided me with feedback. You're a shining star and my days are a little bit better simply because of you.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Warnings for mentions of wounds and past torture.

1. Pull over. Let me drive for a while.

It was nearly dark when Loki opened his eyes. He tried to sit up but quickly slumped back with a quiet groan as every single bone in his body protested at the painful movement. But he didn’t feel quite so heavy with drugs anymore. It was a wonderful feeling.

“Good, you’re awake,” Stark’s voice sounded from somewhere nearby but also not right next to him either. The mortal sounded weak and truly ill but he didn’t stop talking, adding, “How’re you feeling?”

Loki huffed in displeasure as he tried to summon his Seidr, only to discover he was still too weak to use his magic. “Less like death,” he said finally after a long pause for him to evaluate his condition. “And you?”

“I’m not the one who was drugged more than humanly possible,” Stark replied, his voice raspy but audible.

“I am not a human,” Loki pointed out smugly. “My body can withstand much more than yours.”

“Congratulations. When we’re safe at the Tower, I’ll give a medal,” Stark snarked. “Now, care to take over driving for a little while?”

“Driving?” Loki opened his eyes, managing to sit up for a moment to realize they that were, in fact, in a car.

“Uh, yeah. We escaped a long time ago, sleeping beauty. Now, drive, please?”

“And why would I do a thing like that?” Loki questioned as he laid down in the backseat, already feeling his temporary burst of energy leave him.

“Maybe because you feel bad for the person- aka me- who has been driving for the last three hours and would like to rest too?”

Loki yawned loudly, closing his eyes. “You’re doing just fine, Stark. And I do believe your driving skills are better than my own.”

“Did you just admit that I’m better than you at something?” Stark demanded incredulously.

“Must be the poison still in my system,” Loki muttered. “We both know I am exceedingly better than you at every task known to man.”


“Goodnight, mortal.”
When Loki opened his eyes next, it was fully dark outside. He waited for his eyes to adjust before he sat up. This time, he did so without a sound, feeling for the first time since their escape that he was finally in near to full health.

“How’s the driving?” Loki asked into the silence.

Stark swore. “For fuck’s sake don’t do that, you imbecile! You nearly scared me half to death.”

“That would have been a horrible ending for a hero like yourself,” Loki mused. “Death by fright. Where are we now?”

“According to the last road sign, Timbuktu.”

Loki scowled. “You mean we’re lost.”

“No! Not lost...just somewhat off path.”

“Unbelievable. A mortal with your intellect and you cannot tell one direction from another?”

“In my defense, it's dark and really hard to see. And..." Stark trailed off. "And something else.”

“A poor excuse,” Loki growled. “Let me figure out our distance to the Tower before you manage to drive us into an ocean.”

“Fuck off,” came the surly response.

The car fell silent for several minutes as Loki summoned his magic. He calculated their distance to the Tower but discovered he did not have the strength to transport them the rest of the way there.

“We are still several hours away,” Loki griped. “Of which is because you are driving us in the wrong direction.”

The car slammed to a stop. “What?!” Stark demanded.

“You heard me.” Loki rolled his eyes. “You are taking us back to our captors. Bravo, Stark, truly a wonderful performance of intellect.”

“If you think you could do any better, why don't you drive?”

“Boring,” Loki responded instantly. “I'll sit here and tell you where to go. That is much more fitting a task for a being of my stature and intellect.”

“You arrogant asshole, fine, sit there and be lazy,” Stark snapped. There was a rustling sound and then a noise that sounded suspiciously like a groan.

Loki frowned. “What was that?”

“What was what?” Stark asked irritably.

Loki huffed at the rude tone. “Never mind,” he muttered, deciding he’d ignore the mortal minus when he gave him the directions necessary to get back to the tower. However, a thought came to his mind and he was forced to quire, “Have we stopped for gas during our travels?”

“Yes, twice because this piece of shit gets horrible gas mileage, and thanks to that I now owe two
gas stations money for the gas I stole. We also owe a CVS in Tison money for some medical supplies that I stole...but they were needed since checking in at a hospital was and is not possible.”

“You stole?” Loki grinned. “My, Tony Stark, turning corners to join the side of the mischievous? I'm impressed.”

Stark snorted. “I wouldn’t exactly call theft a prank.”

“It’s not an act of menace,” Loki pointed out.

Bemused, Stark looked in the mirror to look at Loki better. “Robbery usually is.”

“Did you not just take the gasoline without payment?”

“Well, yes, I rigged the system so I wouldn’t have to pay and, therefore, leave a paper trail to our location, but that’s beside the point. Crime is crime and I did still steal from a pharmacy. And a gas station. Twice.”

Loki shook his head. “You are a peculiar mortal,” he muttered. “Feeling guilty for committing the smallest of crimes.” His head snapped up when he heard honking and he saw a flash of headlights before he was thrown roughly against the door as Stark yanked the steering wheel to the right to avoid the car coming at them. “What horrible driving was that!” Loki shouted at Stark. “We just cheated death and you would try to kill us both through your pathetic driving?”

“Sorry,” Stark muttered, sounding tense. “I wasn’t looking and-”

Loki sighed. “Just pay attention to the road, Stark. We still have a long road ahead of us and I would prefer to get there in one piece.”

“Oh, you will, trust me,” Stark griped. “You’re already healed and are talking my head off. All is right in the world again.”

“Can’t handle my chatter, Stark? That’s odd considering how often you speak.”

“At least I don’t annoy the fuck out of the injured driver who’s doing his best to get himself and his frustrating frenemy to safety!”

“My, you really don’t like me,” Loki sighed. “I’m hurt, Stark, I really am. And here I thought we bonded over our shared tortures at the hands of our captors.”

“It’s hard to bond with someone who laughed at every single damn torture that was done on you,” Stark snarked.

Loki shrugged. “It was not every single time since I was unconscious for most of your torture sessions. I only laughed when they tried to use those same torture methods on me as well. Mortals cannot hurt me. Their pathetic excuses for ‘torture’ left a lot to be desired in my opinion. They weren’t very creative.”

“Maybe not but somehow I seem to recall having to drag you out of our prison because you were too drugged-up to move.”

“I was unconscious,” Loki snarled.

“My point exactly.” Stark sounded smug. “For all our weaknesses, all it took was some drugs to get you to fall asleep.”
“At least I wasn’t the one who started trembling at the sight of water,” Loki hissed.

“Shut up, you asshole.”

“Why, did I strike a nerve with the courageous Tony Stark? My most gracious thanks for saving my life, Stark, truly, thank you, but I believe it was I who saved you when I put up a fight so they would drug me instead of torturing you! If anything, I deserve the thanks for protecting your sorry self!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot you were a hero. In that case, thank you, my knight in shining gold-and-green armor. However shall I thank you for your selfless act, o hero of mine?” Stark answered sarcastically.

“You fear water and you call yourself a hero?” Loki sneered. “Such a fear makes you pathetic.”

The car fell silent minus the sounds of loud, harsh breathing. “Fuck off,” Stark finally said, and his voice was low with barely contained anger.

Loki laughed at him. “What, cannot take that I am right? Your body consists of sixty percent of water and yet you fear it? That’s shameful. Do you only have troubles bathing or does a shower also cause you to panic? Truly, I must thank the tiny part of you that is a hero for coming out and saving my life, I truly am appreciative that you would set aside your own fears to save-”

The car slammed to a stop and there was a click as Stark unbuckled, followed by a loud slam as Stark stepped out of the car and threw his door closed. Loki gaped at him before he opened his door and followed after the storming-away Avenger.

“Where are you going?” he called.

“Anywhere but here!” Stark yelled, sounding furious as he stormed in the direction they had come. “You can take the damn car and drive to the tower yourself. Better yet, why don’t you teleport? You sure as hell aren’t good company and I’d rather be with our captors again than have to put up with another ten seconds with you!”

Loki grinned in the dark. “I really have pushed all your buttons, haven’t I?”

“And destroyed a couple too, yeah, thanks a lot. Now, leave me the hell alone, would you!” Stark continued to walk away, each step causing the distance to grow between himself and the car.

Loki sighed, calling out, “Stop acting like a child, Stark, and get in the car! It’s the middle of the night and I really would rather not have to explain to your precious teammates that I left you in the middle of nowhere because you were annoying me.”

Stark didn’t respond to him, and Loki squinted to find his form in the darkness of the abandoned road.

“Come on, Stark,” Loki sighed. “It’s dark, the temperature is only going to continue to drop, and who knows what creatures lurk in these woods with the intention to feast on a-” Loki stopped talking abruptly at the sound of a thump. “Stark?” he called.

Still no response. Loki groaned to himself, figuring he was getting the silent treatment for their argument. Fine, if Stark wouldn’t respond, Loki would leave him to walk the several hundred miles back to their captors. He would travel to the tower himself, where he could bathe and be fed and forget the entire kidnapping had occurred.

Loki turned away, scowling to himself. Mortals were infuriating. Stark was infuriating and he was
really beginning to regret he had taunted and fought their captors to keep Stark from getting subjected to the water torture again. Yet, something tugged at his mind. He had awoken in the car only three hours after they had escaped, meaning that his last dosage of drugs had either been small-which was why he had awoken relatively quickly- or his last dosage had been the one from hours before their escape. If the latter was the case, as Loki feared it was based on how he had awoken in the car to not have drugs present in his system, then someone had interfered to keep his captors from drugging him to death.

Someone, like Stark.

But if Stark had interfered, what cruel punishments had they forced on Stark in exchange to keep from drugging him further?

“Stark?” Loki shouted into the darkness, suddenly needing to be reassured that the thump he had heard hadn’t been caused by more serious means than a simple animal rustling in the woods.

There was no response.

Loki began walking in the direction Stark had gone, going increasingly faster as he did so. He went thirty paces before he tripped. Catching himself before he could fall, Loki turned to see what he had tripped over. Green light spilled from his hand as he crouched on the ground and got a good look at the object- at the being- he had stumbled over.

Loki’s breath caught in his chest as he took in the sight of Stark curled on his side on the ground. “Stark?” Loki asked sharply, wasting no time in waiting for a response as he rolled Stark onto his back. He ran his eyes over Stark’s still form and found himself gaping at the wounds present on Stark’s body.

*How had he not recognized earlier that Stark was so seriously injured?*

Muttering angrily to himself, Loki carefully pulled back the tarted remains of the shirt on Stark to expose the long, gushing gash on Stark’s abdomen. Uneven stitches had been torn, no doubt the reason for the spilling blood now. Loki gulped at the sight of the dry and fresh blood that stained Stark’s shirt and flesh.

He could imagine Stark bleeding from his wound as he pulled an unconscious Loki from the building they were being held in. He could imagine Stark running for *their* lives, wincing with every moment as it pulled at his injury, only to collapse into the first car he came across as he hotwired the car, started the engine, and started their long journey to safety.

He could imagine Stark stealing the tweezers, thread, needle, and nail clippers from the pharmacy, all of which were necessary tools to stitch himself up, and then using them to force the thread in and out of his flesh so he would survive long enough to drive them several states and hundreds of miles to the tower where they would be safe.

And he had done all of this to save *both of them* despite his grave wounds.

“You do not get to die,” Loki informed the unconscious Stark, scowling at him furiously as he was forced to press his hand to Stark’s warm, bleeding stomach and murmur words of healing intent. Stark had sacrificed himself to protect *him* and Loki would not allow the deed to take Stark’s life.

He wasn’t used to be indebted to someone, even less used to someone protecting him, but the truth remained that Stark had sacrificed himself to protect him, which meant Loki owed him a debt.

And if that debt was keeping the mortal alive, then Loki would do it.
Loki gathered his strength and summoned his magic. He would be able to teleport them a few blocks away from the tower. The rest he would have to walk himself. His magic would be drained, his strength gone, but he would make it.

Tony Stark was bold, outlandish, annoying, and every bit petty as handsome, but he had protected Loki from harm. And Loki would see to it that the mortal lived to see the new day.

2. It reminded me of you.

“This is hideous,” Stark scowled as he glared at the cloth doll of himself. “I don't know what you're trying to do here but killing the man who sacrificed his own well-being to save you by way of an ugly-ass toy is a horrible way to say thanks.”

Loki blinked innocently. “I have no idea what you speak of,” he said, “But when I saw this device, it reminded me of you and so I got it at once as a ‘feel better soon’ gift.”

“Fuck off,” Stark said bitterly as he struggled to lay back down without aggravating his injuries. “Man, you suck. I saved your life and you can't even bother to say thanks? Unless this thing from hell is secretly your way of saying thanks because in that case, I may actually get better purely so I can stick it up your ass.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “How kind you are, Stark. Can't I see you simply because I am concerned about your well-being?”

Stark stared at him. “I know you're lying but simply because you allowed those words to come out of your mouth, I think you should join me in here.”

“Oh, I have no interest to share a bed with you, no matter how fun a secret night of activities may be,” Loki smirked.

“Get your head outta the gutter, you pervert,” Stark snarked as he threw his doll at Loki's head. Loki dodged it easily and laughed when he saw the affronted expression on Stark’s face at his evasive maneuver. “I meant that you should be a patient in medical too.”

“Why? Merely because I suggested I might feel bad that you were injured on my behalf?”

Stark nodded enthusiastically. “Now you've got it!”

Loki turned away slightly, at that. “I may be cold but I am not without that much heart,” he said bitterly. “It is just simply easier to pretend I don't care.”

“Are you saying…you care about me?”

“Of course not,” Loki snorted. “Don't be ridiculous, Stark. Supposedly you are a genius.”

“I am and don't you forget it.”

“Oh, I could never, not with how often you mention your massive intellect.”

“Uh huh.” Stark folded one arm over his abdomen, frowning at the movement. “You know,” he called, “If you truly feel bad, there is a way to make it up to me.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “I don’t believe I care enough about you to feel guilty that you made the stupid decision to protect me.”
“Stupid decision,’ he says,” Stark muttered. “Well, fine, be that way. Grumpy.”

“Being grumpy is just so much easier,” Loki replied cheerfully. “Goodnight, Stark.” He bent down and picked up the doll, which he couldn't resist tucking under the covers next to Stark’s body. “Sleep well.”

“Fuck off,” came the snapped reply. Loki grinned as he left. This mortal was sharp. He liked that.

### 3. No, no, it's my treat.

“And how are we feeling today?” Loki asked as he leaned down to peer at the inventor who was panting harshly on the ground. “You look pale...are you quite sure you're alright?”

“Oh, fuck off,” Stark muttered as he waved a tired hand at the Physical Therapist who crouched worriedly at his side. “Glad to see you again, Loki. I really do interest you, don't I?”

“Interest me?” Loki snorted. “You are nothing but a source of annoyance to me. Whatever gave you the idea that you interest me?”

“Um, besides the fact that you used all your energy to bring me to the Tower before I died, that you visited me in medical, and now you're watching me struggle my way through PT? I mean, think about it, you've kind of been here throughout my entire recovery. Either you're interested in me or you feel bad about what happened to me…” Stark grunted as he rose to his feet. “And we've already established you don't feel guilty at all because I mean nothing to you, which means you must be here because I've peaked your interest.”

Loki nodded thoughtfully. “Very astute of you, Stark, I'm impressed.”

“Yeah? Does that mean I'm right?” Stark panted through his pain as he struggled to take several steps forward. “Cause, I gotta admit, that would be the motivation I'm looking for right now.”

“Sorry, you're still wrong.” Loki grinned. “You're terrible at reading me, Stark. I don't know why you bother.”

“You know, I wonder that too sometimes. Just like how I'm wondering why you're here.”

“Oh, I wanted to watch you fall.” Loki waited a minute and then laughed gleefully as Stark stumbled and fell to the ground. “See! Now, isn't this fun?”

“You asshole,” Stark groaned as he rose to his hands and knees. “Do me a favor and go to hell, would you? This sucks enough without you laughing at my every failure.”

“At least you aren’t lying dead in a coffin right now,” Loki mused. “A little difficulty walking should be nothing compared to what it could have been.”

“Have you ever...considered...motivational speaking?” Stark gasped for air momentarily. “Cause let me tell you, you'd be great at it.”

“Somehow, I think only you would appreciate my words,” Loki responded sadly. “Oh well. I suppose I'll simply have to settle for watching you- aha! Thank you, Stark!”


The therapist knelt on the ground. “Tony, your breathing is becoming labored. Let's take a break,
“No,” Stark groaned. “I'm fine.” And he rose to his feet again and limped his way to the treadmill.

“You're going to get on that?” Loki laughed. “Stark, you can barely walk and you expect to run? My, you are foolish.”

“Shut up.” Stark stood shakily on the treadmill, adjusted the speed, and then began walking at a determined pace.

The therapist tried to protest but one glare in her direction from Stark kept her quiet as she watched unhappily from the corner of the room.

Loki watched from a distance and found himself actually frowning as he watched the strenuous workout Stark was putting himself through merely to prove he wasn't as weak as Loki thought. It was a stupid act and the final proof of that was the way Stark’s legs seemed to give out from under him and he fell off the treadmill.

As he watched this happen as if it were in slow motion, Loki went from several feet away to right behind the treadmill so when Stark fell, it was right into his arms.

“Get the fuck away from me!” Stark snapped as he struggled in Loki’s arms and tried to stand up on his own. “I don't need your fucking pity; I'm fine!”

“This is the opposite of ‘fine’, Stark,” Loki said calmly. “I think you've had quite enough walking practice today, don't you agree?”

“You don't get to tell me when I'm done,” Stark growled. “Now let me go!”

Loki did so without comment but when Stark was unable to stand on his own, Loki simply rolled his eyes and caught Stark in his arms again.

“Let's try this again. Why don't you call it a day?” Loki asked pleasantly, smirking when Stark scowled at him. “Do not look so glum, Stark, I am merely looking out in your best interests.”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm sure.” Stark managed to stand but remained leaning just barely against Loki as if he was finally accepting that he needed help if he wanted to stand.

“I am.” Loki rolled his eyes. “My, you are so suspicious. Now, tell me, where shall I help you go?”

“Nowhere. I can go wherever I want just fine.”

Loki scoffed. “You cannot walk on your own, Stark. You have aggravated your injury enough as it is, so swallow your pride already and allow me to walk you to one location.”

“Fine, you may walk me to the door. JARVIS, notify Bruce that I would like his help, please.”

“Of course, Sir.”

“You conniving-”

“Careful, Reindeer, don't want people getting the idea that I've outsmarted you, do you?”

“Oh, they all know my intelligence greatly overpowers your own. Now, let's go.”

“Sir, Dr. Banner is in the middle of a lab that cannot be interrupted. Shall I contact the Captain?”
JARVIS asked.

Stark groaned. “So he can give me his look of disappointment for fraternizing with the enemy? Hell no.”

“I'm not your enemy, Stark, but I appreciate you thinking so.”

“Uh, you may be on the same team as me, but after laughing as I was tortured right in front of you, that makes you my personal enemy. Right, JARVIS?”

“The laughter was a bit much,” the AI agreed.

Loki rolled his eyes at them. “At least I cared enough to watch,” he pointed out.

“Oh, don't you give me that, Mr-Loki-I-Don't-Care-About-You-Odinson.”

“My surname is not Odinson,” Loki said sharply.

Stark shrugged at him. “Fine. What surname should I call you then?”

Loki gazed at him for a long moment. “You would willingly call me by a different name without asking why?”

“Um...yes? Do you want me to ask why?”

“No.”

“Okay...then I don’t really see what the problem is. You know what, how about this. You join me for a coffee in the kitchen- my treat because my coffee is so much better than yours- and as payment, I won't call you Rudolph for a month.”

Loki considered the offer. “And if I prefer tea?”

“Ugh, I figured you would. Fine, I’ll make a coffee for myself and a tea for you.”

“Does that mean I have permission to escort you to the kitchen?”

“Um, no, you see, I can't walk out of the room on my own power just yet. ‘Too dangerous’ or some bull along those lines. I guess broken ribs and a stabbing wound are that serious,” Stark grumped. “I can't leave this room unless it's in a wheelchair.”

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“And you are obeying these commands why? The Stark I know would rather die than be forced to obey someone’s direct orders.”

Stark made a pained face. “JARVIS locked me out of the shop. Out of my own workshop, can you fucking believe it? He says I have to be able to walk on my own without wincing before he declares me healthy enough to enter my own home.”

Loki considered that for a moment. If he was in that situation and was locked out of his quarters-which were to him as Stark’s workshop was to him- then he would burn with the agony of not being allowed to stay in the one place he felt safe.

“Oh, you pathetic mortal, you have me feeling sorry for you,” Loki groaned earnestly. “If you have any trust in me, you will allow me to heal your wounds so you can reside in your shop.”

“Um, yeah, no, that's not happening. You could kill me and everyone would be unaware until my
“You have no trust in me at all,” Loki laughed. “I'm not sure if I should be impressed or insulted.”

“Well, you are the God of Mischief and Lies so pardon me if I'm not leaping at the opportunity to allow you to ‘heal’ me.”

“But wouldn't you agree we both looked out for each other when we were in captivity?”

“Well, you are the God of Mischief and Lies so pardon me if I'm not leaping at the opportunity to allow you to ‘heal’ me.”

“I am not someone who follows a certain pattern, Stark. I do what I want when I want to and no one can predict my actions.”

“I guess not.” Stark struggled his way into the wheelchair, gasping heavily as he aggravated his wounds at his movement. “Well, I'll see you around.”

“What happened to that drink you promised me? Did you suddenly gain a head injury in the last two minutes and forget your offer?”

“Haha, no. You didn't exactly seem thrilled at my offer and you've already said no one can predict your actions, so you saying yes was a long shot. One that I predicted wrong, so kudos to me.”

Loki stared after him as he rolled his way down the hallway, firmly ignoring the way a small part of him longed for companionship.

He shook those poisonous thoughts from his mind and returned to his quarters. He did not need something as trivial as a friend in his life. And certainly not Stark as that friend.


When in the middle of studying his mother’s magical journals, it was a horrible idea to interrupt him. And when JARVIS, of all people, called his name sharply, Loki was downright livid as he set his book aside.

“I am sorry to interrupt but I believe Sir requires your service.”

“You believe? Does he or does he not?” Loki snarled. “Do not waste my time.”

“Sir can no longer talk for himself. I believe he would be most pleased if you were to come to aid versus anyone else.”

Despite himself, Loki found himself standing. “What about his Dr. Banner? Or his Steve Rogers. Why am I the one he would supposedly be pleased to have help him?”

“Those are my observations so I cannot firmly state them as fact. And I really must direct you to the elevator; Sir’s breathing is quite unstable. I'll take you to his penthouse.”
Loki swore and teleported into the penthouse instead of waiting for a device that would take much too long. He found Stark laying on his side on the floor, his breathing loud and harsh in the otherwise silent bedroom.

“What happened?” Loki demanded as he knelt on the ground, placed his hand on Stark’s shoulder, and rolled him over.

Stark groaned at the movement, hunching in on himself as Loki helped him sit up. Noticing the way Stark had his arm wrapped around his chest, realization struck Loki. “Your chestpiece is the source of your ailment, is it not?” he demanded, pulling Stark’s arm away as he magicked away the garment Stark was wearing so he could observe the device.

At his action, Stark gave a startled gasp and threw his hand out, trying to stop Loki from touching him.

“What?” Loki asked irritably. “Your AI summoned me here, I would assume to help you, which I cannot do if you do not show me your injury.” He pointed at the reactor. “That is the source of your pain.”

“Don’t touch,” Stark ordered, his breathing ragged.

Loki stared at him for a moment before he nodded. “Very well. Tell me what is wrong and I can fix it.”

This time, it was Stark who stared at him. “What?”

“You heard me,” Loki snapped.

“I...right. There’s a rib…” Stark hissed, drawing in a sharp breath. “Pressing against the casing of my reactor. It’s fine, really…” He exhaled carefully. “Just painful. Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Yet I came in here less than a minute ago to find you lying on the floor in complete agony.” Loki shook his head. “Unacceptable. Come here.”

Stark stared at him blankly, looking confused.

Loki groaned. “Come here,” he repeated as he sat down against the wall and spread his legs with a motion for Stark to sit in front of him. “Let me heal you.”

If he was lost before, Stark looked downright befuddled now as he asked, “Why would you waste your time doing that?”

“Waste my time?” Loki looked amused. “Do you not find worth in yourself?”

“Most of the time, no. And since when did you care, Mr. “I Don’t Care About You” Laufeyson?”

Loki blinked. “You’ve learned my surname?”

Stark looked embarrassed. “Um, yeah? Thor was with me yesterday during PT...and when I asked him, that’s what he said. I hope you don’t mind...” He grimaced in pain and had to pause for a moment before he continued, "That I asked but you never said...”

Loki held up his hand, stopping Stark’s annoying rambling. “I do not mind, Stark. Had you asked me, I would have told you the same as Thor. And in all honesty, I am both surprised and pleased that he accepted my desires for him to call me by Laufeyson instead of his own surname. Perhaps there is
hope for him to learn after all.”

“I guess I don’t need to warn you not to get your hopes up, do I?”

Raising an eyebrow at him, Loki said, “You speak from personal experience?”

Stark shrugged. “People have a way of letting me down. I’ve learned not to have high expectations. It’s easier that way.”

Silence befell the bedroom for many minutes. Stark’s breathing was returning to normal, although the color of his face suggested that he was still in a considerable amount of pain. Loki shifted his position, flicking his wrist as he magicked Stark’s shirt back on him. “Well,” he said brightly, “I will leave you to whatever it was you were doing before the pain struck. If you change your mind, I will heal you so long as it’s within the next forty-eight hours. Otherwise, I won’t waste my magic.”

Snorting, Stark said, “Glad to know you think of me so highly.”

Loki leaned forward, staring at him as he said seriously, “Deciding to have me heal you is not a small matter. You are trusting me with your health. For that reason, I will only heal you if you are absolutely certain.”

Stark tilted his head curiously. “Is there a reason why I shouldn’t trust you?”

“That is up for you to decide,” Loki said as he helped Stark stand. Nodding at the mortal, he left the man in his room and returned to his quarters. Back to his mother’s elegant handwriting and calming notes, something he desperately needed after the night of nightmares he’d suffered from.

5. I’ll walk you home.

Hearing laughter coming from the kitchen, Loki was almost tempted to turn around and go back to his quarters. He thought he heard his name and, confused, he found himself entering the room. To his surprise, the entire Avengers team was seated around the table as Rogers and Banner cooked breakfast.

“Reindeer!” Stark greeted him as he entered. “Nice to see you awake before ten. Sleep well?”

Loki rolled his eyes at him. “Just because I don’t come say hi to you doesn’t mean that I’m not awake,” he snarked as he took a seat to Thor’s right.

Stark laughed, his eyes twinkling with amusement as he dropped a plate of food in front of Loki. Someone groaned. “My milk!”

“Someone drank the last of my milk!” she growled, whirling around the room as she sent everyone a deadly glare. “Who did it?”

“I didn’t!” Barton promised, but from the way he bolted from the room, no one was convinced that he was telling the truth. Least of all the Widow, who charged after him as she drew a knife from a hidden pocket in her shirt.

Rogers groaned. “There goes our peaceful morning,” he griped.
Stark laughed. “I think it’s hilarious.” Using his chair for support, he carefully stood up with a small wince. His expression didn’t go unnoticed by Banner who asked,

“Tony, where’s your cane?”

“Please, Brucie, I’m not an old man,” Stark said indignantly. “I was stabbed, not crippled. I can walk just fine on my own.”

“But you risk-”

Stark held his hand in the air, stopping the doctor (beast) from continuing. “My chest is in worse shape than my abdomen, Bruce, I’ll be fine. I certainly don’t need to walk with a cane. Do you know how high my chances of getting jumped would be if someone saw me using a cane? Yeah, not happening.”

Thor looked surprised. “My friend, are you going somewhere?” he called as Stark grabbed his coat and headed for the door.

“Uh, yeah, to get Natashalie’s milk?” Stark answered. “Why, you need something, Point Break?”

“Merely curious, Metal Man,” Thor replied cheerfully.

Rogers frowned. “Tony, are you sure you can handle the walk? I know the store’s right around the corner but…”

“I’ll be fine, Cap,” Stark dismissed with a wave. “You worry too much.”

“He has a point, Stark. You were just dealt a serious wound,” Loki spoke up.

Stark raised an eyebrow. “Is that a hint of concern I hear in your voice, Rudolph? I’m touched.”

“Hardly. You got injured to protect me. I won’t let you die because of your own negligence.”

Stark snorted. “Thanks, but I’ll be fine. It’ll be a quick walk, I’ll be back before you guys can even begin to miss the sound of my voice.”

“With how much you talk? We’ll gladly take the silence!” came Barton’s voice from somewhere in the vents above them. The room erupted into laughter as there came a furious snarl and then Barton fell through the vents into the room. Loki sat back and watched the spectacle as the Widow attacked Barton and, in the silence, he was the only one who noticed Stark slipped out the door.

The mortal may claim to be fine, but Loki had seen the way his left arm never strayed far from his chest. He was in pain, and Loki would remain alert until Stark safely returned to the Tower.

As it turned out, he only had to wait half an hour before his phone dinged with a text. Surprised, he pulled out the device only to find the message from Stark. It read:

46th and Cal.

Making an excuse to leave and glaring at those who dared to question him, Loki stood with haste and was at the corner in a matter of a few minutes. He found Stark leaning against the tree looking calm as he looked at his phone, but one look closer and Loki saw right through his facade.

“Alright?” he asked carefully as he joined Stark in leaning against the tree.

“Fucking peachy, Reindeer,” Stark said tightly, wincing. He drew his breath out carefully before he
admitted, “Yeah, not really."

“Your chest?”

“Yeah. Rib’s pressing against the reactor casing still…” Stark grimaced. “Kinda feels like my chest is on fire.”

“And you called me here for what purpose?”

“Motivation so I could see your ugly face and run in the opposite direction,” Stark said grimly. He looked at Loki for a long moment and nodded. “Great, thanks. I’ll be able to get to the Tower now.”

Loki held back an amused laugh. “Come off it, Stark, you know I am the most gorgeous being you have ever laid your eyes on.”

“That can’t be true considering I’ve seen myself in the mirror. I’m definitely better looking than you,” Stark pointed out as he pushed away from the tree and began a slow walk towards the Tower.

“Then why do you flirt with me so often, if I am not attractive?”

“I never said you weren’t attractive, I just said you weren't as good looking as me. But you’re actually sexy as hell which is terrifying...” Stark countered. “Oh, don’t give me that innocent look, Rudolph. You know you wear that leather and tight-as-fuck armor just to impress me.”

“Norns, you’ve figured out my secret,” Loki muttered. “I suppose I’ll have to bed you now that my feelings are out in the open.”

Stark laughed but immediately hunched over with a pained groan as he wrapped his arms around his chest. “Fuck,” he wheezed.

Loki clucked his tongue as he watched the way tears stung Stark’s eyes from the pain. “Come,” he said, wrapping his arm around Stark’s waist as he helped the mortal straighten up. “Allow me to walk you home.”

“Oh, we’re walking?” Stark forced through clenched teeth.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Were you anticipating a teleportation to the Tower? A slow walk is much easier on your body than the jostling of a teleportation.”

“I guess it’s probably best that you save your magic anyway,” Stark muttered, leaning heavily against Loki as they slowly made their way down the sidewalk.

“And why is that?”

“Well, you’re going to use your magic to heal me, right?”

For a moment, Loki stopped walking. When Stark stumbled, he quickly caught up and assisted the mortal back on his feet all in a single motion so Stark wouldn’t be in more discomfort than he already was. “You would allow me to heal you?”

“I have no reason not to trust you,” Stark said quietly, resolutely looking down at the ground to avoid making eye contact.

Loki swallowed hard. “Your trust in me is most likely unwise.”

“Keep your friends close and enemies closer,” Stark shrugged slightly.
“And so you would allow me to take your life into my hands?” Loki frowned. “That is pathetic logic, especially so for a mortal of your supposed intellect.”

“Well, I trusted my father figure with my life and he nearly killed me.” Stark snorted. “Can’t possibly go any worse for me if I were to let you take my heart too.”

“You are a foolish mortal.”

“Nope, genius here. Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

Loki sighed. “That is what I am afraid of.”

Stark chuckled. “Great. I’m trusting a god with my life who doesn’t even trust himself. How is this my life?”

Loki smiled tightly at him. “You associate with the wrong kind of people.”

“You calling yourself the wrong kind of people?”

“Considering the company I keep in this building, sadly, yes.”

“Aww, you don’t think that Brucie is amazing? That’s horrible ‘cause he is definitely one of the smartest, most interesting people I know. Not to mention one of the strongest.”

“How admirable,” Loki said dryly, trying his best to ignore the memories that crossed his mind of the way the Hulk had smashed him into the floor like he was a crumb, easy to break, easy to destroy.

They were in the penthouse before Stark got the chance to respond. Loki looked around the bedroom, for the first time getting a feel for Stark’s quarters, and then gestured to the bed. “Lay down, if you are able. Although you will regain your strength, the toll on your frail, mortal body will leave you needing much rest.”

“What about you?” Stark asked curiously.

Loki frowned at him. “Are you asking about my well-being?”

“Uh, yeah. What happens when you use all that magic to reset the bone and do whatever else you need to do? Won’t you be left feeling tired or depleted too?”

His concern was a mystery to Loki but he answered truthfully as he said, “I have healed much more grave injuries than yours and have been left in exhaustion from it, yes. Depending on how long it takes, I may find myself tired, we shall see. Either way, do not worry. I will not cease my healing until your chest is healed.”


“Because I can’t imagine how tired it would leave me feeling if I were to use all my magic to heal a wound? So I figured it would leave you tired too?” Stark frowned at him. “Oh, and do I need to take my shirt off?”

“Yes, so I can see the injury,” Loki responded. “And no one has ever shown such concern over whether or not I am tired after using my healing abilities, so I was not anticipating such a question from you.”
“Well, those people were asses,” Stark grunted as he sat up just enough to pull his shirt off. “Fuck,” he panted as he laid back down, the shirt off and his chest exposed. “Well, that felt nice.”

“I’m sure it did,” Loki said dryly. He sat down on the edge of the bed, leaning down to observe the dark, ugly bruises that painted a moral across Stark’s chest. Tilting his head slightly he commented, “This almost looks painful. For a mortal like yourself, weak as can be, this must be excruciating.”

“Thanks, Reindeer, that’s really kind of you. Great to see the sympathy. And yeah, it hurts, thanks.”

“Well, it won’t in a moment.” Loki hesitated, his magic simmering just under the surface of his skin. “Are you quite sure about this?”

Stark’s eyes flickered up to meet his own. Loki gazed at him, taking a moment to appreciate the color of Stark’s eyes as the man murmured his consent, causing Loki to bring his magic to the surface. It glowed in his hand and he hovered his hand over Stark’s reactor, watching as his green light colored the area around them and soothed over Stark’s injury.

Ten minutes later, Stark was asleep. His rib was set and no longer brushing the outer wall of his chest-piece, and the bruises that once marred his skin were gone, exposing the puffy, raised scars that surrounded the arc reactor. Loki took a minute to admire the piece of technology and then stood, stretching. He was tired but allowed himself five seconds to bring the comforter to Stark’s chin before he silently left the room.

Who said he was incapable of a good deed?

He had just healed a Midgardian Hero.
6. Have a good day at work.

A week passed and Loki, as well as the other Avengers, barely saw Stark at all. He had disappeared to his workshop- after stopping to thank Loki for his help- and had rarely come out since. According to JARVIS, Stark was catching up on all the work he had missed when he had been injured.

Loki was awake at five in the morning when he bumped, quite literally, into a half-asleep, frazzled Stark. He caught the mortal in his arms, keeping a hand on Stark’s biceps as he inspected the exhausted looking man. “Have you slept at all?” he demanded.

“Of course,” Stark snorted. “Just not recently. Got work to do, new suits to make.”

“It has been nearly seventy-two hours since Sir last slept,” JARVIS input.

Stark turned to glare at JARVIS’s nearest camera. “Traitor,” he hissed.

Loki laughed. “Have you eaten?” he asked as they walked together towards the kitchen.

“No, I wish. Gotta dash to catch a plane- I have an SI meeting across the country in… five hours.” Stark groaned. “You’d think as former CEO of my own company- and currently as the person with the second-most amount of power in my company- I could dictate the meetings I want to go to and where they should be held, but nope! Instead, I’ve gotta fly to San Diego.”

“The weather is pleasant enough there. You’ll be fine.”

