Blame It on the Bard (Who is Obviously Tony Stark)

by FluffyHippogriff

Summary

It started as banter at the zoo, nothing more. Tony was just trying to make small talk with a god before backup could arrive.

How was he supposed to know that Loki would actually buy a Dungeons & Dragons handbook and show up to play?

Notes

This story is the result of trying to typecast the Avengers as different D&D classes. Of course you couldn’t run a D&D campaign in the Avengers universe without an actual magical being, and Loki is fun to work with, so here we are.
Wherein Tony has a Big Mouth and Natasha Just Wants to Run Her Campaign

On pain of death via excruciatingly slow arc reactor extraction, Tony would forever insist that this entire mess was Thor’s fault. Natasha and Steve definitely added to the madness by enabling it, but it all came down to Thor, really. Ok, so maybe if you got him drunk and pliant he might be inclined to possibly admit that maybe a few minor fuckups on his part had contributed to the current mess the Avengers were in, but stupid things that Tony said should never be held against him (particularly when the fate of multiple realms were at stake). Tony’s blabbering couldn’t be at fault, really, since everyone on Earth knew better than to take him seriously when whatever he was going on about wasn’t directly connected to engineering or charity donations. Apparently that “on Earth” part was very important, since Asgardians didn’t seem to-

Ahem.

The actual problem had started on a Sunday afternoon at the Bronx Zoo, where Loki had decided to spice up the exhibits by introducing otherworldly creatures like bilgesnipes and three-eyed catfish and-

“OW! God damn these things are vicious!”

Tony, being the paragon of virtue and understanding that he was, only snickered a little bit while Clint tried to shimmy his way up a flagpole. The archer had lost his snow cone cart vantage point minutes ago and was now desperately fleeing to higher ground in an attempt to get away from a sizeable herd of housecat-sized dragons. The little monsters ran the full rainbow spectrum of colors and patterns on their reptilian scales, and breathed everything from fire to ice to some sort of acid that was melting through the wheels of a nearby hotdog cart. Clint was already looking a bit singed, and the dragons were hissing and clambering all over each other to try and follow him up to his perch at the top. “What’s wrong bird brain?” Tony called out as he swooped closer. “Want to go back to shooting at the literal fish in barrels by the food court?”

“At least they weren’t trying to set me on fire!”

“Iron Man, stop antagonizing Hawkeye and make yourself useful!” Steve commanded over the comms.

Tony rolled his eyes and fired off a few repulsor blasts at the dragons near the base of the pile, toppling what had turned into an adorable pint-sized scaly pyramid. Steve was still giving orders despite the fact that he had vanished from the front lines ages ago, clinging desperately to the back of some beast that bore a horrific resemblance to a rampaging bull moose. You know, if moose had six legs and fangs that dripped poison everywhere. “You asking for backup, Cap?”

There were several grunts, followed by what sounded suspiciously like the Avengers’ fearless leader going through a brick wall. “I’m fine,” Steve grunted, “but if Thor’s still wanting us to capture most of these animals alive, we need to find Loki soon.”

“He’s not hiding out in World of Reptiles,” Natasha suddenly chimed in.

Tony cursed as he looped around to stun a few more dragons (stubborn bastards). That was the fifth exhibit that Natasha had gone through, and there was still no sign of the trickster god. “Honestly, why couldn’t he have picked a smaller zoo?” Tony complained. “Or Central Park again; I swear, we know all his usual spots there.”
“I’d take Coney Island,” Clint grunted as he fired an arrow that exploded gelatinous foam over a few dragons. Some of the miniature monsters had started to open their wings to go airborne, yet suddenly found themselves pasted to the sidewalk and began hissing and twisting about in agitation. “Post-battle snacks are so easy to get there.”

“I would prefer Times Square again, for all that you people seem to dislike it,” Thor added from overhead, where he was hurriedly zooming around and trying to keep too many flying creatures from escaping into the city proper. It was proving to be quite the challenge; many of the beasts were far more maneuverable than a burly god of thunder zooming about with a magic hammer, and Thor was ill-equipped to deal with so many pointy beaks and claws digging at his face. “The territory is familiar and easy for me to navigate, if nothing else.”

“Maybe that’s the problem?” Bruce suggested over the comms. He was currently on the quinjet overhead, assisting Natasha in the search for Loki with a bird’s eye view. Fury had made it very clear what would happen to the team if the Hulk was photographed smashing any endangered species, and it included threats of Phil’s taser and being relocated to Greenland longer term. “He’s styled himself as the god of chaos, right? And chaos can’t become predictable…”

Tony was nearly brought up short by that. “Are you saying that this is Loki’s way of trying to be spontaneous?”

A pause.

“Man of Iron, I believe you may be right,” Thor admitted. “Of all the tricks my brother has played over the years, I cannot recall him ever trying to overrun any haven of exotic beasts with even stranger creatures for no other reason than to seek out attention. Were it not for the civilians nearly being mauled, I’d find this trick of his rather creative and uniquely enjoyable.”

“Oh hell no,” Clint snapped. “Please do not tell me that the demented magical god who SHIELD can’t keep on lockdown has decided he needs to expand the kind of crazy he sics on us. I’ve had to deal with boxing trees, sentient light poles, a lizard army—”

“Plus the time he stuck the quinjet in a giant bowl of Jello, don’t forget,” Bruce added, making Tony snicker because hey, that had actually been a pretty good prank. Even if it did send Fury into a royal fit and took over a week to get cleaned up by SHIELD agents; actually, specifically because it did all that.

“-I’m not putting up with whatever comes next on that list!” Clint finished.

“Found him,” Natasha interjected, because of course she was the only Avenger besides Steve to stay professional in the field with any kind of regularity. “He’s at Birds of Prey.”

“Worry not friends, I shall—ACK!”

Tony winced as the comms were suddenly flooded by decidedly pissed off birdlike squawking, alongside swearing from Thor in what he was reasonably certain was old Norse (or whatever the hell Asgardians spoke without turning on their Allspeak filter). “JARVIS, disconnect Thor until he gets... that... under control.”

“Yes Sir.”

“Cap, I’m going after Widow. Try not to get trampled before I get back, god knows how many SHIELD agents would have a breakdown if we had to scrape Captain America off the pavement.”

“Iron Man, GO!”
Tony ordered JARVIS to put the suit on the fastest course towards Loki’s location, hoping the others could survive long enough for him to hunt down the trickster and put an end to this. It would take him a few minutes at this low altitude, but that was all right. Steve was probably durable enough to handle a fanged moose, and Thor could usually take a beating from strange creatures pretty well, and Hawkeye’s current field equipment was mostly flame retardant… “JARVIS, a little extra juice would be amazing right now, buddy.”

“Noted.”

Tony saw Loki loitering outside the exhibit as he made his landing. The god looked relaxed as he reclined on a park bench, staff in hand but armor absent, and gave Tony an incredibly bored look. Natasha was standing nearby, silent and still with a gun drawn on the sorcerer, prepared to fire should he make any threatening moves. She seemed fine with waiting for backup; smart, given Loki’s tendency to wreak havoc on any Avengers (read: Thor) that tried to fight him one-on-one. “Morning Houdini,” Tony called out as he landed. “Not feeling up to a disappearing act today?”

“And miss these delightful nicknames of yours? Perish the thought,” Loki replied, sinuously arching his back and moving to stand with an unfair amount of otherworldly grace. Frickin’ gods, man.

“Aww, and here I was thinking you liked our company,” Tony shot back, not quite able to keep the delight out of his voice. Say what you will about Loki, at least he provided the Avengers with something other than generic threats to take over the world when he yelled at them. Tony would never admit it, but a small part of him always got excited when the Avengers got an alert for Loki, since it meant he’d have a chance to match wits with the god at some point. Maybe one day Tony would even win.

Loki almost certainly knew that Tony was baiting him, but as usual couldn’t resist taking that bait. “Oh don’t misunderstand, Stark, I rather enjoy your presence at times like these,” he replied with a sneer, “but others in your little band of merry men leave something to be desired.”

“Merry men? Aw, has someone been catching up on Midgardian references?”

And then, at that exact moment, when Clint was running screaming from a horde of tiny dragons and Thor was being accosted by a fire-breathing demon goose and Steve was being flung into a pretzel stand and Natasha and Bruce were blissfully unaware of how their world was about to be turned on its head, Tony Stark fucked up.

The correct thing to do at this point would have been to let Loki have his turn at the hero/villain banter. This would have allowed Natasha an opportunity to look for an opening in the sorcerer’s defense, or at least buy the rest of the team enough time to get their own objectives under control and subsequently regroup to back up Iron Man and Black Widow. Instead of following the traditional snark etiquette that had long been established between them, Tony allowed his mind to shift towards certain activities that he and the team liked to participate in on Thursday nights, prompting a terrible idea to form. Just as Loki was opening his mouth for a response, Tony suddenly found himself turning to Natasha and asking, “Speaking of merry men, any chance something like this could go into our next campaign?”

Loki paused, quirking a brow first at Tony and then at Natasha, wondering what had caused this faux pas in their bantering. Natasha, gods damn it, was nonplussed as ever when she answered, “The campaign I’ve spent a week building?”

“...Yes?”

“The one that I shouldn’t have needed to build in the first place, but had to because somehow you
boys yet again managed to die in the starting town?"

“Ok, first off, that was all Clint, second, you should know better by now than to include cursed amulets and haunted castles in any beginner quest, seriously, Bruce and I.”

“And now you want me to shoehorn in a sidequest featuring a magic zoo with a final boss whose stats we don’t even know?” Natasha continued, tone suggesting that Tony should think very carefully about his next words.

“Well maybe we need something simple? Like grinding some low-level monsters, finding some gear hidden around the zoo, and we don’t have to go after the boss-”

“But you will.”

“Your lack of faith in us hurts, Natasha.”

“It feels as though I’m missing something here,” Loki mused in a tone that wasn’t entirely angry, suddenly reminding Tony that they had an audience present. This was where Tony fucked up the second time. He should have spun around and fired a shot or two at Loki to make it look like the whole conversation had been nothing more than a long-winded attempt to distract the villain. Instead, Tony found himself thoughtlessly blurtting out, “Dungeons and Dragons, Natasha runs the campaign on alternate Thursdays. Swing by sometime, bring snacks, but keep in mind we only play version 3.5. I’ll let you get by with a basic version 3 handbook, but bring version 4 into my Tower and someone’s going out a window.”

Loki’s combination of furrowed brow and pursed lips suggested he didn’t know if Tony was being serious or not. Personally, Tony found it delightful; anything besides boredom or outright contempt from Loki was a hard-won achievement, after all. Before Loki could ask or Tony could elaborate further, however, JARVIS alerted him to a high-speed target approaching from the right. Natasha and Loki noticed just a moment later; to everyone’s surprise, it was Steve riding on the back of the moose monster like the world’s most patriotic cowboy. Loki vanished without another word; seconds later, Steve’s shield flew through the air where the trickster’s head had just been. “Damn it,” Tony muttered. Natasha was already talking to someone on the comms, likely asking SHIELD to track Loki, but deep down she had to know it wouldn’t do any good. If Loki didn’t want to be found, Loki wasn’t going to be found. He’d already managed to hide himself from Heimdall for months, and that guy was made of pure ancient magic based on how Thor described his all-seeing eyes. SHIELD couldn’t even find the company fax machine most days; what chance did they have against a literal god?

“Cap?” Clint asked, sounding far calmer than when Tony had left him. Presumably he’d managed to get the tiny dragon problem under control.

Steve sighed and dismounted his ride, which immediately wandered over to the bushes and began nibbling the greenery there. “Loki escaped again.”

Suddenly the pavement to the left exploded, startling the moose monster and forcing the three Avengers to take a defensive stance. There was calm for a moment. And then-

“AHA!” Thor bellowed, laughing as he hefted himself out of the newly-formed crater. His cape was in shreds and his beard had been nearly completely singed off, but for all of that he looked like a king that had just triumphed on the battlefield. His right hand clutched Mjolnir in a tight grip; in his left dangled a lavender-colored bird with two heads and spurs on its legs longer and thicker than any of Tony’s fingers. “I have bested you, foul scourge of the skies! Tonight I shall cook you over the fire and feed you to my shield brothers as a warning to the rest of your kind!” He vowed, shaking the
clearly deceased and somewhat bloody poultry towards the heavens.

“Oh god,” Bruce groaned. Clearly he could see exactly what was happening from the quinjet.

“Tony?”

“Yeah Steve?”

“Please tell me SHIELD managed to clear the TV news choppers out of the area and that there’s no one filming this.”

“You want honesty or comfort right now, Cap?”

Clint swore enough for all of them.

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As it turned out, SHIELD had managed to clear everyone out from the airspace around the zoo. What they had failed to do was make sure that all the visitors to the zoo had actually managed to escape after Loki’s little invasion began, meaning that two tourists plus a junior zookeeper had been hiding in the restrooms not far from the Birds of Prey exhibit and managed to record Thor’s entire outburst on their Stark phones. On the bright side, they’d been far enough away that you couldn’t hear most of what Thor was actually yelling. On the not so bright side, this meant that people on the Internet were editing in sound clips from different movies and TV shows over the footage, and by the time the Avengers had finished their debrief it had officially achieved meme status. “Four hours Thor, I think that’s a new record for you buddy,” Clint stated, watching one of the edited videos on his phone.

“Still doesn’t beat the twenty minutes it took Steve after he sexy-posed by the bank,” Tony remarked. He had the Thor videos pulled up as well, but was far more interested in what the people were saying in the comments on the videos. Pepper was probably going to swing by the Tower with some PR people pretty soon, and Tony liked to know ahead of time what he was going to need to brace for.

“I wasn’t posing! I was concussed and leaning on the nearest wall I could find!” Steve protested for the thousandth time.

“Uh-huh. And you just had to do that without a shirt?”

“The acid slugs melted through my uniform, you know that!”

“We have the strangest problems,” Bruce whispered to Natasha. The two of them had retreated into the kitchen some time ago and were making tea a safe distance from the heart of the chaos. “I used to just worry about setting bones and making sure the kids in the village had access to water and decent medicine if they got sick. Now Stark’s bought them a whole new hospital and I’m living in his Tower while he and Clint meme a Norse god and mock an elderly national icon.”

Natasha hummed and sipped at her tea. “Thinking about running off?”

Bruce sighed and shook his head. “I’d give it three days before Tony found me and used the Science Bro code to guilt me back here. Wouldn’t even have time to get over the jetlag then.”

“Friends, who is this Billy Madison and why is his voice playing over the tape of my avine triumph?!”
Bruce and Natasha shared a look before the superspy walked back into the living room. Someone needed to calm the god down before he could break the flatscreen. Again.

As a direct result of not only failing to capture Loki but also throttling a (seemingly innocent) bird in 1080p for the entire world to see, Fury benched Thor. To be fair, the SHIELD Director didn’t truly have the authority to bench an extra-dimensional prince with diplomatic immunity; he did, however, choose to inform Thor that SHIELD was redesignating him as a reserve fighter right before suggesting that Thor take Jane and company on a SHIELD-funded vacation to Fiji for two weeks. Thor, always eager to spend time with Jane whenever he could manage, barely waited for Fury to finish speaking before flying off to the Tower to pack. Not even an hour passed before he’d packed his rucksack and called for Heimdall, leaving yet another Bifrost-shaped burn on the Tower’s landing pad.

“We just got this repainted,” Tony complained moments later.

Bruce gave his a consoling pat on the shoulder. “At least it’s just cosmetic damage?”

“It’s the principle of the matter!” Tony groused, already furiously tapping up an email on his Starkpad to send for a repair crew. “Thor’s not going to pay for it, SHIELD sure as hell isn’t going to give me a dime, so once again who’s stuck with the bill for Asgardian interdimensional warping? Me!”

“Is this actually about the property damage or are you just mad that JARVIS didn’t have enough warning to set up all your ridiculous sensors and get proper readings from the Bifrost energy?”

Tony muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “magic” and “crock of lies” as he wandered back into the Tower. Bruce tried and absolutely failed not to grin at this. One day, Tony would admit that some things were just beyond him.

Fortunately for all, Tony’s mood lightened considerably after he finished submitting the work request. It was the second Thursday of the month, and that meant Dungeons and Dragons, enough snacks to feed a small army, and guaranteed peace from both Pepper and Fury (barring the end of the world). For a few blissful hours the team didn’t have to worry about mission reports, publicity issues, or whatever personal ghosts were haunting them this week. They were free to be someone else, mucking about in an imaginary kingdom with zero real world consequences for messing up.

Naturally, the universe couldn’t let this stand for long.

At precisely 7 p.m. that evening, Tony, Natasha, Clint, Steve, and Bruce were gathered around the dining table on the common floor. Natasha and Steve sat side by side, a pile of manuals and folders stacked between them with countless sticky notes jutting out from each page. Clint and Bruce sat on the same side to Steve’s left, sharing Bruce’s copy of the player’s handbook that had seen better days. Tony, being a modern man of the 21st century, had an app pulled up on his phone and sat to Natasha’s right. The far end of the table was piled high with at least a dozen different kinds of snacks; they’d need to make room later on when pizza was inevitably ordered. Natasha and Steve were currently looking over the campaign notes in her leatherbound DM journal, likely finalizing a few obstacles before the start, while Bruce, Tony, and Clint gave their new character sheets a final onceover. There had been one campaign wherein Clint had forgotten to spend all his ability points at the start, directly leading to a failed reflex save that got the party healer stuck in the bottom of a pit trap with 0 hp. Tony and Bruce both had choice words about that, and since then the group had followed a “triple check followed by peer review” rule.
Just as Tony was about to pass his sheet across the table to Clint, he caught sight of a glimmer of light in the corner of his eye. Natasha and Steve were both on their feet in an instant, Natasha pulling a gun and Steve grabbing his chair in one hand to throw. Tony heard Clint yelp but didn’t see how either he or Bruce had reacted; he was too distracted by the sight before him.

Loki, magical and nearly immortal god of mischief/lies/etc was standing in the middle of the common floor’s living room, dressed in casual Asgardian wear, holding a player’s handbook in his left hand and a bag of potato chips in his right.

“JARVIS, did someone manage to put some kind of hallucinogen in the vents?” Tony asked, brain desperately trying to dissect this scenario and reassemble it as something that made even an iota of sense.

“Perhaps,” Loki said with a shrug, “but if so that has absolutely no connection to me. I’m quite real, Stark.”

“What are you doing here?” Steve demanded.

Loki smirked. “Why, accepting his invitation.”

“Excuse you?” Clint snapped. “Also, what the fuck-”

“The zoo,” Natasha murmured, realizing what was going on just a moment before Tony.

Tony could see the exact moment everyone else around the table recalled his banter with Loki. At once he felt his stomach drop straight down into his shoes when all the Avengers present turned to glare at him. “Oh come on! I invite Loki out for drinks every other fight! It’s part of..you know…this!” he desperately tried to reason, motioning frantically back and forth between the god and himself as though that would clarify anything.

“True, but even in jest it was still an open offer you made to allow me to enter into your home,” Loki informed him with far too much smugness for Tony’s liking. “It seemed good enough for the spirit in your walls.”

Tony’s Loki-to-English filter needed a moment to realize he was talking about JARVIS. “Really J?”

“Your words implied that Loki was to be given admittance to game night if he so desired to come, and that he should bring food,” JARVIS curtly informed him. “Both of these conditions have been met.”

“Why are you really here?” Bruce demanded, voice calm even as he slowly clenched and unclenched his fists.

If anyone besides Tony noticed Loki’s minute flinch, they didn’t speak up. “Stark’s conversation with the Widow intrigued me,” Loki explained. “I found a Midgardian who kindly took me to a shop to buy the manual you demanded; version 3.5, correct?” Tony nodded and made a mental note to find whatever poor shop had been visited by Loki. Somehow Tony doubted that the handbook had been acquired by traditional legal means.

“Yeah, ha ha, fine, we get it,” Clint snarled. “You made the joke, now beat it before-”

“Oh my dear Hawkeye,” Loki interrupted with a purr, “It was to be just a joke. But I became curious, read through a bit of this book, and I must admit, this is a rather more interesting Midgardian game than what I’ve encountered before among you mortals. I think I’d rather like to play.”
“Hell no,” Clint and Steve barked simultaneously. Bruce shook his head; Tony could only stare.

Loki rolled his eyes. “Your opinions on the matter are hardly of any consequence. Stark is the one who extended the invitation; his is the right to refuse. Although” (and dear god, no not-diabolically evil smile had that many teeth in it) “offering a god an invitation to come into your home, as well as share a meal? If you were to renege on that, there’s no telling what nasty fate the Norns might have in store for you. Granted, it’s been a few centuries since they had to smite anyone, but consider what that time off must have done to their creativity.”

This was the primary reason Thor should be blamed for the whole mess. Had the big blond idiot not gone and gotten himself banished to a completely different hemisphere outside of wifi and cell phone range, Tony might have been able to get hold of him to see if Loki was bluffing or not. It was possible that being smote (or suffering any kind of consequence, really) from throwing Loki out on his ass was a complete lie, but Loki had a tendency to stretch the truth rather than outright break it. And any form of divine wrath was something Tony would rather like to avoid. “Well?” Loki asked, raising a brow. “I’ll even promise not to harm a single one of you, so long as the game goes on.” He dropped the bag of chips on the snack stack and wove an intricate pattern of glowing green lines through the air with one hand, finished with his signature at the base before the entire thing vanished like smoke. It could have been actual magic, or maybe just Loki’s grocery list. Tony had no way of knowing. “Good enough for you?” the god asked with a smile that promised only bad things in Tony’s future.

But Tony never got the chance to answer. Natasha cleared her throat and, once she had the attention of everyone in the room, deliberately sat down and extracted a blank character sheet from one of her folders. “You’re in.”

Clint seemed to choke on thin air. Steve stared, Bruce gave her a long look before sighing and taking his seat, and Tony outright gaped. “Excuse you?!”

Natasha glanced up at him with a look that would have killed a lesser man. “Loki is competent,” she explained. “He is malicious and a liar and a trickster, but he is competent at what he does.”

“Thank you,” Loki said with a polite nod in her direction.

“But that’s not-” Tony froze for a moment, suddenly understanding where Natasha was going with this. “Natasha, no.”

“Five campaigns, Tony,” Natasha went on, ignoring his protests as she dug a pencil out of her bag and slid both it and the character sheet across the table to Loki. “Five fully developed worlds of monsters, villages, dungeons, NPCs, and loot. Epic battles, clever puzzles, mysterious forests that defy logic and reason. Countless hours of planning, strategizing, and rule-verification with the Dungeon Master’s Guide by Steve and I, only for you hopeless would-be adventurers to die horribly before leaving the city limits.”

“Hey,” Tony protested, but it sounded weak even to him.

“We are getting past the starting area,” Natasha proclaimed in a voice that brokered no argument. “Steve and I have tried lowering the number of monsters we throw at you. We have made the entire adventure homebrew, since anything that so much as bears a passing resemblance to a premade module guarantees this group a series of crit fails. We have even lowered nearly all of the Perception DCs to 2 so that you can easily identify what objects are cursed, should you remember that you have that ability. Nothing has worked.” Her gaze suddenly shifted to Loki. “You will get them through the first quest alive and in one piece.”
Loki snapped his fingers to conjure a chair beside Tony. “In case Thor has neglected to mention it, keeping idiots alive on extremely perilous adventures is something of a specialty of mine.”

“Then this should be easy,” Natasha shot back, and oh, there was a challenge in her tone.

Tony looked to Steve, knowing that if anyone could talk some sense into their resident assassin it would be the team leader. To his horror, Steve appeared to actually be considering Natasha’s suggestion, rather than immediately shooting it down. “Cap, be reasonable!”

Steve’s face hardened and he nodded once to himself, before immediately dropping his chair and picking up the DM’s notebook again. “We passed reasonable in the sewers last week, Tony,” he informed him curtly. “I spent ages on that campaign. I turned down volunteering at the humane society so Natasha and I would have more time to plan things out. If Loki wants to participate without maiming anyone, I’ll allow it.”

Clint groaned and slumped down in his chair. Fighting against both Natasha and Steve would be a losing battle, and he knew it. Tony looked to Bruce, his final hope, but the traitor had already reached for a bag of jerky and was making himself a snack pile on a napkin. His eyes locked with Tony’s and he shrugged, as if saying, “What can you do?”

And now for the third time, Tony fucked up. He could have demanded that JARVIS call Fury. He could have told Loki to get out and taken his chances with possibly hubris-punishing cosmic forces. He could have done any number of things to try and salvage game night, which almost certainly would have prevented all of the chaos that was to unfold because of these six superpowered beings gathered around this table. In years to come, Tony would lie awake and ponder what might have been, if he hadn’t looked the god of chaos dead in the eye and said, “All right, you’re in.”
Chapter Summary

The game begins.

Terms to know:
Cleric: they use magic and typically have a connection to a certain god or religion from whom they draw power. Bruce's character follows a god associated with healing and ice.
Barbarian: good at smashing, low on intelligence. The tank of the group.
Bard: Largely there for support to buff the other characters but can fight if necessary.
Rogue: usually a lightly equipped thief type. Think Sera from Dragon Age Inquisition.
d20: a 20-sided die. Most of your actions in D&D are determined by rolling these.
Crit fail: short for critical failure. If you roll a die and get a 1, you automatically fail the action no matter how many points you might have in a trait to pull up your score. Depending on the DM, these failures can have hilarious results.
Perception check: taking a closer look at someone/something to see if you can find any new information. Think Sherlock Holmes investigating a crime scene.
Initiative roll: everyone rolls the dice to determine the order of battle, going from highest to lowest rolls.
Charisma check: roll to see how persuasive you can be.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trouble began barely two minutes after Loki had been accepted into the game, when Natasha asked what class he’d be playing and the trickster god had answered, “Sorcerer, obviously.”

“Nope, vetoing that right now, don’t care if you smite me for it.” Tony declared.

Loki glanced at Tony from the corner of his eye. “I’ve already promised not to harm you, Stark. Must I repeat myself?”

“That’s not it,” Tony assured him with a dismissive hand wave. “This is a role-playing game, Rudolph.”

“I’m aware.”

“Fantasy.”

“So the descriptors in the book would have me believe.”

“It’s...you can’t...Bruce, help me out here.”

“I think what Tony is very poorly trying to explain,” Bruce clarified with an exasperated eye roll, “is that Dungeons and Dragons is about being someone you’re not. Tony is apparently taking issue with the fact that you are, in reality, a sorcerer, and playing one in our game goes against the spirit of D&D.”
Loki gave the scientist a skeptical look and shifted ever so slightly away from him, as though he expected the Hulk to suddenly appear and lunge at him over this faux pas. “These rules of yours weren’t in the handbook.”

“It’s really more of a house rule thing.”

“Look, Dungeons & Dragons has always been for nerds that want to be someone else for a couple hours each week,” Clint suddenly interjected. The archer was clearly upset that Loki was still here, and delaying the game like this was only putting him further on edge. “It’s like playing pretend, but with more rules and dice. Think of it as advanced lying, you’re great at that.”

Loki glanced around, no doubt checking for any hints of trickery by the Avengers on this point. “And you all abide by this rule?”

“I’m a gnome cleric,” Bruce offered. “Small and good at healing.”


“And a human bard to round the group out,” Tony finished. “Just here to provide support and musical interludes.”

Loki remained unconvinced, clearly believing that the Avengers were trying to trick him (to what end, Tony had no idea, seeing as Loki was the one who crashed this party in the first place). Eventually Loki glanced to towards the head of the table, where Steve stared right back at him as Natasha continued scribbling in one of her notebooks. It was well-known that Steve was an awful liar both on and off the battlefield; the sorcerer was no doubt planning to use him as an unwitting lie detector. “And you two?”

“Dungeon Master, obviously,” Natasha informed him without looking up from her writing. Clearly the campaign needed to be slightly modified, and she had better things to do than validate the paranoia of home invading Norse gods. “I do enough pretending to be someone else at my day job.”

“And the good captain?”

Tony and Clint both rolled their eyes before Steve had a chance to answer. “D&D is about playing out your fantasies,” Tony explained, “and apparently Cap’s deepest fantasy is him telling us ‘no’ and us listening to him.”

“Hey!” Steve protested, but made no further effort to defend himself or offer up a different explanation, since he was, again, a terrible liar. Lord only knows how the war might have gone if Captain America had been expected to participate in anything that so much as bore a passing resemblance to subterfuge and misdirection.

“He checks the rules to decide what we are and aren’t allowed to do on the campaign,” Bruce clarified. “If it’s not explicitly stated in the book, he makes the judgement call. His word is law here.”

“You’ve made your point,” Loki acknowledged with a not quite roll of his eyes. Clearly he’d found no lie at this point and had decided to simply go along with the silly Midgarian game rules. “I shall play as something else.”

“Oh damn, he’s going to need to make a full character sheet,” Clint grumbled. “That’ll add at least an hour to our session. Fucking great...”

“Not necessarily,” Tony disagreed. Now that he’d had made peace with the fact that Loki was going to be crashing their session, his mind had shifted gears to make sure that the process of adding a new
player would go as smoothly as possible. Less chance of being cursed that way, probably. “Once
Loki picks something we’ll have Cap buff the skills and abilities to suit a basic member of that class
and load him up with some standard level 1 gear and armor. So, Lokes, what’ll it be?”

To Tony’s surprise, the trickster actually seemed to think about it for a minute. “A thief,” he settled
on. “Just...a thief.”

“Ok, human rogue,” Tony decided. “Now while Cap gets you set up, the rest of us are going to start
the adventure.”

“If you people die before Loki can join-“ Natasha warned.

“We’ll stay alive!” Clint promised in a voice that definitely wasn’t a squeak, no matter what Natasha
might say later.

Natasha leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, breath going in and out slowly. The group
watched as her shoulders relaxed and fingers loosely spread themselves out over her notes. She was
getting into character to run their campaign, something that always filled Tony with a healthy mixture
of anticipation and dread. Suddenly her eyes snapped open, and Natasha daintily swept her hand
across the table. At once a light green holographic grid popped up, covering the better part of the
table. Inside this grid was a large rectangular box near the center in easy reach of all players with
what appeared to be several tables, chairs, and benches drawn inside. There were two openings on
opposite walls, likely representing points of entry for the building, and a fire on the wall farthest from
Natasha. The design was doubtless Steve’s handiwork, and he glanced towards Natasha to see if the
starting location was up to her standards. Natasha looked it over and nodded, then jotted the letters
“RSI” in the lower corner of the box. Once that was done, the spy waggled her fingers near the edge
of the table and summoned three holographic figurines that she set in front of each of Tony, Clint,
and Bruce. A fourth one was called up, then set near her manuals; Loki’s character, no doubt.

Natasha gently cleared her throat, and immediately had the attention of everyone in the room. “Our
story begins in the Rusty Nails Inn,” she stated, pausing for just a moment to let the boys scribble this
down in their adventuring books. “You have all found yourselves seated at a table near the fire.”
(Here she motioned towards one of the tables near the back wall, and everyone scrambled to move
their characters into position). “It’s late autumn now, and a respite from the road is welcomed by all.
The innkeeper’s wife comes by to ask about your orders, and to see what brings you into her inn.”

“I introduce myself as Bannon, disciple of Auril, travelling as a healer for hire and in need of drink,”
Bruce began.

Loki harrumphed from the head of the table, briefly distracting the group. “Bannon? What was that
about this being someone else?”

“We keep dying and there’s no point in coming up with better names if the characters are only going
to last one session,” Tony answered snippily. “Now shush!”

Loki narrowed his eyes at Tony, who was just now realizing that although the god had promised no
harm during the game, they’d almost certainly encounter one another after tonight (what with being
part of the superhero/supervillain dynamic and all). A combination of horrifically vivid stories from
Thor as well as personal life experience had taught Tony that Loki had long ago mastered the fine art
of holding grudges, so perhaps it would be a good idea to tone his snark down a bit before he ended
up flying through yet another window. Then again, since when had listening to good ideas ever lead
to interesting outcomes?

“I’m Clintock, son of Ur,” Clint went on, completely oblivious to his friend’s inner turmoil. “I’m
here to smash! Meat and mead!"

“And I am Antoninus, heading south to warmer parts to earn some money for the winter,” Tony joined in, deciding to focus on the game and not worry about Loki’s temper. Possible defenestration by vengeful god could be future Tony’s problem. “I flatter the bar wench in the hopes of getting a discount on my food.”

“Persuasion check,” Natasha demanded almost before Tony had finished speaking.

Obediently, the genius picked up his d20 and rolled. “It’s a 14 with my charisma modifier,” he quickly calculated.

“The wench demands full pay for your dinner, but she does slip you a bit of salt pork for free,” Natasha determined. Tony nodded and quickly added the extra food to his inventory. “Now, it would probably be a good idea for you three to become acquainted with each other, since you’re eating at the same table.”

“Explain,” Loki whispered to Steve, who had just finished divvying up his skill points and was about to start picking out Loki’s gear.

“The story evolves based on what the players do,” Steve answered, only half-listening to the others as he thumbed through the equipment pages. “But what they can actually do is limited by their abilities, so if they want to do anything more than talking or walking down the street? They have to roll for it and get a passing score.” Loki watched as the players made a show of meeting each other and learning about their past travels. Steve finally finished a character sheet and went over the equipment with Loki. After that, Loki moved back to the empty seat by Tony, while Steve resumed looking over the notes beside Natasha.

Natasha handed Loki the holographic figure (and my, wasn’t it odd to be holding an illusion he didn’t cast?) and spoke to the rest of the group. “The inn door opens suddenly, and a new traveler appears.” She glanced towards Loki, who gave her a look but nevertheless set his piece near the door. “It’s a rogue who comes in and decides to sit at your table.”

“I motion to the wench and ask for something hot and cheap,” Loki said. “I introduce myself to the table as Loptr.” Natasha narrowed her eyes; there must be something about that name that she didn’t like. Still, she allowed it and gave the characters a moment to introduce themselves before-

“Suddenly, the door to the inn swings open wide. Three men walk in (here she position three new holo figures by the front door), each one dressed in full armor. Their leader has the king’s sigil on his shield. He gets everyone’s attention and says-”

“Good people,” Steve took over, putting on a gruff voice for the character. “We’re on the hunt for a group of criminals. We believe they are travelling in a group with a gnome and a half-orc, and are armed. They are wanted for crimes against the king, dead or alive.”

“My, what a coincidence,” Loki muttered from beside Tony, sarcasm so thick you could cut it.

“Think we should take ‘em?” Clint asked the others.

“Perception check,” Tony stated and rolled.

Natasha raised a brow. “To perceive what?”

“Umm...their danger level?”
Tony didn’t dare turn his head to see the look he was getting from Loki. He was pretty sure it was somehow more intensely judgemental than the ones Bruce and Clint were shooting him now for that pile of word vomit. This was the one part of D&D he didn’t care for; you actually had to explain your actions and come up with reasons for them. Not exactly ideal for a man who’d once flown an experimental suit of armor into the stratosphere just to see what might happen.

Natasha, blessed DM that she was, merely looked at his die and allowed it. “Their armor is old and battle-worn. These are clearly veterans of many battles. Each man has a shield and sword, and one has a pouch of unknown contents strapped to his waist. They seem tired from the road, but still capable of fighting. You decide that you do not want to engage them,” she stated, putting firm emphasis on the last sentence.

“I don’t want to fight and decide to sneak out,” Bruce announced and rolled.

Everyone stared as Bruce’s die landed with a 1 facing up.

“Crit fail,” Tony whispered to Loki as Steve put his head in his hands.

“You attempt to leave the table, but your robes get caught on your seat corner and send it toppling over,” Natasha stated, giving Bruce a grave look. “You stumble and attempt to catch yourself only to send everything on the table flying in all directions. You have now managed to capture the attention of everyone in the inn and there is mead soaking into your boots.”

“Maybe we-” Tony began.

“Screw it, time to fight!” Clint shouted. “I draw my ax.”

Steve made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a sob, and Natasha shook her head as she told them to roll for initiative. Everyone except Loki rolled under a 5. “We have to be cursed,” Bruce decided, staring at the dice in disbelief.

“And with that, Loptr goes first, followed by all of the level 5 guards, then the bard, cleric, and barbarian.” She glanced at the sorcerer. “Loptr?”

Tony had been watching Loki very closely since Bruce had failed to sneak out. The god had been sitting perfectly still, fingers of one hand lightly pressed under his jaw as he analyzed the situation. Clearly he’d been expecting things to go horribly wrong and had been preparing something. But what? Loki reached forward and moved his character out from the table, scooting it diagonally to the right to be both closer to the guards and also slightly closer to the rear door. “I draw my sword and accuse them of being imposters,” he stated simply, settling back into his chair.


“Steve?” Natasha asked.

Steve thought for a moment and then said, “I’ll allow it, provided you give us more than that.”

“I point out that their armor is clearly second-rate, probably salvaged after the last war for scrap,” Loki went on. “Why would a group of soldiers only travel in threes? Where is their official notice from the king? Why-”

“Roll charisma check,” Natasha cut in.

Loki did as instructed. “18.”
“You manage to confuse the people in the inn. They’re not sure whether to believe the warriors or you. The innkeeper is asking someone to run and get the local sheriff to settle this before anything else happens.”

“I grab the gnome and run out the back,” Tony declared, already rolling his d20.

“Same with the rogue,” Clint said. This time, both of them succeeded.

“You make it out of the back of the inn and come to the main road before the soldiers can get across the building to you,” Natasha narrated as Steve hurriedly scrolled through the holographic display to come to a blank patch, and then drew a path and stick trees along it. “A few miles to the right is” (here she paused for a moment and checked the map in her notebook) “the city of Lowcaster, and to the left are southern cities and the port town of Greenich beyond the woods. Which way do you run?”


From that point on, the campaign ran incredibly smoothly. Tony hypnotized a bear to sleep so Clint could safely murder it, providing the group with shelter one evening. The party survived an encounter with bandits and escaped a witch living in the woods before finally stopping off at Greenich. Frankly, the worst thing that happened was Tony choking on a potato chip because he’d laughed too hard after Bruce got a two crit fails in a row during the bandit fight (incidentally, he made a personal note then to choke to death next time because Steve thumping him on the back to clear his airway had almost definitely bruised a rib or two). What surprised Tony the most was how deeply Loki became absorbed in the game. Loki figured out the strengths of the other characters only a few minutes into the campaign and threw out suggestions once in a while that always managed to save the party from near-certain doom (such as hinting that perhaps someone should scout the bear cave before they blindly charged in). Clint and Loki’s characters were both injured by the time they reached town, but it was nothing a night at the inn couldn’t cure. By far, this was the least painful D&D session that had taken place within the Tower’s walls in ages.

When Natasha declared an end to that night’s session, everyone gaped at the holographic board in disbelief. “We...made it,” Bruce said quietly, as though he couldn’t quite believe it.

“We actually got through the first part of a campaign in one piece,” Tony said.

Steve shook his head. “I seriously thought you were going to die at the inn.”

“Well what were we supposed to do?!” Clint demanded.

Natasha stared him down. “I specifically said not to fight them. You were supposed to allow them to take you into Lowcaster, where you’d stage a jailbreak and sneak out through a series of catacombs.”

“We had it all drawn out, pit traps and everything,” Steve explained with a motion towards his notebook.

“Oh. That makes sense.”

Natasha muttered something in Russian directed at the heavens.

“Welp, this has been real fun, fellow murderhobos,” Tony said as he stood from his chair and popped by spine, “but some of us have things to check on in the lab.”

“Exploding things?” Steve inquired with a stern look.
“...Not necessarily-”

“Tony!”

“What?!”

“House rule, no running volatile experiments on game night!”

“Cap, that is a ridiculously broad definition, everything is volatile under the right circumstances-”

“Tony-”

“And besides, my experiments from today aren’t even supposed to explode, there’s just one that has an almost statistically significant chance of maybe causing a minor explosion-”

“JARVIS?”

“42%, Captain,” the AI informed him.

“Minor explosion! Minor!” Tony repeated, seeing that Steve was clearly getting ready for another “Stop doing things that might burn the Tower to the ground” lecture.

“Ahem.”

All eyes in the room suddenly turned towards Loki. The sorcerer had stood from the table and was loosely clutching his book in one arm, although his character sheet was still lying flat on the table. For just a moment the expression his face was not exactly confused, but something close to it. He seemed not to know what the proper course of action was, now that the game was over. Tony had the distinct feeling that whatever scheme Loki had actually planned for tonight had gone totally off the rails, and now the god was trying to scrape together some sort of plan B. Then, suddenly, Loki’s countenance had smoothed back down into the casual indifference the Avengers most often saw from him. “Well, this evening has been rather informative, shall we say?” He turned and bowed his head ever so slightly at Tony. “Thank you for the hospitality, Stark.” And in a flash of green he was gone.

There was a pause. And then- “So, that really just happened, didn’t it?” Bruce asked. “We spent the past four hours playing Dungeons and Dragons with Loki.”

“What the hell was that even about?” Clint snapped. “Like I get it, haha, maybe he shows up unannounced and messes with our heads for a little bit, but he seriously sat here and played the whole time!”

“What were you expecting to happen?” Natasha asked.

“I don’t know! Maybe he’d deliberately sabotage the campaign, maybe he’d trap us in the game manual, anything besides actually going along with it!”

“This might be something to ask Thor about,” Steve suggested.

Bruce winced. “Not really looking forward to explaining to him that we kept mum about his brother sitting in the dining room and eating nachos with us for a few hours.”

“This has to be a scheme, right?” Clint continued, looking from one Avenger to another for confirmation.

Natasha quietly shrugged as she turned off the board and began collecting her things. “Perhaps.”
“I’m not sure what exactly Loki has to gain from this though,” Bruce added. “We’re clearly better on the field than in an RPG, so it’s not like he gained any real insight into how our team works or learned about potential weaknesses.”

“You guys are overthinking this,” Tony declared. “Loki just wanted to crash the party and be a dick for a little while, it’s part of his whole mischief and chaos schtick. It was a one-off; just have a couple drinks and forget it ever happened.” There were various nods and grumbles of assent from most of the team. Still, when no one was looking Natasha swiped Loki’s character sheet and slipped it into her notes, safe for the next session. Clearly, one never knew when expected visitors were going to pop into Avengers’ Tower.

Chapter End Notes

I'm never going to be happy with this chapter, but if I don't put it out there now I never will. Next one should come out sooner; this one was just very awkward to write. I'm trying to figure out how I want to balance the narration of what's happening in game vs. what's happening at the table with the Avengers, so we'll probably play around with that in the next few chapters.

NOTE: ok, about 5 chapters into this fic it occurred to me that sometimes I've been posting the chapters under my actual ao3 account, and sometimes under my pseudonym. I've finally gone back and changed the main credit to FluffyHippogriff, but don't freak if some of the replies/chapter postings are from SuspiciousLampshade. Pay attention to that stuff before you post your chapters folks!!
Chapter Summary

Things are going to go poorly for all persons involved, and they've certainly spiraled out of control. How tragic, really.

From this point on chapters are either going to be in Loki or Tony's POV, which will affect how certain characters are addressed or perceived depending on who we're following. I'll try to make it pretty obvious within a few sentences who's POV we're on in each chapter, but apologies for any confusion that causes.

Comments and kudos are loved and appreciated!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To say that the evening at Avenger’s Tower had not gone according to plan was an understatement on par with saying the fallout from Thor's failed coronation had caused a minor amount of tension in Asgard’s royal family.

Loki had initially intended to do nothing more than startle and confuse the Avengers with his sudden appearance. Of course there were no cosmic forces lurking in the wings and waiting to punish anyone who retracted an offer of hospitality that had been (somewhat sarcastically) extended to an Asgardian, any more than they waited to punish your neighbor down the road for doing something similar. Honestly, commoncourtesy was the only thing holding that lie together. But being given such a chance to harass his not-brother’s friends in the comfort of their own home? How could the god of mischief resist?

Really, the problem was that Loki had taken the joke a bit too far and actually acquired the book Stark had mentioned. Let it never be said that Loki didn’t like to have a prop or two on hand when giving a performance. It had been a simple matter to hunt down the book; a few well-placed words and a dagger to the throat of a frazzled New Yorker had resulted in directions to a store that the terrified Midgardian had assured him would have the manual. The shopkeeper himself was rather helpful; instead of cowering or yelling for the police as one might be expected to do after the god of chaos suddenly materialized in your shop, he simply wanted to take pictures of Loki holding the book beside the shop’s logo. He explained it was for something called “Insta-gram” or some such Midgardian nonsense. Loki didn’t particularly care as long as it meant he wouldn’t have to fight about payment, and after getting a thumbs up from the young man he teleported back to his current lair.

This was the point when Loki fucked up.

The smart thing to do would have been to set the book on a shelf, wait until Thursday night rolled around, and then grab the prop and head straight to Avengers Tower for his impromptu appearance. But Loki had gotten curious; the shopkeeper had mentioned that this version was in “high demand” for some reason, and Stark had been rather insistent on using it as well. The store had had an entire
Dungeons & Dragons was clearly a game of make-believe, that much was obvious by the end of page one. Loki couldn’t help but scoff at such a childish, ignorant Midgardian thing. Their depictions of dwarves, for instance, were offensive in at least three realms. And the idea of a deity sticking to only one speciality, and actually answering a devotee’s prayer if enough points had been put into their relationship? Ridiculous. As for their understanding of sorcerers, the less said the better. And yet…

There would be times when Loki would let himself sink ever so slightly into this manual and recall moments from childhood, when he and Thor had planned their own great adventures. Loki had snatched a bestiary from the library that was so thick and heavy both he and Thor had had to carry it back to his room, and the duo had spent hours pouring over the figures and making plans to fight them one day. They’d discussed what weapons would be needed, how much food should be packed, and no, of course we’ll need a second horse Loki how else will we get the carcass back home-

Enough. Those times were long gone, and instead of bilgesnipes Loki now had to worry about both mad Titans with Infinity Stones as well as lying decrepit Asgardian kings with a vendetta against their false offspring. He’d slammed the book shut and considered chucking it out a window and just abandoning his whole plot, but ultimately settled for replacing the book on the shelf. Just a bit longer, and then he could be rid of the damned thing. Possibly by hunting down that shopkeeper and throwing it at his head, provided he could remember how to get back there.

In the end he didn’t touch the manual again until he left for Avengers Tower. He teleported himself to the penthouse with the manual and a pack of chips in hand. He’d chosen this room because the layout of the room was familiar, and if this plan went south at least he wouldn’t be fighting on completely unfamiliar ground. Loki needn’t have worried though; all that happened when he arrived was an eerily calm voice from the ceiling asking, “Might I help you, Mr. Odinson?”

Loki suppressed the urge to flinch. “That’s not my name, whoever you are.”

“Young Mr. Liesmith will do.” Loki glanced around the room; so far, no signs of security. “Am I correct in assuming you’ve already alerted the Avengers to my presence?”

“Not at this time,” JARVIS replied. “Sir extended an invitation to you to join in the Avengers’ game night, and as you appear only armed with a game manual and food, I do not believe that you intend to harm Sir for now.”

“That’s a rather dangerous assumption to make,” Loki remarked. “I could summon all sorts of unpleasant things in the blink of an eye, you know.”

“The analyses of past battles between you and the Avengers would lead credence to that. However, I do not believe that you would be so suicidally foolish as to attempt to fight the Avengers in their own home while they are rested and well-armed. I do believe that your appearance will give Sir quite a fright, however, and perhaps help me in convincing him to stop inviting villains into his home for social events.”

Loki actually smirked at that. “So, I’m supposed to serve as a bit of shock therapy for Stark then?
Delightful.

“In so many words. Shall I send for the elevator?”

“No need. Just tell me where they are.”

That was how Loki found himself thirty floors down in the midst of the Avengers, relishing in the frightened/confused looks on their faces. It was glorious, being able to rattle them entirely because one of their own had insisted on taunting Loki. Stark may have been clever, but he was absolutely delusional to believe that his teammates were safe from Loki here, protected by the power of truth or justice or some other such heroic nonsense. That misstep directly resulted in Loki gaining entry into the Avengers’ personal lives, if only for this moment. Loki almost regretted he’d have to vanish before he could witness the fallout.

But that hadn’t happened. Instead, Romanov (whom Loki privately thought was the only halfway competent one among them some days) had demanded his participation in the game. Not suggested, not requested, but demanded it from her teammates. Loki had briefly thought that this might lead to a fight and he could vanish amidst the chaos, but then the others inexplicably fell in line with her demands. And when the Black Widow had challenged him, Loki’s pride wouldn’t let him leave. He was in.

The game itself was enlightening in the worst of ways. Loki had long wondered if the Avengers could be useful in his plans to stop Thanos, but had yet to develop a sufficient means of testing this. Scarcely an hour into the adventure, the answer came to him and was a resounding absolutely not under any circumstances. It was horrifically reminiscent of times when Thor and his band of morons had gotten themselves into bar fights that Loki had to smooth over, except this was somehow worse because at least those idiots had the strength to hold their own in a fight. Frankly, Loki was both confused and embarrassed that New York’s assorted villains kept losing to this lot. It didn’t bode well for the future of the galaxy at large.

Nevertheless, once Loki had managed to resolve the initial fiasco at the inn, the rest of the evening was...enjoyable wasn’t the right word, but something close to it. A pleasant distraction would likely be better, since trying to prevent the others from dying demanded enough of his focus to take his mind off Thanos for a while. It had been relaxing in a way as well, allowing Loki’s mind to exercise his powers of creativity without some ulterior need to cause a distraction or retrieve some ultra-powerful weapon. Much as he was loathe to admit, he probably needed a break from his solo campaign to save the universe. And if there was some tiny part of him that had enjoyed being part of a group again and receiving their praise, well, no one would ever know it.

But as soon as the game had ended, Loki had come back to himself in horror. He barely managed to bid farewell to his host (Frigga’s manners had at least stuck with him even if he’d abandoned everything else about his upbringing) before returning to his home and throwing the manual so hard across the room it stuck in the drywall. None of that should have happened. Loki was a villain, if only because heroes operated with too many restrictions and calling himself evil tended to make buying questionably legal materials much easier in certain markets. If word ever got out that he’d willingly spent the evening with the Avengers in their own home, playing games and eating that crunchy trash which Midgardians passed off as snacks...forget what someone like Mephisto or Doom might pull, Loki would probably fling himself into a black hole out of sheer embarrassment.

“Calm down,” Loki muttered, summoning a glass of red wine as he flopped down on the chaise lounge. There was no need to panic. Loki didn’t follow Midgardian news as closely as he could, but even he knew that the Avengers were on thin ice with more than a few prominent organizations across the globe. If they ever let slip that Loki had visited their home in a social context and
subsequently left of his own volition, heads would roll. Norns only knew how that one-eyed bastard at SHIELD might respond.

This was fine. Loki could write this whole evening off as a prank with unforeseen results; nothing out of the ordinary for him if you put it that way. And really, he mentally added while sipping the wine, he’d gained more than a bit of insight into the capabilities of the Avengers in a non-traditional setting. It was fine. Really, absolutely, perfectly fine. Loki kept telling this to himself until he’d passed out on the third bottle of wine.

-n-

As part of Loki’s campaign to prove that things were perfectly normal and had certainly not dramatically and irrevocably shifted following the game of Dungeons & Dragons, the sorcerer threw himself into a number of experiments that required the bulk of his time and energy each day. These were very important trials that he simply had to run, and it was entirely coincidental that by the time he could afford to step out and enjoy a respite, the next game night had come and gone. There now. He was clearly not part of the Avenger’s make believe campaign, and both he and the heroes could write off that one evening as a terrible error in judgement that need never be repeated.

If Loki felt a small knot in his stomach at the thought, it was definitely a result of inhaling all the fumes in his laboratory.

Loki now turned his attention back to tracking down the Mind Stone. He was certain the scepter and stone were both on Midgard somewhere, and his money was on SHIELD having stored it away under the delusion that their petty security could keep anything more valuable than a ham sandwich safe from anything more threatening than a pantry rat. Frankly it was embarrassing; even Loki knew that Stark enjoyed breaking through their security for fun, and he didn’t even socialize with the Avengers. Usually.

Tragically though, it was beginning to look like SHIELD had scrounged up their most capable personnel (all three of them, Loki thought uncharitably) and found somewhere to tuck it away that was out of his immediate reach. None of his usual tracking spells or magic tracers were working, and after the fortnight-long experiment run his inner seidr reserve needed a break. And so, one perfectly normal afternoon, Loki went out for coffee.

The wonderful thing about Midgard (particularly their city of New York) was that no one ever looked too hard at you. Loki had gotten more and more lax with his disguises over the months he’d been wandering about the city, and had now reached the point where he could walk the streets without so much as having to alter his hair or eye color; a simple pair of sunglasses and a decent coat would do. Occasionally some Midgardians would stare at him for a bit longer than others, but invariably it was due to them being afraid of handing out their phone number, as opposed to recognizing him as the sorcerer who’d torn open the sky. The anonymity was comforting, in a way. Loki was all but guaranteed peace and quiet as he sipped his coffee in the back corner of a particularly quaint hole in the wall coffee shop in Queens.

Unfortunately for Loki, today was a day the Wrecking Crew were in town.

Loki heard the screams and sounds of smashing stonework begin only minutes after getting his drink. Most of the other patrons started panicking and rushing towards the door in a frenzy, but frankly the god of mischief had had a particularly trying few weeks and just wanted to enjoy his beverage in peace. A few flicks of his wrist threw up a basic shielding spell, and Loki continued to sip at his coffee in the now deserted coffee house. Everything was perfectly acceptable, right until Iron Man came crashing through the front window, skidded along the floor, and finally ground to a halt not five feet from Loki’s table.
Stark groaned and slowly sat up, faceplate and right gauntlet retracting enough to let him rub at a small bump on his forehead. Clearly the fight was not going well for the Avengers. “JARVIS, make a note, I’m going to weld Bulldozer to something very high up, possibly a flagpole on the Chrysler building if it’s not too out of the way-” The hero stopped speaking, and Loki knew that he’d finally noticed the god’s presence when Stark turned his head and froze.

There was a pause. A chunk of broken glass fell out of the shattered window pane at the other end of the shop. Outside and down the street, something exploded. Loki took another sip. It was that small motion that seemed to snap the hero back to his sense. “Cappuccino?”

“Latte,” Loki answered.

“Huh.” Another pause. Another sip on Loki’s part. “I don’t suppose this is…?” Stark motioned vaguely outside towards the chaos.

Loki couldn’t help wrinkling his nose in distaste. “Decidedly not, Stark. I have standards.”

“Oh, is that why you missed game night? Because let me just say,” Stark went on as he climbed to his feet, “we appreciate a little notice if someone’s got to miss. Helps with the rescheduling.”

Loki needed a minute to process that. Stark had thought that he’d be back? But that was impossible; the invitation had clearly been given in jest, that much was obvious from how all the Avengers, Stark included, had reacted to Loki’s appearance. Why would he presume that the trickster would return? This was just banter, then; the hero’s normal attempt at taunting Loki. “What’s wrong, Stark? Couldn’t handle one night without me?”

This was the part of their teasing where the other man would say something lascivious, probably with a wink, and Loki would roll his eyes before putting his adversary through a nearby wall or window. The two of them had it down to a set routine, really, these things were as predictable as sunrise or Thor falling for a Loki illusion. But to Loki’s surprise (and my, wasn’t that the theme of today), Stark actually flinched and looked a bit sheepish. “Define handle.”

Loki quirked a brow. “Are all of you still alive?”

“Oh, alive? That’s what you meant? Because if so, yes, we are perfectly fine, everyone is still living, no one has been reduced to a fine paste yet, and really that’s a pretty good record for us-”

“I’m half-tempted to see how deep you can get in this lie before you give up,” Loki interjected. “But my latte is growing cold and I’d like to finish it before that lot comes barging in.”

“We might have gotten cursed,” Stark admitted. “Like, really cursed.”

Loki blinked at him. “Cursed?”

“IRON MAN!”

Loki and both flinched at the tinny scream that blared through Stark’s comm; apparently the good Captain had been trying to get his attention for some time. Sighing, the hero climbed to his feet and turned towards the gaping hole in the wall, faceplate and gauntlet slipping back into place. “Can’t talk now, swing by next week if you’re up for breaking a curse.” And with that, he was out of the building and back in the fight. Loki stared after him for far longer than was strictly reasonable.

-n-

The next week found Loki returning to the Avenger’s Tower for reasons that even he couldn’t begin
to explain. Part of it was curiosity, to be sure; he honestly wanted to know exactly how the heroes had managed to screw things up, and how badly. Another chaotic bit wanted to see what would happen if he took Stark up on the invitation for a second time; once could be written off as a joke, but twice? There would be consequences to this, and Loki wanted to see what. But another, smaller part (and Loki was loathe to admit this) was attracted to the idea of interacting with people beyond a simple desire to manipulate or murder them. Supervillains tended not to socialize much, and Loki probably needed to get out of the house more before he did something unhinged like enchanting a cauldron to hold a conversation with him. Again.

And so, Loki disinterred the Dungeons & Dragons manual from the hole in the wall, magicked off most of the dust coating it, and teleported himself to the Tower shortly before 7 on Thursday night. His timing likely could have been better; Loki appeared in the room just in time to hear Stark yell, “It was right in the name, Clint, you literal goddamn birdbrain!”

“Am I interrupting something?”

All eyes were on him in a second. Barton went for his bow and Romanov already had a knife in hand, but at least Rogers hadn’t grabbed a chair. “What the fuck are you doing here?! Again?!” the archer demanded.

“I was invited. Again.”

Everyone was now looking at Stark, whom Loki was pleased to see did not look nearly as contrite as someone who invited a supervillain into their home should be. His presence had actually been expected this time, then. A small part of Loki was honestly pleased by this; Stark wasn’t foolish enough to think that Loki would reject the offer this time. “Tony, when exactly did this happen?” Rogers asked.

“Wrecking Crew fight. Loki and I happened to bump into each other in a coffee shop.”

“Stark mentioned that you’d somehow managed to become cursed?” Loki inquired before Rogers could launch into what was guaranteed to be a truly insipid line of questioning.

“Clint did it,” Stark and Banner chorused.

“I’m a barbarian!” Barton shrieked, hands thrown up in the air now. “How was I supposed to know the altar was cursed?!”

“Well gee, Barton, let’s think,” Stark snapped, “if we’re trudging through a sewer system full of plague rats, and we come across an area that a swamp witch said contains a cursed altar of plague, and you decide to fucking cleave a rat king in half on top of the altar-?”

“Well when you put it that way it just sounds obvious!”

Loki turned to look at Romanov and Rogers for confirmation. The Black Widow was glaring daggers at Barton, while her fellow Dungeon Master stared mournfully at the notebooks in front of him that were doubtlessly filled with now-useless campaign plans.

“So now we’re all level 1 rats with no gear, 1 health, and zero idea of how to break the curse,” Banner concluded with a sip of his tea.

Loki didn’t even take a moment to pretend to consider. “I’m leaving,” he announced and spun to exit the room.

“Wait!”
Loki glanced back to see that Stark looked slightly panicked. Interesting… “I have no intention of dragging you lot out of one dire situation if it will inevitably result in you somehow managing to fall into a worse quagmire. Even Thor and his bumbling allies were never this bad, and they once let a herd of goats loose at a Dwarven wedding!” Granted, the goats had been Loki’s idea, but such a revelation would probably detract from the drama of the moment.

The words were barely out of Loki’s mouth before Stark’s eyes widened, and a confident smirk settled on his face. Oh no. Loki didn’t like that look. That look usually meant that something like missiles or the Hulk were in his near future, and try as he might the god had yet to learn how to predict what exactly this Midgardian was going to throw his way. “Loki,” he began, “you have to play.”

Feigning disinterest, Loki quirked a brow. “Or what?”

Stark’s smirk grew bigger. “Or we’ll have to call up Thor in New Mexico and see if he’d like to fly out here for the night and take over his brother’s spot, because something came up and you had to leave early. JARVIS has the footage to back it up.”

Norns damn this man, a Hulk or several tons of explosives would have been better. Loki did his best to draw himself up and stalked slowly forward. He’d been told on more than one occasion this made him look rather predatory, and murder was definitely a possibility at the moment. “Will you now?”

“Absolutely,” Stark promised, and to his credit the man didn’t waver even when Loki was mere inches away, positively looming over him. “And I’ll be sure to let him know exactly how valuable this character was to our campaign, what with saving us from the king’s men and guiding us through the woods to safety—”

“I could peel you like a grape, Stark,” Loki hissed. “I could curse you to peel yourself like a grape. Or if I really wanted you to suffer, I might keep you alive and come up with a nice hex to turn your hair follicles into fingernails and then let you live with the agony of millions of them slicing through your skin as they grow. It would be as easy as snapping my fingers.”

Stark, amazingly, stepped even closer until Loki could practically feel the other man’s breath on his face. “Worth it.”

Damn him. Damn this infernal man to Hel and back. Loki couldn’t chance cursing him with anything that might cause lasting damage at the risk of losing one of his few sources of entertainment in this realm. And whether he cut and ran now or after putting a spell on Stark, Thor would surely hear about Loki’s participation last month and start getting ideas about bonding and whatnot. No, there was only one option. Loki was smart enough to know when he was beaten.

That said, as soon as he got home tonight he was going to throw himself into crafting something particularly unpleasant to hurl at Tony Stark in their next battle. If ever there was a time for creative retaliation, this was it.

He sighed and shoved past Stark towards the table, dropping himself into the same seat as he held the last time. “So,” he began, looking towards a stunned Rogers and a stone-faced Romanov, “exactly what happened while I was away?”

Chapter End Notes
For the record, I didn't come up with the fingernail thing; it's loosely based on the case of Shanyna Isom, who has a disease that causes hardened stems to grow out of her hair follicles and is exactly as much fun as you're picturing right now. On a brighter note, the rat altar thing actually happened to some of my friends when they were elbows deep in their own campaign. The barbarian didn't last long after that.
Frankly, Tony was amazed that he hadn’t been turned into a newt of some sort after threatening Loki with brotherly affection. In Tony’s defense though, the Avengers absolutely needed Loki to join in their game tonight, lest they all die horribly and have to face the wrath of Steve and Natasha for completely buggering up yet another campaign.

After Loki vanished the last time, Tony had dealt with a long lecture from Steve about not inviting villains from their rogue gallery to game nights, even sarcastically, and Tony had made the appropriate faces and hand gestures to make it seem like he felt bad about Loki putting in an appearance. It probably wasn’t very convincing (mostly because Tony didn’t feel a shred of remorse for the results Loki had gotten them) and Steve frankly seemed to be going through the motions more than actually trying to chastise Tony, probably because he felt the same way. It had been ages since one of Steve and Natasha’s campaigns managed to get off the ground, and frankly it had been amazing.

Of course, there had been some genuine fallout. Clint barely spoke to Tony after that, and only began to forgive him when Tony volunteered to be the one to tell Thor about Loki’s sudden appearance. It wasn’t like Tony was dying to bring up Loki’s visit, but someone needed to tell the god of calling down lightning bolts when grouchy before too much time passed and he got ideas about the other Avengers hiding things from him. Plus it gave Tony an excuse to avoid other responsibilities, like showing up for an SI board meeting or returning Fury’s calls, because for some reason Captain Eyepatch had been blowing up his phone for the past few days now.

Tony had expected at least a little thunder and electricity flying through the air, but to his surprise Thor merely laughed and scooped up the inventor in a rib-crushing hug. “Thank you, Tony,” he said after setting Tony back down. “I’m certain it’s been ages since anyone offered such kindness to my brother in circumstances that he was willing to accept. You must have had a fantastic time; Loki always did appreciate a chance to show off his cleverness.”

Tony wheezed for a moment, halfway concerned that the sheer might of Thor’s hug had caused the arc reactor casing to become lodged deeper into his chest. “Oh yeah,” he finally got out with only a minor amount of gasping, “Loki really got into it. Figured out how the rest of us worked in no time and got us to the next town in one piece, which let me tell you, kind of a big deal with this group.”

Thor nodded, a fond smile on his face. “I cannot begin to tell you how many times I and my friends
were saved by his wits. I wish we’d thought to appreciate them sooner…”

“Hey, hey, none of that,” Tony demanded, seeing that Thor was beginning to look like a kicked puppy and the clouds outside Avengers’ Tower were turning darker and clumping together. The last thing he wanted to deal with today, after sharing a heart-to-heart with the god of thunder, was getting a call from Rhodey because the army wanted to know what was causing the weird weather phenomena around his tower this time. “At least Loki’s getting out of the house and doing something other than sinister plots, right? This is supposed to be a good thing, you know, something to cheer you up.”

“Aye, and it has! And it’s actually clarified something that I’d been planning to bring to your attention.”

“Which was?”

Thor extracted a cell phone from his back pocket and gingerly began unlocking it. He wasn’t exactly bad at technology, but very few Midgardian phones were designed to withstand fingers of his size and strength. “Darcy and Jane often send me pictures that they’ve found on the Internet of the Avengers out and about,” Thor explained as he began scrolling through the phone. “Pictures of you and Steve in suits are apparently quite popular.”

“Uh-huh, sounds about right.”

“But a few days ago, one of the game shops in New York posted this, (here Thor leaned in and turned his phone towards Tony, knowing his friend didn’t like things being handed to him) and as best Jane and Darcy could tell it wasn’t photoshopped. We’ve all been very confused, but this clarifies things!”

Tony didn’t reply. His brain had shut down in its effort to process what was very clearly a selfie of a gangly teenager with an arm wrapped around Loki’s shoulder. The teen was smiling from ear to ear, while the god of chaos held up a plastic bag that read “Sword and Scabbard Gaming,” a corner of Loki’s player’s handbook clearly poking out from the top. Underneath was a caption, “Good enough for gods = good enough for you!” followed by a series of questionable tags.

“Tony?” Thor asked.

“Well that explains where he got the manual,” Tony remarked, right as JARVIS informed him that Director Fury was on his way up with questions about why one of SHIELD’s most wanted supervillains was apparently shopping for Dungeons & Dragons materials in New York.

-n-

“They did what?”

Tony winced as Loki’s tone snapped him back to the present. Ok, so without the god of chaos their last session might have gone a little bit off the rails. When it became clear that Loki wasn’t going to show up, the rest of the party had accepted a simple murder quest to clear out the town’s sewers from rats that were carrying plague (Bruce had had words about fleas vs. rats carrying plague, but a look from Natasha had shelved that biology argument for another time). They’d gotten into the sewers and Tony, embarrassingly, had failed to check for traps before climbing through a grate. That had separated the party into three different chambers that they’d each had to fight through, and by the time they got to the plague cult that was at the heart of the town’s sickness, Clint was in the midst of a barbarian rage-fueled murder spree and hadn’t even stopped to think before axing the rat king monster on top of the cursed altar of plague. Steve had actually left the room for a moment to collect
himself as Natasha bluntly informed the group that they were basically fucked six ways to Sunday unless a miracle intervened.

That miracle had come in the form of a god sitting in a coffee shop during the last battle with the Wrecking Crew. The fact that Tony had run into Loki at all was incredible; him being able to ask Loki to play again and getting the god to take him up on that offer? The odds bordered on the impossible. And if Loki got away tonight, they’d likely never-

Tony was literally yanked out of his musings by Clint grabbing his bicep and hauling him towards the kitchen. Moments later he found himself pinned to the fridge by a pissed off archer. “What the fuck Tony?” he hissed. “One time I was willing to write off as you being a crazy bastard, but this-”

“Well, I know you’re angry-”

“That doesn’t even begin to cover it!” Clint snapped. “This guy tried to annihilate New York, he fucked with my head, Coulson’s back as a zombie because of him-”

“Fury really doesn’t like us using that word, Clint, do I need to get the pamphlets again-”

“Explain. Now. Before I find something stabby and rusty-”

“Oh, ok.” Tony took a deep breath once Clint backed off, glancing around the room to make sure they were alone. “Listen, it’s just a theory I’m working on, and I’m only telling you this because you understand gut instinct more than the others-”

“And I’ll shoot you.”

“And you’ll shoot me. Ok, so follow me along the Loki timeline as we know it. Thor and Loki get into a fight, Loki finds out he’s adopted under the worst possible circumstances, blows up a magic bridge, and apparently dies via falling into an abyss from whence there is no return. With me so far?”

“Sure, but-”

“But then months later he pops up here on Earth, very much alive and totally negating the ‘from whence there is no return’ thing. Somehow he’s gained an Infinity Stone, an army, and a plan to conquer Earth during his fall, despite the fact that he had none of those going into the void.”

“...Ok...”

“The invasion fails, the Stone goes into SHIELD’s hands, and Loki promptly vanishes from both our and Asgard’s radar. He then spends the next year making on and off appearances that almost always end in something being stolen or destroyed, but not a peep about conquering Earth anymore.”

“So he’s biding his time!”

“I thought about that,” Tony agreed. “But here’s the thing; I’m like 90% sure that if Loki actually wanted to conquer us, we’d already being hand-polishing a giant statue of him in the crater where the Tower used to be.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“The reason he’s running free right now is because we can’t catch him, SHIELD can’t hold him, and
Asgard can’t do either,” Tony explained. “We only beat him last time because he telegraphed his moves so loudly at the end.”

“Tony-”

“Something else is out there,” Tony hurriedly whispered. “I don’t know who or what it is, but it gave Loki an army and an Infinity Stone and it did something that was enough to convince him to try and carry out an invasion in New York. I think that pissed Loki off and he failed deliberately, and I also think that whatever he’s up to now involves getting back at that thing, because as Thor has made abundantly clear, Loki holds grudges and he’s not exactly trying very hard to exact any sort of revenge on us for taking him down back then.”

“…”

“Look, I know it’s a lot-”

“That actually makes sense.”

Tony gaped. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, I mean, when Loki was in my head he seemed to care way more about the conquering than ruling part of world domination,” Clint admitted. “I always assumed, you know, megalomaniac not really thinking too many steps ahead beyond ‘bow before me,’ but if he was always planning to fail-”

“Why else would he try to attack everyone head-on in the one place we were sure to gather, wielding the one weapon we needed to stop his attack?” Tony went on. “Loki works from the shadows, that’s how he killed one king and almost off’d another. There’s confidence and then there’s suicidal levels of arrogance-”

“Which you’d know a thing or two about-”

“Point is, Loki is up to something,” Tony finished. “I don’t know what, but I think it’s less about conquering Earth and more about crushing some abomination that pulls Norse gods out of voids at will and hands out overpowered accessories like candy on Halloween.”

Clint sighed. “Shit. I think you’re right.”

“Thank you!”

“But that still doesn’t explain-”

“I fully believe that Loki doesn’t want to conquer Earth,” Tony stated. “But at the same time, I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t exactly lose any sleep if Earth got wrecked as part of the fallout of his vengeance plans.”

“So what? You’re trying to endear him to us?”

“…”

“You do have a plan, right?”

“…”

“Seriously Tony?!?”
“I didn’t actually think I’d get this far!” Tony hissed, and wasn’t that the truth. “Maybe I’m hoping he’ll slip up and say something we can use to figure out what he’s up to, maybe I’m hoping he’ll decide we’re not cannon fodder for his scheme, I don’t know! But the whole ‘keeping him as an enemy in the middle of an extraterrestrial war’ thing seemed like it would only end with a lot of people dead!”

Clint pursed his lips and glanced towards the living room. “We need to go back. I think ‘Tash is about finished.”

“Fine.”

“Look, I’m gonna be honest...I’m not on your side in this, but I’m not not on your side. Get it?”

Tony nodded; that was probably the best he was going to get right now. If he was being honest, that was probably even more than he rightly deserved. Clint was literally putting his faith in Tony’s brain before his own horrific first-hand experiences with Loki; if Tony betrayed that trust, there was no way he was ever getting it back. He needed to tread carefully in this.

Tony and Clint made a big show of carrying just about every snack and beverage in the Avengers’ kitchen back to the table in the common area, as though that’s all they’d been up to for the past ten minutes. Loki gave the pair of them distinctly unimpressed looks, but whether that was because he suspected them of plotting or was merely disgusted by their performance in the last session, Tony couldn’t tell. “For the record,” Loki said as Tony dropped several bags of chips mere inches from Loki’s character sheet, “I am embarrassed to call you lot my adversaries. It’s a wonder you haven’t all died from slipping on a bar of soap in the shower or some such act of stupidity.”

“God I hope you crit fail all your rolls,” Clint growled as he tore into a bag of beef jerky.

“Not until he fixes us,” Bruce protested.

“If you boys are done,” Natasha said, one hand delicately reaching for her personal bag of BBQ chips, “We have a session to begin, a village to uncurse, and (hopefully) a band of well-meaning idiots to save.”

“Hey!”

Natasha glanced at Tony from the corner of her eye, daring him to say anything. “Yes?”

“...Nothing.”

The session began with Loki’s character walking back into the center of Greenwich from the port, where he’d supposedly been trying to acquire a ship for the group. He quickly discovered that the entire city was now infested with rats but had no idea what happened. “As you continue down the street, you notice three oddly forlorn-looking rats sitting by a sewer grate,” Natasha narrated. “Unlike the other rats who’ve been running chaotically up and down the streets, these three immediately scurry up to you and stop at your feet, staring up at you for some unknown reason.”

Natasha glanced first to Bruce and Clint, then Tony, clearly expecting them to take over from this point.

“I start to tell Loptr what’s happened.”

“You are a rat,” Steve and Natasha reminded Clint at the same time.

“Wait, we can’t speak Common anymore?!”
“Nope, you are just rats.”

“Then how do we know who Loptr is?! Do we have our human memories? Are we even aware that we’re rodents now, or—”

“I drag my tail through the grime on the cobblestones to spell out ‘cursed,’ before Clintock here has an existential crisis,” Bruce stated as he rolled his d20. “13.”

“It’s messy, but Loptr can read it.” Natasha looked to Loptr. “What do you do?”

“I decide to help them, as thanks for the inn,” Loki stated. “But we’re not going to find help here, so I put them in a sack to take on the road.”

“You can’t just put us in a bag!” Clint whined. “We’re still alive!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, it doesn’t appear that I have ‘cursed rat’ on my list of known languages,” Loki dryly informed him as a delicate finger pointed to his character sheet. “Roll to put them all into the sack of shame.”

Tony probably should have tried harder to suppress his snort.

Natasha hardly even looked at the die; Tony had the distinct feeling that Loki could have rolled a 1 and she still would’ve given him a pass. “The rats are successfully bagged without incident,” she confirmed. “Now what do you do?”

Loki’s character began heading towards the edge of town, where he just happened to meet an ancient crone on the roadside that knew just the spell to turn the rats back into their original forms. She was willing to transform the party members, of course, but at a price. “The old crone informs you that an ancient enemy of hers has stolen a Gauntlet of Transmutation,” Natasha informed them. “He is called Zurlon, and lives deep in the forest outside of Greenich. Return with the gauntlet in three days’ time, and you’ll find the town completely restored.”

“Deal,” Clint and Bruce agreed almost before Natasha finished speaking.

Tony sighed, and when Loki met his eyes they briefly shared a look of mutual suffering over allies that agreed to contracts without bothering to dig deep into the fine print. Magical old ladies that asked for help robbing their archnemeses weren’t going to just let the heroes walk off peacefully into the sunset. This was surely going to blow up in their faces.

Nevertheless, after a quick trip back to the sewers to retrieve their gear (which, to his credit, Clint actually remembered before the others could start heading out of town) the party found themselves trekking back through the woods that they’d traversed to get into town in the first place, albeit going off the beaten path now at the witch’s directions. It was the basic, ‘through the valley, over the river, stay right at the fork’ journey one might expect, right until they nearly stumbled headfirst into several dozen soldiers camped in the woods. Apparently the king’s guard was finally catching up to them following the incident at the inn and had brought the reserves with them for the next encounter. “Oh shit,” Tony muttered.

“Clint—” Bruce began.

“No fighting, right,” Clint agreed. “All in favor of completely avoiding them and taking the long way to Zurlon’s shack?”

“Aye,” Tony and Bruce immediately agreed. Loki took a moment longer to ponder, before nodding in agreement. Tony could practically see the wheels still spinning in his head, however; Loki was up
to something.

That something came to fruition about an hour later, after a fight with several goblins and yet another group of bandits. The party, injured but mostly upright, discovered a horrifically overgrown thicket with bramble bushes so densely packed that they could hardly get through. At the center was a dilapidated old hut under the shadow of a hawthorn tree, the doors and windows shut tight as a stream of black smoke snaked up from a crooked chimney. “All right, I say we send the rogue to do some recon, that’ll give me time to get some buffs ready for Clintock and for Bruce to equip some healing.”

“We’re going back to the soldiers’ camp,” Loki informed the group.


Loki grinned at him in a way that promised nothing but terrible things. “Because I have a plan. Now then, back to the camp; we need to find their latrines.”

“Oh god,” Steve whispered, appearing to realize something that the others hadn’t quite put together yet.

The others were understandably hesitant to waste valuable in-game time doubling back like this (one full day had already passed, according to the DMs), but considering that following Loki was the only strategy of theirs that actually produced decent, not being cursed or dying horribly results, they really didn’t have much of a choice. Obediently, the other members of the party followed their de facto leader back to the camp, and crept up on what Natasha described as a hastily built shack over a cesspool that Steve had clearly scribbled down at the last possible second to account for this change in the narrative. “Now what?”

“Bannon’s patron god is Auril, yes?” Loki inquired.

“Right,” Bruce agreed.

“And you managed to hit level 6 after that last battle, yes?”

“Oh god no,” Steve whispered, head going straight into his hands.

“Right?”

Loki’s smile was positively feral. “How long would it take you to prep Cold Snap?”

Bruce looked confused. “Um, maybe a few hours in game?”

“Perfect. Do it.”

Tony remained thoroughly confused as Bruce prepped and eventually cast the spell under the cover of night. “The temperature on this side of camp suddenly plummets,” Natasha informed them after a quick glance in her rule book. “Many of the soldiers, dressed for the warmth of summer, suddenly find themselves chilled to the bone. A fair number of them succumb to the frigid temperatures and fall unconscious.”

“Excellent,” Loki answered. “Clintock, grab a few of them; we have a trap to bait.”

Suddenly, Tony got it. “Oh my god,” he whispered, staring at Loki in awe.

“Would everyone please stop saying that?” Clint groused as he tried to move four tiny holographic
figures (his plus three soldiers, the max Natasha would let him carry) across the board.

“That’s brilliant,” Tony murmured, making Loki’s smirk grow even more.

The group now ferried the unconscious soldiers back to the thicket, where Clintock roughly dumped them on the ground past the bushes. Tony, having already figured out what was going on, had his character run back through the woods in the direction they’d come from, stopping just out of hearing range of the thicket before he began loudly shouting for help. This quickly attracted the attention of the search party that had gone after the missing soldiers, who soon found their way to the hut. And then…

Loki looked like the cat that got an entire pet store’s worth of canaries. “Well, Miss Romanov?” he asked.

Natasha gave him a long look, before succumbing to the inevitable and saying, “The soldiers raise the alarm upon discovering the nearly-frozen bodies of their comrades. This alarm wakes Zurlon, who grabs his staff and begins to do battle with the enraged men beating down his door.”

Nearly all of the king’s men were wiped out in the subsequent battle, and Zurlon himself was killed in a final suicide blast that obliterated the captain of the company and most of the bramble bushes. It Natasha’s words, it was a rather messy way to go. “Loot time!” was all Clint had to say.

The group picked through the now smouldering ruins of the house and found several minor items of questionable value, including a bag of holding, before Antoninus stumbled upon the Gauntlet. “Detect magic,” Bruce called out and rolled before any of them touched it. “20 with modifier.”

“You can tell that the magic on this gauntlet is ancient and powerful,” Natasha informed him. “However, something has altered the magic so extensively that now it can only perform one type of transmutation. You feel that it would be safe for you to put on the Gauntlet and test it.”

Bruce had his character equip the item and lightly rap on a nearby timber in the house wall to see what would happen. “Suddenly, the wood has changed to gold,” Natasha intoned.

“Wait, hold up. Did you just make a hand of Midas in our game?” Clint demanded. “Like, we’ve basically been hired to find an item that’ll let the witch tap her way into untold riches, right?”

“Yes.”

“All in favor of buggering off and keeping the glove?” Clint suggested, hand already raised.

“Really Barton?” Tony asked.

“Hey, that town was being run by a plague-based death cult! I’ll give it two weeks before everything’s on fire again anyway.”

“And the crone who could probably turn us back into rats with the snap of her fingers?”

“Don’t worry, I have another plan,” Loki solemnly informed the group.

“Of course you do,” Steve muttered in a tone which suggested he was very much regretting the fact that the super serum prevented him from getting drunk.

Loki’s plan turned out to be rather simple; upon returning to the town, he had his character, “equip the glove and punch the crone in the face.”
“What.”

Loki rolled his eyes at Tony. “You heard me. I equip the glove, walk up to the crone, and swing at her jaw with a right hook.” He rolled before Tony could voice any further objections, and managed a 14.

Loki looked at Natasha. Natasha looked at Steve. Steve looked to the heavens and threw his hands up in a gesture of total defeat. Natasha shrugged and told the group, “The crone is immediately turned to solid gold. To your shock, the transformation spell over both yourselves and the town holds. You’ve...well, it would probably be in poor taste to say you’ve saved the day. More like you managed the best success we could hope for from the party at this point.”

“How did you know that killing her wouldn’t undo the spell?” Bruce asked as they began totaling up the experience from the end of the game.

“I didn’t,” Loki admitted. “But it was reasonable to assume that if the magic was something a backwater hag could manage, then there were other users in the world who could weave similar spellcraft. The risk was minimal, at best.”

“Did you have to kill her though?”

“Why wouldn’t we?” Tony jumped in before Loki could answer. “Look, the crone could’ve undone the plague curse at any point, she did it the first time we met her. But she didn’t want to come to Greenich and save the town, she came here to see if she could profit from the situation. She had a decent amount of power but only used it because there was something for her to gain. I say we melt her down and maybe donate her forearms to the local orphanage.”

“...Well put,” Loki added quietly. There was an odd look on his face, but as soon as Tony made eye contact with him it was gone, replaced by Loki’s usual look of disdain.

“Bunch of murderhobos,” Steve mumbled as he collected the rule books.

“Ok, no, you two cannot expect me to believe there was a reasonable way to get out of that one!” Clint protested as he began gathering up the empty bags of chips and pretzels. As Natasha and Steve began going into the exact details of how they’d expected the group to react, particularly before they’d factored in Loki playing, Bruce began stacking up the dishes and taking them into the kitchen. Game night was over.

Tony moved to help Bruce, but at the last minute stopped and turned to Loki instead before the god could bolt. “So, think you might want to make a regular thing of this?”

Loki hmmmphed as he climbed to his feet. “I have better things to do than constantly save your hide, Stark.”

“Not constant,” Tony objected. “Just one night, every other week. We’ll even start ordering whatever pretentious food you like, if you want.”

Loki fiddled with a corner on his character sheet for a minute, before finally taking the paper and tucking it gingerly into the front cover of his player’s handbook. “I suppose I can manage that.”
The best campaigns are the ones that involve breaking a DM's plans, what can I say? Also we're playing fast and loose with the character levels here (pretty sure in actual D&D Bruce's character would need to be level 14 to use a transmutation item like that, but we've already established that rules are being bent for a homebrew campaign, so what's a little more bending going to hurt?)
Interlude 1: Wherein Steve and Natasha Nail Down a Strategy

Chapter by SuspiciousLampshade (FluffyHippogriff)

Chapter Summary

The DMs are plotting. Kudos and comments are still loved and appreciated!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So, what do you want to do about this?”

Steve grumbled something very uncharitable under his breath as he reached for the Monster Manual with one hand while scribbling frantic notes with the other. “Not sure, but it’s definitely going to involve me borrowing from version 5 to add a living wall and some flameskulls.”

“About Loki.”

Natasha silently watched as Steve stopped his plotting, pen frozen against the journal pages upon which they’d been making campaign plans. He looked like he needed a minute to get his thoughts in order, and Natasha was perfectly willing to give him that.

The fact was that they had to address Loki’s presence in the Tower, and sooner rather than later. Loki was one of the Avengers’ most constant and unpredictable adversaries, that was indisputable. The sorcerer had proven time and again that he was both willing and able to wreak havoc on anyone or anything that got in his way, including the Avengers, SHIELD, or even lesser villains operating in New York. Loki was merciless bordering on cruel to anyone that he considered to be his enemy at times, never mind the sheer structural and financial damage any one of his plans might cause on a given day. Nick Fury often said he was dangerous, yet that was absolutely a gross understatement.

And now he was playing Dungeons & Dragons with the Avengers on what was going to become a regular schedule, thanks to Tony.

Steve finally set aside his pen and turned to give Natasha his full attention. “It’s a lot,” he began.

“That’s putting it mildly.”
“I’d like to put the blame on Tony, since it’s his big mouth that got us into this mess,” Steve continued, “but frankly that’s just as much on me for not telling him to cut it out as soon as I noticed the way he was talking to Loki, and how frequently he’d do it.”

“If it would help, I’m happy to blame both of you,” Natasha offered, but there was a hint of a smile on her face that betrayed her amusement.

“Honestly Nat? I can’t even be upset right now because frankly, this is way more confusing than anything else,” Steve admitted. “One session we could’ve written off as Loki playing head games with us. But he came back and now he’s going to be a regular feature-”

“You could still put a stop to that,” Natasha offered. “If you told Tony that we absolutely can’t let Loki back in, he’d grumble but he’d follow your lead and shut Loki out. He respects you that much.”

“I know. But so far Loki hasn’t done anything that even borders on threatening when he’s in the Tower; it kind of seems like a dick move to kick him out or sneak attack the guy if he’s here on peaceful terms at our invitation.”

Natasha knew there was more that Steve was going to say. “And?”

Steve reached for their main notebook and flipped it open to several crossed out pages, “And he absolutely wrecked our campaign. It was vicious, went completely off the rails, had a much higher body count than we were planning-”

“But at the same time was horrifyingly efficient and impressive?”

“We’re going to get him back, Nat,” Steve declared, jaw set and shoulders firmly locked in place as if getting ready for a fight. “We’re going to come up with something so diabolical and unexpected that even Loki can’t burn it to the ground in five minutes.”

Natasha rolled her eyes; the notes on Steve Rogers left behind by Peggy Carter had suggested the man had a massive competitive streak, but they still didn’t do him justice.
“More importantly,” Steve went on, “Clint’s going along with this. You saw him pull Tony aside before the game started, right?” Natasha nodded; even the most junior of SHIELD agents would have been able to notice the way Clint keelhauled Tony out of the common area and into the kitchen. “Well whatever Tony said was enough to get Clint to calm down and play D&D with Loki at the same table tonight, which makes me think Tony has a plan.”

“And obviously we’re not going to talk to Tony about said plan right now, because that’s guaranteed to make him clam up,” Natasha concluded.

“We could force him, but it’s not necessary at the moment, as far as I can tell. For the time being I’m willing to trust Tony.”

“And stake your team on it?” Natasha didn’t care if she was being blunt; she wasn’t about to risk Bruce or Clint’s well-being if Steve wasn’t completely certain.

Her fears appeared to be unfounded; Steve immediately nodded in response to her question. “Tony’s been planning something ever since the Chitauri attack,” he explained. “He won’t tell me anything specific, but sometimes if I’m taking his dinner down to the lab I’ll see projects up on his screen that are definitely not Avengers or SI related. I think Loki’s part of that plan, and if this goes on much longer we’ll be able to talk him into telling us.” He suddenly smirked at Natasha. “And to reiterate my earlier point, I’m pretty sure he’d be walking around with a few more holes in his chest if Clint hadn’t liked whatever he heard last night.”

Natasha snickered. “That was awful.”

Steve shrugged. “Yeah, yeah it was. So anyway, that’s where I stand on the Loki thing as of tonight. What about you?”

Natasha steepled her fingers on the table in front of her, gathering her thoughts. “This is just a hunch, let me say that first. But I think the whole reason Loki shows up is because of Tony.”

“How so?”

“Tony’s the one he always gives the most attention to when we’re fighting.” Natasha reminded Steve. “We always assumed it was just two egotistical geniuses fighting to have the last word, and the flirting was just another layer to that banter. But Loki accepted Tony’s invitation to come here twice, and he’s already RSVP’d for the next session because Tony not only asked him but even
promised him food that we’re probably going to need Thor to fetch from Asgard.”

“Natasha, please tell me you’re not saying what I think you’re saying.”

Natasha gave Steve a supremely unimpressed look. “All Tony had to do was tell Loki he was brilliant and Loki preened like a peacock. There is a reason Loki willingly sits at our dinner table for hours at a time, Steve, and saying he’s doing so for the company is about the most tactful way to phrase it.”

“Do you think Tony might…?”

“Frankly? I don’t think either of them have figured it out yet. Tony is probably convinced that Loki’s reappearances are all thanks to his charisma and brilliant plan to get Loki closer for whatever reason, while Loki is probably laboring under the delusion that this is all just fun and games for him, and neither of them are ever going to realize that the sexual tension when they’re in the same room is the stuff Lifetime movies would kill for.”

Steve put his head in his hands. “I’m going to need Thor to get me a whole tankard of Asgardian mead when he picks up the food for Loki.”

“Inebriation isn’t going to solve this one, Cap,” Natasha reminded him as she reached for the Dungeon Master’s Guide. “Besides, the rate those two are going at means we’ve got at least a few years before they even work up to drunken kissing. Plenty of time for SHIELD to update the contingency plan we have for Tony going down the supervillain path, now with Loki in tow.”

“You are a terrible person and fellow DM,” Steve informed her.

“I’ll have you know being a terrible person is absolutely a requirement for being a proper DM,” Natasha haughtily announced. “Why else do you think I keep you on the sidelines?”

“Nat...”

“In all seriousness? Loki wants something from Tony. I don’t know if it’s building weapons, external validation, sexual gratification-”
“Please never use ‘Loki’ and ‘sexual gratification’ together in a sentence ever again-”

“But whatever he’s after, showing up on game night scratches that itch for him,” Natasha concluded. “For the time being, I think we’re safe because Loki is getting what he wants. Until we figure out exactly what that something is, it’s dangerous to move against him.”

“So you’re all right with him playing again, knowing he’s almost definitely targeting Tony for some reason?”

“At the moment? He hasn’t caused any of us grievous bodily harm during a session, and the Tower’s far better equipped to deal with Loki now than it was during the invasion. If Loki so much as gives Tony a papercut, we’ll all be close by to make him regret taking advantage of our hospitality. I say we allow it.”

Steve sighed. “This is probably going to blow up in our faces, but you’re making some good points. But if anything funny starts happening with Tony and Loki, we’re going to need to rethink this.”

“Agreed. Now then; swamp dungeon or haunted graveyard for next time?”

“Both, obviously.”

Natasha’s grin was positively feral as Steve began writing in the notebook once more. “I love the way you think, Cap.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my, how did that tag get in here? Hmm...
Wherein Tony and Loki Struggle to Communicate Yet Manage to Advance the Plot

Chapter by SuspiciousLampshade (FluffyHippogriff)

Chapter Summary

The campaigns have become a little more hectic. A.I.M. makes a bad life choice. Loki moves into the 21st century.

Kudos and comments are loved and appreciated!

EDIT: by request, I'm throwing up a link for the D&D player's handbook version 3.5: http://web.mit.edu/dvp/Public/butters-lululu.pdf

This is the version that my D&D group plays by, that I'm using to construct the rules of this campaign, and that Natasha and Steve would use to verify different actions in the game. It's not absolute because in-universe we're making allowances for homebrew campaigns, and up to this point I've drawn almost entirely on the sections that lay out what each class can do, so if you're confused by what Tony's character is doing check out the 'bard' section. We're definitely playing fast and loose with some of those rules here though. Also, feel free to google terms/monsters and check out the D&D wiki, but that runs the risk of getting info from version 5, so you might as well ctrl+f on the pdf. I'll also start making lists of D&D terms I'm using each chapter, but after the first couple times that actions like perception checks happen I'm going to assume you know what they are.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loki and the Avengers settled into what might be charitably called a mutual armistice over the next two months. Loki made a point not to launch any over the top schemes on the Avengers’ turf, and in return the Avengers refrained from making any inquiries into what exactly Loki had been up to when he wasn’t hexxing the statues in Central Park to come to life and follow tourists around.

Game nights were still a little rocky, to be sure, but that had less to do with superpowered enemies sharing the same table for several hours and more to do with Steve’s hyper-competitive streak being pitted against Loki’s desire to prove his skills as a master strategist. Natasha and Steve had wisened up after the last few sessions and begun to pull in more and more obscure items, monsters, and scenarios they could cobble together from their manuals. Tony, for his part, had never been more excited to play D&D than now, when it was his and Loki’s analytical skills versus Steve and Natasha’s creativity. Clint didn’t seem to mind the chaos as long as he got decent loot out of it; as for Bruce, he was simply content to be the least destructive person at the table for once.

On this particular Thursday the party began their night trekking towards Vilethorn Swamp, situated at the far edge of the kingdom and strongly in need of rebranding by the tourism board (at least according to Tony). The king and his troops had remained in hot pursuit of the group for three sessions now, and finally even Loki had conceded that they should probably follow the path the DMs were trying to funnel them down and go looking for the actual bad guys whose antics had put
their own party on the lam. Tony’s suggestion of perhaps overthrowing the king and sparing them from further problems was shot down as being too time-consuming, never mind that Natasha would probably set an impossible DC for them to clear as soon as they got within half a mile of the heavily fortified capital city. Ergo, two hours into tonight’s session the four of them were breaking camp in the back end of nowhere and deciding where to go next.

“You come to a fork in the road,” Natasha stated as Steve zoomed in on the map. “To the left, Vilethorn Swamp and the king’s road beyond. To the right, the town of Vilethorn itself, the last outpost of civilization you’ll encounter before crossing the swamp. It’s first light; if you make good use of your time, you believe that you could put at least half a day’s march between yourselves and the army.”

“Team huddle,” Tony demanded, already shuffling towards the snack end of the table. It wasn’t much distance and Steve’s enhanced hearing would probably pick up on everything they said anyway, but at least it gave them the illusion of secrecy. Moments later Clint, Loki, and Bruce were gathered by the snacks as well, albeit Loki was in a princely half-bow more than huddled over and Bruce was merely inclined towards the others from his seat, tea in hand. “Ok,” Tony whispered, “so this is obviously a trap, right? Like, we’re all looking at this and going full Admiral Akbar, it’s not just me.”

“Which part is supposed to be the trap?” Clint cut in. “The swamp, the sign, or the town?”

“All are equally likely,” Loki reasoned, fingers drumming lightly against the table. “The swamp is obviously going to be filled with monsters that we haven’t encountered before, but the town brings its own challenges if we don’t know much about the local politics. What’s Antoninus’ current intelligence?”

Tony checked his sheet and immediately popped right back into the huddle. “15 with modifier. Bardic knowledge checks would be fine for uncommon, maybe obscure, but if any lore in the town is extremely obscure we’re pushing it.”

“Damn.”

Bruce sipped at his tea.

“So how does the sign factor into this?” Clint asked.

“Considering that our DMs were rather unhappy with Antoninus’ actions at the roadside fortune teller—”

“Oh come on, you seduce one psychic and fail your diplomacy check when her sister wives pop in to see how the palm reading’s going, and then suddenly the whole countryside—”

“Point being,” Loki interrupted, “it would not surprise me in the least if we encounter the fury of a woman scorned, and in some unusual form, such as being sneak attacked by an animated object.”

The group considered this possibility for a moment. Clint finally poked his head out of the huddle and turned towards Natasha. “Hey DM, how big is this sign?”

“Average. Why?”

“Now when you say average, would you say it’s medium-sized? Large? Huge?”

Natasha gave him a flat look. “It’s a normal size and shape for a road sign. If you want anything more specific, roll a perception check.”
“Fine.” Clint grabbed his d20 and immediately rolled before anyone in the huddle could object. Immediately after he made a slight choking noise as the die came to rest with a most damning 1 facing up.

“Being a barbarian, you cannot interpret the writing on the sign and do not trust it,” Natasha said, trying to keep a straight face as Steve doubled-over beside her. “In fact, you don’t even trust that it’s a sign. As part of your inspection, you bite down on the signpost to make sure it’s genuine wood and crack a tooth. Lose 1 hp and make a note on your character sheet to visit a dentist before that becomes infected.”

“Well this day’s off to a great start,” Tony muttered as Clint sullenly adjusted his character sheet. “Ok, new plan, maybe we can have Bannon use detect magic-wait, where’s Bruce?”

“He’s in the kitchen making another batch of Hot Pockets,” Natasha answered. “Because someone (and here she gave Steve a withering side-eye) decided to skip lunch and go for an afternoon run all over Manhattan, and is now slowly but surely devouring every speck of food on this table within arm’s reach.”

“Damn it,” Tony huffed. “No cleric or Hot Pockets. Just perfect.”

Loki rolled his eyes and slid his own plate of food towards Tony, offering him an Asgardian snack that was very similar to pigs in a blanket (aside from being bright orange and absolutely melting in your mouth, that is). Thor had raided the kitchens of his home weeks back and brought enough food to all but fill one of the industrial-sized fridges that Tony had specifically ordered back when the Avengers first moved in. Loki had thanked Tony the first time these were offered to him and completely avoided discussing how they’d come into the Avengers’ possession in the first place; Tony of course had not offered an explanation. Part of Loki’s comfort no doubt hinged on pretending that Thor wasn’t aware of their game night antics, and if it kept the sorcerer coming back every other week (and not hexxing his kneecaps off), Tony was more than happy to go along with his denial.

“Thanks Lokes,” Tony mumbled around a mouthful of delicious. “Ok team, so we’re down one cleric with detect magic. Even if he were here, the sign might not be enchanted right now but could be magicked later, in which case we just wasted a perfectly good spell slot on our first turn this day.”

“Fine, ignore the sign and choose between town or swamp,” Clint settled on. “How are we on supplies and gear?”

“I’m still wearing the leather armor we got back in Greenich,” Tony stated. “And my mandolin’s cracked from the last battle.”

“I’d hesitate to call my supplies adequate,” Loki responded without even looking at his sheet. No doubt he had every item in his gear memorized, right down to the last strip of salt pork.

“All right, I’m low on food,” Clint remarked after checking his own notes. “Plus we lost our rope a while back, so if anyone needs to get fished out of the swamp at any point we’re fucked.”

“Straight to town then.” The huddle suddenly broke up as everyone (minus Bruce) took their seats again. “I suggest to the others that we follow the road towards Vilethorn,” Loki told Natasha.

“I second the motion and follow Loptr,” Tony added, while Clint nodded that he intended to do the same.

Natasha smirked. “Before you make it 10 meters down the road, you feel a surge of energy through
the air and hear a low groaning noise from behind you. As you turn around to investigate, you realize that the signpost is no longer a mere sign, but has grown to colossal size and is moving to attack you. It is a huge animated object.”

“Oh damn it,” Tony swore.

“Did we die yet?” Bruce called from the kitchen.

“I swear things were normal here once,” Steve commented as Natasha told the others to roll for initiative.

Two weeks later, Tony was lying facedown on the couch in his workshop and seriously considering the merits of never moving ever again when JARVIS roused him, saying, “Sir, Mr. Lie-Smith has just appeared in the common room and is inquiring after your whereabouts. What shall I tell him?”

Tony groaned and turned his head so that it was no longer buried in a pillow. Everything hurt and he probably smelled like a gym locker room after today’s battle. When he felt up to it, Tony was going to make it his personal mission to find A.I.M. headquarters and burn it to the ground. “Send him down, J.”

“Sir, I’m not sure-”

“I’m not moving from this couch for at least two days,” Tony declared. “Loki just has to snap his fingers to go wherever he wants, he already gets in the Tower that way, what’s a few more floors?”

“Very well, Sir.”

Moments later there was a shimmer of green, and suddenly Loki was in front of him, manual in hand. The sorcerer stood there for a moment, quietly taking stock of Tony’s condition before asking, “Having a little fun without me, Stark?”

“Ugh, there is nothing fun about M.O.D.O.K. and A.I.M. taking their new equipment for a test drive along the Hudson,” Tony snapped. “Seriously, what the hell does Fury even have the SHIELD agents around here do, pick up his dry cleaning and photograph pigeons? We’re talking a huge cache, warehouses plural, we’re goddamn lucky it didn’t take out the whole Navy Yard-”

“I take it things didn’t end well?”

Tony snapped out of his rant, suddenly remembering that he had an actual audience other than JARVIS and the bots. “About as good as could be expected. M.O.D.O.K. got away, other baddies captured, no civilian casualties. Clint’s got a few scrapes and Natasha’s got a pretty bad goose egg on the back of her head, but mostly we’re all just tired. Everyone else is probably in bed right now, but I needed to check on some things down here first.”

“Ah. I see.”

At that point it finally occurred to Tony that, although the rest of the players knew about game night being cancelled, Loki didn’t have a clue. Why would he? The Avengers had no way of contacting him except for when Loki directly came to them, after all. Loki had shown up tonight, ready to continue their adventure in Vilethorn, only to be the last person to find out that the game was off. That was a problem.

Tony was starting to notice how many of Loki’s actions centered on protecting himself; he’d
perfected the very same survival methods over the years and could easily recognize them in someone else. Because of this, Tony could tell that the lack of snarky commentary from Loki about Tony’s sorry state, coupled with the way that his lips were pressed together in a thin line and how his shoulders had tensed up meant that Loki was closing him off. It was inevitable that something would occur to disrupt at least one Dungeons & Dragons session, but the fact that Loki was the last to know and only found out after showing up to play was still awful. It was like he was still an outsider, not…whatever the hell you’d call a Norse god that occasionally played RPGs with you when he wasn’t carrying out nefarious schemes.

Before Loki could make up some bullshit excuse and vanish from the Tower (possibly for weeks or months, depending on how deep this hurt set in), Tony forced himself upright with a hiss, rubbing at a crick in his back. Oh yes, burning down all of A.I.M. was sounding more and more appealing. “Actually, I’m glad you’re here. There’s something I’ve been meaning to give you.”

Loki shot Tony a suspicious look. “And what might that be?”

“Something that a lot of Midgardians own and use to avoid awkward moments like this,” Tony replied as he climbed off the couch. “Just have to remember where…JARVIS, help me out here, where’s the thing for Loki?”

“The desk twenty feet to your right, under the pizza box by the pencil cup.”

“Thanks J.”

Tony began digging through the mess on his desk, trying to remember when the last time was that he’d given the lab a proper cleaning. Too long ago, if the film of mold growing in several coffee cups was anything to go by…

Tony finally found what he’d been searching for and pulled it out, hurriedly wiping it off on a (relatively) clean spot on his jeans before returning his attention to Loki. “Here,” he said, holding it out to the god. “Here,” he said, holding it out to the god. “For you.”

Loki stared at the device for a moment, arms glued to his side. “Is that…a cell phone?”

“Not just a regular cell phone,” Tony assured him. “Custom made Stark phone. Best security in the world, impossible to track or hack, all the commands can be activated by voice, plus the battery is-”

“Why are you giving this to me.”

Tony was momentarily taken aback by the curtness of Loki’s tone. Ok, so maybe he’d expected (read: worried) that Loki wouldn’t exactly be over the moon about Tony giving him something that he probably saw as a frivolous Midgardian plaything, but he hadn’t expected Loki to snap like that. What happened?

“It’s so you can talk to us. Well, me, really, since I didn’t program anyone else’s number into your phone,” Tony explained. “Or I can talk to you. That way if something comes up like this again, I can tell you or vice versa right away. No sad times because someone accidentally missed game night or whatever.”

“And what are you expecting in return?”

Oh. That was it. Tony instantly understood that Loki’s issue wasn’t with the phone itself, but the idea that it was being used as a bribe of some sort. Most of Loki’s plans involved layers upon layers of subterfuge, and nothing was ever done without an expectation of some sort of return on his investment. That wasn’t something you treated as standard unless it was necessary to your survival;
Tony had learned to detect this kind of behavior at his parents’ dinner parties when he was a child. Besides, Loki was the Avengers’ enemy (at least according to his SHIELD file, which was becoming less and less reliable the more Tony got to know the guy), so why would he expect a no-strings-attached gift from Tony?

Tony made sure to choose his next words very carefully. “Honestly? Just answer when I text you a heads’ up about something. If the messages are going into a void it’s not really doing me any good to bother texting, so…”

“So that’s it? You’re giving me something to make sure I’m at your beck and call?”

Ok, apparently that hadn’t been the right thing to say. “Loki, seriously, I’m not expecting anything—”

“For now,” Loki argued. “But what happens if you decide you need something from me down the line? This isn’t some cheap trinket, is it, Stark? And it’s not something the others even know about, or you would have given it to me in front of them the last time we met. You are entrusting me with something secret and valuable; there’s a cost to your gift, whether you want to admit it or not.”

At this point Tony’s patience, already strained by the battle earlier in the day and the subsequent SHIELD debriefing afterwards, finally ran out. “Ok, you want there to be a price tag for this? Fine. Here it is. Stop calling me Stark. You’re over here so often JARVIS has you listed as ‘minimal threat’ in the security system and you have your own snack cabinet for game night, I’m pretty sure we’re on a first name basis.”

“Tony.” Loki wrinkled his nose. “It doesn’t have much gravitas, does it?”

“Well that’s my name. Anthony Edward Stark, aka Tony, aka Iron Man, aka—”

“Anthony.”

Three little syllables, smooth as silk on the god’s tongue, sent shivers down Tony’s spine. The way Loki pronounced his name was...let’s just say that if Tony wasn’t about ten seconds away from passing out facedown on the lab couch again, certain parts of his anatomy would have had a more intense reaction.

“I prefer Anthony to Tony.” Loki finally reached out to take the phone, seemingly accepting Tony’s demand. He stopped short of actually taking hold of the phone, though, as his eyes locked with Tony’s. “Would that be all right?”

It occurred to Tony that this was the first time Loki had ever asked his permission for anything. Normally the sorcerer was content to manipulate or blackmail to get what he wanted; the threats to Tony’s person if he ratted Loki out to Thor came to mind quite readily. A request from Loki for the right to call him Anthony was...frankly, it was a lot of things that Tony was far too tired to even start pondering right now. File this one under something else that could be future Tony’s problem. Along with the shivering thing.

Tony nodded and even worked up a small grin. “Guess that’s better than Stark.”

Loki gave an answering smile of his own and took the phone, which immediately vanished from sight after some slight movement of his fingers. Damn magic users and their tendency to violate the laws of physics. “If you insist.”

“I do.” Tony yawned and shuffled across the lab back towards his couch. “Normally I’d invite you to stay, but seriously, M.O.D.O.K.’s new front line put me through a wall today—”
“Fourteen walls over the course of the battle, sir,” JARVIS corrected. “Hence my earlier concern regarding the state of your ribs.”

“Noted, J,” Tony called out as he finally reached the couch and flopped down, landing on his back. Sleep sounded amazing right now. “When stuff like this happens we usually reschedule for the next week, that good with you?”

“Fair enough. I shall allow you time to rest now. You Midgardians are quite fragile, after all.”

“Uh-huh, sure, just rub it in why don’t you,” Tony mumbled as his eyes began to droop.

“Goodnight then, Anthony.”

More shivers. Crap, this was going to be a thing now, wasn’t it? “Night Loki.” The last thing he saw before passing out was Loki vanishing into thin air.

Chapter End Notes

Way happier with the first half of this chapter than the second half, but here you go all the same.
Wherein Loki Is Horrified by the 21st-Century and Bruce Is up to Something

Chapter by SuspiciousLampshade (FluffyHippogriff)

Chapter Summary

Loki gets a phone and discovers conspiracy theories, Tony makes bad life choices and Bruce gets involved in the chaos.

I'm very sad that this chapter doesn't have any campaign stuff, but fear not; game night will be back next time! Comments and kudos are loved and appreciated, as always.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frankly, Loki didn’t understand the Midgardian obsession with cell phones. He had observed it often enough whenever he had to leave his lair for coffee or fresh air, and in his first few weeks of long-term habitation in New York had wondered if perhaps Thanos was a bit late to the game in dominating this world. Men, women, even children could be seen perpetually hunched over tiny screens, giggling or swearing and everything in-between as their fingers swiped across the glass. On more than one occasion some oblivious fool had actually blundered straight into Loki’s chest because they were so absorbed by their phones (and received a one-way teleportation trip straight to Soho as a result). Frankly, Loki was half-tempted to conquer this realm if only to use that power to be rid of these accursed objects once and for all.

That being said, Loki had always been a bit more curious than was strictly healthy, and beneath his initial layer of agitation lurked an inquisitive mind that wanted to try and understand what made these devices so appealing. Unfortunately the only things he could immediately see to do on the phone would be calling or texting Sta... Anthony, and as moderately interesting a distraction as that might be, Loki couldn’t fathom staying in communication with one human all day, every day. Odds were he wouldn’t even hear from Anthony until hours after the original message was sent, given the man’s tendency to become utterly absorbed in his work if the other Avengers’ game night comments were to be believed. Could that honestly be all there was to this? Just Midgardians desperately trying to talk to each other?

Loki had to know, and he would not stop researching until he got answers. To paraphrase a Midgardian song he’d heard at a bar late one night, Frigga hadn’t raised a quitter or a fool. Frozen hellspawn of a nightmare race that held eternal animosity against the Aesir, yes, but not a quitter or fool. Surely there was more to this cell phone than simply getting in contact with others. It was time to do a bit of investigation.

Regrettably, the one person who would be able to give Loki the most information was also the one person that Loki absolutely couldn’t go to for help. Anthony had been exhausted yesterday, would likely be feeling even worse the day after the battle with M.O.D.O.K., and might try to force himself into talking with Loki even if he simply wanted to rest. Furthermore, Anthony had clearly put a good amount of time and energy into this personal gift if his babbling was anything to go by. He’d already reacted poorly to Loki questioning his motives for gift-giving, and if there was one Midgardian Loki wanted to avoid upsetting right now it was Anthony. If Loki went back and claimed that he couldn’t see the appeal to the present, there would likely be a good deal of hurt on
Anthony’s end and subsequent babbling to cover up that hurt and then Loki would have to deal with feelings-

No. Absolutely not. Loki had to fall back on plan B; once he figured out what that was going to be, anyway.

Eventually Loki settled on going to the only place in Midgard other than the Avengers’ Tower where he knew he would find welcome. Once again applying his tried and true method of holding knives to the throats of terrified plebeians, Loki was able to navigate his way back to Sword and Scabbard Gaming. The shop was practically empty this early in the afternoon, save for a small group of three sitting in the back of the store at a card table and playing something that involved dice. Thankfully for Loki the same gangly fool who had assisted him last time was present, stocki...
“So I add things that I like to my feedwall and block those I despise because doxxing is frowned upon by your legal system. I also pay for none of this but provide others on this internetwork with social validation by pressing these symbols—”

“Uh, not exactly—”

“And I must always credit the artist,” Loki concluded with a nod. “Thank you, shopkeep.”

“It’s Kevin, remember from last time? And would you mind taking another pic? I can show you how to tag people after.”

Loki acquiesced to the mortal’s demand and took another picture, this time holding up the human rogue figurine near a store logo. As far as the Avengers and the world at large were concerned, Loki had simply returned to a shop in New York that had somehow gained his favor; no one need ever know about his seeking help in navigating the confusing world of Midgardian entertainment. He bade the teenager farewell afterwards and whisked himself back to his dwelling, quickly pouring himself a glass of wine as he settled onto the chaise lounge. All right, maybe now he’d have an easier time understanding the appeal of this device.

-n-

Three days later, Loki had to reluctantly admit that he was somewhat impressed by what Midgardians had invented for these little phones of theirs. Using the Internet had greatly cut down on some of the work that Loki would need to do in locating and gathering materials for future projects, for one thing. He’d spent a bit of time digging into Dungeons & Dragons as well, out of curiosity, and had found a few stories that gave him delightful ideas for the future. Mr. Welch, in particular, was a treasure trove of chaos.

Additionally, Loki had been able to do quite a bit of research on the Avengers as the world saw them, particularly Captain Rogers and Anthony. Rogers had been the subject of multiple scholarly papers, and Anthony’s entire life had been so well documented that Loki felt he could summarize the man’s life story with a fair degree of accuracy. Not beyond a superficial level though, mind you; Loki knew a liar when he saw one, and if even half of the videos and interviews he saw of Anthony showed the man presenting his true self to the audience, then Loki really did fuck a horse.

Incidentally, Loki had made it his personal mission to find the Time Stone next after the Mind Stone and use it to go back a few centuries, hunt down whatever cretin had initially concocted that outrageous tale, and violently bludgeon their skull in with their own defleshed femur.

For the present, however, Loki was content to cyber-stalk New York’s finest heroes and villains in all corners of the Internet, from ‘Who Wore it Better’ fashion blogs to Thor’s humiliation at the zoo in video meme format. Loki made a point to bookmark several of those; he had a strong feeling that they’d be perfect for cheering him up in the hard months to come.

And then one day while perusing a conspiracy theory site about the Battle of New York, as the Midgardians called it, he came across a link to a fansite for him. Loki was intrigued; let’s see what these Midgardians had to say about him, then.

-n-

Half an hour later Loki was dialing Anthony’s phone number before he even consciously realized what his fingers were doing. By the time he’d processed this, however, the phone was already ringing and Anthony picked up moments later. “Hey Loki, what’s up?”
“Are you aware that there are people who think the Chitauri invasion was some sort of marketing scheme for your company?” Loki demanded.

“...Well that answers my question about whether you found the Internet or not.”

“They are convinced that it was all designed to show off weapons that your company has recently been secretly selling to governments around the world, and that I am merely an actor on the SI payroll who is contractually obligated to put in villainous appearances against the Avengers whenever your stocks need a boost.”

“Um, yeah?”

“Doesn’t this bother you?”

“Not really,” Anthony explained in a voice so unbothered that Loki could practically hear him shrug. “After the invasion a ton of conspiracy theories popped up. Some people think Stark Industries was behind it all since my company logo was right at the center of the action—”

Loki scoffed at that; foolish Midgardians and their lack of dramatic flair.

“...but there are also groups that think it was a government attack to test how strong the Avengers would be in combat (you’re a secret government agent in that scenario, by the way), but neither of those hold a candle to the nutjobs that figured out that you were actual ancient Norse god Loki fighting against the god of thunder Thor and co., and they’re all convinced that the invasion was actually Ragnarok and we’re all dead now and living in a really crappy afterlife.”

“What?!”

“Look, as much as I love humans and kind of want you to stop thinking we’re all worthless drooling morons, Prancer, I’ll be the first to admit that not all of us can handle the truth,” Anthony explained. “For them, the idea of alternate worlds and space invaders led by Norse gods and a nuke almost wiping out New York, only to be stopped by a team of superheroes? That’s a lot to swallow. So they try to find some other explanation and eventually go through enough mental gymnastics to come up with an answer that makes sense to them.”

“I feel as though I’ve discovered a truly horrific aspect of your realm,” Loki grumbled, rubbing his temples with a thumb and forefinger.

“Hey, they’re not even that bad for conspiracy theories! Wait until you find the one about birds.”

Loki blinked, wondering if he’d misheard. “Birds.”

“Yup.”

“What about them?”

“They’re a government conspiracy.”

“...Explain.”

Anthony actually chuckled. “Ok, so the short version is, some people are convinced that the U.S. government killed all the real birds in the western hemisphere in the 1960s and then subsequently replaced them with government drones. So birds used to be real, but now they aren’t. They’re just government tools. Get it?”
“...”

“Loki? You there?”

“This entire realm,” Loki slowly enunciated, “is utterly mad.”

Anthony burst into uproarious guffaws at that. “Oh god, and you would know, wouldn’t you?” he managed to gasp out between deranged peels of laughter. “The god of chaos, giving the whole planet Earth his stamp of approval-HA!”

“I thought it might be limited to just you and your band of merry adventurers,” Loki continued, trying to come off as serious but utterly failing to suppress his grin and the amusement in his voice, “but no, it’s the entirety of Midgard, isn’t it? Is there something in the water? Or maybe the air? I always suspected Asgard had a reason for cutting itself off from Midgard all those centuries ago, and now I see it was a self-preservation effort to keep the insanity from spreading.”

“Smartass,” Anthony retorted, voice now better controlled and only a few giggles slipping loose. “At least we keep things interesting, right? When was the last time anyone on Asgard had anything to say about birds, huh?”

“600 years ago, when Ordock composed his account of all the birds of the realm,” Loki answered matter-of-factly. “It was exactly as dry a read as you’re imagining.”

“...Ok, that’s not fair, I can’t see your face to figure out if you’re fucking with me or not.”

Loki raised a brow. “You believe my lies are so easy to unravel, Anthony?”

“No, but sometimes you make this face like, ‘haha, foolish Midgardians, my mighty brain is about to completely deceive you!’ Thor does it too, but his is really bad, I mean, it’s so obvious, everyone but Cap has cottoned onto it by now, with you at least there’s some challenge-”

Loki allowed Anthony’s ramblings to wash over him for a time. He was relatively certain that the inventor was just talking for the sake of talking now and failed to give it much attention, but enjoyed the sound of Anthony’s voice all the same. His lair was quiet more often than not; it was nice to hear the sound of someone else’s voice, if only for a short time.

“And anyway, it’s not like I’d even want to-oh crap, I’ve actually gotta go, Lokes, there’s a few lights turning on right now that definitely shouldn’t be-”

Loki jerked and nearly dropped his phone as a sudden wailing noise cut through the phone call, forcing him to hold the speaker away from his ears for self-preservation.

“Yup, that is definitely not a good sound,” Anthony yelled over the klaxon siren wailing. “I’ll text you later, Rock of Ages!” And with that, the call ended.

Loki stared at the phone for a minute. “Hmm.”

-n-

Three hours later, in the midst of writing out calculations that would be necessary for his most recent attempt at an Infinity Stone tracking spell, Loki’s phone began to ring. The name “Iron Man” flashed across the screen, making Loki smirk. “I trust you have things under control now?” he said by way of answer after picking up the phone.

“Oh, so you already know about that,” Banner’s voice replied.
Loki briefly startled; he hadn’t been expecting anyone besides Anthony to even know that he had a phone now, never mind attempt calling him. “Banner. To what do I owe this call?”

Loki flinched as he heard a crash in the background on Banner’s end, followed by muted swearing. “Out of curiosity, how good are you at cleaning up after people who don’t take necessary precautions before doing incredibly stupid things in their lab?”

“Less experience with the lab part, but plenty of the rest,” Loki answered. “Why?”

“Oh damn, I think Tony’s onto me. Just come over to the Tower and I’ll explain everything,” was all Banner said before he hung up.

Loki frowned at that; he despised being ordered about like some inept peon, but it sounded as though Banner had needed to end the call right when he did. He and Anthony were close, and the other inventor appeared to be in some sort of trouble; perhaps Banner’s lack of manners could be forgiven, in light of that.

Besides, any mess of such a magnitude that it required Loki to intercede on Anthony’s behalf was worth investigating on its own merit. Loki took a moment to mark the end of his calculations and put the papers back in his pocket dimension before taking off for the Tower.

He arrived at the common area to find Banner standing by the elevator, clearly waiting for him with Anthony’s phone still in hand. He waved at Loki and turned to hit the button behind him to call up the elevator. “Thanks for this; Tony would flip if he knew I asked for help, but there is a legitimate chance Pepper is going to kill him this time.”

“Pepper…the red-haired woman who is forever on her phone?” Loki inquired as they stepped onto the elevator.

“Yeah,” Bruce verified. “She’s the one who actually runs Tony’s company, you know that, right?”

“Hm.”

“Well she was very explicit last week when she said that she was going to pick Tony up at 7 tonight to schmooze the board members and their families at a charity gala, and Tony needed to be presentable or else.” He glanced towards a screen on the righthand side of the elevator. “We’re almost there. JARVIS, could you…”

“All auditory alarms have been disabled,” JARVIS announced a moment later. “And Sir has been made aware of your arrival, fear not.”

“Thanks JARVIS.” Banner glanced over at Loki and shot him a slightly broken smile. “The first time after I’d moved in and an alarm went off, I ran straight down here. The sirens were blaring, lots of flashing lights, plus Tony thought that someone was trying to break in so he went straight for the suit…” Banner’s voice trailed off as he shrugged. “Let’s just say that the repair bill was pretty steep, even for Tony.”

“I see,” Loki replied, unable to think of anything else to say. The elevator doors opened then, derailing any further conversations between the two of them as they heard what sounded distinctly like Tony shrieking.

“-oh for god’s sake, that is it, you are going straight to that magnet school that keeps asking for donations-”

Loki could only stare. This was only his second visit to Tony’s lab, and to say it made quite an
impression was an understatement. The glass walls the went all the way around the lab appeared to be covered from top to bottom in a thick layer of viscous grey goop. Through the opened double doors (which must have been opened recently, there was no goo past the door frame) they could see Anthony chasing after what looked like a small robotic arm on wheels, which was holding an oversized fire extinguisher and occasionally spraying down Anthony when he got too close. The inventor was covered in goo as well, and had a fine layer of white fire-retardant foam on top of that thanks to the robot’s efforts. The chase appeared to be going rather poorly; the floor was an absolute mess, and neither human nor robot could go more than three feet without slipping badly and almost tumbling to the floor. On the far side of the room, Loki could just make out two more robots using small orange sponges to try cleaning some of the goo from the walls and failing miserably.

For a long moment, both Loki and Banner stood completely still. Loki finally managed to turn to look at the other man. “Should we…?”

Banner seemed to come back to himself then and walked forward, whistling loudly. The fleeing robot beeped and made a sharp right turn, nearly causing Anthony to barrel into his side and only avoiding a collision thanks to a last-minute twirl on the inventor’s part. The robot zoomed across the room and dropped its fire extinguisher at Banner’s feet, beeping happily when the scientist began to pat the top of his claw. “Have you been cleaning up after Tony again, Dummy?”

“That brat wouldn’t know the meaning of the word ‘clean’ if JARVIS uploaded the Merriam-Webster definition straight into his motherboard,” Anthony snapped, storming across the room and nearly crashing to the floor as he slid across the goo. “Seriously, look at this mess, how am I-Loki?”

“Hello Anthony.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was called in to help,” Loki answered in a haughty tone “Ask Banner.”

“Bruce!”

“Tony, what is this?” Banner asked, hesitantly poking at a blob of grey goo with the toe of his shoe. “Things looked bad through the glass, but this…”

“The result of poor calculations, but don’t worry, J and me have already figured out how to adjust for the next test run, we just have to clean the lab first-”

“That seems to be going rather well,” Loki dryly remarked, gesturing towards the rear of the room.

Anthony turned to look in the direction Loki indicated. “Hey now, don’t diss my clean-up crew, You and Butterfingers are the finest robot slave labor known to man!”

“And may we ever be thankful for that,” JARVIS remarked.

Anthony gaped in open-mouthed shock at the ceiling. “Was that...did you just mock your big brothers, J?!”

“Certainly not, Sir. Every day they push the limits imposed upon them by their creator; it’s remarkable, in its own way.”

“I’m hearing an insult there, J, I definitely feel the insult, there is a reason you never get invited to any parties-”

“Tony, do you remember what day it is?” Bruce cut in before this argument could devolve even
further into total nonsensical chaos.

“Uh...Thursday?”

“Yes. And what were you supposed to be doing this Thursday, of all Thursdays?” Banner went on.

Loki could actually see the moment that Anthony's entire life flashed before his eyes. “Oh god, Pepper is going to kill me.”

“I'd say you're overreacting, but her threats were very clear this time.”

“I have to leave the country,” Anthony rambled, mind clearly elsewhere. “I'll have to change my name, leave behind my assets, keep a low profile-shit, she's going to find me in a week.”

“Not necessarily,” Loki finally cut in. Anthony suddenly seemed to remember that a certain god of chaos was now standing in his lab and stared at him. “I can fix this. Consider it payback for the phone.”

“I told you, that's not-”

“Regardless of what you said, I'd rather not feel as though I was in your debt.” Before Anthony could voice what were sure to be ultimately futile protests, Loki had snapped his fingers and rendered both Anthony and his lab space completely goo-free. “And now it's done.”

“How are you doing that?” Anthony demanded. “Seriously, you can't just make matter disappear, that violates so many laws of physics…”

Loki tried not to smirk at that; of course you couldn't simply make things disappear into thin air or conjure something out of nothing. Loki’s vanishing spell, in truth, was merely an adaptation of his travel spell. He’d sent the grey goo to parts far from the lab; the holding area of SHIELD’s helicarrier, to be exact. But that was information that the Avengers didn’t specifically need to know, and so Loki was happy to leave Anthony laboring under the delusion that the god of chaos could bend the laws of reality on a whim.

“What he means to say,” Banner stated, interrupting Loki’s train of thought, “is thanks, now there’s only a slight chance that Pepper will murder him before the night’s over.”

Loki took a moment to study Banner, now that the immediate danger (if you could call being chastised over appearances) was out of the way. There was something about this situation that didn’t sit well with him and hadn’t since the initial phone call. Why had Banner decided to ask Loki of all people for help? His magic made tidying up this fiasco easy, to be sure, but there had to be other beings in this realm who were on better terms with the Avengers than Loki, game night notwithstanding. Yet Loki had been the one Banner had called, had invited in to the heart of the Tower, and then when Anthony was clearly in a vulnerable position he essentially stood back to-Observe. Banner had been observing his actions around Anthony and the lab this whole time, only intervening when absolutely necessary. But to what end?

Suddenly feeling off-kilter, Loki gave Banner a polite bow as he prepared the spell for his departure. “Do try to keep him better controlled in the future; I might not be able to come to his rescue next time.”

“Hey!”

“I'll do my best,” Banner promised, and yes, now that Loki knew to expect it he could feel the way
that the scientist’s eyes were studying him. For what, he still had no idea.

Once back in his lair, Loki immediately poured himself a glass of wine and sat down with his phone. It appeared that his earlier searches on the Avengers hadn’t been as thorough as they needed to be. More in-depth research on Dr. Bruce Banner was necessary. His other calculations would have to wait.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, there is an actual conspiracy out there about birds in the Americas being faked by the government, if you google search "Birds Aren't Real" it's one of the first websites that'll pop up. It's...something.

Also, Mr. Welch comes from this livejournal page: https://theglen.livejournal.com/16735.html and frankly they should stand as an inspiration to all of us that hope to gloriously derail a DM's campaign one day.
Interlude 2: Wherein Tony Has All the Amorous Awareness of a Potato, Unlike Bruce

Chapter by SuspiciousLampshade (FluffyHippogriff)

Chapter Summary

Bruce starts noticing things and runs an experiment. The results are both expected and terrible.

Kudos and comments are loved and appreciated!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce Banner hadn’t had very many good things in his life since the Hulk began to factor into his daily living. Years and years of fighting against his own emotions, knowing the consequences he could unleash on innocent bystanders if he so much as felt slightly frustrated by the way life was going, tended to make a person jaded (and with good reason). He’d lost his friends, his family, and gained a permanent enemy in Secretary Ross in a very short timeframe, then spent years trying to atone for his Hulk outbursts before the Avengers drafted him into their little band of heroes. Frankly even that was unbearable in the beginning, save for one factor: Tony Stark.

Tony was probably the only person on this entire planet that didn’t look at Bruce and immediately see the Hulk lurking in his shadow. The other Avengers tried, to be sure, but Bruce could still see the way that Steve flinched or Natasha backed up slightly whenever a passerby on the street yelled something unflattering or alarms started going off in the lab. They tried to be kind, but the reality of the situation was that most of the others walked on eggshells around him. Thor was an exception, likely because the big lummox didn’t view the Hulk as much of a threat to his own godly strength. The other was Tony, and that was because Tony refused to let someone’s dark side define them.

In a world where most people were terrified to so much as raise their voice around Bruce, it was refreshing to have at least one person who would still throw paper wads at his head or give him a hard time about the calculations for his most recent project. Tony knew that the Hulk side of him was there, that’s why they had the Hulk Basher suit of armor after all; but unless he saw any green, Tony never even considered Bruce to be anything but his fellow science bro. It was a friendship unlike anything that Bruce could get from anyone else, and one he valued above any other relationship in his life.

Needless to say, when Bruce had noticed Loki taking a particular interest in Tony, he’d science bro’d right up and began investigating.

You’d have to be completely blind (read: Tony Stark) not to see how interested Loki was in the inventor. They’d long partook in a colorful, wittily antagonistic relationship on the battlefield, no one could deny that. At first Bruce had assumed that this was merely a symptom of Loki’s megalomania, trying to carve out a supposedly worthy adversary in Tony and subsequently crush him. Bruce had understandably been wary of Loki as a result, and had likely done more than was strictly necessary to inspire a long-standing fear of the Hulk in the god of chaos over the course of several encounters.
And yet…

Ever since Loki had started showing up on Thursday nights for Dungeons & Dragons, Bruce had been noticing Loki’s interesting in Tony grow even further, and not in a good way. Loki always kept Tony in his peripheral vision. If there was a moment where Tony was without food or drink, Loki was quick to rectify this with a wave of his fingers or a simple offering from his plate. Loki delighted in receiving praise from Tony almost as much as he enjoyed debating strategy with the genius; Bruce had long since learned to stay out of their arguments about what the group should do next. Clearly the pair of them were quite happy to keep the debates between each other; even Tony had a habit of blinking owlishly at Bruce’s interruptions, as though he’d honestly forgotten that other people were in the room when these conversations took place.

Besides that, Loki had noticeably vanished off the face of their villain radar over the past few months. If you wanted to be generous, you might say that Loki was being on his best behavior to stay on the Avenger’s good side, but the truth was that Loki was likely only concerned with Tony’s opinion of him. Bruce wasn’t blind; Loki tolerated the other Avengers, but it was Tony’s company that he truly enjoyed. There was no doubt in his mind that if anyone else had extended the invitation for game night, Loki wouldn’t even have bothered to show up as a joke. And so if Loki was deliberately refraining from interfering in the Avengers’ business, it was only for Tony’s sake.

All of this was something that Bruce could handle. In his mind it was simple; Tony was the best friend that Bruce had ever had, and anyone who tried to harm him beyond the usual paparazzi nonsense was going to be put through a few layers of drywall. As long as Loki simply peacocked and teased Tony, there was no real cause for concern.

At least, that’s what Bruce thought before JARVIS informed him that one of Tony’s replicator experiments was on the fritz, and that he’d best get down to the lab sooner rather than later.

Bruce had arrived in the basement of the Tower to see the glass walls of the lab absolutely coated in noxious grey goo, and Tony desperately trying to shut off several alarms before the entirety of the Avengers and SHIELD were notified of the contamination. Bruce had gone straight for the phone bin that sat just beyond the lab doors (a mandatory feature for both of their labs after the third time Dummy had tried to add cell phones to his smoothies to give them more fiber) and unlocked it with the intention of calling Pepper to let her know that Tony might need a little extra time to clean up before the gala that night.

He hadn’t expected to find the name “Loki Liesmith” at the very top of Tony’s call log.

Bruce had stared at the phone for a solid minute, completely ignorant of the alarms blaring around him while Tony swore to high heaven. The phone indicated that the last call had been to Loki, and that it had lasted over half an hour, which presented Bruce with the horrifying reality that 1) Loki owned a cell phone and 2) had Tony Stark’s personal number. The mind reeled at the possibilities this presented.

A lesser man might have panicked at the realization that their best friend had the Norse god of chaos on speedial. But Bruce had long since learned to cope with stressful situations, and at his core was still a man of science. There was no need to panic just yet; particularly when this situation gave him a chance to run a hypothesis he’d held about Loki for a good while now. Following several calming breaths and a few more steps away from the disaster area formerly known as Tony’s workshop, Bruce had dialed Loki’s number. “I trust you have things under control now?” a familiar voice purred over the line.

“Oh, so you already know about that,” was all that Bruce could say back.
At this point Bruce’s brain went on autopilot, inviting Loki to come to the Tower and try to help Tony out of a tight spot, because here’s the thing; Bruce was almost absolutely certain that Loki would do just about anything to impress Tony at this point. He only needed to test the theory, and what better time than now?

Sure enough, Loki arrived at the Tower only minutes after Bruce’s call; the scientist barely had time to get to the common room, in fact. This was the real test; Loki had made a specific point never to be alone in the same room as Bruce if he could help it. Trauma from being put through a marble floor tended to do that to a person, after all. Yet even with the very clear risk of the Hulk lurking in the shadows, Loki didn’t attempt to flee. He willingly followed Bruce onto the elevator and rode down to the basement on the absolute vaguest promise of helping Tony. Even when Bruce deliberately tried to bait Loki, suggesting that there had been times where he had Hulk’d out in lab emergencies hadn’t been enough to dissuade Loki from venturing down to assist Tony. That had been the moment that Bruce knew there was something more than ego at play.

Loki’s reaction in the lab only confirmed this. The way his focus zeroed in on Tony, how he subconsciously turned his entire body towards the inventor, and when his face absolutely lit up at Tony’s reaction to the disappearing goo trick all pointed towards a desire on Loki’s part to entice and impress Tony, possibly even play the hero for him if the opportunity arose.

This was not good.

Bruce knew that there were two ways this could play out. In either scenario Tony would eventually realize that Loki looked at him the way that a starving hound dog looked at a bloody steak. Tony might be oblivious and think that whatever was going on right now was just an extension of their battlefield banter, but Loki seemed to be about five seconds away from carting the man off to parts unknown over his shoulder like a damn war prize, and that would be pretty hard for even his best friend to miss. Tony would either accept Loki’s advances at that point, or reject them.

In the rejection scenario, Bruce would expect at least a few city blocks to be leveled, followed by Tony and the rest of the Avengers either being reduced to a fine paste or turned into some kind of small, easy to squish animals like toads as Loki went on the warpath. And in the acceptance scenario, the universe would be faced with the power couple of Tony Stark and Loki Liesmith, two men far too curious for their own good who lacked things like “understanding of basic safety protocols” or “moral scruples” and oh dear god he was already referring to them as a power couple, bad Bruce, bad.

Before things could get any weirder, Bruce interjected himself into Tony’s rambling (and there were those owlish looks again, this time from both) before Loki departed. So, there it was. Bruce’s hypothesis had been confirmed. There was only one thing to do now.

“What does he mean, ‘pay me back’?” Tony grumbled. “Now I’m the one who owes him a favor, and he doesn’t exactly have an Amazon wishlist I can have JARVIS search-”

“Tony.”

“Yeah Bruce?”

Bruce walked forward and clapped his friend firmly on the shoulder. “Tony, I’m here for you no matter what.”

“O...k...?”

“I mean it,” Bruce vowed, staring directly into Tony’s eyes as the inventor stared back in utter
confusion. “No matter what happens, you are the best friend and science bro I’ve ever had. I’ve got your back.”

“Bruce? Are we, like, about to die? Did you find some kind of weird flesh-eating parasite in the labs, because I swear I’ll pay the cleaning ladies triple to start coming down here again—”

“Nothing like that, Tony. Anyway, let’s get you ready for—”

“Pepper! Crap, JARVIS, express elevator straight to the penthouse and stall her for as long as you can.”

“Your survival skills in the face of Ms. Potts’ expectations never cease to amaze, Sir,” JARVIS intoned as Tony bolted from the lab at top speed. Bruce, meanwhile, lingered in the doorway of the lab for a moment longer, quietly watching the bots tidy up as he processed what had just happened.

There was no way that this wasn’t going to end in catastrophe. The only question now was who would be on the receiving end of it.

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**Chapter End Notes**

I know I promised more campaign stuff, but it seemed necessary to answer some people's questions about Bruce contacting Loki first. So here's another interlude, and the campaign will be back in the next chapter proper.
Wherein the Avengers May Have Committed Some Light Treason and Tony's Curiosity is Piqued

Chapter Summary

Featuring a battle with an unexpected guest, a minor conspiracy, and campaign antics by our favorite murderhobos.

Comments and kudos are loved and appreciated!

Chapter Notes

Terms to know:

Bag of holding: bag that is bigger on the inside than outside. It can hold up to 250 cubit feet of stuff (but nothing alive unless you want it suffocated).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The turning point in the team’s relationship with Loki came the following Thursday morning, when the heroes were awoken at the crack of dawn by the Avengers’ alert blaring at full volume. Apparently the up-and-coming villain of the week had decided that 6 a.m. was the perfect time to noisily attack Times Square and was wreaking havoc long before any sane person would willingly be awake. Suffice to say, Tony was going to break this guy’s face.

Right after he got close enough to do any damage that is.

“GAH!” Tony barely managed to pull off a barrel roll to the left before half of a very large, very on fire billboard came crashing down on the street, sending flaming debris in all directions that blew out several nearby windows and took out an perfectly innocent postbox. The last half hour had been a constant game of dodging cars, street signs, and food carts that their adversary kept hurling at various Avengers whenever any one of them got too close. “JARVIS, any idea how this guy’s rearranging the street like his personal set of Lego blocks?”

“Uncertain, but based on the type of energy output the suit is picking up I would suggest magic being involved.”

“Well that’s great,” Clint snapped over the comms as he raced across a nearby rooftop. He and Natasha were both attempting to find a good vantage point closer to the target, but so far hadn’t had any luck before being spotted and forced to relocate on account of projectiles being hurled at their faces. “Look, maybe we can-”

But Tony never found out what Clint was going to suggest, because at that exact moment a huge chunk of concrete sprang up from the sidewalk and slammed him out of the air and straight through several brick walls. Tony’s brain barely had time to process the sonorous ‘BAM’ of the impact, and there was absolutely no chance of his being able to straighten out or even slow down the impact speed as the repsulors were briefly knocked offline. It felt like a short eternity before JARVIS could
make an attempt to stabilize and slow the crash, and he finally ground to a halt against a row of metal shelves deep in the bowels of some building. Cardboard boxes full of clothes fell onto his head as concrete dust swirled around him; this must have been storage before Iron Man added some new ventilation shafts.

Slowly, Tony maneuvered himself into a sitting position, hissing as stars danced behind his eyes and his ears rang. Worse still, he was having trouble bending his torso; looking down, Tony could see that a few metal plates above his abs were curved inwards and grinding against one another as he tried to straighten up. “Oh crap, that’s gonna bruise,” he groaned from the rubble. “JARVIS, status?”

“Suit armor at 84% integrity. The same cannot be said about your ribs, Sir.”

“Smartass.”

“Man of Iron!”

Tony opened his faceplate and turned to see Thor crouched down beside him, giving his ally a concerned onceover as he set down Mjolnir by the edge of Tony’s crater. “Hey Thor.”

“Are you well? Captain Rogers couldn’t reach you on the comms and asked me to check on you.”

Yikes. That was probably not a good sign; Tony might have blacked out at some point if he hadn’t even heard JARVIS’ alert about an incoming transmission from Steve. “Honestly big guy, I’ve been better. Any headway on today’s villain du jour?”

“He calls himself the Alternator,” Thor gravely announced. “He claims that it is his right to alter the very fabric of this city, tearing down the old—”

“No.”

Thor blinked at his companion in confusion. “No?”

Tony braced a hand against the floor and slowly rose to his feet, trying to ignore the screech of metal plates grating against one another again. “I refuse to be beaten down by a guy calling himself the Alternator, seriously Thor, that is a car part, we use that to charge batteries, it doesn’t even make sense with his powers—”

“By the Norns, it’s even worse than the pictures on Twitter.”

Tony and Thor both snapped their heads around to where Loki had suddenly materialized not far from the hole in the wall. The god was dressed in casual Midgardian clothing today, holding a travel mug in one hand and a very familiar Stark phone in the other. “I’d assume that some intrepid souls had managed to capture a few out of context pictures and posted them,” Loki went on as the phone disappeared from his hand, “but no, you lot actually are getting ravaged by that sorry excuse for a birthday magician.”

“Hey now,” Tony protested, “some of us designed our weapons to deal with normal Midgardian threats like bombs or collapsing buildings, powers that violate the laws of physics on a whim are a little harder to factor in to the blueprints.”

“Hey now,” Tony protested, “some of us designed our weapons to deal with normal Midgardian threats like bombs or collapsing buildings, powers that violate the laws of physics on a whim are a little harder to factor in to the blueprints.”

Loki sniffed at Tony’s argument. “This coming from the man who once single-handedly destroyed an entire battalion of Chitauri in the depths of space? Pathetic.”

“What can I say? Magic and magic users are in a class of their own for me. Present company definitely included.”
Loki took a sip of his drink then, feigning indifference in what Tony was certain was a strategic maneuver to hide a smile. Loki never could resist a compliment.

“Brother,” Thor interjected, ruining the moment, “what are you doing here?”

Immediately Loki’s more typical frown was back on his face as he shot Thor a disdainful side-eye. “I was in the neighborhood and merely wished to investigate how the fight was going for my personal interests, Thor. Why? Do you suspect that since magic and malevolence are involved, I must be a part of this?”

“Certainly not!” Thor exclaimed. “Even as a bumbling novice your tricks were never so clumsy and unrefined!”

Bless Thor’s heart, the man was trying.

Loki ignored Thor’s comment and carelessly tossed his travel mug to the side, where it disappeared in a haze of green light to parts unknown. He strolled across the room to stand in front of Tony, eyeing the damage to the man’s armor with a scrutinizing gaze. “What exactly is your group’s plan to handle this?”

“Dunno,” Tony admitted as his faceplate slid back down. A flashing alert inside the helmet indicated that his communicator was completely offline and would require repairs back home, so he had no idea how the battle might be going for the Avengers at this exact moment. Judging from the frequent crashes and Hulk’s roar filtering in from outside, however, Tony had grounds to suspect that things could be going better for the team. “But we’ve got to stop Houdini out there before anyone else gets hurt. Suggestions?”

Loki’s answer was a snap of his fingers. At once there was a sheen of light and then the god’s armor practically melted down over his frame, covering him from head to toe in pristine leather and metal, including that ridiculous helmet of his. The final touch was a tall staff that settled itself in Loki’s palm as the god casually sauntered through the gaping holes in the walls that Tony’s crash landing had created. “Don’t get used to this,” Loki called back over his shoulder. “I’m only assisting you because it’s Thursday.” Between one step and the next, Loki had vanished from sight.

It took Tony precious seconds to interpret the meaning behind Loki’s words. Once he understood, however, the genius immediately turned to Thor. “Thor, I need you to get on the comms now and tell Cap to evacuate everyone, Loki’s-”

A sudden screech reverberated through the air, followed by a world-shaking explosion that sent both Thor and Tony to their knees. Good lord, Tony might not have seen the damage but he knew it was bad, he could feel the shockwave going through him right down to the core of his arc reactor. “Damn it, Cap’s not going to like this.”