Stark stared at him, shocked. “You’ve been to San- you know what, I don’t want to know what kind of dangerous mischief you were up to there. Why don’t you-”

“It wasn’t mischief,” Loki said indignantly. “I’ll have you know I had a very pleasurable evening with a-”

Yelping, Stark covered his ears with his hands and all but sprinted to the door. “It’s too early for this shit!” he wailed.

Laughing, Loki called, “Have a good day at work!” at Stark as he ran out the door.

Stark poked his head back into the room so he could flip Loki off, which caused the god to laugh, and then he was gone. Suddenly feeling a little bit better about being awake so early in the morning, Loki went to the kitchen to begin his day with a hearty meal.

7. I dreamt about you last night.

In what was quite possibly their most awkward interaction to date, Loki had entered the workshop to ask Stark a question- a question he would not remember after Stark’s surprising words- only to be halted in his tracks when Stark looked up from the suit of armor he was repairing, saw him, and exclaimed, “Rudolph! I dreamt about you last night!”

Loki stared at him for a full moment before he demanded, “Were we in your bed?”

Stark burst into laughter. “No!” he managed to say between laughs. “We were in yours!”
Groaning, Loki sunk down into a chair. “What a horrid thought,” he moaned, dropping his head into his hands as he shuddered. “Me, with you, in that way? Absolutely horrifying.”

Gasping as if hurt at the comment, Stark placed his hands on his hips and glared at Loki. “Are you telling me that I’m not the least bit attractive to you? As People’s Sexiest Man Alive for three years running, I take great offense in that comment.”

“They must be looking at a different version of you,” Loki mused as he observed the way Stark’s hair stuck in seven different directions. “There simply is not an ounce of attractiveness on you when you are in this workshop covered in grease, motor oil, and sweat.”

“Yet, here you are in my sanctuary!” Stark grinned. “What can I do for you?”

“Shower first,” Loki ordered.

“Only if you join me,” Stark winked. “I have trouble reaching my back sometimes.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “In your dreams.”

Waggling his eyebrows, Stark said, “I’ve already seen you in my dreams, remember?”

Loki groaned. “Oh, please, don’t remind me of such horrors.”

Looking amused, Stark leaned back in his chair. “Well, then, if I can’t have sex with you, what can I do for you?”

The thought was gone. Loki paused for a moment to think but he couldn’t recall. He shrugged at the mortal. “You’ve shaken me enough to cause me to forget my question. Well, I suppose it wasn’t important. If it is, it’ll come to me later and I’ll return to ask it then.”

“If you come to me and need help, I’ll only do so if I can get a kiss!” Stark called as Loki headed for the door.

Loki paused in the doorway. “Did I ask for a kiss when I healed your chest?”

Stark blinked. “That was different.”

“Right. Well, shame for you because I don’t anticipate ever having need of your help.”

“Bummer,” Stark sighed. “Maybe one day.”

Rolling his eyes in amusement, Loki bid the engineer farewell and headed upstairs to his quarters. What a peculiar yet interesting mortal. Why had he not seen this side to Stark before they were kidnapped?

8. Take my seat.

It was sadly that time of the month again. The time of the month where the Avengers had their mandatory “Team Building” movie nights. As if the awkwardness of having to listen to the others laugh and banter back and forth whilst knowing he would never have a place on their team wasn’t bad enough, it was perhaps even worse in the beginning of every night when the typical arguing began to see who got to sit in which sit next to whomever.

No one ever wanted to sit next to him.
Loki told himself that was a good thing, that he didn’t want to be contaminated by their germs or weak mortal genes. (It was getting harder and harder to believe that.)

On this particular movie night, it was well past nine in the evening when the majority of people had gathered. Well, he said majority but, in reality, everyone was present except Stark. Considering how everyone else was settled in a seat either on the floor, in a chair, or on the sofa, Loki tentatively sat down in an armchair in the corner of the room.

He couldn’t wait for the night to be over.

Halfway into the previews, which Barton insisted on watching every time, the door opened and Stark entered the room.

“Hey, about time you showed up!” Barton called upon seeing the engineer.

Banner looked up and gave the mortal what Loki considered to be a fond smile as he said, “Up all night?”

“And the night before that,” Stark admitted, looking tense for a moment as if he expected to be ridiculed. When there was only a laugh shared among the teammates, he laughed nervously and ran his hand through his hair, looking around for a place to sit. His eyes glanced at Loki- at his chair, surely- for only a moment before he continued looking, but Loki had seen enough.

Standing, he gestured to his previously-occupied chair. “Take my seat,” he offered quietly.

Stark raised an eyebrow at him. “Really?”

“Really, Stark, you look like Hela, the goddess of death, has held you in her clutches. Sit and rest before you collapse of exhaustion,” Loki snarked back.

“Goddess of Death, huh?” Stark mused as he walked in Loki’s direction. “Is she at least hot?”

“I said you look like she is preparing you for death, not that you look like her,” Loki responded dryly.

Slumping into the seat, Stark took a long moment to close his eyes and relax before he opened them and sat upright, looking at Loki expectedly. “What about you?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Where are you going to sit?”

“I can magick a chair to sit in if I so desire,” Loki said stiffly, a little surprised at the question.

Stark smirked. “Or, you could just sit with me.”

Rogers looked scandalized. “Tony…”

His panicked look was more than satisfying for Loki to see. The Captain was one of the people who trusted him the least and if he could annoy the mortal further… well, he’d use any opportunity he found to frustrate the good Captain. He looked at Stark for a nod of confirmation that the offer was genuine and when he saw that it was, he couldn’t help smirking as he sat down beside Stark on the chair. The armchair was too small for the two of them to sit comfortably and so Loki sat there squished for several moments before Stark groaned, murmured an annoyed, “oh, fuck it,” and then shifted his position so his body was curled around Loki’s, his arm wrapped around Loki’s waist.
Startled, Loki stared down at him, without words.

Stark looked up at him. “Might as well be comfortable,” he shrugged. “This okay?”

“So long as you don’t fall asleep on me, yes,” Loki sighed. “How did I get myself into this position?”

“Face it, you have a soft spot for me,” Stark smirked. “Ever since we were captured and tortured together, you’ve grown fond of me. I’m irresistible.”

“I am immune to mortal charms,” Loki said smugly.

Thor laughed from his seat on the sofa next to Banner. “Aye, it is true, Friend Tony. My brother is not easily wooed and is even less likely to be charmed by a mortal. ‘Tis a shame, for I believe you and him would get along well if he’d only give you the chance.”

Loki coughed in embarrassment and could feel, to his mortification, the way Stark turned to hide his face in his arm as he laughed.

“Thor, I love you, buddy,” Stark said, wiping his eyes. “That’s definitely the best thing I’ve heard all week.”

“That’s because you’ve been shut up in your workshop all week,” the Widow pointed out.

Stark shrugged at her. “Beats being out here with you lot.”

There was silence. Rogers laughed nervously. “That’s a joke, right?”

“No, I’m completely serious,” Stark deadpanned. When the Captain looked horrified, he laughed and said, “Learn to take a joke, Cap, geez. I have a billion-dollar company to keep going, pardon me if I can’t be mingling all the time. Got work things to take care of.”

“First time in my life I’ve seen you doing something halfway responsible,” Widow muttered.

Stark glared at her and Loki could feel the minute shift of his body as he tensed at her comment. “Natashalie, I will have you know that I was dying when you worked for me. If I didn’t meet your super assassin-slash-spy standards, I’m sorry, but that’s your problem, not mine.”

She smirked at him. “Learn to take a joke,” she teased.

Stark laughed in response but there was still pressure in his shoulders as he leaned back and settled against Loki’s side. The room quieted when Barton announced the movie was beginning and when it ended, Stark was the first person to leave the room.

Loki had a feeling the mortal was more bothered by her comment than he was letting on.

Interesting. What had caused his near-death, and why had the Widow “worked” for him? And what had she done to make Stark both dislike and distrust her?

That sounded like an interesting puzzle to solve. He’d have to keep his eye on the two Avengers and learn more about their shared past. He loved a good bit of drama. It always brought amusement to his days and made them a bit more enjoyable. And given how boring his life in the Avengers Tower was becoming, this was exactly the burst of energy he was missing in his life.
As was customary after a mandatory movie night, the next morning brought the entire team together for breakfast. Usually, there was one person at least missing from the table on a regular day, which is why there was always one day set aside for the entire team to be together for “team-building” purposes.

But as everyone took their seats that morning, Loki was not the only person who realized one person was missing.

Stark.

The Captain sighed. “Must be something good he’s working on.”

“Wait, are you saying that he can get out of coming?” Barton squawked. “That’s so not fair.”

Dr. Banner stood. “I can go check on him,” he offered.

“Grab him, would you? I’m sure he’s in the middle of something and probably forgot but—”

“Actually, Sir is not in the building,” JARVIS interrupted.

Everyone exchanged confused looks. “Where is he?” Widow asked.

“I’m not allowed to say.”

“Not allowed?”

Barton swore. “Wonder what illegal thing he's up to.”

“Actually, Agent Barton, Sir is on federal business at the moment. And that is all I am allowed to say on the subject.”

“Federal business?” The Captain frowned. “As in, he's on a mission? Why weren't we called out? Is there something going on we need to be aware of?”

“Sir is not an Avenger, Captain Rogers. That means he can be privately contacted and called to action, as he was in this case.”

“Not an Avenger?” Dr. Banner furrowed his brow. “JARVIS, Tony goes to our meetings. He operates Iron Man and has been on all our team missions. How can he not be an Avenger?”

The Widow cleared her throat. “He wasn’t deemed fit for the Avengers.”

“Wasn't deemed fit?” Dr. Banner repeated, looking stunned. “On what grounds?”

“He's not a team player and he was considered too reckless and headstrong to have a more meaningful position on the team.”

There was a pause as everyone processed that information and ate their breakfast. Loki, when he saw that their attention was not on him, magicked a plate of food away from the table to store for later.

“I'm actively recruited and am on the Avengers,” Banner said slowly. “The Other Guy has been made an Avenger but Tony hasn't? That's... worrying.”

The Widow shrugged. “He showed he was not capable of being on a team. Hence my report.”
“You went undercover in his company to assess him,” Loki realized.

She nodded at him slightly.

Dr. Banner glared at her. “After everything Tony did during Loki’s attack, you don’t think he’s good enough for this team? That’s— that’s bullshit!”

Everyone was startled by his swear, Loki noticed. “He acted in the moment,” the Widow said carefully. “There was not enough evidence to suggest that it wasn’t just a one-time thing.”

“A one-time thing?” Banner laughed bitterly as he stood up. “Loki attacked New York and he’s a full-fledged member of the Avengers! Why? Because you need his magic and intelligence. I’m on the team because I can destroy the toughest of opponents without breaking a sweat. And Tony, who died on the battlefield to save millions, isn’t worthy of the title of an Avenger?”

Sensing someone was watching him, Loki turned his head slowly and was just able to see Stark standing in the doorway of the common room, an unreadable expression on his face as he watched his team discuss him behind his back.

“Maybe he’ll be made an Avenger, one day.” The Widow inclined her head slightly. “But he has a long way to go before I’ll consider changing my report.”

With all of them deep in conversation, only Loki noticed how Stark slipped down the hall, headed for his workshop, no doubt.

Sighing, he murmured his boredom with the topic and headed down the hall in pursuit of the engineer. Jogging, he just managed to catch the elevator before the doors closed.

“What the hell do you want?” Stark snapped when he saw it was him who held the doors open.

Loki stepped into the elevator, shrugging a little. “Your AI told us you were called out on government business,” he ventured after a moment.

“If you’re here to make a comment about my status on the Avengers, don’t. I will seriously hurt you.”

“You are a mortal. You couldn’t hurt me if you tried.”

“Maybe without my armor, I couldn’t,” Stark agreed. He eyed him suspiciously. “Why did you follow me?”

“I was curious about the mission,” Loki replied innocently.

“All hush-hush government things. Good news is, no one died. Mission over, grab the champagne to celebrate, all that jazz.”

Loki looked at him. “You are an odd mortal.”

“Thanks. But if you really must know, the Air Force needed a computer guy to do some work for them. And that’s all I can say or I’d have to kill you.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Stark snorted. “I don’t feel like getting my ass kicked today. Maybe another day.”

“That is a wise decision,” Loki agreed as he thought about how to approach the subject of the breakfast his magic was holding for him. Could it be simple enough to just-
A body connected with his, sending him chest-first into the wall. Loki breathed in calmly despite the way his heart did beat a bit more quickly in his chest as he turned his head to look at the mortal who pinned him to the wall of the elevator.

“Rule number one about me: I hardly ever say what I intend to do unless the situation is truly serious.”

Loki grinned, whirling around and throwing Stark against the wall in his place. Wide-eyed, Stark stared at him. “Rule number one about me: I don't lose.” Loki leaned in closer to Stark, who seemed to be breathing heavily. “Especially not to mortals.”

Releasing his hold on Stark, he stepped back and glanced at the mortal. “Catch,” he said, magicking his plate from nowhere and tossing it at Stark.

The mortal yelped, clearly startled as he fumbled to catch the covered dish. Loki nodded at him, impressed. “I saved a bit of breakfast for you,” he clarified when Stark gazed at him, still wide-eyed. “Do try to eat it all while you work. I went through so much trouble to prepare the plate for you.”

Stark stared at him.

“I believe what you mean to say is: thank you,” Loki piped up when it became clear that Stark wasn't.

“Uh, yeah, thanks,” Stark murmured, still looking bewildered as he stepped off the elevator. Loki watched him disappear into the workshop before he made his way back to the communal floor.

Look at that. He had done a good deed today. Frigga was most likely throwing a party if she was watching. That was two good deeds for him in under two weeks. He was truly becoming a hero, wasn’t he?

Loki burst into laughter. He'd betray the Avengers long before he could be contaminated by the goodness oozing from the team of heroes.

10. I'm sorry for your loss.

Just later that day, they were called to battle. Although clearly weary from his all-night work for the Air Force, Stark was the first person besides himself to arrive on the scene.

“Whadda we got?” Stark asked as he dropped to the ground beside Loki, who was momentarily taking a breather since his sector was now clear of doombots.

“Danger to civilians with the festival going on,” Loki said grimly, sensing and whirling around to blast three approaching bots. “That is our priority.”

“Fucking fantastic. I’ll pass that onto Cap when they arrive. You good here?”

“Fine,” Loki said shortly as he watched the Iron Man armor rise into the sky. By the time the others had arrived, the battle was mostly over. But then there was a break in their communicator system and the fury and fear in Agent Hill’s voice was enough to silence the Avengers.

“Mayday, mayday, I have an agent down. Repeat, agent down! Medical assistance needed immediately!”
“Hill! Give me your position!” Stark demanded, flying overhead the battlefield, repulsors lighting up the final bots still fighting.

“South Street and Pine. It's bad.”

The comms were silent for a minute and Loki had just teleported to the cross street to assist when he heard Stark’s anguished cry of: “No!”

Loki darted into the store through the broken display window and found Stark out of armor as he knelt on the ground beside the broken body of a man of what appeared to be his early twenties.

“Stark…” Loki said quietly, approaching the Avenger. “There is nothing you could have done.”

Starting at the sound of his voice, Stark whirled around and looked up at him. “He was only twenty-two,” he hissed. “Twenty-two, Loki.”

Loki crouched next to the mortal and gently placed his hand on his shoulder. “We will avenge him,” he promised.

“No. I will.” Stark’s voice was deadly calm as he shrugged out of Loki’s touch, stood up, and stepped into his armor. “Jake was my employee for five years. My mentee for even longer. I was supposed to look out for him.”

“Battle is over,” Rogers announced through the comms.

The Iron Man armor lit with power. Loki stepped forward, hands extended.

“Get out of my way, Loki,” Stark threatened.

“The battle is over. There is nothing you could have done; nor is there anything you can do that will bring him back. I'm sorry.”

“Me too.” The armor slumped for a moment. “I have to go inform a couple that their only child will never be returning home to them again.”

Before Stark could fly away, Loki caught the armored hand in his own. “I'm sorry for your loss,” he said quietly.

Stark left without a response but Loki was sure he heard a whispered thank you before the engineer left.

The battle killed ten people: nine civilians and one Agent of SHIELD.
11. You can have half.

Three days passed before Loki saw Stark again. During that time he spent his days either with his brother, whose presence was annoyingly constant, or in his quarters where he could practice his spells.

He avoided the kitchen as he didn't feel like a meal with the others, but on that third day after the battle, he was headed there so he could restock his tea supply when he bumped, quite literally, into Stark.

It was easy for him to catch Stark in his arms before he could hit the ground and once he did, he was not so inclined to let the mortal go. Eyeing Stark carefully he said, “You look ready to collapse.”

Stark pulled out of his grip, shrugging. “I'm fine.”

“You're clearly not.”

“So? What the hell do you or anyone else care? Leave me the hell alone.”

“I care when a teammate doesn't care for himself as that could mean my demise in battle!”

“Of course that's why you care,” Stark snorted. “Look, I don't know what your game is here with all this 'get some rest, eat more’ bull, but I'm tired of you acting like you care or want to be friends. We both know that's some kind of trap so leave it already, would you?”

Loki would not show him his feelings. “You really think I would care about you?” He laughed. “All my interactions with you have been to keep sane the one person on the team who isn't wanted.”

“You know, that does confuse me, why they allowed a murderer to be on the team and not me.”

“Perhaps because you have more blood on your hands than me,” Loki snapped, his patience worn thin. “Since it will please you, I will contact you no further but don't look to me for help the next time you are injured or your not-teammates decide it's your fault for whatever action and hate on you.”

“I've been fighting all that my entire life. You really think I'm not used to it by now? Why do you think I don't need help when someone older, stronger, and better than me decides to knock me down? I'm used to it.” And with that, Stark whirled around and stormed down the corridor.

Loki stared after him, surprised. Did the man just imply that his father had abused him?

The workshop went on lockdown for two weeks following their fight. Loki quickly noticed that from the team, only Banner was concerned for the engineer. Maybe Barton as well, but Loki wasn't sure on how the birdman felt about Stark. And he was only there for half the time anyway, so it was hard to judge whether or not the bird agent cared for Stark. The Widow didn't seem bothered by the lockdown, his brother was with his woman, and the Captain simply seemed annoyed.

Loki, having decided on the fourteenth day that he was tired of their bickering, spent an hour in the
kitchen. He prepared one serving dish of food from Asgard and headed to the workshop.

JARVIS allowed him as far as two steps off the elevator before he insisted Loki move no further. Sighing, Loki set the food on the floor and magicked a note that he then left with the food. He gave JARVIS instructions to tell Stark of his offer, and then he went back to his quarters.

*Enough of this, Stark. You cannot hide from me or the others forever. You can have half of this food if you allow me to come in and share the other half. I believe we could bond over stories of our hatred for our fathers. It is better that than fighting again, don’t you think?*

~ Loki

12. *Take my jacket, it's cold outside.*

In the end, Stark didn't accept his offer. As JARVIS explained to Loki, “Sir is not feeling well at the moment. He sends his regrets about being unable to accept your offer.”

“Are those his words or yours?” Loki snapped in return as he gathered his dish of food that had grown cold. He left the note on the floor in hopes it would spur Stark into some sense and stormed upstairs with his dish. He binned the food and threw the dish in the trash, watching with pleasure as it shattered.

Considering how JARVIS didn't bother to respond, he knew Stark was well and had simply not wanted his contact. Very well, then, he wouldn't have it.

He'd see how long Stark would last in a battlefield without him there to save him from injury or heal his wounds.

Later that day, they were called to action in their own home. As Loki heard from JARVIS later, someone on the Avengers had made a comment about Stark in front of the doctor, which must have been his last straw because the Other Guy came out.

JARVIS sounded the alarm and everyone came running to the common room where the Hulk was standing, clearly infuriated yet a bit frightful as he stared at the Avengers all armed and prepared to fight him.

Loki could see how tense the Widow was and knew he had to act. Although very much not a fan of the beast, he found himself stepping forward.

The Hulk gazed at him. “Puny God,” he muttered bitterly, sounding annoyed.

Loki grit his teeth at the memory. “What do you want?”

“Puny God scare Tiny Friend away.”

Tiny friend. *Stark?*

“Sir is en route from the Bronx,” JARVIS announced. “Five minutes is his ETA.”

The Hulk snorted in annoyance. “Hulk want Tiny Metal Man.”

Yeah, definitely Stark he was referring to.

“Wonder what he's doing in the Bronx,” Barton muttered.
Hulk shifted at his tone, looking tense.

The Widow didn't seem bothered but she did tighten her grip on the trigger of her gun, Loki noticed.

The beast must have noticed too because he tried to storm out of the room. A split second before Widow fired, Loki stepped between her and Hulk and dissolved the bullet before it could reach him.

Everyone present in the room, even the Hulk, stared at him. “Violence will get you nowhere in life,” Loki snapped at her, dissolving the rest of her bullets before she could fire them.

The Hulk seized the opportunity and fled. The Widow stepped forward, growling, “You let him escape.”

“He is not a threat. The beast came out in anger because someone insulted his friend. All he wants now is to be with his friend, whom he now thinks needs his protection from you lot, but you won't let him be!”

“Since when did you have a conscience?”

Loki gazed at her, seething. “We may be on the same team now but do not think for a second that I won't suffer my father's punishment if it means I can hurt you. You are a bullet in the sky and I will put an end to your hatred.”

“I am not your enemy.”

“You judge others for a living and see it fit to hurt them in the wake. Believe me, you are my enemy. And if you cross me, know that I am not under the Mad Titan’s control this time, making me stronger than I was a year ago.”

“Sir has arrived,” JARVIS said, breaking the tense silence.

“Yes, I have. Thank God I was on my way back when JARVIS alerted me to what happened,” Stark said, shivering just a little, Loki noticed. “Where's Brucie’s physically stronger better half?”

“Sitting outside your workshop,” JARVIS informed him. “He is upset, so be fairly cautious when you approach.”

“We both know I’ll be fine,” Stark brushed aside calmly. Waving at the others, he strolled through the common room appearing completely at ease as he headed for his workshop.

Once he was out of sight, Rogers gestured from them to follow him. They stood on the top of the stairs, silent, as they watched Stark approach the Hulk, who was sitting on the floor leaning against the door to the workshop with a frown on his face.

“Hey, Big Guy,” Stark greeted, now standing in front of the Hulk. “I've been told you're looking for me.”

The Hulk eyed him. “Tiny Friend cold?”

“A little,” Stark laughed. “Morning rush hour is a bitch and I wasn’t that far away when J called, so I ran home to you. Didn't bring a coat, which was my fault. February in New York is frickin’ cold.”

“I keep warm?” Hulk offered.

Stark gazed at him steadily. “Are you offering to give me a cuddle?” he laughed.
At the way the Hulk shrunk away from him, Loki could tell Stark's teasing had hurt his feelings. Stark knew it too, apparently, because he immediately stepped forward and soothed, “Hey, I wasn't trying to be mean. I was just surprised by your offer.”

“Hulk not liked,” Hulk said miserably.

“That's not true. I like you.”

“You're just saying that,” Hulk pouted.

“You're the only friend I have here, Bruce. The only person who'll stand up for me.” Stark’s voice was quiet but Loki heard him perfectly. “And no, I’m not just saying that.”

“I warm you?” Hulk offered hopefully.

Stark smiled at him, taking the Hulk’s extended hand. “Yeah, bud, go ahead.”

Loki made them all leave when the Hulk pulled Stark into his arms. That was a moment they had no right to intrude on.

The next day, Stark resurfaced from his workshop and reached out to Loki.

I'm ready to talk if you are.

13. Sorry I'm late.

“Sorry I'm late,” Stark sighed as he dropped to the ground and leaned against the wall.

Loki looked at him in amusement from his seat. “Should I join you on the floor?” he asked.

“I've been sitting in a chair for the past five hours. I'm done with chairs for the next ten years of my life,” Stark groaned, rubbing his eyes.

“Meeting?” Loki presumed.

“Yeah. Way too many snobs in one room at the same time, it was horrible.”

Loki laughed. “That is how I feel when I am with the rest of the team.”

“Yeah, they're a bunch of morons,” Stark muttered. Looking up at Loki he asked, “How does Barton treat you?”

“He tried to attack me once.” Loki shrugged. “Now he just keeps his distance and scowls at me whenever we are in the same room.”

“You’d think he'd understand you better than everyone else considering you were both controlled.”

“He doesn’t see it that way,” Loki said bitterly.

“Well, he's an idiot.” Stark sighed, cushioning his head on his arms as he stretched out on the floor.

Loki huffed at him. “You are a peculiar mortal.”

“Nah, trust me. I'm quite normal. Us humans are an odd species.”
“There's always time to change.”

Stark laughed. “Don't you like how weird we are?”

“Sometimes,” Loki admitted. He looked at Stark, accessing. “You have no intention to speak about our past, do you?”

“No, and I figured you wouldn’t want to either. There are other ways to bond or whatnot without bringing up shitty upbringings.”

Loki nodded at him. “I'm impressed with your deducing abilities, Stark. Well done.”

“Does anyone ever want to talk about their trauma?”

“Not really,” Loki admitted.

“There you are.” Stark sat up. “Besides, there's something I want to show you.”

Curious, Loki remained silent as Stark bounded to his feet and jogged over to his worktable. Loki followed him and when he saw the device, he frowned. “What is it?”

“It's a device that will help my armor fly to me from wherever it is.”

“A type of teleportation device?”

“Yes and no. I have a device that will transmit a signal so my armor- which is coded to me- can find me no matter where I am. But so far, my armor can't even locate me from ten feet away. Which is why I need your help.”

“I know very little about technology, Stark,” Loki frowned. “I am a mage, not an engineer like yourself.”

“Which is why you can help me.”

“How so?”

“Thor says you are one of the best mages in all the Realms. You probably know a locator spell that could help my armor find my signal, right?”

Loki frowned, thinking. “I think so, yes.” He paused. “Why do you want such an ability with your armor?”

“Because I'm being targeted. And it's only a matter of time before I am kidnapped, and I'd rather have my armor able to find me than be helpless again.”

“How serious is this threat?”

“Pretty bad,” Stark grimaced. “JARVIS and I did some digging and we're coming up empty which is near impossible.”

“Why have you not shared such a detail with someone before now?” Loki hissed. “You imbecile.”

Stark shrugged. “What do you think I've been doing the last two weeks? SHIELD suspects something is up but they can't hack the server that contacted me because I can't.”

“Was there an explicit threat?”
“There was a hit ordered against me. It's supposed to go down in a week, at most.”

“Under seven days time?” Loki gaped at him. “And your team doesn't know this why?”

“Because there's nothing they can do? I've been trying to prepare myself which is why I need your help. I'm… well, I could figure it out on my own but I don't know how much time I have.”

“So, this contact between us is because you need my skills. Not because you want to make peace,” Loki said dully. “Lead with that next time.”

“Did I say that? No, I said I didn't want to talk about our shitty dads. I said nothing about talking about our common interests.”

“Which are what?”

“I'm fascinated by magic which you can do better than anyone, apparently. You're interested in my technology which I can do better than anyone else. I think between those two alone we have plenty to talk about, don't you think?”

Loki had to admit, he had a point. “Very well. Transmit your signal so I can trace it.”

“J, switch ‘em on.”

Loki made a small circle with his magic, frowning when the signal traced directly back to the mortal standing in front of him.

“I'm the signal,” Stark explained, apparently having seen the confused look Loki sent his way. “I have electro codes in my arm.” He held out his arm to prove his point and Loki’s magic wandered over to his arm, scanning the signal for its codes.

“Sir, you have an incoming call from a SHIELD server,” JARVIS announced, interrupted the silence. “Shall I answer?”

“Only so Fury doesn't chew me out later,” Stark sighed. “Do you mind?” he asked Loki.

Loki shrugged. “I'll grab a journal from my room. There are some notes in there I can use.”

“Sure.” Stark plopped down on his stool. “Alright, J, patch them in.”

Loki jogged up the stairs to his room, a bit excited. Stark said he was interested in his magic. Was it possible Stark planned to ask him about his magic? No one had ever done that before.

For the first time, Loki was looking forward to spending time with someone on the Avengers.

14. Can I have this dance?

“It works!” Stark grinned from across the room, all his armor on him except for his faceplate.

Loki nodded proudly. “At least from this distance, yes. May have taken a day but at least it is working in small proportions now.”

“This is amazing!” Stark laughed gleefully as Loki waved his hand and allowed the armor to peel away. “I can't believe it works!”
“A simple spell,” Loki shrugged when Stark turned to look at him, his eyes bright. “There's no need to thank me.”

“Nope, not happening. It works because of you so whether or not you like it, I'm going to thank you. I was really starting to think it wouldn't work.”

“You did most of the work,” Loki pointed out.

Stark shrugged as he absently tapped the reactor in his chest. “Yeah, but it didn’t work until you helped. So, thanks, really.”

“You're welcome,” Loki answered softly. They shared a look, Stark’s eyes sparkling with warmth as they silently conveyed their enjoyment of working together.

“Sirs, I hate to interrupt but Captain Rogers told me to remind you both of the gala tonight. I recommend getting ready,” JARVIS announced.

Stark groaned. “I forgot about that. That’s tonight?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“Ugh, damn it. Well, I guess we better get ready for that.”

Loki rolled his eyes at the reminder. “Must we dress formally?”

“I mean, you can dress in sweats if you want but just be warned that Cap’ll give you his Disappointed Look. And yes, it is a capitalized Disappointed Look.”

Sighing, Loki headed for the door. “I'll see you there,” he moaned (but smiled when Stark matched his annoyance with a sarcastic “can't wait.”)

Two hours later, the limousine pulled to a stop in front of the dancing hall. Steeling himself for the event, Loki plastered a bored expression on his face as he stepped out of the car and entered the building.

“Reindeer Games, looking sharp!” Stark greeted as he entered with the others in tow behind him.

“You were supposed to come with us,” Rogers said in slight annoyance.

“I don't do group arrivals,” Stark shrugged unapologetically. “Sue me. Rudolph, care for a drink?”

Loki eyed him appreciatively, enjoying the way Stark’s suit hugged his slim figure and broadcasted his small yet fit body. “You clean up well for a mortal,” he said in reply, smirking when he heard the Avengers behind them take a sharp inhale of breath. Oh, they didn't like that they were flirting, did they?

He extended his arm and grinned when Stark took it and allowed himself to be escorted to the bar. Loki couldn't resist glancing back at the Avengers over his shoulder and smirking at their mixed looks of concern and annoyance. Take that.

A couple of hours passed and Loki was bored with the event. He had conversed with an exceeding amount of mortals of various political positions and he had long grown tired of their suspicious gazes and sharp words.

Yes, he was serving his sentence by protecting the Americans as one of their 'heroes’. Yes, he hated them as much as they despised him. And on and on until Loki had become tempted to strangle the
next mortal to question his motives on his ‘decision’ to join the Avengers as if he had asked to be on
the same team he had fought a war against.

(How could someone, even a mortal, be that stupid?)

As Loki glanced around the gala, he couldn't help but notice the ease with which Stark mingled with
the crowd; he danced occasionally, conversed with a look of concentrated interest pasted on his face
that made Loki envious of his abilities to remain in character, and kept an easy, ‘true’ smile on his
face whenever someone approached him.

Loki was just slightly jealous of his ease at the situation but whenever he looked around to see how
uncomfortable the other Avengers looked, he felt better about himself immediately.

(There was no better sight than that of Rogers struggling to keep up with modern day politics or the
Widow trying to blend into the background to avoid being asked questions about her role on the
Avengers. In comparison to them or even Banner who seemed to loathe the gala even more than
Loki did, Loki was having the time of his life.)

The gala was just coming to a close when Loki noticed a woman capture Stark in conversation.
What interested Loki, however, was her tall stature and Stark’s too, which was one of stiff defense.
As he watched, the woman, sharp in all her angles and fake smiles, laid a hand on Stark’s arm and
trailed her hand up his arm to his shoulder. By the way Stark looked down at his arm sharply,
tracking her movement with a calculating gaze, Loki knew instantly that something wasn’t right.

He found himself at Stark’s side in a matter of a few long strides and gave the woman a bright, false
smile as he extended his hand at Stark. “Care to dance?” he asked politely.

The woman raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow at Stark, as if daring him to say yes.

Stark’s eyes never left hers as he said yes to Loki’s offer, excused himself with a tight-lipped smile,
and took Loki’s hand. Loki guided him onto the dancing floor and wrapped his arm around Stark’s
waist, pulling the mortal closer. “What did she say to you?” he asked quietly.

“She’s working for the people that want to kidnap me,” Stark responded tightly.

“Did she say that?”

“Not in so many words, but her drugs did. She told me it was a warning, that the worst was yet to
come.”

Loki looked down at Stark’s arm and the single line down his jacket sleeve that exposed the long cut
that was quickly turning pink. “Her ring,” he realized grimly, thinking back to her hand and the big
ring she wore.

“Her ring,” Stark agreed. “It held a needle that she used to drug me.” Loki looked at him sharply, not
blind to the way Stark’s words were becoming slurred just slightly.

“If we leave, we will cause a scene,” Loki muttered tensely. He looked up and saw Thor was
watching them. He gestured towards the quickly exiting woman and was relieved when he saw that
Thor understood his gesture and followed her.

“Guess we’re staying. Last thing I need…” Stark wavered, blinking slowly. “Is the press saying I
was drunk and losing my mind.”

“I’ll guide us towards the door. We can make it look like we are lovers leaving for a night together,”
Loki offered quietly. “That would avoid suspicion from the press although they would write a scandal piece about us.”

“Yeah, well…” Stark stumbled, apparently losing his footage. Loki caught his arm and pulled him closer.

“Okay,” he murmured, “Plan B. You're getting weaker. Tell me, do you trust me?”

Stark struggled to lift his head and look at him. “What?”

Loki looked at him closely. Not liking what he saw, he knew he had to act fast. “Forgive me,” he murmured, “But I need to do this.” He placed his hand on Stark’s wounded arm and muttered a few words under his breath, feeling his magic hum from his hand into Stark’s arm and take over the battle against drugs.

Barely uttering a quiet moan, Stark leaned against him a little more, appearing to struggle to stand, let alone dance.

“We need...to get...out of here,” Stark whispered breathlessly, sounding weak and close to losing consciousness.

Loki used one hand to guide Stark’s head to his shoulder. “You're going to be okay,” he promised, returning his arm around Stark’s waist so he could support most of the mortal’s weight. “My magic is fighting the drugs; it will take twenty minutes before you have your full strength but you are no longer in any danger.”

Stark slumped against him more fully, almost as if he was trusting Loki to support his weight. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Nodding, Loki rested his cheek on Stark’s head to secure their cover. The people still in the hall either eyed them with disgust or awe, but he didn’t care. Stark no longer was dying and their cover to hide Stark’s attack was strong. When they returned to the Tower in a few minutes, they would figure out what to do and how to figure out who was after Stark.

But for now, they were fine where they were.

15. I made your favorite.

In the limo, Dr. Banner was the first one (besides Thor, who Loki had told) to realize something was wrong. It was apparent in the way Stark was still slumped against Loki, silent, but from the way the others eyed Stark with disgust, it was obvious they thought their teammate was drunk, something that greatly appalled Loki.

They really thought so lowly of their teammate? The man was a former drinker as far as Loki could tell; he hadn't seen Stark drink once since his invasion. From what he understood, Stark appeared to be trying to stay off alcohol. Even Loki could see that and he was the newest to the team. How could Stark’s teammates not realize that for themselves?

Pulling a stethoscope from the inner lining of his suit jacket, Banner listened to Stark’s heart and lungs before he declared Stark was coming out of the drug-induced haze.

And as everyone listened, Loki told them what he knew. There were mixed reactions from the Avengers but one was constant: Stark needed their protection.
Inside the Tower, Loki carried an unconscious Stark to his penthouse where he laid the Avenger on his bed. Then he went to the common room to be briefed on their next course of action as Banner went to start the first shift of watch over Stark.

In the morning, Stark was just stirring when Loki appeared for his shift holding a tray of food. “I made your favorite,” he said, pleased with himself for having noticed such a detail about the mortal. “Now, eat so you'll have your strength when the Captain yells at you for not informing everyone your life was and is in danger.”

Stark sighed as he sat up and rubbed his eyes. “They didn't need to know.”

“I think Dr. Banner disagrees.”

“Okay, maybe that was a dick move,” Stark agreed. “But we had it handled just fine.”