-n-

Hours later, everyone was gathered in front of a TV screen that played the footage of Loki’s retribution. It wasn’t ideal, merely CCTV footage that SHIELD had managed to confiscate from one of the banks near the Alternator’s final stand, but even in black and white with no sound it told enough of a story.

The camera’s position was fixed on the section of street closest to where the Alternator stood. At the start of the tape, the viewers could see the way that the villain marched into the middle of the road and began attacking anyone who got too close. He was doubtlessly saying things about conquering the world, etc etc, but Tony couldn’t have cared less. Lip-reading was never really his thing, and he
was far more interested in the other villain who’d be making a guest appearance on the tape shortly.

The battle continued on for some time, with no Avengers getting close enough to even clip through the shot. But then Loki appeared to simply walk into existence, (no doubt completing the step he’d begun when he disappeared from Thor and Tony’s company). A single wave of his staff froze everything around the pair of magic users. The Alternator clearly had no idea what had happened; he continued to flail ineffectually for a moment, before seeming to suddenly realize that Loki was the cause of his failure. As the would-be villain began to speak (SHIELD lip-readers thought it might be, “What are you doing?”) Loki raised his other hand, snapped his fingers, and suddenly all hell broke loose.

Based on multiple viewings, SHIELD’s sorcery experts were fairly certain that Loki had somehow compromised the field of magic around the Alternator, and the resultant breakdown of that power had caused an explosion which both left a small crater smack dab in the middle of West 43rd Street and blew out every window in a city block-wide radius. Somehow the camera managed to keep rolling even after this and picked up Loki walking casually into the crater and scooping up the bruised and battered remains of his adversary by the collar of his coat. Loki slowly leaned in by the man’s ear and stayed there for a moment, almost certainly whispering something before dropping the Alternator back to the ground and vanishing from sight.

Nick Fury hit the pause button on his remote and spun around to look at the Avengers. “Once we got him calm enough to use real words, our friend the Alternator swore that Loki told him not to attack on Thursdays or else. Any idea why Loki suddenly has a schedule other villains need to stick to?”

“No idea,” Tony said with an automatic shrug even as his mind began to race. If Fury himself happened to connect the dots between what the Avengers were doing on Thursdays and Loki…but that was ridiculous, right? There were hundreds of far more logical explanations behind Loki’s demands than him wanting peace when playing Dungeons & Dragons with a team of superheroes. Thousands, even. And it would be great if Tony could think of a single one while Fury was staring him dead in the eye with his patented ‘stop bullshitting me Stark’ expression.

Salvation came in the form of Captain America. Steve cleared his throat and sat up a bit straighter in his seat, drawing the attention of both Tony and Fury. “Frankly, sir, I believe we’re wasting our time trying to figure out why Loki has an issue with Thursdays, given that we don’t even know why he felt the need to intervene in this fight in the first place. The Thursday thing could be a ruse to distract from that,” he explained in a sincere voice usually reserved for senators who weren’t listening to reason.

“You people have absolutely no idea what Loki was doing in Times Square?” Fury asked in a flat tone. “None whatsoever.”

“He didn’t exactly stop to tell us what he was doing,” Clint stated, eyes glued to the arrow he was polishing in the seat next to Tony.

“And no one was close enough to his position after the blast to hear him,” Natasha added, “so we’re relying solely on the amateur magician’s recollection of what Loki said. Assuming, of course, that Loki wasn’t simply trying to mess with him.”

Tony really hoped that his poker face was holding up and that the others had successfully distracted Fury, because at the moment his brain had ground to a complete halt and couldn’t have put two words together to save his life. Were they seriously helping him cover for Loki? Technically none of what they were saying was a lie, but still, there was looking the other way during game night when Loki wanted to play, and then there was deliberately trying to mislead one of the most powerful men in the world. Good lord, if they made it out of this without being thrown in SHIELD’s prison then
Tony’s personal shopper was going to work overtime this Christmas for all of them.

“I cannot fathom my brother trying to implement his tricks in a predictable pattern,” Thor put forth then, arms crossed over his chest with a thoughtful look on his face. “Half of his fun was always managing to surprise his victims.”

“So now you think this is some kind of trick,” Fury asked in a tone that suggested it was in Thor’s best interest not to lie.

“It would make sense, given my brother’s normal temperament,” Thor assured him.

Tony dug his fingernails into his thigh to keep from making a sound. Technically Thor wasn’t lying; anything that anyone in this room might consider normal about Loki would have made a situation such as this impossible for a dozen different reasons. But that was one of the great things about the god of chaos; you never could quite get a handle on normal or expected with Loki.

“We’ll have some of our underground contacts look into the Thursday angle,” Maria Hill assured the Avengers. “But for now, SHIELD’s going to dig through the Alternator’s background to find the Loki connection. There’s a chance this could have been a personal squabble between the two, and we might figure out the Thursday issue then.”

“Good luck with that,” Tony uncharitably thought. There was no connection between the two magic users, obviously, but if the drooling sponge cakes assigned to SHIELD’s investigation department wanted to try connecting a few weak threads, more power to them. Hopefully it would keep Fury off the Avengers’ trail for a while.

Fury looked around the room, clearly unconvinced but unable to suss out the truth. “I expect to hear any updates you find,” he informed Steve, willing to let the matter drop for now.

“If that’s all we’ll head out then,” Steve replied with a polite nod of his head. The others were on their feet a moment later, prompting Tony to follow after the team out of the debrief room and down the hall. Before Tony could believe it Steve was saying a polite farewell to Hill on the deck of the helicarrier, and then the team was flying home on the quinjet. It was…

“So technically we’re in a conspiracy now, right?” Damn him and his big mouth.

Bruce, blessed soul that he was, merely shrugged and gave Tony a small smile. “Wouldn’t be the first time I hid something from a secret government agency.”

“At this point it’s necessary for our own safety,” Natasha pointed out, looking completely unperturbed as she buckled herself in to her seat. “If Nick finds out that we’ve been fraternizing with a wanted criminal for months, the best we could hope for is the Avengers being disbanded and all of us being scattered to the four corners of the earth.”

“More likely we’d end up shot dead in a ditch out in rural Montana,” Clint called out from the cockpit. “Covering our asses at this point is the best way to keep the body count down.”

“Regardless of your reasons,” Thor boomed, “I appreciate you shielding my brother from your Director. I can scarcely imagine how Loki might react in the face of another betrayal.”

“I can think of a few ways that might go,” Bruce muttered to himself as Steve scooted closer to Natasha and the pair of them began going over the campaign details for later that night.
Hours later, Tony was fetching beverages for everyone out of the kitchen when a familiar silhouette materialized beside him. “Fancy running into you again,” he commented while retrieving a beer from the fridge. Post-battle fraternization was uncharted territory with Loki; best to play it cool for now.

“You didn’t send a text, so I assumed that my efforts in saving the campaign were successful,” Loki answered casually. So the god didn’t want to be the one to bring up today’s battle. Fine. Tony had worked with worse.

Instead of immediately jumping into an interrogation, Tony hummed in response and got another beer out of the fridge, passing his original to Loki. The god might not be able to get drunk on weak Midgardian alcohol, but he’d developed a taste for some of the craft beers that Steve occasionally insisted on bringing home. Put another tick in the ‘Midgard has things worth saving’ column that Tony was desperately trying to develop in Loki’s mind. “Yeah, we’re good for tonight. In fact, when word gets out that you’ve called dibs on Thursdays we might see a drop-off in in villans showing their faces on game night. On the other hand, some of them are probably going to take that as a challenge, so we’ll see an uptick in nefarious schemes from them. Really not sure what this’ll do to Avengers traffic on Thursdays overall, now that I think about it.”

“Ah. So the fool talked then.”

“Once Fury’s minions finished scraping him off the pavement,” Tony answered with a shrug as he popped the cap off his drink. “Seriously, whatever you did to the kid put the fear of god in him, pun intended. Made debriefing really fun today; Fury definitely suspects something.”

“Apologies,” Loki offered, and he seemed sincere about it. “I did not mean to make things difficult for you.”

Tony shrugged again; his shoulders were going to be sore after today. “Something was bound to happen sooner or later.”

“Hm.”

“Hey, Loki?”

“Yes?”

“Why did you help us?”

Tony had the decency to keep his gaze fixed on the other side of the kitchen as he sipped his beer, giving Loki a minute to find the right words with a modicum of privacy. There was a chance that half of what Loki told him would just be lies or fibs, but giving Loki a bit of slack and letting him speak little by little seemed to be working so far. Besides, Tony liked to imagine that at this point Loki would be more truthful with him than not.

Loki cleared his throat, drawing Tony’s attention back to him. He looked uncomfortable, and the fingers of one hand were clenched tightly around the neck of his beer bottle as the other picked at the label. At least he hadn’t run off. “I haven’t decided to join your band of heroes, so if that’s what you’re thinking allow me to dispel the notion right now,” he began.

“Wasn’t expecting that,” Tony admitted.

“I happened to see that the Avengers were trending this morning while I was out for coffee, and it soon became apparent from the pictures that you lot were in over your heads,” Loki continued. “It was also apparent that this magic user was at best an untrained upstart who figured out how to manipulate the movement of simple objects and considered himself a god for it. Had the fight...
continued much longer, there was a serious risk of you being injured and cancelling tonight, whereas my intercession would bear immediate results at no cost to your side.” Loki scoffed then and took a swig of beer. “Although it seems that I’ve only managed to cause other issues for your group. It won’t happen again, Anthony, I promise.”

Tony’s fingers reached out and wrapped around Loki’s wrist before he could think better of it. Loki glanced down at the hand, eyes tracking up Tony’s arm and face before locking gazes with him, expression perfectly blank. Tony swallowed, hoping that what he was about to say wouldn’t see him reduced to chunks splattered on the kitchen walls. “I’m not mad about you helping. You know we’re...not great at dealing with magic in a fight.”

Loki snorted, lips briefly tugging upwards at the corner of his mouth.

“So I’m happy that you helped us, even if it was just for selfish reasons,” Tony explained. “It kept my team safe and minimized the damage SHIELD had to fix. And Fury’s impossible to please, seriously, you could have completely avoided the fight and he still would’ve found some reason to be pissed at us.”

“But?” Loki prompted with a knowing voice.

“But the Thursday thing might come back to haunt us,” Tony concluded. “And I like the way D&D is right now. Including having you at the table, reindeer games. I don’t want anything to jeopardize it.”

Loki slowly shifted his position around from leaning against the counter to standing in front of Tony, wrist still locked in Tony’s grasp. “You want to preserve this.”

“Yeah. So that means preventing Fury from making any more connections between you and us, his head practically exploded when he saw the picture of you with the D&D handbook and if he ever decides to check when we have game night-”

“I’ll do my best to obfuscate the trail,” Loki promised, twisting his hand around to gently catch and squeeze Tony’s arm. “You have my word, Anthony.”

Tony shivered slightly; there should be laws against literal gods saying a person’s name like that right before they had to go into a room full of people. “Thank you. Although don’t get me wrong, if you ever feel like jumping in to help us with another wizard of the week fight-”

Loki hmmmphed and moved to the other side of the kitchen, finally breaking their point of contact to snatch a bag of chips from his cabinet. “And why would I do a thing like that? You’ll never learn to handle magic users if you don’t gain experience in fighting a variety of them.”

“Just because your argument makes sense doesn’t mean I have to agree with it!” Tony shot back as he finally began gathering the drinks for everyone else. He could swear Loki actually laughed at that.

-three hours later-

“You successfully loot a large iron key off the head goblin’s corpse,” Natasha narrated as the group quickly took inventory of the damage they’d suffered from battle. The session had been rather combat heavy this evening; the party needed to earn enough coin to hire a guide to get through Vilethorn Swamp, which of course meant completing various quests from the local villagers to earn some income after they’d blown their savings on new gear and a night at the inn.

Unfortunately, various quests in this case turned out to include clearing out a horde of goblins from
the mayor’s family crypt, all of whom who were in the thralls of an ancient succubus if the village gossip was to be believed.

“Standing in the midst of the crypt’s main chamber, you see a single door in front of you. It’s sealed shut with an ancient-looking padlock, but through the cracks in the bottom you can see a sickly yellow-orange light coming into the room as a strange tune plays in the distance.”

“Hang on a sec,” Tony demanded. “Clintock, did the map we got from the gravedigger have actual dimensions on it?”

“Lemme check.” Clint pressed a button on the edge of the screen by him, and suddenly a small, hand drawn holographic map popped up on the table. “Ok, looks like it’s to scale.”

(Natasha and Steve glanced at each other out of the corner of their eyes; Tony asking questions about architecture tended to end poorly, both in D&D as well as the real world).

“Ok, so that would make the floor of the crypt about 180 square feet, give or take…”

Everyone watched in silence as Tony began scribbling some calculations onto the corner of Loki’s adventuring journal while the god watched in quiet amusement. A moment later Tony was gesturing between the calculations and Loki, clearly expecting the god to figure out whatever mad scheme he’d cooked up this time.

Tony could tell the exact moment in clicked in Loki’s mind; the god’s eyes widened ever so slightly, and a decidedly sinister grin took over his face. “Oh, now that is delightful.”

(Natasha and Steve both mentally braced for their carefully composed campaign to, once again, go ass over teakettle).

“Clintock, Bannon, we’re going to empty the bag of holding and have you guard the gear outside the crypt door,” Tony explained, already moving his character towards the stairs that led outside. “Loptr and Antoninus take the bag and go back to that stream we passed on the way in.”

“All right,” Clint agreed, moving his character to stand by a hastily scribbled pile of stuff near the crypt’s main entrance.

“Antoninus and I fill the bag with water,” Loki narrated. “As the bag is completely empty, we fill it completely with 250 cubic feet of water.”

Natasha quirked a brow. “I’ll allow it as a free action.” Steve, having already resigned himself to his fate, offered no protests and instead leaned forward in his seat to steal the last Hot Pocket from the plate in front of Bruce.

“Antoninus and I descend the stairs and immediately dump out the water,” Loki continued.

“Thereby filling the crypt to a depth of 1.389 feet,” Tony continued.

“All right, the crypt is now very wet—”

“Clintock, get the Hand of Midas,” Loki demanded.

Finally, Steve cottoned on. “Oh no,” he whispered through a mouthful of Hot Pocket.

After the group had made the decision to keep the “Hand of Midas” as Clint dubbed it, Natasha and Steve had laid out some in-universe rules to keep the party of murderhobos from reducing the entire
realm’s monster population to a series of tacky lawn ornaments. Specifically, after punching the witch its magic was now on the fritz, and therefore the hand was allowed to be safely used only once per day on an enemy or object. Furthermore, Natasha had gone out of her way to emphasize that overuse of the item by any one party member might cause unforeseen curse-like consequences. Needless to say, the group had budgeted their use of the Hand very carefully.

Clint knew exactly what the others were expecting and actually giggled as he moved his character back down the stairs. “I equip the glove and punch the water,” he announced.


Clint rolled. “14.”

“You manage to transfigure the water without falling in,” Natasha announced. “All of the water is now solid gold, including the liquid that has seeped under the mysterious doorway at the other end of the room.”

“Perfect,” Clint said with glee. “And now that everyone is trapped knee-deep in solid gold, let’s get to murdering!”

The in-game boss battle didn’t take long at all, what with the succubus and her entire army being locked into place by solid gold anchoring their legs to the floor. Clintock broke down the door with his ax, yelling about how doors killed his family (“It’s part of my backstory Nat!”). The party managed to pick off the remaining goblins one by one and then moved on to finish off the succubus. The group completely surround her and, with the help of a few critical hits, ended her vile reign of terror in just under five rounds. “And so, our heroes manage to simultaneously clear out the monstrous invaders of the graveyard and greatly increase the crypt’s property value,” Natasha announced as the final monster’s HP dropped to 0.

“Woohoo! Nice one Antoninus,” Clint complimented, already wandering around the battlefield and picking loot off their fallen adversaries.

“Wait,” Bruce interjected. “Why didn’t we just punch a tree with the Hand of Midas and give that to the guide as payment in the first place?”

Everyone stared at Bruce for a moment. One by one, every head in the room turned towards Loki, silently asking their resident god of breaking D&D campaigns why he hadn’t suggested that course of action to begin with. Loki opened and closed his mouth several times, before finally steepling his fingers in front of himself as he sat perfectly upright. “The thought did not occur to me,” he finally admitted.

For some reason, the idea of such a simple solution completely escaping Loki was the funniest thing that Tony had ever heard. Scarcely a second later the genius was doubled over laughing, which definitely didn’t pair well with a set of bruised ribs. “Oh god-HA! Ouch, crap, oh god Loki, haha-”

“What is wrong with him?” Loki demanded, no doubt wondering if Tony had finally gone off the deep end.

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“That Alternator dweeb dinged up his ribs, ignore him, it’ll be fine a few weeks,” Clint promised as he and Bruce began dividing up the loot between the two of them.

Tony suddenly found himself tugged upright as Loki yanked up his shirt. Before he could even begin to process what was happening, cold fingers were prodding at his chest and ouch, fuck, yeah those ribs were definitely bruised (in case the skin discoloration on his torso hadn’t been enough of a
Loki tsked and pressed his palm flat against Tony’s injury, muttering something about fragile Midgardians. Tony yelped as something ran up and over his ribs, tingling heat settling into his skin and burrowing deeper before the pain completely disappeared. When he looked down at his chest, the bruising was completely gone. “Holy crap, did you just heal me??”

“Of course.”

“How?!”

Loki waved a dismissive hand at Tony’s shock. “I spent my childhood following after Thor and his friends, Anthony, learning how to mend bones or stanch a wound was practically a requirement with that lot.”

Tony was far too preoccupied by his newly healed ribs to reply. Instead he began poking and prodding at them from every angle, as though he would be able to discover what exactly Loki had done if he stared at the affected area long enough. “Oh my god, this is amazing,” Tony muttered. “Have you ever done any tests to see how much damage you can heal? Does it matter if it’s bone or soft tissue? What happens if you have two people…”

As Tony’s line of questioning continued and Loki attempted to get a word in edgewise long enough to answer, Natasha and Steve quietly joined hands under the table and began tapping out rapid morse code messages to one another against their palms.

Chapter End Notes

What is consistent chapter length, you ask? Not a feature of this story, that's what!
Judging by the sizeable mountain of food and drink that was piled on his coffee table, one might assume that Thor was settling in to his floor in front of the TV for several days straight. They would be partially correct; Thor was definitely planning on staying put for quite a while, but not for viewing any typical Midgardian drama or sitcom.

Leaning back on the couch with a mug full of mead, Thor tilted his head towards the ceiling. “JARVIS, have they started yet?”

“Not quite. Sir is still retrieving refreshments from the kitchen. By my estimate, they will begin in approximately five minutes. Would you like me to go ahead and turn on the feed?”

“Aye. Thank you, noble friend.”

The day after Tony had told Thor about Loki unexpectedly joining in on their game night, Thor (in the privacy of his own room, of course) had carelessly expressed a wish to have seen Loki in action during a game of wits. It had been far too long since he’d been able to watch his brother in battle without having to worry about his own health and safety, and Tony’s description of the night’s activities had made him nostalgic for better times. JARVIS, being an ever present guardian of the Tower who saw and heard all, informed Thor that there were in fact cameras in the common room, and the entire episode had been recorded for security’s sake, and since Tony had never explicitly barred the Avengers from viewing any footage that originated from the common areas of the Tower…

Five minutes later Thor was on the couch, eagerly watching JARVIS playback the video from the Avengers’ last game night on his personal TV.

Throughout the viewing, Thor’s heart ached whenever Loki would tilt his head or drum his fingers just so. Thor recognized those ticks from days of long ago, when either he or Volstagg (or very rarely, Sif) had said or done something in a tavern or on the battlefield that necessitated Loki’s immediate intervention to smooth things over or rapidly evacuate the group. It had been a constant feature of Thor’s youth, representing an invaluable lifeline that he and the others had unfortunately taken for granted far too often. Perhaps if they had just been a little more conscientious and thought to praise Loki’s wit as often as each other’s prowess in combat—

No. That way lay only regret over what could have been. Thor couldn’t change the past; what use was dwelling on it then?
Instead, Thor tried to focus only on the present, which at the moment was Loki suggesting that they check for any creatures that might be dwelling in the cave the others wanted to explore. It warmed Thor’s heart to see the protective side of Loki come out; fewer and fewer were those who got to see the lengths his brother would go to in order to protect those he considered to be his own. Even if this was only a game that lasted scant hours, it soothed Thor’s heart to see that Loki’s capacity for safeguarding his allies hadn’t perished even after all the betrayal and loneliness that his brother had suffered through.

Unfortunately, all things must come to an end, and Thor had felt a fresh twist in his gut when he saw the flustered way that Loki gathered up his things at the end of the night and said his goodbyes. He clearly hadn’t expected to be allowed to play; this was obviously a trick gone wrong, and Loki didn’t know what to do in the face of his adversaries’ overt acceptance of his presence and participation. Perhaps that was for the best though. Loki needed to know that not everyone in the nine realms was after his head at all times, particularly if he was willing to put his hostilities aside every now and again. And if the ones offering Loki a modicum of hospitality just so happened to be Thor’s Midgardian shield brothers, well, Thor had even less reason to complain. Even if it was only for a night and he chose never to return and partake in this game again, Loki had been able to find some brief respite from whatever hardships were haranguing him these days.

Needless to say, Thor had been ecstatic when JARVIS had spoken to him in the gym weeks later to inform him that Loki had returned to play D&D again, and perhaps Mr. Odinson might like to watch the footage live?

It was only a strong desire to avoid scaring off Loki that prevented Thor from immediately summoning Mjolnir and flying back up to his room in his eagerness. Ever since, Thor had made a point to keep his Thursday evenings free.

Back in the present, Thor could see the entirety of the common room’s layout on his TV with immaculate clarity. Steve and Natasha were already set up in their usual spots at the head of the table behind their many files and books, doubtlessly taking advantage of Loki not being in the room to finalize some plan. Thor had seen the way the two of them plotted on the quinjet earlier, as if preparing for an actual war; Loki had best be on his guard this night.

At that moment Loki walked into the room with a bag of chips in hand, grinning and chuckling at something offscreen. Thor’s curiosity about this was satisfied a moment later when Tony walked into view, arms laden down with drinks. The two of them immediately took up their usual spots beside each other with Tony sitting closest to Natasha. Bruce and Clint were already settled in on the other side of the table; as JARVIS had predicted, the game would likely begin once the drinks were properly doled out.

While waiting, Thor decided to ask JARVIS about something that had been weighing on his mind. “JARVIS, have you told Tony about this?”

“Sir makes a point of providing the Avengers with as much privacy as proper security will allow,” JARVIS replied. “As such, I have not offered up a report on your viewings, Mr. Odinson, since I believe that your observations of game night offer no threat to Sir’s person.”

“Do you think I should tell him?”

A pause. “I believe that telling Sir will result in Sir informing the other Avengers, because he would not see the point in withholding this information from them. In this, there is no harm. However, I also believe that Sir would feel obligated to tell Mr. Liesmith about your viewings, and I am currently unable to determine the threat risk posed by that.”
Thor winced. “You are right to be cautious; my brother would likely view this as a plot on my part with intention to do him more harm.”

“Then my choice to refrain from informing Sir was the right one.”

Thor glanced to the screen again; now Bruce and Steve appeared to be arguing over the division of the group’s Hot Pockets. “JARVIS?”

“Yes?”

“Do you believe that it’s wrong of me to watch my brother and friends like this?”

“As an A.I. designed to observe and track Sir’s well-being at all times, I am perhaps not the best mind to ask.”

“On the contrary!” Thor declared. “Tony has mentioned many times that you know when to shut off the cameras and avert your gaze in this Tower, depending on our daily individual needs. There could be no better friend to ask than you.”

Another pause. “When Sir was kidnapped in Afghanistan, I had no way of monitoring him,” JARVIS explained. “For months, acquiring knowledge about his status was completely beyond my capabilities. Even when he returned, it was a struggle to determine new baselines for his mental and physical well-being. I was unable to perform most of the primary functions that I had been designed for as Sir’s assistant, and was acutely aware of this fact. I believe I experienced what you might call discomfort.”

“I’m sorry, JARVIS.”

“Since then, I have found that this discomfort might be eased by taking a few minutes to check on Sir’s vital signs and determine whether he is exhibiting any symptoms of emotional or mental distress several times each day. The fact that I am now able to observe him in the Tower and the Iron Man suits makes this easier. I cannot fault you in your desire to observe your brother, when I find myself driven by similar impulses.”

Thor grinned. “Then we are cohorts in this, my friend.”

“As you say. They appear to be starting the game now.”

Thor and JARVIS’ conversation ceased as Natasha began her narration, recapping the events of the prior session to help get everyone in the mood. Apparently tonight would focus on the group trying to find a guide to help get across the swamp, seeing as trying to brute force their way through it had resulted in one bout of poisoning and Antoninus almost getting devoured by a huge black pudding hiding at the edge of some ruins they’d tried to camp in. Thor could practically feel the ‘I told you so, idiots,’ vibes radiating off of Loki from here; Tony’s ability to remain upright in the face of that was positively admirable.

As the night wore on, Thor found himself laughing as the group managed to best their adversaries in battle and groaning in sympathy when a role of the dice led to grievous injuries. Even Loki wasn’t immune to this, botching a reflex save so badly that it was a lucky thing the battle ended next round or his character might have perished.

But despite all this chaos, the group’s spirits were high. Even in the face of failure they never considered backing down or abandoning their companions on the battlefield; there was always
someone else in the group in better shape who was willing to step in and offer aid, such as Antoninus distracting the attacking hobgoblin with fascinate long enough for Clintock to sneak up and cleave the thing in twain. As they headed back to town, Tony had cracked a joke about even their star warrior having an off day, and rather than become defensive (as he would have done with Thor or any of his friends) Loki merely moved his plate out of Tony’s reach, thereby briefly denying his host access to the delectable Asgardian pastries that he’d developed such a taste for. Of course it was only temporary; Tony merely had to offer up the weakest of complaints and the food teleported itself straight onto his plate a moment later.

That had been something else that Thor had noticed more and more as the weeks of Dungeons & Dragons went on. Loki and the others were perpetually interacting with one another, be it planning their takedown of the dungeon’s boss in furtive whispers or actively stealing food from one another or offering scathing remarks about an ally’s failed rolls. Even in childhood, Thor had never seen Loki so willing to openly engage with another person for an extended period of time, particularly without growing weary of them. Being around Tony (and the others, to an extent) never failed to brighten the light in his brother’s eyes and relax the tension in his shoulders.

“Hang on a sec.” Tony demanded, interrupting Thor’s train of thought.

Thor watched in quiet amazement as Tony snatched up his brother’s notebook and began rapidly scribbling something down. Every instance of Tony grabbing at his brother’s things on these nights caused a knee-jerk reaction in Thor to dive for cover. It was a known fact on Asgard that one should never touch any journal or book of Loki’s; the last fool to try had been a tutor that attempted to confiscate a spellbook from Loki and was unceremoniously launched out of a nearby window for the trouble. Frigga had not been impressed by Loki’s reasoning that the window was far too close to the ground to result in any permanent damage.

Yet here Loki was, willingly allowing this Midgardian to invade his space and manipulate his belongings on a whim. Furthermore, he actively seemed to be amused by Tony’s antics, now grinning as he put together whatever plot of Tony’s would doubtless cripple the campaign this night. For reasons beyond his understanding, Tony was granted leeway that no one else in all the realms could hope to receive.

Thor couldn’t help but wonder how differently things might have gone for Loki and himself if Tony had been born Aesir instead of Midgardian.

As the game wound down for the night, Thor was surprised to see that he’d consumed not only the entire jug of mead but also an entire coffee table’s worth of snacks without realizing. Watching his friends’ hijinx along with a healthy amount of introspection apparently worked up quite the appetite. As Loki bade farewell to the Avengers and the Avengers responded in kind, Thor couldn’t help but smile. “Perhaps my brother is not so lost as some might think.”

“Sir?”

“Thank you JARVIS. For all of this.”

“My pleasure, as always.”

Chapter End Notes

I will go to my grave hating how the MCU decided that a close sibling relationship of
1000+ years should be burned to the ground in the course of Avengers and Thor: Dark World because we need Loki to be a villain whose trauma is never adequately handled or even acknowledged (no seriously, screw you Joss Whedon for taking Loki's entire breakdown of finding out he's Jotun and turning it into a "he's adopted" joke). So in this story, we instead get Thor creepily lurking in the background wanting his brother to be happy and not knowing how to handle that. Yay?
Wherein Loki Has Friends and Doesn't Know What To Do About This

Chapter by SuspiciousLampshade (FluffyHippogriff)

Chapter Summary

Loki begins his ruse. The Internet is ever so useful. Unexpected actions can lead to unexpected reactions.

Kudos and comments are loved and appreciated!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

True to his word, Loki began his efforts to misdirect Fury the very next day. There was no way he could redact what he’d said to that hack of a magician, meaning that Fury was absolutely going to pursue Loki and the Thursday matter until he had cause to focus his attentions elsewhere. In short, the god simply had to give SHIELD’s Director some more worthwhile angle to pursue. Loki could definitely work with that, he’d caused far more havoc with less motivation and opportunity centuries ago in his youth. The trick was also getting SHIELD so bogged down in useless information that they wouldn’t be able to figure out if the Thursday comment had any actual value or had just been the first phase of Loki’s latest nonsensical plan.

And so, Loki began a run of what might charitably be called chaotic good acts.

After A.I.M. had inadvertently caused game night to be postponed several months back, Loki had made a point to keep track of their movements in the city, in order to head off any operations that might interfere with his own interests. As such, it was a simple matter to hunt down one of their smaller Brooklyn cells on Friday and put a swift end to the meeting they were having with an arms dealer (honestly, if they didn’t want someone to explode 40 pounds of munitions all at once then they shouldn’t have stored everything in the same crate). Loki managed to capture one uninjured goon racing through the flames of what was once a perfectly serviceable dive bar and subsequently pinned him to the wall. Once he was properly terrified, Loki bluntly informed him that arms deals on Fridays in this area would not be conducive to his health or longevity, before throwing him out the front door and letting him scurry off into the night. Hopefully this one would blather to enough A.I.M. fools that word would eventually get back to SHIELD through whatever moles they’d doubtlessly squirreled away in the organization.

Two days later found Loki disrupting a bank heist and letting the defeated robbers know that they should consider taking a “day of rest” if they didn’t want Norse gods to rain fiery vengeance upon their heads next Sunday. Judging from the way one of them whimpered under the heel of Loki’s boot, the message had been received loud and clear. Loki then proceeded to take a bit of time off until the next Friday, given that he had experiments of his own to run and had nearly perfected the tracking spell by this point. On that day, however, he put his own lab work aside for a few hours and made a point to travel back to Brooklyn. He wandered around the borough until he stumbled upon a robbery at a convenience store and stopped it in short order. Afterwards, Loki managed to get in another demand for the villain community of Brooklyn to cease and desist their actions on Friday before the police could arrive, leaving the men slumped against the store’s outer walls too petrified by fear to even consider fleeing. This time there were several witnesses gawking at Loki’s actions...
from across the street, eagerly snapping pictures of the god in action before he departed. Frankly it-

"Whoa, man, you're trending!"

Loki slowly lowered the Monster Manual he was reading (like Hel he was going to allow the party
to be caught off-guard again by something so ignoble as a huge black pudding ) and glanced towards
Kevin, who was currently manning the counter of Sword and Scabbard Gaming across the room.
And by manning, Loki of course meant scrolling through his phone to stave off boredom, because it
was Monday morning and school was in session, reducing the influx of customers to practically
nothing. Such was the nature of the board game and RPG business, it seemed.

Realizing that the teenager seemed to want an answer, Loki replied, "Do tell."

"Yeah, apparently that stuff you've been doing in Brooklyn jumpstarted the 'Loki is owned by Stark
Industries' wackjobs, and now they're thinking the company's trying to rebrand your image and
make you a hero!"

Loki openly scoffed at this and went back to reading his book, snuggling further down into the plush
armchair they (read: Kevin) had hauled out of the employee break room. Midgardians.

"I know that's bull, but man, you've gotta admit it's crazy how many people want to jump on the
you turning into a hero bandwagon."

"I've said it before and I'll say it again, you Midgardians have a terrible habit of forgiving and
forgetting old wrongs, to your eternal disadvantage," Loki remarked as he turned a page. "Side effect
of being mere mortals, I'd wager."

"Anyway, they're already wondering what you're going to do next," Kevin remarked. "So...want to
give me a hint?"

Kevin and Loki had begun a tentative friendship after Loki’s second visit to the shop (impossible to
avoid, really, seeing as the teen had programmed his phone number into Loki’s cell and then added
himself on every one of the god’s social media accounts). Kevin had a few questionable habits like
being an eternal optimist or calling Loki “man” or “my dude,” but he was also the only non-hero in
this entire realm who didn’t immediately run screaming for the hills once they recognized Loki. As
such, Loki had started frequenting the shop in “off hours” to partake in some socializing, because it
turns out interacting with the Avengers every other week didn’t quite cut it if one wanted to
completely quash the outlandish notion of enchanting household objects to hold conversations with
you. Kevin, therefore, had already been made aware that Loki’s recent bout of heroics was part of
some scheme, even if Loki withheld more specific details.

“You do realize that would make you an accomplice to a wanted villain, right?” was his only
response.

Kevin scoffed. "Pssh, I already get the cops in here like once a week asking if you’ve come back
around.”

Loki bookmarked his current page and set the Manual on his lap, leaning forward in his seat to give
the other man his full attention. “You didn’t mention this before."

“Well yeah, it’s not a big deal, they always leave when they realize you’re not like, hiding under the
counter or anything. And screw ‘em, you’re not doing anything wrong when you hang out here.”

Loki hummed a quiet assent, even as he began to mentally prepare a list for the materials he’d need
to place a ward against unwanted intruders over this shop. The last thing he needed was for this
haven to become hazardous to himself or well-meaning, half-witted shopkeepers.

“But for real, are you just picking random days or is this like, following some obscure holidays from those internet calendars?”

“Internet calendars?”

“Yeah dude, here,” Kevin continued, already walking around the counter and beelining towards Loki as he pulled up a new tab on his phone. “See? There’s all kinds of weird holidays: talk like a pirate day, children’s day, a whole bunch of feast days if you’re Catholic…Loki?”

“You Midgardians never cease to amaze,” Loki grinned as he stood from his chair, sending Kevin scuttling back to give him space. With a flick of his wrist both the armchair and book were back in their proper places. “My thanks as always, shopkeep.”

“Err, it’s Kevin-”

“Oh, and do me a favor. If anyone with a SHIELD badge comes by for any reason, make sure you get their names for me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to take their teeth,” Loki replied, his answer only slightly sarcastic.

“…My dude, what are you going to do with just their teeth?”

Questions like that were why Kevin was either going to become Loki’s chief assistant or the first Midgardian he strangled with his bare hands, Loki had yet to decide. But there was time to figure that out later. Right now, Loki needed to head home and play around with what was certain to be a delightful new toy.

-n-

At precisely 9 a.m. the following Wednesday, a small off-Broadway theater was briefly overrun when the costumes and props for Henrik Ibsen’s “The Vikings at Helgeland” came to life and began sacking first the snack counter and then the street vendors just beyond the main entrance. Worried that some particularly thick souls might not catch the reference, Loki even went so far as to have ghostly apparitions appear underneath the clothes, with the result that more than a few terrified hot dog vendors fled in the face of a ghostly Viking horde. He made a point to stand outside the theater and watch the chaos unfurl, even as Midgardians began gathering around and videoing the “ghosts” stockpile all the street food and bootleg t-shirts they could pillage in a three-block radius. Perfect.

Loki stayed until the first few officers showed up and began drawing their weapons, shouting the usual “Don’t move!” as they crouched in their defensive lines. At this point, Loki made a show of hefting a small suitcase that had been taken from backstage and grinning at them. “Happy Leif Erikson day,” he said before vanishing in a shimmer of green.

Once back in his base, Loki had tossed the empty suitcase near his chaise lounge and summoned a congratulatory drink for himself. Perhaps a Nordic reference was a bit too on the nose, even for him, but with any luck the fools at SHIELD would be so obsessed with discovering what had been taken in the suitcase (absolutely nothing) that they’d overlook it. Overall, job well done.

At least that’s what Loki thought until he received a phone call from Anthony half an hour later. “Good morning Anthony. To what do I owe the call?”
“Hey Lokes, any chance that you have an identical twin who was just downtown and might have summoned a Viking horde to overtake New York?”

“Oh please, they can’t go outside the radius I set for them, at best they’ll overtake a few parking meters before the spell wears off.”

“Wears off—are you telling me we’ve been fighting ghost Vikings for the last fifteen minutes and they’re just going to shut off on their own?!”

Loki winced. So the entire Avengers had been summoned in response to the trick, then. Perhaps he should have mentioned his morning plans to the Anthony. Oh well. At least he could try to smooth out the situation now. “Well yes, that is the nature of magic. Everything breaks down eventually, Anthony. That particular spell is only going to last for another half hour at most. Their movements should already be slowing down.”

“Oh for...why didn’t Thor—”

“I’m going to have to stop you, Anthony, because it sounded like you were about to ask a question regarding Thor not knowing something about magic, and we both know how foolish that would be.”

“...was not.”

Loki clapped a hand over his mouth to cover up a snicker. “Of course. My mistake.”

“So these things are definitely going to stop on their own? And do it soon?”

“Yes, and I specifically enchanted them not to willingly attack anyone, merely create a bit of chaos by moving some things around, possibly snatch up a few shiny objects. Fear not, no one is in mortal peril.”

“Ok, well that’s...I’m not going to say good, because Cap’s probably going to want me to replay this conversation for him later, but you know what I mean.”

“Apologies again.”

“Don’t sweat it, I think the plan’s working pretty well. Fury’s trying to find a pattern to what you’re doing now, keep it up for a few more weeks and we’ll be in the clear. Cap might be in a little snit tomorrow night though, just fair warning.”

“Would you rather I skip this week?”

“Hell no,” Tony immediately snapped, and Loki tried not to think too hard about the overwhelming relief he felt at that. “No one’s hurt here, a couple roads are closed off but that’s about the extent of the damage this time. Worst you’ll get is a talking to about responsible use of magic or something.”

“Responsible use of magic,” Loki repeated.

“I don’t know, Cap has like a rolodex of lectures ready to go at all times and they’re always about responsibility, he probably has one ready to go for sorcerers in D&D and he’ll just modify it a little bit for you.”

“How interesting...”

“Loki.”

“Anthony?”
“You can’t turn Cap into a toad just because he wants to lecture you.”

“You musn’t turn Cap into a toad just because he wants to lecture you.”

“Perish the thought,” Loki said with faux innocence. Curses.

“Ok, the Viking ghosts are starting to keel over now, oh man, you weren’t kidding about the magic breaking down were you?”

“That spell isn’t designed to last,” Loki repeated with a dismissive hand wave.

“But you could’ve made them go longer if you wanted?”

“Hundreds of years, if I so chose,” Loki answered, not quite able to suppress the pride in his voice.

“That’s...damn.”

“Try not to sound so surprised, Anthony. There are very few beings in the nine realms who could hope to meet or surpass my magic.”

“Yeah...hey, Cap’s flagging me down to land now, I’ve gotta go. See you tomorrow night?”

“Yes.”

“Later, Prancer!”

“One day I’m going to put him through another window for that,” Loki remarked, completely ignorant of the smile on his face as he said that.

-n-

The next night Loki appeared in the kitchen, away from where the other Avengers were already gathered in the common area. Anthony seemed to think that Rogers wouldn’t be overly upset with the Vikings fiasco, but a bit of distance might be a good choice all the same. Perhaps things had become more heated after the battle, or perhaps Anthony had been downplaying the others’ rage in order to keep Loki from skipping another session. In any case, charging blindly in without knowing how this recent bout of magic might have affected their group dynamic seemed to be a decidedly poor course of action. It never paid to become too relaxed around one’s enemies, after all.

Footsteps approached the kitchen then, and mercifully it was Anthony who walked in. “Oh hey, Loki. Mind helping me with drinks?”

Loki blinked at Anthony’s blase attitude. Nothing about his demeanor or tone suggested any anger on his part, or a trap lurking in the next room for the god to fall into. Quietly, Loki followed Anthony’s lead and collected several beers and sodas in a pile before teleporting them to the dining table, prompting a yelp from Clint in the next room. “That’s just lazy,” Anthony chastised Loki as he handed the god a drink for himself. “It’s literally twenty feet away!”

“And that’s twenty feet I don’t have to carry anything,” Loki replied, feeling some of his tension briefly melt away under the comfort of familiar banter. Perhaps things would be all right tonight.

Unfortunately a good deal of that tension came right back when he walked into the next room and saw the stern expression on Rogers’ face. He was clearly about to be hit by either that damnable shield or a notoriously boring Steve Rogers lecture, and frankly he couldn’t decide which one might be worse. “Loki,” Rogers began, (and yes, that was definitely a lecturing tone, Loki had heard it plenty from Odin in the days before he’d learned to effectively run and hide after his pranks), “I feel as though we need to establish some ground rules for the magic you use in New York, seeing as-god
damn it Clint, stop it!”

Loki glanced to the side to see that Barton was doubled over in his chair, head in his arms on the table and shoulders shaking in barely concealed laughter. “I’m sorry,” he gasped out, “really Steve, I’m not trying to mess you up, but it’s just...you were…”

At that point, any attempt on Barton’s part to remain coherent utterly failed, and the man slid to the ground in uncontrolled peals of laughter. Anthony was snickering as well, but he managed to hold it together slightly better as he took his usual seat. Both Romanov and Banner were smirking as well, but otherwise remained perfectly composed.

“It was not funny!” Steve snapped, and now Loki could see the blush dusting across the captain’s cheeks.

“The Viking hordes decided to pick up Steve and carry him off like a war prize,” Anthony explained, sparking a fresh round of laughter from under the table where Barton lay. “Turns out ghosts have really good grip strength, meaning Steve was stuck like that for a whole city block. Thor tried to reason with them, and it went exactly as well as you’re picturing.”

“Tony!” Steve cried out, looking utterly betrayed.

“Calm down Steve,” Romanov soothed with a gentle pat to his shoulder. “Take it as a compliment; you’re clearly the prettiest Avenger.”

Bruce snorted into his tea, and Barton was all but wheezing under the table now. Anthony broke into a fresh round of snickers at the gobsmacked look on Steve’s face, and there was an actual proper smile on Romanov’s face now. Every Avenger in this room, so long a sworn adversary of Loki’s, had come out of a confrontation with his most recent round of tricks, and instead of throwing him out or dismissing his magic or berating him...they were...

They were laughing at his joke.

Loki distantly registered the sound of shattering glass and pinpricks of pain in his hand. Then there were voices chattering, and suddenly Anthony was standing in front of him, eyes wide and frantically pawing at his hand, and why-

It was at that point that Loki realized he’d accidentally shattered the glass bottle he’d been holding and was now dripping blood all over the carpet.

The god of chaos allowed Anthony to direct him back into the kitchen and straight to the sink, where he turned on the water and immediately stuck Loki’s hand under the stream. “Holy shit Loki, what the fuck was that?”

“I lost control of my grip,” Loki lied. “Sometimes I forget how fragile things in this realm can be.”

“Bullshit, I was trying to get your attention for ages back there,” Anthony muttered, turning Loki’s hand this way and that to make sure there weren’t any shards in the wound. “What happened?”

“I...your friends didn’t react as I expected.”

Anthony looked up into Loki’s eyes then, and the god hoped beyond all reason that Anthony wouldn’t make him try to explain further, to put into words the feeling of defeat when fewer and fewer people see your magic as anything but party tricks and then won’t even laugh at the jokes you use it for, of realizing how lonely sorcery can be, of getting used to being the only one who appreciates your own work-
Loki and Anthony stared at each other in silence for a long moment, the quiet broken only by the soft hiss of the sink running over Loki’s still-bleeding hand. Eventually Anthony broke eye contact and nodded, as if having decided something, and released his grip on Loki. “Ok. Let me get you a dish towel, I know there’s one around here somewhere.”

“No need,” Loki assured him, holding out his hand so that Anthony could see green tendrils of magic already slinking their way over his skin to heal the wound.

“Oh. Right, magic, I keep forgetting you can heal people, whoops.”

“It’s slower healing myself than others,” Loki admitted.

“Why?”

“I can draw on magic from the environment for other spells,” Loki explained, grateful to have something as basic as the fundamentals of magic to talk about now. Anything other than feelings.

“If I’m injured and need to repair myself, however, the magic has to come from within. Otherwise I’m expending energy I don’t have to try and draw in power from outside myself.”

“Ok.”

Another bout of silence fell between the pair of them as they watched Loki’s magic knit the cuts on his hand back together. None of them had been particularly deep, and a few minutes later the skin was pink and perfectly unblemished, as though Loki had never even cut himself. If only he could erase the actual event so easily.

Both of them were startled by the sound of the trashcan lid popping open as Romanov dumped broken glass and sopping towels inside. She turned to look first at Loki, then Anthony, and tilted her head back towards the common room. “Tony, can you help Steve get the last of the glass picked up?”

It was a ploy, obviously. But Anthony still took the bait and scuttled off into the other room, leaving Romanov and Loki by themselves in the kitchen. Romanov slowly approached Loki, hands resting at her side in a clearly telegraphed manner to seem non-threatening to him. Loki might have been insulted if he wasn’t so busy feeling completely off-kilter.

She stopped a respectful distance away and tilted her head back to look him in the eye. “No one is going to bother you about what just happened,” she stated. “If you want to talk about it with Tony later that’s fine, but the rest of us are just going to finish getting ready for D&D tonight. You can come in whenever you’re ready.” And then she did a perfect heel turn and walked out of the room before Loki could respond.

Loki gave himself a minute to process what had just happened. In the span of a very short time he’d lost control of himself in front of the Avengers, had to be manhandled into getting himself cleaned up by one of the few Midgardians he could handle being around for extensive periods of time, and then had a world-famous assassin assure him that they were going to collectively give Loki a pass for his little outburst. Loki couldn’t even begin to think how he was supposed to process all of that.

And so he chose not to. Years and years of putting on a mask in front of others had taught Loki how to efficiently compartmentalize his feelings and pack away his emotions for a later time. Tonight in Avengers’ Tower was neither the time nor the place to try and sort out any of this unexpected internal turmoil. He was here to have a good time, and the Midgardians in the next room were
content to let things lie for now. Very well then.

Taking one last steadying breath, Loki quietly walked back into the common room and took his seat by Anthony. “Shall we begin, then?”

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, this was supposed to be a funny chapter but then *feelings* snuck in and character development had to happen. Oh well. At least Loki’s getting closer to the group; who knows, by the end of the year they might all be on a first name basis with him.

On a separate note, IW2 spoilers: It’s looking like we’re going back to the Battle of New York in the next film, because the MCU has buggered things up so badly that time travel is necessary to fix it. So fuck it, I’m going to do whatever I want for the rest of the story because even Marvel has admitted their canon is trash, we’re getting FrostIron romance and familial bonds!
Tony Stark was worried.

He could still remember with perfect clarity the way that the jovial atmosphere in the room had abruptly shattered when Loki crushed the bottle in his hand. Tony’s initial response had been moderate panic, thinking Loki was mistakenly reacting out of anger over the Avengers laughing at him. This theory died a quick death when Tony beheld the shell-shocked expression on the god’s face, never mind how tightly his hand still gripped the shards of glass that had once been his drink. It was like something had frozen Loki in place.

“Fuck,” Clint said, snapping the others into action. Steve jumped out of his seat and called for Bruce to get some towels from the hall closet, already moving down onto the floor to start scraping up the soggy glass pieces into a pile. Tony was only vaguely aware that Clint and Natasha were standing somewhere behind him; his focus had zeroed in on Loki, staring blankly into the distance even after Tony grabbed his arm and planted himself squarely in front of the god to catch his attention. “Loki? Seriously, Loki, say something, c’mon.”

It took a worryingly long amount of time before he could get any kind of reaction from the god. Loki was practically catatonic, blood soundlessly dripping off his fingers onto the floor below as his feet stood rooted to the spot. Tony began shaking Loki, and to his horror actually caused the god to move slightly beneath his hand and let out a very soft, “Oh.”

At that point Tony was able to force Loki into the kitchen and straight to the sink, and damn if it wasn’t incredibly unsettling to be able to manipulate Loki’s movements like this. Loki might not be as physically imposing as Thor, but the god had once thrown Tony out of a reinforced window with his bare hands and definitely was packing a bit of muscle. Now Tony, a mere mortal, could uncurl his fingers and force his hand under the running water with the ease of handling a small child. “Holy shit Loki, what the fuck was that?” he demanded, unable to keep the undercurrent of panic out of his voice.

“I lost control of my grip. Sometimes I forget how fragile things in this realm can be,” Loki answered, and the untruth of the claim coming from the god of lies was so horribly transparent that it made Tony’s heart ache.

“Bullshit, I was trying to get your attention for ages back there,” Anthony snapped back as his fingers brushed out more flecks of glass. Dear god, Loki had cut all the way down to the muscle of
his palm. “What happened?”

“I...your friends didn’t react as I expected.”

Tony glanced up at Loki then. The god appeared absolutely lost, like the world had gone out from under his feet and he had no idea how to go about regaining his balance. There was truth in Loki’s words now, but from the stricken look on his face Tony knew that there was far more happening here than simple confusion regarding how the Avengers reacted to ghost Vikings.

Tony was acutely aware that his own upbringing hadn’t been ideal, even if he tried not to dwell on the specifics of what made it so very unpleasant more often than could be helped. He had trust issues galore, difficulty forming meaningful relationships with anyone not stubborn enough to cling to him like a particularly determined octopus, and a laundry list of other problems that could probably keep a whole battalion of very expensive therapists employed for decades. As such, Tony could recognize the way that other people with similarly unpleasant childhoods might react to something as mundane as, say, getting approval or affection from others when a rejection wasn’t so much presumed as outright expected and planned for. But that was when dealing with other humans like him: mortals with short lifespans and even shorter childhoods. Loki was ancient by comparison.

According to Thor, both of them were a few decades past a millennium and had a few thousand more years in them at least, and had spent the majority of that time running all over the nine realms and getting into all manner of trouble. Most of the stories ended the same way, however; Thor and his warrior friends got the credit for doing great and heroic deeds, whereas Loki got a passing footnote (at best) for some feat of magic that had been indirectly responsible for the group’s victory. The people of Asgard were far more willing to label someone a hero if they could see the physical proofs of their labors in a hulking physique and victories on the field of battle. Quieter arts, like the sorcery Loki specialized in, were always relegated to the background, often with a dismissive if not contemptuous attitude. How many centuries of Loki’s youth had been spent hearing the same harsh dismissals of his magical abilities over and over again, when even someone as well-meaning as Thor rarely acknowledged his skills as anything more than tricks?

How long had it taken for Loki to give up on ever hearing anything else?

Suddenly remembering that they were still in his kitchen and the others were probably becoming concerned, Tony came back to himself and released his hold on Loki, making a shallow excuse of getting him a dish towel as he did so. Loki of course didn’t need his help; mere seconds later, familiar green light was dancing over his skin as magic began knitting his flesh back together. Loki explained the process of self-healing which Tony only halfway heard; he was far too entranced by how Loki was so quickly and quietly able to repair the damage done to himself. What was wrong with the Aesir if they couldn’t see how incredible this power was?

Tony’s musings were interrupted by Natasha entering the kitchen. He took her suggestion as an excuse to fall back into the common room and regroup before he did something stupid like give Loki a hug and end up being turned into a salamander. The other Avengers all shot him concerned looks as he stepped back into the room, but it was Steve he spoke to. “We’ll talk after.”

Thank god Steve only nodded his head and went back to shuffling his notes; Tony didn’t know what word vomit might have streamed out of his mouth right then if the other man had pressed him for details. Natasha returned a few moments later and took her seat by Steve, whispering something in his ear that likely had to do with Loki. After what felt like a small eternity, Loki finally came back into the room and took his seat beside Tony, ready to begin the game.

It took a little while for the group to actually get back into the right mindset for Dungeons and Dragons. Tony didn’t know if it had been the plan all along or was a last-minute adaptation, but
Natasha’s campaign for tonight was largely combat heavy in the forest as the group trekked back to town through the woods near Vilethorn Swamp. Everyone was able to focus on the mechanics of combat and battle formations, allowing Loki to run on autopilot for the first hour of their session. Tony felt the way Loki gradually relaxed beside him the longer the game ran on, and when Loki shifted ever so slightly in his seat and let his leg brush against Tony’s, the inventor made no move to separate them and actually leaned his own leg back against Loki. Sometimes that grounding touch was all the stood between a person and a major mental breakdown, as he well knew.

The session continued with the party encountering an old trapper living near the edge of Vilethorn Swamp, who swore up and down that he’d seen another group of adventurers that looked just like them camped out just a bit deeper into the bog. Of course this was a trap (and an obvious one at that), but the party went along with it anyway because tonight couldn’t handle any major plot advancements or serious scheming. The evening ended with a one dead trapper, a severely depopulated forest, and more than enough gold coming their way to pay the guide for his services.

“Thank you as always, Anthony,” Loki said before departing in a shimmer of magic.

The Avengers collectively avoided speaking about the god for several minutes, instead taking the opportunity to meticulously clean the common room and dispose of their trash. Each person seemed lost in their own thoughts, Tony especially, all collectively trying to puzzle out what had occurred tonight and what the next steps to take might be. It was only after the last plate had been tucked into the dishwasher and the last napkin thrown away that Clint finally broke the silence. “So that was weird, right? It’s not just me.”

“Tony, did Loki say anything?” Natasha inquired, hip propped against the kitchen counter with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Just that we didn’t do what he expected,” Tony answered. “Which honestly? I think was Loki speak for him being prepared for a lecture or worse, maybe even having to bolt from game night.”

“Seriously?” Clint asked in disbelief, hopping up on the counter to sit between Natasha and Steve. “Like ok, I’m not his biggest fan and I’m really not rushing to start a fan club for the guy or anything, but we’ve been letting Loki into our house to play Dungeons & Dragons for months now. We’re past that!”

“Not necessarily,” Bruce countered from his seat at the kitchen island. “Every time that Loki’s used magic in New York before now, we’ve had to fight him and then spend ages cleaning up the damage. Even if it was a smaller scale attack this time-”

“Not an attack,” Tony argued. “He didn’t hurt anything except Steve’s dignity, and that already takes a beating every time Cap tries to post a decent selfie.”

“Hey!”

“Point being,” Bruce redirected, “it makes perfect sense for him to assume that we would react negatively because that’s what he’s used to seeing from us. Even if consciously he’s aware that we’re...I guess in a truce? He still might subconsciously expect us to lash out at him.”

“Then if he was expecting a fight because of this, why did he summon ghost Vikings at all?” Clint asked.

“That one might be on me,” Tony admitted. “I told him that the Thursday comment he made to the Alternator might land us in trouble if Fury starts putting together some things about game night and the D&D pictures of Loki out there. Loki said he’d try to throw Nick off the trail, that’s why we’ve
been seeing footage of him all over the news lately.”

“Which makes what he did today a calculated risk in our favor,” Natasha reasoned. “The benefits of distracting SHIELD from a potential connection between the Avengers and Loki was worth whatever cost came to him directly from terrorizing downtown.”

“Meaning Loki was willing to have us rake him over the coals tonight even though he did this for our benefit,” Steve concluded with a sigh as he leaned back against the fridge.

“Well fuck,” Clint said, nicely summarizing the general feeling in the room.

“How do we want to handle this?” Bruce finally asked after a moment of silence. “We can’t just...let him keep thinking that we’re his enemies.”

“Please tell me we don’t have to have a sit down talk about this,” Clint begged. “I swear everyone in this room is allergic to feelings and sharing, if we have to have a group discussion about how we feel about each other I’m going out the window.”

“It wouldn’t matter even if we did,” Steve stated. “For him, I think it’s like...sometimes when I’m out, I’ll go to open a locked door but I don’t realize that it’s locked until I’ve broken the damn thing’s hinges. Because I’m so used to how things were before the serum, I sometimes get careless about the super strength. You just get used to things being a certain way and you being seen a certain way for so long that you can’t really shut it off later.” Sensing how quiet the room was, Steve shrugged and gave his friends a small smile. “No big deal, promise. I’m always hyper careful about it when I’m around other people.”

Clint leaned over just enough to bump shoulders with Steve, making the super soldier’s smile a little less melancholy. Verbal sharing might be hard, but at least the Avengers had physical affection down pretty well.

“Here’s an idea,” Bruce tossed out, “maybe we should talk with Thor? Not specifically asking him what to do, god love that man but I don’t think anyone in this entire Tower is qualified to help him sort out the issues he and Loki have. But maybe we could get a little more background on their childhood?”

“If Thor knew how to not hurt Loki then he wouldn’t keep doing it,” Tony countered. “Wait. Shit, that sounded bitchy...I mean, it’s like every time they start talking to each other, Thor somehow manages to say the absolute worst possible thing, and he does that without even trying.”

“But he’s also the only person we know who could tell us anything about Loki’s history prior to the Battle of New York,” Steve countered. “I’d say give it a shot, Bruce.”

“In the meantime, do we actually have a plan for dealing with the god of chaos having a mini-stroke in the Tower?” Clint asked. “Or are we just going to pretend nothing happened?”

“I’ll figure something out,” Tony promised. “Just give me some time.”

-n-

By the next morning, Tony actually had a plan ready to go. It probably wasn’t the healthiest way to handle things, and he certainly wouldn’t be getting the endorsement of any trained psychologist for it, but with any luck it might help with Loki.

Tony began the day by heading down to his workshop with the intention of starting up an experiment that had kept his attention (and fed into many a night’s frustration) for weeks now. He’d
had to put things on hold last week due to Stark Industries demands, but now was ready to dive back into the work. He just needed to do one thing first.

Before heading into the main area of the workshop, Tony shot off a quick text to Loki asking if he could swing by at his earliest convenience. Not waiting for a reply, Tony quickly tossed his phone in the bin and entered the main chamber, smiling as Dummy and the other bots rushed up to great him. “Okay guys, big news. We’re going to have a guest with us today, so everyone has to be on their best behavior. That means you, Dummy, I’m talking specifically to you, no trying to steal his pants or spraying him down with the fire extinguisher, I’d like to keep this guy in my good graces for a while and that means not driving him off the deep end from exposure to my helpers. Do you hear me? The fate of the world depends on you three not fucking this up.”

You and Butterfingers had already rolled off by the time Tony finished his lecture, presumably to do whatever tasks JARVIS had assigned to them earlier. Dummy, to his credit, immediately retrieved the fire extinguisher and brought it straight to Tony for safekeeping. “Good bot,” he said, deliberately putting it on a high shelf where Dummy wouldn’t be able to reach. “Now then; let’s get to work!”

It was another half hour before Loki finally showed up, appearing quietly out of thin air near the door to the workshop. The god was dressed in Asgardian clothing today: leather pants and boots plus a loose shirt, and his hair had been tied back in a braid. His shoulders were tense and his face was a smooth mask of indifference, as though he were trying to affect disinterest but couldn’t quite suppress his nerves entirely. He stood at a distance from Tony, which decidedly hurt given how the genius had become used to Loki and he invading each other’s personal space. “If this is about last night—” Loki began.

“Actually, it’s about that cleaning spell of yours,” Tony interrupted.

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“Actually, it’s about that cleaning spell of yours,” Tony interrupted.

Loki stopped, posture relaxing slightly even as confusion took over his face. “Cleaning spell?”

“Okay, so the day Bruce called you down here I was working on a new material for the armor,” Tony explained. “The way my armor is structured right now involves a lot of solid metal plates that have soft undermesh at the joints, which lets me move a little but is pretty stiff while I’m on the ground. Plus if I take a shot to the chest like what happened with the Alternator, then I’m mostly protected but the suit’s mobility is toast and I might get sliced up by some jagged edges.”

“What exactly does this have to do with me?”

“Simple,” Tony went on. “I’ve made an all new flexible polymer to replace some of the metal in the suit to compensate for the afore-mentioned issues, and I’ve finally gotten it to stop exploding all over the walls in the final fabrication phase. Today is test run day, meaning we’re going to try and destroy a sample of this stuff using every method known to man short of nuclear explosions.”

“So I’m to be the maid and clean up after your mad experiment then?” Loki asked, and although he wasn’t happy the god didn’t sound nearly as upset as Tony might have expected.

“Not exactly. I figured that since there’s been an uptick in rogue magic users running around New York, it might behoove me to put this stuff through a magical field test with the help of a local sorcerer. Magical cleanup might be necessary after that.”

After Afghanistan, Tony hadn’t been ready to talk about his experience with anyone; to an extent, he still wasn’t. What he had been ready to do was barricade himself in the workshop in Malibu for weeks on end, trying over and over to tweak and improve the designs of his original armor and create what would be the true first suit of Iron Man armor. There was something undeniably grounding and pseudo-therapeutic about crafting something with your own two hands after it felt like
your entire world had just been irreparably shattered around your ears. And maybe it wouldn’t be the same for Loki and crafting spells, but if it was between that option and unloading years of trauma on each other through conversation, Tony had a feeling he already knew which option Loki would gravitate towards.

He could see that he’d made the right decision when the god’s face lit up. “Ah,” Loki replied, and there was a glint of mischief in his eyes now, “So I have your explicit permission to attack this with whatever magic I can conjure up?”

“Did you just make a magic pun in my workshop?”

“Would I do such a thing?”

Tony made a shooing motion to his bots. “Out of the way boys, this is going to get messy. JARVIS, you ready to record?”

“On your mark, Sir.”

Tony immediately moved over to the closest workbench and began typing away on its touchscreen tabletop. He’d left the production line running overnight, and now had about two dozen samples of the polymer to work with this morning. Hopefully at least a few of them would be able to survive the initial onslaught of tests. He was pleased to see that JARVIS had already prepped them to be used this morning, and with a few more taps of his fingers had the first sample called up from the production area to the testing room. “This way.”

Tony hurried across the room and stepped through a thick set of double doors to a more enclosed area of the workshop. This particular chamber was used whenever he had to test any of the myriad of weapons or armor that would eventually be incorporated into a final version of the Iron Man armor. As such, the walls were made of solid concrete (ten feet thick at that) and bomb-proof glass, while high ceilings with state of the art ventilation prevented the buildup of any toxic fumes. To top it all off, the entire chamber was outfitted with such an advanced fire suppression system that Dummy had practically blown a servo in joy the first time he was allowed to clean this area of the workshop. This room was designed to contain and control whatever madness done in the name of science Tony Stark saw fit to throw its way, and the genius certainly enjoyed putting it through its paces.

Time to see how much more of a beating the testing area could take from a god of chaos.

“All right, the first test is pretty simple,” Tony explained as he crossed the room and pressed his palm flat against a nearly invisible panel set at eye level. “But first, some precautions.”

At once a thin seam appeared in the wall, before the section curved inwards and swung back to reveal a walk-in closet. Tony ducked inside and returned with two sets of kevlar overalls, safety glasses, steel-toed boots, and two helmets that had once been part of older sets of Iron Man armor. “Ok, I know it seems a little extreme but last time I went without I singed off my eyebrows and got a concussion, and let me tell you the words Pepper had–”

“Your concern is appreciated,” Loki mercifully cut in, “but I’m quite capable of shielding myself.” The mage was already drawing a few symbols in the air around him, and as they faded away Tony could feel a slight tremor in the air. At least Loki was taking this seriously; although that did raise a question in Tony’s mind…

“Putting up shields like that won’t screw up the magic you’ll use later on the polymer, right?” he asked while pulling on the overalls.
“Not anymore than your skin interferes with your blood in ordinary circumstances,” Loki replied. “Same source of magic decreases the chance of interference.”

“How?” Tony had to physically fight down the urge to ask Loki to go into more detail on that. Odds were that Loki would be willing to talk and Tony more than willing to listen for hours on end, and then they’d never get anything done in the testing room, which defeated the whole purpose of inviting Loki over. With effort, Tony redirected his attention to the helmet and safety glasses, before crossing the room to another workbench, this one with actual computer screens that Tony was already utilizing to draw up a variety of charts and calculations. “All right, so the first model I’m going to bring up has been put through the basics: bullets, missiles, teeth-”

“Teeth?”

“Rabid dinosaurs in Manhattan, you weren’t there,” Tony explained with a dismissive hand wave as he called up a 2x2 sample of the polymer stretched over a wire frame and simply labeled ‘T1.’ A few more keystrokes resulted in T1 ascending from an opening that had suddenly appeared in the floor on the far side of the room, before being locked in place in front of a giant scarlet bullseye on the far side of the room from Tony and Loki. Let it never be said that anything Tony Stark did was subtle. “All right Gandalf, we’re going to try and destroy that in as many ways as possible,” Tony explained. “You want first go?”

“How thoughtful.”

“Age before beauty,” Tony answered with a smirk.

Fortunately for him, the comment seemed to amuse Loki as the god merely shook his head. “Careful Anthony. You’re already asking me to get very creative and destructive at the same time. That typically doesn’t end well for others.”

“What can I say? I like living on the edge.”

Loki rolled his eyes again as he raised one hand in front of himself. He waved his fingers and suddenly there was a silver dagger resting in his palms, pointed towards T1. “So, I’m to do my best to damage that?”

“Do your worst.”

Loki took a moment to consider the target in silence. Slowly he brought the dagger to his lips and whispered something under his breath, prompting a thin strand of emerald light to twist around the blade before sinking into the metal. Once whatever magic he was concocting was complete, Loki glanced towards Tony, dagger still perched dangerously close to his lips, and smirked.

Tony was so focused on that smirk that he failed to notice Loki’s movement until he heard a dull ‘thunk’ and became consciously aware that the dagger was no longer in Loki’s hand. He jerked his head to the side to see that the god had thrown the blade faster than human eyes could process, and not only had it gone straight through the T1 but had continued traveling at such speeds that it was now buried several inches in solid concrete.

Tony wasn’t too proud to admit that he was completely and utterly stunned, and he couldn’t help but unabashedly gape at the damage Loki had done to missile-proof material with a few words and flick of the wrist. Gradually he pulled himself together well enough to refocus his attention on Loki, who was trying to put on an innocent look and absolutely failing at pulling it off. “I suppose this would be a bad time to tell you that that wasn’t quite my worst?” the god asked in faux concern.
“How.”

“Magic,” Loki answered, like the smartass he was.

“Of course,” Tony grumbled. “JARVIS?”

“The report is nearly compiled, Sir. It should be available on your screen momentarily.”

“Report?” Loki inquired as Tony scurried back to his work station.

“I have JARVIS monitor all the tests I run in here so that I can play them back later for research. And even though we don’t know much about magic here on Earth, we’ve still got plenty of ways to record weird stuff…” Tony’s voice trailed off as he read through the data that JARVIS had been able to whip together for him in a relatively short amount of time.

Of course the readings indicated that what Loki had just done shouldn’t be possible as per the laws of physics as they functioned in this realm. But when you removed preconceived notions about such trifles as scientific absolutes, you were left with a mountain of raw information that was nothing short of miraculous. If the rest of Asgardian magic was half as intriguing as this, Tony could see why Jane Foster was so obsessed with studying the BiFrost. As it stood, however-

“A-HA!”

“What?”

“I was right!” Tony cheered, giving himself a small fist pump to celebrate. “Magic is absolutely a wave, not a particle! Bruce owes me a pot of curry and his homemade naan bread, take note JARVIS.”

“Already mentioned to Dr. Banner, Sir. He is demanding proof of this claim; shall I forward the report along to him?”

“Absolutely,” Tony ordered as he pulled up another window and began rapidly typing and swiping across the screen. “Meanwhile, if it’s running on this frequency...raise the output...ok, adjust for background interference…”

Tony was vaguely aware that the words coming out of his mouth were now, at best, incomplete snippets of thought which probably did little more than confuse Loki. But if his hypothesis was correct, now that he knew that magic behaved in a wave-like fashion at its most basic level, then he might be able to disrupt it with an appropriate counter-frequency.

On the other hand, tampering with mystic forces beyond his comprehension might lead to unexpected and catastrophic results, but nothing ventured nothing gained.

Minutes later Tony had finished his programming and summoned a small black speaker to the far side of the room near the base of the T1. “Ok, the transmitter will go off when it senses a nearby target,” Tony explained to Loki, who had summoned another dagger the moment Tony stepped back from the screen, “so just throw whenever.”

Loki seemed to be unconvinced that this trial would produce any new results, but did as Tony asked. After briefly muttering the spell again, Loki threw a second dagger.

There was a small buzz from the speaker, and to both Loki and Tony’s surprise the dagger now only imbedded itself a few inches into the polymer, as opposed to slicing cleanly through as it had done previously. “Ok, that’s still not great if this stuff is supposed to be protecting my organs, but we’re
making progress,” Tony stated, already back at his screen and typing away again. “Maybe I can completely stop it if.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that, Anthony.”

Tony glanced up towards Loki. “Why not?”

The grin on Loki’s face was positively devilish as he summoned yet another dagger. “Because now I’ll have to make some adjustments of my own for the next round.”

Tony grinned back. “Think you can keep up with me?”

“I seem to be doing just fine so far. The better question, dear Anthony, is if you can hope to keep up with me.”

“I’ve been told I’m a quick study,” Tony shot back with a cocky tone that had gotten him into trouble more times than he could count. “Especially when I’ve got such an interesting subject in front of me.” Maybe the way he ran his eyes up and down Loki’s figure at the end of that comment was a bit over the top, but the laugh it got from Loki was easily worth it.

The god began twirling the knife in his long fingers as he sauntered over to where Tony stood. “What say we make a bet then?”

“Terms?”

“Simple. If you can completely stop my weapon from penetrating your armor in four hours’ time, you win. If you cannot, I win.”

“Fair enough. What does the winner get?”

“His choice, within reason.”

“So I couldn’t ask you to run the next couple hours of experiments naked?”

“You could, but it would likely end with you finding yourself going through one of those windows,” Loki replied with a motion towards the exit. “I do have standards, Anthony, and the hygiene of this room leaves something to be desired.”

“Your comment has been noted and forwarded straight to the Dummy Cleaning Service.” A few more taps on the screen, and Tony was grinning wildly beside Loki as he looked up into the god’s eyes. “Hit it.”

The next few hours passed in a blur to Tony. The genius incessantly adapted his transmitter’s wavelength or frequency after each trial, although Loki was always ready with a counter of his own. They fell into a rhythm with one another, barely even needing to speak or acknowledge the other as Tony’s fingers flew across the screen while Loki wove increasingly complex spellwork over his weapons. Tony probably should have asked Loki ahead of time if magical buildup or residue was a thing he needed to worry about; his arc reactor was tingling like it had in the fight against the Alternator, only this time it felt a bit more like a cross between cold and itchy, which wasn’t exactly a fantastic sensation coming from a giant magnet implanted in one’s chest.

They kept going well after what had to be close to the hundreth test run on the T5 (T1-T4 had since perished in the course of scientific experimentation), far beyond when the timer that JARVIS had set for four hours expired. And although Tony had finally managed to keep the daggers from penetrating to what would be lethal depths in the field, he’d yet to completely defeat Loki’s magic. It
appeared that the god was the victor this time. “Damn. Well, fair’s fair. What do you want?”

“An answer. Why did you really invite me here today?”

Tony gave himself a moment to study Loki. The god didn’t seem as agitated as he’d been upon first arriving in the workshop, which Tony chose to take as a good thing. Perhaps throwing daggers at walls and expending hours’ worth of magic had helped him relaxed some, or maybe that was just spending time around Tony without any signs of aggression from the other Avengers. Whatever it was, Loki merely appeared curious now, as opposed to being on guard and prepared for a fight.

“Honestly? I think your magic is amazing. Like it sucks when you’re using it to take off people’s head or something, but the rest of the time? Like when you’re moving these impossibly huge objects or summoning god knows what from god knows where, or anything like that? It’s incredible. And the others think so too.”

“So this is about last night,” Loki concluded.

“No? Maybe? Look, nobody’s mad about the magic you’ve been doing around the city except Nick Fury, and the guy’s perpetually pissed about something, I told you that before,” Tony explained.

“Thor’s told us that Asgardians are kind of dicks about using magic if it’s not for healing or fortune telling, so I get that you’ve probably been dealing with that your whole life, but we’re not Asgardian. Ok? It’s all right to wave your fingers around and completely invert the natural order, in fact I’m kind of living for the way you do that. And if you ever want to come down to the workshop to run some experiments of your own, or even just blow off some steam with a reinforced target? That’s an option for you here.”

“I see.”

Tony fell silent as Loki moved to stand beside him again, his position against the workstation more than a bit reminiscent of their conversation after the Alternator fight. Just like before, Tony gave Loki the time to gather his words before speaking. “I thank you for the kind offer,” Loki finally said. “Magic was always something that I had to practice in my own quarters or a secluded area of the woods, lest I be faced with ridicule for distracting myself from my physical exercises.”

“Exercises? Like what?”

“The basics. Foot races, wrestling, close-quarter combat,” Loki ticked off. “I’m quite proficient with a spear, you know. It was expected that I’d inherit Gungir from Odin, since Thor already had Mjolnir.”

“Huh. Bet that was fun.”

“I did it because it was expected of me,” Loki admitted. “Though my preferences always lay in the magical arts. Obviously I became rather adept at hiding these preferences from others unless I was deliberately casting a spell on someone, so I’ve grown used to managing on my own.”

“Oh.”

“That said,” Loki continued, “it might be...nice, to try out some of my own projects with someone willing to give me creative feedback.”

Tony grinned. “I’ll get you your own workstation and everything. Maybe even have Dummy make you a nice name placard-”

“Watch it, Anthony.”
“Sirs,” JARVIS cut in, “Dr. Banner has just informed me that he has finished the curry and naan bread, and was wondering if you’d be so inclined as to join him upstairs for dinner?”

Tony and Loki both started; was it really that late? “I should go,” Loki began, and Tony could practically feel the magic crackling through the air as the god prepared to teleport.

Naturally, Tony did the only thing he could think of in that moment and latched on to Loki’s wrist. “Wait. Stay for dinner.”

“Anthony-”

“Seriously, Bruce’s curry is to die for, I swear that Natasha actually stabbed Clint in the kidney once to get the last bowl, and Bruce always makes a ton of extra curry because he’s used to cooking for the whole team, he can spare you a bowl or five.”

“I shouldn’t,” Loki tried again, but Tony could see the way that he was wearing the god down.

“Think of it as repayment?” he suggested. “For me dragging you away from whatever you were doing today?”

That finally seemed to wear down the last speck of Loki’s resolve. “All right,” he acquiesced, allowing Tony to pull him out of the testing room towards the elevator, “lead on.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my lord this chapter never wanted to end. It was a constant stream of “Ok, are we stopping now?...how about now...maybe now?” And before I knew it we were sitting pretty at 6k words. Oi.
Wherein Loki Has a Bit of Fun and Makes a Tough Choice

Chapter by SuspiciousLampshade (FluffyHippogriff)

Chapter Summary

Dinner time with Bruce and Tony. Of course Loki gets up to some old tricks.

Kudos and comments are loved and appreciated!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Loki received a text from Anthony which simply read, “Swing by my workshop when you get a chance,” he immediately panicked.

Regardless of the fact that the Avengers seemed ready to completely dismiss and ignore his behavior from the night before, the fact remained that Loki had lost his composure among people who might be, at this point, considered fair weather allies. Hel, on a good day Loki might even consider them the closest thing that he would ever get to friends across any of the nine realms. At the very least they weren’t actively seeking to harm each other at this point, to the benefit of both parties.

But how long would that armistice last if they began to see him as unstable?

Long ago, Loki had adjusted to people either making disparaging comments behind his back or shooting him suspicious looks when they thought he wouldn’t notice (fools, he always did), but those were simple people. Brainless peasants. Whatever meathead posse Thor saw fit to tow around with him on half-baked adventures. That ilk. Their words had long since lost any sting they might have been able to inflict on Loki; he’d learned to dismiss the opinions of the lesser folk centuries ago. The Avengers, on the other hand…

If Loki was being honest with himself, he truly liked these Midgardians. They were foolhardy at times and some of them had an unhealthy obsession with justice and self-sacrificing heroics, but they remained good company. Their eternal struggle against the forces of evil was entertaining, if a bit naive, but what else could be expected from creatures with such short lifespans with so little time to making lasting changes? And unlike the Aesir, the Midgardians he encountered in this city were always rushing about and eager for change. Just last month he’d seen a documentary that Rogers had participated in which centered on him taking the camera crew on a tour of Brooklyn and pointing out all the drastic ways that his borough had evolved in just a few decades. By contrast, Loki could describe the entire layout of Asgard with frightening precision because not one element of the city had changed since his childhood. The stables remained stables, the kitchens held the same decor Loki had first observed centuries ago; Loki could probably even recall the exact positions of every book in the library because the collection rarely acquired any new volumes. The potential this world held to grow and adapt, by contrast, was marvelous.

All right, maybe Loki had to admit that it was the entire Norns-damned realm of Midgard to which he’d taken a liking, albeit the Avengers remained a chief part of that attraction. Point being, Loki had found himself in the surprising situation of enjoying his current lot in life, and wanting to keep things from going belly up a la his schism from Asgard. A significant portion of this preservation...
involved the Avengers not assuming he was an immediate threat to the safety of their realm, particularly since any action on their parts to stop Loki would ironically put the entire universe in far more danger.

Loki had arrived back in his home and, utterly determined to put the events of game night behind him, refocused his attention on distilling essence of hellebore for his modified tracking spell. Tracking spells as a rule were quite simple to use in smaller, everyday searches but became trickier to execute the more vague and widespread one’s hunt became. For example, in the event of a wallet going missing in the house, Loki could simply write the spell to search for any wallet within a certain number of feet from the castor and be relatively certain of finding the item. But if the object was less explicitly defined, like a single heirloom fork in the midst of an entire kitchen, more precise information had to be input to get an exact result. And in the event of seeking something even less precise, like a unique magical scroll with only a vague description of its powers that probably existed somewhere in New York City, the parameters became even harder to manage with even greater chances for false hits.

Loki’s hunt for the Infinity Gems over the entire realm of Midgard was a massive net to cast. And the Infinity Gems were stones of nearly unfathomable power which output magical signatures unlike any other form of sorcery that could be found anywhere across the realms. Loki’s input of information into the tracking spell, therefore, was a bit like a man going into a jewelry shop and requesting a very specific piece without knowing what the precious stone was, how it was cut, or even what color the accursed thing might be. Even so, the magic had to be done.

Weeks ago, on the night Loki had first cast the spell with only the barest filter to lock out lesser magicks, his legs had gone out from under him and he’d nearly blacked out from the force of being violently yanked in nearly a hundred different directions, each connection trying to urge his seidr that yes, yes, this was the way he needed to go! He’d barely had the strength to shatter the diagram he’d carved into his kitchen table, after which he’d fallen right back to the floor and promptly emptied his stomach contents all over the tile floor, completely overcome by the unexpected reaction to his spell. Apparently Midgard had become the universe’s dumping ground for unwanted magical artifacts, and while Loki might have once enjoyed a grand adventure traipsing all over this world to collect the ones that struck his fancy, the fate of multiple realms was at stake now and he simply didn’t have the time.

And so Loki had spent an uncomfortably high number of weeks trying to filter out anything that didn’t feel precisely like the way the Mind Stone’s magic had when it curled around his own seidr during the Battle of New York. Finding that particular gem was top priority for him, given that it was the only stone Loki had handled for an extensive period of time. Once that was in hand...well, like calls to like, after all. The other stones would be much simpler to track down if Loki had a similar magical signature to train his spell to seek, as opposed to merely ignoring the obviously wrong ones. It was the difference between knowing the right answer and filtering out a thousand wrong choices, after all. He just had to find the Mind Stone first.

As a result, Loki had been forced to sift his way through whatever bits of magical residue were wafting around the realm at the moment, identify them, and then tie an addendum clause into his tracking spell to ensure that this particular type of magic was disregarded. A bit of sorcery that could have been spelled with a handful of runes in literally any other case now had a framework several feet in length carved across a freshly acquired oaken tabletop that required multiple magical infusions to keep it running, lest Loki completely burn himself out. He’d like to say that the modifications were the work of a truly brilliant mind, but frankly the entire configuration was a cobbled together abomination of magical energy that would have made at least two of his former seidr instructors weep and the rest permanently disown him.
“By the Norns, please work this time,” Loki had grumbled while carefully pouring the hellebore mixture over the most recent line of runes he’d added to the diagram. Any more runes or infusions to this tracking spell and he’d also have to add another layer of warding to his home, otherwise even that oaf Heimdall would take notice of the gratuitous amount of magic pouring out from this area of Midgard. After Loki had added the infusion to the runes, he’d muttered a few words and carefully ran his fingers over the spellwork. Barely a moment later the magic took, and Loki could feel the power of the spell trying to tug him along a few dozen magical pathways towards the source he might be seeking. All things considered, this was the best result Loki could have hoped for. Loki had gone to bed that night very deliberately focusing on what magical threads he’d begin following the next day, while forcibly dismissing any recollections of what had happened during this particular game night.

And then he’d woken up to a text from Anthony which sent his entire day’s agenda flying straight out the window.

Loki now had two options. First, he could dive right back into his search for the Infinity Stones and completely ignore Anthony’s text, thereby sparing him from whatever awaited him at Avengers Tower. The upside of this would be furthering his efforts in saving the entire universe from a mad Titan with a grudge against both this particular realm and a certain god of chaos living within. The downside would be disappointing Anthony, and perhaps making the Avengers even more suspicious of him.

The other option would be going straight to Anthony’s workshop to determine why the man was requesting his presence in such an ambiguous way. If it was a trap, there was a good chance that Loki’s efforts against Thanos would suffer a serious setback because he’d have to go to ground for a while. Not to mention he’d certainly need to take a fair bit of time away from saving the world in order to concoct some particularly nasty revenge against the Avengers for betraying him. But if it wasn’t a trap…

Romanov-no, Natasha had promised that they weren’t going to bother Loki about his behavior, and as much as the woman might like to believe herself to be a master of subterfuge, Loki had never met a liar whose deceptions he couldn’t immediately see through. Part of it being his domain and all that. She’d spoken the honest truth that night, of that he was absolutely certain; but of course there stood the danger that she’d meant her words last night only to subsequently change her mind. Loki had no means of knowing.

Based on what he knew about the Avengers though, they would likely send Anthony to speak to him first before taking any action. And everything about Anthony’s behavior the night before indicated a desire on his part to help Loki, rather than condemn him for the outburst. Besides...as foolish as it might be, Loki implicitly trusted Anthony not to betray him in the sanctity of his own home after all the months they’d spent in each other’s company.

Nevertheless, optimistic hopes were all too often the death knell of fools. Therefore, before setting off for Avengers’ Tower, Loki had gone through his belongings and dressed himself in a particular set of clothes he’d managed to sneak away from Asgard between his escape after the Battle of New York and his return to Earth. They were traveling clothes made by Frigga herself and infused with enough protection spells to ensure that, if this meeting was in fact a trap, Loki would at least make it out alive if not unscathed. Following a final check that the magic array would remain stable in his absence, Loki was off.

But no ambush awaited him in the Tower. In fact, Loki would describe the time he spent that day in Stark’s workshop as the most fun he’d had in ages. He’d never met a person other than Frigga who’d been so eager to see his magic at work, and even his adopted mother’s abilities and spellwork
had never clicked with him the way that Anthony’s scientific experiments did in the workshop. Their constant escalations were carried out in good spirits with clear purpose, and witnessing a mortal actually manage to interfere with a master sorcerer’s craft after only a few hours’ of observation...to say that Loki was impressed would have been a grandiose understatement.

And then, when all was said and done, Stark had offered Loki a place in his workshop on what seemed to be an indefinite time frame. This was different than the extra room Odin and Frigga had added to Loki’s chambers for carrying out his spellwork in Asgard. Deep down, Loki had known that they’d only granted him the extra space so that his work could be kept out of sight from the Aesir, as though Loki’s proficiency with seidr was something to be hidden away. Anthony, on the other hand, was offering Loki a place of equality in his innermost sanctum for no reason other than taking pleasure in seeing Loki’s work. The man never ceased to amaze.

After all that, when JARVIS had mentioned that dinner was ready and Anthony had begged him to stay, how could Loki even think of refusing?

“Seriously Lokes, you’re going to love Bruce’s cooking, the man does things with cumen that are mind-blowing, I swear he made a deal with the devil…” Anthony rambled on as he tugged Loki towards the elevator. Loki probably needed to put a stop to this mortal’s tendency to manhandle him around the Tower whenever he saw fit, before it became a problem. Probably.

A short elevator trip later found both Loki and Anthony on Banner’s floor of the Tower. As soon as the doors slid open Loki was assaulted by pungent spices wafting through the air, accompanied by a few soft clinking sounds coming from beyond. Anthony let out a pleased hum and scurried out of the elevator, leaving Loki to follow behind him at a more cautious pace. The elevator had deposited them in a short entryway that funneled into a living room, whose floorplan was quite reminiscent of the one Loki had seen in the common area some floors below. However, these walls had been decorated with colorful silken tapestries on the right and oversized forest landscapes on the left, while the center of the room held a small table set low to the floor with cushions all around. Beyond Loki could make out a kitchen that looked nearly identical to the one he was used to seeing on game night, but with softer lighting and more plants on the countertop. Banner had clearly taken some liberties in making the space feel more homey; and to his credit, even Loki could appreciate the calming atmosphere here.

Banner himself stepped out of the kitchen moments later, carrying a basket filled with some sort of delectable-looking flat bread. “Curry and rice are in the kitchen,” he stated, walking towards the table and depositing the food. “I figured we could serve ourselves and eat out here.”

“Bruce, you are my favorite,” Tony declared from the kitchen.

At that moment, it occurred to Loki that Banner’s comment had not been directed at Tony, but rather towards him. Falling back on old manners, Loki politely nodded towards Banner. “Thank you Dr. Banner. I realize that Anthony inviting me into your home on such short notice might be...disagreeable.”

Banner waved a dismissive hand at Loki, and even managed to dredge up a smile for the god. “Honestly Loki, it’s fine. Cooking for three’s as easy as doing it for two; besides, I kind of want a closer look at the magic that made me lose my bet with Tony.”

“Bruce, are you suggesting that JARVIS and I lied?” Anthony asked in faux offense, re-entering the living room with two plates of food in hand. “Here Gandalf, saved you a trip.”

“You’ve already used that nickname today,” Loki remarked as a steaming plate of rice, meat, and gravy was thrust into his hands. By the Norns, the smell was mouth-watering.
“What?”

“Twice, in fact.”

“Really? Ok, Dumbledore.”

“Thrice.”

“Blitzin?”

“You went through all the reindeer associated with your inane Midgardian holidays.”

“...Merlin?”

Loki humphed at the mortal. “Really Anthony?”

“Not to interrupt,” Banner said, suddenly reminding Loki that he and Anthony weren’t alone any longer, “But the naan’s going to get cold. Shall we sit?”

“Right, food, warm food, Brucie bear food,” Anthony babbled as he walked past Loki and sank down onto a dark green cushion by the table. “And don’t think I didn’t notice how you avoided the question, Banner,” he commented, shoveling a gargantuan spoonful of curry into his mouth.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Banner explained as he took his own seat to Anthony’s left, “but light can behave as both a particle and a wave. Who’s to say magic isn’t the same?”

“JARVIS,” Anthony countered.

“JARVIS is operating based on preliminary results that he gathered from a single magic source executing a specific type of magic,” Bruce argued. “If you tried to present your findings as absolute fact with just this much testing? C’mon Tony, you’d be laughed out of every conference and university in this hemisphere.”

Loki took a seat and began to quietly eat his meal as the two scientists argued with one another, seeming to forget that he was even present. Loki had initially expected that he might have to come to Anthony’s aid in the debate, though it soon became clear that no interference on his part was necessary. Banner and Anthony’s discussion was animated but never malicious; they challenged each other and poked holes in the other’s argument, yet both had smiles on their faces all throughout. Even if the more technical aspects of their conversation went over his head, Loki still delighted in watching the exchange play out. Watching the analytical prowess of Banner compete against the slightly unhinged genius of Anthony was sublime.

“And another thing,” Banner debated, one hour and three plates of curry for Loki later, “we only saw the magic interacting with inorganic matter.”

“So?”

“X-rays don’t behave the same way in front of lead as they do skin cells,” Banner explained. “Different atomic density, different behavior of electrons-”

“Are you seriously comparing lead shielding to genuine ancient Norse god magic?” Anthony demanded.

“Actually,” Loki said, setting down his spoon and scooting his plate to the side, “Banner has a point.”
Both Midgardians immediately turned their attention to Loki. “Wait, really?” Anthony asked, staring at Loki in surprise.

“Can you give us an example?” Banner requested, leaning forward in his seat.

Loki was about to launch into an explanation of spell configurations and the adjustments one had to make when using magic on a plant vs person vs object, when a better, far more demonstrative (and mischievous) idea occurred to him. “JARVIS, are you still recording?”

“I can be, Mr. Liesmith.”

Loki grinned at Anthony and Banner, who were now looking equal parts nervous and intrigued. “All right. Pay close attention now.” Before either of them could protest, Loki had snapped his fingers.

Transformation, in principle, was quite simple for a sorcerer to do if they were both creative and determined enough. It was magic that boiled down to a rather basic question: could you look at one thing and imagine it being another? Most people had this ability in them to an extent; it was the small voice in one’s head that suggested a cloud looked like a house, or that a lump of clay could be molded into the shape of a man. Simply take that drive, channel a bit of magic through it, and forcibly alter one object into another. It was on this point where most magic users struggled. You see, no matter how much that cloud might look like a house, there was still a part of your mind that was acutely aware that you were looking at floating water particles, and not a real structure of brick and mortar. Overcoming that mental blockade too often proved impossible for many magic users; the sway that reality held in their world was ironclad and unrelenting, even for a moment of spellwork.

Loki, on the other hand, lived for the thrill of twisting, manipulating, and transforming the world around him. Why couldn’t those apples become oranges? What really would happen if those torches could come to life and follow the castle servants down the halls on newly-grown legs? Best of all, what might the world be like if Loki wasn’t bound to the expected decorum of a prince of Asgard? It had been with that final question in mind that Loki had long ago begun experimenting with (and eventually perfecting) the art of transforming himself into something else. Thus, the magic which so often alluded other spellcasters across the nine realms could be executed by Loki with a mere snap of his fingers.

And so it was that seconds later, Anthony and Banner were staring down at an emerald green snake curled up at Loki’s place at the table.

“Holy shit,” Banner whispered, now leaning so far forward that his elbows rested on the table, eyes wide as saucers. Loki inwardly scoffed at the sight; the man could transform into a giant green brute at the drop of a hat, yet was shocked by a sorcerer’s ability to transform into a snake? The inner workings of Midgardian minds would ever remain a mystery to him.

“How are…”

Loki’s attention was immediately diverted by the sound of Anthony’s voice trailing off. Loki tilted his head to the side, quietly watching Anthony as he stared at Loki, his hand slowly moving towards the sorcerer.

Banner seemed to notice this at the same time Loki did, because he immediately snapped, “Tony!”

Anthony froze at once. “Wha-oh, shit. I’m sorry Loki, permission’s important. It’s just...look, I know I’ve already asked you for a lot today, so feel free to say no, but this is…”

As Anthony’s fingers twitched listlessly in the air, hovering mere inches away from Loki’s face, it
occurred to Loki that Anthony was seeking tangible proof of the magic he’d done. He didn’t just want to look, he wanted to feel with his own two hands that yes, Loki had in fact metamorphosed into a snake right here in the Tower following a dinner of curry and naan, for no other reason than to demonstrate his magical prowess to two mortals. Yet as eager as both men must have been to have a more in-depth look at Loki’s sorcery, they weren’t going to force him to do anything he didn’t want, even something as simple as being touched by them in his snake form. In all likelihood, Loki could have transformed himself right back into his normal form at this very second and left both Anthony and Banner groping for answers, and they’d be fine with it. They expected nothing from him beyond this simple demonstration.

It was for that reason that Loki truly wanted to show them more, and slid forward to wrap himself around and up Anthony’s arm.

“Whoa,” Anthony breathed out, twisting and turning his arm to get a better look at Loki’s new shape. “Bruce, this is amazing! Same size as a regular snake, real scales, weight might be a little heavy though-ack!”

Loki might have wrapped himself just a teensy bit too tightly around Anthony’s throat as he spiraled around the genius, eventually resting his own head atop the crown of Anthony’s to stare down at both scientists.

“Ignore him, Loki,” Banner murmured, rising from his seat to circle Anthony as he studied Loki from all angles. “Tony’s brain can’t do science and self-preservation at the same time, it’s physically impossible.”

“Watch it Banner, or I’ll take Loki back down to the workshop and lock you out,” Tony threatened, and he even wiggled backwards in his seat to scoot away from the other scientist. Loki gently flicked Tony’s ear with his tail, making the genius yelp and jerk in his seat. “Ow, fine, we’ll stay.”

Over the next half hour, Anthony and Banner both observed Loki’s transformed state with unbridled curiosity. They eventually figured out that Loki couldn’t speak in this form (trying to incorporate human vocal cords into a serpentine transformation was just asking for the magic to implode on itself), but realized that Loki was still capable of answering yes/no questions with a nod or shake of his head. At that point, their queries became constant; were there many sorcerers in the other realms who could do this? Did it take much energy to hold the transformation? Was this the only animal Loki could turn into? And so on.

All the while Anthony kept running fingers along the scales of Loki’s tail, murmuring words of disbelief between half-sensical notes which JARVIS was doubtlessly recording for future analysis and parsing. Loki didn’t mind; Anthony wasn’t doing anything particularly invasive at the moment, and all their questions were so elementary that he hardly had to think at all before giving them an answer. Instead, he was quite content to settle on his perch with a full stomach before an admiring audience.

Ages later, Bruce stopped asking questions long enough to glance down at his watch. “Sorry guys, but Steve’s going to be here any minute to do meditation with me, and I’ve got to get the rest of dinner packed up.”

“All right, time to go,” Tony stated, stretching one arm out towards the table. “Here Loki, unless you want to spend the rest of tonight riding around on my shoulders. Time to clean up.”

Loki quietly slid down onto the table once more, wrapping himself into a ball in the middle of it. “Oh, I see how it is,” Anthony quipped. “You can’t bus the table because you don’t have hands, right?”
Loki merely flicked his tongue at Anthony. Somehow the gesture was less undignified if one was a serpent while doing it.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it,” Bruce commented as he stacked Loki and Anthony’s plates on top of his own before exiting the room and heading to the kitchen.

“One last question,” Anthony said. “How do you manage to transform your clothes when you’re a snake?”

Aaaaaaand here was the payoff.

There was a flash of green light, and suddenly Loki was back in his normal form, lying completely naked on his stomach with a devious grin on his face. “Simply, Anthony. You don’t.”

The absolutely gobsmacked expression on Anthony’s face would delight Loki for years to come. It was a challenge to catch the inventor off-guard, but this was the first time that Loki had managed to render the man utterly speechless. His mouth was opening and closing over and over, but not so much as a squeak came out. He appeared frozen in his seat, eyes rapidly darting up and down Loki’s body, and with suddenly clarity Loki realized that Anthony must just now be realizing that the sorcerer had been utterly naked while wrapped around him.

Well now. That certainly presented some opportunities.

“Come now, Anthony,” Loki teased, propping his head up with one hand in a seemingly careless fashion and kicking a leg lazily behind him, “Surely I’m not the first person you’ve ever had wrap their naked body around you?”

At that moment, three things happened: Banner dropped a plate in the next room, Rogers stepped off the elevator, and Anthony blurted out, “How are you fine getting naked on Bruce’s table but not in my workshop?!”

(Somewhere off to the side, Rogers made a noise like a dying cat with a hairball in its throat).

Loki shook his head. “I told you, that was an issue of hygiene. When was the last time you cleaned any of those tables, Anthony?”

“You’re a god, your immune system would be fine!”

“That is beside the point, I’m not going to strip down in the same room as multiple species of mold that I’ve yet to encounter over several centuries in any of the nine realms.”

“Loki,” Rogers whimpered, “where are your pants?”

“In my seat,” Loki answered. “I’m not a heathen, Captain.”

“Mathematically speaking,” Anthony pressed on, as though he wasn’t arguing with a naked god of chaos sprawled across his best friend’s table, “less than 10% of the workshop has mold in it, probably less than 5%, ergo the majority of surfaces in the workshop are mold free-”

“Steve, if we don’t get to the gym soon Nat and Clint are going to steal our meditation area for sparring,” Bruce suddenly called out as he walked across the room. He grabbed Rogers by the shoulder and turned him around, ushering them both towards the elevator in haste.

Loki couldn’t help but smirk; Midgardians and their quaint notions of modesty.
At the same time, Banner’s mention of the hour reminded Loki that he had work of his own to do tonight, and he’d already taken plenty of time off this afternoon. “I should be going as well,” he said, slowly raising himself up to a sitting position and moving off the table. Anthony, polite soul that he was, averted his gaze once Loki was properly upright and dressing himself. “Don’t worry, I’ve magicked the table clean,” he stated with another snap of his fingers.

“Right. Um…”

“Yes?”

“Nothing. Forget it. So, I’ll be seeing you around?”

Loki was tempted to give a simple affirmative and be off, but stopped just short. Time and again, Anthony had offered him hospitality and safety in the confines of his own home. He understood Loki well enough to neither underestimate nor fear what the sorcerer was capable of doing, and approached Loki’s actions with more interest than revulsion. At times, some of his actions even bordered on protective. Perhaps…

“Anthony, I’m going to be doing some work over the next few weeks. Dangerous work.”

“...Ok?”

“I can’t go into the specifics yet,” Loki explained, “but there is a chance that things might go wrong. And if that were to happen...could I come to you for help?”

“What exactly are you going to do?” Anthony inquired.

“I told you, I can’t go into the details right now,” Loki answered, and it was only a partial lie. Frankly he had no idea how the hunt for the Infinity Gems was going to play out; the options ran from smooth sailing over calm seas all the way to cataclysmic annihilation. “But I swear this is for the good of our realms. It has to be done, and I’m the only one who can do it.”

Anthony took a few moments to consider Loki’s words, and for that the sorcerer was grateful. An immediate answer of yes or no would prove his friend to be a fool either to his or Loki’s detriment. At last he said, “Ok, if you need help you’ve got it. But the caveat to that offer is that the minute things goes sideways, you tell me everything that you’re doing, no lies, no omission of details. Deal?”

It was the best offer Loki could hope to get. “Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

So much had to happen in this chapter. I had it all laid out, but trying to get the pieces to work with one another and make a coherent narrative was...something. Also it might have been a bit OoC, but I really wanted Loki naked on that table.
There was a long moments of silence in the elevator as the doors closed behind Bruce and Steve. JARVIS, merciful soul that he was, began moving the elevator down towards the gym without having to be prompted. Both men clearly needed a moment to process what had just happened on Bruce’s floor. Loki and Tony had clearly been growing closer over the past few weeks, but their most recent interaction in Bruce’s living room proved that the other Avengers had definitely misunderstood exactly how close the pair of them had become.

Finally, Bruce cleared his throat and began speaking. “So about that—”

“Shawarma.”

“Excuse me?”

“JARVIS, change of plans. Get a message to Nat and Clint that we’re going out for a late dinner. Usual place, ASAP.”

“Right away, Captain.”

“Steve?” Bruce asked.

Steve kept staring straight ahead at the elevator doors, arms held at parade rest and his mouth set in a determined line. “Bruce, I spent the better part of my childhood assuming I’d die from polio or pneumonia. I volunteered to be part of a mad science experiment carried out in a basement in Brooklyn. I went to war after I lost the ability to get drunk and subsequently punched literal Nazis in the face all over the better part of Western Europe. I flew a plane into the ocean and woke up in a world of microwave corndogs and satellite TV. I’m going on 30 or 100 depending on how you count it, and I’ve been put in charge of a team of superheroes dedicated to keeping earth safe from the kind of supervillains you wouldn’t even put in kids’ books back in the day, because it would seem too unbelievable. And you know what?”

“What?”

“I got through all of that just fine. I’ve rolled with the punches before, never say never and all that, soldier on. Apparently my breaking point is seeing a naked Norse god of chaos splayed out on your table like Christmas dinner and one of my best friends ogling him like he wants to do terrible things to that dinner—”
“Ew.”

“Which frankly? Big surprise, given all the naked people you see in Army barracks in wartime. Just bare skin, everywhere. Plenty of asses. But nope, one particular ass going after my war buddy’s kid is the thing that finally does it.”

“Steve?” Bruce asked again, because his friend was beginning to sound a bit unhinged and the idea that the Avengers might have actually broken Steve Rogers was not something Bruce was looking forward to explaining to Nick Fury. Lord only knew how the general public would react to a national icon having a complete breakdown after everything the Avengers had been through already.

“Not now,” Steve demanded with a hand up towards Bruce. “Just...not right now. Food and team meeting. Then talking.”

-n-

Half an hour later found four of the Avengers sitting around a small table that was tucked into the back corner of their favorite hole-in-the-wall Turkish restaurant. Bruce was sipping on a cup of tea, Natasha and Clint were both nibbling on kabobs, and Steve seemed to be making a concentrated effort to eat his way through every item on the menu. Thank god the bill was going on Tony’s credit card. “What’s the emergency?” Natasha asked between mouthfuls of food.

“We might have slightly miscalculated how long it was going to take for Tony and Loki to hook up,” Bruce admitted.

Natasha quirked a brow. “How badly?”

“Well considering I got off the elevator to see Loki naked on a table and Tony complaining that he wouldn’t get naked in the workshop, pretty badly!” Steve snapped through a mouthful of meat.

Clint choked on his food and even Natasha looked a bit startled. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” Bruce sighed out. “If they’re already at the point where they’re arguing about where to have sex-”

“How could you let this happen?!” Clint demanded, pointing a finger at Steve.

Steve looked appropriately offended by the question. “How is this my fault?!”

“You’re supposed to be in charge of the team!” Clint hissed.

“This is not an Avengers issue, this is a Tony Stark not keeping it in his pants issue!”

“Well a former archenemy of mankind is the reason he’s not keeping it in his pants, that makes it an Avengers issue!”

“Boys, I think we can all agree that mistakes were made,” Natasha reasoned, noticing that the group was starting to attract unwanted attention from some of the other restaurant patrons. The last thing they needed was for this argument to end up on Youtube. “I’ll admit, I thought we had more time to figure out a better strategy. We clearly did not, and that’s the reality of the situation now. We need a new plan of attack.”

There was a thoughtful pause as the Avengers took a moment to consider their predicament. The sound of Middle Eastern music played over tinny speakers above their heads, and happy customers came and went at the front counter, completely unaware of the chaos unfolding nearby as the group’s
entire world irrevocably shifted. Eventually, Bruce spoke up. “Is it weird that I think...I mean, Tony could do worse, right?”

Three heads turned to give him silent disbelieving looks.

“Look, I’m not saying Loki is New York’s most eligible bachelor, but think about it,” Bruce reasoned. “After Pepper and Tony broke up, some of those rebounds were...a lot.”

Natasha snorted into her drink and Steve and Clint shared a knowing look. The weeks of coming home to see a half-dressed one night stand scurrying off the elevator and out of the Tower, leaving behind an absolute disaster on Tony’s floor and a flurry of online tweets about the Avengers’ personal quarters had taxed most of them to their limits. It didn’t help that replacing lightbulbs or righting overturned furniture was all-too-often accompanied by scraping a hungover Tony off the couch in the workshop, trying to force fluids into his system between bouts of puking into a nearby garbage bin. Needles to say, that had been a period of cohabitation which none of the Avengers wanted to repeat. Tony was finally in a better place now, and had been for some months; that was part of the reason they’d started up game night in the first place. But ever since the breakup, Tony had yet to enter into any kind of serious relationship. Maybe that was changing now.

“Compared to most of them,” Bruce continued, “Loki at least cares about Tony and wouldn’t try to tear him down just for social media renown. Plus he seems sincerely interested.”

“Interested how?” Clint asked. “Because there’s a difference between wanting to date and wanting to bang a guy like a screen door in a hurricane.”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes!” Clint exclaimed. “Because if this is just a fling then it’s going to make game night awkward if they have a bad split, yeah, maybe there’ll be a little carnage in Times Square, but that’d be the end of it. But if Loki and Tony are actually...dating,” he choked out, saying the word with the same rancor that Steve used when having words about the Yankees, “then we’re talking about them going out on the town for dates with lots of paparazzi following them, and I guarantee the first reporter who says something bad about Tony or Loki is going to end up turned into a newt!”

Steve wisely chose to remain silent and stuffed more food into his mouth.

“If Tony and Loki are together, there’s nothing we can do to stop them,” Natasha reasoned. “And honestly I wouldn’t even want to try. Telling either one of them to break things off...messy wouldn’t begin to cover it.”

“Logically there’s no way we could stop them at this point,” Bruce countered. “If we try to sabotage their relationship, one or both of them is going to come after us for that interference, and frankly I don’t know which one would be worse. Damage control and self-preservation would be the smarter path.”

“Fine, I’ll go along with the crazy for right now,” Clint grumbled. “But we need to set some ground rules for the Tower. Like maybe not getting naked and having sex on other people’s floors.”

“You realize they’d take that as a challenge, don’t you?” Natasha asked. “Suddenly Tony and Loki just happen to be spending an unusual amount of time on the 79th floor on a Tuesday morning, and JARVIS won’t tell us why even though we all know.”

Steve reached for his fifth kabob and took off half of it in one bite.

“Then what? Don’t tell them to please not get naked in Bruce’s living room again? That’s just
common decency Nat!"

“For the record,” Bruce cut in, “I don’t think they were actually going to have sex in the living room; more like Loki was trying to prove a point.”

“Wait, for real?”

Bruce nodded. “Loki apparently didn’t want to have sex in Tony’s workshop earlier today, which is fair. It’s a bit of a mess.”

“Biohazard,” Clint corrected. “The word you’re looking for is biohazard, toxic wasteland, a hellscape of experiments gone wrong and god knows what else.”

“It’s decidedly gross,” Natasha admitted. “So maybe we could...clean it up? As a tacit way of showing that we support their relationship.”

“And more importantly, we support their not having sex in Bruce’s part of the Tower,” Clint concluded.

“Not a bad plan,” Bruce agreed. “Tony’s going to be at a conference for a few days next week, so we could probably get a few cleaning people to come in then. On a slight tangent...do you guys think we should let Thor know about this?”

The others at the table collectively cringed. “Yeah, nose goes on telling Thor that Tony’s dicking down his kid brother,” Clint stated.

Steve slammed down his kabob stick hard enough to dent the table under his fist. “So it’s agreed. We go back to the Tower, we leave Loki and Tony to their own devices, and we never talk about what they’re getting up to behind closed doors ever again. Because frankly, I really don’t want to imagine exactly what kind of sex life they have, and I really don’t want to drag Thor into this until it’s absolutely necessary. We clean up the workshop and leave them be unless we catch them on someone else’s table; agreed?”

The chorus of agreement was unanimous.

Chapter End Notes

I headcanon that Steve is a stress eater and no-one can change my mind.
Wherein Loki is Overworked and Discovers Lifetime Movies

Chapter by SuspiciousLampshade (FluffyHippogriff)

Chapter Summary

The campaign goes on. Loki is a busy bee. Midgardian entertainment can be rather questionable.

Kudos and comments are loved and appreciated!

Terms to know:
Uncanny dodge: super useful in combat, pretty much guarantees that you can dodge any kind of sneak attack once you max it out
Locate Monster: pretty self-explanatory, this one.
Glibness: gives a +30 to bluff
Summon swarm: also pretty self-explanatory
Bull's Strength: gives a +4 strength bonus to selected target

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next two weeks were damnably, mercifully peaceful for Loki. On the one hand, he didn’t encounter any problems during his hunt for the Mind Stone which couldn’t be solved by a little impromptu spellwork or a tactful retreat from a less than ideal situation. On the other hand, a good part of the reason he didn’t have any issues was due to him failing to find the accursed Mind Stone as he trekked all over this thrice-damned realm. Night after night was spent crossing from one end of Midgard to the other, tugging along the strings of magic however the tracking spell dictated and finding only dead ends for his trouble. To be fair, he’d managed to cross off nearly a dozen possible trails and even acquired a few interesting artifacts he’d gladly pore over at some future date, but that was the sum result of a fortnight of incessant labor.

To top it all off, Loki was running low on supplies that he desperately needed to keep the magic array for the tracking spell running. The simpler materials like fresh hellebore or water from a holy spring were easy enough to find and stock up on, but rarer ingredients like phoenix ash were down to their final teaspoons in the jars on his shelves. He would need to replenish his stores within the next week, and that meant either a trip to Asgard to find the herbs and extracts he was used to working with (dangerous) or trying to find an equivalent substitute on Midgard (risky bordering on idiotic). Frankly this entire debacle would have been enough to make a lesser man tear their hair out in frustration; Loki was rather proud of himself for only overturning one table and setting the living room curtains ablaze twice.

Doubtlessly there was once upon a time when he would have caused far more damage, possibly even burned a few city blocks to the ground in the throes of his rage. But things were different now. A prime factor in his hideout remaining intact, rather than being reduced to smouldering ruins, was because Loki now had an outlet for his frustrations on a bi-monthly basis. He didn’t need to lash out at defenseless furniture or scream into a void to vent his frustrations when his anger could instead be channeled into the far more productive path of undermining the meticulously plotted campaigns of his former adversaries. He spent enough of his waking hours being vexed or destructive already; a
reprieve for a bit of mischief was far preferable to more of that. And so it was that tonight, rather than carrying out another wild goose chase which would end in stabbing someone or swearing in every language known to this realm, Loki was seated at a dining table beside Anthony as their Dungeons & Dragons party finally began their excursion to the far side of Vilethorn Swamp.

“As your group crosses the swamp on the rickety flatboat your guide has provided, fog begins to move in on all sides. Soon it is so thick that you can scarcely see more than ten feet in front of you,” Natasha narrated.

“I ask the guide what’s going on,” Anthony said. “And with my charisma modifier...16!”

“The guide explains that this is normal for the area.”

“Wait,” Banner demanded as he rolled a d20. “Perception check on the guide with a 14.”

Natasha and Rogers briefly consulted their notes. “You notice that the guide seems nervous as he continues to paddle the flatboat. His eyes are moving side to side, as though watching for something. The water also seems unusually choppy, compared to what you experienced earlier during the voyage.”

“Swamp monster, calling it right now,” Barton declared. “I shuffle everyone behind me and take a defensive stance on the prow.”

“Bannon, you got some combat spells ready to go?” Anthony asked as he scooted the holographic models towards the back of the ship.

“...Define ready.”

Groans went up around the table. “All right, everyone get in formation to protect the cleric while he prepares his spells,” Loki commanded. “Clintock, please tell me you’re at a high enough level to have maxed out uncanny dodge.”

“Yup, as of last session.”

“Good. Antoninus, you picked the Locate Creature spell to learn when we leveled up last time, correct?”

“...Oh.”

Ever so slowly, Loki turned his head to stare down at Anthony. The man was squirming in his seat, fiddling with the dinner plate in front of him and doing everything in his power not to make eye contact with Loki. Highly suspicious. “Oh?” Loki repeated, trying to emulate the tone that Frigga had oh so often used when attempting to wring a confession out of Thor or himself in their childhood.

“Yeah Tony,” Clint added, leaning forward in his seat to give his friend a scrutinizing gaze. “Oh?”

Anthony cleared his throat and took a sip of Loki’s drink. “I uh, may have forgotten we needed that spell and learned Glibness instead,” he admitted sheepishly.

Loki stared at the supposed genius beside him in disbelief. “You learned...Glibness?”

“Yeah.”

Now it was Banner’s turn to give Anthony a horrified look. “After we specifically noted during the
last battle that, since half the party keeps putting points into charisma and we can’t roll successful attacks on pain of death, we should probably focus on figuring out ways to sneak or talk ourselves out of combat?”

“Well yeah, that’s why Glibness was a good choice. Now I could bluff my way out of a murder even with a town full of eyewitnesses and the murder weapon literally in my hands!”

Banner turned his attention to Loki. “I nominate using the bard as monster bait.”

“Bruce!”

“That’s Bannon to you, meat shield,” Clint deadpanned. “Clintock moves him to the prow.”

“Guys, come on!”

Loki sat back in his seat and watched as Anthony argued with Barton and Banner about having Antoninus try to draw out whatever it was that lurked in the bowels of the swamp. While he was fond of Anthony and didn’t want to upset the man so early in tonight’s campaign, stupidity of this magnitude merited some disciplinary measures. Particularly since that stupidity had now led to Anthony turning away from the other Avengers and looking up at him for help. Loki, of all people. What was this world coming to?

“Lokes, help me out here,” he begged. “Who’s going to buff the barbarian if I’m busy running for my life? Oh fuck you Clint,” he added when the archer giggled at ‘buff the barbarian.’

“We’ve done more with less,” Loki reasoned, trying to hide his amusement at Anthony’s distress. “It’s your fault for forgetting the plan that we went over no less than a dozen times. Perhaps now it will stick.”

Anthony put a hand to his heart, looking more offended than he had any right to be even in the face of Loki’s betrayal. “And after I invited you to move in!”

Loki rolled his eyes. Equating a gifted section of the workshop with asking Loki to take up residence in the Tower was a bit much, even for Anthony. Particularly when prolonged exposure to the workshop in question was likely as not to cause lasting harm to Loki’s health, and for that matter the health of any sentient creature who wasn’t one of Anthony’s machine helpers. On that note, “Perhaps if I were a bit more certain that your workshop wasn’t a biohazard that could test the strength of even my immune system—”

“There is no proof anything in the lab is toxic to gods, you’re still walking and talking, ergo probably no lasting neurological damage—”

“Anthony, you are the bait. Make peace with this before our DMs grow weary and choose to have the monster launch a surprise attack.”

“Fine,” Anthony finally acquiesced. “But you could at least bribe me with a cold one,” he added, gently shaking his empty beer bottle towards Loki for emphasis. Loki gave his friend a look but nevertheless summons a drink for him from the kitchen fridge. A good trade, if it ensured that Anthony would willingly go along with the plan.

But as the drink materialized on the table, Loki felt a tiny spasm in his hand and spots danced across his vision. He braced his spasming hand on the table and blinked rapidly to clear the spots away, hoping the others hadn’t noticed.

“Loki?”
Damn it.

It wasn’t just the alchemic supplies that were running low after all these weeks of work. Loki had been running himself ragged in his quest for the Mind Stone, to the detriment of both his physical energy levels as well as his seidr, the very essence of his magical being. The infusions helped limit the amount of his own magicks that were being poured into the spellwork, to be sure, but by this point it was a bit like trying to substitute a strong cup of coffee for a good night’s sleep. Sleep that Loki, if he were a more honest soul, might admit that he’d been in desperate need of for over a week. His body was finally starting to experience the side effects of prolonged and intense magic work if he was having vision problems; much more of this and the protracted muscle spasms and lightheadedness would start up.

This wasn’t the first time Loki had overworked himself though, and past experience had taught him that a few weeks off would be enough to stabilize him. Of course, it went without saying that Loki couldn’t actually take even a fraction of that time to recuperate at this point. Each one of his failed retrieval missions fueled his drive to try again the next night, and the next, and the next, continuing on until he finally found the accursed Stone and could lock it away somewhere safe from the machinations of the Mad Titan. He couldn’t afford to stop now; he’d already spent days upon days distracting SHIELD from his connection to the Avengers, and who knew how much invaluable time those efforts might have cost the Nine Realms in the war against the Thanos. He would find the Stone first and then sleep for a week. Possibly two. For right now, though…

“It’s fine, Anthony. I’m...” a thousand lies flitted through Loki’s mind, but in the end he settled on a vague half-truth. “Tired, is all. Nothing to worry about.”

He could tell from the look on Anthony’s face that his response hadn’t been nearly as convincing as it needed to be. Wonderful, there were probably going to be uncomfortable questions now just like the last time he’d shown a moment of weakness in the Tower. Suddenly a corn chip flew through the air, nailing Anthony right in the middle of his forehead. “What the-?!”

“Don’t wear out the mage, Stark, we need his brain to counter Steve and Nat’s scheming,” Barton commanded, additional corn chips lined up on his plate and ready to be flung through the air if need be. Anthony had some choice words about that, and within moments Loki’s brief magical hiccup was forgotten. Good. Loki hadn’t come here tonight to have people analyze and critique what he choose to do with his magic on his own time, particularly when it would dictate the fate of all Realms.

Luckily for the party, Anthony gave into the monster-luring plan and offered himself up as bait, albeit spitefully choosing to sit on a grog barrel and loudly sing bawdy tunes until the DMs revealed the creature hiding beneath the waves of the swamp. “From beneath the water arises a beast that reeks of decay and abject misery. Covered in leaves and vines, it lurches towards the front of the ship. All of a sudden, an identical beast slams itself against the port side of your vessel, wrapping its tentacles around the ledge. You’ve encountered two shambling mounds. Everyone roll for initiative.”

“Oh shit,” Barton said. “Antoninus, get behind me. Bannon, whatever you’re prepping better be ready. Loptr-“

“Falling back with my bow at the ready,” Loki finished as he scooted his character towards the rear of the flatboat. The party had a system in place for battles against anything bigger than a fishmonger, and it involved the barbarian taking point, the bard close behind to buff or debuff as need be, the cleric standing as far back as possible to use his spells, and the rogue using either his bow or rapier depending on what kind of terrain they were dealing with. It wasn’t the most revolutionary setup, but it was the only method the group had ever used which successfully prevented the Midgardian
party members from dying horribly.

This night, however, the effectiveness of that system was being put to the test. Shambling mounds didn’t have much HP, but their constrict damage was enough to keep everyone but Clintock at ranged distance for their own safety. This made the battle slow going for the first three turns, until Anthony was struck by a brilliant idea. “Hey DM, the shambling mounds are pretty beat up now from Clintock’s ax, right? Like, bleeding all over the place?”

“Yes, why?”

“I use Summon Swarm to, you know, summon a swarm of starving rats,” Anthony stated. “And direct them towards the bleeding monsters in the water!”

Natasha and Rogers stared at Anthony for a good long minute. “That seems...excessive,” Natasha finally said.

“Probably. It’s still what I’m doing with my turn,” Anthony stated with a shrug.

“I cast Bull’s Strength on them,” Banner added after checking his spell list. “For extra nibble damage.”

Natasha and Rogers now looked towards each other, silently praying that one of them could figure out some way to prevent this heinous slaughter from coming to pass. “Admit it, you guys don’t have anything to counter this,” Anthony gloated, smirking all the while.

“We didn’t think we’d need a counter!” Rogers exclaimed. “We thought you picked Summon Swarm because you were just trying to make a really convoluted reverse Pied Piper of Hamelin joke.”

“I was,” Anthony admitted. “But like they say, sometimes the best offense is a comedic bit gone rogue.”

“Who says that?” Rogers demanded. “Name one person.”

“Steve,” Banner interjected, shooting the man a ‘he has clearly outmaneuvered you so quit while you’re only slightly behind’ look. It was one that Loki had become increasingly familiar with over the course of several D&D sessions, and more often than not it was effective at getting the others to back down in the face of Anthony’s more eccentric plans before a full-blown argument could break out.

Tonight was no exception. Rogers sighed and shook his head at the group’s DM. “It’s not against the rules, Nat. Incredibly poor taste, maybe, but completely legal as dictated by the handbooks.”

The DM nodded, quietly accepting the death of yet another campaign in the face of her players’ actions. “The rats appear from beneath the waves and swim forward, overwhelming the shambling mounds and rending their flesh by the mouthful, consuming everything in their path,” Natasha narrated. “Their howls of pain and suffering will surely haunt everyone on the boat for years to come, and the guide has to step away to vomit over the starboard side. In a matter of minutes, both creatures are completely devoured.”

“Psychopathic murderhobos,” Rogers commented with another shake of his head.

“Effective, but gruesome,” Natasha added.

“Well played, Anthony,” Loki commented as Banner and Barton offered up similar praise. Loki
didn’t miss the way that Anthony seemed genuinely pleased by the compliments, even if he did try to hide it behind an overly dramatic bow to his audience and sarcastic thank yous. Now the group could move on to the next leg of the journey.

At least, that was what Loki thought until they reached the king’s road on the edge of the swamp fifteen minutes later and Natasha informed them that that was the end of their session for tonight. “Wait, we usually go for at least another hour,” Banner remarked after checking his watch.

“We do,” Rogers agreed. “But the rest of tonight’s campaign hinged on the guide trying to direct you towards a swamp witch after seeing your battle prowess, and considering that he’s basically been reduced to babbling incoherently in the fetal position…”

“Whoops.”

“So yeah, back to the drawing board,” Rogers concluded as he began to gather up his books and papers.

“Fair enough,” Barton said. “Movie time then?”

“I’ll get the popcorn,” Banner volunteered as he got up from his seat.

Loki glanced to Anthony, uncertain as to what the others were talking about. Movie time?

Fortunately Anthony picked up on Loki’s confusion at once. “Ok, so you remember how we had this really bad habit of dying like twenty minutes into the campaign before you joined?”

“I’ve heard tales, yes.”

“Well we’d already cleared our schedules and it seemed stupid to try and come up with something to do on our own, so we started watching Lifetime movies if we finished a D&D session early.”

“Awful Lifetime movies,” Clint corrected. “Like, the cheesiest, most contrived, over-the-top idiot plots that cable access can offer.”

Loki pondered this for a moment. “That sounds...abominable.”

“Oh it is,” Anthony promised with a giggle. “90% of the time we’re laughing and tearing it to shreds, you can’t buy that kind of happiness, believe me I’ve tried.”

“You’re welcome to join us,” Natasha offered.

Loki felt himself wavering. It was one thing to make an allowance in his schedule for Dungeons & Dragons; he could justify that it was a fortnightly break from his work which would only be a few short hours. A temporary truce with potential allies that allowed Loki to study their battle tactics while honing his own as he enjoyed a meal provided by someone else. If he stayed for the Avengers’ movie night...there was no strategic justification to that. Such a thing could only be construed as something Loki did for the pure enjoyment of spending time with these Midgardians.

“C’mon Lokes,” Anthony begged. “I want to see you go full catty god of insults on some of them.”

“Have him watch Killer Hair,” Bruce suggested.

Loki knew he was lost the moment he saw Anthony’s face light up. That manic look promised that either the mage would give in to this request of his own volition, or Anthony would use every trick and technique in his arsenal to persuade him into staying (possibly enlisting the help of Natasha as
Loki couldn’t work up the will to put up much of a fight. Besides, surely staying for one film wouldn’t put him too far off-schedule. “Very well.”

“I should have destroyed this entire realm when I had the chance.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Loki wished he could take them back. He’d gotten an hour into the first movie that the Avengers had picked to watch this evening and was beginning to question both the taste and mental capacity of all the denizens of this realm. Asgard had offered up some questionable theatrical productions during festivals over the years, but this...this was a special kind of disaster whose sheer stupidity possessed the power to override Loki’s brain to mouth filter.

Mercifully, the others took his comment in jest, judging from the way that Barton choked on his mouthful of popcorn and Anthony snickered from beside him. “I told you,” he whispered, bumping shoulders with the god. The two of them plus Banner were sitting on one couch while Natasha and Barton shared another smaller one across the room. Rogers, apparently having a tendency to flail oversized limbs in all directions when he became particularly enthralled by a film, had been banished to the room’s lone armchair to avoid anyone leaving movie night with a black eye or split lip.

Speaking of whom...

“Why is a fashion writer trying to take over a murder investigation?” Rogers demanded, arms crossed over his chest and a confused look on his face. “This is just...awful.”

“And of course there’s a former love interest we’re expected to care about,” Natasha remarked with a delicate roll of her eyes.

Loki glanced around the room to see the others were in a similar state. “Do you Midgardians truly find this romantic? Or intriguing?” he inquired.

Anthony laughed, the vibrations shaking Loki’s shoulder ever so slightly. “Romantic? Maybe some people. Intriguing? Come on, look at this!” he exclaimed, gesticulating wildly at the TV. “Multiple people decided making this movie was a good idea, Lokes. There are dozens of humans walking this planet right now that helped with scripting, filming, editing, acting, etc etc, to make this movie a thing! It’s like...how could so many people go into this and not say, ‘wow this is a terrible idea’ until it was too late?”

“Aaaand there’s the car explosion,” Banner remarked, directing everyone’s attention back to the screen.

Loki felt himself relaxing between the couch armrest and Anthony’s shoulder, only vaguely following the plot of this film. The whole venture was incredibly pedestrian, if he was being completely honest. He should have been at his lair brewing more infusions to help on his search tonight; realistically, he could have chased down at least one more lead by this point had he gone straight back after the D&D session concluded. And yet...

Now that he’d been sitting for a while, Loki could finally admit to himself that he was tired. Norns, he was worn out, fatigued, aching down to his very bones tired. This movie was buffoonery incarnate and the food would barely be considered sustenance in most of the Nine Realms, but the company was good and he was too exhausted to make arguments to the contrary even with himself. He needed this break, before either his mind or his seidr hit the breaking point and he irreparably damaged himself. He could give himself this brief time to recover, even if it was only for a few
hours.

Anthony yawned and Loki felt the man put a little more of his weight on the god’s shoulder. “Don’t let me fall asleep, we’re watching Inspector Mom next,” Anthony softly demanded, even as he reached up to pull a blanket from the back of the couch down across his lap and snuggle further into the cushions.

“Mhm,” Loki hummed in agreement. That seemed as good an excuse to stay as any at this point. Thoughtlessly, he reached down and grabbed a corner of the blanket to pull it across his lap as well. The least Anthony could do was share if he was going to hog the only blanket within easy reach.

-n-

THUNK

“Ow!”

“Shh!”

Loki woke up to a dark room and the sound of hushed whispers. He must have fallen asleep at some point during the second movie; he could distinctly remember watching the end credits roll and then Natasha grabbing the remote to queue up the next movie, but beyond that everything was a vague blur of color and murmuring voices. It appeared that the Avengers had concluded the movie and were trying to leave the living room, but someone (it sounded like Rogers) had run into the coffee table on the way out and inadvertently woken up the god.

Wanting a few more minutes of rest, Loki kept his eyes shut to feign sleep. Someone would likely come over to shake him awake and ask him to leave soon enough; he’d take that as his cue to leave and get back to work. Except that that moment never came. One by one, Loki could hear the others whispering and walking out of the room, followed by the soft whooshing noise of the elevator opening and closing as JARVIS took the Avengers back to their rooms. Confused, Loki finally opened his eyes and looked around the room, wanting to confirm that he had truly been left alone in the Tower to sleep on Anthony Stark’s couch.

Shifting himself upright dispelled that misconception rather quickly. He wasn’t alone after all; Anthony was still here, sound asleep and pressed face-first into shoulder.

Carefully so as not to wake him, Loki disentangled himself from his seat, catching Anthony with one arm and gingerly lowering him onto the couch so that his head was nestled on the armrest where Loki had most recently been curled up. At some point during movie night Anthony had kicked off his shoes on the floor, so it was a simple maneuver to lift his legs onto the couch and tuck them in under the blanket. Anthony remained sound asleep throughout the entire process; apparently Loki wasn’t the only one feeling a bit worn down these days. Let him sleep, then. Someone else could be awake to do the heavy lifting for a while.

Having ensured that Anthony was going to be able to rest without awaking to a sore back or crick in his neck, Loki whispered a soft goodbye and took his leave from the Tower. Back to work.

Chapter End Notes

This isn't the most worthwhile chapter I've ever written; frankly it's a lot of schlock
composed for no other reason than to have a campaign chapter again with a little domestic fluff mixed in. I just couldn't move the story forward until I got 4k worth of Avengers playing games and watching movies while Loki gripes about his work life out of my system. I'm happy, but I understand if others are not. Next chapter should do more to help propel the plot forward.
Chapter Summary

Tony cleans house. Loki gets himself into a bit of a mess. Clint might be a better responsible adult that anyone’s willing to admit.

Kudos and comments are loved and appreciated!

Chapter Notes

Top secret bigot: an actual clearance level in US government, even higher than top secret; Eisenhower's D-Day plans fell into this category.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony Stark was in over his head.

Ever since he’d ended the Battle of New York by flying a bomb through a wormhole, Tony had been obsessed with planning and preparing for whatever else lay on the other side of that portal. The scant seconds he’d spent drifting in the void before falling back to Earth had imparted a terrible realization upon him. The massive army which had wreaked havoc on New York, plowing through countless buildings and decimating more lives than he’d care to imagine, had been nothing more than a miniscule scouting party. Loki’s supposed army was just the barest glimpse at the forces lurking beyond the safety of their solar system, and blasting a chunk of those forces to pieces with a nuclear warhead likely hadn’t done much to endear their leader to Earth or its inhabitants. There was no way any force on Earth, Avengers included, were prepared to deal with an adversary of that caliber.

And so Tony had thrown himself headlong into arming himself and the planet for the war that he knew was coming. Plans and schematics were drawn up and discarded by the hundreds in his workshop as he desperately tried to refine them into a viable strategy. Prototype suits were created en masse, built specifically to counter every single Chitauri technique which JARVIS’ sensors had been able to record. Countless nights were spent hacking into and studying both satellite and early warning systems owned by various governments (and less than legitimate organizations) the world over. Stratagizing and preparing for an largely unknown and barely understood adversary became Tony’s entire life, to the detriment of everything else.

Part of him truly mourned losing his relationship with Pepper. He would never forget the day she marched into his workshop, business suit perfectly in order and heels clicking sharply across the floor, and asked him for a minute. Calmly, head held high and voice never wavering once, Pepper told him that she couldn’t handle a relationship where her partner’s priorities were always going to be the Iron Man project, his SI work, and her, in that order. Tony had nodded along, agreed that she was right, and asked if they could at least remain friends. She said “We’ll see,” in a tired voice, hugged him goodbye, and exited his workshop for the very last time.

Tony could have promised at least a few nights off from his projects each week to devote more time and energy to Pepper, but he didn’t. It wasn’t fair to her; Pepper was an absolute goddess of a
woman, loving and wrathful in equal measure and far more devoted to Tony and his company than he deserved. She merited better than a man who saw a romantic relationship as something that needed to be blocked off on a schedule to make sure dinner and a movie even happened once a week. Pepper’s significant other should be someone who could make her the center of their world; someone who didn’t wake up every night at 1 a.m. and run down to the workshop in their home’s basement because they couldn’t stand another second of lying in bed and not actively working on plans to save the world. Someone who wasn’t Tony Stark, perpetual human disaster who would always be better with a keyboard and a pile of circuitry than his fellow humans.

And so he accepted the breakup with good grace, gave JARVIS instructions for the next month of work, and proceeded to drink about five years off his already shortened life. The other Avengers, bless them, eventually scraped him off the workshop floor and pulled him together well enough that he could return to functioning like a proper adult. Now the Chitauri contingency plan (codename “SI Quarterly Reports 2009” because like hell anyone at SHIELD would want to read something with that title) was fully underway and could be handled by JARVIS for a solid twelve hours each day, Tony Stark was successfully schmoozing businessmen left and right to keep his company’s professional relationships afloat, and Iron Man was protecting the streets from increasingly ridiculous villains who seemed to pop up all over these days. If he could just keep up his efforts on all three fronts, the Earth might stand a chance.

And then along came Loki.

It had taken Tony exactly three Avengers incidents after the Battle of New York to realize that Loki didn’t want to conquer the world. Loki’s attacks were chaotic and more often than not resulted in significant property damage, but the overt malice and wanton destruction that Tony had witnessed during the Chitauri invasion were absent. This wasn’t Loki trying to line up his adversaries like dominoes and topple them all in their own backyard, or level the whole world to rebuild a kingdom on top of the ashes. To Tony, it seemed that Loki wasn’t trying to conquer Earth; he just needed to remind the inhabitants that he was here. But why?

Most of Tony’s theory about Loki’s master plan was largely guesswork at this point. Loki wasn’t actively working towards world domination, anyone with half a brain and a functioning set of eyes could have told you that much. But someone had sent him to Earth with that goal in mind. Whoever or whatever they were had the power to save Loki from certain death and equip him with the proper materials and manpower (alien power? whatever) to launch an invasion against an entire realm. Yet when that invasion failed, Loki hadn’t vanished quietly into the night. Instead he’d dug in his heels and begun flaunting his magic for the entirety of the Nine Realms to see. Somewhere in the cosmos lurked an entity with the ability to alter life and death on a whim using powers beyond the comprehension of most humans, and Loki was spitting in his face every day he spent peacefully living in this realm he was supposed to have taken over. Determination like that was enough to make even Tony Stark marvel and think that Earth had a fighting chance against this opponent. Naturally, he started getting ideas.

If Loki was really so willing and eager to defy whatever force had sent him to Earth, perhaps he could be persuaded to fight against that force in a more direct manner. Tony was all but certain that Loki’s more recent bouts of magical madness weren’t intended to directly undermine that being, but there was no reason Tony couldn’t try to win Loki over to that line of thinking. Loki was powerful, intelligent, clever, and above all defiant of traditional order and political hierarchy. The Avengers were always going to be limited in what they could legally get away with (or more importantly, how much rope Fury would give them before SHIELD tried to hang them all), but with a supervillain on his side Tony’s project could exceed even his wildest expectations. Not to mention the simple fact that the time Tony spent with Loki, bantering on the battlefield or otherwise, was the most fun he’d had in years.
Tony’s interest in the god only grew when Loki started regularly attending their Dungeons & Dragons sessions. The wit that Loki utilized on the battlefield in short bursts was even more stunning stretched out over the hours of their sessions. Seeing Loki’s tactical mind at work was borderline hypnotic; Tony lived for the increasingly tricky plot twists that Natasha and Steve cooked up for the campaign because it ensured that Loki would have to sincerely put his mind to work in order to develop a truly clever yet devious counter. Never let it be said that Loki would try to solve things the simple way when there was surely a solution he could flaunt which would showcase his inherent genius. As much as Loki might like to pretend that his plots were best developed and executed from the shadows, Tony knew that Loki craved the spotlight as much as any underappreciated talent ever had. He needed someone there to admire his work, offering praise or criticism in equal measure and approach Loki with a willingness to challenge him. With that in mind, Tony had offered up space in his workshop to Loki.

On some level, Tony knew that his offer was incredibly risky. Loki might play tabletop games with the Avengers twice a month, but he remained an unpredictable variable in most of their day to day heroics. Still, Loki hadn’t been averse to staying at the Tower for dinner with Bruce, and he’d even joined the Avengers for movie night a week back. Given that context, letting him know that Tony had carved out a space for him in the Tower to enjoy on a more permanent basis seemed like a perfectly logical step. Saving the Earth was paramount; anything that Tony could do to endear Loki to the Avengers, therefore, was worth whatever personal risk it might pose to him. Now he only needed to get Loki to take him up on that offer. Hence why he was currently on his hands and knees in the main area of his workshop, wearing scruffy clothes and a painter’s mask over his face as he spritzed down the fungal growth beneath his primary work station with a fine layer of bleach. “JARVIS, make a note; Dummy is no longer in charge of cleaning the workshop. Until further notice he’s not even in charge of cleaning my blender, seriously, what even is this—”

“Tony?”

Tony poked his head out from beneath the table to see Bruce standing a few feet away, giving him a concerned look. “I brought lunch,” Bruce explained, holding up a plate with sandwiches in Tony’s line of vision. “What are you doing down there?”

“Ok, apparently Loki was actually serious about the whole ‘not moving into the lab until it’s less of a biohazard’ thing, so I’m giving this place a deep clean. Maybe then Gandalf might actually move in a cauldron or—GAH!” Tony yelped and back-peddled from his spot under the table after some of the disturbingly warm fungus came loose and fell on his shoulder. “Holy crap, what is wrong with that texture?! he yelped, frantically brushing the goop off himself.

“Moving in?”

“Uh, yeah? Remember, I mentioned it at game night?”

“Moving in...to your lab?”

Tony couldn’t help but flinch a bit at Bruce’s tone. That was not the voice of a person who approved of your actions. “Look, I get it, you guys live here too and I probably should have at least talked with you before making the offer to him, but I swear it was a spur of the moment thing! Plus, I mean, it can’t really count against me if Loki hasn’t even taken me up on the offer yet.”

“What? Right, yeah...”

Tony stood up from his spot on the floor and focused his attention on his friend. Bruce was acting strange; not necessarily disapproving or being angry at Tony, of course, because for all the grief and headache Tony might cause him Bruce had never truly gotten angry at his science bro. And yet there
was definitely something off regarding his behavior. It wasn’t like Bruce to lose track of conversation or not have at least one retort at the ready in preparation for any of Tony’s antics. “Bruce? Something wrong?”

“Well...just, do you think Loki would actually want to move any part of his life into the Tower? Not that there’s anything wrong with the Tower,” Bruce quickly clarified before Tony could rush to the defense of his magnus opum, “but it’s decidedly Midgardian hero territory, plus Thor lives here. Doesn’t really seem like someplace Loki would be in a hurry to move any of his personal effects into.”

“That’s why starting with the lab seemed like a good idea,” Tony explained. “The upstairs parts of the Tower are either Stark Industries or Avengers floors. The workshop down here? All Tony Stark. No Avengers unless JARVIS buzzes you in, no Thor pretty much ever, just lots of space to do whatever kind of experiments I’m in the mood for that day. Right up Loki’s alley.”

“All right...and you’re wanting Loki to move in for some reason.”

Tony sighed. “Yeah. Look, if I show you something, promise not to freak out?”

“That is a terrible request.”

Ok, maybe Bruce had a point with that one, given the whole Hulk issue. “JARVIS, pull up tape 22-3DH, starting when we hit the portal.”

“Portal?” Bruce repeated as Tony set down his cleaning supplies and turned the monitor on his work station towards the other man.

“From the Battle of New York,” Tony explained. “I know you’re going to have questions, but just watch this all the way through for me first, k?” And then before Bruce could protest, Tony had tapped away at his keyboard and started up the video.

Tony had told the other Avengers what he’d seen on the other side of the portal in New York. But words, even from a genius like himself, could never adequately describe the sheer scale of potential destruction that he’d born witness to that day. Hovering silently in the vacuum of space, watching the mindless Chitauri drones undulating in perfect formation, simply waiting for the command that would send them to Earth and annihilate the human race had made for the kind of terrifying sight that Tony would never be able to erase from his mind. And even if he did somehow manage to forget, JARVIS had managed to record precious moments of footage before the cameras went dead as the suit’s power began shutting down.

In Tony’s defense, he hadn’t actually realized that the suit’s cameras had managed to record and store any footage in the immediate aftermath of the battle. It was only days later, after the shawarma and the SHIELD debrief and a lot of alcohol followed by even more sleep that Tony had gone to town on the suit and, in the process of repairing some of the more serious structural damage, discovered a recording of what lay in wait on the other side. He’d briefly debated showing the footage to the other Avengers but ultimately dismissed the idea. They already had a good general understanding of what Tony had seen, and showing the footage now might lead them to suspect he was hiding even more information. Instead, Tony put the recording under lock and key, filed it away in the bowels of JARVIS’ memory banks, and contented himself with knowing that there was concrete proof of the horrors which haunted so many of his dreams. But now he needed to show Bruce, if he was going to get the other scientist on his side.

Tony therefore stood there in complete silence, watching as his best friend’s face went white in horror, eyes widening as he stood slack-jawed before the screen. The brief seconds it took to watch
the entire recording dragged out for a short eternity before the video finally ended. Only then did Bruce take a breath. “Tony…”

“That’s what was waiting for us on the other side of the portal,” Tony started to explain. “They just couldn’t get through the bottleneck all at once.”

Bruce finally looked towards his friend. “How exactly does this connect to getting Loki in your lab?”

“I don’t think Loki was sincerely trying to conquer Earth back then,” Tony explained. “No, listen. If you were half as smart as Loki, would you go with the big dramatic invasion directly over your enemy’s headquarters after giving them ample warning that you’re up to no good, or would you do, say, literally anything else?”

There was a pause as Bruce considered Tony’s words. “You think Loki was trying to lose,” Bruce reasoned.

“Not lose, warn us,” Tony corrected. “Maybe not Earth specifically, I’m pretty sure Loki still thinks most humans struggle to blink and breathe at the same time, but Thor’s realm had to be watching the Battle go down, their two princes were going head-to-head. If they could figure out where that portal led to, maybe they could launch a counterattack against the Chitauri before they had a chance to regroup.”

“But Thor hasn’t mentioned any major fighting happening in the other realms.”

“Which makes me think that either Asgard doesn’t know what’s going on, or doesn’t think that it needs to get involved in something that has thus far only been an Earth issue. Despite the fact that, you know, whatever raised that gigantic army of the damned also fished Loki out of a void in space and time and gave him the equipment necessary to launch an inter-realm invasion.”

Bruce sighed and rubbed at his temples. “Well can’t say I expected much else. Thor’s pretty clear about Asgard’s whole, ‘leave the Midgardian issues to the Midgardians’ policy, after all.”

“Right. Now consider this; what do you think Loki decided to do when the whole ‘get Asgard to fight my battles for me’ plan didn’t pan out?”

Tony could see the exact moment when it clicked in Bruce’s head. “Holy shit.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You honestly think that Loki’s trying to take on all that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“By himself?!”

“I mean, probably? It seems like he’s burned a lot of bridges—”

“And he’s going to drag Earth into it, isn’t he?”

Tony shrugged. “Well if you were going to pick a realm to fight in, might as well be the one with the heroic idiots who’ll punch their way through giant space fish and blow up their reinforcements. Kind of ensures that the other side has grounds to challenge us for a rematch somewhere down the line.”

Bruce groaned and sagged against a pile of steel that had once been a functional workbench before a drunken Tony with a blowtorch and a pocketful of dreams got hold of it. “This is bad, Tony.”
“No, this is merely a potentially bad situation that we can still get under control.”

Bruce shot Tony an unimpressed look. “Is that a line you’ve used on Pepper before? Because it’s awful, Tony. Terrible. Impressively abysmal.”

“Loki’s kind of our friend,” Tony continued, having learned to tune out Bruce’s criticisms to his witty responses by now. “Or he’s...well...you know...” Damn it, why was it so hard to find an all-encompassing word for a former enemy/Norse god/space wizard/mad science partner?