“You don't trust your teammates,” Loki realized as he placed the tray of food at Stark’s side.

“Um, no, not really,” Stark admitted. “Do you trust them?”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

“Well, there you go.”

“You have been on this team much longer than I have, though.”

“Actually, you have. I'm not actually a member of this team,” Stark pointed out. “Consultant, remember?”

“You have the doctor’s protection.”

“Well, he'd be the only one.” Stark paused, looking at him. “Although, technically you're also protective of me. You stepped in when you saw that woman with me. And then you saved my life so…”

“Consider that my thank you for saving me from being drugged again when we were held together. Now I am not indebted to you.”

Stark shrugged. “Call it what you want. The facts speak for themselves.” Having already finished eating, he climbed out of bed and headed for the door.

“Going to apologize to the Captain?”

Stark snorted. “Hell no. I'm going to the shop. I remember what that woman looks like so I'm going to make a sketch and track her back to her employer.”

“Clever.”

“Genius, remember?” Stark grinned, patting Loki’s shoulder as he walked by. “The muffins were great. You're officially my favorite now, by the way.”

“That's terrifying.”

Stark laughed. “I think you meant to say ‘amazing, thanks’ but we'll work on that bit later. Catch you soon, my red-nosed friend!”

“What does that mean?” Loki growled, hating that he didn't understand the reference.
Stark’s laughter was his only response.

Chapter End Notes

To clarify: Tony was drugged with a sedative. As you'll find out in the next chapter, his future-captors were not trying to kill him when they drugged him, they just wanted to scare him. They knew Loki was watching him and would help him before the sedative could take hold. The reasons why will be explained briefly in the next chapter but ultimately many chapters later.
16. It's okay. I couldn't sleep anyway.

The entire next day passed without an attack and so did the one after that and the one after that, but the news stayed the same. They didn't know who was gunning for Stark.

And the mortal himself was stubborn, refusing to allow himself to remain sealed off in the protection of the tower.

He went on meetings, sometimes not checking in for hours at a time. He seemed completely at ease which baffled Loki. The man had been drugged and could have died, yet he wasn't concerned? It was odd.

Apparently the others thought his behavior to be odd too because they began shifts during the day to guard Stark. He griped and groaned at being treated like a child but they were relentless. One of their own was in danger and they would not leave him defenseless.

On the third night following the attack on Stark at the gala, Loki found himself awake and sitting on the roof of the Tower as he overlooked the city.

He was lost in his thoughts when a quiet cough came from behind him, followed by footsteps until a person sat down beside him and handed him a mug of some steaming beverage.

Loki looked at Stark curiously. “You made me cocoa?”

Stark shrugged. “I saw you were up. Everything okay, Roody?”

“Roody?”

“Short for Rudolph,” Stark clarified.

“The red-nosed reindeer,” Loki realized.

Stark laughed. “You watched it?”

“No,” Loki admitted. “I looked it up though.”

“’S a good nickname. Suits you,” Stark said proudly before he sobered. “You didn't answer my question.”

“Just thinking,” Loki sighed. “I am fine, Stark.”

Stark nodded silently, looking at the city stretched out for miles around them. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It no longer looks like it did in the aftermath of my attack.”

“It’s a wonderful city,” Stark said quietly. “Definitely not perfect and filled with some assholes, but its heart is in the right place.”

Loki sipped his cocoa. It was warm, not too hot, and even had some marshmallows. He allowed
himself a small smile as he stood and brushed the dust from his garments. “The cocoa was unexpected...but nice. Thank you.”

Stark shrugged. “No big deal. Sleep well.”

And as Loki went inside and to his room, he thought he might just do that for the first time in many nights.

17. Watch your step.

The next day Loki and Stark were having lunch together when JARVIS said tensely, “Sir, a helicopter just flew overhead and something was just thrown onto the roof. I have tried to scan the contents of the parcel but-”

Stark was running for the door before the Ai finished his first sentence. “Evacuate the lower floors,” Stark ordered to Loki. “J, stay with me for scans. If it's a bomb, I can disarm it. Most likely it's on a timer so I need to-”

“I can do it,” Loki interrupted. “I can hold the blast with my magic.”

“No, no, this could be a big bomb. You could probably still contain it but there are innocent lives at risk. Trust me, we need to-”

“Sir, incoming threat from a blocked server,” JARVIS said tensely. “The message says ‘Watch your step.’ I’m alerting the Avengers as we speak and they should be here within minutes from SHIELD facilities. But I must advise you to use caution when you get in the roof as the package could be a trap.”

Watch your step…

“A pressure-sensor device?” Loki speculated.

“It's possible,” Stark shrugged. “Whatever it is, we don't have much time. You need to evacuate the building.”

Loki grabbed Stark’s arm to stop him before he could run to the roof. “Do not get kidnapped,” he snapped.

Stark stared at him for a moment before he pulled away and ran for the stairs. With the alarm to evacuate already going off throughout the Tower, Loki went through the lower levels to ensure everyone was out.

When he was done, he teleported to the roof where he found Stark hard at work over the device, his eyes filled with pain as he worked. Loki used his magic to hover over him, unwilling to step foot on the roof as he demanded, “What happened?”

“It’s a time bomb and somewhere there’s a second device that rigged the entire roof with electricity,” Stark forced out. “A low current but hellish after the first two minutes. My entire body is tingling and I- I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up. You might-”

“Let me do this,” Loki ordered, dropping to his knees on the ground. He felt a slight sting at the electricity but it wasn't painful for him since he was a God, not a weak mortal. With his left hand, he suspended Stark in the air and demanded Stark tell him what to do.
A minute later, Loki stood up. “The bomb is disabled. Let's get you inside before something else happens. Norns knows it's coming. We'll access the damage once you're back in a secure location.” He lowered Stark to the ground, moving to support him, only to have Stark move away from him.

“I'm fine,” Stark snapped. But when he began walking away towards the door, Loki couldn’t help but notice how he was limping ever so slightly.

Loki followed him with a sigh. They needed to figure out who was after Stark, now.

18. Here, drink this. You'll feel better.

After the latest attack, Rogers was near-impossible to separate from Stark. It seemed to annoy Stark but he never yelled at the Captain, something Loki assumed was due to the attack and how it had left Stark feeling vulnerable, causing him to allow the Captain to remain at his side.

Taking note of the time the two men had left to train together, Loki made his way to the training room where he found Stark was hard at battle against Rogers.

A break was called upon his entry and Loki went over to the ring, tossing Stark a water bottle as he did so. “You have, at most, two days before your attackers will strike. Do we still have no information on who they are or what they want with you?”

Stark sighed. “Most likely, they want me to build weapons. Or they want information about the team, but that's unlikely considering I'm not really on the team to begin with.” He shrugged. “I guess we'll know when they take me.”

“They won't take you,” Rogers interjected firmly.

Stark just looked at him. “Cap, their security is so tight, J and I haven’t been able to hack them in two weeks, almost three at this point. You really think you'll be able to protect me from someone like that? We couldn't even track the woman who drugged me back to her employer. No, they're going to get me one way or another and it's okay. I'm ready for it. Just know that when it goes down, I'm not going to make anything for them or tell them anything.”

“I know that, Tony.” Rogers sighed. “Goodness, I hate this. I hate knowing something is going to happen to you but being helpless to stop it!”

“Hate is a strong word,” Stark teased.

Rogers rolled his eyes at him, but there was a hint of fondness on the action, Loki saw. “Tony~”

“I know you're worried and it's touching, really. But these guys are off the grid. They're better than me- look at that, I admitted that someone is better than me- and they are going to capture me one way or another. This is beyond military-level intelligence meaning someone big is after me. They'll slip up at some point, they always do, and when that happens, I'll fight like hell to get out or to send a signal and then you can save my ass if I haven't already saved it myself. Okay?”

Rogers sighed. “No. But understood.”

“Good. Now, let's get back to it.”

Loki left them in silence, his mind racing with worried thoughts. Someone big, Stark had called them. What if his attackers weren't from Midgard? Could they be one of his enemies going after the
only person on his team he didn’t hate passionately?

But there was no reason for outside interference… Was there?

No, no, that was ridiculous. Stark was right. The only thing they could do was sit back and let it happen.

That night, the entire team remained awake and alert. They all knew the attack was going to occur at any moment and they wanted to be prepared. And they were- for the enemy.

But no one had entertained the notion that Stark would mute JARVIS and exit his workshop through the back way when they were all either standing guard outside the shop or talking about how to better secure the perimeter of the Tower.

It wasn't until the Widow entered the workshop to ask Stark a question that they realized what the engineer had done. At her angered outcry they had burst into the workshop, guns blazing as Stark would have called it with a smirk, only to find her standing alone in the empty workshop as she pointed at a piece of paper left behind on Stark’s stool.

Sorry, guys. I know you're all probably freaking out right now (besides Natashalie because you definitely don't freak out) because I'm not there but hey, good news! I'm not kidnapped, yet. Figured hiding would do us no good when the Tower was attacked, and well, I didn't want innocent people to die trying to protect me when we all know I'm going to be taken one way or another… so, I left! (Sorry not sorry.) Contact should be established within the hour, I'd guess, with the news that they've taken me. Try not to annoy each other too much in my absence, that's my job. Back soon, Tony.

P.S. Bruce, unmute JARVIS, would you? Give him my regrets but I did what I had to do.

The Captain looked ready to slam his fist through the wall once the Widow was done reading the note out loud. He didn’t say anything, though, just took a seat on the sofa and waited with his arms folded over his chest, his shield placed in his lap.

At Banner’s quiet demand, JARVIS came online with immediate apologies for not being able to alert them that his Sir had left the premises. He was easily forgiven by everyone since he really had no option besides obeying his creator, which everyone understood, but Loki remained annoyed and didn’t say a word.

Stark was an idiot. He was going to get killed- only gravely injured if he was lucky- and as he was most likely being tortured, they were all going to be sitting back, helpless, waiting for news of a lead that they could chase down.

“It’s really not any of Tony’s enemies?” Banner sighed after an unknown amount of time. “He’s one of the most powerful men on Earth, he has hundreds of enemies and we couldn’t connect one of them to the threats?”

“The only noteworthy ‘threat’ is Justin Hammer, who is still a decade or two from being able to make any powerful weaponry,” the Widow said from her seat at a desk as she and JARVIS scanned through various documents together. “We haven’t been able to come up with anything yet.”

The group fell back into tense silence, each one doing their part to try to locate Stark or his likely-captors.

Then the ransom came, faxed to JARVIS from a nearby hospital's fax machine.

As the hours passed, the realization only grew stronger that their teammate was running out of time.
With each passing hour, the likelihood of finding Stark alive was diminishing. They were not normal kidnappers; they were criminals with an agenda: kill Tony Stark. (That much had been clear to Loki from the purposeless ransom that had arrived that really acted more as a threat against Stark’s life.)

Loki scowled. “So we sit here and do nothing as Stark suffers?”

“Do you have a course of action?” Thor asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“I may,” JARVIS spoke up before Loki could. “Sir was looking at something, off the grid, I believe because I have just now noticed the server open- meaning he was trying to keep this hidden from me…” He trailed off. “I believe I have a clear image of who Sir’s kidnappers are. Moreover, I believe Sir realized several days ago who was after him but opted not to say anything because, I believe, he thought that saying something would not aid him in any way.”

“Show me what he was looking at,” Barton demanded as the others crowded around him. Loki watched with interest as a hologram appeared, blinking when he saw the names associated with the photos that popped up.

“AIM…” Barton looked pale. “Shit, Nat, these are the three agents that we found to be spies for AIM, and if they’re after Tony…”

“AIM?” Rogers asked, frowning.

“We'll explain later. Right now, all that matters is finding him,” the Widow said firmly. “These agents, besides myself and Barton, were three of the most highly trained assassins that SHIELD had. They were found to be spies but escaped before we could capture them. If they’re the ones who have Stark and he doesn’t do what they want…” The end of her words was obvious. Torture and a slow death will result.

“They won’t go to a safehouse,” Rogers frowned. “And they won’t go anywhere associated with SHIELD or, what was it, AIM…”

“What about one of Stark’s safehouses?” Loki offered. When the others looked at them, he gazed at them right back, unblinking in their scrutiny. “A man of his stature on this planet with so many enemies? I find it hard to believe that he doesn’t have hidden locations where he goes to hide. Houses that he would only know of, making it impossible to track them if we didn't think about it directly.”

“JARVIS?” Banner called.

There was silence for many minutes before JARVIS said, “If these agents are as skilled as they appear to be, it is likely they would have taken Sir to one of three locations. Each location was only recently added to Sir’s ‘safehouse’ list which is why I am not installed in those establishments yet. But, with their capabilities, I believe they could have discovered the location of any of these three homes.”

“We'll go in teams of two,” the Captain decided. “Natasha, Clint, you’re together. Thor, with me. And Bruce and Loki—”

“You need to determine ways to get to your destinations,” JARVIS input. “These agents have the capabilities to avoid my detection meaning they most likely have some ability to hack my servers. And as they are agents, using a quinjet would be ill-advised.”

“I can help with that,” Loki said. When everyone stared at him, he shrugged. “I have a persona I invented during my time on this planet before I attacked. I can purchase three small carriers.”
“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but great. Do that.” Rogers turned to Romanov and Barton. “I’m sure you know someone outside of SHIELD that we can use; we need a doctor on each carrier, someone who can be trusted to take care of Tony and keep it quiet that he was hurt.”

“I know someone,” Barton offered, already turning and heading for the stairs.

“We only need a medical staff of two,” Loki said. “I have healing powers that will more than suffice to heal Stark’s wounds, no matter what they are.”

Rogers looked pained. “I’m not so sure that is such a good idea, Loki…”

“Because you do not trust me?” Loki raised an eyebrow at him when the Captain wouldn’t meet his eyes. “I recall shielding you in battle since my attack and also doing the same for the Widow and Barton, yet you all still do not trust me to protect my teammates?”

“No,” Romanov said simply. “Sorry.” She turned to Rogers. “I know a couple of people.”

“Good, get them.” Rogers looked at Loki, apologetic as he said, “How soon can you have the planes?”

“Two hours at most,” Loki sighed.

“Good. JARVIS, how far is the farthest destination?”

“By any normal jet, eighteen hours,” JARVIS said, almost sounding glum in his response.

Thor looked at Loki in excitement. “Brother, couldn’t you teleport yourself and Dr. Banner?”

“I could easily,” Loki said slowly, entertaining the idea.

“If I may offer a suggestion, why not have Loki teleport to each safehouse? If he determines Sir is there, he can return to the Tower and then teleport the entire team to the home. It is likely these agents will be heavily armed and may resort to even more physical violence at the arrival of anyone from the team,” JARVIS pointed out. “Therefore, having the entire team would be advised.”

Rogers seemed to consider the idea before he turned to Loki. “Could you do it? Check on each house and then come back here, grab the rest of us, and teleport us to wherever Tony is being held?”

“I could but the energy required to teleport everyone there and fight in battle may leave me unable to bring us back to the Tower after we rescue Stark,” Loki said carefully.

“Okay, so we improvise. You find Tony, come get us, take us to the safe house, and then while we fight, you find Tony and get him out.”

“You want me to leave you there?” Loki frowned. “What if one of you requires medical aide?”

“We walked away from an entire war against you, didn’t we?” Rogers said with a faint smile. “We’ll be fine.”

Loki shrugged. “Fine. Someone call Barton and have him come back. While we wait, I will check each house so we can leave when he arrives.”

“I have sent the coordinates to your phone,” JARVIS informed him.

“Be safe, brother,” Thor called as Loki looked at his phone for the three locations.
Snorting in amusement, Loki teleported to the first home. Silent in his every action, Loki kept a dagger in his hand as he walked around the home. When he was certain the home was empty, he moved onto the next home. This one, a small log cabin, was easier for him to maneuver and he was in and out of the cabin within a few minutes.

The moment he stepped into the third house, he knew it was the place. Although the agents were certainly skilled, for there was no evidence to suggest anyone was present in the home, the place did not look like the others. There was something unsettling about the home and Loki couldn’t help but grip the handle of his dagger tighter as he walked around.

But as certain as he was that Stark was in the house, he could not find him. Frustrated but trusting of his instincts, Loki searched the entire house again.

But he found nothing.

Admitting to himself that he had made an error, Loki was heading back to the front of the house in the last sweep when he froze.

He heard something. He knew he did.

Stepping forward carefully, Loki fingered the wall. He had not found Stark in any room which meant there had to be a secret room. It figured that Stark would purchase a home with a secret room. Such...dorkiness, for lack of a better word, was just a part of Stark's personality.

Feeling a niche in the wall, he knew he had found the way into his hidden room. Proud of himself for recognizing something was off about the house, Loki pressed his ear to the wall. He could just make out the ragged breathing of one person.

Just one?

Frowning, Loki held his breath and listened again.

There was only one person behind the wall.

And from the sounds of the breathing, Stark was struggling.

Could he wait until Loki returned with the others?

Loki wouldn't take that chance. Magical shield in one hand, dagger in the other, he silently pressed on the trigger and watched as the wall slid open.

Stalking inside the room, he took a glance around to make sure they were alone before he rushed to Stark’s side.

“Stark,” he demanded anxiously, looking over Stark’s many grave injuries. “Look at me. You need-”

“Loki, no,” Stark groaned at the sound of his voice, his eyes fluttering for a moment before he slumped, clearly unconscious.

Swearing, Loki snapped his fingers and watched as the handcuffs keeping Stark hanging in the air snapped. As the mortal fell limply to the ground, Loki stepped forward and used his magic to gently ease Stark into his arms.

With the engineer safe in his arms, Loki focused his magic. He faintly registered a shout followed by gunshots, but they were gone before the bullets reached the place he had been standing. They were
Arriving in the Tower was an unpleasant surprise for everyone involved. Dr. Banner, the closest one to Loki when they teleported, cried out in horror when he saw Stark.

“Tony!”

As the Avengers ran to his side, Barton racing to bring medical down to the workshop, Loki laid Stark on the sofa. He was immediately shoved out of the way, which he did not appreciate.

“Let me see him,” Loki demanded, stepping around Romanov so he could observe Stark’s head wound.

She pushed him away, muttering something about him being untrustworthy but Loki wouldn't have it. Snapping his fingers, he paralyzed everyone in the room.

“My magic is sealed so I would not be able to use it if my intentions were not good,” Loki snapped at her. “You know that.” He knelt down at Stark’s side and gently pressed the palm of his hand to Stark’s head, murmuring a spell quietly.

“You could have found a way around it!” Romanov fired back angrily, struggling to move and clearly hating that she couldn't.

“Then I would have killed him before bringing him here,” Loki countered calmly. “Distrust me all you want but your teammate has suffered a severe head trauma. I am what stands between him and memory loss. Would you rather that than a healed head?”

Dr. Banner looked at him curiously. “May I help?” he asked quietly.

Loki observed him for a moment before he slacked his hold, allowing the doctor to move. The doctor gratefully went to Loki’s side and placed two fingers to Stark’s neck, taking his pulse before moving to support his neck.

“What happened?” he asked quietly.

“It appeared to be between torture sessions when I arrived in the last home. I almost didn’t find him,” Loki said grimly. “They were not there; most likely his captors had left to get food before returning to torture him again.”

Dr. Banner had a green tinge to him.

“I seized my opportunity and went to him. His captors were arriving as I left.”

“They could still-”

“They will have left by now, Cap,” Barton said dejectedly. “Right now, all we can do is make sure Tony is okay.”

“He should be,” Loki said slowly. “I will heal what I can. But some of his wounds, such as his head or ribs, will be tender for the days to come. His hands will be fine, though.”

“What about his reactor?” Dr. Banner suddenly gasped, immediately peering under Stark’s shirt. “Oh, thank God,” he sighed in relief.

“They clearly wanted information,” Loki said coldly.
“But about what?” Thor questioned. “Brother, he is not on the team!”

“He is the technological genius of his time,” Loki countered dryly. “I wonder what they could have possibly wanted with him.”

“Most likely they wanted information on some device or they wanted him to make them something,” Barton mused, agreeing with Loki’s train of thought.

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

Loki eyed the group carefully, keeping close attention on Romanov as he said, “If I release my hold, will you still allow me to heal him?”

When there was not an immediate answer, Banner said, “I can see from where I am and Tony’s getting some color back.”

“I will,” Rogers said after a moment. Thor also rapidly agreed and when Romanov and Barton reluctantly gave their consent, Loki allowed them to move.

Rogers was first to his side and joined him in kneeling on the floor as he took Stark’s limp hand. And as Loki healed him, the team sat in strategic positions around the workshop so they could protect their fallen teammate.

19. Can I hold your hand?

Opening his eyes was more tiring than Loki had expected it to be. Exhaling weakly, he rolled onto his side and immediately fell to the ground.

Groaning, he pushed himself to his hands and knees and looked around his bedroom. There was a swear from somewhere nearby and when Loki looked up, he found Stark kneeling in front of him.


Loki stared up at him. “We need to stop meeting like this,” he murmured.

Stark grabbed his arm and helped him stand, wincing as he did so. “Meeting like what?” Stark asked innocently as if he hadn’t just been in pain himself.

“Like this. You hurt and me healing your wounds.”

Stark shrugged. “Can't help it. Even the villains like me.”

“A bit too much, if you ask me,” Loki muttered. He dusted off his clothing, annoyed. “Must you have laid me in the furthermost corner of my bed?”

“You should have looked before you rolled over,” Stark shrugged. “Not my problem.”

Loki rolled his eyes.

“But…” Stark hesitated. “Bruce told me what you did for me. Thank you.”

“For saving your life?” Loki shrugged. “It was easy. Though, I do grow tired of having to do so.”
“Then, don’t waste your time next time,” Stark said lightly as he headed for the door. “Good to see you up and at ’em, Snowflake. You headed to the meeting?”

“What meeting?” Loki asked warily.

“Some pointless shit-talk where I explain what my captors wanted with me.” Stark rolled his eyes. “Boring, really.”

Loki eyed him carefully, sensing the mortal was not being quite as honest with him as he could be. “Depends. Do I have to sit beside Thor?”

“Sit wherever you want,” Stark shrugged. “I don't care. But beware of his puppy eyes, though, he's as bad as Cap.”

“Oh, I'm well aware.” Loki sighed loudly, following Stark. “I suppose I'll come.”

"Great," Stark said, smiling tightly. "I was going force you to go, by the way, if you had said no. You kinda need to hear what I have to say."

Loki frowned, wondering what Stark had meant, but he didn't bother asking. He knew Stark would admit what he needed to during the meeting. They entered the conference room together and took seats opposite of each other. Dr. Banner was the last one to enter and once he did, Rogers began the meeting.

"It's good to see you up and at ’em, Tony," he said earnestly, giving the inventor a small, yet still shaky smile. "You scared us."

Stark shrugged, looking sheepish. "Can't help it, Cap, I've got a knack for attracting attention."

"Would it kill you to attract attention that's a little less dangerous?" Barton teased.

"Apparently, considering the number they did on me," Stark answered, completely honest. In the silence that followed, he flushed and seemed to shrink under their intense stares. "Sorry, still feeling the effects of the concussion," he muttered. "Cap, move on, please?"

The Captain nodded, frowning slightly. "Nat, you want to..."

She nodded, pressing a few keys on her laptop. She didn't look up until the image she wanted was projected: the image that had been sent to them in the "ransom" (death threat). "That's the proof they sent us that they had you," the Widow said quietly. Loki resisted the urge to scowl at the sight; the photo was of Stark hanging limply from the ceiling, his face badly bruised. Despite the slightly worried stance she had taken, her voice was still hard as she said, "Torture, clearly. What did they want? Weapons?"

“Information,” Stark said shortly.

“On?”

“Not much, really.” Stark shrugged. “They didn't get what they wanted, obviously.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, clearly growing frustrated at his lack of open responses. “And what exactly did they want?”

“Information about the team?” Stark said in a tone that suggested the answer was obvious. He looked around the room but when he made eye contact with Loki, he quickly looked away, something that
made Loki frown.

“Did they say why they picked you?”

“As a matter of fact, they did. And listen here, just because I'm not on the team doesn't mean I don't
know as much as the rest of you. Remember who supplies your armor and battle strategies.”

“They wanted the codes to our armor, then?” Rogers frowned.

Stark sighed, shaking his head. They all waited for him to respond. After a moment, he lifted his
head and looked straight at Loki, who was already looking at him curiously. “They wanted
everything I knew about you.”

Thor blinked. “Loki?”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “They didn't think to take Thor?”

“Drugging a God into submissiveness isn't exactly an award-winning plan, Rudolph. And I think
they thought they had a better chance of getting me to talk than Thor. They knew, only god knows
how, that you and I were working together because they asked me for everything I could tell you
about your powers and how to stop them.” Stark snorted. “You know, I think they figured they
could easily break the most human, most easily hurt person on the team… but they failed. Barton,
ext kidnap, you're up. I guarantee it.”

“Not that I'm worried about my safety because I have no need to be,” Loki interrupted, “But what
exactly did you tell them?”

“A lot of “fuck offs” and a lot more insults,” Stark snorted. “God, they were pissed.”

“Which tactics did they use on you?” Widow asked curiously.

Stark stared at her. “Not happening.”

“If you won't break, I doubt most people will either. I need to know so I can come up with stronger,
more effective interrogation tactics,” she shrugged.

Stark huffed, anger clear in his movements as he stood hastily. “Why don't you just give them a real
good ‘mom’ vibe and make them think that you care about them, that their life actually means two
shits to you? And then, when they naively open up to you, thinking wow, I'm not a statistic to her,
why don't you stab them in the neck? I'm sure it'd work, it certainly has before!”

He stormed from the room.

Dr. Banner gaped at her. “You did that to him?” he growled, looking on the verge of turning green.

“He's exaggerating.”

Loki frowned at the spot Stark had been occupying. He didn't think the engineer was, not really.
And as an argument began, he stuck out of the room in search of Stark.

It was easy to catch up to Stark in the elevator and although Stark glared at the sight of him, Loki still
forced his way inside the transporter before Stark could get off.

“What the hell do you want?” Stark sighed, rubbing his temple distractedly. “I'm not going to tell you
how they tortured me and I didn't tell them anything about you, so what do you want?”
“You're upset and you are still battling the effects of a bad head wound,” Loki said simply in response. “I wanted to check on your well-being.”

Stark snorted, doubting. “Well, I'm fine so thanks but no thanks for the ‘support.’”

“You think I am pretending to care.”

“Got it in one,” Stark said bitterly as he took a long drink from his water bottle. “Any other brilliant deductions?”

“What could I possibly gain by having your trust?” Loki growled. “Your trust would have no value to me, nor is it a priority that I have it. Sure, you have struggled. Congratulations, we all have. But if you ever expect to have people who care about you stick around, you need to get over yourself.”

“What could you gain?” Stark repeated, incredulous. “Is that really the question you just asked? Well, for one thing, you could destroy half the earth with my technology and resources, so there is that. There's also my arc-”

“Don't give yourself so much credit. You specialize in a craft that any child could do on Asgard. Your race is just weak, making you look superior. Trust me, there is nothing special about you.”

“And here I thought you cared,” Stark said dryly, stepping off the elevator. “Guess that would have been a pretty neat birthday gift, huh. But that was a fantasy. Do us both a favor and stay away from me.”

“With pleasure,” Loki growled, slamming the button on the elevator to bring him back to his floor.  

Pathetic mortal.

20. You can borrow mine.

Only a few days after their argument, the alarm was called for them to assemble. Loki ran out of his bedroom to the common room, where he found the others either already there or approaching.

“What’s the situation?”

“Out-of-towners in Bulgaria,” Stark said grimly, pale and tired looking as he looked over to JARVIS’s camera, nodding at him. "And, no, before you ask me, I'm not benched anymore. The doc lifted the ban this morning, my head is fine now, so are my ribs.”

The Captain frowned slightly but nodded before he turned his attention to Loki. “You're not allowed to teleport,” he announced. “I'm afraid you have to come with us in the carrier.”


“SHIELD forbid it. There's too much risk if you get there first.”

“Out of everyone here, Thor and I can fight our own kind best,” Loki growled.

“SHIELD doesn't trust you to teleport so far away. It means too much time where you will be unsupervised. The U.S. is different but for battles in other countries, you have to stay with us,” Romanov said plainly. “Tony-”

“I'm not letting dozens of people die because I wasted an hour coming with.” Stark ran to the open
balcony.

Loki eyed him. “Stark, we only tested that once…”

“Which means it works! See you there!” Stark yelled as he scaled the railing and disappeared over the side of the Tower.

“Tony!” Rogers yelled, the Avengers running to the balcony.


The team gaped at him. Loki just smirked knowingly.

“Sometimes, you're not so bad, Rudolph!” Stark called.

Everyone turned to look at him. By the time they looked back, Stark was far from sight.

Rogers sighed. “I'll ask later. Everyone, to the carrier. Clint, patch into Tony. I want to know everything.”

“He'll be there in thirty, Cap,” Romanov said quietly as they ran onboard the carrier.

Rogers shrugged. “Meaning he has thirty-five extra minutes he spends with these creatures, alone, without backup.”

“Oh, you could let me teleport…”

“Not happening,” Romanov glared.

Loki sat back in his seat, annoyed. “When Stark is injured, his blood will stain all of your hands.”

“He's fought worse.”

Thor’s voice was excited. “No, he hasn't.”

Loki stood, going to the monitor Thor was looking at. “Dark Elves,” he murmured. “No, he hasn't faced worse. None of you have. And alone…”

Rogers frowned tightly at their news but said nothing further on the subject. The carrier fell into silence as they headed to their destination; in fact, not a single word was said until Stark's voice suddenly announced loudly, “The weakest of your heroes is here to save you!”

“Stark, what are you doing?” Romanov hissed.

“Of course, I'm the strongest person here, but that's beside the point. Here's the situation. There are the bad guys, here is the good guy. See where I came from? Run that way.”

“Stark…”

“Shut it, Romanov, this is a monologue.”

“Tony, how many are there?”

“Couple dozen. Red and gold flier out.”

“Tony!”
“It's not like I can call for backup; what's the point of staying on?”

“Tony, keep your channel on,” Dr. Banner begged.

There was a long pause that was filled by the sounds of repulsors. “Fine.”

The next twenty minutes were silent, filled only by the sounds of battle and the occasional retort from Stark to the elves he was fighting. Just as they were nearing Bulgaria, something crashed into the Iron Man armor. They heard Stark swear and then the video feed went black, Stark’s line going harsh with the sounds of static as well.

The team leaped into action. “Tony!” Dr. Banner cried out, looking green. “Are you okay?”

“Fine...stop...mom.”

Footage from SHIELD took over their screens, showing the Iron Man armor in pieces on the ground with no sign of Stark in them.

Someone gasped, Loki wasn't sure who.

Fury’s voice filled the carrier. “Stark’s got some new armor, it seems. Right now it's in pieces on the ground and he-” the camera turned to an Elf approaching a defenseless Stark- “is currently without armor.”

Roaring in anger, Dr. Banner ran to the emergency hatch and slammed his fist on it. Everyone ran for a seat with a belt as the door opened, leaving them all exposed.

The Hulk was racing for Stark before he even touched the ground.

Thor made it to the door, closing it, and then turned back to look at the monitors with the others. The Elf approached, snarling.

Stark backed up until he reached the brick wall at the end of the alley he was cornered in. The Elf charged. Stark ducked under his arms, dove to the ground, rolling, and, on his feet, ran for the entrance of the alley. Once there, he paused, turned around, and threw his hands out in the direction of the elf. He then threw himself against the wall of the alley as his armor flew into the alley and attached to the Elf. And, as they watched, the armor exploded and the elf turned to ash.

Grinning, Stark saluted the SHIELD camera keeping an eye on him. The camera moved away but it didn't matter because the team landed a moment later and joined the fight.

More armor quickly arrived and as Stark maneuvered the battlefield, sometimes in his armor, sometimes out of it, his armor attached to the Elves and blew up, turning each elf into ash.

When it appeared the entire team was getting defeated, each of them exhausted, injured, or plainly overwhelmed, Loki seized his opportunity. He duplicated Stark’s armor and threw it onto each of the Elves. Moments later, the battle was over.

Rogers stared at him, shocked. “Thanks,” he gasped, wiping the ash from his neck that had been left there by the elf that had died choking him.

Loki nodded at him. The other team members approached from their various positions of battle, all but Stark, who was yet to appear.

Barton noticed the same time as he did. “JARVIS, where's Stark?”
A loud groan sounded from above them and Loki looked up to see the building he was standing under begin to collapse. He looked around, as if paralyzed by what was about to happen, and saw that he was the closest one to the building. The only one in harm’s way.

His magic grew, working to create a shield to protect him from the collapsing structure…

Armor snapped onto his body and lifted him across the street just as the building collapsed.

Loki blinked, utterly surprised, and tried to ignore the displays in front of him as he looked around for Stark.

“Where is he?” he demanded.

“Sir had been surveying the area from the roof of the structure,” JARVIS spoke in a voice that couldn't have been him, for a computer couldn't experience emotions, could it? “He saw you were in harm’s way when the building began to collapse and so he gave his armor to you, Mr. Laufeyson. And then he jumped.”

Loki looked up, not seeing anything, and then turned his gaze to where the others were looking. And it was there, in Hulk’s arms as the Other Guy began to lose control, that he found Stark’s still form being held.

As they approached quickly, cautious but relieved, Stark sat up with a faint groan and looked around. He managed a weak grin when he saw the armor Loki still wore.

“Damn,” he teased. “Loki, you can wear my colors whenever you want.” He patted a now-struggling Dr. Banner’s shoulder as he hopped to the ground. “Thanks for the save, Brucie. Your better half really does like me, doesn't he?”

Dr. Banner cleared his throat. “Actually, he thinks you need his protection.”

Stark groaned. “Uncool, tell him that's uncool. I can look after myself just fine, with or without the armor. I'm not weak.” He looked at Loki as he said this.

Loki gave a slight nod, conceding to the point.

He owed Stark an apology.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who has left a kudo or comment, it means a lot!
22. **It's not heavy. I'm stronger than I look.**

“Not one word,” Stark demanded to them as Loki entered the workshop a few days with Thor at his side to find Stark stretched out on the ground, an entire metal contraption covering his abdomen and legs and, therefore, pinning him to the ground.

“I will say more than a word,” Thor decided as he looked down at the metal and then the mortal trapped underneath it. “Do you require our assistance?”

Stark groaned. “Thor, buddy, that's exactly what I was hoping you wouldn't ask.”

“I'm sorry, Man of Iron, but you seem to be…” Thor floundered for a word. “Stuck.”

“I'm fine,” Stark snapped. “This is a new...type of massage that I'm testing out for Pepper.”

“Your Lady Potts has an odd taste in massages,” Thor commented, sounding amused.

Stark glared at Loki. “And what do you have to say about all this? Might as well get it out now.”

Loki knelt down and prodded the armor carefully. “It looks...painful. For a mortal.”

“It's not that heavy; I'm fine.”

Loki ignored him. “Have your robots tried to assist you yet?”

“Don't call them!” Stark said sharply. He stared at Loki, wide-eyed. “They’re how I ended up here in the first place.”

Observing the sad beeps from the robots, Loki looked back at Stark. “Why not just call for help?”

“And admit to my team of Gods, beings of superbeing strength, and two SHIELD agents who already don't think I'm qualified to be on the team, that I'm not strong enough to lift a simple piece of metal off my legs?” Stark laughed bitterly. “I'm fine, thanks. And I'll be great once the two of you leave and don't bring this up to anyone. I'll figure a way out of here in a minute.”

Thor huffed. “Your arrogance is as strong as my own, Tony Stark, and your intelligence rivals my brother. But you both lack self-esteem which is your downfall. You do not need to have superbeing strength to be the strongest amongst us all.” He went to Loki’s aide and lifted the suit from Stark’s legs with ease.

Stark flinched as the weight was lifted from his legs. Loki took hold of his arm, helping him sit up as he muttered, “You have broken my brother. He never compliments me- or others. And he has done both because of you.”

Thor helped Stark stand but when he let go of the engineer, the mortal’s legs gave out from under him and he would have fallen had Loki not caught him.

“Careful,” Loki murmured into his ear, stabling the mortal by bringing him to his side, “Or someone might get the impression you are falling for me.”
“Because falling for a sexy, intelligent God is so hard to believe,” Stark scoffed, leaning into his hold slightly, Loki noticed with a small smile.

“Well, we are enemies,” he countered.

“Were.”

Loki stared at him, utterly surprised by the confession. “Were?”

“Uh, yeah? We kinda fight on the same side now.”

“Not for a lack of want on my end, though.”

“Liar.”

Loki blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You were controlled, hurting, and pissed off when you attacked New York. You’re not actually an evil person.”

Loki stared after him, incredulous, as Stark pulled away from him and slowly limped his way over to his desk. Thor clasped his shoulder. “The Man of Iron is smarter than you know,” he said as he called a farewell to Stark and made his departure from the workshop.

“Now, where were we…” Stark muttered under his breath, pulling up some floating visual of a project. “Hey, Reindeer, you and Point Break have a reason to coming to my modest shop or…?”

“Yes, actually, we had a reason.” Loki cleared his throat, standing tall. “The All-Father, although wary, has granted me permission to wield a single weapon so long as you are the person who creates my weapon. I came to see my options, or order you to make me a dagger of my choice if I see nothing of satisfaction.”

“Okay. I take it knives are your thing?”

Loki blinked. “You would take me at your word? I could be lying to you.”

“Yes,” Stark said cheerfully as he waved away parts of his blue visual. “So, knives?”

“Yes,” Loki said slowly. “Thor said you are the manufacturer of the Avengers’ armor. I am in the right place, am I not?”

“No, you are. This is why Tony Stark is a consultant.” Stark finally looked up from his visual, flicked it away, and stood, clapping his hands. A display of about twenty different knives appeared a few feet in front of Loki. “Those are your options. Some are prototypes, others are being stored off-site, and others are put away for safekeeping. Tell me what you want to try and I’ll see what I can do.”

Loki cautiously poked one of the visuals, which sent the dagger spinning in circles in the air. “Oh,” he murmured. “I can pretend to wield this, can't I?”

“The hologram will conform to your movements, yes. It'll give you an idea of how wide the handle is, how long the blade is, stuff like that.”

“Fascinating.” Loki curled his fingers around the hologram of the dagger he was considering and experimentally waved his hand, mesmerized by how the dagger floated seamlessly with his every movement.
“Let me know if you have questions,” Stark requested as he pulled out a small circular device and placed it on what seemed to be a scanner.

“Fine,” Loki murmured absently, enthralled by the many visuals. He tried another dagger and was thrilled by the assumed grip of it. “Stark, I think this one will-”

He froze, eyes widening as he took in Stark’s pale face that had a blue tinge to it, his shuddering chest, and the light that was not shining through his shirt.

Loki ran to Stark’s side declaring tightly, “What are you doing?” as he snagged the arc reactor from the scanner and thrust it at Stark. “Do you have a death wish? Put this back!”

Stark gasped for air silently, shaking his head. “Put it down,” he begged.

Loki did so without question and watched, unnerved, as Stark took the device, lifted his shirt, and placed the device in the gaping hole in his chest.

He exhaled. “What foolish thing were you doing now?” he demanded.

“Running tests,” Stark said calmly, only breathing a little bit abnormally now. “Until you interrupted me, at least.”

“Interrupted? I saved your life!”

“Uh, no, you overreacted.”

“Overreacted? You took out your chestpiece, which you need to survive!”

“I can last a minute without it,” Stark said defensively. “I've had this thing in me for five years; I think I know what I'm doing by now.”

“Clearly not,” Loki muttered. “Are you alright?”

Stark gave him an odd look before he nodded. "What were you saying before you nearly had a heart attack?"

Loki brightened a little. "Before you nearly committed suicide in front of me, I had a dagger in mind. May I show it to you?"

“Why, aren't you polite today?” Stark teased.

Loki glared at him.

Stark laughed. “Sorry, sorry. Go ahead, then.”

Loki looked over at the hologram floating across the room. Deciding the walk there and back was too long, he focused and drew the dagger in the air with his magic. “Is this one available?”

“That one?” Stark blinked. “Correct me if I'm wrong, J, but that's just schematics, isn't it?”

“Correct, Sir.”

“You have to make it,” Loki groaned.

“Sorry,” Stark shrugged. “I had most of my scans completed before you ruined everything so while Jarv takes a look at those, let's see what you and I can come up with.”
“You want me to stay?” Loki asked, surprised.

“Uh, yeah? I mean, I could make a prototype and you could wave it around, stab a few things- I said things, not people- but it would be easier if you just stayed and told me what you wanted both in looks and ability.”

Loki leaned against the workbench. “Alright, then. This is what I want…”

23. I’ll wait.

It was late evening when Loki nodded his approval and Stark leaned back in his chair and exclaimed, “It's all yours, JARVIS! Let me know when you have our first prototype. We'll be upstairs.”

“We will?”

“Sir, at the very least, will be,” JARVIS answered smoothly. “He has not eaten in over fifty-six hours.”

“Just a number, J,” Stark waved off as he leapt off his stool and bound for the stairs. “Come on, Lokie Dokie, let's have a late dinner!” Loki made a face at the nickname but followed him, allowing himself a small smile since Stark's back was to him so he, therefore, couldn't see it.

Halfway up the stairs, Stark swore and stopped. “I forgot to check in with our scans! Loki, heat something up, will you? I'll be right there!”

“Your scans can wait,” JARVIS suggested.

“Nope! I wanna figure this out. I'll only be twenty minutes, I swear.”

Loki shrugged at him. “Do as you wish; I have no preference to whether or not I eat alone.”

Stark saluted him. “Then see you soon!”

Rolling his eyes, Loki continued up the stairs and to the communal Kitchen. He had just turned on the stove when he sensed the presence of another. “Do you intend to watch over me so I don’t blow up the tower?” he asked lightly to Agent Widow as he ducked into the pantry in search of pasta.

“You've been spending a lot of time with Tony recently,” she commented.

“Yes, well what we do on our own time is none of your concern.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’re sleeping with him.”

“My, my, Agent Widow. Just because our resident engineer is a playboy does not mean he is averse to a relationship.”

“It’s unlikely,” she said, tilting her head slightly. “Do you think of it as something more?”

“I think,” Loki dropped the box of pasta on the counter, “It is of no concern to you whether or not Stark and I are dating.”

“It is just sex, then.”
“Why, because I used his surname?”

“Exactly.”

“I use surnames for everyone in my life, including you. Are you inquiring because you are concerned for Stark, because you want the gossip to share with your precious SHIELD, or because you are hoping you are the person I turn my attention to?”

“I have no interest in you. This is simply to determine where Stark’s head is at.”

“And what then? You decide he is not worthy of the Avengers because he doesn’t disrespect me like the rest of your teammates? Let me tell you something, Widow, you may dislike him but you cannot afford to lose his skill set, resources, and brilliance on this team.”

“I have no intentions of booting him. I simply want to look after him. When Tony attaches to someone, he attaches. And he is easily hurt because of his huge heart. I just want to make sure you aren’t going to be his next heartbreak.”

“Sentiment is a defect found in mortals and Thor. I am above such weakness.” Loki turned his back to her as he placed the pasta in the now-boiling water. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have a meal to prepare.”

She shrugged at him. “I have heard enough.” And she slid quietly from the room without a single look back.

Loki sighed and turned his attention to preparing a salad. But even as he did so, a dark idea began forming in his head. He wasn’t sure he’d act on it, if he wanted to, necessarily, but having the idea as a backup plan couldn’t possibly be anything but a good thing.

*Stark fell quickly and easily, did he?*

He could work with that.

24. Just because.

By the time Stark entered the kitchen, Loki had already eaten and was waiting in the common room, listening for Stark’s reaction.

“Whoa,” Stark murmured.

Loki smiled to himself. He could only imagine what it was that Stark was actually looking at.

Stark backed out of the room, calling, “Jarv, who do you think is being wined and dined tonight? Clint to Natashalie? Clint by Natashalie? Ooh, maybe Rogers is doing the wooing. A homemade meal does seem more his speed…”

The AI’s response sounded amused. “Sir, you promised me you would eat. Last time I checked, the living room does not serve food and drinks.”

Stark entered the room and brightened when he saw Loki. “Reindeer Games! You’re my witness, hopefully. Did you see who was cooking?” He paused. “Hang on. Did you eat already?”

Loki shrugged. “You took too long so I didn’t wait.”
“Did you see who made the feast back there? There's pasta, salad, garlic bread, and wine, I swear, someone is being wooed.”

“Sir, I really must insist you eat or I’ll call Col. Rhodes.”

Stark rolled his eyes. “Fine, you mother hen. I'll grab something to eat at the hospital cafeteria. Those are open twenty-four hours, right?”

“Hospital? Are you dying?” Loki asked, mildly interested. If the mortal was unwell, then Loki would have to find someone else to use for his ploy.

But Stark was so easy. Surely he could just cure the mortal if he needed to?

“Dying?” Stark laughed. “Only to see you in my bed.” He whistled cheerfully as Loki groaned.

“That was horrible,” he moaned. “Not creative at all.”

“Give me a better opening then,” Stark shrugged. “I, lockdown. I'll give you your prototype in the morning, alright? I've got a date.”

“In the hospital?”

Stark actually gave him a real smile. “Yep, I'm going to the NICU to hold the babies and Pediatrics to see the kiddos. I do it every once in a while and it's been too long so I was there last, so I thought I'd do it tonight.”

Loki frowned. “You would willingly hold the runts of your kind?”

“Runts' is a cruel word and I don't like it. These kids were born early, not by their own choice or their parents’ choice. They’re all fighting for their lives because they were born so small and aren’t fully developed yet.”

“Runts, then.”

“No...precious angels if you really want to have a name for them besides their actual names.”

“Angels?” Loki laughed. “They will never amount to anything in life, not having been born so small. They will always be weak.”

“Okay, what the hell is your problem? Do you not like kids? Babies? Or are babies born early or with a disability considered weak and pathetic to you?” Stark folded his arms over his chest, looking increasingly annoyed.

Loki considered his response options. Lying sounded considerably better than telling the truth, but if his plan to ‘woo’ Stark, gain his trust, and betray him was to succeed, he needed to gain Stark’s trust. And he could only do that if he was honest. (Or told really well-disguised lies...but somehow, he suspected Stark would see through his ploys, even if they were his best.)

“I am the son of Laufey, the deceased King of Jotunheim. I was left in the snow to die because I was a runt.” Loki tilted his head curiously. “Why would your culture be any different?”

“I think you turned out pretty okay for a supposed ‘runt,’ don’t you think?” Stark mused. “After all, you are taller than me.”

Loki huffed out a weak laugh at his comment. “I am from a race of frost giants, Stark. We are meant to be tall.”
“Frost? Then, shouldn't you be...blue? Or something? Like, Mr. Freeze in the incredibly cheesy but very adored 1966 Batman TV show? Wait, no, he was just really pale. Well, that's why you're pale, isn't it?”

Plan be damned.

Loki stormed forward, intending to grab Stark’s throat. “Do not mock me, mortal,” he growled.

Stark ducked under his hand and went to the other side of the room, breathing heavily. “Yeah, I don't know how you do things on Asgard but choking people will not solve your problems,” Stark snapped, breathing heavily. “I don't know what your problem is, I was just asking a question. If you don't like the question, tell me and I won't ask. I'm not heartless.”

“You brought up my true form,” Loki seethed.

“What?” Stark stared at him. “Look, I don't know what you think I know but Thor has told me nothing except that you're adopted and go by the last name of Laufeyson. That's it. And I don't appreciate being choked in my own home for a second time so if I upset you, say something for God’s sake. You can't just kill every person who says something that bothers you- especially if the person has no idea what they said wrong to begin with!”

“Lies,” Loki hissed.

“Yeah, sure, whatever, believe what you want.” Stark stared at him. “God, you never fight with anyone else. Why is it always me?”

“Because, mortal, you don't know how to keep your mouth shut. The others- even Thor - know how to.” Loki said, frustrated. “You just talk, you go on and on about pointless topics and ramble on even when no one is listening. You fill our battle line with mindless chatter that no one appreciates having to listen to; you are immature, unstable, and frankly, it's confusing as to why you flirt with me and everyone else on this planet considering the fact that no one likes you... And in general you an insubstantial being with little value and-”

“Alright, that’s enough,” Stark asked stiffly.

Loki exhaled, annoyed at himself for going off the way he did. He wasn't so petty, not even to Thor. “Now you know what it feels like to hear someone you despise go on and on.”

“Great, good, wonderful, thanks. J, lockdown.”

Stark didn't look at him as he left, leaving Loki to his thoughts and the brief, concerning question of did Stark truly not know about his true heritage?

25. Look both ways.

“Nothing,” Dr. Banner sighed as he came up from the workshop alone. “JARVIS seems to be on mute and he hasn’t come out since Monday morning. I ran into him when he was on the way in from the NICU. He seemed okay, a bit quiet but…”

“Maybe he's just got a big project and he doesn't want to be interrupted?” Rogers said hopefully as he took a seat at the kitchen table.

Romanov eyed Loki suspiciously out of the corner of her eyes. Loki ignored her.
“He wouldn't have put JARVIS on mute, then.”

“I miss him,” Barton groaned. “We had a prank war all set to begin today and he's not here!”

“Perhaps the Man of Iron succumbed to a Midgardian illness?” Thor asked.

“To what, the common cold?” Barton rolled his eyes. “It's fucking July. No, he's hiding and I want to know why.”

Romanov’s phone dinged. She pulled it out of her undergarment all while glaring in a silent dare for anyone to comment, and murmured a surprised _aha_.

“What is it?” Barton demanded, leaning over to peer over her shoulder. “Whoa, is that Tony?”

The team, including Loki, gathered around to watch the video she played. It was a news broadcast that showed Stark coming out of a building and making his way through reporters only to freeze by his car when loud, frantic honking filled the air.

The video, clearly taken by one of the reporters, showed a flash of a car speeding down the street followed by a shot of a young boy stepping off the curb.

Stark shouted a cry of warning as he darted in the street after the child. It was a race to see who would get there faster and Stark did by an instant, scooping the boy into his arms and running to the other side of the street before more upcoming cars could come by.

The person filming swore, gave a shaky, _thank God_, and applause was heard as Stark knelt on the ground, keeping his hands on the boy's shoulders, and talked to him quietly, clearly trying to reassure him of his safety.

The boy was crying, clearly unable to talk as he waved his hands around in a frantic mess of symbols and letters.

“The tiny Midgardian says he is deaf and did not know the car was coming,” Thor announced. “He is frightened. He was headed home from the library.”

Stark visibly hesitated for a moment before he began communicating in the same manner. “Friend Tony says it is okay, that he is safe.”

“He knows sign language,” Romanov murmured. “That is not on his chart.”

“Now he says he will walk the boy home. The boy is called Thomas,” Loki announced, pleased that the All-Speak had enabled him and Thor to understand what was going on.

The video ended with the boy running into Stark’s arms and the engineer holding him gently before standing, taking his hand, and walking him in the direction of the boy’s home.

“_Good press_,” Romanov read aloud from her phone. “Fury knows Tony better than to think he saved the boy just for the press.”

“He risked his life to save a child with a disability,” Loki murmured.

Romanov looked at him. “That's the kind of person he is.”

Noticing movement from the corner of his eye, Loki turned to see Stark walking past the kitchen. “Stark!” he called.
The man in question paused in the doorway for a moment but when he entered the room with a smile on his face- one that almost looked fake in Loki's opinion- Dr. Banner was the first to greet him. He went over to Stark and patted his shoulder, saying fondly, “I was getting worried. You got some big, secret project down there?”

Stark shrugged. “Needed to catch up on some SI work. Projects, meetings, the like.”

“Why the lockdown and radio silence?” Barton pouted. “We were supposed to have a prank war today!”

“Sorry, Barton.” Stark shrugged uncomfortably as he went to get himself a glass of water. Loki noted the faint tremor in his hand but did not comment. “Work comes first.”

“Fine. But you owe me one!” Barton called as Stark downed the glass and headed for the door.

Stark hesitated for a moment before he left.

Rogers nodded after him, pleased. “It’s good to see that he’s putting in the effort to do his work and be responsible.”

Dr. Banner murmured an absent agreement but his eyes were thoughtful as he looked after Stark. Almost as if he had seen something the others had not.

Loki just frowned in silent contemplation. Stark had been very short in his statements, something that Stark never did. His lack of speech was...odd.

Odd and concerning.

26. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to.

It was another week before they saw Stark again. Dr. Banner reported that Stark was answering his texts for the first two days but then...there was nothing.

“I texted him needing his help with a lab! He always responds to those!” Dr. Banner said in frustration as he paced the communal living room. “Something isn't right.”

“He hasn’t responded to my texts either,” Rogers agreed.

“Nor mine.”

Everyone stared at him.

Loki stared back. “He is furnishing me with a weapon at the All-Father’s discretion. I asked him about it.”

“I am aware of this,” Thor spoke up before anyone on the team could question him. “Loki has proved his intentions towards this team to be genuine and so he is being granted the use of one dagger.”

“Sir is coming back to the building,” JARVIS announced, apparently no longer on mute.

Everyone exchanged confused looks. “Okay...where has he been all this time?” Dr. Banner asked.

“Sir was at an SI meeting.”
“Today or...for the last five days?”

“Sir was at an SI meeting,” JARVIS repeated.

The team exchanged concerned glances. "JARVIS, is something wrong? Why are you repeating yourself?"

"Sir was at an SI meeting," JARVIS said again, sounding frustrated with them.

“He was kidnapped,” Romanov realized slowly, putting together the pieces. "Wasn't he, JARVIS?"

“Kidnapped?” Dr. Banner yelped. “JARVIS, why didn't you say anything?”

“I was forbidden to do so.”

“Forbidden? Why would he forbid- oh, I don't even want to know. Is he hurt? What happened to his kidnappers?” Rogers demanded.

“Handled,” Stark said shortly as he walked on by the living room and continued down the hall.

Dr. Banner and Rogers ran after him, the rest of the team on their heels. “That's it, that's all you're going to say? Who kidnapped you? What did they want? How did you escape? Why didn't you let JARVIS notify us that you were missing?” Dr. Banner rambled, sounding abnormally tense and upset like he was close to losing his composure.

“Associate of Hammer’s, weapons, rigged the building, wasn't important,” Stark said calmly as he continued on his way to his workshop.

“It wasn't important your teammates know you were kidnapped?” Thor said, incredulous. “Why not?”

Stark clearly ignored him as he did something with the wall and the door to his workshop opened. “I have five days work to catch up on,” he said plainly. "It's really no big deal, don't worry about it.” He stepped inside the workshop and turned to close the door and that was when Loki caught sight of the dark circles that underlined Stark’s eyes and the way he had a jagged looking cut on his cheek, as well as a dark bruise on his jaw.

“Something is up with him,” Romanov growled. “He's never that quiet, or quiet in general. He single-handedly defeated his kidnappers and he doesn't say a word about it? Something's not right.”

“He's most likely just tired. He probably wasn't fed that well,” Rogers suggested.

Dr. Banner and Romanov didn't look convinced.

Loki was unsure. He agreed something was wrong with the engineer...but something nagged him. He momentarily flashed back to their argument on Monday and the harsh words he had said in the heat of the moment...and then he realized what had been bothering him.

"You just talk, you go on and on about pointless topics and ramble on even when no one is listening. You fill our battle line with mindless chatter that no one appreciates having to listen to..."

What if Stark wasn't talking as much...because of him?

Now concerned, Loki waited until everyone was back on the communal floor before he teleported into the workshop.
Stark visibly startled from his desk when Loki suddenly appeared just inside the doorway but did not rebuke him. He just stood and began walking over to a cabinet in the back corner of the shop.

“What, no remarks about how thinking of me kept you sane during captivity?” Loki questioned as he approached.

“Sure,” Stark said absently as he unlocked the cabinet. He lifted an emerald-colored cloth and placed it on the table before he locked the cabinet. Walking back over to where Loki was standing, he handed Loki the cloth.

Their fingers brushed accidentally and Stark’s expression tightened, as if holding back a wince.

Loki pulled back the cloth and observed the dagger with glee. He took it in his hand and did a few experimental thrusts. He then magicked a dummy in likeliness to a standard creature and stabbed it directly in the heart. He then stabbed the neck, the lung, and the side.

He groaned, greatly displeased. “No, Stark, the blade is not durable enough. I need something stronger if I want to defeat a mortal, let alone a being from a different realm.”

Stark took the dagger quietly, though he did look ashamed as he apologized for his error.

Loki sighed. “It is fine.”

The mortal was already pulling up the schematics.

You wounded his spirit. Apologize.

Just as Loki opened his mouth to speak, Stark said, “It'll be done by tomorrow.”

He believes I am here to hear about my weapon only.


“'M fine.”

“Well, you don't look fine.”

Stark said nothing in response.

“Would you just talk?” Loki growled. “I apologize for yelling at you but not talking at all isn't exactly-”

“I'm fine. I made them weapons that will never be able to work. Then I left.”

“You left.”

Stark went back to his schematics.

“Being wounded will not gain you my pity,” Loki sighed. “Just tell me in what ways you are wounded so I can heal you.”

Stark looked at him. “I have work to do,” he said sharply, tightly, as if suddenly he was upset with himself.

Loki frowned at him. “Be that way,” he muttered. “Call me when my dagger is completed.”
He didn't receive an answer. Annoyed, Loki stormed to the stairs. He had apologized. So why wasn't Stark flirting his ear off again?

And why was he so bothered that Stark wasn't talking to him?

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry for the delay on the update! I'm already updating the next chapter, though, so hopefully, I can have it up in ten days. Hope you enjoyed this emotional whirlwind of a chapter!
27. Try some.

It was just past midnight when Stark wandered into the kitchen where Loki was nursing a cup of coffee, slapped a knife on the table in front of Loki, and turned to leave.

“That’s it, it’s done?”

“Yes.”

Loki unwrapped the knife curiously and examined it. “Looks better,” he commented. “Coffee?”

Stark shrugged. “Still working, sorry.”

“Yes, you have been since you returned from your secret kidnapping. Take a break before you collapse from exhaustion.”

Stark just gave him an unidentifiable look and left. Loki watched him leave and sighed. The mortal was clearly nursing several injuries as well as exhaustion, so why was he continuing to push himself so hard?

Loki resolved to make him eat in the morning, even if he had to force the nutrients down his throat himself. And then he would engage the mortal in a conversation because, for Norn’s sake, how was he supposed to use Stark for his ploy if Stark wasn’t talking to him, wasn’t spending time with him, and was distancing himself in general?

It was incredibly frustrating and Loki would put an end to Stark’s mood, if not for his own sake as well because life without Stark there snarking at him was becoming painfully dull.

28. Drive safely.

The morning came and went and Stark never resurfaced from his workshop. It wasn’t until that night when the team was gathering for their movie night that Stark came up for air.

Loki looked up from what had become his chair to share with Stark (they had shared the armchair three times and now Loki was certain they continued to do so just to annoy the others) when the mortal stumbled into the room, dark circles underlining his eyes and his hair sticking up all over the place.

Stark glanced at their spot for a moment and Loki smirked, moving over as he tapped the space next to him. But Stark just plopped down on the carpeted floor and leaned against the front of the sofa in front of Rogers and Romanov.

Everyone looked back and forth between Loki and Stark. “What’s the matter, Stark, don’t feel like cuddling?” Loki teased, hoping the lightness in his voice disguised the slight hurt he felt at the already clear rejection.
“Not tonight,” Stark said flatly, his voice devoid of any emotion at all.

Romanov shot him a glare as she leaned forward and carded her fingers through Stark’s hair. “If you're tired, котенок, just come up here and lay down.”

Stark stiffened. “I’m fine here.”

Dr. Banner eyed Stark carefully before he slid out of his seat and sat down next to Stark on the floor. “Well, I’ll join you,” he murmured. “Clint, what are we watching?”

Stark watched Dr. Banner with a growing uneasiness in his eyes. But he didn't say anything.

“How about...Legally Blonde?” Barton suggested, grinning. He and the entire team knew that Stark despised that movie.

But Stark didn't say anything. In fact, he didn't appear to have heard the archer at all.

Rogers stared at Stark. “Tony, please tell us what happened,” he begged. “You're barely talking and you won't tell us what happened when you were kidnapped; you're clearly pulling away and I want to know why. What happened?”

“I'm tired. Didn't feel like arguing about a movie,” Stark shrugged. He gestured towards the television, clearly suggesting the movie be played.

“Fine,” Rogers sighed. “Play it, Clint.”

“Well, now I don't want to,” Barton pouted. “I wanted to get a reaction outta Tony but that was so boring. Fine, we'll just watch Star Wars. Nat, if you would?”

“I'm going to bed,” Stark announced suddenly as he stood carefully.

“No, Man of Iron, stay with us!” Thor exclaimed.

“Tired,” Stark said pointedly.

But Loki wasn't fooled. It was obvious the mortal wasn't sleeping and so he used a knowing tone to state that it was obvious as he called, “Drive safely!” to Stark as he walked to the door.

Stark turned and gave him a dark look before he left, presumably to go to the NICU again.

Loki sighed. His lack of response was frustrating. He had to get Stark to return to his normal self. But how?

29. Well, what do you want to do?

They had a battle only a few days later. In the beginning, Loki had been pleased to notice that Stark was making his usual wisecracks. It had almost seemed like Stark had snapped into his funk…

Until Stark stopped, cutting himself off abruptly in the middle of his own sentence.

The communication line was silent for a moment and then the Widow demanded, “Stark? You hurt?”

“Fighting,” Stark said tensely. He clearly hesitated and then, “You?”
“I'm fine. You've got incoming on your five.”

Stark said a response that sounded like thanks and then he was quiet. Loki ran around on the battlefield, occasionally using magic, in other moments getting close enough to stab the octopus-looking creatures in the gut before he'd jump out of the way of their convulsing, falling bodies.

“Stark, my dagger works wonderfully!” Loki exclaimed gleefully.

“Good.”

Loki waited for the of course it does, I made it, but it never came. In fact, “good” seemed to be the only response Stark had for him.

It was infuriating.

Fine, if the mortal wasn't going to talk, Loki would talk for him.

“Stark, how about dinner after this?” he asked, sensing an approaching creature and whirling in time to stab it in the neck.

“What?” Stark asked, clearly surprised.

Loki calmly wiped the green puss off his armor and ran down the street to assist Romanov. “Dinner, Stark. I asked you if you would like to have dinner with me after this battle is over to celebrate our victory.”

Barton cheered. “Yes! Finally, some talking again! Tony, say yes, please. I want to watch.”

“Do you have an interest in a threesome?” Loki questioned innocently.

Sputtering was heard over the line.

“Guys, keep this rated G for Cap’s sake,” Romanov said dryly. “You know he's a child about these things.”

“Maybe in the middle of a battle! But I'm not exactly innocent either,” Rogers admitted, clearly put out by Romanov's calling of him a 'child'.

Barton burst into laughter. “Do you have something you'd like to tell us, Cap?”

A cut-off swear halted the banter. Loki looked up just in time to see the Iron Man armor crash into the wall of a skyscraper and then begin a fast-paced, limp fall to the ground.

“No!” The Hulk shouted, jumping over taxis, overturned trucks, and approaching creatures to get to where he needed to be to catch Stark.

“Not falling,” Stark said tensely as an armor flew overhead. “This is me.”

“Goodness,” Rogers muttered, sounding relieved.

Hulk snorted his own sound of relief as well.

The armor crashed onto the ground. It wasn't bent, cracked, or broken, but the fall would have likely damaged Stark’s spine had he been in the suit, of that, Loki was sure. A moment later, the very same armor that lay on the ground was up and fighting again.
“How can we locate you amongst all the armors?” Thor questioned Stark.

“I'm in the new armor, looks newer.”

With the momentarily worried moment now passed, Loki called, “You never answered my question about dinner, Stark.”

“Why do you want dinner?”

“Well, what would you rather do to celebrate our victory?”

“Eat a pop tart!” Thor said cheerfully.

“Sleep,” Romanov said.

“Eat in general,” said Barton.

“Chatter,” Rogers cautioned.

"Smash!"

In the following conversation and the rest of the battle, no one except Loki seemed to notice that Stark never responded to his query.

So Loki sought Stark out after the battle.

30. One more chapter.

It was just after Stark was emerging from the workshop to go to the kitchen for a midnight meal that Loki caught him. He lowered his book quickly, a little annoyed that he hadn't been given the time to finish the last chapter, and then hurried down the hallway to intercept Stark before he could get to the kitchen. Grabbing hold of the mortal's arm, he whirled the mortal around and pressed his back to the wall firmly but carefully.

“Please tell me why you aren't talking,” he murmured, looking at Stark desperately. “You aren't flirting with me, you cut yourself off once you realized you were talking during the battle… why?”

Stark stared at him, wide-eyed and a hint defeated. “Does it matter?” he finally asked.

“Does it- you're always talking!” Loki explained, ignoring the way Stark flinched at his words. “To have you not talk, not flirting… it's quiet.”

“Isn't that what you wanted? What everyone wants?”

Loki blinked. “What?”

“You asked me to stop talking. I did.”

“I never said that,” Loki said sharply.

“You told me everything I said was pointless.”

“I didn't say that either.”

“Not in so many words.”
“Well, why listen to me?” Loki demanded, a bit frustrated. “Why believe the God of Lies?”

Stark tilted his head. “Because it was the truth.”

And with that, he ducked under Loki’s arm and headed for the kitchen. Loki let him, resigned.

He had to fix the mess he'd created.

*But why did it matter to him whether or not the mortal was talking all the time?*

Shaking his head, Loki dismissed the worry. A guilty conscience, most likely. It would not serve him well to question the reasons why he cared about Stark’s well-being.

Such a question could only lead to answers Loki wasn't willing to think about.

### 31. *Don't worry about me.*

It came during the night a few days later that Loki found Stark. It was by chance that he ran into Stark but when he saw the dark circles that underlined Stark’s eyes, he was relieved that he had found the man when he did.

Taking a seat next to Stark on the floor of the roof, Loki placed a mug of cocoa on the ground between them and slid it closer to Stark.

Stark eyed the drink curiously before looking at him. “Is that...cocoa?”

Loki shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not.”

Stark reached for the mug and took an experimental sip. “You're up late,” he commented quietly.

“Couldn't sleep. What's your excuse?”

“Same thing.”

Loki leaned back, resting his weight on his hand. He allowed the silence to grow for five minutes and then said softly, “Thor’s friends told me to shut up, once. I didn't speak for a week.” Sensing Stark’s eyes on him he continued, “My silence was partly out of spite, to make them feel guilty.” He sighed heavily. “The other reason was simply that they had hurt me and I didn't want to talk anymore.”

Stark’s watchful eyes tracked the movement of his mug to his mouth. “Why are you telling me this?” he asked finally.

“Because for you, I am what Thor’s friends were to me. Your personality is built around your wit, snark, intelligence, and flirtation. Not talking takes away part of who you are. Should you not speak up more, I will simply engage you in conversation until you talk because I cannot bear to see your silence go on any longer.”

Stark stared at him. It was hard to say if that was because he was surprised or trying to figure out if there was an alternative reason for his honesty.

“When I was eight, I tried to show Howard my robot dog when he was busy working. And when I didn't stop pestering him when he told me to, he backhanded me and told me to shut up.” Stark let out a shaky breath. “And then he destroyed Buddy.”
“That is horrible,” Loki said quietly.

“Well, he was a shitty father.”

“Why offer that information to me?” Loki asked softly.

Stark shrugged a little. “You shared with me. It seemed only fair that I share something too.”

“It is not necessary for you to share with me anything if you are not comfortable with sharing, understood?”

That earned him a startled look, but it was one that told Loki that Stark was silently telling him the same thing.

“Come on,” Loki sighed after silence passed for several minutes. “It will serve us no purpose if we stay out here for the remainder of the night. We both might as well try to fall asleep again.”

“Together?” Stark teased, his voice weak but no less welcome.

“Only in your dreams,” Loki replied back.

Stark laughed, taking Loki’s hand and allowing himself to be pulled up. Together they walked back inside the building and headed for the elevator. And although Stark was still quiet, the dimness in his eyes wasn’t as strong as it had been just half an hour before. Loki was pleased.

*Good.*

Chapter End Notes

I’m sorry for the delay. Because this is a shorter chapter than usual, the next one will be posted tomorrow. Hope you enjoyed this one.
32. It looks good on you.

“You seem...upset.”

Whirling, Loki shot Stark a nasty look as the engineer stumbled his way into the kitchen. “My mug has been destroyed,” he said darkly, “by someone in this building and I intend to know who.”

Stark yawned loudly as he went into the cupboard and took out his standard WAR MACHINE ROXS mug. “Wasn’t me.”

Loki caught a glimpse of his attire and paused in his furious examination of which mugs were missing from the cabinet so he could turn to look at the engineer.

“That looks like my shirt,” he said slowly. “How did you come across it and why are you wearing it?”

“It's a green shirt,” Stark said, amused, taking a long sip from his mug. He offered no further comment and Loki didn't press for one. He knew the mortal was still struggling with memories from his past in regards to talking so he would allow the man to speak when he wanted, as much or as little as he was able.

“You are in my shirt, though,” Loki pointed out.

Romanov happened to walk by the room and Stark cleared his throat, catching her attention. “She’s in green too, doesn't mean she slept with you.”

“I never said such a thing,” Loki fired back.

“You said I'm wearing your shirt. How else would I get it if not from sleeping in your room?”

“Fucking Loki sounds both hot and very dangerous,” Romanov called from what sounded to be half a corridor’s length away.

“She summed me up in two words: hot and dangerous,” Loki smirked, leaning over to take Stark’s mug from his hand and take a sip of his coffee.

Stark gave him an annoyed glare but offered no verbal complaint. Loki held his gaze as he continued to gulp the disgustingly bitter-tasting liquid and then,

“Stop, give it back,” Stark demanded, making grabby hands at his mug.

Loki sighed, mentally smiling at being able to get a response out of the mortal, and placed the mug on the table. “I will have to see if the ghost in your ceiling will offer some assistance as to who broke my mug and then was too coward to come forward with an apology.”

“Maybe they don't want to die,” Stark suggested.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Is that so? Well, I shall just simply have to go on a rampage until the perpetrator comes forward. I placed my mug in the sink last night when we came inside and it was in pieces this morning meaning in the last five hours, someone was awake and somehow managed to touch and break something that did not belong to them.”
“Are we allowed to prank you back?”

“If you think you can handle a war against the God of Mischief.”

“Disaster is my middle name. I’ll be fine.”

Loki laughed as he walked over to where Stark was sitting. Placing a hand on the engineer’s shoulder he leaned down and whispered in his ear, “My colors suit you. You should wear green more often.”

Stark raised his mug in his direction. “Give me a reason to.”

Loki didn’t respond, but he didn’t have to. Instead, he just turned and left, grinning to himself. Stark was just a bit more talkative now than he was in the morning hours. It would be slow going, of course, it would be because it was a process working to overcome the past, but the mortal would talk to him more regularly soon enough, Loki was sure of that.

And Stark was already flirting slightly. That was always a good sign when the mortal was involved. He was pleased.

He could allow his pranks to begin now, for he was going to get revenge on the unknown Avenger who broke his mug and was too coward to say anything about it.

33. Close your eyes and hold out your hands.

The next morning, Loki woke up with red-dyed hair. Furious, he stormed into the communal kitchen where he found the entire team seated around the table.

“Stark,” he growled, going over to the mortal and tipping his chair back so he was looking up at him. “How dare you touch my hair.”

Stark gave him a quick once-over, looking unconcerned. “You’re trying out a new color, I see. Well, I appreciate the tribute.”

“You dared enter my bedroom last night?” he hissed. “This is far different from what I did to you.”

“Um, despite knowing I had nothing to do with your broken mug, you still touched my stuff. And I didn’t dye your hair but thanks for the confession for pranking me yesterday. I’ll get you back, don’t worry.”

Barton looked amused. “I like the red, Loki. Looks...demonic.”

Loki whirled, turning on the archer, and dropped Stark’s chair, sending the engineer scrambling to find purchase with the table before he could fall. “You broke my mug,” he accused.

“Wasn’t me,” he smirked.

“Did you ask JARVIS?”

“He offered no help,” Loki said stormily in response to the Widow. “And now not only is my only cup for tea missing, but my hair has been tampered with and marked with Stark’s signature.”

“It's okay, you know I'm your favorite,” Stark teased lightly.
“Why not just...un-dye it?” Dr. Banner asked. “Or, do you have to re-dye it to get your color back?”

“Have you tried washing your hair, brother?”