“I know Tony, you and Loki have your thing.”

God bless Bruce, sometimes the man just got it. “Anyway,” Tony went on, “if we can convince Loki that moving in here is a good idea, maybe we can get him to open up about what he’s planning or even convince him that we can help. You know, so the world doesn’t end or anything, because JARVIS and I are estimating at least a 40% chance of however Loki handles things resulting in Earth either exploding or becoming uninhabitable. Possibly both.”

“So your solution to preventing the apocalypse is tidying your lab with the bots.”

Tony glanced around to see that U and Butterfingers were still trying to figure out how the squeegee worked, axel deep in soapy water, while Dummy appeared to be sweeping everything in his path, including office chairs and pieces of the Iron Man armor, into a massive pile in the middle of the room. “I mean...I’ve had worse plans.”

Bruce sighed and set the plate of sandwiches down on the metal slag. “Pass me a rag and tell me there’s bleach somewhere down here.”

It took them four hours to get the workshop clean by Tony’s standards and another two before Bruce agreed Loki would probably stop calling it a threat to his personal health every time the room came up in conversation. “Oh god, this restaurant isn’t even open anymore,” Tony marveled as he and Bruce scraped out compressed takeout containers from behind Butterfinger’s charging station. Apparently the bots had developed a hoarding tendency while Tony had been working on the save planet Earth initiative; lovely. “Forget what past me said about no more outside cleaning people, past me was an idiot and a slob, we’ve got to hire some regulars to come in here at least once a month.”

“Good luck,” Bruce responded, gagging as Tony dumped the containers into the garbage bag he was holding at arm’s length. “Steve and I tried to get some people to come down here a while back but gave up after the third one ran out of here crying.”

Tony popped up from his spot on the floor. “Wait, you did what?”

Bruce paled at Tony’s reaction. Clearly he hadn’t meant to let that little tidbit of information slip out. “It’s just...we thought it might be a nice gesture. You know, since you’ve been a little busy lately and we want to support you?”

“Support me,” Tony repeated, not buying that line for a second.

“Yeah, just...look, you’re getting a clean lab out of it and you’ve got me on your side for your whole ‘helping Loki defeat the bad guy/not burning Earth to the ground’ scheme, it’s a good thing. Just take it.”

“Fine. On one condition.”

“Which is?”
Tony pointed to a nearby heap of metal fragments, t-shirt scraps, and Tupperware lids that they’d yet to touch. “You get to be the one to start disassembling Dummy’s nest.”

Dummy, either sensing that his treasure trove was under imminent threat or choosing to listen to Tony for once in his life, immediately peeled across the room from where he’d been trying to sweep up the couch and insinuated himself between the scientists and his prized possession, robotic arm bobbing menacingly in their direction.

“Oh come on, Tony, that’s not fair! He’s got wheels and a claw,” Bruce argued, very deliberately moving himself out of Dummy’s grabbing range.

“Well Dummy’s nest is the last big thing we have to do since we cleaned out the other bots’ hidey-holes,” Tony countered as he tied off Bruce’s garbage bag. “Everything else is just putting pencils back into cups and maybe dusting the lights. On that note…”

Tony exited the workshop, tossing the garbage bag in the direction of the trash chute as he stopped by the phone bin and grabbed his cell. Maybe it was a bit premature, given that they weren’t technically done with the cleaning, but the sooner he could extend a fresh invitation to Loki, the sooner they could move forward to the next phase of his plan. The message itself was brief, only stating that the lab had recently been deep-cleaned and Loki ought to swing by sometime before game night to give it a look. Short, sweet, and not at all hinting at any kind of ulterior motive.

“ACK!”

Tony looked back towards the lab, startled, and then relaxed upon seeing that it was only Bruce, nobly trying to retrieve a Tupperware lid from Dummy’s stash and being fended off by the jabs and snaps of the bot’s claw. There was a reason Dummy was in charge of security if something ever incapacitated him and JARVIS at the same time. “You’ve gotta go for his left side,” he called out upon re-entering the main workshop area. “His camera’s got a blind spot.”

At that moment, JARVIS’ alarm began blaring and something exploded twenty feet to Tony’s left.

Tony’s body started moving towards the armor on the other side of his workshop before he even realized what he was doing. “Kill the alarms J!” he demanded, glancing towards Bruce to make sure that his friend hadn’t started Hulking out yet. He’d gotten better about alarms since living in the Tower and having to deal with Avengers emergencies, but you could never be absolutely sure that the Hulk wasn’t having a rough day. Bruce wasn’t turning green, though. In fact, he actually looked even paler than usual, eyes glued to-

Tony froze in his tracks as he saw that what had exploded in his lab was a badly wounded Loki, weakly grabbing onto a workbench in an effort to hold himself upright. He couldn’t remember a time he’d moved faster than he did that day as he bolted back across the room to Loki’s side.

He arrived just in time for Loki’s legs to give out, sending the god crashing to the floor with enough force to dent the cement beneath their feet. He swayed dangerously to the side, prompting Tony to drop to his knees and practically slide to a stop on Loki’s right, less catching the god and more controlling his descent. “Loki, what the-”

“Thor.”

Tony blinked dumbly at the sorcerer. “What?”

“Get...get Thor,” Loki hissed, clutching at his left side and groaning as he leaned even more of his weight on Tony. And that was when Tony realized exactly how badly off Loki was.
Tony stared in abject terror as bright red blood seeped through a distressingly huge wound along Loki’s flank, going from just under his armpit to halfway down his ribcage. The skin at the edges looked burned, and judging from the smell whatever Loki had gone up against had definitely tried to flambe him. The injury went down through the muscle; Tony’s stomach flipped as he realized that the specks of bright white he could see peeking through in spots were Loki’s ribs. Glancing up as he tried to find Bruce, Tony was horrified to see a thick streak of red painted against the workbench from where Loki had slipped down to the floor. Losing that much blood didn’t bode well for anyone’s survival, even a god.

“Bruce, get Thor now!” he shouted, scooting back from Loki enough to lower (or at least not clumsily drop) the god into resting on his back on the floor. He didn’t hear what Bruce said in response, if in fact the man said anything at all; he was too preoccupied with tearing the remnants of Loki’s shirt off his body to better assess the wound.

It wasn’t a difficult feat; whatever had torn open Loki like this had obviously gotten in a few good shots before it took out a chunk of him. The shirt was practically torn in half already; Tony recognized it as the Asgardian outfit Loki had been wearing on the day they tested the new armor alloy. Aside from the gaping wound in his chest Loki was covered in bruises, and unless Tony was mistaken something had shorn off at least two inches of hair on the mage’s right side. “Please tell me the other guy looks worse,” he blabbed as he yanked off his own shirt.

“I didn’t tarry long enough to find out,” Loki replied, voice distressingly calm and quiet. “What are you doing?”

Tony’s answer was to wad up his shirt and press it into Loki’s side as hard as he could. “Stopping the bleeding,” he explained. “Pressure, and something to help stop the blood flow, or maybe make it clot faster? Shit, I don’t know, this is just what you do, I don’t think I’ve got enough gauze in the first aid kit to help with this—”

Tony’s frantic, panicked rambling was cut off by Loki pressing a hand to his chest, bloody fingers curling over the arc reactor and applying gentle pressure. His face was pale and his breathing was shallow, but his eyes held no hint of panic. “Anthony, breathe. If Thor is here I will be fine. Is he?”

“Mr. Odinson is currently on his floor, and Dr. Banner has made him aware of the situation,” JARVIS assured them. “They wish to assure you that they will be down momentarily.”

“Top speed in the elevator J,” Tony ordered, because that was all he could do now.

“See? Anxious mortal,” Loki quipped, and damn, even with more blood outside his body than in it the god somehow managed to look smug and perfectly in control.

“Forgive me, a Norse god bleeding all over my workshop is kind of a new thing,” Tony shot back, borrowing some of Loki’s confidence for himself because otherwise the panic would come back and likely devolve into full-blown hysteria this time. “Also, rude, I just cleaned this place, Bruce helped out and everything.”

“Lies, those light fixtures haven’t been dusted in years,” Loki countered, eyes looking upwards to the lights above his head.

“Yeah but everything else is spotless, you’ll see when we get you patched up.” A pause, and Tony nervously swallowed before going on. “Please tell me you’re not lying for my benefit, that Thor can fix you and I’m not going to have to watch my friend bleed out in my workshop on the floor.”

Slight pressure as Loki’s fingers curled more firmly over the reactor. “I won’t. I can’t.”
“Sirs, Mr. Odinson and Dr. Banner are here.”

“About damn time!” Tony screamed as the pair of them raced off the elevator and into the lab. Thor was in a pair of sleep pants and nothing else, carrying a leather satchel over his shoulder. Bruce was trailing slightly behind him, carrying a medical bag in his hands as well; they must have stopped off at Bruce’s floor.

There was a brief moment where Thor froze in place and stared at the pair of them in horror, eyes darting between Loki’s position on the floor and the smear of blood on the workbench as though he couldn’t process what had transpired to lay Loki out this way. It was only after Tony shouted his name that Thor came back to himself, hurrying across the floor and dropping down to kneel beside Tony. “Bruce said that you were injured, brother, but I did not realize the extent of your wounds.”

“Do you have the calamint?” Loki demanded, eyes drooping slightly. Oh god, the blood had seeped all the way through Tony’s shirt now and was starting to leak through his fingers.

Thor opened and closed his mouth, then shook his head. “Brother, you’ve lost so much blood...you need the yarrow extract.”

Loki swore and shut his eyes, hand falling from Tony’s chest to the ground with a dull thud.

“Anthony, I need you to move back for a moment,” Thor demanded as he began rummaging through his bag. Moments later he extracted a solid black wineskin and moved himself so that he was straddling Loki’s thighs and...taking off his belt?!

“What the fuck Thor,” Tony blurted out, gaping at the god of thunder.

“Anthony, I’m going to need to hold Loki down for this,” Thor explained, folding the belt in half and then holding it in front of Loki’s mouth. “Bite.” Loki took the leather into his teeth without argument, head falling back to the ground with an audible thunk. “You have to pour the extract on the wound, I cannot do both.”

“But-”

“Now,” Thor ordered as the air grew thick with static charge. This was not a conversation that would allow for argument; this was a warrior king giving a command in order to save his fallen brother. He thrust the wineskin into Tony’s hands and then leaned forwards over Loki, planting one hand firmly in the middle of the sorcerer’s chest and the other on his forehead. Scared and confused, Tony nonetheless obeyed and upended the entire contents of the wineskin over Loki’s wound before backpedaling out of the way.

The effects were immediate and horrifying. As soon as the medicine had been applied Thor leaned forward to pin Loki down with his entire forearm, but still Loki’s back arched off the ground as he began convulsing violently. His eyes had gone wide and the belt clenched between his teeth did absolutely nothing to muffle the volume of his screams as his lower legs kicked out and put a hole in the workbench.

“Please, brother, it’s only for a moment!” Thor shouted over Loki’s screams, pressing down as hard as he could to limit Loki’s movements as Tony and Bruce could only look on in silent, horrified dismay. “It will pass!”

If Loki even heard Thor he gave no sign of it, screaming and thrashing on the floor for an agonizingly long time before going completely silent and still without warning. Tony’s panic returned tenfold as he scrambled back towards Loki. “What happened?!?” he demanded, hand
shooting out to check Loki’s neck for a pulse.

“He passed out,” Thor explained, finally climbing off Loki and returning to his original position beside Tony. “The yarrow extract is some of the most potent medicine that Asgard can provide outside of a healing chamber, but the side effects are equally powerful. It’s a wonder that he remained conscious as long as he did.”

“But he’ll be ok, right? Best medicines are the most bitter and all that, yeah?”

“See for yourself.”

Tony looked down to Loki’s injury. To his amazement the bleeding had not only stopped, but the tissue and skin in the afflicted area seemed to be knitting itself back together before his very eyes. “Oh thank god,” he breathed out, slumping forwards as all the adrenaline that had been pumping through him suddenly gave out. “I thought...there was so much blood.”

“Anthony?”

“Yeah Thor?”

Some of that nervousness returned when Tony looked back towards his friend. Thor’s brow was pinched and his mouth was pressed into a flat line, hands curled into fists as he leaned back in his seat on the floor. “It has been a very long time since Loki has been injured in combat,” Thor explained, speaking each word very slowly and deliberately. “I have never, in all our years, seen Loki this grievously wounded. Whatever affairs my brother has involved himself in now need to be investigated at once.”

“Absolutely,” Tony agreed. “I’ll talk to him once he wakes up.”

“Anthony-”

“He promised,” Tony interjected, attention back on Loki’s slowly healing injury. “He told me he was doing something important, and that is was dangerous, and when I told him he had to cough up some actual specific details if things went to hell, he agreed.”

“He...he agreed to such a thing?”

“Long story,” Bruce cut in with a clap to Thor’s shoulder. “I’ll tell you later.”

Right, Thor probably didn’t know anything about Loki’s little extracurricular sessions with Tony and the other Avengers outside of D&D. Someone needed to fill him in, and right now that could be Bruce’s job; Tony was clearly in no shape to handle anything except panicking. “We should get him off the ground,” he decided out loud. “Maybe move him to the couch...”

“Tony, the others know something is up; JARVIS’ alarm is pretty hard to ignore,” Bruce pointed out. “Let’s take him upstairs and put him in the common room, that’s the closest we’re going to get to neutral ground in the Tower.”

“Oh. Yeah, good point. Thor, mind helping? I don’t think Bruce or I can carry Loki, you guys are kind of ridiculously heavy.”

Tony slid back to give Thor enough space to scoop up Loki from the floor, lifting him and carrying him across the workshop towards the elevator. The bots, having stayed back since Loki’s arrival, attempted to wheel themselves out to the elevator as well, bobbing and beeping in concern. “Oh no, you three stay here and listen to JARVIS,” Tony ordered. “I, keep the lab on lockdown, no one in or
out until I can get back down here later, and all the footage from Loki’s arrival onwards is highest
security, top secret bigot level stuff, understand?”

“Of course, Sir.”

Orders given, Tony followed after Bruce who was waiting for him by the elevator door. Moments
later they were all heading up through the Tower, Thor holding an unconscious Loki in his arms as
Tony and Bruce both kept an eye on Loki from the other side of the lift. “Ok, we’ll go to the
common area and gather everyone together, family meeting in 10,” Tony announced.

“No, Thor will go to the common area,” Bruce corrected. “You and I are going up to your floor.
You need to get cleaned up and changed.”

“What? Why!?”

“Tony…” Thor tilted his head downwards towards Tony’s person.

Tony looked down, intending to tell off Thor for criticizing the shirtless look when the god regularly
forgot that the upper part of one’s body was expected to be clothed in modern society, when it
clicked. Every inch of fabric below the knee of Tony’s blue jeans was practically black from how
much blood had seeped into it, and his shoes were in a similar state, having even tracked a few
indistinct bloody footprints onto the elevator floor. His hands had blood dried onto them up to his
wrists and caked under his nails, and there was a very distinct handprint in the center of his chest
from where Loki had tried to calm him. “Oh.”

“Tony?” Bruce asked, worried.

Tony barely had time to grab the handrail to stabilize himself before he began violently throwing up
everything he’d eaten that day. Bruce was at his side in a heartbeat, one arm wrapped firmly around
Tony’s chest and the other pressing down on the back of his neck, muttering soothing words that
Tony barely registered over the ringing in his ears. Loki had nearly died. Right here, in the basement
of his home on a perfectly normal evening, Loki had sloppily teleported himself into the workshop,
collapsed from severe blood loss, and avoided death by the skin of his teeth only because Thor had
saved him with a literal magic potion. And now Tony was covered from head to foot in his blood.

Slowly, Tony became aware that he’d frantically been repeating “Off” again and again as he tried to
peel himself out of his remaining clothes. Bruce helped him with the shoes and socks as he
scrambled out of his pants, distantly registering that the elevator had stopped long enough to deposit
Thor and Loki in the common area before continuing on to the penthouse. The doors scarcely had
time to open there before Tony was running towards the bathroom, managing to hold it together long
enough to get to the toilet before he started dry-heaving.

What followed was one of the quickest, most utilitarian showers that Tony had ever taken outside of
Pepper forcing him to get cleaned up for a board meeting. He scrubbed every inch of his body so
fervently that his skin was raw and red from the force of it. He rubbed himself with a towel just long
enough to be considered more dry than wet, then grabbed the first pair of pants and a shirt he could
find in his dresser. The whole venture from the moment he stepped off the elevator to exiting his
bedroom couldn’t have been more than ten minutes.

Bruce was waiting for him on the couch in the living room and offered him a small, comforting
smile. Tony’s old clothes were nowhere to be seen, and while the elevator still had a vaguely acrid
smell to it the vomit itself was gone. Clearly Bruce had been making good use of his time as well.
“JARVIS says the others are waiting for us downstairs,” he explained, climbing to his feet. “You ready?”
There was no way in hell that Tony was truly ready to go downstairs and interrogate Loki about what he’d been up to today and how that had led to him nearly bleeding out. But he needed answers and he wasn’t going to get them up here in the penthouse. So instead of screaming or crying or curling up into a ball in the corner of the room, he tamped down his emotions and nodded to Bruce. “Let’s go.”

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Tony and Bruce arrived in the common area to see the others gathered around the couch where Thor had set Loki down. Thor himself was talking quietly to Steve, though the conversation immediately stopped when they saw the two scientists walk into the room. “Thor was filling me in on what happened in your workshop,” Steve said. “Care to explain why Loki’s here and why he looks like a truck ran him over?”

“He said he was doing something for the good fo the realms,” Tony answered, internally wincing at how weak that explanation sounded. Coming from Loki it actually came across as noble and mysterious, but maybe that was the whole being a god with a sexy accent thing.

“Ok, that answers exactly no questions I have,” Clint put it, throwing his hands in the air in exasperation.

“You said that Loki promised you more details if things went wrong, correct?” Thor asked.

“Yeah, that was part of the whole me not asking too many prying questions deal.”

Thor nodded. “I do not believe he would lie to you at this point, Tony. And furthermore, I do not believe that he is capable of extracting himself from the Tower without considerable effort, so even if he did not wish to speak to you there would be no escape. If we had to, we could likely force the information from him.”

“Well done Thor,” a familiar voice wheezed from the couch. “Two whole minutes of strategizing before you settle upon brute force as an answer. Personal best.”

The Avengers watched in silence as Loki hauled himself upright into a sitting position, hissing as the new skin and tissue stretched under the movement. “Fantastic,” he muttered, eyes slowly blinking over and over. “Injured, exhausted, and trapped in a room with a group of oh-so-curious Midgardian heroes. Just how I wanted this day to go, really.”

“Brother, I have never seen you in so wretched a state,” Thor argued. “Whatever could do this to you is likely a threat to all of us, even I can see that. Keeping secrets will do you no good right now-”

“Oh, so it’s my fault then?” Loki snapped. “Loki and his secrets bringing ruin to us all again. If only I had turned to Thor and his merry band of shield brothers then everything would have worked out by now, the villains defeated and the heroes triumphant. Is that what you think?”

“Perhaps,” Thor shot back, “but I could not say that with certainty, given that you haven’t told any of us anything about what schemes you are attempting to carry out this time!”

“Enough!” Tony shouted before the bickering could devolve any further. Storm clouds were gathering overhead just outside the windows, and Loki looked ready to throw the coffee table straight at Thor’s head. “Thor, you’re done. Steve,” he said, turning to the Avengers’ fearless leader, “I’m tagging you in.”

Tagging someone in was a strategy that Tony and Rhodey had invented during their time at MIT,
after one too many questionable life choices on a night of copious drinking led to the pair of them torching Tony’s car on a backcountry road approximately an hour’s walk from any form of civilization. Since then, they’d had created a system wherein one of them could either tag in or tag in the other when the situation called for it. Whoever was tagged in was the designated responsible adult; no drugs, no firearms, and no murdering anyone unless multiple lives were at stake. The tradeoff for these restrictions was that the designated responsible adult had absolute authority until they rescinded their rights or 24 hours passed, whichever came first. It was a strategy that Tony had let slip to the Avengers one night after a particularly grueling game of Trivial Pursuit resulted in the common room refrigerator being overturned to see what kind of coolant modern fridges used, and since then had been implemented only a few times in the most dire of circumstances. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, Tony considered two gods preparing to rip each other to pieces in the living room as fairly dire in the grand scheme of things.

Loki, of course, understood exactly none of this and was understandably confused when Thor deflated and beat a hasty retreat to the kitchen, exiting the argument without so much as a final verbal jab. Natasha quickly followed after Thor, likely hoping to calm him down away from the others. “What did you…”

“Loki,” Steve began, “I know you’re probably not in a great mood right now, I’m usually not after something rips a chunk out of me that big. Thor probably didn’t help with the fifth degree just now, but he’s worried. We all are.”

“You sound like someone’s parent,” Loki snipped, swinging his legs around to set his feet on the floor as he adjusted himself to be more comfortable on the couch.

Steve fixed the sorcerer with his most no-nonsense Captain America look. “I’m the designated responsible adult in the room,” he explained.

Loki, to absolutely no one’s surprise, snickered at this. “What?”

“It means he’s in charge,” Tony snapped before he could stop himself. “And he gets to be in charge right now because Thor’s doing the macho man version of panicking, Clint should never be in charge of anyone ever, Bruce is currently stressed enough after all the bleeding and screaming you did, and I just had to take a shower and get new clothes because I was drenched in your blood, Loki, head to foot and I’m pretty sure there’s still some along the seal of THE FUCKING ARC REACTOR CASING-”

“Tony!”

Steve’s voice brought Tony back to himself. He hadn’t realized that he’d been screaming at the top of his lungs until he registered how quiet the room was. Everyone was staring at him in terse silence, including Loki whose wide eyes and slightly opened mouth made it look like he’d been sucker punched by Tony’s words. That hadn’t been the effect Tony was going for, but frankly he was too emotionally wrung out to care at the moment.

Sighing, he sank down onto the loveseat catty corner to Loki’s couch. Bruce took a seat beside him a moment later, one leg pressed gently against Tony’s to give him some grounding contact. “So it’s between Nat and Steve,” Tony finished in a much quieter voice, eyes glued to the floor now that he’d burned up the last of the adrenaline in his system. “And she got the job last time, so Steve’s up. I know you promised to talk to me about this, not everyone else, but right now the best I can do is sit here and breathe and try not to puke again. Ok?”

It was a long moment before Loki finally nodded and turned his attention to Steve. “Let me begin by saying you’re not going to like this, but SHIELD cannot find out what I’m doing.”
Steve, to his credit, did not immediately refuse. “Why not?”

“Because I have reason to believe they’ve been compromised, and trying to pull them in to things is only going to decrease the chances of saving the world from someone who would very much like to see all of us burn.”

Loki had Steve’s full attention now. “Start from the beginning. Who exactly is trying to kill us?”

“There is a being in the cosmos known as Thanos,” Loki began. “He is a Titan with power and forces far beyond what even Asgard in her glory days could muster, and he intends to use that power to meet one simple goal: wiping out life across the universe.”

“Why?”

“He wasn’t exactly forthcoming with the exact details when I was his prisoner,” Loki sardonically replied. “But I know that’s his goal, his underlings said so often enough. He’s got quite a devoted fan club; it’s rather macabre, if I’m being honest.”

“When were you his prisoner?”

“After his fall off the Bifrost,” Clint answered before Loki could speak. “That’s why you came out all weird and world conquer-y afterwards, isn’t it?”

“Very good deduction, Barton. You are correct that I was in Thanos’ hands from the point I fell until I was sent to Midgard.”

“Why did he send you to Midgard?” Steve asked.

Loki answered with a tight-lipped grin. “To murder and kill, of course.”

“You could have done that in any of the realms,” Steve countered, not one to be baited so easily. “There are nine realms total, Thor’s explained that before. What made Earth so special? Why did it have to be first in Thanos’ plan, specifically?”

“Infinity Stones,” Loki answered. “Or Infinity Gems, depending on which term you prefer.”

“Which are…?”

“Gems of incredible power, capable of altering the very fabric of space and time on the user’s whim,” Loki explained. “There are six in total: Mind, Space, Time, Power, Reality, and Soul. Six stones whose combined power could enslave planets, put out stars like candles, create galaxies from nothing, and everything in between. Six gems in all of creation. And two of them are on Midgard.”

“Two?!” Clint gaped.

“Three then two now, actually, since the staff I used in the invasion has the Mind Stone for its core,” Loki continued nonchalantly, as though he hadn’t just informed Earth’s mightiest heroes that their entire realm was screwed six ways to Sunday because someone had decided to use it as a storage locker for intergalactic weapons of mass destruction.

“And Thanos needs these gems to achieve his goal of massacring the galaxy at large?” Steve asked, voice perfectly calm.

“Indeed.”

“Then why did he send you to Earth with one of them?” Bruce asked. “Why separate himself from
any of them?"

Loki grinned at this. “I may have convinced him that, besides making it easier for me to control the Chitauri forces he placed under my control, the easiest way to find the other two gems would be by giving me his, since the stones tend to call to one other if you get them close enough. Or know the right spells to use in order to amplify that call.”

“You talked a murderous space Titan into giving you an artifact that can level realms,” Steve stated in a deadpan that would have made Nick Fury proud.

“There is a reason I gained the moniker ‘Silvertongue,’” Loki shot back with a bitter smile. “Point being, I brought the Mind Stone here to Midgard, I opened a portal with the Space Stone—”

“You mean the Tesseract,” Steve cut in. Loki waited in silence for the few seconds it took to make things click in Steve’s head. “Wait, you’re saying—”

“The Tesseract, as you call it, is yet another Infinity Stone,” Loki concluded. “Though I understand that’s been moved off-realm, hence bringing three down to two.”

Steve nodded slightly as he tried to process this new information. “Using two of these gems in battle would attract attention from our leaders and Asgard as well,” he decided. “You wanted them to see those objects, know how dangerous they could be, and put them under lock and key.”

“At least for a while,” Loki admitted. “More importantly, I wanted Thanos to know that other people were aware that someone was coming after his precious stones. It’s the same reason I’ve made my presence known to the general public; as long as Thanos knows I’m here, he knows that there is someone aware of his endgame who is actively working to counter him. Much more of a challenge to try and invade the realm now.”

“Push him back, make him have to reevaluate his plans and buy yourself some time,” Steve said. “Why?”

“Because Asgard’s vaults are very heavily guarded,” Loki explained. “The Soul Gem’s whereabouts are unknown, the Reality Gem has been missing since the war against the Dark Elves, and the Power Gem is somewhere in the outer edges of this galaxy. For Midgard to have two gems and no idea that they need to be guarded? They’re an easy target, Rogers. And once Thanos gets the first two, it won’t be much work to collect the remainder.”

“So you invaded New York out of the goodness of your heart,” Clint concluded with a disbelieving look.

“Don’t be stupid,” Loki muttered with a roll of his eyes. “I simply understand that Thanos is a psychotic lunatic who cannot be appeased or dissuaded from his master plan of killing us all. He fully intends to destroy all of the nine realms to achieve this end, and I’m rather fond of the realms given that I’m currently living in them!”

“So how does that connect to you getting half your chest blown off?”

Loki sighed. “I’ve been trying to find the Infinity Stones still present on Midgard. Not for anything nefarious before you lot get any ideas, but as a preemptive defense against Thanos’ plans. Getting enough of the gems together could allow someone with enough training and magical control to use them to destroy Thanos before he finds the rest. Recently, however, I’ve heard word that the Power Stone has been rediscovered and housed on a planet called Xandar. Thanos has already failed to invade your world once; he might decide that Xandar is an easier mark and retrieve that gem before
coming back here.”

“He sped up your timeline,” Steve worked out.

“I’ve been following up on different leads all over this accursed realm,” Loki continued, “but since last week it’s been nonstop. And today...things did not go well.”

“What happened?”

“Months ago, I decided that the Mind Stone would be the first gem I would seek, given that I was not only familiar with its particular magical signature but also understood that it was supposedly in SHIELD custody—”

“What do you mean ‘supposedly’?”

“I mean that when I went to the last known location housing my scepter, as indicated by SHIELD records—”

“How did you get access to that?”

“SHIELD personnel take their computers home sometimes and are very open about their passwords when you seduce and ply them with enough alcohol, now will you let me finish?” Steve nodded, prompting Loki to continue. “I went to the facility where the scepter was meant to be under lock and key. And the building was there, completely in tact. The guards were on patrol, the cameras were working, everything was as it should be, except that the vault itself was completely empty.”

A beat. “What?”

“The vault is there, but the Stone is not,” Loki simplified, steepling his fingers in front of him and giving Steve a patronizing look. “Care to guess why that might be?”

“Someone at SHIELD took it out and didn’t tell anyone,” Tony cut in, finding his voice. Loki perked up a bit upon hearing his voice, though the reaction was short-lived when he saw the haggard look on Tony’s face. “And they kept it quiet because they want the rest of SHIELD to go on assuming that everything is fine. There’s no way some grunt SHIELD picked up from a classified ad would want the scepter, they wouldn’t even know what to do with it—”

“Meaning someone higher in the food chain is acting as a double agent,” Steve concluded, head falling into his hands. “And it’s not just one person because it’s never in the history of humanity been just one person.”

“So SHIELD did that to you?” Clint asked.

“No, the trip to the vault was a while ago,” Loki admitted. “Tonight I found whoever took the Mind Stone, and they were, shall we say, unhappy to be discovered.”

“Where was it?” Steve pressed.

“I don’t know the specifics, I just follow where the tracking spell leads me. I think it was somewhere in Eastern Europe,” Loki dismissively answered. “More importantly, the people who possess the Stone have been using it to create humans with incredible power. I have reason to believe the Alternator you fought was one of their early experiments gone tragically wrong.”

Tony winced; following being taken into SHIELD custody, the Alternator’s mental condition had gradually deteriorated until he was perpetually in a near-catatonic state. If Fury was to be believed,
the man was currently tucked away into a New Jersey asylum and had to be fed through a straw most days.

“There were a number of superhumans there,” Loki explained. “Including ones with the ability to see through a standard cloaking spell, it would appear. Getting out proved to be a messy affair.”

“And you decided to come here because…?”

“I needed to teleport myself to somewhere safe,” Loki stated. “Anthony happened to send me a text as I was preparing to escape. That brought the idea of the Tower to mind, and here we are.”

Steve nodded and stood. “Thank you Loki. I’m going to go check on Thor.”

Tony watched in silence as Steve exited the room, unsure what to say. So, there it was. All of his suspicions confirmed. Loki was trying to fight off the kind of monster that fuels children’s nightmares, the Earth was a target, and the one agency on this entire planet who might have been inclined to help the Avengers defeat him had been compromised by enemy agents doing horrific human experiments in the back end of Europe. “We should probably send out a search party,” he voiced aloud. “Whoever’s got the Mind Stone probably cleared out already, but we could at least look into the facility and see if they left anything behind.”

“I do not believe that will do much good, Sir,” JARVIS suddenly stated. “The alarm I issued earlier was in response to a nuclear detonation in Moldova. SHIELD agents have already been dispatched to what appears to be a former Soviet bunker. The timing between Mr. Liesmith’s arrival and the explosion—”

“That’s what you meant by messy affair?!” Tony snapped. “You were trying to outrun a nuclear blast?!”

“There was a very loud countdown and evacuation order blaring over the speaker, I didn’t bother investigating what was to come in the event I didn’t escape in time,” Loki retorted, shoulders tensing as he defended himself. “Calm yourself, I am fine.”

Tony gaped at the sorcerer, feeling actual rage boiling up inside him at Loki’s nonchalance. “You are...you didn’t...Loki—”

“Thai food.”

Loki and Tony turned to look at Clint, whose attention was focused on his cell as he typed on the screen. “What?” Tony dumbly asked.

“Thai food, I’m jonesing for Thai food, have been all day and now that it’s looking like we’re not cooking tonight, I’m just going to order in. Bruce, any requests?”

“From the usual place?”

“Yup.”

“Some of their yellow curry, and two bubble teas.”

“Great, Tony?”

“For fuck’s sake Clint—”

“Usual it is, I’ll get a double order for Loki too. Bruce, go find out what the others want; Tony, I
need your help upstairs real quick. We’ll be back, Loki.”

Caught off-guard, Tony had no choice but to follow after Clint onto the elevator. JARVIS silently closed the doors and began moving them upwards towards Clint’s floor. “Clint, what the hell?”

“You’re a goddamn moron, Stark.”

Tony stared. “Excuse me?”

Clint leaned back against the wall of the elevator, arms crossed as he gave Tony an unimpressed look. “Loki almost got killed today. He was out trying to save the world, like you thought, and shit went sideways and he almost bled out on the floor of your workshop. You hearing me? Your workshop. Because when he needed somewhere to run, he thought of you and thought safety. Which if we’re being totally honest, isn’t exactly an association a lot of people make between your mad science room and their personal well-being.”

“Thor was-”

“He knew Thor was upstairs, Tony! He could have gone straight to him and asked for help, but he went to you. Because he didn’t trust Thor as much as he trusts you.”

“I-”

“And then you start screaming at him?! He almost died-”

“I KNOW HE ALMOST DIED!” Tony shrieked. “Why do you think I’m so...so-!”

Clint watched in silence as Tony slid down against the elevator wall to collapse onto the floor, bringing his knees up and resting his forehead against them. It took several minutes of deep cleansing breaths before he was willing and able to speak again. “Loki’s on the couch in our living room right now,” he mumbled. “He’s lying on the couch, healing from what should have been a fatal wound, because I sent him a text asking him to swing by the lab and see how much better it looked.” Here Tony looked up. “Do you get that, Clint? He would be nuclear-contaminated dust right now if I hadn’t sent him a stupid text-!” Tony punched the wall beside him. “That’s why he’s alive. Because he didn’t trust any of us enough to tell us what he was doing or where he was going, but as soon as things go ass over teakettle he’s here.”

“That’s what you guys agreed on though,” Clint countered. “You don’t get to change the agreement retroactively just because the results upset you.”

“But-”

“Look, I’m the last person to be handing out advice on what you should do about Loki, but right now he’s the one that nearly bit it. He doesn’t need us to yell. You think I didn’t want to scream when I saw Thor carrying him in? You think Steve wanted to be all calm and restrained when he was asking Loki questions back there? No. But we held it together because I told the others about your Loki theory, and it turns out that he’s one of a frighteningly small group of people who might be able to help us save the world. So, and I can’t believe I’m the one having to say this to you, play nice. We’ll go destroy some targets at the shooting range later, but for right now you don’t get to take your issues out on Loki. None of us do.”

Tony stared up at Clint. “You know you have to say you’re tagging yourself in before giving a Natasha-level motivational speech.”

“Fuck you Stark,” Clint shot back, making both of them laugh. Tony felt some of the tension drain
out of his shoulders then; Clint had a point. Loki was in a vulnerable place at the moment, not only suffering traumatic injuries but subsequently having to lay out the details of his master plan to people who until recently had been his enemies. Whatever garbage Tony needed to work through on his own could wait, at least until tomorrow.

Smiling ever so slightly, Tony climbed back up to stand opposite the elevator from Clint. “So was stealing me from the living room just an excuse to chew me out?”

“Nope,” Clint replied, and that was a distinctly Loki-like grin on his face now. “Tony, what do we as a team do when someone nearly dies?”

Sudden realization washed over Tony then. “Wait, that’s why you dragged me up here?! Get Steve-”

“Nope, Steve is currently handling Thor and you’ve got some nervous energy to work out of your system,” Clint said. “JARVIS, we’re good.”

The doors suddenly opened; Tony hadn’t even noticed that they stopped moving. “You can be mad at Loki later, when he’s healthy and you guys have redefined your boundaries or whatever the hell the term is for that now,” Clint went on. “But for tonight you’re helping me move a mattress.”

-Fifteen minutes later Tony and Clint were hauling a king-sized mattress off the elevator and back into the living room of the common area, swearing to high heaven the whole way. “Why is memory foam so hard to maneuver?!” Clint demanded as they nearly crashed into yet another wall.

“What in the Norns’ name are you doing?” Loki inquired from his seat on the couch. It looked like the god had barely moved since Tony and Clint had originally departed, seated exactly where they’d left him on the couch.

“Avengers tradition,” Clint explained. “Bruce, need some help in here!”

Bruce entered from the kitchen moments later. “What is...oh. I’ll get the coffee table.”

“Again, what is going on?”

“Any time one of us has a near-death experience, we get together in the living room and have a sleepover the first night everyone’s back home,” Clint elaborated.

Loki stared, clearly expecting that there was a punchline to follow.

“And you just had a near-death experience, so congrats, you’re part of the tradition now,” Clint finished as Bruce scooted the coffee table to the far side of the room. Tony and Clint let go of the mattress then, allowing it to flop onto the ground with a soft ‘whump’. “Prepare for Lifetime movies and takeout.”

“You’re joking,” Loki said, still staring at Clint. “Anthony-”

“I’m going to get a drink,” Tony announced before walking out of the room. It might have been a bit immature, but even after Clint’s little pep talk he couldn’t deal with happy family togetherness right now. Maybe after a few beers.

Of course things couldn’t be that easy, though. Tony stepped into the kitchen to see Thor doubled over in his seat, face pressed into his hands as Natasha rubbed his shoulder. Steve had apparently wandered off somewhere, leaving these two alone in the kitchen. Thor was in jeans now; at some
point someone must have gone to get him a change of clothes. Natasha glanced up to Tony and motioned towards Thor with a tilt of her head, clearly indicating that Tony needed to jump in. Tony, having expended all the energy he had for a fight already, gave in and called out, “Hey Thor,” as he went to the fridge.

Thor sat up and gave Tony the weakest smile he’d ever seen on the god’s face. “I apologize, Tony. I did not mean to start a fight earlier. Loki is...well, when you’ve been brothers for a thousand years you learn how to push each other’s buttons.”

Tony nodded as he opened the beer. “I’d say I understood, but only child here.”

Thor hummed. “I’m just grateful he decided to come to you. There was a time where Loki would have sooner dragged himself into the woods to die alone than admit he needed someone else’s help.”

“Would he?”

Thor laughed at that. “Perhaps not. In reality, I would have expected him to try stealing the medicine bag mother gave me and patching himself up far away from any prying eyes.”

Tony took a sip, processing that. “So why do you think he did it? Asking for you, I mean.”

“I cannot pretend to know the workings of my brother’s mind,” Thor replied. “But I know this; for whatever reason, Loki saw your home as a sanctuary for him in his hour of need. And regardless of how little he trusts me, he felt that coming to you first would offer him some modicum of safety. And for that, I am grateful.”

“Sir, the food is here,” JARVIS intoned. “Dr. Banner is retrieving it from the delivery driver as we speak.”

“Thanks for the heads up J,” Tony answered. “Thor, you ok buddy?”

“I will be fine,” Thor promised. “It will simply take some time for me to recover. As I stated earlier, I’ve never seen Loki so horrendously wounded. For a moment, I thought I would lose my brother again.”

Tony felt his stomach drop into his shoes at that. Crap, Thor had been through this all before; how could he have forgotten? “I’m sorry big guy.”

“Don’t apologize. He is alive because of you, my friend. And for that I owe you a great debt.”

“Thor, Tony, food’s on!” Clint yelled from the living room.

“Coming!” Thor called back. “Shall we rejoin them?”

“In a minute,” Tony said. “Just...give me a minute.” Thor nodded and walked out of the kitchen, leaving Tony alone with his thoughts. He stood by the sink, quietly sipping at his beer and pondering what Clint and Thor had said to him. Eventually he finished the beer and dropped the bottle in the recycling bin. Time to face the music.

-n-

The others had already settled themselves in front of the TV, food dished out on plates with the containers and extra utensils settled on the coffee table. Steve must have gone off to collect blankets because the mattress in the middle of the floor was covered in them. Thor, Natasha, and Clint were all sprawled out on the bed, plates in front of them and drinks resting just off the edge of the mattress.
Bruce was on the loveseat, stretched all the way out with a plate of food carefully balanced on his stomach. Steve, as usual, had been banished to the recliner and had served himself enough food to feed a professional football team. Loki remained alone on the couch, quietly picking at his food as the movie began. He glanced up as soon as Tony stepped into the room, locking gazes with him. A pause.

And then Tony walked over to the Thai, made himself a plate, and took a seat beside Loki on the couch. Loki barely reacted to being jostled, eyes still focused on Tony. “Anthony?”

Tony reached down and wrapped his hand around Loki’s wrist, index and middle finger pressing gently against Loki’s pulse point, feeling the pound of blood through veins beneath his fingertips. Loki was alive. Possibly as reckless as Tony and twice as secretive about it, but right now he was alive and sitting here with Tony, because that’s where he felt safest. Who was Tony to deny him that?

“I’m mad at you,” Tony whispered, staring down at Loki’s hand. “Not for coming to me, I’m happy you knew you could come here when you needed the help. But the stuff you did that almost got you killed? Loki, if I hadn’t texted when I did, you would be a pile of ash right now. And I never would have known. I would’ve just thought that you went back to some other realm, and maybe I would have wondered about you sometimes, but I would never have known. And that’s not ok.”

“Anthony…”

“But you’re not a pile of ash,” Tony went on. “You’re here with me and everyone else, eating New York’s version of Thai and watching questionable made for TV movies. So we’re going to sit here, and eat, and watch the movies. And then tomorrow, we’re going to make a better plan that doesn’t involve you skulking around Eastern Europe without any kind of backup and me screaming myself hoarse because I don’t do well with my loved ones getting hurt.” Tony glanced up. “Is that ok with you?”

“Yes.” Loki slowly rotated his wrist in Tony’s grasp, sliding his hand down so that his fingers could brush against Tony’s.

It was tense at first, but as the movie went on and the others started making quips, Loki and Tony both found themselves relaxing. Tony leaned into Loki’s side, letting the god pick off his plate rather than getting up to get more for himself. Finally, as the first movie finished and Steve queued up the next, Tony asked Loki the question he’d been wondering all night. “Why me? Why come here?”

Loki tilted his head to the side to rest against Tony’s. “Because you are the mortal who flew a bomb through a wormhole to protect your people. Who better in the all the realms to go to?”

Tony chuckled, very deliberately avoiding eye contact at that. “What can I say? I guess we both make stupid choices if we think it’s for the right reason.”

“Mhm.”

“Honestly, how are you feeling?”

“Tired,” Loki whispered. “Yarrow root is effective but very tiring. Don’t be surprised if I sleep for most of tomorrow.”

“Ok. You need to stretch out and sleep go ahead, we’ll be here all night no matter what.”

Loki hummed, letting Tony take a little bit more of his weight then. “I can see the appeal of this tradition. Strengthening bonds, reassuring yourselves that an injured ally is ok; it’s all very quaint.
Anthony?"

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“Loki-”

“I’m not used to having people worry about me,” Loki went on, voice so soft now that Tony was the only one who could hear. “Most Asgardians are quite aware of how well I can protect myself, if worrying for my safety ever occurred to them at all. I forget how much more fragile life must seem if you’re mortal.”

“Hey now, Thor’s told us you guys are mortal too. Just have a longer lifespan, that’s all.”

Loki chuckled at this. “That’s a way to put it.”

Wait, what? “Loki? What does that mean?”

But Loki didn’t answer. Instead his breathing leveled out as his hand went limp in Tony’s grasp; the god had finally fallen asleep.

Gently, Tony grabbed the blanket from the back of the couch and draped it over their laps. Looks like he and Loki were on the couch for tonight. Now to figure out how to get them horizontal before his entire shoulder fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter was basically me saying, "I could stop things here. But what if I didn't?" over and over until we hit 12k words. This is the longest chapter I've ever written for anything, so hopefully it's worthwhile to those of you who were asking for longer chapters. Sorry it took so long though. Also debating whether I need to kick the rating up to E because of all the blood in this chapter, but for now we'll leave things at a T rating.
Wherein Loki Has Had a Very Rough Day and Friends Make it Better

Chapter Summary

Loki has been through it today, let me tell you. Emotions are hard. The couch ships it.

Kudos and comments are loved and appreciated!

Chapter Notes

Seidmann: taken from Norse seidmenn, which I'm fairly certain is the plural. Someone correct me if that's wrong.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Atop some unnamed, overgrown hill in the back end of Europe, on a moonless night miles from any sort of Midgardian settlement, Loki felt a hostile surge of magical energy buzzing in the air and sighed to himself, long and slow. “Well. I do believe I’ve found the Mind Stone.”

Ever since he’d departed from the Avengers Tower after the group’s movie night, Loki had been running himself absolutely ragged. Sleep was a forgotten luxury as he raced to find the stones, given that events outside of Midgard’s boundaries demanded more immediate action on his part. The news from Xandar regarding the Power Stone was decidedly bleak, given that the gem may have been beyond his reach but certainly not Thanos’. He needed to cover as much ground as possible here on Midgard before Thanos could gain the upper hand again, and if that advantage had to come at the cost of his own health so be it. But sheer determination can only get a person so far, even if the person in question happened to be a god. Realistically Loki was probably a few days away from his body totally collapsing from the strain, so even if he’d wanted to keep pushing on it wouldn’t matter. Coffee and potions designed to keep him physically and mentally functional could only do so much, after all. Loki had spent the better part of the last 24 hours with a distinctly fuzzy feeling oozing through his limbs as his mind needed longer and longer to recall the symbols and words for the spells he utilized. He couldn’t keep fighting like this; his body needed rest. For all the many things his not-father had gotten wrong, Odin had unfortunately been very accurate when he’d told Loki that sometimes the best strategy to take was inaction over action. Probably one of those stopped clocks being right twice a day moments, as the Midgardians liked to say.

Point being, as much as Loki truly desired to keep pressing onwards in his search, things were rapidly reaching a point wherein it would almost certainly be a danger to both himself (and possibly the magical artifacts he kept encountering) if he tried to force things. He needed to pull back and regroup, infuriating as that might be after all his months of hard work. Loki had set out from the hideout tonight in only Frigga’s enchanted traveling clothes (it was too much work to summon the armor any longer), reassuring himself that this would likely be a dead end so more drastic measures and better equipment wasn’t necessary. Even if he found the Stone he wouldn’t actually make any efforts to commandeer it; this particular venture needed to be about scouting over actual retrieval, which could wait another day or so. It was a simple strategy that would demand little energy or time, in all likelihood.
Of course the fates had decided that tonight of all nights was when he was destined to find the thrice-damned thing, in a solid metal army bunker surrounded by electric fences, motion-detecting lights, and a bevy of armed guards, besides being under what felt like enough protective magic to make some of Asgard’s outposts on Vanaheim look like welcome centers. The smart choice now would be to beat a hasty retreat, sleep until his eyes stopped going out of focus every ten seconds, and then come back here to make a better plan of attack in another day or two, as he had originally intended to do. However…

Loki frowned, fingers reaching up and beckoning to the magic around him, running his own seidr over the force this place was emitting. In ages past, Loki had traveled to most of the branches of Yggdrasil and studied every kind of sorcery he could get his hands on across the realms. He’d witness and analyzed everything from the delicate work of nomadic scholars to the sturdy arrays woven into the very foundations of Asgard. He’d come to know the sort of spellwork that a warrior might use to reinforce their shield, or what a field nurse might have prepared in a heartbeat when that shielding spell inevitably failed. He’d soon realized that every type of magic was distinct, based on its user and the specific sort of spelling at work in their magic. Each had its own unique feel or sound, and a seidmann such as Loki could distinguish between them as easily as a master jeweler could tell the difference between diamonds and paste beads.

What Loki sensed from this place was the hacksilver equivalent of magic.

To an amateur or someone with a severe head injury it might have seemed impressive; Loki was a good 200 feet from the closest stretch of fence and he could still feel the energy rolling off the fortress in great waves. But its size and reach were the primary things that Loki could sense, and try as he might there was no specific spellwork to be found. Normally Loki could poke and prod at someone else’s magic and eventually discern how they’d arranged, say, a defensive spell over the threshold of their home, right down to the runes and ingredients used for the work. This, on the other hand, seemed to be notably absent of anything besides sheer volume, as though whoever had set this up was hoping that any nearby magic users would be stupid enough to run headlong into the magical wall and not notice it before they themselves were noticed. Loki’s worst fears had just been confirmed: the Infinity Stone was in the hands of idiots.

Sighing, Loki began digging through his bag. Going home was out of the question now; leave the Stone in the hands of these buffoons and it’d be a gamble whether Midgard would even remain standing come dawn. He needed to sneak in and see if there was any possibility of extracting the Mind Stone tonight, before the current owners got everyone on Midgard killed via their mishandling of it. Unfortunately, Loki barely had the energy to both cloak and teleport himself into the building, never mind saving some magical reserves to handle whatever was inside this den of stupid. Which meant he was going to have to get creative with his resources.

Loki wrinkled his nose as he extracted a small vial of light brown powder. It was hideaway dust, perfectly fine for cloaking oneself if one was all right with smelling like wild onions for a few days after. He considered, then pocketed the extract once more. Supplies were running short, after all; he could probably manage an invisibility spell to last for an hour. Any obstacle he’d run into that needed longer to be handled merited something stronger than invisibility anyway. Snapping his fingers, Loki disappeared from sight. Now for the tricky part.

Normally if he were going to teleport himself to a location guarded by a magical forcefield, Loki would simply throw up a cloaking spell to counter whatever wards had been set in place to detect invaders. However, because these halfwits had slapped up a solid wall of magic, there was nothing to counter because there was no design to the spell in the first place. As infuriating as it might be, these humans had inadvertently managed to set up the sort of protections that not even Loki could smoothly slip through. Very well then; plan B.
Loki had spent quite a bit of time tinkering with Midgardian technology after his experiments with Anthony in the Tower. It was surprisingly easy to cause their technology to malfunction with just the slightest application of magical force (he was going to have a grand time this coming Halloween as a direct result of that). But today his mischief could be put to slightly better, more utilitarian use; provided that the inhabitants of this bunker were as halfwitted as Loki had estimated. With a swish of his fingers, Loki caused one of the searchlights on a guard tower to start flickering on and off rapidly.

Barely a second later alarms began to blare as every light around the fence suddenly came to life. Guards in black body armor streamed out of the building, guns at the ready and screaming for whoever had tripped the alarm to stay exactly where they were. In the midst of the chaos, Loki teleported himself across the campus and through a door that one of the guards had left open as he rushed out to accost the intruder. He was in.

Loki estimated that it would be about 10 minutes before they decided that it had been a false alarm caused by the very magic that was swirling throughout the facility, and then another 10 before everyone who’d gone to investigate would return to their normal posts. With any luck whoever had attempted to use the Mind Stone to set up this place’s defenses didn’t know enough about magical energy to distinguish between a genuine sorcerer and an accidental hiccup in the security system. Midgardians were surprisingly easy to trick if you only provided them with the right sort of physical evidence (or lack thereof); logically, the guards would find no trace of whatever had caused the lights to start flickering and have to assume that it was some short in the wiring caused by haywire magic when the sensors picked up real magic, i.e. Loki’s teleportation. Evidently most denizens of this realm were under the impression that magic and machinery were incompatible with one another already; given that they had no reason to believe that there was any magic here besides the Mind Stone, their own biases might be enough to cloak Loki’s presence.

Sure enough, the alarms eventually were shut off as Loki allowed the tracking spell to tug him deeper into the building, going down further and further. As big as the bunker had looked on the outside, the bulk of the facility was in truth hidden underground and invisible to the outside world. Highly suspicious, and yet another unpleasant twist to Loki’s evening. He frowned as he made his way down a set of stairs and through another hallway; the magic in the air was making his stomach church and the hair on his arms stand on end. This was an obscene amount of magical residue, suggesting that the current owners had no qualms about making use of the Mind Stone’s energy. What were they doing, using it to power the whole facility?

Down another flight of stairs, and then Loki stopped in his tracks. Something was decidedly off in this area of the building; upstairs things had been overwhelming, but now the magic in the air felt wrong. There wasn’t a better way to put that, truly, than him simply knowing with absolute certainty that the energy brushing up against his own seidr had been perverted. It was the feeling one got when entering a somber house but not yet knowing what caused the mood. Or perhaps more like the discomfort one felt as they walked down a familiar street in the evening and sensed that some unknown, unnamed element of the walk had been altered in a sinister way. Atrocities had been carried out here in the bunker, violations of the most primal elements of magic usage, and Loki knew that down to his very core. In another instant, his mind put two horrific realizations together. The first was that whoever had possession of the Mind Stone (a dangerous, overpowered crafted artifact) was actively using it to make serious alterations to living, organic creatures in the depths of this building. The second was that he finally recognized the sensation sizzling through the air; it was the same feeling he’d experienced during the Avengers battle with the Alternator.

The Mind Stone was dangerous because you could do truly monstrous things to a person if you had absolute control of their mind. There was the control and brainwashing Loki had inflicted on the Midgardians during his invasion, for example, but that was barely scraping the surface of what the Stone was capable of. Transformation magic often failed on living beings because they could never
fathom really being different from the way their minds already perceived them; a normal sorcerer
would never be able to truly think of themselves as, say, a bull moose, because even if they could get
the form right there was still the matter of wanting to hold onto their consciousness and memories to
eventually change back.

But what if you had the power to fundamentally alter someone’s perception of themselves, forcing
extremely painful and permanent changes to the body and then making the mind accept these
changes as perfectly natural and absolute? A little bioengineering here, a little magical infusion there,
and with the right amount of determination one could make an army of superpowered underlings in
relatively short order. This was, of course, assuming you didn’t bend the subject’s mind so far it
broke.

Loki had known as soon as he entered the fight against the Alternator that the man was good as
dead, even before the god had collapsed the magical field around him. There was magic in the
Midgardian, yes, but it was not his own. The way the mortal had stood, twitching slightly while
curling and uncurling his hands over and over, as though his mind didn’t recognize the body parts as
its own, had convinced Loki that the human’s mind was actively in the process of disconnecting
from the body entirely; too much change inflicted too fast on a decidedly weak being. The man
would be dead inside of a year, and if Loki hadn’t been so certain it would put a damper on game
night with the Avengers then he would have put the poor thing down on the streets of New York
that day. He cursed himself for not recognizing the Mind Stone’s residual signature during the fight,
but how could he have expected it in the middle of New York? And now here he was, standing in
the basement of some facility that was likely churning out more efficient versions of the Alternator
even as Loki snuck through their halls. Not good.

Slowly making his way further into the bowels of the building, Loki noticed that he’d come to an
area with reinforced metal doors lining both sides of the walls. All were sealed shut with red lights
overhead; every feet few Loki could see locked cases with firearms beside an alarm switch. The
doors all seemed to have some form of damage; largely minute scrapes and chips in the paint, but
there were a few with dents ranging in size from minor dings to obtuse bulges into the hallway, as
though whatever was locked within had been trying to bash its way out. Walking along more
carefully now, Loki could hear noises behind some of them; scratching sounds like the inhabitants
were dragging something along metal walls, anxious whispers whose exact words he couldn’t make
out, and even a steady thump-thump-thump that might have been pacing around a room. These were
almost certainly prison cells.

“Number 14, incoming!”

Loki internally swore and flattened himself against the wall, praying that he could either fall back or
sneak around whoever was coming this way. Murder wasn’t out of the question, true, but he didn’t
have the energy to vanish or hide any corpses right now. Keeping his breath as soft and shallow as
possible, Loki watched two armed guards march around the corner from the other end of the hall.
There was an emaciated brunette woman sandwiched between them, half their size and bound in a
straight jacket worn over a grimy hospital gown. Her head was bowed forward, swinging limply as
her bare feet weakly dragged across the concrete floor; Loki was fairly certain the guards weren’t
escorting her back to her cell so much as physically carrying her along. She hardly seemed aware of
what was going on around her, and she gave off the same sick energy as the Alternator. Another
experiment then.

“Where is everyone? They said it was a false alarm, right?” He heard one of the guards ask,
dragging the woman along none too gently with a firm grip on her shoulder.

“Yeah. Guess they decided to take the long way back down here.”
“Can’t blame them; being around these freaks all day can fuck with you. Seriously, what’s the Baron thinking?”

“Dunno and don’t care. Long as we get paid-HEY!”

The woman had lost her footing and stumbled to the ground, nearly pulling down one of the guards with her.

“Damn it, how hard is it to walk in a straight line?!” the first one demanded, roughly hauling her back into an upright position. “Three more doors and-”

But Loki never found out exactly what was going to happen to that woman in three more doors, because as she was pulled upright once more she briefly lifted up her head to glance down the hallway. It took Loki just a second too long to realize that she wasn’t looking through him but directly into his eyes, and by that point in time she’d already begun screaming bloody murder.

Loki immediately regretted not using the hideaway powder when he’d had the chance. He simply didn’t have the energy to both keep himself hidden as well as summon his weapons at the same time; his seidr reserves were all but depleted, and two spells at once was out of the realm of possibilities now. Cursing, he shimmered into sight one moment and had his knives drawn in the next. The men screamed, dropping their prisoner as each reached for their own weapons. Loki’s daggers, however, became embedded in their skulls through their eye sockets before either had time to properly draw the firearms. It didn’t matter. One of them must have hit a panic button, because suddenly an alarm was blaring all over again as lights flashed above Loki’s head. This time the beeping was much faster as a robotic voice intoned, “Evacuation. This is not a drill,” over and over. Swearing vehemently, Loki charged down the hallway past the guard’s corpses, knowing that he needed to find the Mind Stone and leave now. Who knew where the Stone might end up next, and how long it would take him to track it down anew?

Unfortunately his progress was hindered seconds later when the lights above every door in the hallway suddenly switched from red to green as the doors swung open. Lovely. Now Loki was going to have to deal with whatever abominations passed for a security system down here. Out of about two dozen doors in the hallway, however, only three swung open any further. That certainly didn’t bode well for the survival rate of the Mind Stone experiments. On the other hand, the burning projectile that slammed square into Loki’s back, sending him crashing down onto the concrete floor with a hard landing, didn’t exactly bode well for his own survival either.

Loki’s first thought was that he should have worn his armor after all. His second thought was relief that he’d bothered to wear the enchanted clothing Frigga had made, because otherwise whatever was currently melting a steaming hole in the floor beside him likely would have put an abrupt end to this venture. At the same time he doubted the shirt could withstand another hit of that caliber, and certainly not in the same spot. No chance of outrunning the enemy, then. He’d have to fight.

Rolling over and forcing himself into a sitting position, Loki saw two newcomers in the hallway besides the screaming woman who was now bashing her head repeatedly against the steel walls. The first prisoner was an elderly man, leaning heavily against the wall as sweat poured off his shriveled body in thick rivulets. Like the woman he was dressed in a tattered hospital gown, albeit his was singed through in multiple places. Further down the hallway Loki could see a massive quadruped lumbering towards him with a low growl. Initially Loki thought that the beast’s fur was gray, but as it came closer Loki recognized the unpleasant sound of stone grating against stone, making him realize that the gray coloration was due to the creature being solid rock on the outside. “Well now. Someone’s gotten creative,” he muttered, climbing back to his feet.

The movement tragically sparked the old man to action. He pushed off from the wall and swung his
arm back before hurling a translucent orb at Loki’s head. Loki ducked down just in time to miss the ball of fluid exploding just above him, sizzling against the wall as it ate through the metal. With a healthy mix of horror and disgust, Loki realized that what the man had flung now (and likely hit Loki with moments ago) was actually a ball of his own sweat, which appeared to have the same destructive properties as particularly corrosive acid. Before Loki could think up an appropriate verbal response to such a revolting manner of fighting the rock monster had charged, plowing into Loki’s torso hard enough to lay him out on the ground some meters away and crack several ribs in the process.

The god went flying and barely had time to get his bearings before the monster was on top of him again, weight bearing down on Loki’s already fractured bones and causing the sorcerer to see stars. Loki managed to get his legs under him this time, however, and flip the beast overhead, but not before its claws snagged the edge of his shirt and tore it nearly in two. Whatever protections the clothing had offered were gone.

Loki scarcely had time to mourn its loss before another acidic bomb was flying straight towards him once more. He ducked and rolled, nearly having his throat torn open by a swipe of claws as one escape threw him back into range of the other attacker. Strands of hair drifted to the floor as he scrambled backwards, trying to put himself out of range again. It wasn’t enough; unfairly fast for something that size, the rock creature bounced off a nearby wall and lunged for him again. This time its claws ripped straight into Loki’s side.

The god screamed and blindly hurled a blast of his seidr at the beast, unable to construct a proper spell and instead channeling the raw desire to get it away NOW from his core down through his arm and out his fingertips. The magic threw the creature back and sent Loki to his knees, screaming anew as the old man finally landed a hit just over where the monster had torn into him.

Continuing on was impossible. His magic was all but gone, there was an ever-growing puddle of blood on the floor below him, his good arm was burning from the uncontrolled use of magic as the other dangled limply due to severed muscles, and his mind was too exhausted to effectively fight and counter these monsters. Frankly Loki would be lucky to get out of this place alive. The evacuation order had started counting down over the speakers now, and Loki wasn’t looking forward to what awaited him if he was still in this hallway when it hit zero. The beast was on the ground but trying to push itself upright once more for a fresh attack, and the old man was trembling but still on his feet. Loki couldn’t take them both on; even if he somehow managed to kill them he wouldn’t have enough energy (or more realistically, enough blood still pumping through his vital organs) to make escape possible. Quickly he began weaving his teleportation spell, internally chanting the words and forcing his seidr to carry out this one last spell, just one more bit of magic then rest, yes, he just needed to get away from here and hide somewhere safe-

And at that moment, the cell phone in his bag vibrated. Anthony. It had to be.

Before he consciously realized what he was doing Loki had locked in the spell’s location to Anthony, wherever the man might be, and let the magic take him.

-n-

In hindsight, Loki supposed he should count his lucky stars that Anthony was in the Tower and so was Thor, otherwise the chance of him surviving would have plummeted to nearly impossible odds.

The landing was rough, but that was to be expected from spellwork done in a pinch and driven more by emotional willpower than logical construction. He grabbed onto the workbench he’d appeared beside, letting his bag drop somewhere to the floor behind him before his legs gave out entirely. He hit the ground hard, knees denting the floor although he barely registered the impact. Lack of
physical sensation probably didn’t bode well for his overall health.

Loki’s body lilted dangerously to the side beyond his control, but instead of slamming into yet another block of concrete in a very short while he collapsed against something soft and warm which smelt faintly of solder and oil. Anthony. Thank goodness for small graces.

“Loki, what the-”

“Thor,” Loki blurted out.

Anthony, unfortunately, needed a little more prompting than that as he stared down at the god in utter confusion. “What?”

Oh, of all the Norns-damned times for the Midgardian’s common sense to fail him… “Get...get Thor,” Loki demanded, hissing and clutching at his wound. Putting aside brotherly squabbles and attempted fratricide, Thor was Loki’s best chance of survival right now. Between his loyalty and Anthony’s...Anthony-ness, Loki’s chances of living to see the next day were fairly decent.

It still took the Midgardian painfully long seconds to process what Loki was asking him for, eyes darting wildly between the god and the (oh lord) copious amount of blood that he seemed to be leaking all over the workshop. Loki was about to voice his demand once more when Anthony suddenly came back to himself, shouting for Banner to fetch Thor. Apparently the other scientist was down here as well. Briefly, Loki wondered why Anthony didn’t simply order JARVIS to relay the request, but withheld his inquiry; beggars couldn’t be choosers in situations like these.

Loki felt the room beginning to spin, and eventually realized that it was actually him being moved again; Anthony had lowered him completely to the ground, lying on his back to stare up at the frankly atrocious light fixtures that the engineer insisted on equipping his lab with. Once Loki had been settled he began ripping off the remnants of Loki’s shirt, doubtlessly trying to better assess the sorcerer’s injuries. The look on his face told Loki everything he needed to know. “Please tell me the other guy looks worse,” Anthony begged, pulling off his own shirt as he spoke.

“I didn’t tarry long enough to find out,” Loki carelessly answered as he attention was directed away from his own wounds. He couldn’t help staring since he’d never seen the arc reactor like this. Anthony only ever had it on display for the world to see when he was outfitted in his armor; the rest of the time the reactor stayed hidden beneath shirts or jackets, only noticeable due to its glowing softly through the fabric. Shirtless and mere feet away, Loki could see where the casing sat flush against raised scar tissue, surrounded by tiny pockmarks in the skin all over Anthony’s chest. There was a story here, and one that Anthony clearly wasn’t a fan of people asking after, given his tendency to hide the reactor. “What are you doing?” Loki finally managed to get out before he could say something far more stupid.

“Stopping the bleeding,” Anthony explained, frantically pushing against the wound in Loki’s side with what had to be a good deal of his weight behind the motion. “Pressure, and something to help stop the blood flow, or maybe make it clot faster? Shit, I don’t know, this is just what you do, I don’t think I’ve got enough gauze in the first aid kit to help with this-”

Loki recognized when someone was about to succumb to panic. He needed to bring Anthony’s focus back to the here and now; the god wasn’t sure what he would do if the man’s mind broke before Banner returned with help. Forcing the arm on his uninjured side to move, Loki carefully lifted his hand to the arc reactor and settled it over the glowing blue circle, praying that Anthony’s protective tendency towards the device in his chest would overrule his panic at Loki’s current state.

It worked. Loki could see the instant Anthony came back to himself, words freezing in his throat as he stared down at the god in a mixture of confusion and disbelief. That was good; they both needed
to be calm right now. “Anthony, breathe. If Thor is here I will be fine,” Loki stated, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. “Is he?”

It was JARVIS who answered the question. “Mr. Odinson is currently on his floor, and Dr. Banner has made him aware of the situation. They wish to assure you that they will be down momentarily.”

Loki felt some of the stress he’d been carrying all night start to drain out of him; with any luck Thor would realize that his asking for help meant something was truly wrong, and he would bring whatever medicines Frigga had sent along with him on his adventures in Midgard. The woman had always been good at slipping a few healing elixirs and extracts into their bags before they left home, and Loki sincerely doubted she’d ever change the habit even though Thor was grown.

“Top speed in the elevator, J,” Anthony demanded.

Loki couldn’t help but grin at the man’s attempt to take control even in a situation like this. “See? Anxious mortal,” he chastised, grinning in hopes of lightening the mood.

“Forgive me, a Norse god bleeding all over my workshop is kind of a new thing,” Anthony shot back, and the confidence Loki was so used to hearing from the man was weak but present. “Also, rude, I just cleaned this place, Bruce helped out and everything.”

Had it not taken more energy than he had to spare right now, Loki would have rolled his eyes at such an audacious claim. “Lies, those light fixtures haven’t been dusted in years.”

“Yeah but everything else is spotless, you’ll see when we get you patched up.” There was a moment of silence in their conversation, and when Anthony spoke again his voice was softer and a bit uncertain. “Please tell me you’re not lying for my benefit, that Thor can fix you and I’m not going to have to watch my friend bleed out in my workshop on the floor.”

Loki dug into the skin around the arc reactor, praying that he wasn’t going to have to drag the mortal back from another near panic attack. “I won’t. I can’t.” It was true; what was happening behind the scenes with the Mind Stone and whatever organization had claim over it was a threat to this entire realm. Loki couldn’t afford to keep operating by himself any longer; it would be ages before he was back at full power after this fiasco, and Anthony would demand answers regardless. Loki needed to survive so that the Nine Realms would also survive, it was as simple as that. He would last, at least until he could bring Anthony into the plan and tell him of Thanos and the Infinity Stones.

“Sirs, Mr. Odinson and Dr. Banner are here.”

“About damn time!” Tony shrieked over his shoulder, prompting Loki to raise his head from the ground to confirm JARVIS’ announcement.

Thor was indeed standing across from them in the workshop now, looking for all the world like he’d just rolled out of bed (pathetic, it couldn’t be past seven here in New York). The blond oaf gaped dumbly at them, and it was only after Anthony yelled out “THOR!” that he moved towards them, collapsing on the ground beside his fellow hero. “Bruce said that you were injured, brother, but I did not realize the extent of your wounds.”

“Do you have the calamint?” Loki snapped, ignoring the other god’s concern. He didn’t have time for whatever ridiculous sentiments were going through Thor’s mind right now, he needed help.

Thor opened and closed his mouth, then shook his head. Oh Norns, if Thor was about to say what Loki thought he was going to say... “Brother, you’ve lost so much blood...you need the yarrow
Loki let his head fall back and swore to all the powers that be. Thor was likely right, unfortunately; he’d seen enough battlefield casualties to know when a warrior was beyond the healing powers of the common potions Asgard equipped them with. Yarrow would work, but it was going to be excruciating agony all the same.

Loki distantly heard Thor give Anthony instructions as he began digging through his bag, followed by Anthony saying...something, voice fuzzy as though it was underwater. Oh dear, that was cause for concern. Moments later there was a leather belt folded double in front of his face, and Thor was telling him to bite. Loki did so without protest; this was going to hurt, and frankly he was grateful Thor even had the forethought to make sure he didn’t accidentally bite through his tongue. More words, and then Thor was splayed on top of him, pinning his body to the ground to make sure that Loki wouldn’t hurt himself. Protecting him now, even after everything Loki had done to them. It was in that exact moment as he lay bleeding out on the workshop floor when Loki became certain he was going to survive, not because Thor had the medicine he needed but because Thor himself wouldn’t allow the veritable monster he still viewed as his younger brother to die.

And then the yarrow was dumped on the wound and the thought was completely eclipsed by torturous anguish the likes of which Loki had not felt since his time among the Chitauri. It was the sensation of hellfire burning a slow course through his entire body again and again with no reprieve in sight, scorching thought and sense from his mind and violently forcing his seidr up and through the body, mixing with the extract and compelling the magic to heal his body at an unnatural pace far outside of his own control. Distantly he was aware that a voice was screaming at him to be calm, and another voice (oh god, his own) was shrieking incessantly.

It was a mercy when the pain finally caused him to black out.

-n-

Some time later, Loki registered that he was lying on something soft, and that there were familiar voices talking above his head. Thor must have brought him up to the others; to what end, Loki was uncertain. Deciding to eavesdrop for the time being, Loki kept his eyes shut and feigned unconsciousness as the Avengers continued speaking around him.

“So that’s it? He just showed up in Tony’s basement and asked for help? From you?” That sounded like Barton, and given the context of the situation he was probably talking to Thor.

“Aye,” and yes, there was Loki’s confirmation. “I do not yet know what caused my brother to be so injured, but Tony has assured me that Loki promised him answers.”

“And you believe him?” Rogers asked. To the man’s credit he didn’t sound as though he doubted Thor’s claim but was merely curious as to whether or not Thor believed the words himself. Only a fool would implicitly trust a promise from the god of lies, to be fair, but it was still touching that Rogers wasn’t overwhelmingly suspicious of him anymore. There was something to be said for bonding over mutual interests and Midgardian tabletop games, it would seem.

“If the promise had been made to anyone else I would have doubts,” Thor responded, because the man might be a fool but he wasn’t a complete moron. “However, my brother and Tony have something of a unique relationship with one another. Tony is granted far more grace than anyone else I’ve known in our lives; if Loki were to be honest with one person in all the realms, it would be Anthony Stark.”

Loki could have scoffed at that if it wouldn’t have blown his cover. Just because he liked Tony
more than most of the countless fools populating this universe didn’t guarantee any additional honesty on his part. Perhaps it had happened to work out that way, yes, but that was far more coincidental than intentional on his part.

“Everyone, Sir and Dr. Banner are in the elevator now and will arrive shortly,” JARVIS stated, interrupting their conversation.