Loki glared at him. “Why would one of you use washable dye?”

“Oh, to see you squirm? Had I thought of it, I would have done washable dye just to see you freak out,” Stark admitted.

Loud laughter filled the room and Loki, as well as the others, turned to gape at Thor, who was wiping tears from his eyes as he exclaimed, “Brother, ’tis but a simple spell, one that you can easily reverse.”

“You did this?” Loki demanded, utterly surprised.

“You painted the walls of my room purple!”

Loki smirked. “Brother, ’tis but a simple spell. I would say you could easily reverse it, but you do not know as much magic as I.”

“I’ll change your hair back only if you bring my bedroom back to its regular state.”

Loki waved his hand. “To save myself time from having to find the spell you used, I will allow you to reverse your spell. But if you ever tamper with my hair again, I will end you. Understood?”

Laughing, Thor said a few words quietly and snapped his fingers and Loki could feel the physical change as his hair went back to its normal color. He sighed in relief and then whirled around and left the Avengers to their amusement in the kitchen. He still had to figure out who broke his mug.

And to his utter disappointment, he was unable to. Each Avenger denied involvement and some (Rogers) seemed downright hurt that he wasn’t taking them at their word, and so, in the end, Loki admitted defeat and decided he was simply going to have to get a new favorite mug.

He was just about ready to go to the store when a knock came on his bedroom door. Surprised, Loki pulled his hair into a loose ponytail as he went over and opened the door.

“Stark,” he greeted, surprised. “What can I do you for?”

“You can close your eyes and let me walk you somewhere.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “And why would I place my trust in you?”

Stark shrugged. “Consider it a bonding exercise after our latest argument. I think we could use a little trust between us, don’t you think?”

“No.”

There was a flash of something on Stark’s face before his features were impassive. Loki was about to inquire when Stark shrugged and said, “Suit yourself. Good luck with your mug hunting.”

The engineer got as far as halfway down the hall before Loki sighed and called, “Wait.”

Stark stopped and turned to look at him, raising an eyebrow.

“This adventure you plan to lead me on, is it just for you and me?”
“I’ll be sure to have everyone pull out their knives and guns as we walk past,” Stark snarked.

_Defensive._

Loki took a small breath. “Can I give you my word not to open my eyes or do you need to blindfold me?”

Stark looked surprised but recovered quickly, saying, “A blindfold, eh? Kinky. Nah, your word will do.”

Loki held out his hands. “Then lead away.”

Stark walked over to him and took hold of him by placing one hand on Loki’s arm, the other on his hip. Loki allowed the contact and then allowed Stark to lead him down the hallway.

“Stairs or elevator?”

“Be adventurous, Stark. Stairs.”

“Great. I'll direct you but please don't make us fall. You won't be hurt but I'll never walk again.”

Loki paused. “Perhaps, the elevator then.”

“Nope, we're already at the stairs, which is what you wanted to do. Now, step down slowly. It's not as far down of a step as you might think.”

Loki put his foot out cautiously and once he felt the stair beneath him, stepped down.

“Great, now we only have seventeen more. Step.” Loki did so. “Step. Step. Look at this, we're not dead yet. Step. And step…”

But something went wrong. Loki put his foot down but overestimated the distance, causing him to lose his balance. He stumbled down the next few stairs, knocking into Stark who cursed and tried to stabilize them. But Loki's collision had been too much force and they both tumbled a few more stairs before Stark shoved Loki backward so he fell on his back on the stairs where they had just fallen from instead of going down as well.

Loki landed and immediately threw out his hand, a bolt of his magic going to Stark and stabilizing him before he could fall the rest of the way. “Are you alright?” he demanded, sitting up and looking down at the Avenger sat several stairs below him.

Stark burst into laughter. “That was great. Thanks for the save, Reindeer. We should try that again.”

“You want to try that again?”

“Yes.”

“Why in all the realms would you possibly want to do that again?”

“Because you were trusting me to lead you. You weren't cheating; I was watching. And you saved me from breaking my back. I want to try it again, make it to the bottom.”

Loki stared at him for a long moment. “I do despise failure… alright, we can try it once more.”

Cheering, Stark ran up the stairs and to his side, pulling Loki up before he continued to the top of the stairs. Loki followed him and before they could begin he said, “I want you to allow me to lead you
up once we have successfully gotten to the bottom.”

Stark shrugged. “Sure.”

Although surprised at the ease of the agreement, Loki didn't say anything. He just closed his eyes and allowed Stark to lead him step by step to the bottom of the stairs.

“As fun as this is- I know, we’re building trust- I brought you to my workshop to give you something.”

“Oh?” Loki asked in amusement as he took a step down. “What is the occasion?”

“Occasion?”

“For giving me a gift.”

Loki could practically hear Stark's grin as he said, “Who needs an occasion? Maybe I just wanted to get you something.”

“Get me something?” Loki mused, taking another step and, feeling confident with Stark’s hand on his arm to stabilize him, stepped down two more steps. “Could it be you have a crush on me?”

“You wish,” Stark murmured as Loki reached solid ground. “Alright, you can open your eyes now. Unless you want to be surprised when I give you my gift.”

“Lead me,” Loki ordered, keeping his eyes closed.

Laughing, Stark took Loki’s hands and pulled him into the workshop. After being guided into a seat, Loki kept his eyes closed and waited for a moment as he listened to the sounds of a drawer being opened and closed. A moment later, a small box was placed in his hand.

Loki opened his eyes, looked at the box, and then opened it. Eyes wide, he looked up at Stark. “Did you make this?”

“No. Custom ordered it though. Had it delivered overnight.”

“You are a peculiar mortal,” Loki mused. “Who else would get me an exact replica of my favorite mug just to replace the one that was wrongfully broken?”

Stark shrugged. “Someone who is as cool and amazing as me, who else would bother?”

Loki laughed. “That is probably true.”

But when he finished examining his mug and looked back at Stark, there was something tense in his expression that had not been there before. Frowning, Loki questioned, “Are you alright?”

Stark blinked. “I have a project I forgot to finish,” he answered slowly, looking away as he rocked on his heels. He didn't meet Loki’s eyes.

He's lying, Loki realized numbly as he looked at the mortal. He's never lied to me before.

He considered confronting him a brief moment but he knew nothing would come of that. Whatever had caused Stark’s mood to darken, he didn't want to talk about it. And just this once, Loki wouldn’t pry.

“Very well, then, I'll leave you be. But I expect you to allow me to walk you up the stairs before the
“week is over,” he called over his shoulder as he headed for the door with his mug in his hand. He had just reached the top of the stairs when he realized he had never thanked Stark for his present. He jogged back down the stairs and was about to step back inside the workshop to give his thanks when he saw Stark sitting on the floor, back against the wall with his head in his hands.

A moment later, the windows were darkened and Loki and the rest of the world were closed off from Stark once again.

Loki didn't understand what had just happened, both because of why Stark had wanted to complete the trust exercise with him and why Stark was pushing him away now. *What had happened to upset Stark so badly?*

(And what was he going to do to make Stark open up to him more so he could get the mortal’s trust?)

34. *That’s okay, I bought two.*

The next day Loki, determined to get into the workshop so Stark wasn't alone, knocked on the door to announce his presence before he scanned in and entered the workshop.

“Steve, for the last time, I'm fine, now would you please leave me alone?” called Stark’s tired voice. “I know you want to help and I appreciate it, really I do, but-”

“Stark?”

There was a pregnant pause. “Loki, is that you?”

Loki looked around the workshop, not finding Stark in the space. “Yes, where are you?”

Hearing a noise to his left, he walked in that direction just as Stark scooted out from under a car engine. Raising an eyebrow, Loki said, “You look hard at work.”

“Nah, this is a project. Not a requirement.”

“How many ‘requirements’ do you have?” Loki asked, genuinely interested as he examined the car.

“I don’t count,” Stark replied absently as he wiped his hands on a grease rag. Loki took one look at him and began to smirk. “What?” Stark demanded. “What’re you laughing for?”

Approaching, Loki stopped in front of him and raised his hand, using his thumb to wipe a grease mark from Stark’s cheek. “You need a shower after this 'project' of yours,” he teased.

“You gonna join me and make sure I get myself all squeaky clean?”

Loki’s eyes gleamed at the idea. “That's a tempting offer.”

Stark laughed bitterly. “You have no idea how much it really isn't.” Throwing his rag onto his desk, he went over to the sink to wash his hands.

“Nonetheless, you need to take a shower,” Loki pointed out, frowning internally at Stark's bitter tone towards himself. “We're going out.”

“We are?”
“Yes. I am taking you to my favorite cafe.”

Stark looked a hint amused. “Okay...is there any particular reason why?”

“Because I want you to experience my favorite pastry, now come on and get ready so we can be there when it opens!” Loki urged, not really lying but definitely not telling the truth either.

“I...okay, yeah, I'll go get ready, then.”

“Good. I'll meet you in the garage in half an hour.”

The drive to the cafe was filled with mindless chatter and some harmless banter, and every now and then Loki would look away from the road to glance appreciatively at the outfit Stark was wearing. He was dressed in tight black jeans that highlighted his curves perfectly and a light blue polo shirt that countered his brown eyes in a stunning contrast. He was, by all means, admittedly impressed by Stark's ability to clean up so nicely (and so effortlessly.)

When he parked the car and went to open Stark’s door, the cafe’s sign was just changing from closed to open. Pleased, Loki looped Stark’s arm into his own and walked them into the restaurant.

“Oh, sweet pea, you're back!” Margaret greeted him with a pleased smile when she saw him enter with Stark. “I was getting worried that you weren't coming back.”

“Not even a remote possibility of that occurring,” Loki promised as he pulled away from Stark to give the elder a hug. “Are you well?”

“Business has increased and I got hired to cater for a baby shower, so I can't complain,” she smiled. “Your usual table?”

Loki glanced back at Stark who was standing somewhat awkwardly a few paces away as he watched their interaction. “Please,” he agreed, stepping back to place a hand on Stark’s arm to guide him over to the corner table. “And how does Joe fare these days? Is he in better spirits?”

Margaret gave him a tight-lipped smile. “Somedays he remembers, others he doesn't. It's a struggle but he's my Joe and I'll always love him, just as I know he’ll always love me.”

“Of course, he will,” Loki murmured as he took a seat across from Stark at the table. “May we have my usual, but for two?”

Seeming to now realize that Loki wasn't alone, Margaret turned and gave Stark a smile. “Mr. Stark,” she greeted. “How are you, dearie?”

“Learning more about Loki by the minute,” Stark shrugged, smiling easily at her. “I've been informed that this is the best cafe in the city.”

She blushed. “I'm not sure about that, but I'm pleased he thinks so,” she said as she pat Loki’s shoulder. “Let me get your drinks now, and I'll be back shortly with your pastries.”

“Thank you,” Loki murmured as she left. He turned to look at Stark. “It is a quaint little place, you must admit.”

Stark propped his chin on his hand and grinned at him. “It is, but at the moment, more so because it seems to be magical.”

“Magical?” Loki raised an eyebrow. “How so?”
“You're being nice, you're complimenting the shop owner, inquiring about her husband’s well-being, and being polite. I don't think I've ever seen you do any of that before and you've lived with us for...how many months now? Four? Five? Six? I honestly have no idea but the point is, this is the first time you've ever been nice to anyone, meaning this cafe must be working some kind of magic.”

Loki nodded thoughtfully. “Or, perhaps, I just simply find Margaret worthy of my respect.”

Stark gasped, clutching at his heart dramatically. “Are you saying you don’t find me worthy of your respect? How dare you!”

“You could put it that way,” Loki consented, nodding slightly despite his smirk.

“You ass,” Stark snorted, looking amused. “So, I take it you've been coming here for months?”

“Since the weeks leading up to my attack on your city,” Loki confirmed. “I was hardly kind to Margaret or her husband but they refused to turn me away. Margaret reminded me of my mother and when I was free from Thanos’s control, I returned here to apologize and to enjoy what was becoming my traditional order.”

“Thanos?”

Loki closed his eyes briefly. He hadn't meant to say that. “I was under his control when I attacked New York,” he said hoarsely.

Stark eyed him for a moment, assessing, and then said, “So, what exactly is your ‘traditional’ order? Is it something exotic that’s going to make me gag? Or is it something that's going to be way too sweet and make me gag?”

Recognizing Stark’s offered chance to change the subject, Loki took the opportunity gratefully and with grace as he shook his head, winked, and said, “You'll find out soon enough.”

“I knew I shouldn't have come,” Stark groaned. “This was just a ploy to get me to eat some of your poisoned food, wasn't it?”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “You think I would bother myself with poisoning some of my favorite food just to harm you? Don't be ridiculous. There are much easier ways to harm you than by using poison.”

Stark nodded thoughtfully, something tensing in his expression before it was wiped of emotion. “Alright, fair enough, that's a good point. And really, it's all about the creativity when you're trying to kill me, right?”

“The strangulation and throwing you out the window was quite boring,” Loki agreed. “Definitely not one of my prouder moments.”

“Don't worry, Reindeer Games, you've got the rest of my life to kill me,” Stark said consolingly, patting Loki’s arm. “I'm sure you'll get your chance one day soon.”

Loki blinked at him. “Why do you joke so calmly about your own betrayal?”

“Betrayal?” Stark laughed. “Snowflake, it's only a betrayal if I'm not expecting it.”

“And you are?”

Stark leveled him with a dark look. “My godfather-slash-mentor-slash-father-figure ripped my heart
out of my chest. So yes, I'm expecting your betrayal. Yours and everyone else’s in my life because there is no such thing as being trusting. That’s called being a fool.”

It was a near thing but Loki managed not to smile. Managing to betray Stark might just be more of a challenge than he had anticipated.

Bring it on.

35. After you.

That evening, Loki walked into the kitchen for dinner to find Stark dressed in a suit, quickly gulping down a cup of coffee as Captain Rogers watched disapprovingly.

“You could just have a quick bite,” Rogers said as he held out a plate of food.

Stark shrugged, gulping down his last sip of coffee as he said, “Don't be such a mother hen, Steve. I'll pick up something to eat after the meeting.”

“We both know you won't!” Rogers called.

Turning from the doorway, Stark winked at Rogers before he turned around to leave, walking directly into Dr. Banner. “Hey, Tony,” the doctor greeted with a smile, hands trailing down the engineer’s arms as he looked at him fondly. “Late to a meeting?”

“Yep and Pep’s gonna kill me,” Stark moaned. “It's all over, Bruce, there will be no more sciencing for us cause she's gonna kill me and-”

“I won't let her do that. But I will allow her to yell at you,” Dr. Banner said as he fixed Stark’s tie.

Patting Dr. Banner’s shoulder in thanks, Stark turned to leave. “Where are you going, Friend Tony?” Thor asked as he entered the room.

“To my execution!” Stark yelled cheerfully. “Nice knowin’ ya, buddy!”

Thor shot Loki a horrified look. “If he is in danger, we must protect him!”

Loki rolled his eyes. “He’s late for a meeting so he thinks he will get in trouble.”

“Pepper’s fierce,” Dr. Banner commented as he took a seat at the table. “And not afraid to call him out when he does something stupid.”

“I didn't do anything!” Barton exclaimed from the doorway, swiping a taste of the food on the stove before he plopped down in a seat.

“We're talking about Tony,” Dr. Banner said, amused. “And as I was saying, Pepper’s fierce and she may yell at him for being late, but she has the biggest soft spot for Tony.”

Rogers shivered slightly. “She’s as terrifying as Peggy was,” he admitted. “When I first met her-”

“Did she give you the shovel talk?” Barton asked gleefully.

Rogers blushed bright red. “No, Clint!”

The archer shrugged. “Sorry, Cap, it wasn’t an unwarranted question. You look at Tony like he’s the
sun, moon, and stars.”

“He’s sweet once you get past his outer, rougher exterior,” Rogers defended, blushing a bit more.

Loki raised an eyebrow, thinking. *Was he going to have competition for Stark’s attention?*

He would rather not have to concern himself with an additional challenge but, if he had to, well, it would add to the amusement. He supposed he could deal with Rogers’s crush if he had to.

Redirecting his attention back to the conversation, Loki listened with interest as the team teased Rogers for his crush. It was quickly becoming apparent that Rogers might just actually have a crush on the engineer and if he did, well, Loki would have to up his game if he wanted to gain Stark’s affection so he could gain the mortal’s trust so he could use the mortal to overthrow the Avengers.

It would be a fun challenge. He couldn’t wait for it to begin.

36. *We'll figure it out.*

It was close to midnight when Stark finally entered the Tower. Closing his book softly Loki called from the common room, “That must have been a long night.”

“Jesus Christ,” Stark swore, clutching at his chest as he went into the kitchen. “Don’t scare me like that.”

“I’m afraid I’m just a lowly god, not Christ himself,” Loki responded, amused, as he stood up and followed Stark into the kitchen. “There’s a plate of food for you in the refrigerator if you want to heat it up.”

“Steve’s such a mom, I swear, but I ate out with Pepper after the meeting.” Stark gave a small but fond smile at the mention of the captain before continuing, “I’m actually just here for- ow- a glass of water.”

Loki frowned at the pained admission. “Why are you in pain?” he questioned curiously as he took a seat at the counter.

“Reactor’s being a bitch,” Stark shrugged as he absentmindedly rubbed his hand on his chest over the metal casing. “But that’s nothing new.” He eyed Loki oddly. “Why does it matter to you anyway?”

“Merely curious.”

“Uh huh.” Stark frowned at him. “Okay, well, just as a reminder, if you’re asking because you’ve decided pulling my reactor out of my chest is going to be how you decide to kill me, I’d like to warn-slash-remind you that JARVIS will kill you before my arc is even halfway out of my chest.”

Loki raised an eyebrow at him. “Why must you always assume the worst about me?” he sighed, partly hurt but not willing to admit that. “I was informed at dinner today that Agent Romanov has betrayed you before, yet you assume it is I who would kill you and not her.”

Stark folded his arms over his chest. “Uh, I don’t trust her either. I don’t trust anyone, remember? Except maybe Steve. He’s too good for this betrayal thing. Oh, and Bruce too. He’s too kind and sweet to betray me. Anyway, point is, you just seem to be more of a threat than Natasha is.”
“Have I not proved myself trustworthy to you after saving your sorry self during multiple battles when you were in trouble and required assistance?”

“Uh, yeah, no. That just proves that you’re my teammate, which, frankly, is more than I have ever imagined you and I would be.”

“For all your flirting, you never considered the idea that I would take you up on your offer and pursue a relationship with you?”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, snowflake, but every time you and I have flirted, it’s always been of a sexual nature and last time I checked, being fuck-buddies would not put us in a relationship.”

“I see,” Loki hummed. “Well, that is a shame.”

Stark blinked, looking utterly floored all of a sudden. “Hang on, when you took me to that cafe, that wasn’t a date, was it? Because you and I are not dating and—”

“It was not a date,” Loki confirmed. “Believe me, if it was, you would have known.”

“Oh, good,” Stark sighed, slumping. “That was terrifying.” He finished the rest of his water and put his glass in the sink before he said, “Well, goodnight, Loki. I’m off to the shop for the night.”

“You’re not going to bed?”

“Nope,” Stark said, punctuating the ‘p’ sound with his mouth. “I don’t sleep that much. You’ll realize that the more time you spend out of that bedroom of yours. Or the more you come out of your bedroom in the middle of the night and find me cooking at four am, whichever happens more often. Anyway, goodnight!”

Loki looked after him for a moment before he called, “You are an odd mortal, Stark.”

Laughter rang in the hallway. “Don’t I know it!” Stark shouted.

A sudden thought came to him and Loki leaped out of his seat, jogging down the hallway to catch up to Stark before he could get on the elevator. “Uh, can I help you?” Stark asked, raising an eyebrow.

“What are you doing about your chest pain?”

Stark narrowed his eyes at him. “Goodnight, Loki,” he said pointedly, stepping onto the elevator when the doors opened. Sighing, Loki nodded and said goodnight before he went to the communal living room to retrieve his book before he returned to his room.

He might just have to do some research into Stark’s reactor. If he could come up with a solution for Stark’s chest pain...well, it might just help him get into Stark’s good graces and hopefully earn his trust (a little) as well.

(Though, a part of him did worry for the mortal. With Stark's lack of sleep and his constant work ethic, any problem regarding his chestpiece was...worrying.)
An undercover assignment forces Loki and Tony to not only work together, but to trust each other as well.

Warnings for sexual harassment. Please do not read #37 if this is triggering to you.

37. Can I kiss you?

“Must we?” Loki sighed, staring at the director in annoyance. “Why can't the captain go in my place? He and Stark actually care about each other for one thing and secondly, they already act like a couple in love.”

Fury leveled him with an unwavering one-eyed look. “You and Stark are both divas, I'm sure you can make it look realistic.”

Loki sighed, annoyed. “Let me put it this way, you're trusting me to have Stark’s back if something goes wrong.”

Stark gave a frustrated sound. “You might as well call Hammer at this point. Even he and I could make it look believable.”

“Hammer?”

“Justin Hammer, my enemy. Tried to kill me at least five times now,” Stark responded. “Pick up your game, Reindeer Games, he's already at five and you’re only at two.”

“Maybe I'll use this mission to make it three,” Loki mused.

Rogers looked horrified. “Director…”

“He wouldn't incriminate himself in front of us or let on in front of the person he wants to kill.”

Thor coughed loudly, saying nothing.

Loki smirked. “No, of course not. Well, since I have no choice in the matter, I guess I will go find something suitable to wear.”

Once he had returned to his bedroom, he began grinning, finally able to show how he truly felt about the mission. The mission was perfect. He and Stark were going to be undercover together as a couple. Of course, Stark would be acting under a slight but careful disguise so he didn’t look too much like himself, and he, of course, would be doing the same in order to secure their covers.

But the perfect part of the mission was that if danger were to befall them and he was to save Stark, he might just earn a sliver of trust from the engineer.

Loki truly hoped something would go wrong so he could swoop in and save the day.
That night he and Stark were dropped off in front of a high-class building by a small, privately hired limousine. They took a moment to compose themselves, Loki fixing Stark’s tie calmly.

“Ready, lover boy?” Stark teased, his eyes glimmering.

“Of course. Are you?” Loki eyed Stark, muttering, “You look a little too eager, Stark. Enjoying the idea of being my lover?”

“Nope,” Stark said cheerfully. “Just thrilled that criminals hate us so much, they throw a secret gala where they dress like us and discuss evil business. It's rewarding.”

“Rewarding?” Loki repeated as they walked hand in hand into the dance hall together.

“Yep, shows we're a force that worries them.” Stark leaned against him slightly as they paused in the doorway. “Perk up, we're supposed to be madly in love gangsters.”

As many eyes fell on them, Loki leaned over and murmured in Stark’s ear, “Would the cover of two lovers whispering dirty promises in each other’s ears be realistic enough?”

Stark smirked, licking his lips as he looked up at Loki. “My, my, unable to resist me, are you?”

Loki wrapped his arm around Stark’s waist, pulling him closer. “In this outfit, yes,” he purred. “It makes you look positively delectable.”

“Gentlemen,” a voice sounded from behind them and they turned together to find a smaller but well-built, heavily tattooed man looking at them cautiously. “You are new to this establishment.”

“We are,” Loki agreed. He gestured at himself and then at Stark. “I trust you can tell who we are?”

“Loki the criminal turned ‘Avenger’ and Tony Stark the billionaire himself.” The man looked pleased. “Solid covers, both of you. If you look around, I believe you will find many Captain Americas and Thors have joined this party as well.”

Stark grinned. “Any Batmans?”

“Yes, as well as Wonder Woman, Batgirl, and Superman.”

“A party full of heroes,” Loki smirked. “I can appreciate the irony. But I highly doubt the true ‘heroes’ would be so flattered by our dedication.”

The man laughed. “I'd kill to see their faces when they hear about this operation. Enjoy yourselves,” he said before leaving them alone.

Stark looked at him, holding his arm as his eyes gleamed. “Yes, let's enjoy ourselves,” he decided, teasing Loki’s composure by bringing his other hand to the small of Loki’s back. “Who should we talk to first?”

“Our friend should be dressed as Thor,” Loki said quietly. “So, shall we mingle and get to know our fellow heroes before we find our companion?”

“Let's,” Stark agreed. They walked hand in hand over to the bar where Loki grabbed two cocktails. He discretely hovered his hand over them and changed the liquid from alcohol to a soda, all without changing the appearance of the drink, before handing a glass to Stark.

He received a grateful nod in thanks and they were silent as they looked around the dancefloor. “I'm one of nine Iron Mans,” Stark mused. “There are six Thors and eight Caps. And seventeen Wonder
“Women.”

“Yes, well, criminals often times have a beautiful woman hanging on their shoulder,” Loki responded quietly. “And to wear an outfit like that? Must be a tease for the men and empowerment for the women.”

Stark shrugged. “Personal experience, I take it?”

Loki laughed somewhat bitterly. “Not really.” *Not with my true heritage and Thor being my older brother.*

Very few women had shown an interest in him and those who had had either wanted sex or wanted something from him personally. He had found it easier to seduce the woman himself if he wanted her or to simply just find a form that suited him and the woman (or man) so he could have sex and his partner (and himself) would be pleasured. Relationships...didn't work. At least, not for him. One night was simply easier, in all ways considered.

“That's surprising.”

Loki turned to look at Stark. “What is?”

“The fact that...hey, there's our guy.”

Loki didn't follow Stark’s eyes right away but when he did, he saw the tattoo on the man’s bicep that had been listed on SHIELD’s list of identifying marks.

“I have an idea,” he murmured. “Why don't we walk around, get to know a few of the people.”

“Mm, good idea but...” Stark drained his glass and set it on the counter. “We could always dance,” he suggested, his eyes raking over Loki’s body slowly.

“You just want to feel my body against yours,” Loki pointed out even as he finished his own glass and put it on the counter. “Why not wait until the slow dance before you ask me to dance?”

Stark considered the offer and nodded. “Deal. To save time, why don't... *hello.*”

Loki turned and plastered a pleasant smile on his face at their suspect, who had come over and had put a hand on Stark’s arm.

“Hello, Tony,” the man said in a voice that was raspy and sounded as if he truly had just been laid. “Where have you been my whole life?”

Stark raised an eyebrow at him. “Flying around in my red-and-gold armor and fucking Loki on the side,” he said in response, teasing the man. “I take it you've been using hammers and making it storm?”

The man laughed, his blue eyes darkening with interest as he leaned closer to suggest to Stark, none too quietly either, “Why don't I show you my hammer?”

Loki cleared his throat. This man, dressed as his brother, knew that Loki and Stark were dating (they were holding hands, for Norn’s sake, how obvious could they be?) and yet had the audacity to shamelessly flirt in front of Stark as if he weren’t there? He was half tempted to kill the man himself and get their job over with. SHIELD would owe him one, that was for sure.

Stark flinched back as if remembering Loki was there. “Oh, Thor, don’t get me all excited. Not
now.” He winked shamelessly at the man before turning to Loki. "This is my boyfriend. And you already know his name.”

The man- Loki was not going to refer to him as Thor for his own mind’s sake- nodded seriously. “And what do you and Loki do besides sleeping together?”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “You are really asking for that information?”

He received a hard look in response. “You are newcomers here so I won't be too harsh on you but I will inform you of this: in this place, when I ask, I receive.”

Stark tapped the man’s shoulder lightly. “Sorry about him, he can be a bit...overbearing. We’re in the-

“I see,” the man interrupted, looking at Stark boldly, clearly showing where he was looking. “With an ass like that, it's no wonder he’s possessive.”

Loki grit his teeth, seething silently. There was flirting and then there was being downright inappropriate.

Stark laughed. “Why, thank you. You're pretty well built yourself.”

“Perhaps, you'd like to see just how muscular I am?” the man purred, already reaching for Stark’s hand so he could drag Stark off to some back room.

Stark just laughed, taking a step back. “Sorry, no can do. Maybe a dance, though?”

“Mm, a slow one?” the man said hopefully.

“The next one,” Stark agreed.

“Tony,” Loki hissed, “May I speak to you privately please?”

The man laughed. “Oops, guess you're in trouble now. Can I watch as he spanks you?”

“Sure,” Stark winked as he allowed Loki to snatch his hand and drag him away from the man. Loki led Stark out of the dance hall and into a darkened corridor. Once he was sure they were alone, he snapped and he pushed Stark against the wall.

“What are you doing?” he demanded in a harsh whisper.

Stark raised an eyebrow. “What? I'm not doing anything.”

“Oh, as if flirting and promising to basically sleep with some creep who wants to get in your pants is nothing,” Loki hissed.

“What, jealous?”

Loki glared at him. “He sees you as a piece of meat that he can ravish. His eyes keep wandering to places they shouldn't and his hands will be next and you're just going along with it as if we aren't dating?”

“You're totally jealous,” Stark laughed. He cupped Loki’s cheek in his hand, leaning forward as he murmured, “Don't worry, babe, it's just a bit of harmful flirting. You know it means nothing to me. You're the only one I want.”
“I better be,” Loki growled, sensing someone was approaching from their right. He had been right to assume the man would follow them and oh, was he grateful that Stark had followed his lead in keeping their cover even away from prying eyes. “You're mine, do you understand? Mine.”

“Hey, Tony Stark with the really nice ass, is that you?” the man’s loud voice resonated down the hall. “I just asked and they have a slow song going next song!”

Loki looked at the mortal he was pinning to the wall still. He leaned closer and pressed a lazy kiss to Stark’s neck, mumbling, “Get him talking during the dance. We need him to incriminate himself on tape.”

Stark tilted his head to the side, uttering a soft moan as he pretended to be fully immersed in what Loki was doing as he whispered, “He’s into me; won’t be hard at all.”

A loud groan sounded from behind him and Loki turned his head just enough to look at the man. It was hard to see in the darkened hallway but Loki could sense his eyes were blown wide as he stared at them, more specifically at Stark, longingly. “Come on, let’s dance,” the man said hoarsely to Stark.

Loki shot a glare in his direction. “I am dating him, you are aware of this, are you not?”

The man just shrugged as if to say, ‘what can you do’ and Loki’s patience snapped. He stepped to his right so his body was in front of Stark’s and then he ducked his head, slamming his lips against Stark’s as he brought his right hand up to fist the material of Stark’s shirt.

Stark pulled back and looked at him, his eyes wide, breathing quickly. “You're mine,” Loki growled.

“Oh, damn,” the man muttered hotly, sounding aroused.

Loki was about to step back, both ashamed and proud of himself for what he had done to secure their cover, when he felt Stark grab his face with his hands, turning him so they were facing each other once again. He glanced down just as Stark moved, smashing their lips together once more. Heat ignited low in Loki’s gut, moving south as he gave a moan of pleasure and stepped forward, pressing Stark against the wall as they kissed more ferociously.

They pulled back gasping for air and for a long moment they just stared at each other. And then, “Hot damn, that was hot,” the suspect, the idiot had the audacity to say.

Stark slumped against the wall and looked over his shoulder at the suspect. “We put on a good show, didn’t we?” he rasped, glancing back at Loki with an unreadable look in his eyes.

“Yes,” the man muttered, his eyes dark as he grabbed Stark’s hand and pulled him away from Loki. “Sorry, handsome, he's mine for the rest of the night.”

Loki resisted the urge to magick his dagger into appearance and shove it down the man’s throat as he watched Stark be dragged away by the absolute annoying, pathetic moron of a man. He took a moment to compose himself and then he followed them into the dance hall.

The music was indeed a slow song and Loki headed straight for the bar, grabbing a drink and swallowing it in one go as he watched in annoyance as the man held Stark dangerously close during their dance. They were talking, which was a good sign, but Loki couldn’t help but watch in growing discomfort as the man’s hands wandered low on Stark’s body.

He watched as Stark said something, as the man laughed and continued in his movements, his hands on Tony’s belt…
Loki pushed himself off the wall and headed for them, cutting in with a smooth, “He's my dance partner, thank you,” as he stepped between Stark and the man. He held out his hands and Stark reached for him, stepping into his arms in a way that was much different than what it had been a few minutes before.

“You can't take him!” the man snapped at Loki, who just leveled him with a glare.

“What was it you said earlier? You ask and you receive? Well, I love and I protect those I love and you are clearly making my lover uncomfortable so you can consider your contact with him over with,” Loki fired back sharply.

Creating distance between them and the man who was still eyeing Stark hungrily, Loki was silent until he felt Stark lose some of his tension in his arms. “That man is a fucking creep,” Stark muttered. “I can't wait to get his ass and throw it in jail for the rest of his life.”

Loki spun him and then brought Stark back close to him, taking their closeness as an opportunity to say quietly, “Did he touch you?”

“I was very close to kicking him where the sun doesn't shine,” Stark continued darkly. “Maybe I'll still do that. And then I'll hire Nat to have a nice one-on-one on him before-”

“Hey,” Loki interrupted gently, halting their dance so he could bring his hand to Stark’s jaw and make the man look at him. “You’re safe right now. Okay?”

Stark looked at him, really looked at him and deflated, sighing as he slumped just enough for him to rest his forehead against Loki’s shoulder. “What an ass,” he muttered.

Loki kept his hand on Stark’s shoulder as he swayed them gently. “Tony, did he touch you?” he asked quietly. “I will kill him if he did.”

Stark gave a weak laugh. “No, but not for a lack of trying,” he mumbled. “I feel like I need ten showers and he didn't even do anything to me.”

“That's because he's a- what did you call him? An ass? That's because he's an ass. I'm going to go speak with him now and once he confesses, I'll send Romanov a notice so she can interrogate him.”

Stark lifted his head to look at him. “How do you expect him to do that? Just walk up to him and say ‘hey, tell me about everything evil you do?’”

“That's an idea,” Loki said thoughtfully. “Do you want me to-”

Stark’s widening eyes were the only indication that something was wrong and Loki was just about to comment when his name was shouted and he was tackled to the ground, Stark landing on top of him.

Loki managed to look up just as a gun went off for a second time. He threw his hands out and a shield appeared around them, the bullets dissolving as they touched his shield.

“No one says no to me!” the man yelled, not stopping shooting even though his bullets weren't getting through.

People began swearing but Loki ignored them as Stark slid off him and they stood back to back, Loki keeping his shield around them as Stark made a motion, calling for his armor.

Weapons were being drawn and before anyone could run from the hall, Loki created a growing bomb with his magic, throwing it just as the first man made it to the doorway. Everyone who wasn’t
him or Stark was instantly frozen in place.

Loki grinned as he panted through the exertion of using so much of his magic at once. “That worked well,” he said proudly, looking around the room.

Stark laughed as the window shattered and his armor encased his body. “What, didn’t see that coming?” he taunted as he stepped forward and walked over to their suspect, who was snarling and screaming as he struggled and failed to get out of Loki’s hold. “You’re hosting a hero-themed party and didn’t think we’d find out and sneak in?” He raised his hand and his armor fell away from his hand just as his fist made contact with the man’s jaw. “Fucking pervert,” he growled.

Running footsteps made Loki lift his head and he looked up as SHIELD agents stormed in the hall and began handcuffing the helpless criminals. Once the last criminal was cuffed, Loki allowed his magic to recede.

Stark was instantly at his side, stepping out of his armor just in time to take hold of Loki’s arm and hold him steady.

“Should have kept your armor on if you wanted to support me,” Loki grunted tiredly.

“Yeah? I’m insulted. I was able to tackle you, wasn’t I?”

“The element of surprise can work wonders,” Loki said dryly.

“Ha ha, very funny.” Stark took a step closer and brushed away a strand of Loki’s hair from his face. “Well, ready to go back to the Tower?”

Loki looked down at him and swallowed hard, something clenching uncomfortably in his chest. “And celebrate a successful mission?”

Stark shrugged. “Depends. You gonna kiss me again?”

“Not in this lifetime.”

“Then there’s a reason to celebrate, let’s go.”

Loki halted, glaring at the Avenger. “Did you just dare to insult my kissing abilities?”

“Yes?” Stark tilted his head innocently. “There a problem?”

“Only with your ability to recognize an excellent kisser after he has kissed you,” Loki fired back smoothly.

Stark laughed. “You’re assuming an excellent kisser kissed me tonight.”

“Do I need to provide evidence to support my claim?” Loki purred, holding tight to Stark’s hand as the mortal escorted him out of the building.

“Oh god no, kissing you once was more than enough, thanks.”

“I didn’t see you complaining,” Loki teased. He noticed Stark was shivering slightly in the brisk mid-May weather and he silently pressed closer to the mortal as he added, “And, might I remind, you were the one who decided we needed to kiss more than once.”

Stark hummed thoughtfully. “So I was. Must have been a lapse of judgment.”
“Or, perhaps a sign that you cannot resist my charms?”

“Maybe,” Stark mused as they climbed into the back of the limousine. They fell quiet for several minutes as they were driven home and then Stark offered softly into the dimly-lit backseat, “Thank you. For having my back in there.”

Loki looked at him, nodding slowly. “Thank you as well.”

Stark gave him a small smile. “We made a good team.”

“Oh, now you're just being a sap,” Loki scoffed, bumping his shoulder against Stark’s lightly. “But I agree, I guess. You're at least somewhat more pleasing to work with than the rest of your team.”

“Thanks, I think.” There was a pause and then, “Making out was fun,” Stark added as an afterthought. “Kinda hot too.”

“Here I thought you weren't impressed,” Loki teased.

“Well, it's certainly not how I imagined making out with you would go.”

“Oh? And just what were you thinking?”

“Something steamier. More private too.” Stark made a face. “Not in a sleazy dump like that.”

“Having me pin you against the wall as we made out in front of an audience wasn't in one of your many fantasies about us?” Loki raised an eyebrow. “I'm disappointed in you, Stark.”

Stark laughed. “Me too, come to think about it. Well, now I have a new fantasy, I suppose. Thanks.”

“All in the name of keeping our cover,” Loki swore vehemently, laughing to himself at their banter. He loved how sharp Stark was, how he wasn't afraid to flirt with him. The mortal was one of a kind, that was for sure.

“Oh, of course,” Stark said seriously. “You being unable to resist me didn't play a role, no, not at all, right?”

“Certainly not,” Loki sniffed. “I have better restraint than that.”

“Sirs, we are here,” the driver called from the front.

“Great, thank you,” Stark said, paying the man and leaving him a generous tip. He stepped out of the car and Loki followed, the two of them walking into the Tower together.

Later, after the briefing and the celebration of a successful mission, Loki crawled into his bed and grinned to himself. The mission hadn't gone how he had expected it to, but it had gone even better than he had hoped for.

He had made progress with Stark.

Good.

38. I like your laugh.

But not everything was smooth-sailing after the mission. Stark, for all his bravado and his seven-
layer mask of arrogance and nonchalance, was clearly shaken by Brad Dunford and his attempts to get into Stark’s pants while on the dance floor. He was cautious, shying away from any and all touches that he didn't initiate first. Thor, in particular, had been especially chagrined when Stark had nearly bitten his head off for trying to hug him.

The next week passed by slowly, with Stark staying holed up in his workshop for the majority of it so as to spend as little time with the team as possible. Loki suspected it was because he didn't want their pity, which he could understand.

But the team wasn’t treating him any different than usual. Rogers still made him meals and took them to him, trying to get Stark to eat when in the workshop. Dr. Banner still went into the workshop to assist Stark or to drag Stark to his lab so Stark could assist him on some experiment of sorts.

Perhaps they were going out of their way to help him feel safe, but Loki was starting to realize it was because they, as a team, had become more united. They weren't just a team of warriors anymore, they were a team of friends.

He was clearly the exception to that but at least Barton wasn't trying to kill him every time he saw him. (And the sight of Dr. Banner didn’t make Loki quite so uneasy anymore, so there was that.)

The end of the week marked the time for their monthly movie night. They were going to watch some new drama/action movie that had just come out recently and the entire team, excited to see the film, had rearranged their schedules, finished work early, and turned their phones off so they couldn’t be reached just for the sake of being able to watch the movie together.

When it came time for the movie to begin, Loki quietly entered the room and sat down in his (and Stark’s) chair. Rogers was already there and engaged him in a small conversation until the others began to arrive.

All but Stark.

Dr. Banner was the one to call it. “I guess he's not coming,” he sighed, clearly disappointed.

“Who’s not coming?” Stark’s voice sounded from the doorway.

The room seemed to brighten at his unexpected but hoped for arrival. Rogers smiled and Barton cheered as Romanov stood to get a chair for Stark to sit on. But Stark simply waved for her to stop and then walked over to Loki and their chair and simply plopped down, lifting Loki’s arm so he could cuddle against him and rest his head on Loki’s shoulder.

There was silence for a long moment. Even Loki was surprised after Stark’s display of not wanting to be touched over the last week. And then Barton snorted and said, “Figures,” already turning his attention to the TV screen. And that was that.

Thor gave Loki a knowing smirk, one that he very studiously ignored as he looked down at the man cuddled against him. “Are you okay with this position?” he asked quietly.

“Clearly, or I wouldn't be here, now would I?”

He had a point.

“Are you comfortable where you are or should I move so you can-”

“Loki, this is fine. Unless you’re not comfortable. In which case I'll go cuddle up with Steve-”
“I’m fine where we are,” Loki interrupted, oddly annoyed at the idea of Stark cuddling with the captain.

Stark nodded, yawning softly. “Good. Clint, the movie, please?”

“Yes sir!” Barton snapped lightheartedly. “Coming right up.”

The agent pressed play and the movie began. And as it played, Loki couldn’t help but notice just how close Stark was to him. Of course, they had occupied the very same chair many times together without their closeness being an issue but for some reason...this time was different.

Loki was very acutely aware of the arm Stark had draped over his abdomen, just as he was aware of his arm, which was wrapped around Stark’s shoulders. And Stark’s head was on his shoulder, his face close enough to his own that Loki only had to bend down a little if he wanted to kiss Stark’s temple.

Why would he want to do that?

Memories of their kiss(es) at the dance hall suddenly crossed Loki’s mind and then all he could think about was that he was holding in his arms the man who he had pressed against the wall only a week ago, their bodies pressed flushed together as they had kissed with a power that had sent want and desire to every inch of Loki’s body.

Stark snorted at something said by one of the characters, commenting to Barton about it, and the memory was gone from his mind. Loki turned his attention back to the movie, tuning out Stark and Barton’s back and forth conversation until Barton gave an affronted gasp and Stark giggled, turning slightly so he could hide his laughter in Loki’s chest.

Loki smiled down fondly at him for a moment before he turned his attention back to the movie. But he didn’t forget that moment and when the movie was over, after the others had left and he was helping Stark clean up the popcorn from Thor and Barton’s popcorn-throw-in-the-air-and-catch-it-in-your-mouth competition, Loki caught Stark’s hand, making the mortal look up at him.

“What?”

“Your laugh is adorable,” Loki informed him, watching Stark blush. “And I was tempted to cover your mouth with my own when you laughed, to see how it would feel to have that joy inside me as well.”

He hadn’t meant to say that...

Stark gave him a heated look. “Keep that in mind for a later date,” he said after a brief pause. And then he winked. “You can’t get me off your mind, can you?”

Loki laughed. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Uh huh. Keep telling yourself lies if you want but deep down you know you can’t resist my charms for long!” Stark called over his shoulder as he left the room.

Laughing, Loki followed Stark from the room. He knew Stark couldn’t resist him either. But pretending they could just made it that much more interesting.

And he could use that to his advantage as well. If they did enter some sort of relationship, sexual or romantic, it would be so easy to earn Stark’s trust. And then all he’d have to do would be to get the information he needed.
And then he could bring the Avengers down.

Just like that.

39. Don’t cry.

The next morning, after Stark’s SI meeting and his sparring with Thor, Loki went to the workshop. Stark barely glanced up as he entered but he did greet him with a bright smile and a cheerful hello.

Loki took a seat gingerly on a stool (curse Thor for hitting him so hard) and announced, “I would like to learn more about your trade.”

That brought pause to Stark and he sat up tall, putting his tool down as he looked up at Loki. “Run that by me one more time, you wanna do what?”

“I would like to learn more about your trade,” Loki repeated, annoyed. “It’s a simple question, Stark, all it requires is a simple yes or no saying you would be willing to sacrifice your time to teach me.”

“Yeah, okay, but why are you suddenly so interested?”

“Because I understand everything on this planet except how your technology works.”

“I see. No ulterior motives having to do with wanting to operate the Iron Man armor? Because that would be so uncool.”

“Of course not.”

“Uh huh. Well, if you want to learn more about what I do, then you’ll have to spend time down here. And if you spend time down here, you have to know who you’ll be working with.”

Loki frowned. “It’s not just you?”

“Well, it feels like that most of the time but nope, it's not just me.” Stark grinned at him, taking his hand and pulling him over to the corner of the workshop where two odd-looking robots were playing.

“Hey, take a break,” Stark commanded, tapping each bot once on their...head? “Loki, meet Dum-E and U.”

“U, as in me or as in the letter?” Loki frowned.

Stark laughed. “The letter. My old man said I’d never be better than Captain America. I made U to remind myself that I didn't need to be Cap to be worth something. The logic between that and the letter doesn't make sense but I was drunk when I made U so…”

“And how did you decide to name Dum-E?”

Stark laughed. “Howard told me my robots were worthless because they weren't weapons. Dum-E was my first AI and he was- and is- quite flawed. I got called a ‘dummy’ a lot by him, hence the name for Dum-E. Again, I was drunk. Although his coding job is pretty shitty and he could probably stand a huge rewrite and upgrade, I love him just the way he is. And he's much smarter than what my codes credit him for so I don't give a damn what people think so long as they don't insult him.”

“What do you mean he's smarter than his codes?”
Stark frowned a little, looking distant for a moment before he snapped out of it. Turning to go back to his desk he called, “He saved my life.”

Loki gaped. “He did what? How?”

“Nope, enough storytime for one day. Although, I do need to advise you, don’t drink Dum-E’s smoothies. There’s motor oil on them. And he likes to use fire extinguishers so watch out for that. U’s pretty harmless though, but he likes to dance. Right, Jarv?”

“Indeed, sir. I’m afraid his talents surpass your own, though.”

“That’s not possible,” Stark gasped, pretending to be hurt. “I’m much more talented than he is.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I seem to recall you stepping on my foot during our dance,” Loki teased.

Stark raised an eyebrow. “That was you, snowflake.”

“No, it was you.”

“It was you or I won’t teach you.”

Loki glared at him. “You drive a hard bargain,” he grumbled, folding his arms over his chest. “Have it your way.”

“Smart answer. Now, what do you want to learn about first?”

40. I made this for you.

Tentatively, nearly three weeks later, Loki called Stark to his side. Raising an eyebrow at him, Stark lowered his tool and went to take a seat on the edge of the worktable close enough to see what Loki was working on but not close enough to get in the way. “What can I do for you, Rudolph?” Stark asked, wiping his grease-stained hands on a rag. “Make any progress?”

“Depends on what you call progress,” Loki huffed, a bit annoyed with himself. “I can make sense of anything magical if I struggle with it for a long enough time but this, this I cannot compute and it is driving me up a wall.”

Stark looked highly amused as he leaned over and looked at the gadget Loki was holding. “First of all, that was a very mortal phrase you used there, ‘driving me up a wall,’ very American, I love it, and second of all, I love that you just admitted to struggling with something in front of me. That’s a first and I’m going to take it as a compliment because clearly, you’re admitting that I’m smarter than you since I know exactly what I’m doing and you do not.”

Loki glared at him. “You are insufferable,” he sighed.

Stark laughed. “Well, you did ask me to teach you so you should have expected my arrogance in regards to something I literally do for a living.”

“You mean to tell me being annoying isn’t what you do for a living?”

Laughing, Stark leaned over to pat Loki’s cheek. “Funny,” he said, “But nope, that’s just a hobby, I’m afraid.”

“More like a lifestyle,” Loki commented as he leaned back in his seat, stretching before he sighed
and said, “Alright, tell me what I’m doing wrong.”

Stark took the device from Loki’s hand and looked it at for a moment. He gave a command and Loki watched, fascinated but defeated, as JARVIS scanned the device and then made a hologram of it for them to look at. Stark picked it apart slowly, careful to pull apart the outer shell before he began looking at the inner workings of the device.

He gave a low whistle and then gave Loki a sideways look as he murmured, “Let’s just walk over to Dum-E and U, shall we?”

Loki gave him an odd look but stood, following the mortal over to the two happily playing robots. He glanced back at his device that was so far away from them now. “Stark, what are you doing?” he demanded, a little angry. “Why did you make us come over here?”

“Let me ask you something,” Stark interrupted before he could rant at the mortal. “Were you trying to kill us?”

Loki gaped at him. “No.”

“Okay then. Stay here, play fetch with U. Dum-E, stand by with the fire extinguisher.” Stark started back for the worktable but Loki grabbed his arm, halting him.

“What did I build?” he demanded to know.

Stark gave him a long, searching look before he said, “Well, you were very close to building an armor retractor device for my Iron Man suit, which is pretty sophisticated for a beginner but you’re a genius so I’m not surprised. With that said, though, you currently have a bomb sitting on your desk.”

Loki blinked. “A bomb?” he repeated. “And you are going over there to disarm it? What if it goes off while you work on it?”

“Well, that’s a chance I’m taking, now isn’t it?” Stark replied steadily, pulling out of Loki’s hold so he could go over to the desk. “Do me a favor and next time follow your notes as you’re working, okay?”

“I did,” Loki said haughtily, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched Stark take a careful seat on the stool and reach for the device.

“Then you intentionally tried to blow both of us up,” Stark said cheerfully as he carefully, slowly, dismantled the device so the core was showing. “Alright, J, have my back on this one, alright?”


Stark tilted his head slightly and his eyes widened, Loki observed. “Good spot,” he murmured.

“Alright, bring that hologram over here.”

Loki took the ball that U offered him and then threw it, sending the bot speeding happily to the very corner of the workshop, as far away from his workspace as possible. He eyed Dum-E and where he was standing near Stark, already armed with the fire extinguisher, and then he took a cautious step forward.

“You know, you did pretty damn good on this,” Stark commented without looking up from where he was carefully retracting wires. “Only problem is, you connected two wires causing an unstable current of electricity between them; basically, you created a time bomb because once the power reaches fifty thousand kilojoules in the red wire-”
“Sir,” JARVIS said sharply.

Stark glanced at some hologram the AI was projecting and swore, leaping off the bench and scrambling away. Loki leaped forward, throwing his arms out to create a shield around the inventor and another one around his device. A mere *moment* later, the device exploded. But Loki’s shield held, holding the fireball and bits of metal from the device in a small sphered area that didn’t come close to reaching the frozen-in-place avenger.

Stark looked at him, wide-eyed, breathing heavily. “You saved my life,” he breathed.

Loki shrugged. “It’s the least I could for putting you in danger.” His allowed his shields to lower now that the explosion was over, leaving behind a still-burning desk.

There was a “pssshht” sound and Loki watched, completely amused, as Dum-E unleashed the entirety of the fire extinguisher contents on both Stark and the flames itself. Loki burst into laughter at Stark’s repulsed, annoyed look as he swore and began wiping the foam off his face.

A moment later the door opened and the other Avengers, led by Rogers, burst into the workshop. The entire team froze, looking around in what appeared to be both concern and surprise as they looked back and forth between Loki, who was laughing still, Stark, who was covered in foam but completely unharmed by the flames only a foot away from him, and the fire itself, which was being suspended in held in a two-foot circle by Loki’s magic.

Thor was the first to speak up. “Impressive, brother.”

Romanov went to the wall and grabbed the other available fire extinguisher, emptying the contents on the flames.

“What do we want to know?” Dr. Banner asked, looking surprisingly *fond* as he gazed at Stark.

Stark laughed as he accepted a rag from Rogers and wiped the foam out of his hair. “Just an inventing lesson gone wrong.”

“Let me guess, this lesson was called, “what not to do,”” Romanov said dryly.

Stark winked. “Let’s go with that.”

Rogers looked exasperated. “Please don’t get yourself killed,” he begged.

“No promises, Cap,” Stark said cheerfully. “Now, shoo, we’ve got more inventing to do.”

“You weren’t burned, right?” Rogers confirmed, touching Stark’s arms gently.

Stark looked up at him, smiling softly as he raised an eyebrow. “Do I look charred to you?”

“No,” Rogers admitted. “But-”

“You worry too much, babe,” Stark said fondly patting Rogers’s cheek with his clean hand. “Loki protected me. Now, if you don’t mind, Loki and I have some inventing to do.”

Rogers nodded at him, giving him an award-winning smile before he stepped back.

“I’d offer to stay and supervise but I don’t want to stay and supervise,” Dr. Banner chuckled, pausing to brush foam off Stark’s shoulder before he left, Thor trailing after him. Romanov was the next to leave, with Barton leaving only after he had gotten foam and thrown it at Stark childishly.
“You don’t want to be here for the next explosion,” Stark grinned at Rogers, gesturing for him to leave as well when the captain hesitated in the doorway. “You know as well as I do that Rudolph and I would happily set off a bunch of explosions down here.”

“Just for the fun of it,” Loki agreed.

Rogers looked horrified and incredibly exhausted all of sudden. “Tony…”

“You know I’m kidding, Steve. We’re good down here,” Stark reassured. “Now, leave us be, please.” But once the captain left (reluctantly) Stark turned to Loki and winked. “He’s so easy to fool,” he sighed happily.

“I do miss causing explosions,” Loki mused, going over to his burnt workbench and wrinkling his nose at it. He’d have to get Stark a new one now, considering it was his fault this one was burned. He turned to tell Stark as much and his eyes widened at the sight of a now-shirtless Stark approaching him, eyes twinkling. “What are you doing?” he asked warily, eyeing Stark’s widening smile.

Stark held up his shirt. “Can’t wear it when it’s covered in foam,” he pointed out. “Figured you’d already seen my scars so it didn’t matter if I took my shirt off. Besides…” He was now standing right in Loki’s personal space. Loki was about to speak when Stark raised his foam-covered hand and slapped foam onto Loki’s cheek.

Loki gaped at him, ready to protest, only to full out gasp when Stark brought his hand to Loki’s hair and rubbed foam into his hair. “That’s for nearly getting me killed,” Stark said, sounding way too cheerful for a moral about to get executed. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to take a shower and-”

Grabbing his arm, Loki caught him completely by surprise when he spun the Avenger around and pressed him down to the part of the worktable that wasn’t scorched. “You are going to regret touching my hair, let alone ruining it with that concoction,” he hissed.

Stark raised an eyebrow. “Oh, yeah? Whaddya gonna do, kiss me?”

Loki blinked. “That’s the first punishment you can think of?”

“Well, to be fair, at this angle, the only thing I can think of is table sex,” Stark replied. “So, either we’re going to do that or I’m going to take a shower, which, by the way, I recommend you do as well.”

Loki pulled the mortal up by the collar of his shirt so he was sitting. “You are insufferable,” he moaned.

Stark winked. “Second time you’ve told me that today, babe. You’re losing your touch at insulting me, just like how you’re losing your edge on threatening me.” He pat Loki’s shoulder. “Come find me later and I’ll help you make a new armor retractor.”

Loki glowered at him but not even his pride could stop him from going back to the workshop after dinner so he could make a functioning piece of technology. Perhaps it was pride though that had made him go to the workshop because as much as it pained him to admit he needed Stark’s assistance, it was even worse to admit that he hadn’t been able to make a piece of technology that
They worked tirelessly for the next four hours with only a minimal amount of flirtatious banter between them and by the end of the night, Stark was back to working on his own project as Loki completed his own. When it was finally done, Loki snatched the device off the table, admired it proudly for a minute, and then stalked over to the other table. He thrust it into Stark’s hands grunting a short, “Here, it’s yours,” before he left the workshop to go to bed.

He could feel Stark’s eyes on his back as he left but it was the “oh my god, yes, J, we need to test this,” that made him hesitate for a moment, a part of him wanting to watch the display. He waited in the hallway for JARVIS’s response, followed by Stark’s, “He made an armor retractor and I made an armor tractor so I say we take this show to the sky!”

_They were going to test the devices in the air._ Loki so wanted to watch to see if the devices would work but-

“Lokes, you coming?”

Loki blinked, swearing quietly under his breath.

“Come on, I know you’re out there and you clearly want to watch, so come on!”

Loki hesitated and then grinned, calling, “I’ll meet you on the roof,” before he ran up the stairs and went to wait for the Avenger. This was going to be fun.

**41. Go back to sleep.**

“Explain it to me.”

Stark’s eyes gleamed. “Okay, do you remember when we were in the battle the other week and my armor fell off me when I was bombarded with blows in the same spot?”

“Thor caught you, yes,” Loki said slowly. “What does this have to do with-”

“You’ll understand in a moment. What I’m working on is an armor tractor. So, if my armor takes a major hit and a piece falls off- this is possible with the new armor you used your magic to help me create- this device will help the armor basically move to cover the gap.”

“I understand,” Loki said slowly. “And if I wanted to make a device that did the opposite?”

“You trying to make me exposed on the battlefield?” Stark teased.

“Not a bad idea,” Loki mused, pretending to consider the idea. “I was thinking more along the lines of a situation where you needed to be in armor but something required the use of your hands. The retractor would fold back the armor enough for you to work but the rest of you would be perfectly safe. It would be an updated version of what you did so you could punch Dunford yet still remain otherwise in armor.”

Stark gave him a startled look. “That’s oddly protective of you.”

Loki shrugged. “You are oddly always injured. Consider this my way of saying you are always injured and require additional protection that the rest of the team does not.”

Stark groaned. “And that sounds more like you. Thanks a lot for that. Well, you can make one if you
want. The schematics would be pretty similar since yours would just be doing the opposite of mine.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Loki decided that was what he wanted to build. And he did.

Flashforward three weeks and one explosion later and he was standing on the roof of Avengers Tower, watching as Stark’s armor flew over and came together like puzzle pieces on his body.

“Ready for this?” Stark asked Loki. When he nodded, the man then said, “J, you got a camera going?”

“Of course,” came the response from JARVIS through the earpiece he was wearing.

“Great. Here’s how this is going to work. I’m going to get pretty damn high and at my signal, J will use your device to remove all of my armor that controls flight. And I’m going to freefall. And when I give the signal, we’ll use my device and see if I can’t save myself before crashing into a building. Sound good?”

“What if your device doesn’t work? Should I intervene?” Loki spoke up.

Stark’s faceplate raised, the mortal giving Loki an amused look. “Are you saying your device will work but mine won’t?”

Loki blushed. Slightly. “No, I’m not-”

“It’ll be fine,” Stark interrupted, his faceplate slamming into place. “J, let’s get this party started, shall we?”

But he didn’t take off immediately. It was quiet for a moment and Loki could only assume it was because Stark and the AI were having a private conversation. But after only thirty seconds, the Iron Man armor took to the skies.

Loki sat down on the ledge and watched as the red-and-gold armor disappeared into the sky as it got higher and higher. “Enjoying the view?” he called through his earpiece.

Stark laughed. “It never fails to amaze me, how small and beautiful the city looks from up here. I think you’d love it too, to be honest.”

“Oh, I’m quite enjoying the view from here.”

“I’d make a comment about admiring my ass but I’m too far away for that,” Stark laughed. “Oh, well. I’ll be there pretty s-soon.”

Loki frowned at the slight stutter he had heard to Stark’s words. But he never got to inquire because then the earpiece filled with the sounds of whistling wind. “It worked?” he questioned excitedly, unable to see anything above him except for the night sky.

JARVIS spoke up on the line, saying, “Sir, you’re rapidly approaching the buildings. I think it’s time you-”

“JARVIS!” Stark called, his voice filled with fear.

Loki scrambled to his feet, looking up desperately at the man who was falling that he couldn’t see. “What’s happening? Are you unsafe?” he demanded, ready at a moment’s notice to use his magic to
catch Stark if he needed to.

Stark was shouting something, something Loki couldn’t decipher but that sounded an awful like fear. JARVIS was telling Stark his armor had tracted, was back on him, but Stark didn’t seem to hear him. Less than a minute later the armor snapped onto the roof beside him and the armor fell away from the Avenger. Unable to support his weight, Stark uttered a weak gasp and stumbled forward, clearly badly shaken and struggling to breathe.

“Stark?” Loki asked, reaching for the avenger only to catch him in his arms when Stark’s legs gave out from under him. He brought his arm around Stark’s waist and then Stark’s arm around his shoulders as he assisted the mortal into the tower and into the common room. “JARVIS,” he said tensely, “What’s wrong?”

“Sir is suffering from a severe anxiety attack,” came the grim response.

Loki helped Stark sit on the sofa and then he knelt in front of him, floundering as he thought of what to do. He’d had many attacks like this one himself but no one had ever witnessed him having one, nor had he ever witnessed someone else having one before.

“Come on, Stark,” he muttered, at a loss of what to say that would help.

There was a gasp from the doorway and then Rogers ran into the room, glaring at Loki as he sat on the sofa beside Stark. “What did you do?” he all but growled at Loki, wrapping one arm around Stark’s shoulders to pull the struggling-to-breathe Avenger against him. “Tony, it’s okay, you’re safe, come on, breathe for me…”

A sob escaped the inventor and he slumped against Rogers, hiding his face in the man’s chest as he struggled to draw a breath. Rogers just held him, rocking them slowly as he murmured calming words into Stark’s ear.

Uncertain but somehow knowing that he had somehow (unintentionally) played a role in Stark’s attack, Loki let them be and went to his bedroom. He changed and sat on his bed, thinking, and when he asked, JARVIS was honest with him.

“You choked Sir and threw him out of this very Tower, very nearly sending him to his death had his prototype armor not gotten to him in time. And in the same battle, Sir flew a nuke into space and fell through the wormhole, his heart stopping before Dr. Banner’s Hulk was able to bring him back to life. Sir does not have a fear of heights but he does have a fear of falling, which is why I tried to advise him against this display of his just now.”

Loki felt vaguely ill. He really was to blame for Stark’s panic attack. And knowing all the anguish and trauma he had brought to Stark...how could the mortal stand to look at him, let alone flirt with him, share a chair with him during a movie night, or allow him to share in his workspace?

How could the mortal go near Loki when he was the source of so much trauma and pain for the man?
42. Is this okay?

For once, it was Loki who was avoiding Stark. There were feelings of guilt, an emotion that he had thought he had lost the ability to feel long ago. But whenever he saw the mortal in the kitchen or passed him in the hallway, his chest always ached with a pain that made Loki want to apologize for everything he had put the mortal through during his attack.

But he didn't.

So he stayed away, allowing Stark his peace and a chance to recover as he retreated to the privacy of his bedroom. Gone were the days where he went to the workshop and worked alongside Stark, the two of them flirting shamelessly throughout the hours.

His days were once again dull, his life now without excitement as he went through the same routine as he had before he began spending time with Stark. And that was another thing. He had never realized how much time he spent with Stark until the mortal was no longer part of his life.

Of course, it was of his own choice that he not spend time with Stark because he was a toxin to the mortal, but that didn't mean Loki didn't sometimes regret the distance he had created between them.

On one occasion he had been awake at three in the morning after suffering a nightmare, and when he had gone to the communal kitchen area to make himself a tea, he had found that he wasn't the only one awake.

The doors to the balcony had been open and he had been about to shut them when he heard his brother’s voice. Something was said about him, Loki thought, but when he approached to be able to hear better, he found that Stark was now talking. But he left before he could overhear anything further, not wanting to eavesdrop.

As much as it pained him to admit, he...missed the mortal. He missed their banter, the way they could flirt and snark back and forth in a conversation, switching seamlessly between the topic of the conversation and light-hearted insults. The mortal was sharp and intriguing and he...had been the best part of Loki’s day.

And now he was gone and Loki was alone again.

The distance lasted for two weeks. At the beginning of the second week, Loki was stepping around a corner when he collided full-on with another person. Said person grunted, stumbling backward, and Loki acted on instinct, grabbing the man’s arm and stabilizing him before he could fall.

Stark looked up at him, murmuring a quiet, “thanks” in a voice that was completely void of any emotion.

Loki started to say something in response, perhaps, to apologize, but he hesitated at the dark circles under Stark’s eyes that screamed of a severe lack of sleep.

“St-”
“I need to go,” Stark interrupted, not looking at him. “I have a plane to catch for a conference in Tokyo.”

Loki nodded slowly, removing his hand and watching as the mortal practically ran away from him. Seeing his reaction now made Loki kick himself for not realizing sooner how much anguish the mortal had been feeling while in his presence. *How had he not noticed something so potent like that?*

When the hall was empty, JARVIS asked him, “Have you pondered yet the reasons why Sir is hurting right now?”

Loki didn’t care to have it confirmed that he was the reason so he said nothing. But he knew the answer. Stark was hurting because he had spent a continual amount of time with the person- him- who reminded Stark of his past traumas. And now that the central reminder of his trauma was out of his life- again, him- Stark had to go through the recovery process from his traumas all over again.

A few nights later, Loki was awake at half past one when he was cornered in a hallway and a knife was pressed to his throat. Blinking, Loki looked down at Romanov.

“May I help you?”

“You're hurting Tony, you asshole. Stop it,” she growled at him.

Loki frowned at her and then held up his hand, gesturing for her to allow him to speak. “On the contrary, I am making sure he isn't further hurt.”

“By staying away from him?” She raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow and glared at him. “From the way he and Thor praise you, I thought you were supposed to be a genius.”

He huffed at her. “I am.”

“Then what exactly made you think it would be a good idea to suddenly avoid Tony after witnessing him have a panic attack?” she hissed.

Loki froze at the implications. “He can't- that's not why-”

“Then why?” she demanded.

“Because I'm the reason he had the panic attack!” Loki snapped.

“So?”

“So? How is that all you have to say about it?” Loki fired back. “After realizing the pain I've caused him, I thought I would spare him the agony of having to look at the thing that reminded him of his traumas!”

“He cuddles with Steve on the sofa even though Steve reminds him of how his father belittled him because he wasn't Captain America,” Romanov pointed out. “He still talks to Thor despite fighting him in the woods. He still lets me take care of him even though I betrayed him. We've all hurt him before yet he still cares about us. Why would you be any different?”

“Because he doesn't deserve to be reminded of his pain everytime he looks at me!” Loki hissed.

She sighed. “Loki, did you ever stop and think that maybe Tony spends time with you because he wants to?” When he stared at her, she continued, “Don't you think he deserves to know the truth of why you're staying away instead of thinking you're looking down on him because of his attack?”
Loki breathed out slowly, saying nothing. She stepped away from him, tucking her knife away. He watched her walk down the hallway but when she got to the end of the hall, she turned and promised, “If I see that you're hurting him again, I will not hesitate to come and stab you. And you will not get a chance to explain yourself.”

And then she left.

Loki leaned against the wall and sighed. He thought he had been protecting Stark. He hadn't meant to hurt him further.

43. I picked these for you.

It was raining on the day when Stark returned home from Tokyo. Loki had spent the better part of the morning preparing himself for what he wanted to say when he saw the mortal but when he actually laid eyes on him, words escaped him.

He instead was among the other members of the team who went over to greet Stark as he entered the communal floor. Someone said something about him not looking well but Stark just waved the person off and claimed jetlag.

He stopped in front of Rogers, giving him a weak smile as he said, “Happy Birthday, Cap.”

Rogers laughed at the comment, opening his arms for a hug as he said, “You know it's not.”

“4th of July, Independence Day, your name is Captain America… I don't know, sounds like your name to me.”

“Goofball,” Rogers said fondly as Stark stepped out of his arms. “You really okay?”

“Yeah,” Stark sighed. “Jetlagged and coming off a cold- yes, Clint, I do get sick- but I'm fine. Ready to go back to work, I hate business trips.”

“Come out of your cave every once and a while and say hello, okay?”

“For you,” Stark promised, patting the Captain’s arm and he pushed his way past the team- ignoring Loki - and headed for the elevator.

Romanov sent Loki a dark look at that, causing Loki to raise his hands in surrender before following Stark to the elevator.

They didn't say anything until they were onboard and the doors had closed. Loki observed Stark for a moment, who had his eyes closed, and then said quietly, “I have been informed that my distance has given you the wrong impression.”

It wasn't what he had planned to say but it wasn't an incorrect statement so Loki didn't say anything further and waited for Stark’s reaction.

Stark opened one eye and glanced at Loki. “Whose ass do I have to kick?”

Loki blinked at him. “What?”

“It was Romanov, most likely. She guilt-tripped you, didn't she? Sorry about that. She can be kinda protective sometimes, I think so she can make up for lying to me. Anyway, not important. Ignore whatever she said, it's fine.”
“Ignore? Why would I-”

The elevator came to a stop and the doors slid open, Stark stepping off and onto his floor. “Look, it's fine, expected, really, so no hard feelings, okay?” He turned and began to walk away as Loki stared after him, wondering how his attempt to make it better between them had gone so wrong.

So he did the only thing he could think to do. He called loudly, “I wasn't staying away from you out of disgust because you had a panic attack!”

Stark froze and then slowly turned around. “Okay, I’ll bite. Tell me why I should believe that.”

“Your fear of falling,” Loki said. Seeing Stark’s glare he continued quickly, “You were panicking in the air, I heard it. I know of two instances when you fell. One was when I threw you out the window, the other was when you fell from the sky during my attack. It was my fault you had panicked because you wouldn't have your fear if it wasn't for me, so I stayed away to spare you the reminder, which is myself, of your pain.”

Stark stared at him. “I think I might just believe you,” he said slowly. “But I'm jet-lagged and tired and I have work to do so I'll worry about that later. For now-”

Loki stepped forward, crossing the distance between them swiftly so he could cover Stark’s mouth with his hand. When the mortal looked at him expectantly, silent, Loki spoke again. “I am sorry,” he said quietly. “I never apologized but I am sorry for all of the pain I have caused you directly and indirectly because of my attack.”

For a long moment, there was silence as Stark stared at him. And then the mortal nodded, accepting his apology. “Thank you.”

Loki gave him a small, tight smile and then left the mortal alone in his penthouse. He felt lighter, for some reason. But he knew that apologizing had been the right thing to do.

And he didn't regret it.

The next morning, Barton greeted Loki as he entered the kitchen by saying, “Now that you and Tony have made up, it's time for the kissing part. Here's our grocery list, go have fun, and please, if you're going to have sex in the car, be discreet about it.”

Loki raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “I thought we had someone buy our groceries for us?”

“We do but Nat, JARVIS, and I worked together and told the delivery service to cancel our order. So, here's the list, Tony’s getting dressed and then when you return, hopefully, you both will have gotten it out of your system.”

“Clint,” Rogers groaned from where he was making breakfast. “That's enough.”

“Nope,” Stark said from the doorway. Loki turned and watched him as he entered the room, saying, “I've been told and I quote, ‘go out to eat and if the menu includes each other, sounds like a win-win all around.’”

Loki shot the agent an annoyed look. “You have a concerning interest with our sex lives. Are you quite sure you don't want a threesome?”

Barton looked horrified. “With you two? No way in hell.”
“Then stopping trying to set us up.”

“Well, is it working?”

“No.”

“Then, I'll have to keep trying.”

“Clint, continue and I'll team up with Loki in a prank war against you.” Stark promised calmly as he took the list from Loki’s hand. “Now, come on, sugarplum, let's go do some shopping.”

Laughing at the nickname, Loki followed Stark down to the garage. Getting behind the wheel, Stark turned to Loki and handed him the list. “I wasn't there when it was made, so scan it and if you want to add anything, go ahead.”

“Who is paying for this?” Loki frowned, glancing at the incredibly long list.

Stark shrugged. “I do.”

“The others don’t?” Loki demanded, surprised.

“Uh, no? Calm down, Reindeer Games, it's not like I don't have enough money to go around.”

“But that is taking advantage of your generosity!”

Stark turned the car on but didn't make any attempt to back out of the space. “Why is this making you so upset?” he questioned curiously.

“Because you are letting them take advantage of you!” Loki growled, folding his arms over his chest.

Stark sighed, turning to face Loki. “Look, if it wasn't for my money, they wouldn't be in the tower. So if letting them ‘take advantage’ of me means they'll stay, so be it.” Huffing a bit as if annoyed with himself for saying too much, Stark fell silent and pulled the car out of the space.

Loki just gaped at him. “What do you mean, they wouldn't stay if it weren't for your money?”

“It's nothing,” Stark muttered, clearly done with the subject.

Loki dropped the subject reluctantly but he couldn't get Stark’s words out of his mind. Did the mortal really think so low of himself, that he thought his teammates and friends would only stick around because of his money?

They drove ten minutes to a store that was bigger than the small, selective one just down the block from the tower, and by the time they had arrived, Loki had added five new items to the list. Four were his and one was Stark's.

“We're going to have to buy two shopping carts at a time because this list has enough food on it to fill four or five carts,” Loki said thoughtfully, handing it to Stark.