“All right, when Tony gets here we’ll ask him what happened. Thor, are you ok?”

Loki almost cracked his eyes open at that. Had something happened to Thor? Why wouldn’t the god be all right? Perhaps Loki had thrashed a bit harder than he remembered upon receiving the yarrow and broke something; it wouldn’t be the first time one of them had unintentionally injured the other while being treated for serious injuries. To be fair it had almost always been Thor doing the thrashing, but first time for everything.

“I will be fine, Steve,” Thor assured his friend, alleviating any potential concern on Loki’s part. “My brother’s condition was unexpected, that’s all.”

Loki could hear the elevator doors open then, followed by soft footsteps pattering into the room. More steps, and then Rogers spoke again. “Thor was filling me in on what happened in your workshop,” Rogers stated. He must be talking to Anthony now. “Care to explain why Loki’s here and why he looks like a truck ran him over?” Rude.

“He said he was doing something for the good fo the realms,” Anthony answered, and Loki had to resist the urge not to groan aloud at that. Could the accursed Midgardian not have tried a bit harder to make it seem like he wasn’t actively plotting the downfall of this realm again?

“Oh, that answers exactly no questions I have,” Barton said, tone conveying the exact levels of exasperation which Loki was feeling at the moment.

“You said that Loki promised you more details if things went wrong, correct?” Thor asked.

“Well done Thor,” he called out, and oh dear was that his voice? He must have screamed louder and longer than he remembered. Still, bigger priorities right now. “Two whole minutes of strategizing before you settle upon brute force as an answer. Personal best.”

Loki waited until he was fully upright before continuing; if he was to be interrogated he could at least do it while sitting, rather than draped across the couch like a swooning damsel. “Fantastic,” he muttered, trying to blink away the spots in his vision as his eyes readjusted. “Injured, exhausted, and trapped in a room with a group of oh-so-curious Midgardian heroes. Just how I wanted this day to go, really.” Sarcasm wasn’t exactly the pinnacle of wit, but it had been a long day and now appeared to be nowhere near finished, so Loki felt that he was entitled to a bit of frustration. “Brother, I have never seen you in so wretched a state,” Thor argued, doubtless trying to save face in front of the others with that concerned tone now. “Whatever could do this to you is likely a threat to all of us,
even I can see that. Keeping secrets will do you no good right now—"

“Oh, so it’s my fault then?” Loki snapped, any good will he might have had towards Thor evaporating in the face of him pulling out the same stale arguments they always seemed to fall into. “Loki and his secrets bringing ruin to us all again. If only I had turned to Thor and his merry band of shield brothers then everything would have worked out by now, the villains defeated and the heroes triumphant. Is that what you think?”

“Perhaps,” Thor shot back, “but I could not say that with certainty, given that you haven’t told any of us anything about what schemes you are attempting to carry out this time!”

“Enough!” Tony shouted, reminding Loki that he and Thor were not alone at the moment. The man was wearing a fresh set of clothes and his hair was damp now; apparently he’d taken a shower while Loki was passed out. Given how much blood Loki had lost, that was probably a good choice on his part. “Thor, you’re done. Steve,” he said, “I’m tagging you in.”

Tagging in? Loki tried to remember if there had ever been a time during Dungeons & Dragons where someone had used that turn of phrase and came up with nothing. Perhaps it was a Midgardian slang term; he’d have to ask Kevin about it later. Thor at any rate seemed to understand. To Loki’s shock, he actually stopped speaking as the fight drained out of the god in between one breath and the next. Instead of arguing further as Loki expected him to do, Thor turned and stormed out of the living room towards the kitchen, Natasha fast on his heels. “What did you…?”

“Loki,” Rogers said, dragging the god’s attention away from Thor back to the other Avengers, “I know you’re probably not in a great mood right now, I’m usually not after something rips a chunk out of me that big. Thor probably didn’t help with the fifth degree just now, but he’s worried. We all are.”

Loki felt some of his annoyance flair up at the man’s tone. It was painfully reminiscent of the way Odin began his scoldings, and even hundreds of years later it still grated on Loki’s nerves. “You sound like someone’s parent,” Loki snipped, swinging his legs around to set his feet on the floor. He tried not to sway in his seat; the yarrow had helped things, but his body was still trying to compensate for a number of serious injuries. He was in no condition to get up and leave, Thor was right, but there was no point in letting the Avengers know exactly how badly off he was.

“I’m the designated responsible adult in the room,” Rogers answered, as though that explained anything about what just happened.

Loki snickered at such a pathetic response. “What?”

“It means he’s in charge,” Tony snapped, catching Loki’s attention once more. “And he gets to be in charge right now because Thor’s doing the macho man version of panicking, Clint should never be in charge of anyone ever, Bruce is currently stressed enough after all the bleeding and screaming you did, and I just had to take a shower and get new clothes because I was drenched in your blood, Loki, head to foot and I’m pretty sure there’s still some along the seal of THE FUCKING ARC REACTOR CASING—”

“Tony!”

Anthony stopped yelling then, but Loki could still see the fine tremor in his limbs as he stood across the room. The engineer’s hands were balled into fists, nails digging into his palms as he took several deep breaths, face pale and shoulders heaving up and down. It took Loki a minute to understand that
Anthony was really and truly furious with him.

Before he could think of anything to say in the face of that anger, Tony had collapsed onto the nearby loveseat with Banner settling in beside him a moment later. “So it’s between Nat and Steve,” Anthony told him in a much quieter voice, eyes focused on a patch of carpet off to the side. Like he couldn’t even bring himself to look at Loki right now. “And she got the job last time, so Steve’s up. I know you promised to talk to me about this, not everyone else, but right now the best I can do is sit here and breathe and try not to puke again. Ok?”

Loki would have given him right arm for the ability to teleport away at that moment. He could see now how flawed the escape plan had actually been. He’d come here on a foolish whim and dragged Anthony into this mess with the Infinity Stones without any kind of preparation. Running to the Tower while he was still injured had been a colossal mistake. Loki should have tried to get back to his hideout first and made do with the supplies he had on hand. Or perhaps he could have tried to sneak into Thor’s quarters and steal his medicine bag and then replace the supplies later. Anything but this, watching the closest thing he’d ever had to an ally and equal lash out at him and then turn away for the trouble he’d caused. Loki had almost certainly burned the one bridge in all the realms he couldn’t afford to lose, and the worst part was he hadn’t even been trying this time. Any fight he might have had left collapsed at the thought. Fine. He’d tell the other Avengers his plan. Nothing to lose now, anyway.

Rogers, mercifully, didn’t pry too deeply into the finer details of Loki’s explanation. He asked the expected questions and Loki gave the best answers he could, too drained by today’s events to bother lying. He spoke of Thanos, of the Infinity Stones and the actual motives he’d had during the Battle of New York, relieved to finally have at least these people understand what was at stake for the galaxy at large. He felt snark and biting commentary coming more easily the longer he and Rogers talked, nearly forgetting his slipup around Anthony. At least until the man spoke again, still refusing to make eye contact with Loki. After that Loki rushed through the rest of his explanation about SHIELD and the bunker he’d infiltrated tonight, grateful when the story was over. He didn’t want to talk anymore.

Rogers, of all things, thanked Loki and departed the room to check up on Thor. There was a moment of silence before Anthony began speaking again. “We should probably send out a search party,” he stated, the faraway tone of his voice suggesting that his mind was already working out the next ten steps the Avengers needed to take. “Whoever’s got the Mind Stone probably cleared out already, but we could at least look into the facility and see if they left anything behind.”

“I do not believe that will do much good, Sir,” JARVIS told him. “The alarm I issued earlier was in response to a nuclear detonation in Moldova. SHIELD agents have already been dispatched to what appears to be a former Soviet bunker. The timing between Mr. Liesmith’s arrival and the explosion-”

“That’s what you meant by messy affair?!” Tony interrupted, finally turning his attention on Loki again in his rage. “You were trying to outrun a nuclear blast?!”

The judgement and accusation laced within Anthony’s question was the final straw. Loki was running on the absolute last dregs of his energy and had very recently been burned, gutted, flung across a room, saved from dying by a cure that was almost as bad if not worse than death itself, and lastly had to reiterate his entire plan to a group of judgemental heroes. Yet Anthony was still attacking him. So be it. He was too tired to bother salvaging anything between them any longer; why settle for only burning the bridge when you could throw the ashes in the river below afterwards?

“There was a very loud countdown and evacuation order blaring over the speaker, I didn’t bother investigating what was to come in the event I didn’t escape in time,” Loki stated, head high and
shoulders back. “Calm yourself, I am fine.”

He knew those words would upset Anthony. He knew telling the other man to calm down was provoking a fight. Anthony was a clever mortal, but as prone to emotional outbursts as any of them. They’d fight, they’d scream, Loki would figure out how to make his exit (somehow), and the rest of this affair with the Infinity Stones could be handled from a safe distance outside of the Tower or the Avengers inner circle. Easy as setting up dominoes to watch them fall. Loki just had to let Anthony be the one to topple the first, to ensure that the mortal would always believe that ending this amiable truce between them had been his idea. “You are...you didn’t...Loki-”

“Thai food.”

Loki started at the unexpected interruption in their fight. He and Tony both looked towards Barton, standing off to the side and typing on his phone. “What?” Tony dumbly asked, voicing the same question Loki was thinking.

“Thai food, I’m jonesing for Thai food, have been all day and now that it’s looking like we’re not cooking tonight, I’m just going to order in. Bruce, any requests?”

“From the usual place?” Banner asked, reminding Loki that he’d been about to start this fight in front of the Hulk of all people. He blanched; perhaps it was a good thing he’d been interrupted before the arguing became too heated.

“Yup,” Barton said, eyes still on his screen.

Banner nodded. “Some of their yellow curry, and two bubble teas.”

“Great, Tony?”

“For fuck’s sake Clint-”

“Usual it is, I’ll get a double order for Loki too. Bruce, go find out what the others want; Tony, I need your help upstairs real quick. We’ll be back, Loki.”

The god could only watch in utter confusion as Anthony followed after Barton out of the room and onto the elevator. That had been...unexpected didn’t even begin to cover it.

“Loki.”

Loki quickly jerked his head to look away from the elevator back towards Banner, who was still sitting on the loveseat. The man had taken off his glasses and was quietly polishing the lenses on the front of his shirt, sparing Loki unwanted eye contact for the moment. “Tony’s one of the best friends I have, so please understand that I’m saying this from a place of love. He can be an idiot when it comes to reading the room.” Here he glanced up briefly, smirking softly before returning his attention to cleaning the glasses. “You wouldn’t think, given the whole ‘charming playboy’ persona he’s got going on, but when it comes to dealing with serious stuff it’s completely hit or miss. Sometimes he gets it, sometimes not. And this time was definitely not.”

“I don’t-” Loki started, only for Banner to raise a hand and cut him off.

“He was a jackass to you just now,” Banner continued. “It doesn’t matter whether you’re ok with that or not, he messed up and that’s on him. And in about twenty minutes he and Clint are going to come back down here, and hopefully he’ll have cooled down a little. And eventually, Loki? He’s
going to snap out of it and apologize and try to have an adult conversation with you, because between me and Steve and Nat we’re getting better at forcing him to use his words. And you know what? You don’t have to accept that apology. You don’t have to have that conversation with him. But if you want those things...just know that they’re coming.” Loki nodded, because what else was there to do? Banner smiled at him and stood, replacing his glasses and turning towards the elevator. “I’m going to get you and Thor some clothes, ok?”

“I’m fine,” Loki insisted, because he still felt tense and poised to flee from the Tower at the first opportunity. He didn’t need the Avengers giving him food and clothes and...whatever else they had planned for tonight. Especially not if it meant dealing with all that kindness juxtaposed against Anthony’s foul mood.

Banner was having none of it. “No you’re not,” he knowingly replied. “And that’s ok. We want you here right now, all right? Fine or not fine. Today has been a lot.” Conversation finished, he walked to the elevator and waited for JARVIS to send it back down from wherever Anthony and Barton had gone.

Loki, meanwhile, remained frozen in place on the couch, quietly calculating how long it would take for his seidr to recharge enough to escape from this Tower of emotional lunatics. The answer turned out to be longer than it took for Banner to return with fresh clothing for himself and Thor, or for Loki to strip out of his old clothes and pull on the new dark grey sweats that he’d been lent, or for Barton and Anthony to return to the common area, hauling what appeared to be...a mattress?

“Why is memory foam so hard to maneuver?!” Barton grumbled as he did a very poor rendition of the splits to keep the mattress from crushing Anthony against the drywall.

“What in the Norns’ name are you doing?” Loki inquired, unable to keep his curiosity in check.

“Avengers tradition,” Clint explained. “Bruce, need some help in here!”

Bruce reentered the living room upon being summoned. “What is...oh. I’ll get the coffee table.”

“Again, what is going on?” Loki repeated, wondering what strange Avengers nonsense he’d become entangled in this time. Curse his seidr for taking so long to recover. While he was at it, curse himself for letting his seidr become so run down in the first place. Were it not for that he could be home alone right now, nursing his wounds far away from demented heroes who rearranged furniture while waiting for takeout to arrive.

“Any time one of us has a near-death experience, we get together in the living room and have a sleepover the first night everyone’s back home,” Barton explained.

Loki stared. Maniacs, all of them.

“And you just had a near-death experience, so congrats, you’re part of the tradition now,” Barton finished as Banner moved the coffee table across the room to sit flush with the wall. Moments later the mattress was lying flat on the ground, and Barton had flopped backwards onto it. “Prepare for Lifetime movies and takeout.”

“You’re joking,” Loki said. “Anthony-”

“I’m going to get a drink,” the engineer stated before he practically ran out of the room, refusing to look at Loki yet again. Part of Loki had been expecting that, but it still hurt. Barton sighed, and Loki heard him whisper a soft “Damn it Tony,” but he made no move to follow after the man into the
kitchen. Not that it would have made much difference; contrary to what Banner believed, Anthony seemed bound and determined to stay angry at Loki. That was all right. Loki would be out of here before the end of the night.

Vaguely he could hear Thor and Anthony speaking in the kitchen, but for once he had no interest in what they were saying to each other. Something about him, surely, but beyond that it didn’t matter to him. Eventually the food arrived, and Natasha was kind enough to make a plate for him that would have fed someone of Thor’s stature quite easily. He picked at the food in silence, knowing that his body needed the nutrients even if he couldn’t work up enough of an appetite to want to eat.

Some time later, once everyone had served themselves dinner and Rogers had carted in every blanket stored in the hall closet and Thor and Barton had narrowed their film picks down to three possible contenders, Anthony came back into the living room. He looked at Loki for a brief moment and then crossed the room to where the others had set up the Thai, serving himself in silence. Loki had honestly been expecting him to choose to sit on the loveseat beside Banner, and so it caught him off-guard when the engineer instead seated himself directly beside Loki, scarcely an iota of space between the two of them. “Anthony?”

Anthony’s response was to reach down and wrap his hand around Loki’s wrist, the gesture painful in its familiarity. This was what Anthony did when he wanted to talk to Loki and let him know that they were ok; things would have to be all right if he was willing to do this, surely. “I’m mad at you,” he whispered, eyes glued to Loki’s arm as his thumb began to stroke up and down his wrist in an absent-minded gesture. “Not for coming to me, I’m happy you knew you could come here when you needed the help. But the stuff you did that almost got you killed? Loki, if I hadn’t texted when I did, you would be a pile of ash right now. And I never would have known. I would’ve just thought that you went back to some other realm, and maybe I would have wondered about you sometimes, but I would never have known. I would’ve just thought that you went back to some other realm, and maybe I would have wondered about you sometimes, but I would never have known. And that’s not ok.”

“Anthony…”

“But you’re not a pile of ash,” he went on, grip relaxing ever so slightly around Loki but nowhere near letting go. “You’re here with me and everyone else, eating New York’s version of Thai and watching questionable made for TV movies. So we’re going to sit here, and eat, and watch the movies. And then tomorrow, we’re going to make a better plan that doesn’t involve you skulking around Eastern Europe without any kind of backup and me screaming myself hoarse because I don’t do well with my loved ones getting hurt.” Tony glanced up. “Is that ok with you?”

It was disgusting and pathetic how relieved Loki was to hear those words. Once upon a time he would have snapped the neck of any mortal who had spoken to him the way Anthony had done earlier this evening, but now he could only feel elated that there wasn’t a fresh battle he’d have to fight. It wasn’t an apology like Banner had expected, but it was a start and a promise of something other than chaotic conflict on the horizon for Loki. It was peace and safety and a ‘we,’ comfort in others following what had been one of the most exhausting days of Loki’s long life. How could he refuse that?

And so he whispered a soft “Yes,” and turned his hand over so that he could touch back, returning the contact and grounding himself. For now there could be a reprieve in the long string of battles he had to fight.

The night continued on and Loki’s appetite returned, prompting him to not only finish his plate but what was on Anthony’s as well (Loki had a sneaking suspicion the mortal had deliberately served himself too much food in order to have leftovers for the god, but chose not to ask). They offered up
a few smart remarks at times during the movie, but by and large the pair of them kept quiet, content just to be sitting there in the living room with the others nearby. Finally, at the close of the first movie Anthony spoke to him again. “Why me? Why come here?”

Loki tilted his head to the side and rested it against Anthony’s. Exhaustion was catching up to him at last; odds were he wouldn’t make it through the next film’s introductory credits. Still, he could answer Anthony’s question before sleep took him. “Because you are the mortal who flew a bomb through a wormhole to protect your people,” he answered frankly. “Who better in all the realms to go to?”

Anthony chuckled quietly, and Loki closed his eyes at the sound of it. “What can I say? I guess we both make stupid choices if we think it’s for the right reason.”

“Mhm.”

“Honestly, how are you feeling?”

“Tired,” Loki whispered. “Yarrow root is effective but very tiring. Don’t be surprised if I sleep for most of tomorrow.”

“Ok. You need to stretch out and sleep go ahead, we’ll be here all night no matter what.”

Loki hummed. “I can see the appeal of this tradition,” he murmured before he could think better of it. “Strengthening bonds, reassuring yourselves that an injured ally is ok; it’s all very quaint.” An idea occurred to him then, and he forced himself to open his eyes slightly if only to stay awake.

“Anthony?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“Loki-”

“I’m not used to having people worry about me,” Loki explained, hoping Anthony would understand. “Most Asgardians are quite aware of how well I can protect myself, if worrying for my safety ever occurred to them at all. I forget how much more fragile life must seem if you’re mortal.”

Truth be told, Loki didn’t know if he even needed to be the one apologizing right now. But he wanted to make things better with Anthony, to convince the mortal that the hurt Loki caused him today had for once not been intentional. If apologies were a viable option for mending their friendship, so be it. Loki could swallow his pride and give the man this much.

Blessedly, Anthony refused to become bogged down in the emotional side of Loki’s statement, instead focusing on the ‘silly mortals’ aspect of it. “Hey now, Thor’s told us you guys are mortal too. Just have a longer lifespan, that’s all.”

Loki chuckled, half-formed thoughts of golden apples and magical spells drifting through his mind. “That’s a way to put it,” he whispered just before he finally fell asleep.

-n-

Some time later, Loki awoke to the feeling of an elbow digging into his ribcage. “Oh fuck,” someone
whispered. “Loki? You still asleep?”

Loki blearily opened his eyes to confirm his suspicions that the elbow in question belonged to Anthony. “Define asleep.”

Gradually, Loki became aware that the pair of them were lying down on the couch together. The lights and TV were both off, and there were no sounds coming from the other Avengers (barring the low rumble of Thor’s snoring, at least). There was a soft yellow light trickling in from the city outside the windows, and aside from an occasional ambulance siren in the distance all was silent in the Tower. Movie night must have finally ended.

“Sorry, I was trying to get us comfortable on the couch together,” Anthony apologized. “You know, like laying down. For sleeping.”

Anthony had managed to arrange them so that Loki was pinned between the back of the couch and the engineer, who was lying on his side facing the god. Loki briefly wondered if the couch was even wide enough to sleep two grown men at the same time, only to immediately decide that he was too worn out to care. If Anthony needed more space then he could be the one to move. “Are you certain you don’t want to join the others on the mattress?” he asked, snuggling back down against the pillow beneath his head that Anthony had procured from parts unknown.

“Oh god no, Clint kicks like a rabid dog and Thor tends to roll over on people if you sleep too close to him,” Anthony whispered, making Loki snort because he had a whole childhood of memories to confirm the latter claim. “Besides...I, uh...I kind of really don’t want to move from here.”

Those words woke Loki up. Blinking away the last vestiges of sleep, Loki tried to look Anthony in the eye, only for the man to once again avoid eye contact with him. “Why?”

For the first time, Loki saw Anthony truly struggle to find his words. His eyes kept darting between Loki’s face and the scant amount of space on the couch between the two of them, mouth opening and closing futilely and not a sound escaping his lips in the dim light. Finally he muttered “Hold on,” and sat up on the edge of the couch, pulling off his shirt and tossing it to the ground.

By the branches of Yggdrasil, what was Anthony doing?!

“Ok, that’s better. Now I can actually see you,” he whispered, resuming his former position on the couch and pulling the blankets up over the pair of them again as the soft blue glow from the arc reactor illuminated both their faces. This time he reached up and curled a hand around the back of Loki’s neck as he made eye contact, demanding all of Loki’s attention in those simple gestures. “Loki, I’m sorry for yelling earlier. Like, really, truly, incredibly, I will be making this up to you for the next decade levels of sorry.”

Loki blinked at Anthony, waiting for him to go on.

“I just...I know you’ve been doing all of this fighting space monsters and infiltrating secret bases stuff for centuries, and your partners are usually idiots in comparison so you’re used to working alone. And you’re good at it; I mean, unbelievably good. You’re the most incredible person I’ve ever met in my life, Lokes, and honestly? I don’t think anyone’s ever going to top you, because you’re a genius space warlock with the kind of wit and battle improvisation that puts me to shame.”

The grip on his neck tightened ever so slightly. “The reason I got so mad earlier was because you were almost gone, Loki. Vanished right out of existence. And it’s not just that I wouldn’t have known, even though that’s still a big part of it. I just...I keep thinking about all the different things I could have done to help you today. If I had known what you were doing I wouldn’t have tried to
stop you, you get that, right? I would have given you armor or weapons or backup, I would have gone with you, I would done something-!” He stopped then and looked away, taking a deep breath to settle himself, and for that Loki was grateful. He needed a minute to process what he was hearing.

Finally, Anthony met his eyes again. “So here’s the truth. All my cards on the table. The whole Thanos thing? It’s not new information to me, it’s just you filling in specifics to a general idea I already had my suspicions about. I’ve been getting ready for a major fight for months, Loki. I know that there are monsters out there, I’ve seen them in person just like you. It’s terrifying as hell, but I want to fight. And I want us to be on the same side for that fight.”

Loki was fairly certain he’d forgotten how to breathe.

“So Loki? Please, whatever you want or need to crush Thanos, you’ve got. Just ask. You’re not alone.”

As shocking as the words were, what finally broke Loki that night was the feeling of Anthony stroking his thumb up and down the side of Loki’s neck, the gesture as familiar as the hands themselves now. He began trembling without fully understanding why, hands clenching and unclenching against his chest as his mind raced. Anthony noticed, of course, and his determined expression melted into one of confusion. “Loki? Hey, Lokes?”

“Anthony.”

“Yeah?”

Loki closed his eyes, took a single shuddering breath, and whispered, “I’m so tired.”

Later, neither of them would be able to remember who moved first. But suddenly Loki’s face was buried in the side of Anthony’s neck, Loki succumbing to full-body tremors as dry sobs slipped out into the silence of the night. Anthony scooted forward and wrapped his arms around him without hesitation, holding him tightly and whispering soft words of comfort against the crown of his head. They remained pressed together until Loki, finally at his physical and emotional limit, fell back asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Regarding the meta of this story: I realize this chapter is basically a rehash of chapter 16 from Loki’s point of view. There was too much going on for a short summary of Loki events at the start of the next chapter, so I simply redid the whole thing with Loki. Apologies for those of you who wanted plot advancement, I'll provide a proper next chapter soon.

Regarding the chapter itself: It doesn't matter how confident you act, insecurity manifests at the worst times in the worst ways, hence Loki’s reaction seeming incredibly disproportional to what was happening (and Tony sensing none of that, because you get good at hiding those things). I’m sure some of you wanted kisses at the end, but you'll have to settle for emotional intimacy instead (mwahaha). Also I keep snickering because in the scene where Tony strips off his shirt in the living room I can't help but picture Loki as an antebellum Southern lady clutching their pearls in shock. Yup, that's where we're at now folks.
Wherein Steve is an Agent of Chaos and Tony Makes Important Plans

Chapter Summary

The Avengers make choices that may or may not destroy us all. Loki's sensible preparations are mildly inconvenient. JARVIS is both logical and sneaky.

Comments and kudos are loved and appreciated!

Chapter Notes

3/20: So it's been brought to my attention that sections of this chapter have been lifted and posted elsewhere under someone else's work. If you come across this, please let me know because I definitely didn't give anyone permission to repost this work in any way, shape, or form anywhere else.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Tony next woke it was morning. He could hear voices drifting in from the kitchen and smelled freshly cooked bacon; hopefully that meant Steve was still making breakfast. Yawning and slowly blinking his eyes open, Tony attempted to sit up and get off the couch, only to realize that he was currently pinned down under Loki’s slumbering form. Sometime during the night their positions had shifted, so that rather than laying side by side Loki was now halfway draped across him, sound asleep and (ew) drooling on Tony’s chest with one arm flung out over him.

Tony stared at him in silence, mind buzzing as he thought back to their last conversation. He hadn’t meant to wake up Loki or initiate that heart-to-heart chat in the dead of night. Loki was clearly worn out physically and mentally, and a better man than Tony would have waited until the next day to say his piece instead of unleashing that torrent of word vomit on a friend still recovering from such a devastating trauma. But Tony couldn’t just let things lie; the argument in the living room following JARVIS’ report was the closest he and Loki had come to a real fight in a very long time, and he couldn’t shake the paranoia that Loki would vanish before Tony could give him a real apology. Truthfully, he’d expected a little stilted small talk between them before they fell back asleep, with the goal of actually working things out the next day. Instead…

See, here’s the thing. Tony had realized a while back that he and Loki were getting to a point where their relationship was becoming increasingly hard to define. He’d always enjoyed bantering with the god across the battlefield, but nowadays just being in the same room as Loki was enough to raise his spirits and put him in a better mood. Their conversations were Tony’s favorite kind of challenging, Loki’s presence was shockingly comfortable to be in (once you got past the whole “he could turn me into a frog with a single blink” thing), and the way Loki fit in with the Avengers on game night made the entire evening better than it had ever been when there were only five players. It was like finally having the best friend Tony had always wanted, someone who fully understood him and wouldn’t immediately balk at the ridiculously impossible twists and turns that his life seemed to always take. Yet at the same time the two of them would often go a week or more without any kind of contact; no visits, no conversations, not even a text to see what the other was up to. Dungeons & Dragons only
happened twice a month, and besides that Loki had only spent time with him once in the workshop and then with the group for a single movie night. Was Tony’s fascination with Loki, therefore, based on nothing more than the novelty of the friendship not having worn off yet?

He’d decided to test this theory out and invite Loki over more often. Having him working alongside Tony in the basement could easily segue into dinners with the Avengers, maybe another movie night if he was particularly lucky. Such a simple plan, really; just get the god to spend more time with him in a safe space and see where things went from there. Tony could lie and say he was doing it all for the sake of Earth and defending it from invaders, but that hadn’t been the case for a very long time now, had it? Tony needed Loki to help save the world, but now personal attachments (ugh) had gotten involved. And then Loki almost died.

Tony was fairly certain that the sole reason he hadn’t suffered a complete mental breakdown had been his mind repeatedly insisting that Loki was a god. He wouldn’t die as easily as humans; not like Tony’s parents who died in a car crash or Yinsen in the cave in Afghanistan. Loki was made of sturdier stuff, material that the Hulk could slam into marble and it would be the marble with the dents in it afterwards. This belief was so strong, so firmly entrenched in Tony’s understanding of the world and the way in which it operated, that even as Loki laying bleeding on the floor Tony never completely broke down, having that one certainty to cling to.

But pseudo-immortality has its limits, as it turned out. Thor’s assertion that Loki needed something stronger than what he’d normally request was horrifying in hindsight. The screams and spasms from the treatment would haunt Tony for years, as would the knowledge that if it hadn’t been for whatever was in that extract then Loki wouldn’t have survived. Nothing on this entire planet of Earth could compare to medicine like that; there was no help anyone could have provided in that moment to save his friend. And that realization had been a horrific punch to the gut.

Getting back to the couch incident now.

After Loki had fallen asleep during the movie, Tony had replayed their interactions that evening over and over in his head, berating himself all over again each time he remembered the way he’d screamed at Loki when the god had likely never been closer to death (excepting his fall from the Bifrost, obviously). Loki had sought out Tony in his hour of need and gotten hysterical shrieking for the trouble; good lord, if Clint hadn’t interrupted their spat who knows how much worse things might have gotten. But even after all that Loki had still stuck around for dinner, calmly accepting Tony’s not-apology and even apologizing himself. For what? Coming to a friend in his time of need and then inadvertently upsetting said friend simply by being injured? Goddamn it, Tony didn’t even want to start pondering what that said about Loki’s self-esteem.

Intense reflections on personal failings had always been an excellent way to keep sleep at bay, and last night was no exception. Tony stayed awake long past when the others had drifted off one by one, quietly telling JARVIS to kill the lights and TV both after he was certain that all the other Avengers were out. A bit of clever footwork stole a pillow from the mattress on the ground, and he’d actually managed to get himself and Loki both lying on the couch. Unfortunately his elbow had accidentally jammed itself into Loki’s ribs while he was trying to make himself more comfortable, waking the sorcerer.

At that point, a smarter man than would’ve simply apologized and told Loki to go back to sleep. But no, guilty Tony brain couldn’t handle any chance that Tony might have upset Loki again, and so he tried to justify what he’d been doing and explain the concept of sleeping together on a couch to Loki. Great job there, brain. Really earning your keep. Then Loki had suggested Tony move somewhere else (which fair, the god was probably annoyed with him now) and Tony had blurted out that he didn’t want to move. You know, like a total creeper.
Of course **that** woke Loki up all the way, clearly expecting an explanation for Tony’s nonsense. And what was Tony supposed to do? Say that letting Tony sleep on the couch was a better option than having him curl up on the nearby mattress, because he was going to get up every couple of hours anyway to check and make sure Loki was still breathing, because he did that sometimes when one of the others came home after a particularly harrowing stay in SHIELD medical? Loki didn’t have much magic at his disposal right now, but Tony was still fairly certain that the god could find some way to make his life a living hell for that kind of insanely clingy and frankly unsettling answer.

Of course that was when his brain decided to bail, the damn traitor likely realizing that there was no good way out of the hole it had just dug for Tony. Eventually Tony gave up on trying to craft a decent explanation for his behavior and instead settled for unloading the stress he’d been under for hours by giving Loki a proper apology.

In hindsight, perhaps he shouldn’t have precipitated that by taking off his shirt while the two of them were smushed together on his couch. His memory of the scandalized/baffled look on Loki’s face would dole out secondhand embarrassment at the most inopportune moments for the rest of his life. But he’d still managed to pull himself together well enough to make a proper apology, which unfortunately was immediately followed by him gushing over Loki. What kind of broken, socially awkward excuse for a human being decided that jumping from “I’m sorry” to “I’m the de facto president of your fanclub” was an acceptable conversation trajectory?!

Loki understandably looked shocked by this development, which really, **really** should have been Tony’s cue to back down and shut up for the night. Instead he went ahead and dumped even more personal baggage on Loki, telling him about all the ways Tony could have imagined helping if only he’d known what the god was getting himself into. When he finally shut himself up he was worried that the apology had done more damage than good; Loki might become defensive all over again after Tony had essentially turned this conversation into berating him all over.

But he didn’t. In fact, when Tony was able to work up the nerve to make eye contact again, Loki appeared to have frozen on the couch, looking at Tony with something akin to wide-eyed hope. And that was what made Tony finally admit that he’d had a vague idea about Thanos for ages, that he wanted Loki on his side for the battle they both knew was coming, and that if Loki wanted help all he had to do was reach out and take it. No more secrets. No more plotting to trick Loki into accepting Avengers help somewhere down the line. He couldn’t handle another night like this.

Of all the reactions he might have expected from Loki, crying wasn’t one of them. Technically there were no tears, to be fair; just a lot of clinging and shuddering and painfully broken noises muffled against Tony’s skin. He’d known that Loki was probably at the end of his rope, but still, Loki’s exhausted whisper of “I’m so tired,” was the most heartbreaking sound Tony had ever heard. He couldn’t remember if Loki came to him or he pulled Loki towards himself, but suddenly he was holding Loki in his arms as his friend utterly collapsed. How much of a burden had Loki been carrying, trying to save the universe all by himself while the realms continued to label him a fugitive madman and villain?

Tony would always miss some of the freedom that came with Iron Man being a solo act, but he could definitely admit that the whole ‘keeping the world safe’ part of the gig was easier now that he had a team working towards that goal as well. And that was just dealing with normal Earth threats like scientists with no morals or secret organizations tampering with things beyond their comprehension; if it were up to only Iron Man to defeat an actual factual Titan bent on galactic conquest and eradication, he probably would have cracked ages ago. For Loki to last this long...well, Tony hadn’t been lying when he called the god incredible.

Letting Loki have his emotional breakdown in silence, Tony quietly held him close until Loki fell
asleep, tucking him in a little more firmly before succumbing to sleep as well. Now it was daytime and the god slumbered still; apparently Loki hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d said that he might need a full day to recover.

Carefully, Tony extracted himself from under Loki (good lord the god was heavy) and retucked the blankets around his shoulders, smiling softly as Loki grunted and burrowed face-first into the pillow they’d been sharing. Loki might need a little more rest, but Tony was starving and ready for breakfast. “Be right back, don’t go anywhere Prancer,” he whispered, only half-joking. After rising and taking a moment to pop his back he followed the succulent scent of breakfast into the kitchen.

Steve was hard at work cooking at the stove, piling fresh strips of bacon onto a small mountain he’d already stacked up on a nearby plate. Bruce was at the table sipping tea and picking at scrambled eggs, and judging from the stack of dishes piled by the sink Tony was going to be the last one to get breakfast. The clock on the microwave told him it was a bit past ten, so it made sense that the others had already gotten up. “Hey guys,” he called out. “Any eggs left for me?”

“Sure,” Steve called back with a glance over his shoulder. “How you want ‘em?”

“Quick,” Tony answered, prompting Steve to shrug as he took a few from a nearby egg carton and cracked them directly into the skillet. Nothing like eggs cooked in bacon grease to start the day.

“Ahem.”

Tony glanced back to Bruce as he walked over to the coffee pot, pleased to see that there was still a bit left in the pot for him. “Something up?” he asked, pouring himself a mug.

“What happened to your shirt?”

Tony had a moment of panic, realizing that there was no way he could explain why he’d taken off his shirt without sounding like a deranged lunatic. “I...I needed to take it off last night,” was all he managed to get out. Yup, totally not suspicious.

Bruce, thankfully, merely shook his head at Tony and let the matter drop. “Is Loki going to be getting up soon?” Steve called out. “I don’t want to shut off the stovetop if he’s going to want breakfast five minutes from now.”

“I doubt it,” Tony answered. “He told me that he’d sleep through most of today, and he barely moved when I got up.”

“Ok, I’ll make something hearty for dinner then. If he eats like Thor he’s going to be starving later.”

Tony considered this suggestion for a moment as he sipped his coffee, wanting to make sure his next words didn’t come off as too accusatory or suspicious. “You’re being awfully nice to Loki.”

Steve nodded in acknowledgement as he served the eggs onto a fresh plate for Tony. “I’ve seen the plans in your lab, Tony,” he stated, nearly making the genius choke on his coffee from a sudden surprise inhale. “You know there’s something out there and you’ve been gearing up for a fight. Bruce and Clint both filled in some things for me, and it seems to line up pretty well with what Loki told us last night.”

“Ok…”

“I asked Clint and Natasha to look into some things today,” Steve went on, grabbing a fork and knife to set on the plate as well. “Thor’s going to see if there’s any credence to the Xandar/Power Stone thing, and Fury called me about three hours ago asking for a meeting regarding ‘enemy activity’ in
Eastern Europe. If everything checks out…”

“Then Loki’s right,” Tony finished, taking the plate from Steve and crossing the room to sit by Bruce.

“Is it bad that I wish he was lying?” Bruce asked, finishing off the last of his eggs.

“Nope,” Tony replied as he took his seat, “because this is going to be a godawful uphill battle the whole way through. No seriously, Steve, hold off on the optimistic Captain America schtick for a second, we’re talking about a world where we can’t even get Congressional approval for more NASA funding or deep space security, despite the fact that New York was almost leveled by an extraterrestrial army that everyone and their mother recorded on a cell phone. They know something is out there, and they don’t care. And now we’ve got to convince them that there’s a bad guy trying to build a galaxy-wide nuke out of magic stones that are just lying around somewhere on Earth?”

“But you’ve been working on this plan for a while,” Bruce pointed out. “You knew all that. What changed?”

“I had a contingency plan in place to counter another direct attack,” Tony explained. “Since I was expecting something along the lines of invasion 2.0. But now we’re dealing with the world’s worst fetch quest, meaning it’s back to the drawing board.”

“I’m not arguing with you there,” Steve said, dumping a fresh omelette on top of a small heap of bacon for himself. Thank god for the super serum or the man would have died of a heart attack ages ago. “But we don’t need Congress’ support; at least not right away.”

“You’re suggesting finding the Infinity Stones first,” Bruce surmised. “Well I guess that makes the most sense, since we know at least one of them is in pretty dangerous hands at the moment.”

“We’ll wait until Loki wakes up and see what he thinks, but yeah,” Steve agreed, leaning back against the kitchen counter to eat his breakfast. “It sounds like Thanos is going to come to Earth no matter what, so the smart move right now is doing whatever it takes to guard the Stones from him.”

“Oh, supposing we find the gems,” Tony hypothesized. “Then what?”

“We tell the world an apocalypse is coming,” Steve stated before taking another bite of omelette. The room was silent except for the sizzle of the cooling skillet. “What?” Tony asked.

“You’re right, those old curmudgeons aren’t going to believe that there’s some outer space boogeyman heading towards Earth to kill us all. We don’t need to make them believe, we just have to get the people to listen so they’ll put some pressure on Congress alongside us.”

“And how exactly are we going to do that?” Tony asked.

“The Stark Expo,” Steve said, as though he expected his friends to think that was a perfectly sensible answer.

“Excuse you?”

“Every year the opening ceremony draws a huge crowd,” Steve explained as he cut into the omelette with his fork. “Thousands of people live, millions watching on TV. That’s what you always say when you get into the Stark-zone anyway.”

“I repeat, excuse you?”
“Stark-zone,” Bruce cut in. “It’s what we call that inventing blitz you go through in March when you’re trying to come up with something really crazy to show off for the Expo, despite the fact that Pepper keeps telling you all people want is a Stark phone with a better battery life.”

“They already get 14 hours, I’m trying to make rocket boots,” Tony countered, just like he did every time this debate came up. “It’ll be the top-selling Christmas gift for a decade, I just need to—”

Steve interrupted him there, having sensed an impending Tony rant in the future if drastic action wasn’t taken immediately. “Point being, we’ll have a guaranteed audience primed to eat up every word you say. So you announce that you’ve got something big, something the world’s never seen before—”

“An Infinity Stone?!” Bruce yelped as he finally put two and two together and came up with doom.

“Why not?” Steve went on. “It’s just now November, the Stark Expo usually starts in April or May, right? That’s plenty of time to hunt one down.”

“Time constraints are not the issue here!”

“Hold up,” Tony demanded. “Are you, Steven Grant Rogers, suggesting that I hijack my own expo, possibly tanking SI stock for months, to demonstrate unfathomable power no mere mortal should possess before the world stage, presumably without informing any outside party like SHIELD beforehand?”

“More or less, yeah.”

Tony grinned. “I knew there was a reason I let you move in here.”

“That’s insane,” Bruce said, face pale and looking a bit shell-shocked. “That’s going to cause panic, we can’t—”

“That’s why we do it at Stark Expo,” Steve went on. “Everyone’s used to Tony doing crazy stuff. We’ll have all the Avengers present and sell it as a controlled demonstration. And then we do...something, I don’t know what yet, but we make it so big and so unbelievable that people can’t stop talking about it. We could try going to Congress or the UN, but they can dismiss meetings and probability and anything on paper we throw at them.” Finishing the last bite of his food, Steve set down his plate and turned his full attention on Tony. “But we use one of the Stones at the Expo? We put an example of how dangerous these things can be on every website and TV station across the globe? It’d be like trying to put a bullet back in the gun after you fired it. They won’t be able to ignore us then. And we’ll be able to prepare for Thanos and whatever he brings with him with a lot more backup.”

“It’s still reckless,” Bruce argued, but Tony could see that he was starting to sway towards Steve’s side. Something about the man’s natural charisma did that to people.

“I’d rather cause a little panic now than risk millions of people dying because some old Congressional windbags won’t listen to reason,” Steve declared in his best ‘I am Captain America and thou shalt not cross me today’ voice. “Tony, you in?”

“Absolutely.”

“Bruce?”

The scientist dropped his head into his hands and sighed. “Not like I’ve got much of a fighting chance against you two. Fine, I’m in. But you have to be the one to talk to Natasha and Clint,
they’re going to have feelings about this.”

“I know,” Steve agreed. “I’ll handle it. You guys and Loki just need to figure out exactly what kind of demonstration we can run.”

Tony leaned back in his chair and sipped on his coffee. “There’s six Stones total. The Tesseract aka Space Stone is on Asgard, the Power Stone is on another planet, and the Soul and Reality Stones are who knows where because of course life couldn’t be easy. That means Mind and Time have to be here on Earth, and just throwing this out there, I sincerely doubt we’re getting the superspies to sign onto any plan that involves using the Mind Stone.”

“So it needs to be something with the Time Stone,” Bruce reasoned. “Do we actually know what it can do?”

“The name is rather self-explanatory,” came a tired voice from behind him.

All three Avengers turned to see Loki hunched over in the kitchen entryway, looking sleep rumpled and thoroughly displeased at being awake. “Please tell me there is food,” he muttered, shuffling slowly towards the table.

Tony was out of his seat and across the room in a heartbeat, grabbing a plate and loading it down with the remaining unclaimed bacon even as Steve turned on the stove again. “Thought you were going to be sleeping today,” Tony stated as he circled back around the room to set the food in front of Loki.

“Too hungry,” Loki answered. “Food, then sleep.”

“Preference on your eggs, Loki?” Steve asked.

“Abundant,” Loki replied through a mouthful of bacon. His chewing paused as his eyes drifted to his right and settled on Tony. “You’re not wearing a shirt.”

For the first time in a very long while, Tony felt embarrassed at being partially undressed. Loki was probably too somnolent to realize he was doing it, but the god’s half-open eyes were locked onto his chest from mere feet away and seemed quite content to stay there. “Uh, well,” Tony started, casually crossing his arms in front of himself, “I didn’t want to, you know, accidentally wake you up. Again. After what happened. So I just...between the blanket and...you know, it was warm enough, didn’t even need it.”

“Oh. Right. I didn’t-”

“No! Seriously, it was fine, it’s a shirt, you kind of...like, there were more important things than shirts. You. You are more important than shirts. So...yeah.”

Loki was fully staring at Tony and chewing very slowly now. “All right,” he said, though it came out more like a question than an affirmation.

“So when you say it’s self-explanatory, what exactly does that mean?” Bruce interjected, because he was a fantastic friend who would jump in to save Tony when the engineer was seconds away from making a complete idiot of himself.

Accepting the change of subject, Loki shrugged and ate another piece of bacon. “It controls time.”

There was a pause in the room as the others processed Loki’s words. “Like a time machine?” Steve asked, barely salvaging the eggs in his skillet before they began to burn.
“Not exactly,” Loki answered as he finished the last of the bacon. “It moves time forwards or backwards, brings things back that were gone, loops on itself...quite a few possibilities.”

“And it’s somewhere on Earth?” Steve asked as he crossed the room to dump the eggs on Loki’s plate. Loki hummed an affirmation as he began shoveling eggs into his mouth with a fervor that Tony had only ever seen in Thor before. Steve took a minute to assess this and then walked right back to the stove to make another batch before Loki could even ask. “You know where?”

“No,” Loki replied curtly. “But if I can find one the others are easier to locate, I told you that already.”

“Ok, ok, we’ll stop with the questions and let you eat,” Tony promised, seeing that Loki’s patience was wearing thin.

In total, Loki ate two pounds of bacon and over a dozen eggs before finally trodding back to the living room to immediately pass out on the couch again. Bruce stayed in the kitchen to clean the dishes while Steve left to prepare for his meeting with Fury. Tony made himself a fresh pot of coffee and then settled in on the common area’s loveseat with a tablet, answering Pepper’s emails and jotting down ideas to manipulate the space-time continuum as they came to him. And if he looked up every now and again to check on Loki, well, no one was around to judge him for it.

This time Loki stayed asleep until sunset, and once again woke up ravenous if the rumbling of his stomach was any indication. Rather than beelining straight for the kitchen, however… “Please tell me there is somewhere in this Tower that I can bathe in peace.”

Had those not been the first words out of Loki’s mouth when he awoke, Tony might have had enough time to recall that there were about half a dozen floors permanently made up for guests who might need to spend some time at the Tower. Loki could have used any of those floors quite easily; that’s what he’d had them installed for, after all. Instead, “There’s extra towels in my bathroom,” came tumbling out of his mouth before he could think better of it. If Loki considered Tony’s answer strange he didn’t show it, instead heading straight for the elevator and asking JARVIS to take him up to the penthouse. Well great. Tony Stark was about to have a naked god of chaos in his personal quarters. If Clint found out Tony would never hear the end of it. Speaking of which... “JARVIS, where are the others?” he asked.

“Miss Romanov and Mr. Barton left early this morning and are still out of the Tower, though Miss Romanov asserted that they would be contacting Captain Rogers at some point this evening. Mr. Odinson also departed the Tower this morning after breakfast and indicated that he might be in Asgard for several days. I’ve already called the contractors to repair the Bifrost damage to the landing pad, Sir.”

“Damn it, Thor.”

“Captain Rogers has gone to the grocery to prepare for tonight’s dinner, and Dr. Banner is currently in the workshop,” JARVIS concluded.

That got Tony’s attention. “Workshop?”

“Yes Sir. Dr. Banner believed that returning to the lab in its current state might be upsetting to you. He has enlisted the help of the bots to clean up the mess from last night.”

Tony gave a bitter chuckle at JARVIS’ explanation. ‘The mess’ was one way to put it. “Can you ask him to come back up here when he gets to a stopping point? It’s not urgent, just...let him know, J.”
“Certainly.” A pause as JARVIS relayed the message, then, “Dr. Banner says he will be up when he finishes.”

“Thanks JARVIS.” With that taken care of, Tony settled back onto the couch once more and returned to his tablet.

The elevator doors opened a while later and Bruce reentered the living room with a leather satchel over his shoulder, giving Tony a sheepish smile when he saw the man on the loveseat. “Sorry I didn’t let you know,” he apologized, taking a seat beside his friend as he dropped the bag onto the ground. “But if I’d said anything you would’ve tried to come downstairs to help with the cleanup—”

“And that would’ve ended badly,” Tony concluded.

Bruce nodded, smile falling away. “Yeah Tony. It would’ve.”

“...Um...”

“Hm?”

“Was there...a lot?”

Bruce sighed. “Yeah. I’m...it was a really good thing you stayed up here, Tony.” At that point, Bruce glanced over and saw that the couch was empty. “Loki finally up?”

“Yeah, he’s taking a shower now.”

“Makes sense. Which guest floor did you put him on?”

“Err...”

Bruce gave his friend a look. “Tony.”

“I panicked, ok?! He wanted a shower, I have a shower-”

“You have a Tower full of floors with bathrooms, Tony. Showers included.”

“And I have the best one.” Bruce appeared utterly unconvinced by Tony’s line of reasoning. “And maybe I didn’t want him to end up on some random floor that looks like a fancy hotel room.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And he’ll need clean clothes too, we don’t keep those on guest floors, he can just raid something from my closet this way!”

“...”

“What?”

“Moving in to your lab -”

“I know, ok?! I know!”

Bruce shook his head and set the bag down on the floor. “Do you, though? Tony, yesterday you were just trying to get Loki to drop by your workshop a little more often. Letting him shower in your room and borrow your clothes after he spent the night and had Steve make him breakfast? It’s a lot, you know that.”
“Things change-”

“I know, and I get where you’re coming from, I was there too,” Bruce reminded Tony. “But listen. I know you. I know you like having everyone in the Tower together because we’re safer here than anywhere else. And I know you tend to overreact when one of us gets hurts. So right now, I’m worried that you’re going to push Loki too hard and try to force him to stay here long-term, because to you that seems like the best way to keep him safe. And I think we both know how Loki’s going to react to that.”

Tony sighed and slumped forwards in his seat, hands loosely gripped in front of him as he stared at the ground. “He said he came here last night because I protect my people, Bruce. You get that? He called my home safe. He knew I’d protect him. He trusts us-”

“Trusts you,” Bruce corrected.

“He stayed here,” Tony said. “Not just in the Tower, but in the living room with all of us. He fell asleep on the couch during an Avengers slumber party, which, by the way, we didn’t exactly have to force him into. I’m starting to think it’s not going to be that hard to get him on our side.”

“Tony-.”

“Sir, Dr. Banner, Mr. Liesmith has finished bathing and dressing. He’ll be rejoining you momentarily.”

“Let me try at least,” Tony begged. “It doesn’t have to be permanent, I can maybe talk him into staying just until we get the Thanos thing taken care of. And then we can play it by ear afterwards.”

“If you think it’ll work I’m not going to stop you. Just don’t be too upset if Loki says no, ok?”

The elevator arrived a moment later, forcing Tony and Bruce to attempt to look as though they’d been casually discussing anything other than a Norse god moving into the Tower in the near future. Loki stepped off the elevator, hair wet and dressed in fresh Stark Industries sweats, although the shirt was a bit tight and the pants were obviously too short. “Hey Lokes,” Tony called out. “Enjoy the shower?”

“Your supplies are shockingly utilitarian,” Loki commented. “I had to have JARVIS put in an order for me.”

Tony blinked. “JARVIS?”

“Mr. Liesmith has requested a number of bathroom accoutrements,” the AI responded, and if Tony wasn’t mistaken JARVIS sounded rather amused. “As well as placing an order for several articles of clothing and a number of herbs from a local nursery, preferably still alive.”

“I don’t have access to my own supplies at the moment,” Loki explained. “And your wardrobe is a bit small for me.”

“Uh…” was all Tony could get out.

“JARVIS and I discussed it. There’s no point in keeping our work separate any longer if the end goal is the same, that will only result in wasted time and duplicate labor. I can bring most of what I need to your workshop within a week and use my allocated space, as previously discussed. As for the orders I’ve put in, JARVIS has assured me that we can get them sent straight to the Tower by tomorrow since I put a rush on it. Now then; is there anything to eat in your fridge?”
“Should be?” Tony answered in a bit of a daze.

“Excellent.” And with that, Loki sauntered out of the room on a hunt for dinner.

Bruce and Tony stared after him in silence, too shocked to speak for a moment. Finally, Tony chuckled and gave Bruce a weak grin. “Best laid plans of mice and men, huh?”

The look on Bruce’s face spoke volumes.

-n-

By mutual agreement, neither scientist mentioned Loki choosing to move into the Tower until after dinner, because there were certain risks that even the boldest of heroes were unwilling to take and startling Captain America while he was within range of steak knives was pretty high on that list. It was only the four of them eating together tonight; Thor was still away, as expected, and Natasha had called Steve earlier to inform him that it would probably be a solid week before she and Clint returned. When pressed for details, Steve could only shake his head. “She didn’t say much, but she definitely wasn’t happy with what they found. And Fury’s meeting was a bunch of ‘keep an eye on Moldova and see if something happens’ again but he was pretty sparse on specific details. Something’s going on that he’s not telling us about.”

“Told you,” Loki said between bites of lasagna.

Steve, being the patron saint of superpowered beings with high metabolisms and bottomless pits for stomachs, had made a frankly obscene amount of lasagna, garlic bread, and steamed vegetables for them to eat. Bruce and Tony had already reached their limit a while ago, but Steve and Loki were still in the process of demolishing a cafeteria-sized pan of lasagna. Tony would have been disgusted if he wasn’t so completely fascinated by the sheer volume of food these two could take in.

“All right Loki, we’re giving you the benefit of the doubt for now,” Steve announced. “You can stay here while we get the Thanos situation under control. So you heard the plan for the Stark Expo, right?”

“More or less.”

“Are you in?”

“Your plan is going to send this entire realm into an uproar, Rogers, besides complicating Thanos’ future endeavors here. Of course I’m willing to lend my services,” Loki agreed with a vicious grin. For the good of the realm, Steve ignored the potential chaos which was heavily implied in that look. “You said you’ve been tracking the Mind Stone. How exactly are you doing that?”

“Spellwork, naturally. Very advanced, very intricate spellwork.”

“Is it something you could put together in Tony’s workshop?”

“Perhaps under better circumstances. At the moment, however, I lack the supplies necessary to build the array from scratch. Even if I had the right equipment my seidr couldn’t jumpstart the initial sweep of the spell. And considering the fine-tuning and modifications that had to be made to the initial array...trying to recreate the entire thing would take months at this point,” Loki estimated.

“What’s the alternative?”

“My plan is to retrieve the table into which I’ve carved the array,” Loki said. “It has enough magic
infused into it at the moment to keep running for another week on its own. That will be more than enough time for me to recover and replenish my stores in the workshop, so that by the time I’ve brought in the table I’ll have all the supplies necessary to allow the search to resume.”

“Great, we’ll get it today,” Tony suggested. “Though I’m guessing you’re not up to poofing it into the basement, right?”

“I wouldn’t regardless,” Loki replied. “Layering a teleportation spell on top of everything else could destabilize the entire magical structure and cause, shall we say, less than ideal results.”

“Meaning?”

“Several city blocks reduced to ash.”

The others at the table collectively cringed. “Ok, we’ll rent a trailer and bring it here,” Tony amended. “Less chance of imminent doom that way.”

“It’s not exactly down the block,” Loki curtly explained. “There’s a reason I haven’t tried to leave and check on it yet.”

“How far are we talking?” Tony asked. “Queens? Soho? New Jersey?”

“Belgrade.”

Tony paused, trying to place the name in his mind. “Belgrade…?”

“Montana,” Loki concluded.

And that was when Tony realized he might have slightly miscalculated exactly what getting Loki moved into the Tower would entail.

-n-

When the sorcerer laid out his explanation, it actually made perfect sense. New York City had this nasty habit of getting attacked by every up and coming villain around on a near-weekly basis, if not more frequently. Between the secret organizations, the rogue magic users, and whatever other nonsense might be evil’s flavor of the day, it was a wonder that the better part of the city hadn’t been leveled ages ago.

Loki, of course, had taken this into consideration when setting up a hideout on Midgard. Much as he enjoyed the energy and amenities that city life afforded to him, it simply wasn’t safe to leave powerful and slightly unstable magical artifacts lying around where any two-bit would-be world conqueror might either steal or damage his belongings. Particularly given the whole ‘might level multiple city blocks’ issue they were apparently contending with from some of them. And so, for the sake of preserving his experiments, Loki had selected a location for his hideout hours away from any major cities, free from any sort of media scrutiny even for something as trite as the world’s largest ball of twine, and above all else very sparsely populated. Normally this wasn’t a problem for Loki who could come and go as he pleased; with his seidr currently in a slow recovery, however, accessing his hideout posed several issues. “There’s nothing SI related within a hundred miles of Belgrade,” Tony complained after JARVIS had pulled up the town’s location on the living room’s TV screen. “So I couldn’t use the company as an excuse to fly out there.”

“And taking the quinjet is going to raise questions from Fury,” Steve reasoned, finishing up his final helping of lasagna as he stared up at the screen.
“I don’t require an entourage to retrieve my table,” Loki insisted for the fifth time in a very short while.

“You said magic was out,” Tony argued. “That means transporting it here with some kind of vehicle, and last I checked you didn’t have a driver’s or pilot’s license!”

Loki scoffed. “How difficult could it be to operate a Midgardian vehicle?”

“We’re also talking about an 11-hour flight or a 33-hour drive,” Bruce pointed out, because trying to argue with an ancient god about whether he needed a license to operate a vehicle in the 21st century sounded exactly like what a future shrink might jot down in his file as his mental breaking point.

“That’s travel time each way,” he went on when Loki remained unconvinced. “With weather and traffic prevailing.”

“Also, I’m assuming that this table isn’t exactly the small kind you set at the end of a couch,” Steve chimed in. “How exactly are you going to get it loaded onto anything by yourself without magic?”

Loki seemed unperturbed by this line of arguing. “As you Midgardians say, I have a guy.”

Steve gave him an incredulous look. “A guy.”

“Yes. He is a local shopkeep, and thus far he has proven himself to be both a reliable and sturdy minion.”

“Ok, I’m going to stop you right there,” Tony interrupted, because neither “minion” nor “sturdy” inspired a lot of confidence in this mysterious man and whatever arrangement he and Loki had set up with one another. “Let’s say that somehow you and this guy make it to East Jesus Nowhere—”

“Belgrade.”

“-get your supplies loaded up, and set out for New York again. What happens if someone attacks you on the road? If there were any security cameras in the bunker you tried to rob then someone out there has a picture of your face in their system. They might be looking for you right now.”

Over the course of dinner Loki had gone into the specifics of his little foray into the bunker where the Mind Stone had been housed. The shoddy magical construction and Loki’s concerns for the users’ competence in manipulating the Mind Stone set Tony on edge. He’d been on the wrong end of one too many volatile engineering experiments in his day, but as bad as they’d been human engineers were working with relatively controlled variables which had to abide by the laws of physics. Throwing magic around randomly with little to no understanding of how it operated was in a whole different league of risky and potentially lethal. Not to mention the human experiments these people were running.

Steve and Bruce had both had rather visceral reactions to Loki’s description of what he’d seen in the basement. Bruce had suddenly excused himself from the room and failed to return for several minutes, whereas Steve rigidly sat at the table in silence, hands balled into fists in a way that promised Tony would wake up tomorrow morning to a notification from JARVIS that Steve had decimated the Tower’s supply of punching bags. Furthermore, Steve visibly flinched at Loki’s assertion that one of the guards had referred to someone as “Baron” but said nothing more. Still, Tony wouldn’t be surprised if Steve decided to give Natasha an update later this evening specifically to pass on that part of Loki’s account. Point being, as much as Loki might consider these people to be insultingly inept and beneath what he might normally consider a threat, the Avengers could understand the danger this group posed. Now if only they could get Loki to look at things that way.
Unfortunately at the moment, Loki was still ready to argue rather than acquiesce. “A simple transformation—”

“There’s cameras everywhere now,” Tony quickly countered. “On the highways, at gas stations, and there’s always the chance at someone accidentally snapping a picture and getting you in the background. And if they’re half as smart as we’re worried they might be, then they’re going to be on a constant hunt for you using any means they have at their disposal. If you had to, could you fight and win against these people right now, particularly if they have more experimental soldiers?”

Loki quietly considered the question before finally shaking his head. “It would be risky,” he admitted.

“So it’s settled,” Tony concluded. “The Avengers are coming with you to pick up a magic table from Montana so we can save the world before a space Titan and/or an evil organization that infiltrated SHIELD manages to kill us all.” And wow, wasn’t that just his life nowadays.

“Agreed,” Bruce said. “But now we need to figure out how to make that actually happen without drawing any unnecessary and unwanted attention to what we’re doing. Because honestly? Half the Avengers suddenly showing up in small-town Montana is going to catch some eyes.”

The four took a moment to consider this predicament. “JARVIS, can you zoom out a little bit?” Steve requested. JARVIS did so, allowing them to take a look at the surrounding states on the map. “Thought so.”

“What is it?” Bruce asked.

Steve pointed to the screen. “That’s Yellowstone. JARVIS, how far apart are they?”

“Approximately 90 miles, Captain.”

Suddenly, Tony was hit with a burst of inspiration. “That’s it. A vacation. We’ll sell this as an outdoors trip because Cap here got sick of the city—”

“I’ve lived the majority of my life in Brooklyn or Manhattan, Tony. I’m more New Yorker than you could ever hope to be.”

“And you’ve always regretted not getting to take a trip to some of our national parks when you were younger, because Great Depression,” Tony went on, having learned to tune out Steve and his ridiculous notions of logic by this point. “You finally decided to go now because you thought it would be a good way to motivate more young people to get out of the house, and Bruce and I got dragged along for the ride.”

Thankfully, now Steve was nodding along instead of arguing back. “We’ll go to the park during the day, put in a few publicity shots, and claim that we want something rustic to stay in instead of a chain hotel. We’ll find a bed and breakfast in or near Belgrade, that would give us an excuse to be there.”

“And what exactly would I be doing while all of this is going on?” Loki asked.

“Packing up whatever you want to bring and getting ready to get out fast,” Tony said. “JARVIS, what’s the closest airport to Belgrade?”

“Bozeman, Sir. It’s approximately 10 miles away and can accommodate larger and smaller aircraft alike.”

“Perfect. I’ll schedule a flight out there by the end of the week, that’ll be enough time to buy
whatever outdoorsy nature stuff we need to make this look convincing."

“You can get everything put together that quick?” Bruce wondered.

Tony grinned. “When you know the right people? Absolutely.”

-"Hello?"

“Pepper, I need you cancel my meetings for the next few days. I’m taking a flight to Yellowstone, should be back after a long weekend, no big deal-”

“I’m tagging in.”

“What?! C’mon Pepper, you don’t even know-”

“Tony, you’re calling me out of the blue to say you’re going to be flying halfway across the country to an area whose sole major attraction is the great outdoors.”

“So?”

“You **hate** the great outdoors.”

“But Steve doesn’t!”

“...Steve?”

“Yeah. Funny story, Cap’s always wanted to go to Yellowstone and I might have mentioned how easy it would be to fly us out there on my jet, so-”

“Put Steve on the phone, Tony.”

Pouting, Tony nevertheless deferred to the power of tagging in and handed his phone over to Steve, who was sitting beside him on the couch now and doing his best not to laugh. “She wants to talk to you,” Tony explained, and if there was a bit of sulking conveyed through his tone he was probably entitled to it.

“You must explain to me how that works sometime,” Loki casually requested from across the room. He was kneeling on the floor in front of the coffee table, going through the bag that Bruce had brought up from the workshop earlier. Apparently it was Loki’s standard travel bag, and the god was currently taking stock of its inventory to see what had survived the fight from the previous day.

Tony had needed to distract himself while this was going on; hence making the phone call to Pepper. As fascinating as he might find Loki’s various potions and powders under normal circumstances, there was a huge blood stain soaked into the side of the bag that Bruce had been unable to clean when he’d gone down to the lab earlier (“It might be enchanted or boobytrapped Tony, I’m not risking it when Loki can do the job later.”). It was a painful reminder of what had happened to Loki only a short while ago, and Tony wasn’t sure he’d ever be ready to directly confront that. Besides, it wasn’t like he was missing a once in a lifetime opportunity. JARVIS had apparently talked Loki into setting up shop in the Tower, and Tony was certain he’d get to see the mage’s various and sundry magical supplies soon enough. For now…

“Yes. Yes. Thank you so much Ms. Potts. Haha, yeah, I’ll make sure Tony doesn’t get lost in the forest-”
“I’m a grown man, Pepper!” Tony protested, knowing that it would fall on deaf ears.

“All right. Good night.” A moment later, Steve had hung up the phone and set the phone down on the couch cushion nearest Tony. “Well, that’s that then. Pepper thinks a trip might be good for PR and she hopes we take lots of pics.”

“You sure this’ll work, Tony?” Bruce asked.

“Best plan we’ve got. We’ll do the shopping tomorrow, fly out Friday, visit the park Saturday, get Loki’s stuff loaded up on the jet Saturday night and then be back here Sunday afternoon. Simple.”

The four of them stayed together for a bit longer to strategize, although by and large it was just hammering out an exact list of supplies which Tony and Steve could pick up the next day. Beyond that, there wasn’t much they could actually do until they arrived in Belgrade and gathered up Loki’s possessions. Eventually the group splintered off as Bruce excused himself and Steve decided to go burn off some energy in the gym. For all that Loki had slept earlier in the day he seemed to be wearing down as well, so Tony made the excuse that if they were the only ones left then he was going to just head back to his own room. Sleeping on the couch the night before certainly hadn’t done his back any favors, and he was beginning to feel the repercussions of that choice now. “Going my way?” he joked as Loki stepped onto the elevator behind him.

Loki gave Tony a look, clearly unimpressed by such a low caliber joke. “I understand that you have other floors in your Tower for guests,” he stated. “If it’s too much trouble to have me on your floor…”

“What? No, who said that? Was it Bruce?”

“JARVIS asked whether I wanted my shopping sent to the penthouse or another floor,” Loki explained. Tony silently cursed his A.I.; first JARVIS convinced Loki to move in without running the plan by Tony, and now it was forcing him to have a serious conversation about living arrangements with the god as well?

“Yeah, I’ve got the space if you want some privacy,” Tony stated. “Everyone’s got their own areas here. But realistically Nat and Clint are almost always together on one of their floors and Steve really only goes to his space for sleeping, he’d rather be in the common areas in case you haven’t noticed and-look, what I’m saying is that yeah, if you want a whole floor to yourself you’ve got it. But if you want to stay with me on what is clearly the best floor of the entire Tower by a landslide, then I’ve got a spare bedroom down the hall that’s move-in ready. Your call.”

Loki hummed in response, but didn’t provide a more concrete answer. The elevator stopped on the penthouse floor and Tony stepped out with Loki following a moment after. “You want a drink?” Tony asked, unsure how to proceed now. When did this get awkward?

“A drink would be lovely,” Loki replied, and the two of them made their way to Tony’s bar. At least sharing a drink would give Tony time to think about what to do next.

Loki took a seat on one of the bar stools as Tony pulled out two tumblers and a bottle of decent whiskey. He doubted it would be enough to touch Loki’s alcohol tolerance, but at least it would taste decent going down. “So…”

“So?”

“Any ideas for causing chaos at my expo?” Tony asked, because that was the only topic that came to
mind at the moment.

“A few,” Loki replied, watching Tony pour him a drink and then taking a sip. “Hm, I like this.”

“I’ll make sure to keep it stocked,” Tony blurted out, and whoa, slow down there, that sounded dangerously close to him making long-term plans. “Anything specific? For the Expo, I mean.”

“Not yet. It would probably help if you could explain what this Stark Expo actually is.” Oh right. Loki probably needed information like that.

And so the two of them spent a good deal of time at Tony’s bar that night, Tony elaborating on the history of the Stark Expo from its glory days in the 20th century to the more modern revival that he’d begun a few years ago. The original plan to have the Expo run for a full year had been derailed by Justin Hammer and his murder bots (and wasn’t that a fun bit of history to recount) but there had been some good to come of it. Rather than a year-long exhibition, Stark Industries had retooled the event to run for a solid two months on a traveling basis.

“Wouldn’t that make the entire process far more difficult to orchestrate?” Loki asked as Tony refilled his drink. “Seems like you’ve created unnecessary complications when you could simply leave the Expo in its original facilities and location.”

“Well yeah, keeping it in one place would absolutely make the logistics easier,” Tony admitted. “But then Clint pointed out that it’s kind of insulting to call it an Expo ‘for all the world to see’ if the only people who can come are the ones with the means to get to New York and stay for at least a couple days. So a traveling model that can actually reach a lot of people for relatively little cost on their end is more in line with what I’m going for in the revamped version.”

“Hm. Tell me more.”

Tony explained that the Expo would still kick off in Queens, just like it had in the early days, but then the exhibits would be dismantled and sent on to the next host country. This way, a random kid living in Egypt or Malaysia might actually have a chance of attending the event instead of having to settle for watching a livestream. And at the end of the 12-month cycle, the old exhibits would return to New York and be formally retired on the day before Tony kicked off the new presentations for the next year. Stark Industries loved the publicity (and Tony footing most of the bill from his own pocket) while the public loved seeing mad science experiments. It was a win-win for everyone.

“It all seems rather fascinating,” Loki remarked on what was probably his fifth drink. “And certainly a good way to capture the world’s attention.”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Tony agreed on his third (fourth?) glass. “Just catch their eyes, stir up the Internet, and then talk to the right people up the military food chain.” He laughed then. “Wow. Just realized, my old man started all this to try and get people to work together for the greater good. And I’m about to use his stage to save the entire planet from an alien invasion.”

“I suppose this will create a difficult act to follow next year,” Loki remarked with a smirk. Tony couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of the statement. “Yeah, no kidding.” A comfortable silence fell between them then, until Tony glanced at the clock he’d set up behind the bar. “Oh wow, didn’t mean to ramble on like that.” It was decidedly late now; they’d need to come up with a final decision regarding Loki’s sleeping quarters soon.

The god in question, however, gave no sign that he’d heard Tony’s latest remark. Instead he looked down at the glass in his hands, swirling the amber liquid around with a thoughtful look on his face.
Oh good lord, if Tony had to be the one to make the final call on this he wasn’t sure exactly what might come spilling out of his mouth this time. “So…”

“It’s odd,” Loki remarked, interrupting Tony put still not looking up at him. “Growing up in Asgard, everyone’s packed in rather closely inside the city. You could open any window in the palace at any time, day or night, and you’d hear someone’s voice. Usually it was a drunkard looking for a fight if the hour was late enough, but they were there.”

“…”

“And inside the castle, there were always people running about,” Loki continued. “Guards discussing their latest conquests or maids passing on gossip. Even if you went into the libraries there would be someone scurrying between the shelves and looking for a specific tome, or some novice asking their teacher for help in their research. It was constant. And as frustrating and overwhelming as that din could be at times...I suppose I became accustomed to the background noise of it all.”

Tony finally understood what Loki was asking for, even if the god couldn’t put his request into more direct words. “What was your room like on Asgard?”

“Resplendent, as befit a prince. Why?”

“Well the guest room’s pretty sparse,” Tony explained, eyes glued to the fresh tumbler of alcohol he was pouring for himself. “I need some ideas for redecorating.”

“You don’t-”

“Plan on doing it tonight? Hell no,” Tony interrupted. “It’s late and we both need sleep. Just...start thinking about what you want to go in your room and have JARVIS make up a shopping list. We’ll get some of it tomorrow and the rest after we come back from Belgrade.”

Tony knew this was a major step. This was Loki moving into the Tower and joining forces with the Avengers if only for this one battle. Not just letting him play in the D&D campaign, not even giving him space in the workshop, but making the conscious choice to let Loki house himself in the Avengers’ living space. There were countless ways this could go wrong; the issues Clint or Natasha might have when they found out Loki moved in while they were away, for one thing, or the headbutting that would absolutely come to pass when Thor inevitably tried to make things right with Loki and failed. All of which was besides the fallout the Avengers as a whole would have to contend with if Fury caught wind of this…

But all of those sounded distinctly like things that could be future Tony’s problem. Present Tony was still reeling from his friend’s near-death experience and discovering that not only was there a Titan out to destroy Earth, but that one of the few organizations on this planet which might have looked into that threat had been infiltrated by an as yet unknown adversary. It wasn’t time to parse out the logistics of this arrangement, it was time to close ranks and protect your own by whatever means necessary. The rest could wait.

Chapter End Notes

Oh dear god writing this chapter was like pulling teeth. But like if the teeth were crazy-glued into the jawbone and the tooth puller was a mobility-challenged octogenarian.
We've had a lot of angst in the past few chapters, and hopefully the next few sections will be moving in a slightly more lighthearted direction (at least for a while). I get that some people might not like the direction the story's going now, but I hope most of you are still along for the ride!
The phone rang twice before someone picked up. “Carter’s farrier shop, how may we help you?” a deep voice drawled in a Southern accent from the other end of the line.

Steve blinked, taking a moment to check the phone number he’d dialed. “Clint? You’re going with farrier?”

“Oh Steve! Hang on, let me get Nat...all right, you’re on speaker.”

“So Steve?” Yup, that was Natasha. Steve glanced around the room to check for privacy, pointless as the gesture might be; he was already in the bedroom on his private floor and had made a specific request to JARVIS to announce any guests before they came up. It was late enough that privacy was practically a guarantee, and at last check JARVIS had confirmed that the others were quite occupied with their own business. Bruce was settled in on his own floor now, meditating, while Loki and Tony were drinking in the penthouse together.

Pacing to help dissipate some of his energy, Steve relayed Loki’s most recent volley of information to the others. “Ok, so there’s been another update to the Loki trying to steal the Mind Stone thing. He went over the whole story again and filled in a lot more details.”

“And?”

“And you’re not going to like this.”

Steve was right. Clint and Natasha both swore in turns as he worked through the story of what Loki had seen during his time in the bunker. Even though he’d heard the story earlier and had more time to process, the grim circumstances regarding the disappearance of the Mind Stone weren’t any easier on Steve. Human experiments, abuses of magical artifacts, and referring to an authority as ‘Baron’ were all familiar tunes that he had hoped never to hear again in the 21st century. “Fury’s report confirmed that whatever or whoever was in that location up until last night is gone,” Steve concluded as he paced around the bedroom at a faster clip. “There’s nothing but a small crater now, and if SHIELD actually knows what was in that place or who was pulling the strings they’re not telling me.”

“What are you thinking, Cap?” Clint asked.

Steve sighed and sank down onto his bed, knowing that he needed to calm down before he got to the next part or he might accidentally put his fist through the wall. Again. “I know how crazy this is going to sound. I know they were supposed to have been completely wiped out decades ago, I sent
Red Skull into the void or something with the Space Stone and saw him vanish with my own two eyes...but this all feels like HYDRA.”

“...”

“Guys? You still there?”

“Yeah Steve, just thinking,” Clint replied.

“I’ve never heard of any modern HYDRA cells,” Natasha stated, though Steve could tell from her tone that she hadn’t yet rejected his idea. “But that doesn’t mean they’re not out there. Losing Red Skull and the Tesseract to an American hero right before the end of the War...if there had been any members left with half an ounce of sense, then they would have gone to ground after such an absolute defeat. Let the world think they’ve been vanquished and rebuild themselves very slowly and carefully the next time around.”

“The Cold War was all about subterfuge and espionage,” Clint added. “Makes sense for an organization like HYDRA to swing that way too. Give it a few years, maybe a decade or two, then when you’ve got enough people in the right places-”

“Like SHIELD,” Steve suggested.

“Like SHIELD, start making bigger moves.”

There was a pause as the three of them took a moment to consider the implications of what they’d just hypothesized. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance some other evil organization with a penchant for human experiments and using ‘baron’ as a rank popped up while I was in the ice?” Steve asked, though he had a feeling he already knew the answer to his question.

“Uh, definitely not,” Clint answered, and Steve could practically feel Natasha’s disappointed look filtering in across the phone line.

“That’s what I was afraid you were going to say.”

“Anything else we should know about?” Natasha asked, clearly trying to soften the blow with a change of subject.

Steve laughed, thinking about the post dinner plans he and the others had made to fetch Loki’s magic supplies from rural Montana. He didn’t know what was more ridiculous, that the Avengers were about to help a former arch-nemesis relocate his entire operations or that the relocation would move him into the Tower for an as-yet undetermined length of time. “Yeah but you wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Let’s just say that it involves Loki and my life going a direction that I really wasn’t expecting at the start of the week.”

“Sounds about right,” Clint said. “Anyway Steve, Nat and I have to go. Can’t be too careful on a field job, right?”

“Right, sorry to call you guys again-”

“Don’t apologize,” Natasha interrupted before he could start feeling too badly about calling them. “This might actually make the next part of the job a little easier.”

“Do I want to know?”

“No. We’ll call you when it’s safe and we have a little more info, but like I told you earlier, don’t be
surprised if it takes a few days or even a week before you hear from us again,” Natasha warned.

“Right. Be safe you guys.”

“You too.”

“Bye,” Clint added just before the call ended.

Steve took a minute to reflect on their conversation before tossing his phone onto the bed and practically jogging out of the room. Looks like it was back to the gym for another few hours.

-n-

Clint watched Natasha in silence as she removed the battery from their burner phone. He knew in a moment she’d be going out to the parking lot under the guise of refilling their ice bucket at the machine down at the other end of the roach motel they were staying in. Once there, she’d slip the battery under the machine and toss the phone in the garbage, decreasing the chance of anyone being able to find and use the phone again. It was a strategy that they’d perfected over the years, and even if it was unnecessary 90% of the time the pair of them always believed that one could never be too careful in operations like this. Particularly given the current circumstances. “What do you think?” he asked.

Natasha took a moment to formulate a reply, quietly turning over the battery in her hands. “I don’t like it,” she finally stated. “We went into the SHIELD archives today and found a report which indicates that the Mind Stone ought to be in a holding facility in North Dakota. But then when we took a closer look, it’s impossible to find any record of the transport that brought the Stone there, or of the personnel who accepted the non-existent delivery.”

Clint frowned, remembering. It hadn’t been easy to dig that deep into the archives, unfortunately; “borrowing” Coulson’s security pass and switching it for a fake while the man was in the restroom was a bit underhanded, but neither he nor Natasha had high enough clearance to access SHIELD’s records of transport or storage of dangerous objects without setting off a ridiculous amount of alarms. Ergo, they’d swiped the pass, snuck into a conference room that was closed for remodeling, and done a bit of off the record research. And what they had been able to access off travel laptop Tony made especially for them (“HA! I’d like to see SHIELD’s firewalls keep this guy out.”) had been rather concerning.

The Mind Stone supposedly arrived at the North Dakota outpost mere days after the Battle of New York had concluded. However, there was no record of a high security transport going into the facility on that day, meaning that SHIELD had either opted to have one of the most powerful artifacts in the universe transported in with the cafeteria’s monthly food delivery, or the Stone had somehow magically appeared in a max-security vault sixty feet underground. Alone, that wouldn’t have been grounds for concern; records disappeared from SHIELD’s history all the time if a coverup was necessary for the sake of a major operation. Someone could have simply deleted the transit report to try and conceal the Stone’s location from any prying eyes. But there were other anomalies in this case that could raise even Natasha’s eyebrow and helped convince Clint that this wasn’t just another SHIELD operation been obfuscated for the sake of security. Most notably, agent Charles Stamper.

Charles Stamper had been a SHIELD employee for the better part of a decade. He’d been recruited into the trainee program due to exemplary decorum and technical skill during his time as an engineer in the National Guard and had been snatched up as soon as his first tour was finished. He’d been considered for field agent candidacy but opted for a cushier desk job in records after less than a year in SHIELD’s employ. Two years ago he’d been transferred from Oklahoma to the North Dakota
branch, and thus far seemed to be a diligent but private worker, if his employee evaluations were anything to go by. Overall, Charles appeared to be a perfectly average SHIELD employee. Unfortunately, he also didn’t seem to actually exist.

Once upon a time, it had been easy to make a person disappear. You took them out of their hometown, erased what few physical records existed in doctor’s offices or tax filings, and perhaps shoved a bottle of hair dye into their welcome kit to complete the disappearance. Even a few years ago it might have been possible to delete a person’s education or employment records and have that be the end of it. But life in the Tower had taught Clint and Natasha one simple fact: in a world with JARVIS, no one really ever disappeared.

SHIELD had a contingency plan for Tony Stark going rogue that was at least an inch thick when you printed it out, and with good reason. JARVIS could out-think and out-maneuver anyone or anything on Earth, operating with speed and efficiency that was honestly terrifying even knowing that the A.I. was on their side. During a particularly rough week where the internet wouldn’t stop making memes out of a pantsless Hulk, a drunken Tony had briefly threatened to shut down the internet completely until the entire planet got its shit together, and JARVIS had almost immediately provided a time estimate as to how long such a plan would need to be properly executed. Six and half hours give or take, as it turned out, which was long enough to convince Tony that he’d be better off finding something productive to do in the workshop while he sobered up. Later on JARVIS attempted to reassure the others present that his answer was really based on how long he estimated it would take for Tony to calm down; in reality, should the Avengers ever need to cripple the world wide web for any reason, JARVIS could probably achieve 99% success in under three hours. Clint hadn’t known what was scarier at the time, the notion that Tony Stark and his creations could break the internet on a whim, or that he was living in a home with an A.I. smart enough to lie to its creator about how long it would take to cripple the entire planet’s information networks.

Point being, JARVIS could not be fooled by simple, outdated tricks to disguise or erase a person’s identity, because he’d been made by a man who would take any attempts to disguise or erase online behavior as a personal challenge for him to combat. He was a learning system who was perpetually adapting to human tricks and plans, and knew how to check every online nook and cranny that normal humans might not even consider. There was always some picture from a childhood birthday party, some b-roll shots of a crowd at a baseball game, even an alternate Twitter account that could be linked back to you as a person, given enough time and processing power to find them. And JARVIS, despite an extensive search across all corners of the world wide web, could find no record of a Charles Stamper who might have been part of the military before quietly disappearing off anyone’s radar. In short, Natasha and Clint were dealing with a delivery that never happened being received by a man who never existed. Oh, and this was all besides the fact that never in their entire history of working for SHIELD had Natasha or Clint heard of highly sensitive cargo being shipped to a remote facility, as opposed to one of SHIELD’s better staffed and more secure locations a bit closer to civilization. Steve had agreed with their assessment when they reported in earlier that night; things were not good.

Never ones to back down, however, the superspies had immediately set out in a rental car (acquired at Tony’s expense, not that he needed to know about that quite yet) and beelined for North Dakota. Charles Stamper might not exist, but somebody had to actually be staffing the facility. Clint and Natasha just needed to start poking around and asking the right people the right questions.

They’d made it as far as rural Ohio before stopping for at a motel after that, having given Steve an update on the situation while driving. Steve had been disappointed, understandably; the evidence that they’d gathered so far had been rather spartan, but what little they could find seemed to corroborate Loki’s account of the Mind Stone’s disappearance. And now that it looked like they were facing a far more intimidating and calculating enemy, things were worse.
“But more than that,” Natasha continued, redirecting Clint’s attention to the present, “I’m worried that if we decide to pull out now, whatever evidence we might find in North Dakota is going to be wiped out of existence. At the moment, we’re dealing with an organization that may or may not be HYDRA. All we know for certain is that they like to operate behind the scenes and have done a very good job of covering their tracks for years.”

“You and I specifically don’t have any reason to turn tail right now,” Clint reasoned. “They probably know that it was Loki who tried to take the Stone, but as far as the world knows he’s definitely on the outs with the Avengers. So they might be on the lookout for him coming back for round two, but they’d have no reason to suspect that we’re up to anything right now.”

Natasha nodded in agreement. “So it’s settled. You and I keep pushing on. And as much as I hate to say it-”

“Please don’t, Nat,” Clint whined, already sensing where this conversation was going.

“-we can’t afford to waste any time spending the night here in the motel. We’ll have to sleep in shifts on the drive.”

Clint sighed but rose from his bed, having already resigned himself to his fate. “All right. You toss the burner, I’ll get us checked out. But the first thing we’re doing after getting on the interstate is finding a truckstop with decent coffee.”

“Obviously.”

The drive itself took a little over 18 hours, factoring in restroom, gas, and stretching breaks. Clint and Natasha both stayed up for the first leg of the trip, Clint driving as Natasha used the satellite connection on the laptop to do a bit of research into the employees of the North Dakota branch. To no one’s surprise, the facility seemed to be staffed by a skeleton crew of SHIELD’s not quite finest. Most were underlings who had either proven to be utterly incompetent during basic training or had committed some sort of unforgivable infraction against their superior officers that merited being banished to the ends of the earth. However, among the few higher level management workers at the facility, Natasha was able to hunt down one Rory Simmons, who (by JARVIS’ reckoning, at least) really existed. He was a divorced father of 2 and a SHIELD employee of 15 years who’d never so much as gotten a footnote on his own evaluations for a messy desk. The pictures JARVIS found of him suggested a perfectly average man who usually wore button ups and bifocals whether he was at work or grocery shopping; the kind of person you’d see at a company picnic and then promptly forget about until you ran into them at work a few weeks later. He was unassuming and unproblematic, and didn’t appear to have many social connections outside of the office or his immediate family. Overall Rory came off as the kind of person no one would ever suspect of doing anything more sinister than trying to use a slightly expired coupon at a supermarket checkout. And yet, Rory was the one who’d been writing Charles’ employee evaluation reports for nearly two years. Needless to say, his home stood as the top point of interest on the superspies’ road trip.

Hours later, after two shift changes in their driving and several uncomfortable naps in the back seat of the car, Clint and Natasha pulled up to Rory’s home. It was a well-kept double-wide trailer set a few meters off the main road, if you could call a two-lane highway in the middle of rural North Dakota a main road. The sun had set by the time they finally parked and shut off the engine, and Clint for one was happy to finally be getting out of the car for a period of time longer than a few minutes. There was a pickup truck in front of their car in the gravel driveway and the porchlight was on, the soft yellow light attracting moths even this late in the year. By mutual silent agreement, Clint and Natasha had both brought small handguns with them on this trip, leaving their Avengers
equipment back in New York. No point in tipping off anyone that this trip was something that the Avengers as a whole planned on involving themselves in.

Natasha took point as they approached the front door, checking that Clint was a few feet back before knocking. They heard footsteps, followed by a cry of, “One sec!” Moments later, the door opened to reveal a heavyset middle-aged man with sandy blond hair. He was dressed in scruffy jeans and an oil-stained t-shirt; judging from the screwdriver in his hands he’d been doing some repair work around the house before they’d arrived. “Can I help you?” he asked, eyes ping-ponging between Natasha and Clint.

“Rory Simmons?” Natasha asked. He paused, then slowly nodded his head. “We need to ask you a few questions.”

Rory began closing the door. “Listen, I don’t know what you’re doing out here-”

Natasha’s foot was in the doorway between one blink and the next, the toe of her boot jamming the door from closing any further. “Rory, please. A lot of lives are at stake.”

Clint watched as Rory stiffened, perhaps getting ready to argue with Natasha (bad idea) or run (worse). Of course that wasn’t the kind of person Rory was; fighters didn’t end up working a desk job in the middle of nowhere for a decade without even thinking of putting in for a transfer at some point. The battle was won as soon as Natasha had spoken. Rory sighed as his shoulders sank down, whatever fight he might have possessed leaving him in one great exhale. “All right. But don’t expect me to put on the coffee for you.”

Natasha and Clint followed him into the trailer’s living room and took a seat on a worn leather couch, while Rory made himself comfortable in a rocking chair set beneath a high window. The blinds were closed and the night was overcast, meaning that their only light came from the dusty fluorescents humming overhead and down the hallway. To the left was a small kitchen, where a ceiling fan was sitting on the counter in pieces; doubtless, this was the project Rory had been occupying himself with prior to their arrival. “I won’t pretend I don’t know who you are,” Rory said, setting his screwdriver on the floor in a non-threatening manner and then folding his hands in front of him. “Go right for the throat, don’t you,” he commented as he extracted a small tumbler and a bottle of whiskey of a brand that Clint knew was strong enough to peel paint.

Both spies watched him in complete silence; had they suspected Rory was planning on extracting a weapon of any type, he’d already be dead with half a clip emptied into his chest. But nothing about his movements indicated that the man was prepared to challenge either of them; he was defeated and slow in his movements. This was nothing more than a condemned man choosing to meekly meet his fate after enjoying one last drink.
Pouring himself a generous three fingers of hard liquor, Rory shuffled back to his chair and set the bottle on the ground near his feet. Clearly he intended to keep the alcohol within easy reach, which certainly did not bode well for whatever story Clint and Natasha were about to hear. He took a healthy sip, winced slightly, and began speaking again. “To answer your question, Charles exists on paper only. There’s never been a Charles Stamper in SHIELD’s employ that I know of, and definitely not at my branch.”

“So you’ve been forging official records,” Natasha concluded, voice carefully neutral even with such a damning accusation. “Lying to SHIELD about your branch’s activities. Putting countless agents in danger.”

“It didn’t start out that way!” Rory insisted.

“So what really happened?” Clint asked.

Rory took another drink. “About four years ago, my daughter called me up in the middle of the night crying,” he explained. “Said that she’d had a couple classes that she didn’t do so hot in and lost her scholarship. If she couldn’t come up with next semester’s tuition in a few weeks, she’d be out of the university.” Rory shook his head. “She’s real smart, you hear me? Graduated valedictorian and all that. She just gets real anxious sometimes about school, and this was her first year living away from me or her mom. Just some bad luck, that’s all. I knew she could pull through if I could help her out of this one tight spot!”

“But that was a lot of money to come up with on short notice,” Natasha concluded. “And SHIELD doesn’t pay that well if you’re at a desk job in the middle of nowhere.”

Rory nodded. “I just...I couldn’t stand the thought that she’d come back here and end up working at a truck station married to some meathead on an oil rig. I said something to my coworkers one night while we were at the bar, and then a few days later this guy I’ve never seen before is in my office and says he wants a private meeting.”

“Who was it?” Natasha inquired, leaning forward ever so slightly in her seat to indicate her interest.

“Said his name was Herman Donnelson, but I’m pretty sure that’s fake,” Rory admitted. “Older fella, short blond hair, kinda had this high school vice principal vibe to him, you get me? Anyway, he said that SHIELD had heard what was going on and wanted to look out for me. Said I’d been too good an employee for too long, and as long as I worked for them, well, looking out for me meant looking out for my family too.”

Rory drained the last of his drink and poured himself another. “I want to say that I told him no, gave some line about how my family didn’t need the charity.”

“But you didn’t,” Clint deduced. “Because your daughter was more important than your pride.”

Rory shot him a bitter smile and shrugged. “She and her brother are worth more to me than anything else in the world. A guy higher up the company ladder wants to help me make sure she’s got a better shot than me or her mom ever had? What kind of father says no to that?”

“And did he help you?”

“Oh yeah, Kathy called me up the next day to say that some angel donor sent her a letter promising to help get her through school,” Rory confirmed. “Dunno any of the specifics, but she had a roof over her head and tuition covered in the next term so I couldn’t complain.”

“But that wasn’t the end of it,” Natasha prodded.
Rory’s smile fell away. “A couple of months go by, and Herman swings by my office again. This time he says that he and his friends heard about my son, and they know college is coming up for him in a couple years. Don’t get me wrong, Alex is smart but he’s not brainy like Kathy. Scholarship money would be a pipe dream for him. So when they offered to pay for him too…”

“But there was a catch this time,” Natasha surmised.

“Small stuff, at first. They needed some help adjusting shipping dates back a few hours, or maybe I needed to underreport the amount of supplies we were shipped sometimes,” Rory explained. “I figured it was just warehouse graft, maybe these guys were trying to make a few extra bucks on the company dime. Nothing I hadn’t seen before. So I did it and tried not to think too hard about what I was doing, since no one was really getting hurt. At least, until two years ago.”

A longer drink this time, and when he finished Rory immediately reached down for the bottle of whiskey again. “Herman said it would be simple. All I had to do was fill out some employee evaluations for a man named Charles Stamper. Charles was an undercover agent, see, and if he didn’t have an air-tight cover than he and a lot of other people might get hurt. All they needed me to do was fill out a few extra pieces of paper every couple of months.”

Rory sloshed another round into his glass and looked up towards the superspies. “I’m not stupid. I’m not as brainy as some of the folks you two hang around, but I’m not dumb. If SHIELD actually wanted us to provide a cover for this Stamper guy as an employee out here then they would’ve briefed the whole team. Something was hinky about this. I started to do some digging and noticed a few things not lining up with the history they gave me for the guy, plus a few of our records that had clearly been tampered with by someone off-base.”

“What did you find out?” Clint demanded.

Rory shook his head. “One day I came home to an envelope taped to my door. No name, no address, nothing. But I was curious and took a peek inside…” he shuddered and drained the glass. “Pics. The envelope was stuffed with pictures of my kids.”

“Were they...hurt?” Natasha inquired, trying to word her question as delicately as possible.

“No and thank god for that,” Rory answered. “But there were tons of them; my son at the movies with friends, my daughter walking around her university campus, stuff like that. It was like...it wasn’t a threat, per se, but it was something you know was meant to be taken as a threat, you get me?”

Natasha and Clint both nodded in understanding.

“So after that, I stopped digging,” Rory finished. “I went back to filling out the reports on Charles Stamper and turned a blind eye to whatever they were doing. But now I’ve got two of the Avengers sitting in my living room, so I’m guessing things are getting pretty serious.”

The three of them sat in silence for a time, letting the weight of Rory’s confession sink in. The only sounds were the hum of the lights overhead, and a distant crackling noise coming from outside. Clint paused. Crackling-

Clint barely had time to grab Natasha and fling them prone on the ground before the bullets began tearing through the trailer.

Natasha swore in some European tongue as Rory cried out and fell heavily to the ground, clutching his stomach and groaning. He’d been sitting with his back towards the window and now there was
blood seeping between his fingertips, indicating that whatever was being fired at them had enough velocity to tear through the side of a house and a person afterwards as well. “Fuck, Rory, where’s your panic button?!” Clint demanded as he began army crawling across the living room towards the kitchen.

Rory sucked in a shaking breath and whimpered, teeth clenched in agony as he curled into a tighter ball. “Re...cliner...lever...”

“Got it,” Natasha muttered from behind Clint. The recliner in question was sitting besides the couch, meaning that it was easier for Natasha to find the button than for Clint to turn around. All SHIELD personnel who lived away from official barracks had some sort of alarm system installed in their home, so that in the event of a hostile attack they could always contact someone for backup. The living room wasn’t a bad choice, given that most attacks in the home tended to happen as soon as a person entered their residence. If Natasha had been able to find the button and trigger it, then help was on the way. Now they just needed to survive long enough for backup to arrive.

Clint finally made it to the kitchen and saw, to his eternal joy, that there was a back door leading out from the trailer. It wasn’t the most sophisticated of escape routes, but it was better than charging straight out the front door into a hail of bullets. Checking that Natasha was following his lead, Clint unholstered his handgun and shot through the trailer wall twice towards their mystery assailant. If the pair of them didn’t want to risk a sneak attack as soon as they went out the back, then they needed to convince their attacker that they were hunkering down in the living room for a fight.

It worked. Immediately bullets began flying through the air again, shattering windows and sending drywall raining down upon Clint’s head. He and Natasha quickly scrambled towards the exit, him sitting up just long enough to twist the knob and open the door so that Natasha could dive out with a gun drawn, ready to intercept whoever might be waiting for them. Fortunately, no one was there.

Unfortunately (and Clint realized this far too late) even though they’d made it out of the trailer there was nowhere to run. What had doubtless been cornfields abounding in seven-foot tall stalks mere months ago were now flat muddy plains. There was no shelter anywhere in sight, not that they could see very far in such low light. Oh, and the crackling sound that Clint had heard earlier? He was positive now that he was hearing a roaring fire, and a betting man would probably guess that whoever was attacking them right now had decided to torch the rental car and Rory’s truck as well. Great.

“Shit, this is bad,” he whispered. Natasha didn’t even bother to voice her agreement; that went without saying. Instead she jerked her head to the left and began creeping along the ground around the back of the trailer, gun drawn and at the ready. Clint moved in the opposite direction, hunkering down to make himself as small as possible. When they’d both reached opposite sides of the trailer and the gunfire had ceased for a moment, the pair of them sprang out and began shooting.

In the glowing orange-red light of the burning vehicles, Clint was able to make out a few features of their assailant. Shockingly there was only one person attacking them: a man, stocky build, mask pulled up over the lower part of his face with a concerningly large amount of firepower strapped to his chest. He hadn’t even flinched when the superspies dove out of cover, but rather relaxed his hold on his rifle and charged towards Natasha at a speed even Steve would be impressed by. Clearly he intended to take them out one by one.

Clint immediately dropped to a low crouch and aimed at him, firing off as many shots as he could before their adversary got too close to Natasha. To his shock the man simply raised his left arm to block the shots, bullets ricocheting off him with a metallic clang. He must have been wearing some kind of body armor under the layers of black he was wrapped in. As the man closed in on Natasha,
bringing himself too close for gunfire, Clint drew a knife and began running towards the two of them.

Natasha, of course, hadn’t so much as flinched when the man started charging towards her. Instead she continued firing on him and actually managed to clip him in the leg if a momentary stumble on his part was anything to go by. She refused to stay stationary and instead hurriedly cut diagonally across the field, trying to minimize how much of a target she made at the expense of her accuracy. Sadly handguns can only hold so many rounds, and as soon as her clip was emptied the attacker fell upon her, latching on with one hand as the other pulled back to make a fist.

Natasha spun out of his initial grab and swiped at his back with a knife, missing anything vital but slicing through the strap holding the gun across his shoulder. He let the weapon fall to the ground and spun around with a sweep of his legs, nearly managing to knock Natasha’s feet out from under her. Natasha grabbed his hair for leverage to catch her balance and then slammed a knee into his face, and Clint knew from personal experience that at the very least she’d broken his nose.

But rather than startle and stumble back from the attack like most victims did, the man instead reached up and grabbed Natasha’s wrist. Clint shouted in dismay, realizing too late the predicament his noise had put them in as the man shifted his weight and turned his head towards Clint. Suddenly Natasha was in the air and flying towards Clint at top speed, and there came a horrific moment of clarity as Clint realized that this person, whoever they were, had just thrown a grown woman twenty feet through the air like a ragdoll. Despite years of combat training and field experience, in terms of raw power both Clint and Natasha were out of their league in this fight.

Natasha slammed into Clint’s chest with a grunt, the force of the impact sending both of them crashing to the ground in a confused tangle of limbs. Clint hissed as stars danced across his vision; a few of his ribs were definitely bruised if not cracked now. Natasha rolled off him as quickly as she could and Clint tried to prop himself up to attack, but his gun had gone flying in the collision. Natasha needed a minute to reload which they didn’t have, because already their opponent was collecting his fallen rifle and turning towards them again, raising his weapon to take fire-

And then, out of fucking nowhere a car’s headlights came on just seconds before the vehicle slammed into the man, sending him flying over the hood before it skidded to a stop.

Clint stared, utterly dumbfounded by this turn of events. One minute he’d been preparing to fling himself over Natasha to provide her with what little cover his body could give, and the next minute they were being saved by a deus ex machina in the shape of a hatchback. Before he or Natasha could move the car was doing a k-turn, reversing and turning back towards the road seconds before the passenger door popped open and…

“Get in,” Coulson demanded in a no-nonsense tone that he’d perfected over years of working in close quarters with the Avengers.

Clint and Natasha didn’t need to be told twice. Natasha ran and dove into the car, scrambling into the backseat as Clint jumped in behind her and slammed the door shut. He’d barely even gotten into the vehicle before Coulson was flooring the accelerator, and with good cause; from the rearview mirror, Clint could see that their adversary was slowly but surely getting back on his feet, eyes peering around to see where his gun had flown after the impact. “Goddamn,” he whispered.

“You can say that again,” Coulson commented darkly.

“What are you doing here?” Natasha asked.

Coulson glanced at her in the rearview mirror for a moment before returning his focus to the road
through the now-cracked windshield. “Lipstick.”

“Huh?” Clint intelligently inquired.

“Lipstick. Always found it rather handy; easy to make excuses for why you have it around, lightweight and small, not to mention the many uses it has in the modern age.”

“Uh-huh…”

“For example, there’s this great brand that’s really popular with the club kids in Germany. Looks perfectly transparent under ordinary light, but when you put it under a blacklight suddenly it’s glowing neon green or pink.”

Clint still wasn’t following. “Sir?”

“Several years ago, certain SHIELD agents who shall remain nameless got into this nasty habit of swiping my ID card off my desk whenever they wanted access to the snack machines on the more secure levels,” Coulson dryly went on. “I started marking my ID card with blacklight lipstick so it’d rub off on their fingers and I’d catch them red-handed later on. Or green-handed, as the case may be.”

Clint had a sinking suspicion he knew where this was going. “Umm…”

“Picture this, if you will. Yesterday afternoon, I come into my office and notice that something doesn’t seem quite right about my ID,” Coulson continued. “I check it under the blacklight, and yup, there’s no lipstick. Someone’s switched it for a fake. But before I can get around to reporting this security breach to the higher powers that be, I discover that hours later, someone has returned my original ID to my desk once again and escaped with the fake one.”

“I-”

“In all of SHIELD, there are very few agents who are foolish enough to take my ID for any extended period of time nowadays,” Coulson said calmly, eyes glued to the road. “But there is exactly one agent in the entirety of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division who is inexplicably dumb enough to think I wouldn’t notice him not only swapping my ID for a fake but then trying to change them back later—”

“Hey!”

“So I do a little digging, and it turns out that one of your aliases and one of Natasha’s aliases have decided to rent a car with Tony’s Stark credit card and go for a road trip,” Coulson carried on, completely ignoring Clint’s indignation. “One that demanded nearly 24 straight hours of driving and ended with you nearly getting gunned down at a SHIELD agent’s home right before an alarm went off from this location. Mighty suspicious, if you ask me.”

Suddenly, Clint remembered that Rory was still lying on the floor of the trailer, possibly bleeding out. “Oh fuck, Rory!”

“SHIELD’s on the way,” Coulson assured him. “If they get there in time fantastic, but there’s nothing else we can do. Right now, we’re going to drive until we get to a safehouse with a car that doesn’t look like it just ran over a person. Once we get there I’m going to pass out on the first flat surface I encounter, because I’ve been up for the better part of thirty hours by this point. But until then,” (and he very pointedly flicked the lock for the car doors at this point) “you two are going to tell me exactly what is going on.”
Yup, we've got some new faces popping up in the story now. Not sure how much we'll work with them in the future, but we'll see.

I headcanon that JARVIS and Tony have an argument at least once a month about how to make people be less stupid, and it almost always involves JARVIS having to be the one to talk Tony down. JARVIS is just having too much fun with humanity right now.
Asgard was the same as ever when Thor arrived. Although it was early morning back on Midgard, here the stars hung low in the twilight sky as he crossed the rainbow bridge, waves gently undulating beneath him as the city shimmered in the distance. Heimdall had briefly greeted him before returning to his post, leaving Thor alone with his thoughts on his return home.

If Loki had spoken true the night before then all the realms were in dire straits. Titans were beings who made even the strongest of Asgardians look frail and helpless; if one of them had truly gone rogue with the intention to end life across the universe, then they posed a threat Asgard could not ignore. Of more immediate concern to Thor, however, was whatever Midgardian had so grievously injured Loki.

One of the constants of Thor’s youth had been Loki’s near-impunity to any sort of bodily harm on their adventures together. Thor’s approach to life’s novelties had always been more hands on than Loki’s, so to speak. Scrapes and bruises were as much a part of his childhood as playing outside or listening to Odin’s bedtime stories, being acceptable side effects to wrestling with friends in the training yard or chasing down unknown beasts through the woods beyond the city walls. Loki was a different story.

Loki had always been a cautious child; while Thor might be willing to run forward and immediately try to give a belly rub to a merchant’s pet three-headed dragon, Loki would wait and observe from a distance until Thor beckoned him over, certain the dragon wouldn’t hurt either of them. Loki had always been the more hesitant of the two, content to see how things would play out for his brother before he involved himself. Thor never minded, since Loki would still be nearby and his other friends were quite happy to charge in headfirst with him to explore and examine the unknown. But childish habits morph into adult mannerisms, as Jane had told him once. And so by the time they were adults fighting across the Nine Realms, Loki had developed a fighting style that allowed him to operate from a distance while Thor and the others served as the vanguard. The caution had paid him back in dividends; it had been centuries since Loki had sustained a wound more severe than a paper cut incurred while flipping through a book.

And now there was something out there with the power and intent to bring gods to their knees, in the quest for some unknown goal using a relic that no one in all of Midgard was equipped to properly handle. Asgard needed to be made aware that the Infinity Stones were being manipulated by people who couldn’t possibly understand the consequences of using them, and that an even more dangerous adversary was trying to collect them all.

As he reached the end of the Bifrost, Thor’s gloomy thoughts were briefly dissipated by the appearance of Fandral by the gates, apparently flirting with one of the women who was delivering
supplies to the guards at this outpost. Once he noticed Thor crossing the rainbow bridge, however, the startled warrior immediately forgot his current romantic conquest and began jogging towards him, hand raised in greeting. “Thor!”

Thor responded with a smile and a slightly quicker pace. He loved his life on Midgard and the friends he’d made there, but there was something comforting in a return home to see the city and his Asgardian shield brothers. In a moment the two of them were hugging, Fandral chuckling and smacking Thor on the back to make him let go. “Good to see you again, Thor! Heimdall sent word that you’d be back today, but we didn’t realize it would be so sudden.”

“I’ve business with the Allfather,” Thor explained, walking towards the palace with Fandral in tow. “Things are not well on Midgard, I’m afraid.”

Fandral’s jovial mood deflated a bit then. “Is it...Loki?”

The fallout from Loki’s destruction of the Bifrost, supposed death, and later invasion of Midgard had divided all of Asgard into different factions regarding the people’s support for the disgraced prince. Some demanded justice in the form of prison or worse; Loki’s actions could arguably be seen as malicious attacks on three different realms in a relatively short time span, and Asgard needed to set an example for the rest of the realms to follow. Others argued that Loki ought to be dragged before the royal court and sentenced to make amends for the damage he’d done to Asgard, as well as renounce any ties he had to the royal family as penance. And then there was a third group, far smaller than the former two, who still clung to Loki with blind fealty and insisted that their prince must have had cause for what he did to Jotunheim and Midgard. Every time Thor returned to Asgard there were new arguments from all sides, most whispered in hushed tones that died away as soon as someone noticed Thor’s approach. Thor couldn’t be surprised; in a realm as stable and unchanging as Asgard, such disturbances would certainly still be fodder for gossip years after the fact. Thor could only be thankful that Loki’s Jotun heritage was still hidden from all but a few Asgardians; the Norns only knew how much worse that information might bias what the people were saying.

Where his friends’ opinions fell among these factions (if, in fact, they belonged to any) was a guess most days. Sif and Hogun were tight-lipped whenever Loki came up in conversation, and Volstagg wavered between wordless anger and confusion over his fallen friend. Fandral, on the other hand, simply became sadder when people began to whisper about Loki and made an effort to change the subject. Of all Thor’s friends, Fandral had taken the most delight in Loki’s pranks during their childhood and battle planning later on. Of course this appreciation was masked behind layers of sarcasm and backhanded compliments which Loki doubtless took as insults. Fandral never rushed to defend Loki when the others lay into him with quips and digs at his tricks, but of all the voices who’d ever spoken unkindly of Loki’s seidr and cunning, his was the mildest. For all the good it had done them, anyway...

Realizing that Fandral was still waiting for an answer, Thor glanced around and then motioned for his friend to step a bit closer. “Yes, but not in the way you’re thinking my friend.”

“Oh?”

“It might be nothing, but I want the Allfather to verify a few things for me before I tell you and the others.”

“You’re being rather mysterious about all this,” Fandral noted. “Which only increases my certainty that Loki is at the heart of whatever you’re doing and does nothing to alleviate my worries.”

“Again, I will tell you more-”
“After speaking to your father,” Fandral finished with a dismissive hand wave. “Very well, it’s not like we’ll have a hard time finding you. Once the kingdom finds out you’re back everyone and their mother will demand a full night of eating and drinking to celebrate and hear tales of what’s happening on Midgard now.”

Thor forced a smile. Although Loki’s warning hadn’t left him in a very lighthearted mood, it would still be comforting to see his fellow Asgardians again. “I’ll be here for a few days, Fandral, plenty of time for that.”

By now they’d reached the edge of the city proper and were crossing into the edge of the mercantile district. People waved and called out greetings to the pair of them, forcing a pause in Thor and Fandral’s conversation as they responded in kind. Being back on the streets of Asgard, watching everyone bustling about the market with arms full of their daily shopping or hurrying down the street to attend to business elsewhere helped Thor relax. For all the danger that the Nine Realms might soon fall into, right now his home was still safe. Thor needed to protect these people, he knew that down to his bones. It was imperative that he speak to Odin soon, and relay whatever information he could back to the Avengers and Loki as soon as he had a better idea of what was going on beyond the relative safety of Asgard’s walls.

At last they came to the palace and Fandral bade his friend goodbye with a clap on the shoulder. “I’ll let the others know you’ve returned,” he promised. “We’ll find you before dinner.”

“Thank you Fandral. Wish me luck.” A nod of the head, and then Fandral was gone.

Thor took a moment to center himself before entering the palace. The news he brought with him would not be well received. He had to hope that Odin was willing to hear it all the same. “Brother, I pray that this isn’t another one of your tricks.”

-n-

The guards directed Thor to Odin’s personal chambers, informing him that the king had chosen to spend the morning in his study working on a treaty he was brokering with a neighboring realm. They assured Thor over and over that Odin had taken care of most of the work for this deal the day prior, and was simply reviewing it now. Thor’s arrival, therefore would be unexpected but not unwelcome.

They were correct. Thor only had to knock twice before a familiar voice called out, “Enter!” He stepped into the room and saw his father seated at a table absolutely littered with documents, scrolls, and inkwells, marking through several lines on a lengthy roll of parchment as Thor approached. A half-eaten plate of food sat near his elbow, suggesting that Odin had been up working since dinner the night before. Perhaps the guards had underestimated exactly how important Odin’s current work was to the king.

Odin paused his writing for a moment to glance up when he heard the door shut again, then stopped and set it down completely upon realizing who exactly had entered his chambers. “Thor?”

“Father,” Thor replied. “I see you’re busy as ever.”

“Negotiations will be the death of me,” Odin groused as he slowly rose from his seat and crossed the room towards his son. “King Odin, all-powerful ruler of the Nine Realms, mighty warrior and slayer of giants and demons, finally laid low by a trade deal with Vanaheim!”

Thor laughed as he embraced his father. For all the sourness in his tone, Odin appeared to be in a decent mood this day. “I seem to recall you swearing that it would be my adventures which would
do you in."

“An old man can be defeated by many adversaries,” Odin retorted in a good-humored tone, releasing Thor from his hold. He stepped back and took a moment to study his son, face falling slightly after a moment. “You’re not here on a pleasure trip, are you Thor?”

Thor shook his head. “No.”

Odin waved a hand towards the door, effectively locking it with a bit of magic. “Must be serious if you beat the messengers to the palace for once in your life.”

“How can you—”

“The whole kingdom knows as soon as you return home,” Odin explained, crossing the room again to sit back in his chair, grunting as he had to bend over once again. “Heimdall’s excellent at sending word back here with haste on that front. The fact that I found out you’d come back from you, and not a gossiping scullery maid? Quite a novel phenomenon, my son.”

No point in trying to warm up Odin with small talk, then. Just as well; Thor knew he couldn’t afford to delay this conversation. “What I have to say cannot wait.”

Odin motioned to the corner of the room, seidr summoning a nearby chair to scoot across the floor until it rested across the table from him. “Then let’s hear it,” he demanded.

And so Thor took a seat and set about relaying everything that Loki had told him, alongside the concerns the Avengers had raised the night prior. Perhaps he didn’t give the most unbiased account of events that he could have; Thor may have spent a bit of extra time emphasizing how Loki had made no real attempt to destroy the realm since the initial invasion, how he’d been more than willing to lay out the details of his plans to the Avengers when prompted, and how the Midgardians were taking their own pains to validate Loki’s story because the wisest of them had done their own research and drawn similar conclusions to Loki. Odin listened to all of this in silence, lips pressed together in a thin line and his hands folded across his chest. When Thor finished Odin leaned back in his chair, single eye narrowed in focus on his son. “And what would you have me do?”

“Tighten the guard on the Space Stone, and confirm Loki’s assertion that the Power Stone has been relocated to Xandar.”

Odin nodded. “And then what?”

Thor blinked, surprised that Odin was so willing to heed his request. “Father?”

“Let us suppose that for the first time in his life, Loki has chosen to be completely honest with you,” Odin began. “That everything he’s warned you about, particularly concerning Midgardians abusing the Infinity Stones and a Titan simultaneously hunting for them to wipe us all out, is true. Two of the Stones are missing, Thor. Two are on Midgard, if Loki is correct. One is here, one is on another world. That puts the majority of Stones out of his reach. I want you to think about what he is expecting of us.”

“Expecting?”

“Loki isn’t a fool, Thor. He can and does make rash decisions in the heat of the moment, but given the choice he’d never blunder his way into anything more complicated than a dinner party without a twelve-step plan, you know this! Do you think that he would have been so complacent in your traveling to Asgard and informing me of all this if our conversation here didn’t factor into whatever plan he’s currently hatching?”
Oh. So that’s what Odin was getting at. “I didn’t tell Loki about my plan to return here,” Thor argued.

"Loki knows you! It doesn’t matter whether or not you explicitly told him that you planned to journey home, he would have known that as soon as you heard ‘Titan’ or ‘Infinity Stone’ you’d rush back here to inform me,” Odin countered. “Nothing you have done this day goes beyond what he expected of you.”

“But—"

“You stated that Loki is planning on gathering the Stones himself to counter Thanos,” Odin went on. “Who’s to say that he isn’t hoping that Asgard would do some of the work for him and begin tracking down the other Stones? That his injuries aren’t some ploy to increase your concerns and try to persuade me to close ranks and gather up the Stones as best I can, since not even Loki is safe now?"

Thor could feel his temper beginning to flare. “You didn’t see him, father! He was not scheming that night, he was desperate and in need of help! If you had been there—"

“But I didn’t and I wasn’t!” Odin shot back in a louder voice. “Because Loki has yet to return to Asgard and explain himself, either to his family or the courts! Instead he hides himself away on Midgard, obscuring himself from my or Heimdall’s sight at all times. Our healers could have seen to his wounds properly if we’d known he needed the help, yet instead of revealing himself he had you upend our most powerful drug over his injuries in some Midgardian tinkerer’s basement?! He’s convinced you that the realms are at risk and made you feel sorry for him, all while evading Asgard’s reach. He’s manipulating you, Thor, why can’t you understand that?!"

“Father—"

“And now you wish me to believe that this has all been some noble machination on his part, to protect a realm he so often dismissed as ‘primitive and insipid’ for centuries? That after abusing the powers of the Bifrost and a single Infinity Stone, he should be trusted to gather all six together for a counterattack suspiciously lacking in details against an adversary who may not even exist?!"

“You’ve put faith in me for less, and I nearly started a war with Jotunheim!” Thor bellowed, jumping up from his seat with enough force to send his chair skittering across the ground to crash into the wall. “I abused the freedom you gave me to travel between the realms over a postponed coronation, father! And yet you forgave me that.”

“Thor—"

“Why is it so different with Loki?! If it weren’t for him we would have perished on Jotunheim for my poor choices! Loki protects his own—"

“At the expense of whoever or whatever he considers expendable!” Odin shouted, and now they were both standing and screaming. “You care so much for Midgard? Then consider what little regard Loki holds for that realm, and understand that if there is in fact a threat from a Titan, and if Loki truly plans to make a stand against Thanos on Midgard, then it will not end well for that realm or its inhabitants, Thor!”

Thor could hear the rumbling of thunder from outside the windows as the skies grew dark. Both he and Odin were red-faced now, and it was taking everything in his power to back down from escalating this shouting match any further. It wouldn’t matter if Thor explained how Loki had volunteered this information because of a promise he made to one of the supposedly detested
Migardians, or that Loki had built up a relationship with these particular Midgardians which seemed far more genuine and rewarding to him than the bonds he’d shared with Thor’s shield brothers for centuries. It was too little information, based more on emotional hunches than sound logic, competing with too much bias borne of Loki’s past actions against the Nine Realms in recent memory. This was a lost cause; Thor had to stop before things devolved any further. “Will you at least look into the Power Stone’s location for me?” he asked through gritted teeth, taking great pains to make his request as calmly as he could while there were still specks of red at the corner of his vision.

Odin stood in silence for a long moment and then finally nodded once in agreement. “But what I do beyond that is my business and mine alone, Thor.”

It was the best that Thor could hope for at the moment. “Thank you.”

Odin sank down in his seat, looking far more exhausted than he had at the start of the conversation. “I’ll see you at dinner tonight. Shut the door on your way out.”

Quietly, Thor crossed the room to straighten his overturned chair as Odin picked up the contract he’d been looking over. Thor got as far as the chamber door and had to stop and look back at his father then, taking stock of the man who for so long had seemed utterly invincible to him. The last few years had been hard on their family; Odin carried more grey hairs in his beard now, and a few more lines around the corners of his eyes besides. Thor wondered how much of that was from Loki, and how much of it was his own doing.

Odin’s single eye glanced up from his papers then. “Something else?”

“He’s all right,” Thor stated. “In case you were wondering. I left him among friends who’ll look after him.”

A pause. A slight nod from Odin, and then his attention was back on his work. Perhaps Thor was mistaken, but as he left the room, it seemed as though just a little bit of stress had drained out from Odin’s slumped shoulders.

-n-

Frigga was in her garden, walking between the rows of plants and occasionally snipping off a flower or bunch of leaves with a quick flick of her knife. She didn’t even look towards Thor as he trudged towards her down a row of flourishing hellebore, doubtless having already noticed his presence from the clomping of his boots. “I take it you and your father had a bit of an argument,” she commented, snipping a few more sprigs for her basket. “The wind nearly uprooted some of my rose bushes on that side of the palace, you know.”

“Sorry mother,” Thor replied, coming to stand beside the queen of the Nine Realms.

Frigga sighed and straightened up, sheathing her knife to safely give her son a hug that rivaled Odin’s in strength. “My two hot-headed loves,” she commented, giving Thor a soft kiss on the cheek before letting him go. “What’s happened this time?”

Thor relayed the details of Loki’s story once again, this time taking less care for embellishing. He was fairly worn out from the confrontation with Odin, and besides, Frigga had always been good at catching him and Loki altering the exact details of events. Like Odin she listened quietly, continuing to walk along her plants and waiting for Thor to get through the entirety of his story before giving any sort of response. By the time Thor was finished, including his argument over Loki’s motives with Odin, they’d worked their way down to a row of purple flowers which Frigga began harvesting.
“If your brother is telling the truth, then the realms are in grave danger,” Frigga stated matter-of-factly. “If he’s lying, then the realms are still in danger but from a different source. The Infinity Gems are not to be trifled with, even by someone as knowledgeable as Loki.”

“What should we do?”

Frigga hummed to herself as she turned over a flower in her hand, fingers gently stroking the soft petals beneath. “Your father has a point. Loki doubtless already has a plan in place, and we have no idea how far along it is. And if Thanos is as aware of Midgardian events as Loki seems to think, then we have to assume that he has also put a plan into place to counter that. So it would appear, my son, that the first thing we have to do is catch up with the other players of this game.”

“How?”

Frigga closed the tie on her bag and circled around the end of the row to come to a small, prickly bush covered in red flower buds. With a small waggle of her fingers the old bag had vanished and a new one took its place, top open and ready for whatever she’d harvest next. “If your father confirms Loki’s suspicions about the Power Stone, and if we subsequently find any evidence of a Titan moving through the realms with less than pure motives, then we have to trust Loki’s warning. I’ll have Heimdall keep watch over the Titan here and counsel Odin accordingly. Meanwhile, you’ll have to stay with Loki on Midgard to help him fight, and you absolutely must reign him in before Midgard is reduced to ash in the coming war.”

“Mother-”

“Your brother,” Frigga continued in a quiet voice, “doesn’t always make the best decisions, Thor. And recently, those decisions have resulted in far too many good people suffering as collateral damage.”

“…”

“But I know my children. And I know that Loki is at a juncture where he could either be returned to us, or become lost forever,” Frigga cautioned. “Perhaps you don’t believe that, and I’m certain Loki doesn’t believe that either. But your brother is capable of doing so much good, Thor. He always has been, even if Asgard doesn’t see his abilities in that light or give them the same reverence we dole out to our more…physically present warriors. Even if he tries to disguise his intentions or hide behind the excuse of wanting to save his own hide, I cannot believe that he’d be completely indifferent to the Nine Realms flickering out one by one like so many candles. Don’t you think?”

Thor recalled the Thursday nights he’d spent at the Tower, watching Loki and the others play their games from afar. How Loki seemed enamored with the players as much as the game, how he bantered and plotted and ate with these Midgardians with more joy than Thor could recall from any of their adventures together in the last century. But more than that, Thor thought of the way Loki had rushed to the Tower in his hour of need, taking comfort in a place they both considered safe for vastly different reasons. He remembered how even though it was Thor who’d provided the medicine Loki needed, it was the Midgardians (Tony especially) that made him want to stay there to recover. For their sake if nothing else, Thor knew Loki would defend Midgard, at least for a time.

“I believe he will fight to save the realms,” Thor answered. “But I do not know how or when, or what I can do to help him.”

“Neither do I, for all my powers and wisdom,” Frigga answered, pocketing her knife again and then drawing up the drawstrings on her bag. “But I do know that Loki is going to be utilizing every skill
he has in his arsenal for this fight. And the most powerful tools he has are his mind and his seidr.”

“Well, yes. But how does that help me?”

Frigga gave her son a sad smile. “Your father wasn’t wrong when he said that Loki has little concern for whatever he considers expendable. And right now, I’m afraid that Loki’s own wellbeing falls into that category. There’s no doubt in my mind that as soon as he’s mobile again he’ll fall back into the same destructive habits that caused him to be so grievously wounded in the first place.”

Frigga’s attention fell away from Thor then, landing back on the bush as she gently stroked her fingers over its leaves in a careless manner. “I can’t travel to Midgard, Thor. I can’t speak to your brother, or send any of our mages to provide him with assistance. I am the Allmother, and my actions are limited by the proclamations and expectations of my husband the Allfather. Directly, my hands are tied.” She tapped one of the buds on the bush then, prompting the flower to bloom before their eyes. “However, I happen to have a garden full of every herb a seidmann could ever require for any of their spells.”

“…”

“Furthermore, I also happen to have a rather large and durable bag with a pocket dimension woven into it resting on a chair in my personal chambers, a number of books I’m certain any advanced seidr user would find rather helpful, and a son with more loyalty than sense who has the means and will to get all these supplies back to Midgard.” She gave Thor a sideways glance. “Do you understand me, Thor?”

Thor nodded, swallowing down a wave of emotion. “He...whatever he was fighting ruined the traveling clothes you made for him.”

Frigga, warrior queen that she was, barely reacted to this. “Well then, it’s a good thing you’ll need a few days here to rest and visit with friends, isn’t it? Because it sounds like I’m going to be rather busy until you go back.”

Chapter End Notes

Normally I don't like doing two interludes back to back, but this little scene wouldn't leave my brain until I got it down. Next chapter it's back to the main boys, promise, plus some more of the campaign goodness that I know you all came here for!
Chapter Summary

Loki settles in to domestic life. The Avengers make plans. The campaign returns!

Terms to know:

Modifier: When you have a certain score for traits like intelligence or charisma, you also get a modifier that will add or subtract value to what score you roll. So a roll of 12 when you have a +2 modifier means you actually have a 14.

Intimidate: technically part of D&D v.5, put it's based on charisma score to intimidate someone into doing something
Bluff: pretty much what it sounds like. Higher rolls are necessary for more intricate or unbelievable fibs

Long rest: a rest period of 8 hours in-game, wherein the player can regain all hit points and half their lost hit dice

DC 10: Damage check 10. A DC is the number you have to roll (with modifier) to succeed in a roll. Depending on what kind of DM you have, they may or may not tell you what the DC is for a given roll.
Bardic knowledge: specific gossip or knowledge that has traveled through social grapevines that bards might have heard of. Does not necessarily supplant other knowledge areas

Kudos and comments are loved and appreciated!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony was woken up bright and early Thursday morning by a hand none-too-gently jostling his shoulder. “Wassat…?”

“Anthony, wake up.”

Tony blearily cracked open his eyes to see Loki staring down at him, looking annoyed at Tony for daring to still be asleep at what was surely some ungodly hour of the morning. Holy crap, was the sun even up yet?

“JARVIS has informed me that the others are already downstairs eating breakfast,” Loki stated, continuing to shake Tony by the shoulder in an effort to drag him closer to the realm of consciousness. “We agreed on an early start today to make our preparations for Belgrade. Up.”

As Tony slowly dragged himself closer to the realm of consciousness, he became aware that Loki was not only awake but appeared to have showered, put on fresh clothes, and (shockingly) trimmed his hair to even up the bits that had been shorn off in the fight at the bunker. Clearly the god hadn’t just rolled out of bed, and it was with dawning horror that Tony realized the grave mistake he’d made allowing Loki to move in on his floor. “Oh god, you’re one of them, aren’t you? A morning person.”
Loki appeared utterly unperturbed by Tony’s realization, and having expended all his patience reached across Tony’s body to yank his blankets away and down to his feet. Tony yelped as he was suddenly exposed to the cold air of his bedroom, making Loki smirk. “Asshole!” he snapped, jerking upright on the bed and pulling his legs up into a defensive ball.

“Oh please, it’s not like I turned your blankets into eels or…”

“Oh?”

“Anthony, what are these sheets?”

A bit of context is in order here. Several years ago, back before the Battle of New York or Capsicles being fished out of the Arctic Sea or gods crash-landing in New Mexico, Stark Industries had celebrated its 70th anniversary by releasing a line of SI memorabilia. The designs were all hybrids of 20th-century aesthetic with 21st-century tech, ranging from tea towels to invisible ink pens to commemorative toasters. Most of the products sold incredibly well, but the one item which no store seemed able to move in great quantities was a particular pattern of bedding that Pepper had declared an eyesore and that Tony found hilariously tacky. Some pea-brained (and hopefully now unemployed) member of the design department had created a print of the original SI logo surrounded by a halo of tiny blue arc reactors set against bright scarlet fabric. To this day, no one in the entirety of the marketing department could answer exactly what demographic this pattern was supposed to have appealed to.

Needless to say, Tony ended up with an abundance of extra sheets that simply wouldn’t sell, which naturally made their way into his closet, given that there was something rather comforting about being wrapped in a product that was both blissfully soft as well as eye-scouringly hideous. And since Tony wasn’t exactly at a point where he was inviting people back to his bedroom on a nightly basis anymore, he’d thought nothing of making up his bed with the SI sheets the other day. Of course, that was before Loki barged into his bedroom at the crack of dawn, looking at the sheets as though he couldn’t decide whether to be more horrified or disgusted by them.

Tony, understandably, was capable of explaining exactly none of this to Loki, given the early hour of the day. Frankly, the engineer was lucky to string together three whole words with proper subject-verb agreement before his morning coffee. All he could say in his defense, therefore, was, “They’re really soft.”

“They’re self-congratulatory,” Loki corrected.

“Nu-uh, no sass, too early, need coffee-”

“Oh for Norns’ sake,” Loki muttered as he took a seat on the edge of the bed. Silently he waggled his fingers in the air, and suddenly a mug of steaming hot coffee materialized in his hand.

Tony stared, confused and incapable of processing what he’d just witnessed, until Loki grabbed one of his hands and all but shoved the drink into it. “Here. Maybe this will make you a bit more coherent.”

Tony mindlessly brought the mug to his lips and inhaled, stress already draining away in a Pavlovian response. Maybe now some cylinders would start firing. “Thanks. So, magic’s back?”

“It’s returning,” Loki clarified. “It will be some time before my seidr has regained its full strength, but simple retrieval spells like this lie within my grasp again.”

Tony nodded and took a sip. Ick, a little more milk and sugar than what he liked, but who was he to
turn down a fresh cup of coffee in bed? Instead, he settled on asking Loki another question. “Is your seidr weaker right now because of your injury?”

“No. The wound didn’t help, but my reserves had nearly been depleted before then,” Loki explained with a wince. “The fight merely exacerbated matters.”

Tony hummed, taking another sip. “How’s that work, anyway?”

“What, seidr?”

“Yeah, the whole…” Tony settled for vaguely flailing his free arm in Loki’s direction, hoping the god would understand what he was getting at.

Loki tutted at Tony’s behavior. “I doubt you’re capable of processing all the intricacies of magic at the moment, so I’ll keep this simple. Seidr is part of me. It’s the core of my being, as it is for all mages who have such a gift. And using that gift involves proper channeling either through spells or sheer will and focused concentration, though the latter isn’t recommended if it can be helped.”

“Why?”

Loki took a minute to formulate his answer before speaking again. “Have you ever punched a wall as hard as you physically could?”

“ Nope,” Tony answered. “Engineers need working hands.”

“Well pretend then. Imagine one of the walls of this bedroom, the exact thickness and strength of the drywall and material beneath capable of holding the rest of your Tower up. Now imagine that you’ve become irrationally upset and simply have to lash out, and so you slam your hand into that very wall with as much force as you can muster up, all without any resistance or hesitation on your part.”

Tony winced. “Oh.”

“So you understand,” Loki concluded. “You’ll have damaged the wall, yes, but you’ll also have split your knuckles at the very least, and probably broken a few bones besides. Seidr is meant to be properly channeled through spellcraft, otherwise your body suffers consequences as equally damaging as punching that wall would have for your fist.”

“So that’s what happened with you?”

Loki’s eyes slid down towards the sheets as he nodded. “A moment of weakness during a difficult battle.”

“And the results are…?”

“This time? A longer recovery period of my seidr, and a bit more effort to use it during the recovery period,” Loki explained. “Though I’ve heard stories of seidrmenn who made this mistake too many times and eventually lost their ability to use their seidr at all. They expired soon after.”

“Seriously?”

“Did you miss the part where I told you it’s the core of my being? Seidr is a mage’s essence, Anthony. It’s an extension of my body, a key part of processing the world in my mind, and as influenced by my thoughts and emotion as a soul. My seidr is me.”
“Huh,” Tony commented, because the coffee still hadn’t fully kicked in yet.

“Honestly,” Loki muttered as he rose from the bed. “Come along, we ought to head downstairs.”

“Coffee-HEY!”

Loki had reached down and plucked the half-drunk mug of coffee from Tony’s hands. “There’s more in the kitchen, as well as food. Up.”

“You’re a terrible person,” Tony grumbled. Nevertheless, he finally climbed out of bed and slipped on a pair of house shoes before following Loki to the elevator.

-n-

The pair of them arrived in the common floor kitchen to find Bruce already present, picking at a bowl of cereal while tapping away on his tablet. He waved at them in a brief show of acknowledgement, only to startle as his eyes fell upon the coffee mug in Loki’s hands. “That’s where it went!” he declared.

Tony looked back and forth between Loki and Bruce until it finally clicked. “Wait, did you steal Bruce’s coffee?”

“It was the closest cup of coffee I could find, and you were utterly incoherent without it this morning,” Loki countered, finally passing the mug back to Tony as he took a seat at the counter. “Besides, Dr. Banner seems to have managed just fine,” he added, motioning to Bruce’s new cup sitting beside the cereal bowl.

“Call me Bruce, please,” Bruce requested, generously choosing to ignore Loki’s theft for the time being. “As long as you’re living here, we might as well be on a first name basis.”

Tony was pleased to see that Loki only needed a minute to consider this request before he was nodding his head in agreement. “Fair enough. Now then; what is there to eat for breakfast?”

“We burned through most of the eggs and all of the bacon yesterday,” Bruce informed him. “There’s some cereal in the cabinets but no milk, and whatever’s in the freezer.”

“That’s it?” Tony asked as he dumped Bruce’s disgusting sweetened rendition of coffee down the sink and made his way over to the coffee pot to pour a fresh round of pure black heaven. No point in tackling a barren fridge problem without caffeine.

“Steve already got back from his morning run and polished off last night’s leftovers,” Bruce explained. “We needed to go grocery shopping today, but considering that we’re about to leave town for a while…”

“All right, time to forage.” Sipping at his freshly poured coffee, Tony walked over to the fridge and opened the freezer door, waving Loki over to join him a moment later in case the god wanted to give some input. “Ok, we’ve got popsicles...some frozen broccoli...frozen brussel sprouts...more broccoli...a-ha!”

“What?” Loki asked.

Tony’s response was a smirk as he extracted a brightly colored box from the very back of the freezer. “Loki, allow me to introduce you to the magic of breakfast burritos.”

-15 minutes later-
“I reiterate, I should have destroyed this realm when I had the chance.”

“So I take it you’re not going to finish-”

“I said no such thing.”

In an ideal world, Tony and the others would have spent the day recuperating at the Tower after sending Happy off with a shopping list of things to gather up before they left for Belgrade. Of course nothing in Tony’s life could ever be that easy. The problem was Steve and his damned 20th-century mentality, insisting that they could just go out and buy the hiking gear, Tony, you have a car and it’d only take a few hours, besides you already asked off for today. And so late Friday morning found Tony and Steve perusing the clothing section of a sporting and hunting goods store to get started on the group’s shopping, because it was a terrible idea for Loki to be seen in public with the Avengers and Bruce had drawn the short straw on who would stay home and show Loki how the satellite TV worked. “Who needs this many pockets on a jacket?” Tony demanded, holding up a padded winter parka with about 12 different pouches sewn across the chest and sleeves.

“Tony…”

“Seriously, if you need this many pouches just bring a backpack, you’re going to spend more time looking for whatever you packed in here-”

“Tony,” Steve tried again, this time finally managing to distract Tony from his recently developed vendetta against clothing with too many pockets. “I thought we could talk a little. You know, just you and me.”

Tony felt his stomach sink a little. “Look, if it’s about Loki moving in-”

“Actually, I just wanted to see how you were doing after Loki’s...accident,” Steve assured him before Tony sank too deeply into a defensive mindset. “I remember what it’s like seeing one of your friends injured like that.” His voice grew quieter at the end of his statement, eyes drifting and becoming unfocused in a way that told Tony he was thinking of something from life before the ice, as the Avengers called it. “Despite what the film reels showed, me and the Commandos didn’t always walk away from a mission without a scratch. The ones of us who were able to walk away, at least.”

Oh. So Steve had just wanted to check on how his friend was holding up after a pretty traumatic evening. Now Tony felt like a jackass for assuming he was going to get chewed out by a Captain America lecture. “I’m all right,” Tony promised, suddenly finding the other jackets on the rack to be incredibly fascinating. “Loki says he’s doing better, it’s just going to take him a while to heal up this time. Pushed his seidr too hard or something.”

“Or something?”

“Yeah, it’s...look, he explained it all, but I was kind of half-asleep and annoyed at him for making fun of my sheets when he did it.”

“Your sheets-wait, was it the SI 70th anniversary sheets? Because in that case I’m on his side, Tony, those things deserved to be burned.”

“You’re just mad because I tricked you into using a set for the first two months you were living in the Tower.”
“You lied and said my mattress was a weird shape so we’d have to special order new bedding, I would’ve thrown them off the helipad as soon as Natasha said you were fucking with me if-”

Steve’s righteous indignation was interrupted by a familiar beep from Tony’s phone. “Hold that thought, it’s Bruce,” he cut in, praying that everything was going ok back home as he extracted the phone from his pocket. The sheer possibilities regarding how badly things could deteriorate with only Loki and Bruce in the Tower’s upper levels boggled the mind.

Fortunately, all seemed to be well. Bruce had sent Tony a picture of Loki sitting on the couch, remote in hand as he frowned disapprovingly up towards where Tony knew the TV screen was. A moment later Bruce had sent text to go with the photo, saying, “Don’t think Loki is a big fan of midday talk shows.”

Snickering, Tony turned his phone so that Steve could see. To his surprise, however, Steve’s only reaction was a quizzical look. “Is that your Metallica shirt?”

Turning the phone back towards himself, Tony gave Loki a more critical look. Steve had noticed something which Tony’s sleep-addled morning brain and cursory glance over Bruce’s text had missed; Loki was indeed dressed in a familiar tattered band shirt and what might have been (and likely were) a pair of Tony’s jeans. Immediately Tony pulled up Loki in his contacts and texted him, demanding, “Are you wearing my clothes?”

It took a few moments, but eventually Loki texted back. “Yes. I refuse to wear clothing described as ‘sweats’ for another full day. JARVIS gave no indication that you’d take issue with me borrowing a few items from your closet.”

“Tony?”

“One sec Steve,” Tony said as he typed back a reply. “It’s not a problem, it’s just that you’re a little taller than me. Aren’t the pants kinda tight, at least?”

Loki’s reply came quicker this time. “Yes. You’re quite a bit smaller than me.”

“Hey now, I’m a perfectly normal human height! Not my fault my wardrobe wasn’t designed for gods with freakishly long legs.”

“Is that so.”

Uh-oh. Tony could hear the exact inflection of that statement and picture the look on Loki’s face to boot. “Is that so” was the sort of inquiry which usually preceded Loki exploding a sewer pipe in his face or throwing a hotdog cart at the Hulk in the middle of battle, just to prove that he was a powerful trickster who took great pleasure in making fools of the Avengers. And now he was living down the hall from Tony, who would presumably have to eat or sleep at some point and drop his guard. Time to beat a hasty retreat and save his own hide.

“Did I say freakishly? I meant attractively long legs. Powerful legs. Legs that could kill.”

Loki’s response took a bit longer this time. “Killer legs?”

Tony snickered. “Exactly ;)”

“I’ll have you know I’ve never murdered anyone with my legs. At least not yet...”

“Figure of speech. Ask Bruce.”
“Oh forget it, you’re getting the blue parka,” Steve grumbled as he pulled a coat in Tony’s size off the rack.

The rest of the day went by in a blur of shopping across New York, packing everything into sensible suitcases once they returned to the Tower, and a number of Instagram posts after the packing which Tony sent out specifically to get people excited for the trip. They were all very basic, mostly photos of suitcases with captions like “Guess where we’re heading” or straightforward text posts asking people to fill out a poll for who among the Avengers would look best in cargo pants (Steve won that by a landslide, of course). By the time everyone was ready to turn in for the night, the Internet was rife with speculation regarding the Avengers’ secret trip.

The next morning found everyone up bright and early at the crack of dawn, groggily shuffling onto the elevator to travel down to the Tower’s garage. Steve and Loki had both packed light (only a portion of Loki’s clothing order had arrived the previous day), but Bruce needed to bring extra clothing for Hulk-related reasons, and Tony liked to pack in a manner that Rhodey had once described as “yuppy doomsday preparation” even before he had the suitcase armor and mobile repair kit. Naturally, this meant that the boys were unable to drive one of Tony’s sports cars due to space restrictions and were forced to take-

“No.”

Steve shook his head. “There’s no other option, Tony.”

“Absolutely not!”

“Tony,” Bruce said, “this is basic physics. Spatial relations. You can’t get all the bags into the Aston Martin, or the Bugatti, or any other car parked in the garage except-

“Bruce, don’t finish that sentence.”

“We’re taking the van,” Steve stated. “And that’s final.”

“But it’s hideous!” Tony whined. “The engine probably won’t even turn over, I just keep it around so Dummy believes that he might actually get shipped off-”

“Anthony.”

Three heads turned in unison towards Loki, who was giving Tony a rather incredulous look. “Are you telling me that the sole thing delaying our trip to Belgrade, where we will retrieve the supplies that are required to save the universe as we know it, is your distaste for this particular vehicle?”

“Well when you say it like that-”

Loki quickly began advancing towards Tony, causing him to backpedal until he hit the side of the van with a soft “oof.” Between one blink and the next Loki’s arms were on each side of Tony’s head, effectively pinning him between the car and a god who looked decidedly unimpressed and incredibly menacing. “Anthony, you have two options,” Loki informed him, acting horrifically predatory for a person who’d been shuffling around Tony’s penthouse with severe bedhead a mere hour ago. “You may either get in the van yourself, or I will put you in the van.”

In his defense, Tony didn’t immediately collapse in the face of Loki’s potential wrath. “Can I have a minute to think about that?”
Loki leaned in closer, smiling a tight-lipped grin that promised nothing good. “By all means. Take your time.”

“...I’ll get in the van.”

15 minutes later, with a little grumbling on Tony’s part and a lot of cramming suitcases on Steve’s end, the four of them were ready to go. Steve would be driving with Bruce riding in the front, while Tony and Loki were seated behind them. The van windows hopefully had enough tint that no one would immediately recognize them, because forget Nick Fury finding out about Loki, if anyone took a picture of Tony riding in the backseat of an off-white church van he was going to spontaneously die of shame. Steve put the key in the ignition and unfortunately the engine turned over, condemning Tony to his fate. “Oh stop it,” Bruce chastised, turning around in his seat to give Tony a disapproving look as Steve began pulling them out of the garage. “The only other car you have that’s big enough for all of this is the limo, and Steve didn’t feel comfortable driving that.”

“Fine,” Tony begrudgingly admitted. “Happy would’ve killed us if we got a single scratch on the limo anyway.”

“Speaking of Happy,” Steve cut in, “We need to start thinking logistically about some of the non-Avengers people who come by the Tower.”

“You want to tell Happy about Loki,” Tony guessed.

“Realistically, we should at least tell the people who see us the most often,” Steve continued. “Pepper’s in the Tower 2-3 times a week, and she has clearance to all floors. Even if somehow we didn’t accidentally tip her off by mentioning Loki or setting an extra plate at dinner, she’d notice if she suddenly lost access to the lab or the penthouse because you were trying to keep those floors private.”

“Ok, Pepper and maybe Happy because we’re probably going to need transit again before the hunt for the Stones is over, and he’s already going to have questions about why I didn’t want him to drive us to the airfield today,” Tony reasoned.

“What about Rhodey?” Bruce added. “I know he’s military, but if he pops in for a visit…”

“What do you think?” Steve asked.

Tony had honestly considered telling Rhodey. They’d been best friends for decades now, when most people couldn’t even pull off being normal friends with him for more than a few weeks before they ran screaming for the hills. Rhodey had been the one to bundle him up on a plane and get back home after Afghanistan, and stood by Tony even after the most self-destructive chapter of his life when the original model of the arc reactor was poisoning him. He’d been a shoulder to cry on after Pepper, and consistently offered to run a not-quite-illegal War Machine flyby over certain news networks when their comments on the Avengers became a little too personal. Of all the people on Earth, Rhodey was the one person Tony trusted implicitly to sincerely have his best interest at heart.

Unfortunately, those very qualifications ensured that right now, Tony couldn’t trust Rhodey with knowledge of the Avengers’ alliance with Loki.

“If we called him right now we’d get as far as ‘Loki stopped by the Tower’ before we had the entire U.S. army banging down our door,” Tony explained. “Not to mention SHIELD would probably have some questions, mostly variations of ‘what the hell Stark?’ along with a few expletives I’m guessing.”