Stark groaned. “We're going to be here all day.”

“And you had plans on a Saturday?” Loki questioned, teasing. “Why would you do such a silly thing like that?”

“Because I have a date.”
Something stabbed uncomfortably in Loki’s chest at those words which he defiantly ignored as he said, “Oh? Is it with Rogers?”

“No, Thor,” Stark deadpanned as he gathered twenty red delicious apples and put them in a bag. Loki stared at him, horrified, and Stark held his eye contact for all of thirty seconds before he burst into laughter.


Stark laughed. “It's not with him,” he agreed. “Actually, I have a date with Rhodey, my best friend. He's on two day R&R from the Air Force. He's arriving tonight.”

“And you are in relations with him?”

Stark winked at him. “Ask him yourself. Now, come on, let's finish produce and move on to the meat department.”

Surprisingly, the rest of the shopping went decently quickly for them. When they had loaded two carts of food, Stark had paid and then brought the carts to the car to be unloaded while Loki continued with the shopping. He was methodic, shopping the sales and choosing the items that were going to last the week so they wouldn't go to waste.

He had filled a cart halfway when his phone rang. And it was then that he realized Stark hadn’t come back yet. Digging in his pocket, he pulled out his phone and accepted the call.

“Hey, Reindeer, miss me?” Stark’s voice filled the line.

Loki mentally sighed, relieved that something hadn’t happened to the mortal. “Sure,” he decided. “Mind telling me where you are?”

“I'm on my way back. We kinda forgot about all the bags we would need to store in the car...yeah, so the trunk and backseat and passenger seat were filled with bags so I dropped the groceries off at home and now I'm headed back.”

“I see. Well, do hurry because I'm already a quarter of the way done,” Loki drawled.

“Aww, you're having all the fun!” Stark complained. “I'll be there in a sec.”

Loki hummed in response and hung up, going about his shopping calmly. He had just rounded the corner when he was greeted by Stark’s smiling face. “Norns,” he gasped, startled. “Did you call from around the corner?”

“The other aisle,” Stark grinned. “Where are we at on the list?”

“We've made some progress,” Loki informed him. “Let's see if we can't get it done in another hour or so, okay?”

“Big plans?”

Loki winked. “None that I'm willing to share.”

Stark raised an eyebrow. “Ooh, a date?”

“I'll never tell,” Loki called over his shoulder. Laughter sounded from behind him but Loki ignored the man’s questions about his evening plans as they went around the store and filled their carts.
At the register, as their items were being scanned, Loki caught Stark eyeing the candy display. Rolling his eyes fondly, Loki leaned over and murmured, “Just choose one already.”

Stark turned to look at him, blushing slightly. “What?”

“Choose a chocolate,” he repeated. “We both know you want to.”

“I do not,” Stark said, crossing his arms over his chest in embarrassment.

“It’s a candy bar, come on, Stark, eighty-nine cents can’t hurt. Choose one, preferably before our cashier is done ringing up our groceries.”

Stark ignored him and although Loki couldn’t understand why Stark wouldn’t choose a candy even though it was clear he wanted to, he decided that he would get Stark the candy bar he had been eyeing the most.

Reaching around Stark’s shoulders, Loki grabbed two Kit-Kat bars and placed them on the conveyor belt. Stark looked at him. “What’s that for?”

“You weren’t choosing one so I chose for you,” Loki shrugged.

Once the candy bar was scanned, Stark took it from the belt, still blushing slightly. “Thanks,” he murmured, clutching the bar in one hand as he reached for his wallet with the other.

Having thought about this during the car ride there, Loki reached over and covered Stark’s hand with his own, telling the mortal quietly, “I’ve got this.”

Stark looked at him. “What are you doing?”

“Sharing half the burden.” Loki gave him a small smile. “Stop gaping and eat your candy bar.” He shrugged at the cashier as if to say, ‘geniuses, what can you do?’ and then pulled out his wallet, looking at the total before he pulled out a sum of bills and handed them to the cashier.

The mortal was quiet until they had loaded the car. And then he said quietly, “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would you pay?”

“Because you always do when you shouldn’t.” Loki pat Stark’s arm. “You can drive us home now.”

Stark looked bewildered. “Home?”

“You know, the tower where we live with five other people?” Loki prompted, teasing. “You should know that.”

“You consider the tower to be home?”

Loki stared forward. “It no longer seems like a punishment to live there,” he said softly, surprised at his own revelation.

Stark gave a small, sweet smile. “Home it is, then,” he said and started the car.

**44. I’ll drive you to the hospital.**
It was not the first time he had met Col. Rhodes since he had come to reside in the tower, but it was the first time he had had a serious conversation with the man.

He had drifted into the common room to grab the novel he had accidentally left there, only to flush when he saw Stark nestled comfortably on the sofa in the arms of the well-built, kind-looking man.

“Loki!” Stark exclaimed, looking happy to see him. “You remember my honeybear, right?”

The colonel groaned. “Tony, I've told you about that.”

Stark waved him off, grinning. “You know you love my nickname, Rhodey.” He sat up, calling over his shoulder, “I'm making popcorn!” as he bound from the room.

Loki watched him leave before he reached over to grab his novel from the coffee table. “Are you well?” he asked the colonel, deciding he was comfortable enough to make small talk with the man.

“It's good to be back,” Rhodes said with a small smile. “God help me but I miss Tony when I'm on base or overseas.” He gestured for Loki to sit down, which the mage did cautiously. “From what Tony has told me, it sounds like you and him have some sort of friendship.”

Loki smiled slightly. “I can agree with his assessment of our relationship.”

“Uh huh.” Rhodes eyed him carefully. “Do I need to be concerned?”

“Oh, yeah,” Rhodes muttered under his breath. “Look, whatever you two have going on, I better not hear about you mistreating him or hurting him or I will take leave and come to kick your royal ass back to Asgard. Got it?”

“Do you say this to all this of Stark’s potential lovers?” Loki drawled.

“Just the crazy ones,” Rhodes replied promptly.

Loki grinned. “You're sharp, I can see why Stark is friends with you.”

“And you're an asshole, I can see why he likes you.”

Something didn't sit right with him hearing those words. Loki lost his grin and said, “What does that mean?”

“It means you're a sarcastic, smart little shit.”

Oh. Loki relaxed. “You're not wrong.”

“I know.” Rhodes leaned back in his seat just as Stark reentered the room with a bowl of popcorn in hand. He plowed down on the sofa and wormed his way under Rhodes’s arm, resting his head on the colonel’s pectoral as he munched on a handful of popcorn.

“Enjoying yourself?” Rhodes teased.

“Definitely,” Stark said happily, tossing a kernel at Loki. Instead of letting it hit his face, Loki turned his head so it landed in his mouth. He smiled smugly at Stark’s wide, surprised eyes as he stood.

“I'll leave you two to a pleasant evening,” Loki said. “Rhodes, be well.” And then he left for his floor so he could read his novel in peace.
Two days later he was training in the weight room when a wolf whistle made him freeze. He turned slowly and found Stark standing in the doorway watching him.

“Looking good, Lokes,” Stark hummed appreciatively, stepping into the room as he peeled off his shirt to reveal a tank top underneath.

“Where’s your better half? I thought you would be with him,” Loki replied, going back to his assault on the punching bag.

“Nah, Rhodey had to go back to his base.” Stark sighed loudly. “I miss him already.”

Loki smiled a little. “How long have you been friends with him?”

“Since we met at MIT.”

“That is a university,” Loki recalled.

“Correctamundo. I was fourteen, almost fifteen, he was eighteen. He saved my sorry ass and the rest, as they say, was history.”

Loki contemplated the many and varied implications in those two sentences. “How did he save you?” he asked finally.

Stark came over to hold the bag for Loki, who didn’t have the heart to tell him one true punch from him would cause Stark to fly backward several feet. “I was a fourteen-year-old little shit in a place full of eighteen-year-olds who either admired or hated Howard and, therefore, me. Didn’t help matters that I was a sarcastic, arrogant shit back then; I got picked on a lot and Rhodey stood up for me one day when I was getting my ass handed to me.”

“You weave an interesting story.”

Stark shrugged sheepishly. “Oh, the stories I could tell. But I’m guessing you can relate to some of them about being a genius and having difficulties fitting in because of that.”

Loki swallowed hard. “I can,” he whispered, offering nothing further. But a sudden thought crossed his mind and before he could think about it, he said, “There is a second reason I acted the way I did after you had your anxiety attack.”

What once were open and expressive eyes immediately went dull as Stark gazed at him. “Okay…?”

“The year before my attack on New York, I learned the truth about my heritage. I was both feeling betrayed and furious. I lashed out in my anger and fought Thor; my story ending when I purposely fell from the Bifrost.” Loki swallowed hard. “I, too, have a fear of falling. And being witness to your attack and knowing that what I had done was the reason for your pain and trauma, therefore, your panic attack as well… I felt guilty. And I foolishly, selfishly, stayed away because I did not want to remind myself what I had done to you, just like how I had caused my own fear.”

Stark let go of the punching bag, looking guarded but less defensive as he asked quietly, “How did you ‘purposely’ fall from the Bifrost?”

“Thor and I had been fighting and had both fell from the Bifrost...we both were holding onto Odin’s staff so we wouldn’t fall... I tried to convince Odin I had acted to impress him, to prove I was as worthy as Thor.” Loki laughed bitterly. “I wasn't even worthy of the title of his son. He admitted as much to me. So I let go...and fell.”
He had to close his eyes to suppress the memories that came with talking, *thinking*, about that event. He listened to the sounds of his breathing in the silence that ensued following his story and then he realized exactly what he had done.

He had told a *mortal* about his being suicidal. He admitted to insecurity, to a lack of self-confidence and having doubts about his self-worth and he had told that all to Stark, who was a *mortal*. He hadn't shared those details, that story, with *anyone*. He had never even entertained the thought.

And he had just exposed his heart to Stark for no apparent reason. Drawing in a slow, shaky breath, Loki opened his eyes, prepared for humiliation or a judgment or, worse, scorn.

Instead, he found understanding and compassion in Stark’s eyes in the two seconds it took for Stark to cross the distance between them and wrap his arms around Loki’s waist.

Loki froze. He didn't know what to do. Should he...hug back? Pinch himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming the entire thing?

He was released. Stark looked up at him, his eyes unbearably warm. “I'm glad you're still here,” Stark offered to him quietly, his hand trailing down Loki’s arm gently before the inventor pulled away and walked over to some machine so he could begin his workout.

Loki stared after him for a long moment, his heart pounding. He had laid his heart out bare for Stark to take and to stomp on and Stark had not done that even though he had the perfect opportunity to do so. He had just taken Loki’s heart and gently handed it back to him, telling him to keep it safe because it was important.

No one had ever done that before, not to him. No one besides Frigga had ever truly told Loki that he was important, that his life mattered.

But Stark had just said that. Not in so many words but he *had* said it. Silent tears slid down Loki’s cheeks as he kept his back to Stark and exercised.

Someone... *cared*.

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45. *What do you want to watch?*

A few nights later, Loki was sitting on one end of the sofa in the communal living room with Dr. Banner seated on the other sofa as they conversed quietly and flipped through tv channels when Stark entered the room.

“Hey,” Dr. Banner greeted Stark with a small smile that Loki had come to realize was the doctor’s own smile just for the engineer. “How’s the upgrading coming?”

“'m just taking a break, I'll go back to work in a minute, Howard,” Stark groaned, sounding half asleep and very out of it as he plopped down on the sofa beside Loki. “'m not slacking off…”

Dr. Banner exchanged a worried, displeased frown with Loki. “Tony…”

The mortal froze and then slowly sat up, appearing to be more coherent than only a moment before. “Sorry,” he sighed, yawning as he rubbed his eyes. “Ignore that.”

“You know no one is going to fault you if you go to bed, right? You've been working nearly nonstop down there; go to bed, get some rest.”
“Sleep is for the weak,” Stark waved off. “I'll just take a break and I'll be fine.”

Dr. Banner frowned at him. “Tony…”

“No mother-henning,” Stark said defensively. “I'm-” he yelped as Loki leaned over and grabbed his arm, pulling on him. “What're you doing?!”

“Helping you lay down,” Loki responded, bringing a pillow to his lap and then guiding Stark to lay down so his head was resting on the pillow.

Stark sat up, saying, “Uh, yeah, no, not happening, I've got work to do and-”

Loki shot him an unamused look. “And you're above following the directives of a god?”

Stark actually floundered, looking unsure of what his response would be and what Loki’s reaction would be if he were to say the wrong thing.

“Um...yes?”

Loki raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. He reached over and gently touched Stark’s arm. “Stop fighting yourself, Stark, and allow yourself to rest.”

When Stark didn't look convinced, he added, “You wouldn't want there to be a problem with your repairs because you made them while sleep-deprived and exhausted, would you?

Stark shot him a half-hearted glare. “Fine, you win,” he sighed, but he didn’t lay down. He simply leaned back on the sofa, closed his eyes and mumbled, “Brucie, choose something to watch so you and Loki will stop flipping channels.”

Dr. Banner gave a quiet laugh. “He and I never can agree on what to watch, though.”

“I like anything science-fiction,” Loki informed.

“And I don't.”

“Too tiring trying to point out everything that's incorrect, right Bruce?”

“Exactly!”

Stark yawned. “But taking the mick outta the plot is so fun.”

“A man after my own heart,” Loki said proudly, agreeing completely.

Dr. Banner rolled his eyes fondly. “You and Loki are so similar,” he sighed. “Fine, we'll watch a crappy science movie.”

Stark laughed. “Aw, come on, Bruce. Loki can pick apart the magic, and I'll do the technology, and you can do the science. It'll be great!”

“Yeah, great,” Banner said dryly. “Until you fall asleep.”

Loki grinned. He was sharp in similar ways to Stark. Not quite as sharp, for Stark had a mouth on him, but the doctor was incredibly intelligent and more than capable of making a wisecrack.

“Me? Fall asleep during a movie? I would never,” Stark exclaimed, aghast at the assumption.
“Of course not,” Banner agreed, teasing gently. “JARVIS, I trust you can find us a ‘good’ movie to watch.”

“Most certainly,” JARVIS responded, pulling up the beginning credits to an older space movie that Loki didn’t recognize.

And in all fairness, Stark did give it his best but it was only a matter of time before he slumped over, his head coming to rest on Loki’s shoulder as he slumbered peacefully. Loki looked down, eyeing the sleeping mortal with a mixture of pleasure and disgust.

“Wake him up and I’ll have JARVIS find which movie is least correct about space and magic and have him play it,” Banner threatened without looking away from the screen.

Loki smirked at him. “I offered for him to sleep on me; I will not awaken him.”

“A true gentleman at his finest,” Dr. Banner mused before falling silent and giving his full attention to the movie.

With the doctor distracted, Loki looked down at the mortal who was slumped against him. Stark’s neck would hurt him later for the position he was sleeping in so Loki carefully shifted his position so Stark would be more comfortably placed against him. And then he cautiously lifted his arm and brought it around Stark’s shoulders to keep the man in place.

All of this was done quickly but gently and only moments before Thor happened to walk past the room. He stopped at the talk of magic and then poked his head into the room. He took one look at Loki and winked, causing the mage to roll his eyes.

“Is it a good movie?” he asked the doctor.

Dr. Banner made a slight face. “Sure.”

“Excellent! I will see if our other friends are available and then I will return so we can watch it together!” Thor decided, happy, and bound from the room.

“There goes my quiet evening,” Dr. Banner sighed.

Loki gazed at him curiously. “Would you really have it any other way?”

The doctor took his glasses off and wiped them with his shirt before he put them back on. “No,” he admitted. “Would you?”

Loki considered the question and the implications that came with either his affirmative or negative response. “Most likely, yes,” he admitted. “But in some situations, for some, no.”

“Like Tony,” Dr. Banner guessed.

Loki didn’t look at him. “You might as well restart the movie. You know the others will be here in a minute because they are all incapable of saying no to Thor and his overly-bubbly personality.”

Dr. Banner eyed him carefully, as if deciding if he wanted to question Loki further. Loki didn’t look away, silently challenging him to ask. Dr. Banner looked away first, reaching for the remote just as the other members of the team entered the room, chattering loudly.

No one was dumb enough to ask Loki about why Stark was sleeping on him, but he saw them all looking and wondering to themselves quietly. He’d allow them their speculations. He had nothing to
Although he did ask himself the question: why was he allowing Stark to sleep on him?

46. **You can go first.**

He didn't remember dozing off. He remembered being on the sofa with Stark sleeping in his arms as the team watched the science movie, followed by a second movie, but he didn't remember falling asleep.

He awoke briefly to find a phone in his face, Barton leaning over him as he laughed and took pictures. At that, Loki did try to wake up more fully and shove the agent away, but his right arm was pinned down and he was too tired to actively pursue stopping the annoying mortal.

And when he truly awoke, it was to find a blanket covering *them*, as Loki *still had Stark asleep in his arms.*

Lifting his head, suddenly wide awake, Loki breathed quickly as he looked down at the mortal so comfortably held in his arms, so peacefully asleep. Stark’s hair was ruffled but still decently in place and *Norns,* there was something raw and so very beautiful in Stark’s peaceful expression. Without the stress of the day and the events in his life, Stark looked *years* younger.

It made Loki realize just how much weight Stark held on his shoulders, how much stress he was really under, and how utterly overworked and exhausted the mortal was. The sleep was clearly long overdue, hence why Stark seemed so deeply immersed in it now.

Looking around the dimly lit communal room, Loki made up his mind. He could have them stay on the sofa for the rest of the night, but that would mean having the team witness to them sleeping together in the morning. Granted, the team had already seen them sleep together during the unexpected team movie night… but there was no reason to give them a second viewing.

Carefully sliding out from the back of the sofa, Loki kept his arm in place so Stark wouldn’t slump over and then once he was in a position where he could easily stand, Loki gently, carefully, lifted Stark into his arms.

Dimly-lit lights turned on as he stood, giving Loki a clear pathway to the elevator. “Thanks, JARVIS,” he murmured quietly when the doors opened and closed for him. “To his penthouse, please.”

“Of course, Loki,” the AI said in response, bringing the elevator to the correct floor. The doors opened under their own accord and Loki carefully stepped onto the floor, not bothering to glance around the living space as he walked to the bedroom and over to the bed and gently laid Stark on it.

The mortal groaned as he was set down and Loki froze, not daring to breathe, let alone move. When Stark didn't open his eyes, he thought he was safe but then, just as he began to walk away, Stark’s sleepy voice mumbled, “Loki?”

He turned slowly, feeling uncomfortable even though he knew he had done nothing wrong. “Stark,” he said evenly.

“What’re-”

“You-“
They stared at each other through the dim lighting. Loki cleared his throat. “You can go first.”

“Okay, two things. One, I think we’re at the point where you can call me Tony, especially now that I’ve done basically everything except have sex with you. And second of all, did I fall asleep on you?”

Loki blinked. “Yes. During the first movie.”

Stark- Tony, looked sheepish. “Sorry about that. Guess I was more tired than I thought.”

“Yes, well, I apologize as well.”

Tony frowned. “For what?”

“For magicking away your goatee,” Loki said apologetically.

Tony gaped at him, openly horrified. “You did what?!” he demanded, scrambling to feel his face.

Loki laughed at his scandalized look when he felt that his goatee was, in fact, still there. “Well, I couldn’t let you think you were getting away with sleeping on me without punishment,” he explained. “Your face was hilarious, thank you for being so gullible.”

“Asshole,” Tony muttered, glaring at him for the scare.

Loki winked at him. “Somewhere, deep down, you know you love how much of an asshole I am. After all, you are one yourself.”

Tony made a face. “I wouldn’t say I love that about you but… eh, you’re not so bad.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” Loki admitted, giving the mortal a small smile. “Goodnight, Tony.”

The engineer gave him a soft smile that made Loki’s heart stutter for half a second before he blocked the feeling. “Night, Lokes.”

Loki got into the elevator, slumped against the wall, and breathed heavily. Was he developing feelings for a mortal?

That was not possible. At all.

He didn't do sentiment. He definitely didn't do sentiment with mortals. Or with mortals who were doomed to an exceptionally young life due to a heart problem like the one Tony had. Or with mortals who took it upon themselves to fight evil as if they were near-immortal demigods.

No, absolutely not. There was no way he was even considering Tony Stark in a romantic way, let alone as a friend. He had told himself, he had promised himself that he wouldn't become friends with anyone on Midgard.

He had come to convince Odin and the Avengers that he could be trusted only so he could betray them and rightfully claim some position of power. Developing feelings for anyone, especially the person he had decided to use for his own gain had not been part of the plan.

When had it gone from spending time with Stark to gain his trust so he could use him against the Avengers become spending time with Tony because he wanted to because they were friends?

Where had he gone wrong?
So sorry for the delay, everyone! This chapter has been done for a few weeks, I just never got around to finalizing my editing and pressing "post." The next chapter should definitely be up sooner. Hope you enjoyed the update, though.

Also, Loki admitted to himself that he considers Tony his friend! Granted, he's currently conflicted about it but look at that, they're friends! We're making progress here folks! xD
Chapter 10

47. Did you get my letter?

After having come to terms with these newfound possible ‘feelings’ of his, Loki decided to ignore them and continue with his almost but not really forgotten plan to use Tony by gaining his trust, stealing information about the Avengers and their armor, and then beating them in a surprise ‘betrayal’ battle.

Maybe. The plan was either to ignore the ‘feelings’ he was developing or use them to help gain Tony’s trust. The specifics didn't matter. He normally wouldn't be so obtuse with the particulars but this was a group of mortals he planned to overtake. And Thor. But he knew they (Thor’s naive self included) couldn't possibly be that difficult to fool or best.

He spent the next several days wallowing in self-pity about his possible feelings while trying to keep a civilized relationship with Tony. The engineer didn't seem to notice that anything was wrong or, if he did, he didn't say anything about it. They just went about their days as usual, which involved being together in the workshop having a conversation of snark and sarcasm as Loki worked and Tony assisted (taught.)

A few days after the night when Loki had put Tony to bed, Loki was just about to scan into the workshop in the morning to begin their session when the windows were unexpectedly blacked out and JARVIS announced, “Sir is training with Agent Barton this morning. And he is on standby to assist in the Netherlands, so I believe his workshop has been closed for the day.”

Loki frowned as he headed back up the stairs. “He is being called to arms?”

“It looks that way. I have one recorded call from their government and with it being an isolated but powerful incident, they are keeping it private from the world, thusly why the Avengers have not been called out.”

“Explain powerful.”

JARVIS showed him the video footage that had been sent along with the phone call that had put Stark on standby. Unsettled after watching the robots attacking the technological center, Loki found himself going to the communal living room to listen to the team’s mindless chatter so he wouldn't have to think about the danger Tony was likely to head into.

But he only managed to listen to half an hour’s worth of conversation, inputting his opinion twice, before Barton appeared, followed shortly by Tony.

Oh. Loki swallowed hard despite himself, eyeing Tony’s figure appreciatively through the tight-fitting undersuit he was wearing. “Looking good,” he drawled to Tony.

Tony winked at him, blowing him a kiss.

Rogers made a face before his expression smoothed to one of confusion. “Are we being called out?” he asked.

“Nope, just me,” Tony said cheerfully. “Oh, the joys of not fully being an Avenger. It should be a day’s trip, nothing more. But hey, at least it's not a solo undercover assignment. See you on the flip side!”
“Where are you going?” Romanov asked.

“The Netherlands!” Tony grinned. “You think there's a forest there somewhere that can magically take me to the Neverlands?”

“Neverlands?” Loki frowned. “That is not a country on your planet.”

“It's not.” Tony grinned. “It's an imaginary place from a movie called Peter Pan. Speaking of, Clint, you think I'll meet him?”

“It's a possibility,” Barton nodded, seeming serious.

Thor frowned. “I do not know who this ‘Peter Pan’ is that you refer to. Is he a Midgardian hero as well?”

“Yes,” Tony said as the others said no. He glared at them as he approached the balcony. “P squared is definitely a superhero!”

“He's definitely not,” Dr. Banner responded.

Tony groaned, looking at the bird agent. “Come on, Clint, you agree with me, right?”

“Of course, duh! Who didn't want to be Peter Pan as a kid?”

Rogers raised his hand, smirking.

“Fuck off, Cap,” Tony called goodnaturedly as he leaped off the balcony, only to be inside his armor in a matter of seconds.

Rogers waved at the armor, still smirking. Tony gave them a salute using his armored hand and then he was gone, only a bolt in the sky suggesting where he had gone. Sighing at his departure, Rogers sat down on the sofa. “I don't like it,” he said glumly to no one in particular. “Tony, out there, alone without backup. What happens if he gets hurt? If his armor is destroyed and he needs Hulk to catch him? We need to be out there with him so we can protect him.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Captain, you have gone on solo missions for SHIELD before, have you not?”

“Yes, but—”

“Tony fights to protect others. He may be a civilian but he is not weak by any means. He has his suits and JARVIS for backup, us as well if needed. But we need to trust that he was privately called out because the situation is not grave enough to bring the Avengers to battle.”

It was quiet for a moment and then Barton pointed out, “I think that's the most I've ever heard you say at the same time.”

But it was Thor who pointed out, teasing, “‘Tony?’”

“Oh, shut up, Thor,” Loki snapped. “He asked me to call him by name, I am respecting his wishes.”

Barton stepped forward, eyes gleaming. “Okay, call me Clint then.”

Loki made a face. “No.”

“Why not?” Barton complained.
“I don’t like you enough to do that.”

Barton looked crestfallen until he exclaimed, “That means you like Tony!”

“He is able to match my intelligence with ease, surpass it on many occasions. I respect him for that,” Loki informed. “He is not special for any other reason but that.” Liar.

“Ooh, ouch. Does he know that?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Find some other childish game to play, agent, I have no interest in playing this one with you.” He stood, preparing to head to his quarters. “I would, however, call Dr. Banner by his given name if he were to ask me to do so,” he called over his shoulder as he left the room, leaving them to discuss their inferiority in comparison to Tony and the doctor.

Many hours later during a break from his room, Loki called up to JARVIS, “How does Tony fare in his battle?”

“He has suffered no life-threatening injuries,” JARVIS responded promptly.

“But he is wounded?”

“Only minor injuries,” JARVIS reassured. “If I believe he is in danger and requires backup, I will call the Avengers to assemble and receive permission for their participation in battle while the team is in transit.”

Loki returned to his reading. He had dinner with the team and then afterward had JARVIS send a text to the Iron Man armor that read: ‘Barton is hurt that I call you by name but will not do so with him. Oops. Stay alive so you can needle him later about how you are my favorite.’

The response came a few minutes later in the form of JARVIS telling him, “Sir laughed at your message. He says to tell you he's been your favorite since your attack on New York. And he is proud for that fact because it means he got under your skin with his insult, causing you to become interested in the ‘mortal dumb- brave- enough to take you on without armor.’”

Laughing, Loki shook his head. “He merely was the most interesting because of his stupidity.”

But an answer didn't come to that. Loki had been expecting some ‘hurt’ response or a wisecrack about how he actually is the smartest Avenger, but no response came.

An hour later, at almost midnight exactly, he learned the reason. “Sir is in need of assistance,” JARVIS announced tensely to Loki. “Please proceed to the Quinjet to await further instructions.”

Throwing aside his mother’s gift to him that he'd been studying, a magical journal, Loki’s armor simmered to life on his body as he ran from his room and to the Quinjet. He found the others either there already or mere paces behind him.

“What happened?” Dr. Banner demanded, looking slightly green already as if he knew that Tony asking for help meant he was in serious trouble. The Quinjet started immediately since they were all on board and took to the skies.

“Sir suffered a devastating blow to the chest cavity. Three of his ribs have been broken which is danger within itself but because he is still in battle, I believe he requires assistance so as to not suffer any further injuries that could be potentially life-threatening. In addition, because Sir's armor would potentially be at risk if he were to go to a hospital without someone there to secure it, he refuses to go until someone from the team is there to collect the remains. Due to the location of the injury, I would
be only able to transport some of the armor, but not the arc reactor portions."

Loki looked at Romanov and Barton. “I need SHIELD’s approval to go to him,” he said. “I can get there considerably faster if I teleport than if I wait for the Quinjet to arrive.”

Romanov frowned, thinking.

“How serious are his ribs?” Dr. Banner asked, shaking slightly. Thor came and stood by him, placing a calming hand on the man’s shoulder.

There was a moment’s hesitation and then JARVIS informed, “He is critically injured. His arc reactor’s position has been compromised due to the pressure of his broken rib which is putting a dangerous strain on his heart.”

Dr. Banner looked at Romanov. “Tell Fury that Loki needs to go to Tony. One more hit and Tony could die.”

Rogers was pacing the Quinjet, his armor on but his cowl clutched tightly in his hands. Loki thought back to his last message to Tony and then said quietly, “JARVIS, tell Tony I am on my way.”

Romanov looked at him sharply. “You don't have clearance yet.”

“I was speaking to Tony an hour ago but he never responded. That means he has been injured for over an hour now, suggesting he most likely has other serious wounds that we aren't aware of. JARVIS cannot reveal anything if Tony had forbidden him from doing so,” Loki pointed out. “I cannot just stand here and let him suffer as we wait for me to have permission to assist a teammate.”

“You're going to defy SHIELD?” Barton stared at him.

Thor looked concerned. “Brother, if SHIELD makes a fuss, your agreement with Odin…”

He hated the prisons more than he despised Odin, which was truly a testament to how bad the prisons were, but Tony was critically injured but still fought to protect the people of the Netherlands and to keep his armor from getting in the wrong hands.

Loki shook his head. Tony’s arc reactor had been bothering him for months, causing him more pain by the day. Loki had been witness to that and, if he was honest with himself, he wasn’t sure if his frail mortal body could withstand the damage caused by the chest injury. He wasn’t willing to take the chance.

“I am aware of the circumstances and recognize I have no authority to go to the Netherlands before the rest of you since it is out of our country's borders but,” Loki shrugged, “My teammate will not die today. Consequences be damned, I am going.”

And he teleported.

“Loki, Sir has lost consciousness and is currently out of sight behind a destroyed automobile two blocks to your right,” JARVIS announced when Loki landed and demanded a location of the armored hero from him. With something resembling fear gripping his chest, Loki sprinted the distance between him and the downed avenger, pausing only to demolish any robots that he saw before he was able to collapse to his knees at Tony’s side.

“JARVIS, pull back his faceplate,” Loki commanded shakily as he raised his right hand and held it shakily over the flickering arc reactor, using his magic to plead with the device and keep it shining.
The AI did so promptly and Loki didn’t hesitate to bring his left hand to Tony’s face, pressing two fingers to Tony’s neck to illogically feel for the pulse that he knew was there due to the shining of the arc reactor.

“Turn the quinjet around and send your scans of Tony’s injuries to the SHIELD medical bay. I am going to bring him there,” Loki decided as he carefully lifted Tony into his arms. The engineer’s head fell limply to his shoulder, causing Loki to blanch, but he didn’t hesitate to focus his magic and bring them to the SHIELD facility.

Doctors, alerted by JARVIS, rushed to meet him as he laid Tony on a stretcher. Orders were being given, nurses scrambling for gauze and other medical supplies as other doctors rushed into the room and began looking at the X-Rays and scans that JARVIS had provided for them.

“Is it safe for me to remove his armor?” Loki asked, hand hovering over Tony’s armor.

There was hesitation for a long moment and then the head doctor made his decision. “When I give you the signal, yes. Nurse McCall, stand here please and be ready for my instruction. Dr. Nimoy, you will be keeping the device in place once the armor is removed. Nurse Beckett, you’re on vitals. And someone call a cardiologist!” The doctor glanced at Loki, giving him a tense nod.

Loki waved his hand over Tony’s body and the armor retracted. Once it was removed from the engineer, Loki forced the armor into a flat rectangle that resembled a piece of paper, then used his magic to fold the armor twice before he put it in the breast pocket of his shirt that was safely hidden under his armor.

It was then he became aware of the shouting going on from the doctors and nurses. Odd wires and devices were attached to Tony’s body and the first thing Loki noticed was how the heart monitor was an eerily flatline because the arc reactor had gone out.

“Tony!” he cried out, trying to force his way to the stretcher so he could use his magic to reset Tony’s ribs and heal his injuries himself.

But an orderly followed by three more met him, grabbing him tightly and forcing him back. Loki lifted his arm and elbowed one man in the chest, sending him flying. “Let me be, I can save him!” he shouted, his hands brightly shining with power.

The head doctor turned his head to look straight into Loki’s eyes. “Being an Avenger does not take away the fact that there are a countless amount of lives you took away. I have no reason to trust you so you will not be ‘saving’ Mr. Stark. You need to leave now or you will leave me no choice but to call for SHIELD agents to remove you from the bay.”

Loki pushed one of the orderly away from him, stepping forward as he protested, panicked, “Tony is my friend, I am not going to harm him. His arc reactor has been hurting him for many months and his ribs are pressing against the casing of his reactor- JARVIS told me that his reactor is compromised and that means he is dying- and I can save him!”

“No,” the man said plainly. “You’re not suddenly reformed just because your precious daddy put you down here to make peace. Claire, call security. I want him out of here, now.”

Tony’s arc reactor was still dark.

Loki’s magic built and he threw it at Tony from where he was, hoping that against all odds, his magic would wrap around the mortal’s body and restart his heart. A sharp pain suddenly erupted in his shoulder and Loki gasped silently, fingers reaching to pull the offending dart from the place
between his shoulder and neck that wasn’t covered by armor.

The drugs entered his system and rendered him senseless before he could even see if Tony was breathing again or not.

48. I’ll do it for you.

When Loki sluggishly opened his eyes, he found the unattractive sight of his brother’s face looking down at him worriedly. Making a face, Loki groaned, “Thor?”

“I am here, brother.” Thor frowned at him, looking both hurt and disappointed as he said quietly, “Dr. Brady informed us that you tried to harm Friend Tony. Why would you do such a thing?”

Loki stared at him. “He’s lying,” he snapped bitterly, turning his face away from his brother so Thor couldn’t see just how strongly his accusation stung. “Tony’s reactor was dark and I told the doctor I could save him; he told me he didn’t trust me.” He paused and then his words sunk in as memory came back to him. He bolted upright, gasping desperately, “Is he alive?”

Thor looked away and Loki sunk back, numb. “He should have let me heal him,” he hissed. “Tony would have been alive had it not been for his foolishness—”

“No, he is alive,” Thor interrupted. But he frowned, continuing, “But he is in a coma.” Seeing the confusion that no doubt was expressed in Loki’s features, he clarified, “I have been told it is similar to Odin Sleep.”

Loki closed his eyes briefly. “Is he expected to live?”

“His odds are not favorable,” Thor said quietly. “I’m sorry, brother.”

“And my punishment for disobeying orders?”

“There is none.”

Loki’s eyes flew open and he stared at his brother. “What?” he demanded.

Thor shrugged. “Dr. Banner, Captain Rogers, myself, and JARVIS argued on your behalf and managed to convince the Director Fury that you intentionally disobeyed orders to save your teammate, not because you wanted to do him greater harm.”

“The three of you defended me despite the doctor’s claims?” Loki frowned as he tried to raise himself slightly. “But you thought I had tried to injure Tony—”

“We convinced Fury before the Quinjet returned to the Tower,” Thor clarified. “As for what the doctor said… I wanted to be sure.”

“You cannot trust your own brother,” Loki said bitterly.

Thor gazed at him. “You have oftentimes stabbed me for your own enjoyment. What was I supposed to think?”

“That I would not try to harm the mortal I had risked my security for!” Loki shouted. He rolled onto his side, refusing to look at his brother for another moment. He knew he was being unfair; he had betrayed Thor many times, after all, but he wasn’t so much the monster now that he once was.
Sighing quietly, Thor left him in peace. Loki waited until the door shut behind him before he sat up and asked softly, “JARVIS, where are my clothes from the battle?”

“I had Ms. Potts bring them to your quarters, although I did have her bring the armor to the workshop so it wouldn’t be left unguarded,” JARVIS responded. “My sensors indicate you are in better health than you were before. The drugs were meant to sedate you more than harm you but I am pleased that you are on your way to being well again.”

Of course Tony’s invention would be what cared about his well being, even before his own brother. Sighing but well used to it, Loki magicked his nightgown into a more suitable outfit of comfortable pants and a thin t-shirt before he snuck out of his room and down the hall into Tony’s.

When he entered the room, he found Ms. Potts was sitting there with him, as well as the other members of the team, which did, sadly, include Thor as well. Dr. Banner leaped from his chair, going to Loki’s side and having him take his seat.

“Are you alright? How do you feel?” he asked, bringing his hand to Loki’s wrist to feel for his heart rate.

Loki shrugged away from his touch stiffly. “Sluggish but not any worse for the wear,” he informed.

“JARVIS told me what you did for Tony.” Loki looked up and found Ms. Potts was looking at him. “Had you not gotten there when you did, Tony wouldn’t be here right now.” She sniffled, leaning against Agent Romanov briefly for support. “I know his chances of getting better are low, but you gave him that chance. Thank you.”

“Mortal medicine will not be enough for him,” Loki said quietly, not meeting her eyes. “Tony has been in pain for many months because of his arc reactor. The injuries he has sustained will have amplified whatever injury he has been dealing with all this time.”

“Sir was trying to find an alternative to his arc reactor,” JARVIS announced in the silence that followed. “His best option was surgery.”

“Surgery?” Ms. Potts lifted her head. “That doesn’t make sense; Tony told me that removing the reactor would cause shrapnel to go to his heart.”

“That is so,” JARVIS agreed. “Sir had a plan for the surgery. Upon removal of the reactor, there would be a six-minute grace period before he would suffer from severe brain damage. The doctors would have six minutes to remove the shrapnel; however, with a top surgeon and Sir’s x-rays of his chest, the odds, although against him, do suggest that such a surgery could be completed successfully.”

Thor looked at Loki, both of them thinking of Frigga’s healing powers. “Our mother is one of the most powerful mages in all the realms,” Thor spoke up. “If the surgery were to be done, I believe she could safely remove the shrapnel herself by using her magic.”

Rogers looked at Loki for clarification. Oddly touched by his trust, Loki nodded. “She could locate and move the shrapnel from the wounds and out of his body, healing the torn tissue and blood vessels as necessary.”

Dr. Banner looked thoughtful. “It makes sense to me.”

Thor stood. “Then we will return to Asgard and ask for her assistance.” Loki nodded at him, standing as well. Nodding at the others and promising a speedy return, they went outside where Thor called to Heimdall before they were beamed back to Asgard.
“My sons,” Frigga greeted warmly, although most likely surprised, Loki surmised, as they arrived together in the palace. “Heimdall told me you might return.” She hugged Thor and then Loki, her loving embrace an aching comfort to Loki, who still felt shaky from the drugs still present in his body.

She took their hands and walked them to her quarters. “Your father is out attending to our people today,” she informed them before turning to Loki and questioning, “I still sense abnormalities in your body. Perhaps you should rest?”

Loki gazed at her, surprised. “You are aware of what happened?”

“I felt your anguish and then loss of consciousness,” she confirmed. “Heimdall told me what had been done to you and then restrained me when I tried to go to you and the overwhelmingly obtuse doctor and his orderlies.”

Thor looked appalled. “Mother!”

She didn’t look phased. “They harmed my son,” she said in way of explanation. She glanced at them curiously. “But you are here for another reason.”

“Mother, our brother in battle, the Man of Iron, has been gravely injured,” Thor said, sitting forward in his chair. “He requires medical assistance the mortals cannot safely give him.”

“And you have come for one of our healers?”

Loki touched her hand slightly. “We come for you, mother.” She gazed at him. “Tony has a device in his chest that keeps shrapnel from going to his heart. This device keeps him alive but it currently kills him because he has suffered a chest injury that has compromised the structure of the reactor, something, I presume, was already giving him problems.”

“Can you not exchange the device for a new one?”

“It would only slightly improve his health. I have observed his pain grow steadily over the months and the reactor itself is dangerous to him,” Loki explained. “The solution is to remove the reactor but to do so, we need to remove the shrapnel and repair his chest in under six minutes. You have the ability to do so with your magic.”

Frigga looked at him for a long moment before she turned to Thor. “The Warriors Three would be pleased to spend a few minutes with you,” she said to him. “Please, go to them and give Loki and I a chance to speak alone?”

Thor looked confused but obeyed, kissing her cheek as parting before he left. When the door shut quietly behind him, Frigga sat on the edge of her seat and took Loki’s hands in her own. “This mortal has become your friend; he is the one I have observed you spend so much time with.”

She said it as a statement but Loki nodded anyway. “Tony Stark is his name,” he told her quietly.

“What makes him attractive to you?”

Loki glanced at her sharply but her eyes held no malice. He knew she had known his orientation for quite some time but had said nothing to protect him, and so he sighed and spoke the truth.

“Beyond his physical beauty, which is far surpassing others for his race, I believe, he sees me. He is not afraid of me even though we began as and were enemies for so long. He is far more intelligent than I had expected from a mortal and he understands me because of that alone.”
“But he understands you in other ways.”

“Yes.” Loki looked away. “When we talk, he listens. We may banter back and forth or insult each other or flirt, but when we are serious, there is understanding to be found. He has proved many times that he does not find a birth defect a lesser quality of one’s worth, and he has shared stories of his youth that are both achingly similar and worse than my own.” Loki gave a bitter smile. “We both only had our mothers as our loving parent.”

She brushed her fingers to his cheek. “Odin does love you,” she promised. “Just not in a way he knows how to express. And that is of his own fault, not of your own.”

Loki nodded silently, not believing her but not willing to hurt her by admitting to such.

Frigga squeezed his hand gently and he looked up at her. “You are sweet on him,” she said gently, smiling softly. “You have protected him many times, saved his life before as well. And you spend a majority of your day with him not because you have to, but because you want to.” She looked at him sharply. “Could you really betray him?”

“I wasn’t—”

“God of Lies you may be, but I am your mother and know you better than that.” She looked at Loki sadly. “You have been scheming to gain his trust and then steal his knowledge of the Avengers. I have watched you; I am not blind to your initial intentions. But you are yet to try anything despite seeing firsthand how he trusts you, which would make it easy for you to gather the intel you wanted to if you just simply took action. And I ask you, could you really betray him?”

“He does not trust me.”

Frigga raised an eyebrow at him. “During your undercover mission, an over-zealous man made him uncomfortable with his advances and longings to touch him privately. Despite his clear uneasiness with touch in the following days, your Anthony still went to you during your team’s ‘movie night’ and spent the duration of the movie in your arms. And, yet, he doesn't trust you?”

There was nothing to say that could counter her statement. Resigned, Loki stayed quiet.

“Evil is not in your nature. Mischief is,” Frigga allowed, “but not evil. You tell yourself to scheme because you feel you must in order to prove your worth, as if who you are is dependant on your Jotun heritage. Your heritage is only a name. Your heart has been forged by the scars of lies, betrayal, and anger, but has been strengthened by the love and goodness that had always been a part of you.” She touched his cheek. “You have not yet acted out your plan to use and betray Tony Stark because you do not desire to hurt him.”

Loki looked away, silently seething at how easily she read him, how easily she read things he had tried to ignore himself for so long.

“My son,” Frigga said quietly, “You have come here, having set aside your own reluctance to ask for help, to ask me to spare your mortal’s life.” She gazed at him steadily. “Whether you wish to see it or not, you care about him. And for you, I will heal him.”

In under an hour, Tony was unconscious in his hospital bed, the arc reactor gone from his chest and the shrapnel no longer present in his body. His other wounds would take the proper amount of time to heal but his chest would no longer cause him pain.

Loki joined the others in thanking Frigga and then said goodbye to her before Heimdall brought her back to Asgard. When he hugged her, she whispered in his ear, “You are loved, Loki.” She pulled
away after he kissed her cheek in silent acknowledgment and she faded back to Asgard.

You are loved, Loki.

She loved him, Loki knew that. He had never doubted her love for him, even as a child. And she was...right. What had started as a ploy to gain Tony’s trust had become spending time with Tony because he wanted to, not because he wanted to gain his trust only to use him to betray the Avengers.

He wasn't ready to admit he liked Tony but he could admit they were friends. And he was glad Tony was going to be okay.

Thank you, mother.

49. Call me when you get home.

“Knock knock.”

Tired brown eyes brightened when Tony saw him standing in the doorway. Waving him in, Tony said, “Aww, learning Midgardian phrases just for little ‘ol me? I'm touched.”

“Only so I can tease you mercilessly,” Loki replied as he took a seat on the edge of the bed. “For instance, you appear to be a lazy bum today.”

Tony stared at him for a moment, utterly shocked, before he burst into laughter. But he immediately groaned, clutching at his chest as he said through clenched teeth, “Maybe don't make me laugh, okay?”

Loki gazed at him, automatically agreeing not to make him laugh but not willing to say as much aloud. “Not a fan of your own Midgardian sayings?”

“Coming from you, they sound really weird.”

“Now you know what it is like for Thor and me when you morals say them.” Loki tapped Tony’s good leg. “I've been informed you will be wearing a cast for six weeks.”

“Yeah, it's going to be hell but that's what happens when you get knocked out of the sky and then a car is smashed on your leg.” Tony huffed. “Better my leg than my arm, though. At least I can still work, even if I can't walk around.”

“I offered to heal you,” Loki pointed out. “Accepting would have eliminated the issue.”

“I know, and I appreciate your offer, but I can't just have you heal me every time I get a papercut. That's not right.”

“Almost dying is a bit more serious than that, Tony.”

Tony shrugged slightly. “You've healed me too many times now. I don't want to take advantage of your generosity.”

Loki could appreciate his reasoning.

“But,” Tony gave a sly grin. “I've been told you defied SHIELD to come rescue me? I'm not sure if I should call you my knight in shining green-and-gold or simply tease you about having a crush on
me."

"Me having a crush on you?" Loki snorted. "You're confusing me with Rogers, and frankly, it's insulting."

"Hey, Cap's not so bad." Tony looked oddly fond as he said, "He's pretty protective, I'll give you that. But he's sweet."

"He is mildly irritating."

"You're just saying that because you're not as self-righteous or muscular as he is," Tony teased.

"Yet, I was able to handle my own against him in Germany."

"I was able to knock you on your ass," Tony pointed out. "Guess that means I'd be able to take Cap as well, which, by the way, sounds like fun."

Loki laughed. "Your armor is impressive."

"Did you just-"

"For a mortal."

Tony pouted, folding his arms over his chest. "Here I was thinking you had complimented me," he complained.

"I do not believe I have yet found a quality in you worth complimenting," Loki mused. "I suppose you will simply have to be patient as I continue looking for some redeeming quality in you that I find worth praising."

"My amazing good looks aren't 'worth praising?'"

Loki pretended to consider the idea and then shook his head.

"What about my ability to kiss?" Tony waggled his eyebrows, giving him a heated, very suggestive look. "You can't possibly tell me that you weren't at least a little into it when you pinned me against the wall and nearly had me with one hundred people just around the corner, all of whom could have potentially heard or been witness to you claiming me."

That realization was all too pleasing but Loki just calmed his pulse, smoothed over his facial features and said pleasantly, "I wasn't."

"Unbelievable," Tony pouted. "What about-"

"Face it, Tony, you can’t impress me."

"But you can impress me, is that what you're saying?"

"Of course. No one can resist my charms."

"Oh, I don't know about that, I think I've done pretty good so far at resisting your charms."

Loki gave him an unimpressed look. "You say that, but you cuddle me with on the sofa."

Tony blinked, thinking. "Are you saying I'm actually helpless to resist your charms?"
“That's exactly what it means.”

“Well then. Since I'm apparently being exposed to your charms, wouldn't that mean you are seducing me?”

“Maybe,” Loki allowed, winking.

Tony’s eyes widened. “See! I knew there was something!”

“I'm sorry?”

“You'd only be seducing me if there was something you liked about me. Therefore, even if you won't admit it, there is some aspect of me that you find impressive or you wouldn't be wasting your time in seducing me!”

Loki nodded thoughtfully. “Sound logic, Tony. However—”

“Hey, Tony,” came Rogers’s voice from the doorway. “Mind if I come in if I'm not interrupting?”

Tony looked up at the Avenger, brightening at the sight of the captain. “Hiya, Cap,” he said happily. “You come bearing gifts?”

The captain took the greeting for the invite to enter that it was and walked over to the bed, sitting down on Tony’s other side. He greeted Loki, who nodded at him stiffly, and then he leaned forward slightly, saying to Tony, “I don't have any gifts for you, sorry, not unless you want a goodbye kiss.”

Startled at the bold statement, Loki looked at the captain just as Tony frowned and said, “'Goodbye?' Are you going on an assignment?”

“For SHIELD,” he said apologetically. “Nat and I. We'll be gone for a month, maybe more.”

Tony looked crestfallen. “That long?”

“Yeah, I'm sorry,” Rogers said, leaning forward to take Tony’s hand in his own. “We just got called out; we leave within the hour.”

“Oh.” Tony looked down at their hands. And of all of a sudden, Loki got the feeling that Rogers was either making or had already made his move on Tony. And considering the look Tony was given the captain, perhaps he had been wrong to assume all these weeks that their flirting had been partly due to their unspoken feelings for each other, at least on Tony's end. He wasn't ready yet to admit that he had these 'feelings' when he wasn't even sure if they were genuinely there or not.

“I'll leave you two,” he muttered, standing and quickly walking out of the room. Neither Rogers nor Tony acknowledged his departure and somehow that hurt worse.

“Brother,” Thor greeted him, smiling, when Loki got into the elevator only to find Thor was already in it. He eyed Loki closely. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” Loki dismissed tensely. “Where are you going?”

Thor stepped off the elevator. “I thought I would visit Friend Tony and keep him company.”

Loko laughed as he threw his arm out to keep the elevator doors from closing. “I wouldn't,” he said. “Rogers is with him already.”

Squinting, Thor looked at him closely. “Are you jealous?”
“No!” Loki snapped. “I do not have your pathetic weakness of ‘feelings’ and certainly not for a mortal.”

“But if Tony had been born on Asgard, you would have.”

Loki groaned. “Thor, you know nothing about me. Just leave me be.”

“You're gay,” Thor said confidently.

“Do you even know what that means?”

“You are attracted to men. In this case, Tony.”

“I flirt with him, Thor. That doesn't mean I desire him.”

“Well, why were you leaving Tony’s penthouse looking so upset after Captain Steve had arrived?”

Loki pulled his arm back, allowing the elevator doors to close. “Goodbye, Thor,” he called. “And good riddance,” he muttered, pressing the number for his floor.

Norns, his brother was so annoying.

But he had a point. Loki had been upset leaving the penthouse. But that was not because he had feelings for Tony. It was because Tony, just like everyone else in Loki’s life, was choosing someone else over himself.

And it would only be a matter of time before Tony would forget he existed, so caught up in his newfound lover that Loki would become a distant memory, a forgotten friend, and Loki would once again be alone.

50. I think you’re beautiful.

After Rogers and Romanov left, Loki was too selfish (and perhaps too pathetic) to stay away from Tony. The biggest part of him told himself to stay with Tony for as long as possible, to cherish their friendship while he still had it. The more logical side of him realized doing so would only hurt him worse when he did lose Tony’s friendship… but Loki was pathetic enough to stick around and allow himself the fantasy that maybe Tony would be the person to be different.

He had a month at least before Rogers would return. He was going to make the most of that month.

Two days after the departure of the captain and the female agent, Loki stepped off the elevator, announcing his arrival with a call to Tony as he strode toward the bedroom.

Only to find the bed empty. Frowning, Loki called, “JARVIS?”

“Sir has escaped to his workshop.”

Loki raised an eyebrow as he turned around and headed back for the elevator. “Stuck in a wheelchair and he still manages to escape,” he grumbled. “Has he wounded himself yet?”

The elevator began its descent. “To the contrary,” JARVIS responded.

“Are you suggesting that being in the workshop is helping heal him?” Loki asked wryly.
“Sir would certainly tell you that.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Why am I not surprised?” he muttered, scanning into the workshop. He took a few steps inside and his eyes fell immediately on Tony, who was lying on the sofa, fast asleep.

He walked closer and watched as Dum-E and U, the two bots stood on either side of Tony, worked together to carefully cover Tony with a warm blanket. They seemed at ease with the task, as if they had done so many times, and Loki couldn't help but wonder if they had experience in watching over their creator.

As he approached further, Dum-E turned to look at him, giving him a warning chirp. Loki held up his hands, approaching more slowly. “I am not here to hurt him,” he promised the protective bot.

Dum-E continued following his every movement, something that amused Loki as he stood at the foot of the sofa next to where Tony’s head was.

“Take good care of him, yeah?” Loki whispered to the small bots.

Dum-E chirped happily in response.

Loki smiled at him. “I know you will,” he said fondly, patting what he thought was Dum-E’s head. He turned to leave but only made it a few paces before he realized the position he was in. JARVIS had allowed him into the workshop, meaning he had the AI’s trust. With Tony asleep and him in the workshop already, it would be so easy for him to hack the computer and take the information, codes, and weapons he wanted. With two Avengers gone and Tony out of commission, he could attack and overthrow them in a matter of hours.

He reached the doorway and paused, looking over his shoulder at where Tony lay on the sofa. He thought back to the moments where they had spent a night on the roof simply talking, or when they would work in the workshop together. They had spent many nights on that very same sofa, talking and exchanging quips until they both were too tired to stay awake any longer.

If he acted now, he would be betraying Tony and destroying the friendship between them.

He didn’t want to lose their friendship. Moreso, he wanted to keep the trust between them more than he wanted to gain power.

Frigga had been right after all.

Annoyed at himself for openly admitting to himself that he had feelings for Tony, Loki turned and went to sign himself out. He made it as far as the first stair when he heard a low cry from the other side of the door.

“Tony?” Loki called, instantly concerned as he whirled around, signed back in, and jogged over to the sofa.

Tony was quiet, although he was thrashing slightly. That explained his outcry. He was having a nightmare.

Frowning, Loki took a step closer and then reached down to lightly clasp Tony’s shoulder. “Tony,” he murmured, “Wake up.”

Tony gave a violent shudder and then sat upright, gasping in pain at the movement before he began breathing heavily as he reached for his chest.
Loki sat on the edge of the sofa by Tony’s shoulder, touching his arm lightly. “Breathe slowly,” he commanded.

Tony’s eyes flew open, fear flashing in his eyes for a moment when he saw Loki before he took a shuddering breath, blinked, and said hoarsely, “Loki?”

“I’m here.”

Tony exhaled loudly, still breathing quickly. He eyed Loki suspiciously. “What the hell are you doing down here?”

The question startled Loki. “I went to visit you in your room but you weren’t there. JARVIS told me you were here so I—”

“Came here so you could spy on me? Watch me while I sleep? Let me tell you something, that’s pretty creepy, even for you.”

Loki scowled. “I was here for only a minute and I was leaving when you began to cry out in your sleep.”

“That’s another thing. Who gave you the right to wake me up?”

“Would you rather I left you to suffer?” Loki demanded.

Tony crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t need your help,” he said stubbornly. “And I don’t need your pity.”

“Pity?” Loki scoffed. “What makes you think I find you worthy of my pity?”

“The way you told me that ‘you’re here?’” Tony ventured as if it should be obvious. “It was just a nightmare, I have them all the time, and I don’t need you coming around to pull me out of them.”

Loki stared at him, hurt. “I know how painful nightmares can be,” he said quietly. “And I merely wanted to stop that pain for you. That was all.”

“Loki, wait,” came the somber call when Loki got to the doorway. Loki paused but didn’t turn around. There was a deep sigh and then Tony said quietly, “Not having my reactor is a good thing, I know that, but when I have a nightmare and then it’s not there… I panic. And I took my frustration out on you. I’m sorry.”

Loki turned, looking at him over his shoulder as he leaned against the doorframe. “Me too,” he said after a long pause. “But my intentions were not evil, I assure you.”

Tony nodded at him, exhaling shakily. “Dum-E and U wouldn’t have let you near me if they saw you as a threat.”

“Oh, great,” Loki huffed. “I’m losing my criminal status, clearly.”

“Maybe,” Tony allowed. “I don't know, though, seems like a better fit for you.”

“What does?”

“Being an Avenger. Saving people but still—”

“I am the God of Mischief,” Loki said cautiously. “My status as an Avenger is the result of my crimes against your city, it is my punishment. It does not mean I am not dangerous.”
“Oh, you're still pretty dangerous,” Tony agreed, “I'm just saying, your criminal past doesn't define you. If you ask me, being an Avenger suits you.”

“Suits me?” Loki frowned. “I'm not sure if I should be insulted or not.”

“An Avenger who loves pranking everyone,” Tony corrected. “I mean, you are the God of Mischief, just like you said. I kinda like the mischievous side, though. It's hilarious when you pull one on Cap. And I get to prank you back which is always a good challenge.”

Loki eyed him curiously. “You are a peculiar mortal,” he finally murmured. “Most everyone does not appreciate my mischievous side. Nor do they appreciate my magic.”

“They don't really appreciate you, then,” Tony said quietly, looking up at him from where he was curled up on the sofa, his hair ruffled, Dum-E and U standing protectively on either side of him. Loki looked at him for a long moment before he admitted to Tony what he had only ever told Frigga before;

“Very few ever have.”

Tony looked at him, his eyes hurt on his behalf yet brimming with understanding. “I'm glad you had the few that did.”


Tony smiled. “My mom too.”

There was silence for a long moment before Tony said timidly, “You might as well sit down.”

So Loki did.

The next few weeks were unlike anything Loki had ever experienced or had expected to experience. Any feelings Tony (most likely) had for Rogers were well hidden, something Loki was secretly relieved by.

They were together more than they ever had been before. Loki was spending most of his time in the workshop assisting Tony, who, with his leg and chest injury, had difficulty working on certain projects alone. It was slow-going in the beginning, with Loki having only minimal experience with technology, but as time went on, Loki began to understand more about what Tony was doing, and it became easier and easier for him to assist Tony with his projects.

When he wasn't assisting Tony, he often times found himself going to the workshop simply to read. Tony had given him a stack of books to read when Loki had shared with him what kind of books he enjoyed reading and, much to his surprise, he did find himself enjoying the books Tony had recommended.

But even as they worked together or Loki read as Tony worked, whenever Tony was away, the workshop was on lockdown and Loki was kept out. It was as clear an indication as any that Loki still did not have Tony’s trust.

The realization hurt, Loki couldn't lie. And he was bitter that despite spending so much time with Tony, despite saving his life countless times, that Tony still did not trust him simply to be in his workspace unattended. Granted, it was the workshop with access to the weaponry but didn't Tony realize he could teleport into the workshop at any time and simply take the armor himself?

But considering the lack of trust between them, Loki couldn't help but admit that there was an
element of true friendship in their relationship. They did spend the majority of their days together, after all, and it was on those long days spent together that Loki truly saw proof of the truth in their friendship. Though, that didn't mean Tony didn't surprise him from time to time.

One night during the third week of the Captain's absence, Loki was startled awake at some time past two in the morning with a horrible nightmare, one of the rare, cruel ones that he had sporadically but always wished he would never have again. He was never so lucky though. He awoke gasping for air, feeling like he was suffocating, and in his desperation to get out of the confining space of his bedroom, he all but ran from his floor.

He had just made halfway to the roof via the elevator when he realized it was too small, still confining, just like the prison walls that had held him captive when he had been pinned down and his lips sewn-

“Loki?” Loki flinched, instinctively, and a familiar voice swore quietly. “Come on, Loki, breathe with me,” the voice continued. There was- there was a hand on his arm? Another on his shoulder…

No, the hand on his arm moved and now he was holding hands with…no, his hand was pressed to a chest. “You can swoon later over my firm pecs but for now, just breathe with me, okay? Deep breaths, Lokes, you've got this…”

Blinking, Loki drew in a shuddering breath and tried to open his eyes. He was on the ground on his knees. He closed his eyes again, feeling a heart beating steadily under his hand.

“There we go, nice and steady.” Tony sounded relieved. “You with me?”

Loki breathed slowly. “I am more coherent.” He cleared his throat, not yet willing to open his eyes and therefore meet Tony’s eyes. “Thank you.”

“Nightmare?”

The question made Loki grit his teeth but he nodded. The mortal had comforted him; he owed him the courtesy of an explanation at least.

The hand on his shoulder moved to his cheek. Loki froze, his eyes opening automatically so he could watch Tony’s face for an explanation behind his movements. But there was nothing sinister or mocking in Tony's expression.

There was only understanding.

A thumb gently brushed away the tear Loki wasn't even aware he had shed. He froze, ready to bolt or to receive Tony’s teasing...but nothing came.

“You can punch me later for that, but you came here. And I know how painful panic attacks can be, especially after a nightmare. I merely wanted to-”

“Stop that pain for you,” Loki finished quietly, remembering the similar words he had told Tony only a few weeks before.

Tony nodded at him. “Wanna migrate to the sofa?” he asked. “Cause the floor ain't too comfortable.”

Loki looked at him, absorbing that statement before he looked around the workshop in growing horror. In the midst of his panic, he had teleported into the workshop.
He had teleported into the workshop. Subconsciously.

Why?

“Loki?” Tony prompted.

“Yes, of course,” Loki murmured, rising shakily to his knees. He looked down at Tony, gasping. “You're on the floor...did you fall? Did you-”

Tony pointed to the crutches on the ground a few feet away from them. “Nearly had a heart attack when you suddenly appeared at two in the morning,” he said lightly, “But once I got over my shock, I hobbled over and simply slid down to the ground.”

“And your leg, you did not injure yourself further?”

Tony looked at him. “I'm not that clumsy,” he pouted. “It was a foot and a half fall. Not ten feet.”

Loki exhaled carefully as he rose to his feet and then reached down to help Tony stand. They made their way over to the sofa where Tony promptly moved over so he was pressed into Loki’s side.

“Tell me and I’ll move,” he said before Loki could say anything. “But after all of my sad experiences with panic attacks, Dum-E and U are always at my side to ground me in the present. And I know I'm not as good looking as Dum-E but-”

Loki laughed a bit wetly as the last memories of his dream and attack faded to the back of his mind, hidden away for the moment. “You are still a beautiful sight, Tony,” he promised, bringing his arm back and around Tony’s shoulders.

Tony melted against him for a moment before he tilted his head and teased, “Did you just call me beautiful?”

Loki considered. “I think your lack of sleeping is causing you to mishear me,” he finally said. He had called Tony beautiful aloud?

“Oh. Is that what it was?”

“Most definitely.”

“And here I thought you actually had paid me a compliment.”

“That'll never happen.”

“Shame, considering how awesome I am.”

Smiling slightly, Loki pulled the mortal closer to him. Tony moved with ease, resting his head on Loki’s shoulder. “If you are, I've never noticed,” Loki said, his words a gentle tease despite the confusion raging through him; he had just had a panic attack and although he was still shaky, he felt more at ease now than he had before he had gone to bed.

The question was why Tony’s presence was soothing to him, but Loki wasn’t sure what the answer was.

Tony snorted. “Impossible. All this time spent with me and you've never noticed how fantastic I am?”

“Fantastically annoying, perhaps, but not fantastic all on its own.”
“You're so kind.”

“I am.”

Tony laughed into his neck quietly. “At least you're modest.”

They fell into silence after that and it was in that silence that Loki became aware of what exactly they were doing. They were *cuddling*, there was no better word for it, for even though Loki had an arm around Tony’s shoulders, it was actually *him* that was being held. Tony had his arm behind Loki’s back, another around his waist, and it was him that was pressed against the length of Loki’s body, keeping him grounded in the present and reassured that he wasn't alone.

Loki cleared his throat. “I'm sorry for this.”

Tilting his head slightly, Tony looked up at him. “For not realizing my awesomeness or for failing to pay me a compliment yet?”

“Tony, I'm serious.”

Tony looked at him. “So am I.”

“I came in here uninvited and practically forced you to comfort me. By coming in here uninvited, I proved that you cannot trust me because I can come in whenever I want because I can teleport.” Loki looked away. “I'm sorry.” *I'm sorry for ruining whatever small amount of friendship we had.*

“Oh, you do realize I'm a genius, right?”

Loki blinked. “Beg your pardon?”

“I'm a genius. I know you can teleport so I kinda figured you could come in here if you wanted to. And you kinda have before so... Besides, you didn't come here under your own power, I don't think. Seems to me like you just came here, like-”

“This was the place my magic felt I would be safe,” Loki finished helplessly. He lifted his arm to pull away from Tony but the mortal caught his arm and lowered it, forcing Loki to remain in place.

“Is that such a bad thing?” Tony asked quietly.

“Yes.” Loki couldn't look at him.

“No.

“Why? Because you don't think you should trust me or because you-”

“Because I don't want to burden you like that,” Loki interrupted.

“Burden?” Loki could hear the frown in Tony’s words. “We're friends. If you're upset, I want to be here for you. I mean, I'm definitely not just here for the flirting and pranks. That's just an added bonus.”

“Why not?” Loki blurted before he could stop himself.

“Why would I be?” Tony sighed. “Come on, Lokes, work with me. Sure, we flirt a hell of a lot. And yeah, we’re the prankbros when it comes to pranking the tower. But we also work side by side together every day. You've seen me at my worst, quite literally, sad as that is, and now I've seen you at yours. That doesn't change anything for me, at all. All I've gotten from this interaction is that I am glad I could be here for you and that you also make a good snuggle partner.”
Loki laughed wetly. “And-”

“And I’m right here and I’m not going anywhere,” Tony said firmly. “Your magic brought you here for a reason. If you want to leave, go ahead. Come back on your own terms, I won't push you. But do you really want to be alone right now?”

A tear slid down his cheek that Loki would forever deny fell. “No,” he whispered. “I don't.”

“Then stay.” Tony nudged his shoulder gently, a soft but firm reminder that Loki wasn't alone, that he wasn't being judged.

Loki nodded, bringing his arm back around Tony’s shoulders. And he stayed.

51. Are you sure?

He didn't remember falling asleep. He knew they remained on the sofa for many hours, having shifted their position slightly so they both would be more comfortable (but still cuddled together) during the movie JARVIS had put on for them. He remembered watching the first movie (dull, not worth remembering the title) and then there were flashes of the second movie, but he mostly remembered their conversation before the first movie and between the second one being put in after the first’s conclusion.

Most of all, though, Loki remembered feeling safe.

If there would have been awkwardness between them, and maybe there was, it was only on Loki’s side. In the following days, Tony seemed completely at ease. He greeted Loki with a winning smile and a flirtatious comment each morning and they spent each day together, as per their usual.

Dr. Banner joined them twice, providing scientific knowledge that impressed Loki and made Tony beam with pride.

On the Tuesday after Loki’s incident, Thor came down to the workshop to announce he was headed to see Jane for a few weeks. Loki knew he had missed her and also knew that not even the many phone calls or short few-day visits had satisfied Thor’s desires to be with his love. Tony had seemed happy for Thor, telling him to have fun but not ‘too much fun', which Loki thought was an odd contradiction… but considering it was Tony who had made the statement, Loki let it slide. Such Midgard oddities were normal and frequent coming from Tony’s tongue.

It was odd with Thor gone and Romanov and Rogers on a mission for SHIELD, Loki had to admit. He had a cool professional relationship with Romanov but sparring with her was a surprising challenge and he missed that. And with Rogers gone, despite his silly crush and his overprotectiveness of the entire team, the Tower just seemed quiet.

Thinking on it though, it probably was because Rogers wasn’t there to complain or tell him, Tony, or Barton off for starting another prank war.

With the Tower down to four occupants, Loki found that he was spending even more time with Tony. It wasn’t on purpose- maybe, it was, but he wasn’t going to admit that- but when they spent all their time together in the workshop, they ended on the same schedule for meals.

For many of those meals, one of them would cook for them both. On other occasions, they would cook together. And still, on other occasions, they would go out together either to one of Loki’s favorite restaurants or to one of the restaurants that Tony thought Loki should try.
Those nights were especially fun because the cuisine was always different. Tony knew the best restaurants in the city and he wasn't afraid to make a reservation ahead of time and halt them in the middle of their inventing so they could shower and get dressed nicely to go to dinner together.

It was during those nights that Loki learned the city of New York best. If the restaurant wasn't far from the Tower, they would walk home together. And Tony knew all the pathways to keep them out of the public eye yet still allow them to see the shining moon or the beauty of the sun setting over a small body of water.

It was fun, more fun that Loki had ever experienced with another being, and it was due to those walks and to those dinners that he and Tony became closer.

One night during the fifth week of Rogers and Romanov being on their mission, Tony took Loki to the shawarma place that he and the other Avengers had gone to after capturing Loki. The food was good but it was the knowledge of knowing he had been taken to the ‘Avengers Hotspot’ that truly meant the most to Loki.

It was so valuable simply because Tony had trusted him with the title of an Avenger, and not only that, but he had not been shy with that information. In fact, Tony had announced it to the world by way of having himself and Loki walk into the shawarma place, known publicly as the Avengers hotspot, together. (It was coincidentally the night the media photographed them walking arm-in-arm in a park and decided they were America’s next celebrity scandal couple.)

They had only been arm-in-arm because Tony was wearing a boot and was using a cane to walk while in the privacy of the Tower, but no one had to know that. Loki would allow them and himself the illusion that Tony had been holding his arm because he wanted to.

The walk after the dinner aside, Tony's silent but nonetheless clear announcement that Loki had his trust as a teammate greatly touched Loki and left him wanting to reassure the engineer of the same agreement in a similarly important setting.

A week later, Tony’s boot was removed and he was able to walk around on his own power. Loki waited another week so Tony would be able to walk without most of the residual pain and then he put his plan into action.

They were hard at work (watching the last Harry Potter movie) in the workshop when Loki asked JARVIS to stop the movie.

“Uh, Lokes?” Tony frowned at the paused face of Professor Snape on the television screen. “Why did you pause it? Bathroom break?”

“Not this time.” Loki could feel his pulse increasing in his chest and silently willed it to calm. He shifted his position, looking at Tony more easily. “I would like to take you somewhere tonight. Is that alright with you?”

“Yeah…why are you asking? You've never asked before.”

Loki shrugged. “Tonight is different.”

“Where’re we going?”

“It's a surprise.”

Tony’s eyes gleamed. “Ooh, okay. Do I get a hint?”
“I doubt you'll be able to correctly guess even with the hint.”

“Try me.”

“It is somewhere I have never taken you before. Nor have you been to this place.”

“I’ve been a lot of places, Lokes. A lot more than you know of. I bet I've been there.”

“That would be a piece of unexpected news should it turn out you have been.” Loki shook his head. “Still, I guarantee you have not.”

“I think you underestimate this billionaire who has had to travel all over the world for SI business. I say I've been there.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Is that a wager you are proposing?”

“Sure. But not for money, that's boring.”

“What would you propose we wager for, then?”

“Bragging rights?”

“That would tarnish your record considering I already have bragging rights over you.”

Tony laughed. “You do?”

“Certainly. I've bested you on many occasions.” Loki smirked. “Let's try something more creative. When I win, you have to do something of my choosing. If you win, which won't happen, I'll do something of your choosing. Deal?”

Tony pretended to be thinking but Loki knew he had already made up his mind. “Deal.” Tony held out his hand and Loki shook it. “Alright, now what should I wear to this place that I've definitely been to already?”

Loki laughed. “I would dress in some of your finer clothes. Have dignity and pride in what you choose to wear.”

“Honey, I look good no matter what I wear.”

Loki considered that, eyeing Tony carefully as he did so. Many thoughts crossed his mind before he settled on, “You believe you would look good even in my armor?”

“Hell yes. Tight leather and armor? You wouldn't be able to keep your hands off me.”

“I don't see you having that problem when I wear it.”

“You do look hot in your armor, I'll give you that. But I'd wear it better.”

“Maybe I'll have you wear my armor when I win our wager,” Loki mused. “See if you're right, if I will struggle to keep my hands off you.”

“You really want to take on that losing battle?”

“Only if you're sure you want me to touch you.” Loki looked at Tony, completely serious. They were flirting into dangerous territory. And he would not do anything without consent first.
Tony looked at him, his expression telling of his agreement. “When do we leave?”

It was a silent confirmation and although Loki was certain nothing would happen between them, he would still request verbal confirmation later if, on the off chance, something did happen.

“As soon as we have showered and dressed. I'll meet you on the roof.”

“The roof?”

“That’s where I want to meet you, yes.”

Tony shrugged as he stood. “See you in an hour, then.”

Loki nodded at him and together they went to the elevator to be taken to their respective floors. For all his excitement, the nerves simmering in his gut did not settle despite his banter with Tony.

Loki could only hope their night went as well as he wanted it to.

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