“Let’s hold off on telling more people then, at least until we can figure out how to keep Fury from...
setting up shop in the living room or have War Machine throw someone off the helipad,” Bruce suggested.

“Fine by me,” Tony agreed. The Avengers had enough things to strategize over right now anyway; coming up with more plans might be stretching themselves too thin. Instead, Tony sent off another teaser tweet and settled in for the remainder of the drive, content to let the matter drop.

-n-

The four of them had left early enough to avoid the worst of morning traffic in the city, and the sun was just starting to peek over the horizon by the time they left city limits. They’d be flying on one of the Stark Industries’ smaller planes that had thoroughly been gutted and upgraded by Tony several years back, following what might be described as a “very animated discussion” wherein Pepper told him that S.I. stocks couldn’t take another hit in the near future and so Tony needed to find a personal project to occupy himself with for a month or two. The result had been the only aircraft on planet Earth which surpassed SHIELD’s offerings in terms of energy efficiency and raw computing power. Flying on that, they’d easily get to Belgrade in under 5 hours.

Tony, of course, was quite happy to brag about all of this to Loki as they stepped onto the plane with Steve trailing behind them. Bruce had gone off to park the car, leaving Steve to carry most of their belongings onto the plane. As the supersoldier made a valiant effort to squeeze five different bags through the plane door at the same time, Tony began shoving one of his own into the overhead bin as Loki stood nearby, glancing around the plane. “So?” Tony asked. “What do you think?”

“It’s rather...eclectic, compared to other examples of Midgardian aircraft I’ve seen.”

Loki had a bit of a point. Although the front half of the plane was outfitted with a few traditional rows of airplane seats, the back half had been redesigned for comfort and style à la Tony Stark. There were standard overhead bins to store their belongings in, but additional storage space had been added underneath the double couches set a few feet back, and the sleeping area in the rearmost part of the plane had a proper closet. There was a small fridge stuffed between the couches, already stocked with alcohol and snacks that could be warmed in the mini kitchen to the left, and on the opposite side of the aisle was a table with benches bolted into the floor. Just beyond that, there was a small, slightly elevated stage with a moderate lighting and sound setup, right before you reached the sleeping area with proper beds modeled after Tony’s own room in the Tower. Tony may or may not have been in somewhat of a sleep-deprived designing fervor when it came to choosing the interior decor.

In any case, the SI plane would be more than sufficient to meet their needs for a quick in-and-out retrieval mission. They probably wouldn’t be using the beds or stage this trip, but the option of the twin mattresses and kitchen would at least give the Avengers plus Loki a guaranteed place to stay, in the event that lodging simply couldn’t be found near Belgrade. Moreover there was ample storage, which was incredibly important given that they had still yet to determine exactly how many of Loki’s current possessions would need to be taken back to New York with them.

With a final shove, Tony was able to get his bag secured. Steve finally got the rest inside and shuffled past him, dragging the luggage towards the back of the plane. Loki, unsurprisingly, made no offer to help. Instead, he copied Tony and effortlessly lifted his own bag to store in another overhead bin. Taking a seat by the window, Tony asked, “So, any chance you’ll tell me where you set up shop, or bring me by?”

“What fun would that be?” Loki retorted, closing the bin and taking a seat beside Tony.

“Come on, give me something! I’ve been trying to picture what your hideout looks like for months.”
“Oh, now there’s even less incentive to tell you or bring you over,” Loki remarked, grinning. “I’d much rather hear what ideas you’ve managed to come up with. Tell me, how does the home of Loki Lieszith appear to the mind of Anthony Stark?”

“Hm...I’m think something big and ridiculously ostentatious, with an unnecessary amount of balustrades and marble gargoyles.”

Loki raised a brow. “Go on.”

“Something in the Rockies,” Tony said, and he didn’t even try to keep the smile off his face. “With perpetually dramatic lightning and thunder that you can only see from one giant window, because the rest of the hideout is solid stone cut into the mountain. What, do the Rockies even cut through Belgrade?”

Loki waved off his geography concerns. “What else?”

“Silver and green everywhere,” Tony continued. “Tapestries on all the walls, museum-quality statues up and down the halls, the most ostentatious bedroom imaginable, a library with bookshelves that go up to the ceiling all stuffed with books that no one on Earth can read because they’re written in Elvish or something, and all the tables would perpetually be covered in potions and magic devices-”

“That’d be a risk with the henchmen.”

“Pfft, we both know you wouldn’t risk letting henchmen run around your operation, we’ve seen how well that works out for Dr. Doom or A.I.M. You? I’m thinking more of a Beauty and the Beast thing with enchanted furniture walking and talking-”

Tony’s description was interrupted by a bout of laughter from Loki. “Norns, you have no idea how much power it would take to enchant an entire castle’s worth of objects, do you?”

“Oh, so it’s a castle now?”

Loki shrugged, turning fully in his seat to face Tony now. “Why not? Name a more ostentatious form of architecture short of a church basilica.”

“Fine, a castle. And somehow you’ve enchanted everything to move and follow your orders without draining too much power, because you’re just that good.”

“What about guards?”

“Well you have to blend in with your surroundings, so they’d all be magicked local wildlife. I’m thinking possessed bears, maybe some buffalo-”

“Buffalo?”

“Yeah, they’re like...uh, imagine you combined a moose with a cow, made it really stocky...you know what, just look it up on the internet. Anyway. Guard animals everywhere, enough melodrama to choke a small community theater company, more space for experiments than you know what to do with. That’s the general picture I’ve got, anyway.”

Loki chuckled, the grin on his face matching Tony’s own. “Ridiculous. Perpetual storms and enchanted furniture would be an impossibility to keep running, magically modified animals are always far more trouble than they’re worth, and how do you suppose I’d even begin to construct a mountainside fortress on my own?”
“Noticing you’re not arguing about the bedroom or library.”

“I’m not averse to comfort, Anthony,” Loki said. “And if the librarians hadn’t complained so extensively about missing books, half of Asgard’s collected writings would have been permanently housed in my chambers.”

“Noted.” Tony’s smile relaxed as he turned in his seat, completely facing Loki. “You know we could do some of that at the Tower. I was serious about letting you personalize your room, Prancer.”

“I gathered. Perhaps when we’ve finished up at Belgrade?”

Bruce boarded then, interrupting their conversation as he slung his carry-on into the plane. “I think that’s everything,” he stated. “I parked the van and radioed the ATC guy. He said no one else was taking off from here for another 20 minutes, so there shouldn’t be any delays. We’re good to go as soon as the pilot gets here.”

“Perfect. JARVIS?”

The plane door suddenly swung shut and locked itself. “Yes Sir?”

Bruce yelped in surprise as a very familiar A.I. suddenly began speaking over the plane’s P.A. system. “JARVIS?!”

“Good morning Dr. Banner. Am I right to assume that you are a bit confused by my presence here?”

“Yes, that would be a very safe assumption, JARVIS.”

“As part of his upgrades, Sir determined that having a human pilot ran an unnecessarily high risk of flight error in the event of illness, exhaustion, or unexpected death. As such, an extension of my program was installed in this aircraft to assist with or, if necessary, completely control this vessel’s takeoff, flight, and landing procedures.”

“Ok…”

Uh-oh. Bruce had that look on his face which suggested he was making unfair mental comparisons between JARVIS and Skynet or HAL again. “Relax Bruce, if JARVIS let anything happen to us he’d be stuck alone in the Tower with the bots, and then what would he do for entertainment?”

The incredulous look on Bruce’s face suggested that Tony’s comment had not been nearly as comforting as he was intending for it to be. Time for a change of topic. “You’re traveling kind of light there, Bruce. Steve get all your stuff loaded up earlier?”

“Barely,” Steve grumbled as he stepped back into the main area of the plane. Presumably he’d been able to find storage space for the rest of their luggage, seeing as he only had his carry-on duffle bag at the moment. “Going to go ahead and play my old man card for the day, but we never needed this much baggage when we were traveling back in the 20th century.”

“Steve, we’re already flying halfway across the country on a corporate jet, no point in downsizing the bags just so we can pretend that we’re slumming it,” Tony pointed out.

Steve wisely chose to ignore that comment as he took his seat. “We’re good to go, JARVIS.”

“Excellent. Everyone, please take your seats and fasten your seatbelts. I shall begin taxiing the
plane momentarily."

“I suppose we’ll be able to get some shuteye once this aircraft has taken off?” Loki asked.

Tony snorted and Bruce shook his head. “Yeah, no. Once JARVIS gets the plane leveled out, it’s D&D time,” Tony said.

Loki glanced back and forth between the two scientists in confusion. “But...neither Barton nor Natasha are here,” he stated, speaking slowly as though the others had failed to notice this fact.

“We do this sometimes when the group has to split up,” Bruce explained. “Steve and Natasha both work on the campaign, so we can have either one of them run it. And if any of the players are missing, we usually just put their characters in stasis or create an in-universe reason for them not to be on this particular leg of the adventure.”

“For today, we’ll just say that Clintock accidentally swallowed some swamp water during the fight with the shambling mound and got sick after,” Steve decided.

Realizing that Loki still seemed concerned, Bruce added, “It’s better than just sitting on a plane watching whatever movies Tony brought along.”

“Hey!”

“I’ve got the snacks,” Steve continued, patting the bag in his lap and ignoring Tony’s indignation. “And my books and papers. When JARVIS gives the all clear that we can get up and move around, we’ll get set up on the table in back.”

“If everyone is ready, I’ve received final clearance from Air Traffic Control,” JARVIS informed them. “Prepare for takeoff.”

“Thanks J.” Tony adjusted his seat belt, glancing over to make sure that Loki had managed to get his own sorted out. “You ready?”

“I’m beginning to think that answer is never going to be ‘yes’ with this group,” Loki admitted, making Tony laugh.

-15 minutes later-

Steve began his narration as the others finished doling out the last of their snacks and completely settled themselves in at the table. “You arrive in the town of Adder’s Bend, a bustling agrarian settlement of well-meaning but simple folk. From an initial inspection of the town, you locate the town square which seems to be the hub of the community. It is sundown by the time you arrive, and you would do well to seek shelter after a day of traveling, particularly since Clintock has grown sick and will need to rest.”

“I suggest to the others that we get a few rooms for the night,” Bruce said. “I stop one of the locals and ask if there is somewhere we can stay?”

“She confirms that there is a single inn towards the eastern end of town.”

“In that case, I walk into the inn and look for an innkeeper to see if they have any rooms available for tonight.”

Steve hastily drew out the inside of the inn on the table’s dry erase surface before continuing on. “You walk inside to see the downstairs area bustling with all manner of people from all races.
Behind a bar you find the owner of this fine establishment, who hears your request and says that they can sleep two to a room upstairs. How do you divide up the party?

Immediately the players grouped themselves together at the far end of the table. “This is a trap, right? Whoever rooms with Clintock is fucked because he’ll be on his own, that’s what we’re all thinking?” Tony inquired, sighing as the others nodded in agreement. “Thought so.”

“Ok, so Bannon/Loptr, Bannon/Antoninus, or Loptr/Antoninus are the potential combinations,” Bruce reasoned. “Bannon and Antoninus would both need time to prepare their more powerful abilities, so putting them in the same room is courting disaster. One of us needs to be with the rogue for our own safety.”

“Realistically, Antoninus has the higher strength modifier and a rapier besides, so he could at least defend himself long enough for us to get to him,” Loki put in. “We should probably house him with Clintock.”

Tony shrugged. “Makes sense to me.” The trio returned to their seats. “I tell the innkeeper that we’ll take two rooms, and that I’ll be tending to the sick barbarian tonight and would appreciate some privacy. Sick warriors are very touchy, you know.”

“Charisma check.”

Tony rolled. “With modifier +3, that’s 22. Wait, should that be a bluff check?”

“I’ll take straight charisma,” Steve replied. “The innkeeper leads you upstairs to two rooms, sitting side by side. She agrees to leave you alone and demands 30 gold for the evening.”

“30?!?” Bruce gaped.

“Ok, now I’m using bluff to argue that she has to drop the price or we’re leaving, these rooms are a health hazard that our friend could die in,” Tony stated before rolling again. “And with Glibness...that’s 42.”

Steve frowned. “The innkeeper reluctantly agrees to reduce her price to 20.”

“Fine. Loptr, pay the woman.”

“At last you settle in for the night.”

“Perception check on surroundings,” Bruce called out as he moved his character into the bedroom that Steve quickly drew up. “It’s a 16.”

“The rooms are rather spartan, with only a table, chair, oil lamp, and the two beds as furniture,” Steve narrated as he drew out these features. “Each room has a window, and the doors both have locks on the inside. Beyond that, nothing catches your attention.”

“Ok, I’m good to take a long rest,” Tony decided. “I dump Clintock in bed and climb into my own.”

“I’ll do the same,” Loki stated, with Bruce following his lead a moment after.

“All right. Hours pass at the inn, and all seems well as everyone goes to bed. Until-”

“Called it!” Tony exclaimed.

“Antoninus wakes up to see a knife-wielding intruder, dressed in full armor, looming over his bed,” Steve finished, giving Tony a deliberate ‘you brought this upon yourself’ look.
“Oh. Whoops.”

“Rolling to see if I hear anything from next door,” Bruce offered like the loyal murderhobo he was. Unfortunately, the spirits of D&D tended to not be swayed by such things as loyalty, and he only rolled a 2. “You continue to slumber soundly, unaware of your ally’s imminent doom,” Steve informed him, trying and failing to suppress a smirk. “Tony, how do you—”

“I seduce him.”

Three sets of eyes stared at Tony. “Pardon?” Steve finally got out.

“Well I’m already in bed, presumably undressed because what kind of idiot sleeps in full armor at lodgings inside a town?” Tony reasoned. “So I just, uh, strike a pose, show a little leg, and ask him ‘Hey soldier boy, want to breach my perimeter?’”

Steve gagged and Bruce shot his friend a look of utter disappointment. “That is a terrible—”

“I can think of at least three Einherjar warriors that line would have worked on,” Loki flatly remarked.

“And every day, my regard for Asgard falls a little lower,” Tony said, drawing a small grin from Loki.

“Fine, I’ll let you roll for it—”

“Nat 20.”

“Oh god DAMNIT. Fine, you seduce the intruder,” Steve acquiesced, hands thrown in the air in resignation as Bruce clamped a hand over his own mouth, shoulders trembling from barely contained laughter.

“Ok, now I’m going to try to persuade him to disrobe, plate armor isn’t the kind of protection we’re going to need—”

“Please stop talking and just roll,” Steve pled as he reached for an unopened packet of beef jerky.

Tony rolled, then groaned as he saw the results. “That’s 6 total with modifier.”

“Ok, somehow you manage to seduce the intruder into your bed yet can’t get him to take off the armor,” Steve informed him, and now Bruce was doubled over, head practically resting on the table from trying to control himself as Loki just gave Tony a bemused expression. “Frankly it’s rather impressive and decidedly heavy.”

“No sweat, I can fix this,” Tony boasted. “I’m going to, um…”

“Yes?” Steve asked.

“Killer legs?” Loki suggested, seeing the way his friend was floundering.

That gave Tony a brilliant idea. “Yes, killer legs, that’s it! I grab his hair and start nudging him down—”

“I swear I will let you roll for it if you skip to the end of whatever you’re about to describe.”

“Strength check to crush his unprotected neck with my thighs,” Tony demanded, already rolling. “That’ll be...16 with modifier.”
Steve sighed, long and slow, before speaking again. “Although you fail to crush his windpipe, you
do manage to hold him in place and put significant pressure on his carotid artery, cutting off his
blood supply and causing him to pass out.”

“Would the muscle spasms while he’s wearing armor be loud enough to wake us up?” Bruce asked.

Steve considered this. “Perception check, both of you, DC 10.” Loki and Bruce both managed to
succeed this time. “You are awoken by the scuffle next door and arrive to find your bard lying in
bed, half-undressed with a strange man passed out between his thighs.”

“So a normal Tuesday then,” Loki deadpanned, causing Bruce to inhale and choke on a potato chip.

“I graciously choose to ignore my teammate’s snark and request that they get a rope to tie up the
intruder,” Tony stated. “Let’s tie him to a chair and interrogate him.”

“He’s passed out, I’ll allow it,” Steve agreed.

“Ok, we need a plan,” Bruce said.

“Does bardic knowledge tell me anything about this guy?” Tony asked. “Intelligence is high enough
to give me obscure lore.”

“Roll intelligence check.”

“22.”

“You recognize the crest emblazoned on his armor as belonging to the Black Cats, a regional
mercenary group.”

“Probably tied to the dopplegangers we’re chasing,” Tony reasoned. “So we need to get information
from him. Should be easy, I’ve already seduced him-”

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’?”

“I mean that you’ve knocked out and tied the man to a chair, you cannot seduce information out of
him at this point!” Steve declared.

“Fine,” Loki muttered. “We’ll do this the old-fashioned way. Antoninus has the highest charisma,
right?”

“Yup.”

“All right, we’re going to intimidate this man into telling us everything about the people who sent
him here, under penalty of being crushed between your thighs again.”

“Or, and I’m just throwing this out there, maybe we could talk to him like reasonable people,” Bruce
suggested, seeing that Steve was already reaching for the pork rinds and they weren’t even an hour
into the campaign yet.

“Fine, we’ll talk first, but my thighs are ready to go anytime,” Tony countered, smirking widely at
the disappointed groan that got out of Steve.

As it turned out, the intimidation rolls were high enough not to require death via bardic thighs. The
mercenary was indeed from the Black Cats, and had been hired to take out the adventurers when
they arrived in town. A quick search of his personal effects revealed a contract that confirmed his story, signed by someone named Erik Lansdowne. Using his charisma, Antoninus was able to coax a bit of information about Erik out of one of the barmaids in the inn, who explained that Erik was apparently the richest man in the whole town. His home was a sprawling mansion in the exact center of Adder’s Bend, allowing him to keep the populus under his constant gaze. Naturally, the group left the mercenary tied to his chair and immediately set out to break into his house.

“You approach the grounds of-”

“Hold it,” Tony cut in. “We didn’t make it through the whole night, so does that actually count as a long rest?”

“Well no,” Steve answered, “You weren’t in bed for more than a couple hours-”

“Back to the inn.”

Thus, the trio of adventurers returned to the inn, slept through the rest of the night, and set out at dawn after they’d completely recharged, leaving behind an exceptionally disgruntled mercenary.

“Oh, now you approach the grounds of Erik’s manor,” Steve corrected. “It stands three stories tall, made of dark-grey stone that towers over the smaller wooden buildings around it. The entire mansion is surrounded by stone walls and iron gates, and a few guards patrol the grounds within the walls.”

“I have Loptr circle the building to check for any weak points,” Loki decided.

“Roll perception.”

“18.”

“As you walk around the building, you notice that besides the large front gate, there is a smaller gate in back where servants have gathered to receive shipments of grain, meat, and wine throughout the day.”

“That’s our in,” Loki decided. “I return to the others and tell them about the back gate.”

“All right, simple plan team,” Tony stated. “We get inside through that gate, but first we have to make sure no one is going to stop us. Thoughts?”

“I have the open lock skill,” Loki pointed out. “If we can distract the guards and servants then I’ll be able to get us in and out without detection.”

“Perfect. Bannon, what skills do you have charged up?”

Bruce checked his sheet. “Magic missile, cold snap, cure light wounds, and breathe underwater.”

“Of all the spells, why did you learn breathe underwater?” Loki wondered aloud.

Bruce shot Tony a look. “Because some people like to play rogues who get a little too drunk and accidentally drown themselves in the village well after challenging a nonexistent well witch to a fistfight.”

“Oh Norns…”

Tony put a hand over his heart, shooting his friend a betrayed look. “Bruce, I feel like you’re focusing too much on the mistakes of the past, when really we should be trying to avoid potential
failings in the future.”

“For the last time, Tony, stop feeding us lines you use on Pepper.”

“Perhaps,” Loki interjected rather forcibly, “we should look to the bard for help.”

Tony looked down at the character sheet on his tablet. “I’ve got summon swarm, obviously-”

“I was considering something more along the lines of having you play your lute and distracting the locals with a song,” Loki suggested.

“Well that sounds...incredibly simple.” Tony turned his attention from Loki to Steve. “I’m doing that.”

Under Loki’s guidance, the party was able to successfully distract the guards, sneak into the mansion grounds, finagle their way into the cellar (“Why is seduction always your go-to solution in these-” “It’s a legitimately strategy, Bruce!”) and locate a secret door, thanks to Loki’s search ability. From there, it was a struggle to get through a virtual labyrinth under the manor that was populated by a variety of decidedly unpleasant creatures, and it was a very good thing that Bannon still had a single healing potion left in his pack-

“Wait, why didn’t we go to an item shop to restock before we invaded the mansion?” Bruce asked suddenly after using the potion on Antoninus.

Tony blinked. “That...is a very good question.”

“Oh dear god.”

“For the record, I’m choosing to blame Loki-”

“We are flying at over 10,000 feet and your armor is on the other side of the plane, Anthony.”

“Choosing to blame Loki for absolutely nothing, as this entire debacle is definitely my fault and not his.”

Once Steve was able to restore order, the adventure continued. The trio discovered a secret lair at the heart of the underground chamber, where a rich noble (presumably Erik) was seated at the head of a grandiose war table, surrounded by a number of armed guards that were wearing an unknown sigil on their armor (“Fuck, the one time I botch an intelligence roll.”) On both sides of the room were huge glass tanks that ran from floor to ceiling, filled to the brim with all manner of carnivorous beasts. The left tank held a disconcertingly high number of cloakers and carrion crawlers, while on the right stood a saltwater tank filled with dire sharks-

“Excuse me?”

Steve paused at Loki’s inquiry. “Dire sharks.”

“Elaborate.”

“They’re like regular sharks, but dire,” Tony cheekily explained.

“Anthony.”

“All right, they’re just really big and really vicious. Also I’m totally getting a Bond supervillain vibe, Steve, I don’t know whether to compliment your taste or judge you for not ripping off an actual supervillain we’ve fought before-”
“Now that we’ve clarified the dire sharks, what would you like to do?” Steve asked.

Once more, the adventurers gathered at the far end of the table. “I have a plan,” Loki informed them. “Bannon, we’ll need cold snap. Antoninus, do you have anything bigger than a rapier?”

“No.”

“I’ll handle this then. Bannon, cast cold snap directly on the glass of the tanks. Antoninus, brace yourself.”

Steve appeared concerned, but allowed Bruce to roll for it. “Ok, you successfully cast cold snap, but I’m limiting it to a 6x6 area since you’re casting on an object, instead of the room at large.”

“Perfectly fine,” Loki agreed. “I’ll need a minute for the physics to work.”

Tony perked up at that. “Oh.”

Bruce cottoned on a moment after that. “Oooh.”

Steve sighed. “Whatever you’re planning to do to break the campaign this time, just do it.”

Loki grinned. “I draw an arrow and fire it at the right-side tank.”

“Roll strength.”

“With modifier, 18.”

“And considering that we’ve already weakened the structural integrity of the glass with Bannon’s cold snap…” Tony prompted with a smirk.

Steve shook his head and grabbed a fresh bag of potato chips. “The force of Loptr’s arrow is sufficient to crack the glass. Spiderweb cracks appear across the surface of the tank, before the entire wall shatters, flooding the chamber with salt water and incredibly irate sharks.”

“HA!”

Steve was utterly unimpressed by Tony’s glee. “Everyone roll a constitution saving throw against the wall of water, and a dexterity saving throw to see if you can dodge the dire sharks now swarming towards you.”

“Oh damn it,” Tony grumbled.

Miraculously, everyone managed to succeed in the dexterity saving throw. When it came to constitution, however, only Bannon and Loptr were able to make successful rolls, whereas Tony managed to get a 6. “You find yourself dragged to the bottom of the water, unable to move or breathe as the sheer force of the waves cascade over you. Can Antoninus swim?”

“I mean, we haven’t established that he can’t swim—”

“I dive down to drag Antoninus to the surface of the water,” Loki stated. “Will that suffice?”

“Fine. You manage to haul Antoninus out of harm’s way, just in time for the force of the water to collide with the other tank and shatter its glass, freeing the creatures in the other tank.”

“Pardon me, sirs,” JARVIS suddenly interjected. “But we’ll be beginning our descent shortly, and as such I must ask that you return to your seats.”
Tony couldn’t help but startle a bit; a quick time check confirmed that yes, they’d been playing for over three hours now. Steve quickly jotted down everyone’s position in his notebook so that they could restart exactly where they’d left off, before gathering up the books and character sheets. Bruce began gathering up their snack trash, leaving Tony and Loki free to return to their seats.

It hit Tony rather abruptly that they were actually going through with Steve’s plan. In a few days they’d be back on this plane, heading towards New York with an untold amount of magical artifacts in tow that only Loki would know how to operate. With his help, the Avengers were not only going to retrieve even more dangerous artifacts from a number of decidedly unpleasant people, but also use them to overthrow a literal Titan. They just had to survive long enough to do it.

Right before Loki got to his seat, Tony grabbed him by the wrist to get his attention. “Hey.”

Loki turned around, confused. “Yes?”

“I just...we’re going to have to split up to make this work when we get to Belgrade, so if something happens on your end don’t be afraid to call us for backup. You’ve got a phone and my number, it’s in there for you to use. Ok?”

“All right.”

To the end of his days, Tony would deny grinning from ear to ear at Loki for simply agreeing his request so readily. Instead, he let go of the god and resettled himself by the window. In less than an hour, they’d touch down in Belgrade. With any luck, this would be a quick in-and-out trip with a little sightseeing thrown in besides. The villain community at large had been mercifully quiet for a few weeks, and what were the odds that anyone would bother attacking the Avengers all the way out here in the middle of nowhere? Realistically, Tony’s biggest concern right now was making sure that there weren’t going to be any amateur photographers at the airport, trying to snap a picture of the team when they disembarked. Fingers crossed that things would go smoothly beyond that.

Chapter End Notes

Oh. Dear. God.

This was the worst chapter to write. This whole thing is about 9k words, but another 4k ended up on the editing room floor. So much filler and pointless building of scenarios that went nowhere and added nothing to the plot, starting and stopping over and over again. Couple that with external life stress and I swear, a chapter that should have taken a week top to pound out necessitated a whole month. Well, here you go. Next time: adventures in Belgrade!
Mercifully, no one had been able to figure out that the Avengers were going to touch down at Bozeman Airport, meaning that the SI jet was able to land with a minimal amount of attention. Tony hadn’t called ahead to schedule a rental car (too much risk of people trying to sell that hot tip to paparazzi) so that needed to be their first stop. Steve, all-American angel that he was, was able to talk the nice rental car worker into getting them an SUV that Tony didn’t completely hate, and within an hour of landing they had loaded up the car and were getting on the highway. “Wait, Steve, strike a pose before we get on the road,” Tony demanded, phone cam at the ready.

Steve turned his head just enough to shoot Tony a small smile and give the camera a wave. Bruce, after checking that there weren’t any cars lined up behind them, barely turned his head enough for the camera to catch the exasperated look on his face in the next picture. Both of them were sporting insulated parkas and toboggan hats, having nearly frozen as soon as they stepped off the plane because New York winters had nothing on Montana.

“Well, cat’s out of the bag now,” Tony remarked as he posted the photos followed by ‘Yellowstone here we come!’ In a matter of minutes the world would know where half the Avengers had decided to travel for their vacation. “Also, good god Loki, why didn’t you mention how cold it was here?”

Turns out, spending the better part of one’s life in Malibu wasn’t the best way to acclimate oneself against freezing temperatures. Tony was going to be miserable until the SUV’s heater kicked on, shivering in the back seat as he tried to dust off the few flurries which were still clinging to his parka.

Loki, being Loki, merely seemed amused by the humans’ suffering. “Firstly, you are probably the only Midgardian who’s ever referred to me as a ‘good’ god-”

“Oh ha ha.”

“-and second, the weather here is scarcely enough to necessitate even a jacket,” Loki finished.

Loki was currently sitting in the front passenger seat, having demanded the extra legroom as soon as he saw the SUV. While the humans were completely bundled up in winter gear from head to toe, Loki had opted for a simple long sleeve button up and an ordinary pair of dark wash jeans over new hiking boots. He didn’t even have a pair of earmuffs on and seemed utterly unperturbed by the snowflakes which were now slowly melting into his hair. Had he not been within throwing range, Tony might have pointed out that Loki looked a bit like the eye candy one typically found on the cover of a harlequin romance novel.

Buoyed by self-preservation, however, Tony instead tried to make himself more comfortable while
bundled up like a deep sea diver and grumbled, “Last time I take climate advice from a Frost Giant.” Loki winced, mouth smoothing out into a flat line. Oh damn, Tony hadn’t meant anything by that; sometimes it was still difficult to tell how Loki felt about the whole Frost Giant issue. Not good. “Bruce, did you find somewhere for us to stay?” Tony inquired, hoping to change the subject.

“Yup,” came the reply from the driver’s seat. “Took care of it while Steve was getting the car and you and Loki were handling the baggage.”

“And?”

“I found a family with a few rooms to rent in their lodge this time of year. We’re pretty far into the offseason for Yellowstone, so they offered to make us dinner when we check in with them tonight too.”

“That explains why the roads are so deserted,” Steve remarked. All around them were rolling, snow-dusted plains broken up by gorgeous, towering evergreen trees and mountains looming overhead. In the distance Tony could make out what looked like a small herd of elk shuffling through the snow, and now and again he could spot a solitary hawk lazily circling overhead. But while there were definite signs of wildlife, human activity was a little harder to locate. Aside from an occasional pickup truck puttering along in the other lane, there were hardly any other vehicles traveling in their immediate vicinity.

“Offseason?” Loki repeated.

“Yeah, once the weather turns and the snow picks up most of the trails and roads in Yellowstone become dangerous to travel, so a lot of areas shut down in October and don’t reopen until March or April,” Steve explained as he pulled up the park’s website on his phone. “It looks like we’ll still be able to visit Mammoth Hot Springs or Old Faithful, plus we can watch the buffalo migration if we want.”

“Sounds like it’s a good thing we’re making this a quick trip,” Tony remarked. “Well, it’s a little past 11 now; do we want to drop Loki and then head straight to the park?”

“No need. We’re close enough to Belgrade that I should be able to transport myself,” Loki announced.

“You sure?” Tony asked, thinking of his conversation with Loki the day before. “If you’re not up to it-”

“-then I wouldn’t have suggested it,” Loki sharply cut in. More softly, he added, “I won’t be able to get myself back to New York, Anthony, but this is just a matter of a few miles. I can handle that much.”

Tony decided against arguing; at the end of the day, the god certainly knew more about seidr and his own personal limits than Tony possibly could. “All right, stay safe and don’t go harassing any moose without us.”

Loki rolled his eyes, directing his attention to Bruce. “If I’m not needed at the moment…”

“We’re good. See you later?” Bruce said, his farewell coming out as more of a question than statement. Loki nodded briefly and then vanished from sight in a haze of green.

The car descended into silence for several long minutes, until finally Bruce spoke again. “So Steve...any chance you’ve heard from Clint or Natasha?”
It wasn’t completely out of the ordinary for the Avengers to go days (or sometimes weeks) without seeing each other. Half the group was currently employed by SHIELD, after all, and Tony and Thor both needed to travel quite often for their work (albeit Thor had a decidedly longer commute). However, whenever something called away any of them rather unexpectedly, it set the others on edge. Natasha simply not being in the Tower come breakfast, or Tony’s plan for a brief morning teleconference suddenly morphing into a weeklong trip to Hong Kong prompted a noticeable anxiety spike in the others. Ergo, even though Steve had already told them not to plan on hearing from the spies for another few days, the boys couldn’t quite shake the hope of a spontaneous unexpected message.

Unfortunately, such a thing wasn’t meant to be. “Nothing,” Steve answered. “I know they’re probably fine, Natasha and Clint wouldn’t do anything stupid when the stakes are this high…”

“But the fact that they might be going up against your old friends at Hydra has you worried,” Tony finished.

Steve had told them about the possibility that SHIELD had been infiltrated by the very group he’d worked so hard to destroy in the 40s, and if even half the war stories that Howard had drunkenly rambled about were true then Tony wasn’t willing to take any chances. JARVIS had been instructed to go over every inch of SHIELD’s servers with a fine tooth comb, and anything out of the ordinary would be investigated by Tony and the team once they were back in New York. It wasn’t an ideal situation, but even JARVIS would need some time to search through the entirety of SHIELD undetected, and the Avengers simply couldn’t afford to wait around and hope that Team Magical Human Experimentation would hold off from doing anything else with the Mind Stone in the foreseeable future.

“That might actually work to our advantage,” Bruce commented. “Don’t get me wrong, I hate being out of contact with them, but Tony still needs to come up with a decent explanation for Loki-WHOA!”

Steve and Tony braced themselves as Bruce abruptly slammed on the brakes, forcing their car to a stop in the middle of the highway. “Bruce, what the fuck?” Tony demanded, gingerly rubbing the scar tissue around the arc reactor where the seat belt had dug in.

Their driver could only point towards the highway in front of them. “Um…”

Tony and Steve both turned to look out the windshield, confused, right up until they realized what Bruce was pointing out. “Oh,” Tony whispered.

“Son of a bitch,” Steve said.

-n-

Tony Stark was many things, but avid outdoorsman or distinguished zoologist were not on that list. Having grown up largely in cities and boarding schools, he’d never really been exposed to many animals much larger than your average house pet, and had only really seen buffalo in textbook pictures or advertisements. He had a decidedly vague notion of their size, thinking of them as ‘big’ animals that were slightly larger than a deer and decidedly heavier, in very general terms. Seeing them in person blew that image right out of the water.

The reason the roads had been so deserted was due to a small herd of buffalo attempting to migrate across the highway at this particular stretch of road. Unfortunately for the tourists and locals, these buffalo had also decided to temporarily halt their migration smack dab in the middle of the highway, and were now grazing or investigating the cars stopped along each side of the road. Tony handled
this turn of events exactly as well as could be expected.

“Oh my god it’s going to break the window!” Tony squawked, scrambling backwards across the car seat until his back was pressed flush with Steve’s side, eyes wide in terror and glued to the side window where a buffalo curiously sniffed at the glass.

“It’s fine,” Steve assured him for the dozenth time in a very short while, and if he happened to be pressed as far back against the door as he could without denting it, that was no one’s business but his own. “They’re buffalo. Giant vegetarians. Not like we’re surrounded by a pack of hyenas or anything.”

“I wasn’t worried about them eating us, so thanks for that mental image,” Tony snapped. “But they might be aggressive and trample us to death, like moose.”

“I mean, I don’t think they are? They’re not in rut or anything, right?”

“Why are you asking me?!”

“Settle down, as long as we don’t get out of the car to antagonize them we’ll be fine,” Bruce calmly informed them, head bobbing along to the soft folk music currently playing on the radio.

“Easy for you to say,” Tony grumbled. “The whole herd could stampede right now and the Hulk would be fine.”

“Don’t you have your armor?” Steve asked, warily eyeing the buffalo.

Tony turned his head to give Steve a look of complete disbelief. “Are you kidding me? If I hit a protected American buffalo with a repulsor blast in Yellowstone National Park, Pepper would...uh...I don’t even know, if her head didn’t spontaneously combust from pure rage she’d probably lock me in a dungeon and strongarm the entire R&D team into inventing some hitherto undiscovered way of-OH GOD!”

Tony may or may not have shrieked while Steve sucked in a breath as the buffalo began scraping its horns against the side of the car, inadvertently causing the entire vehicle to shake. Bruce was utterly unimpressed by his friends’ reactions. “You fight supervillains on a near-weekly basis. People with bombs and lasers who are actually trying to kill us.”

“With the armor on!”

Bruce remained unswayed by Tony’s line of reasoning. “You antagonize arms dealers and dictators out of the armor on a stroke-inducingly frequent basis. Last time SI sent you to Latveria you couldn’t resist provoking Doom and laughed at him nearly taking your head off.”

“Well apparently murder cows are the line for me Bruce, I don’t know what to tell you!”

“It’ll be fine,” Steve reiterated. “I could probably take one in a fight if I had to.”

“Probably?!”

“I’ve never had to fight one before, Tony, contrary to popular belief we didn’t have buffalo in New York in the 1930s!”

“Steve, no, it’d be a PR nightmare,” Bruce pointed out, because he was a killjoy who didn’t mind passing up a Buffalo, New York joke in the name of being reasonable.
“Really Bruce? Because Captain America punching out a buffalo might be the most American thing I’ve ever heard of. Or the least, depending on—”

“Tony,” Steve hissed, heading jerking back towards the window. “there’s another one.”

“Oh god.”

Bruce, having long since found his happy place, chose to ignore his friends’ panic and instead whipped out his phone to take pictures of the migrating herd. He thumbed through the pics, then made a split second decision and turned the camera around to snap a picture of Steve and Tony in the backseat. This could very well serve as prime blackmail material the next time he wanted a few days of privacy in the lab. “City boys.”

-n-

It took another half-hour, but eventually the buffalo herd completely moved itself off the highway and allowed their trip to resume. The three of them stopped at a small diner for lunch (the owners insisted on giving them a discount in exchange for taking dozens of pictures to post on the walls of the shop as well as online) before finally reaching the park. Tony had suggested seeing Mammoth Hot Springs first, since Old Faithful was 1) probably the most popular attraction with the biggest crowd, and 2) the springs were closer and they were running short on daylight by this point. The trio parked by the Visitor Center and headed in, where Steve struck up a conversation with the rangers to figure out the best way to maximize their time as Tony and Bruce grabbed a map and began looking it over. Later, after touring the center (and purchasing some hot chocolate) the group was off.

The springs were one of the most gorgeous natural wonders Tony had ever seen in his life. The boiling pools of liquid in the Terraces gave them a naturally flat appearance from a distance, with white calcium deposits bulging out and cascading over the reddish stone beneath. The springs stretched as far as the eye could see, the Terraces rising up and up like steps leading to the heavens. Even in the frigid November cold he cold still feel the heat roiling off the springs as they strolled along the walkways, Bruce excitedly babbling about the chemistry at work while Steve snapped multiple reference pictures for future drawings. At length, Steve noted that the sun was beginning to set, and suggested they head to the walking trail that the rangers had recommended earlier. They definitely didn’t have time to hike the whole thing, but at their pace they could at least do a mile before having to turn back. Overall, it was nice. And yet…

Every time something caught Tony’s eye he found himself turning to point it out to Loki. The god had only been living in the Tower for a few days, but Tony had adapted surprisingly quickly to having Loki perpetually within earshot. Whether it was waking him up in the morning or putting around the kitchen, Loki had been a constant presence in his daily routine recently. And even though the majority of their friendship had been spent only seeing Loki on a fortnightly basis, his absence was painfully noticeable now. After the fourth time he’d gone to call for Loki, Tony chalked it up to his being separated from half the team already, so of course missing another person was only going to exacerbate matters. On the bright side, his Stark phone still had a signal (albeit a weak one) so he could at least send Loki a few photos from the trail between tweets. Perhaps the added ‘Bet you wish you weren’t stuck inside packing’ message wasn’t entirely necessary, but he thought it might at least get a snarky text back.

“What are you doing?” Bruce asked from behind him.

“What are you doing?” Tony replied as he tucked his phone into his parka and put his gloves back on. Steve had fallen back to take more pictures, and since it was already late in the afternoon Tony and Bruce were alone on the trail now. The snow crunching beneath their feet was only a few inches deep since the flurries had stopped, though a blanket of white still managed to
cover the trees around them and obscure parts of the trail from sight. Beautiful as it may have been, the sun was decidedly low in the sky now. They needed to turn back.

Bruce hummed in response. “Have you heard from him?”

Tony sighed and shook his head. “Nope, part of today’s recurring theme with friends I guess. You ready to head back?”

“Yeah, sun’s going down pretty fast now.” Bruce turned around then and sauntered back down the trail at a leisurely pace, causing Tony to follow. “So, how’s the whole Loki living in your penthouse thing going?”

Tony groaned. “First off, he’s a morning person.” Bruce cackled. “Don’t laugh, it’s literally something out of my worst nightmares. Oh, and then this morning...”

Realistically, their discussion shouldn’t have taken more than a few minutes; Loki hadn’t even been living in the Tower for a full week, after all. And yet Tony ended up talking to Bruce about everything from Loki’s requests for the kitchen (“I swear, sometimes I can’t tell if he’s asking for stuff he legitimately doesn’t know can’t be found on Earth or if he’s just fucking with me”) to some of the plans that Tony had started to draw up to personalize their shared space for Loki. Before he realized it they’d made it back to their car in the Visitors Center lot. “Whoops,” Tony sheepishly apologized. “Didn’t mean to talk the whole way back.”

“It’s fine,” Bruce dismissively replied. “I’m just happy you and Loki are still getting along. At this point it’d be hard to explain why you got thrown out of a window again if you made Loki too mad.”

“Why do you assume I’m the one who would make him throw me out a window??”

Bruce wisely chose to ignore that question and instead looked towards the trailhead where Steve was still taking pictures. “Steve, you ready?” he called out.

Steve put up his phone and came jogging up to them moments later. “Yup. You still good to drive, Bruce, or do you want me to take over?”

“I can drive if you can pull up the directions for me.”

“Civilization ho,” Tony singsonged as he climbed into the back seat again.

“Tony, it’s been a couple of hours,” Steve chastised.

“Point?”

Steve rolled his eyes and sighed as he got into the car. He knew better than to get into that argument.

The drive to their hosts was rather slow, given that Bruce was now hyper-paranoid about megafauna crossing their path and was driving quite a bit under the speed limit as a result. Tony was just happy to be out of the cold again, and quietly watched the wilderness passing by out of his window. “You know, I wouldn’t mind coming back here when the weather’s a little nicer,” he stated. There was something undeniably gorgeous about Yellowstone, and Tony was certain that if the temperature was a bit higher he’d honestly love being here, even with the (potentially) murderous animals roaming the plains nearby.

“Agreed,” Steve said. “Maybe make it a longer trip too, we’re not going to have much time tomorrow to do anything if we want to get Loki’s stuff loaded on the plane at a reasonable hour.”
“Oh yeah. Bruce, remind me to look into a rental truck when we get to the B&B.”

The rest of the drive passed in comfortable silence, broken only by one of the SUV’s occupants occasionally pointing out some natural feature on the horizon before the sun completely set. It was utterly dark by the time they made it down the long gravel driveway which led to their lodgings, and everyone was quite worn out. It seemed that their hosts were ready for the Avengers arrival, which definitely lifted their spirits. The porch lights were already on, revealing a sprawling two-story lodge with dark wood paneling and massive timbers holding up a staircase and vaulted entryway half-obscured by the multitude of trees surrounding them. Soft orange light filtered out through high windows, and a short distance away through the greenery Tony could make out a guest house that, while dwarfed by the main building, was still large enough to pass as a respectable residence on its own.

Tony let out an impressed whistle as they pulled up and parked the car beside a pickup truck. “Not exactly what I was picturing when you said family with a few rooms, Brucie bear.”

Bruce shrugged as they exited the car. “It was pretty far out of the way from town and it could sleep three of us easy. I didn’t do too much digging beyond that.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the appearance of an old man stepping out the front door. His hair was completely white and he was easily pushing 70 if not past that, but there was a wide smile on his face and he moved at a good pace towards the Avengers as he came down the stairs. “Hello!” he called out, and unless Tony was mistaken there was the slightest hint of a Scandinavian accent to his voice. “You’re Bruce?”

“Yes, and these are the two guests I said I’d be bringing with me. Thank you so much for taking us in on such short notice, Mr. Wising.”

“Please, call me Fredric!” their host replied, having now reached them to offer Bruce a handshake. He turned to Tony and Steve, who quickly made their own introductions and shook their host’s hand one after the other. Fredric stared at them for a moment, smile falling slightly. “You’re...the Avengers, aren’t you?”

“Yes, and these are the two guests I said I’d be bringing with me. Thank you so much for taking us in on such short notice, Mr. Wising.”

“Please, call me Fredric!” their host replied, having now reached them to offer Bruce a handshake. He turned to Tony and Steve, who quickly made their own introductions and shook their host’s hand one after the other. Fredric stared at them for a moment, smile falling slightly. “You’re...the Avengers, aren’t you?”

“Is that going to be a problem?” Steve asked. “We’ll understand if you’re uncomfortable having us stay here, but we promise we’ll do our best not to cause your family any trouble.”

“It’s...never mind, I’m sure it’ll be ok. Come on, I know how you tourists feel about the winter cold around here. Nothing on Stockholm, of course, but come summertime you’re the ones running around in the middle of the day while Sophie and I are melting!”

“You’re from Stockholm?” Tony asked, while Bruce and Steve shared a look and fell back behind the pair. Their host was clearly uncomfortable having a group of heroes stay with them; best to let Tony handle the pleasantries until Fredric had properly warmed up to them.

Fredric nodded, smiling wistfully at Tony. “Boden in my childhood, but after the war my parents moved into Stockholm. Sophie and I came here because of my job, and that was 45 years ago.” By now they’d reached the front door and stepped inside the house. The interior had a cozy rustic design with wooden floors and walls that were covered by furs, handwoven rugs, and scenic paintings. A huge fire was burning in the center of the living room, surrounded by couches and chairs near a sizeable mahogany coffee table. Tony could hear voices drifting in from down the hall and smelled something wonderful as soon as they entered; dinner was waiting for them, apparently.

“Come on, Sophie won’t be happy if we let the food get cold,” Fredric said as he ushered them down the hall, presumably towards either the kitchen or dining room.
“Thank you again for making dinner,” Bruce gratefully said.

“Of course! We’re already cooking for five, and more mouths mean less chance of leftovers spoiling.”

“Five?”

“Our daughter and grandson are staying with us for a little while; don’t worry, their rooms are on the other side of the house from yours. We’ve got a long-term tenant as well in the guest house,” Fredric added with a dismissive hand wave. “He doesn’t always eat with us, but Sophie makes him a plate all the same. You probably won’t even see him tonight, now that I’m thinking about it; he’s been working out there all day.”

“Harley, help me set the table!” a woman called out.

“Just a sec mom!” a younger voice answered. “We’re putting up the runestones!”

Tony stopped in the hallway, staring at Fredric in confusion. “Runestones?”

Fredric sighed and whispered something in Swedish. Slowly, he turned around to face the Avengers, mouth pressed in a thin line and a stern look on his face. “Before we go into my kitchen, I must ask that you keep an open mind. My wife and I kept some of our traditions when we immigrated that you might find...odd.”

“Oh of course,” Steve immediately assured him. “We’d never-”

“Please,” Fredric interrupted. “If Harley is doing what I think he’s doing, this might be a little much for you. Believe me when I tell you; everything is all right, and no one is in any kind of danger.” At that warning he turned right back around and began walking towards the kitchen again, calling out, “Harley! Elise! Sophie! Our guests are here.”

Equal parts curious and suspicious, Tony followed after Fredric into the kitchen as Bruce and Steve took up a defensive position behind him. Fredric’s non-explanation heralded the sort of trouble the Avengers might expect before walking in on a supervillain in their secret lab, and in their line of work it was better to air on the side of caution. Tony had every intention of merely poking his head around the corner and then making some excuse which would allow him to double back to the car and grab the suitcase armor, but the sight which awaited him in the kitchen actually managed to completely freeze him where he stood. Vaguely, Tony was aware of a little old lady stirring a pot of something on the stove while another, younger woman unloaded plates from a cabinet, clearly intending to set the table. At the counter sat a teenage boy, gently putting a number of small glowing stones into an ornate metal box one by one, with the help of-

“LOKI?!”

Immediately everyone’s focus was on Tony, including a very confused Loki. “Anthony?” he asked. “What are you doing here?”

Suddenly Bruce and Steve were beside Tony, staring in disbelief. “Loki? Weren’t you supposed to be...” Bruce trailed off, sudden realization dawning upon his face. “Oh.”

It clicked for Tony a moment later. “This is where you’ve been staying?!”

Fredric and the others glanced back and forth between the Avengers and Loki over and over. When it gradually became clear that the four weren’t about to come to blows, Fredric visibly relaxed. “Come along, everyone. Sophie and I will be happy to explain everything over dinner.”
The state of affairs was as follows: after Loki had escaped Asgard and made his way back to Midgard, the god had been forced to bounce around the realm for several months, never feeling secure in any one particular hideout for more than a few weeks at a time, if that. The constant need to relocate had limited the amount of progress he was able to make in his “personal projects” so to speak, eventually forcing Loki to take additional steps to secure more permanent lodgings. He’d disguised himself with a bit of magic and come to the Wisings with a tale of being a reclusive author, looking for a bit of privacy far away from the hustle and bustle of the city. They’d happily rented the guest house to him for twice what they’d been asking in their adverts (turns out the whole alchemic transmuting lead into gold thing had some basis), and the ruse had held for almost three weeks before Sophie had walked in on Loki out of his disguise, with the intention of inviting him to dinner. Loki had been prepared for a fight, but what he received instead was sheer delight and a hug from his elderly host.

“Pagans,” Fredric stated between spoonfuls of stew. “That’s what they called us, even in the cities with other immigrants. We learned to keep quiet about religion, but Sophie and I have always believed in the existence and power of the old gods. Who were we to turn one of them away?”

Sophie nodded in agreement from her seat beside her husband, while Bruce and Steve stared at them from across the table. Sophie had followed her husband’s lead earlier, and with the grace and skill that only comes from years of hosting had everyone seated and eating before they had time to actually process how absurd the whole situation was. Their daughter Elise was circling the group to ensure that everyone had enough to eat, with Harley sitting at the foot of the table. Loki was seated catty-corner to Fredric at the table’s head, and Tony had taken a seat beside him. At the moment, however, Tony’s attention was on the old man as opposed to the god. “So you just...let him stay?”

“You just let me stay,” Loki pointed out.

“That’s different!” Tony insisted in a tone that convinced absolutely no one.

“The attack on New York didn’t bother you?” Steve asked, attention still on the elderly couple.

Sophie shook her head. “I know the stories. Loki always has a reason for what he does, we knew this. Besides, he’s sworn not to cause us any harm during his time in our home, under the ancient rules of guest friendship.”

“And I have every intention of keeping that promise, even after I depart for New York,” Loki assured her.

“Will the charms still work?” Harley asked.

“Charms?” Tony repeated.

“I had to ward my quarters for protection,” Loki explained. “Adding a few more to this house hardly required much more effort. And to answer your question, yes Harley, the spells I’ve placed upon this household will hold for quite some time.”

Steve and Bruce glanced towards one another; that particular conversation was worth bringing up later.

“Huh,” Tony mumbled around a mouthful of brown bread.

“On that note, please feel free to come by even after you’ve moved out, Loki,” Fredric requested, gracing the god with a small smile. “Things are going to be rather quiet around here once you leave.”
Loki’s answer was a noncommittal hum.

“How’d the packing go?” Bruce inquired, making a valiant attempt for normalcy in the midst of this turn of events.

Loki frowned. “Unfortunately, I was unable to finish everything I needed to get done today. After dinner I need to go back to work if we’re to have any hope of loading everything up by tomorrow evening.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Yes, Anthony, properly packing magical artifacts takes time if one doesn’t want to accidentally blow their fingers off when unpacking later.”

“Do you need a label maker? Should we have gotten you a label maker before we came out here? Or maybe some extra packing peanuts?”

Loki narrowed his eyes at Tony’s poorly concealed grin. “Perhaps I shall leave you in charge of unpacking at the Tower. See how many boxes it takes before you sprout an extra pair of eyes.”

“Not the weirdest thing that’s ever happened in my Tower, not even the top five.”

“Ridiculous,” Loki declared, but smiled as he did so.

“Am I right in assuming you three will be fine staying with us tonight?” Fredric asked. “You seem to be on friendly terms with Loki, and I’d hate to send you off again when it’s this cold after dark.”

Tony and Loki both started, suddenly remembering that their hosts had no idea what had transpired between the Avengers and Loki over the past few months, and were more than likely confused and a bit on edge over this recent turn of events. “Yeah, it’s fine,” Tony assured them. “We’re in a truce with Loki right now; he’s, uh, actually going to be moving in with us, in case he hasn’t told you.”

Fredric’s brow went up as Sophie let out a soft, “Oh,” in surprise. Elise stared, while Harley rapidly glanced back and forth between Tony and Loki. “Wait, so does that make Loki an Avenger now?” he asked.

“Not for all the gold in Asgard’s vaults,” Loki immediately answered. “Think of me as an...independent contractor is the accepted term, I believe. Or perhaps a professional consultant for the supernatural.”

Now Harley’s attention was back on the Avengers, specifically Tony and Bruce. “I thought you guys were geniuses.”

“Not when it comes to the magic arts,” Loki corrected with a smirk.

Harley perked up at this. “Could I show them the runestones?”

“Harley, it’s late and I’m sure our guests are very tired,” Elise firmly told him.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Loki suggested, earning a small smile from the kid.

Tony was fascinated by this dynamic. For all the grief that Loki regularly gave this realm, he seemed rather taken by this particular family. Tony had honestly expected that wherever Loki was living to be secluded, set off in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by enough traps and protective spells to make approaching it unwise if not impossible. But now, watching how Loki acted like an
extended relative in the midst of this family reminded Tony of his and Loki’s conversation a few nights prior, when Loki indirectly implied that he enjoyed being around others (or at least enjoyed knowing that they were nearby). If nothing else, Tony knew Loki had always enjoyed having an audience for his tricks; why wouldn’t he want company and attention on a more domestic level, then?

“Anthony?”

Loki interrupted Tony’s train of thought, shooting his friend a concerned look. “Are you all right?”

“Uh, yeah. Just tired from today.” Not that far a stretch of the truth. Besides, Tony was fairly certain that this was neither the time nor place to have a conversation with Loki about his most recent epiphany.

Fortunately, Loki seemed more than willing to believe this fib (and wow, wasn’t that a bit of a power trip to pull one over on the god of lies), tsking at his friend. “You should have rested earlier.”

“We had the campaign!”

“In the car then. Your trip to Yellowstone doubtless took a good bit of time, did it not?”

“It’s a little hard to nap when you’re under attack by a herd of buffalo-”

“The stocky cow moose creatures?” Loki asked, confusion all over his face. “Why didn’t you call for help then?”

“We weren’t under attack, Tony’s just being dramatic,” Bruce clarified.

“Ah. That does make a bit more sense.”

“Rude, Prancer. Rude.”

“Oh, I’m sure you handled this ‘attack’ with a great deal of grace and dignity,” Loki said with a grin that immediately betrayed his insincerity.

“I’m sensing your mockery, Gandalf, see if I get you any bookcases now, you can just keep all your things in their boxes in the living room for the next six months.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Idle threats don’t become you, Anthony. We both know you’d complain that the cardboard is ruining the aesthetic you’re going for in the penthouse, and then you’d end up building the shelving units in your workshop from scratch by the third day.”

“Oh!”

Once again, Tony and Loki were reminded of the presence of other people thanks to an interjection from their host. It was Sophie who’d let out the exclamation, and she was now beaming at the two of them. “What?” Tony asked.

“Nothing, nothing. We were just a bit worried when Loki announced he was suddenly moving out, but it looks like he’ll be in good hands.” Loki humphed at that, doubtless thinking it was absurd for mere mortals to be worrying about him, but if Sophie was upset by his reaction she didn’t show it. Instead, she rose and began clearing everyone’s plates. “Now then; who wants dessert?”

-n-

The rest of the meal passed in relative peace, and almost as soon as their hosts began cleaning up
Tony was hit by an overwhelming wave of fatigue. He’d had plenty of experience with long days turning his tenure in SI, but that didn’t make a morning of flying and a busy afternoon any less exhausting. Even Steve’s eyes were starting to droop, and Bruce was practically asleep at the table by the time the last plate had been loaded into the dishwasher. Loki went back to the guest house to continue packing while the others stayed in the main house and began to wind down for the evening. Tony drew the short straw for the shower and had to wait, tapping away on his phone in the living room while he waited. Their hosts had already retired, meaning that he was left in peace. Until…

Tony looked up from his phone as the couch sank down to his right. Harley had taken a seat beside him. “Hey kid. Need something?”

“Can I ask you some questions?” Harley demanded.

The kid was sitting up ramrod straight, eyes boring into Tony and clearly trying to project a serious air that drastically differed from the one Tony had seen at dinner. Something was going on here, but Tony had no clue what that might be. All he could do, then, was answer, “Sure kid.”

“You guys are Avengers,” Harley stated in a tone that expected a confirmation.

“Yup, that’s us.”

“And you fight bad guys.”

“When they cause trouble, yeah.”

“But you’re fine with Loki. What’s up with that?”

Tony set down his phone, giving Harley his undivided attention. “Are you asking me why we sat down and ate dinner with Loki instead of trying to put him through a wall?”

Harley shrugged. “Well, kinda. Mom and I have seen you guys fighting him on TV before, so it’s weird that you guys are so cool with Loki in real life. Like, he’s supposed to be one of your archenemies, but you’re letting him move into your house? It’s weird. Is he actually an independent contractor for the Avengers, or was that a lie? Are the fights scripted or something? Is the whole supervillain thing really just a marketing gimmick for your company?”

There it was. Harley was confused about dinner earlier, and had waited until he could get one of the Avengers alone to ask a few more follow-up questions. Well that made sense; he and Loki seemed to be on friendly terms, and he was probably just trying to make sure that the god would be fine when he officially left the Wising residence. Tony sighed and leaned back in his seat, trying to find the right words to explain the clusterfuck that was his life. “That’s a really long story, kid.”

“Harley.”

“Harley,” Tony corrected. “Here’s the condensed version. Loki was an Avengers enemy, emphasis on the was. But a little while ago we figured out that he’s not trying to destroy Earth, he’s trying to save it but in a really roundabout way.”

Harley stared at Tony with an expression of disbelief that all teenagers have mastered to utilize in their dealings with adults. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, I know, he’s pretty bad at it,” Tony went on with a sardonic smile. “But that’s why he’s moving all of his stuff into our home. Much as it sucks to admit, the Avengers can’t save the world on our own, just like Loki can’t do it on his own. So he’s coming to New York with us to help us out by combining his magic with our resources.”
Harley took a minute to consider this. “So...you guys are really ok with him?”

“I am,” Tony affirmed, the words coming out before he had time to consciously decide on them.

“Even after the Battle of New York?”

Tony had had an inkling that the battle might come up in conversation, and already had an answer ready to go. “I’m not going to lie, Loki’s done a lot of stuff to us in the past that makes it harder to trust him. But honestly Harley? He’s the one taking the risk here. Right now he’s packing up his entire life on Midgard to move into a base where it’s six against one (on a bad day) if he crosses us. If he were trying to trap or trick us, this is probably the worst way he could go about doing it. So at the moment, I’m inclined to believe that he actually wants our help and he’s telling us the truth about why he needs us. And I think when that sinks in with the other Avengers, then they’re going to have an easier time trusting him too.”

Harley nodded, accepting this line of reasoning. “Can I ask you something else?”

“Shoot.”

“Wait.” Harley craned his head back to look down the hall, checking to ensure that they were alone. “Can you keep a secret?” he whispered.

Tony agreed, vaguely wondering where Harley was going with this. If Loki was responsible for the kid’s current nervousness then Tony was going to be having a little chat with a certain god after this.

Harley dug into his jeans pocket and pulled out a leather keychain about the length of his index finger and twice as wide. “It’s a protection charm,” he stated, holding it out for Tony to see the variety of runes pressed into the leather. “Loki gave it to me.”

Tony studied it, trying to keep his face expressionless. “Protection charm?”

Harley nodded, quickly retracting the keychain and tucking it back into his pocket. “Last summer I broke my arm before mom and I came up to visit. I told everyone I fell and landed on my wrist funny.”

“But that’s not what really happened,” Tony guessed.

“I mean, technically I did fall. I just fell because some kids pushed me down the stairs at school, that’s all,” Harley clarified. “And everyone bought that pretty easy because I’m kind of clumsy, but Loki figured it out.”

“You know he’s the god of lies, right?”

“Yeah, he mentioned that when he was calling me a terrible liar,” Harley said with a wince. “And then the next day he gave me the charm and said that as long as I kept it with me I wouldn’t have to worry about that stuff anymore. And like, I know you’re not supposed to take gifts from gods, that’s like mythology 101, but...do you know how much it sucks to be 12 and not have one of your hands for half of summer break? Like, a lot. A lot a lot.” Harley shifted in his seat, smoothing down the fabric of his jeans. “So, when we went back home a couple weeks later I kept it tied to my backpack.”

“What happened?”

Harley shrugged. “It was like all the bullies found something better to do. Like, whenever I’d go to the mall back home they’d stop whatever they were doing and walk off somewhere else. Or when
church started back up, they’d ignore me or clam up about me whenever I was in earshot.”

“Ok, I’m with you so far. What’s your question?”

“Was taking the charm bad?” Harley blurted out. “They were seriously making me miserable, but this charm isn’t just some stupid four leaf clover or rabbit’s foot, it’s actual magic that’s forcing them to leave me alone. And that feels messed up, but...if I stop using it, I’m scared things are going to go back to how they were before. And I was worried because it’s from Loki too so maybe it’ll really hurt someone one day like in those myths with the monkey’s paw or something, but you guys trust him so maybe it’s not so bad? What should I do?”

Harley was breathless by the time he’d finished his line of questioning, and it was a good thing he needed a minute to catch his breath so Tony could formulate an appropriate answer. Harley’s situation inspired a number of feelings towards his tormentors, and none of them were particularly favorable. At the same time, what Loki had done was essentially force Harley’s bullies to back off via magical manipulation and, lacking any sort of background in the magic arts, Tony had no idea what the long-term side effects might be on the children, if in fact there would be any at all. He didn’t exactly have a wealth of advice to dig into for situations like these, but even he was fairly certain that waving off Harley’s concerns and assuring him that Loki’s interference was fine wouldn’t produce the result either of them wanted. And so he took a moment to properly gather his thoughts before speaking again.

“Honestly Harley?” he said at last. “I think taking the charm was ok. You were in a bad situation, and Loki was trying to be a responsible adult and help you out without getting too involved. But you know what?”

“What?”

“I’m betting that Loki probably didn’t expect you to always need the charm,” Tony continued, hoping that Harley couldn’t read the uncertainty in the hogwash he was currently espousing as gospel truth. “He’s told me before that all magic breaks down eventually, and that’s got to include the charm he made for you. The bullies have left you alone for a while now, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then maybe it might be a good idea to leave the charm at home for a little while,” Tony suggested. “If things start to backslide you can always start carrying it around again, but I’m thinking Loki only gave you that to get the bullies to leave you alone, and it’s sounding like the charm has already served that purpose.”

Harley mulled this over for a bit. “I guess that makes sense. And I don’t want to hurt them or anything by using this all the time, Mr. Stark, I just don’t want them to bother me anymore.”

“That’s why I’m telling you to keep it in the back of your closet or something instead of hurling it into a river,” Tony stated, and he was happy that his tone sounded a bit more confident this time. “Be kind but also be smart, kid. No matter how you look at it, you’ve got the protection of a god in your pocket and it would be stupid to throw that out.”

With an adult, Tony probably would have had to offer up a much better explanation or withstood additional scrutiny behind his logic. But Harley seemed perfectly willing to accept Tony’s reasoning; whether that was because Tony had actually made a good argument, or if he was simply looking for any kind of validation for holding on to Loki’s gift would have to remain a mystery. “Ok. Thanks Mr. Stark.”
“No problem.”

“You guys sticking around for breakfast?”

“Probably.” That was a fairly safe assumption by this point. Tony knew he and the others had been planning to return to Yellowstone the next day, but if Loki still had a while to go on packing then it would probably behoove them to hang around here in the morning and see if they could offer him any kind of help. Actually-

“Tony, shower’s all yours,” Bruce called out as he strolled into the living room in his pajamas.

“Got it, thanks,” Tony replied. “Hey, I’ll see you tomorrow morning, ok Harley?”

“Night, Mr. Stark.”

Tony waved as Harley disappeared down the hall, then proceeded to head towards the bathroom on the guest end of the house. He’d need to make it fairly quick though; there was one more thing he had to do before going to bed tonight.

-n-

One shower and a change of clothes later, Tony was standing outside the guest house and pounding on the door. The already chilly temperature of the day had plummeted once the sun went down, and he’d wrongly assumed that he’d only be out in the cold for a few short moments, so he hadn’t bothered to put on his parka and was currently stuck outside in only his pajamas and shoes. Unfortunately, Loki had locked the outside door and was apparently out of hearing range, leading to Tony shiver and desperately pray that the god would eventually hear him and open up.

Just as Tony was thinking of giving up and going back into the house to text Loki, the god finally opened the door, peering down at Tony in confusion. “Anthony?”

“Cold, scoot, cold,” Tony babbled as he practically shoved his way past Loki into the entryway. He breathed a sigh of relief once he was out of the frigid Montana air, hurriedly rubbing at his arms and hands in an effort to warm them back up. He was so focused on getting the feeling back in his limbs that it took a while before it clicked that Tony was finally standing in Loki’s home, and he ought to be taking a look around if only to satisfy his curiosity.

Tony had entered through the living room and was standing in the midst of several half-packed cardboard boxes scattered about the room. The shelves set against the walls were largely bare, save for a few glass jars here and there that themselves were more empty than not. Pressed against the wall on the opposite side of the room was a massive oak dining table, and to Tony’s shock it was giving off a faint golden light. Besides this, the only other furniture in the entire room was a chaise lounge set off from the table at a slight distance, a single blue fleece blanket draped over the red, crushed velvet body. It was...barren.

“Not quite the castle you were picturing, I’m sure,” Loki remarked as he shut the door. “But it’s been adequate for my purposes.”

Hearing those two sentences, Tony felt like a complete and utter jackass. Loki was on his own, of course he wouldn’t be living in a sprawling fortress with near-limitless resources at his disposal. Once upon a time Loki would have had access to everything he could have wanted or needed, obviously; being part of the royal family definitely had its perks, if Thor’s bragging of his homeland was to be believed. For Loki to lose all of that, and still scrape together a functional headquarters that he could operate out of was frankly astounding.
“I assume there’s a reason you’re pounding on my door in the dead of night,” Loki stated, turning to his guest after he closed the insulated curtains hanging over the door. Tony’s embarrassment must have shown on his face, because Loki sighed and said, “Oh don’t get upset, Anthony. Truly, I enjoyed our little chat on the plane, even with your fundamental misunderstanding of how furniture enchantments work.”

“It’d be worth the effort,” Tony argued, and was disappointed in himself for how little levity he was able to imbue with that statement.

Mercifully, if Loki noticed this he was willing to ignore it. “Do you want a drink?” he asked, already walking into the kitchen. Tony quietly followed after him into a room that was just as spartan as the living room, missing even basic furniture like a table or chairs (albeit there were plenty of dishes stacked on the countertop, waiting to be packed). Loki extracted two glasses from this pile and set them by Tony before he crossed the room to the fridge and extracted a bottle of red wine. “Might as well finish this off before leaving,” he commented, pouring both of them a glass.

Tony thanked him and took a sip, needing a minute to gather his thoughts. Everything about Loki’s behavior was telling him that an apology would be unwelcome right now; Loki had already tried to comfort Tony and then changed the subject. It was probably in Tony’s best interest to follow his lead. “I came over to see if you wanted any help packing,” Tony explained. “You know, ‘cause it seems unfair that you’re stuck packing all day while we’re running around taking pictures and staring at nature.”

“That was the entire point of this trip though,” Loki pointed out as he sipped on his own glass. “You and the others provide a reasonable cover story to explain why the SI plane is in Montana, and I gather all my supplies behind the scenes.”

“Well yeah,” Tony admitted, “but that’s still putting all the work on you, and that’s not fair.”

“Anthony-”

“Oh, I get it. This is one of those ‘foolish Midgardians can’t be trusted with magic’ things, isn’t it? You’re probably worried I’m going to drop your jar of powdered griffon horn and turn myself into a toad-”

“Griffons don’t even have horns to powder,” Loki corrected. “It’s the eye of newt you have to be wary of.”

“It’s getting easier to tell when you’re fucking with me, you know that right?” Tony asked as he held out his glass for a refill.

“Then I suppose I’ll have to try harder,” Loki retorted, smirking as he poured Tony another glass and topped off his own.

“But seriously, if I can help you let me,” Tony pled. “Otherwise I’m just going to be lying in bed all night feeling guilty about it.”

Loki took another sip as he considered Tony’s offer. “All right,” he acquiesced. “But only handle the materials I explicitly say you can touch, and you are not, under any circumstances whatsoever, to try opening any of the jars. Understand?”

“Absolutely,” Tony quickly agreed, because this was Loki’s wheelhouse and if he said not to do something then Tony was going to listen.

This was how the two of them ended up in the living room 15 minutes later, steadily working their
way through both the jars that still needed to be packed and the bottle of wine which Loki had brought along (though that was 90% Loki, given how certain Tony was that trying to load a moving truck tomorrow with a hangover would definitely be A Very Bad Idea). The packing itself wasn’t terribly complicated, but the necessity of snugly packing each individual jar one by one and taking care not to load certain ingredients together in the same box did make it time consuming. “Ok, that’s the hellebore and birch extract packed,” Tony announced as he taped up the box he was working on. “Little low on both of them though, just fyi.”

Loki waved off his friend’s concern, boxing up a jar of something that he’d snatched out of Tony’s reach as soon as the man had thoughtlessly moved to pick it up. “You make do with what you have. There may not be much here, but as long as there’s enough then I will make it work for our purposes.”

“Yeah…”

Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was Loki’s willingness to show Tony exactly how much in dire straights he’d found himself, or maybe it was a combination of both that served as the impetus for what happened next. Whatever the reason, Tony found himself seated on the floor, taping closed the bottom of a new box and asking, “Did you ever hear exactly how I ended up with the arc reactor?”

Tony very carefully kept his eyes glued to the box after speaking. Part of him was certain that he if looked up at Loki right now then he’d try to change the subject or laugh it off, and who knew when he’d work up the courage to bring this up again. There was a pregnant pause in the silence of the room before Loki finally answered. “No, I don’t believe I’ve heard that story.”

Tony took a deep breath and polished off the rest of his wine to steady his nerves before he began. “Well, it wasn’t exactly an elective procedure, in case you hadn’t figured that one out yet.”

The whole endeavor gradually came out as Tony and Loki worked their way through the rest of the jars (and the wine as well). Tony had only told the story in its entirety to Pepper and Rhodey before; most of the Avengers had a general idea of what had happened thanks to the SHIELD file on him, and Bruce’s few questions on the matter had been answered as briefly as Tony possibly could. Tony always struggled to talk about what had happened, particularly about Yinsin, and even now found himself glossing over some parts, like the torture he’d suffered. But the rest of it came…not easily, but it came. Talking about the early days with the arc reactor, when escape seemed nearly impossible and the Mark I was nothing but a dying man’s desperate bid for freedom, had been utterly exhausting all those years ago. Yet telling this story to Loki was draining, but not as agonizing as Tony remembered. Perhaps it was time, or the alcohol, or just who his audience was. Pepper had gasped and cried throughout his account, and Rhodey kept getting up to pace and swear. Loki, on the other hand, merely sat nearby and listened, the only sounds from him being the rustle of cardboard or the occasional tinkling of jars being knocked against one another.

“So yeah, maybe announcing I was Iron Man at a press conference wasn’t the best move I could’ve made, but when have I ever been accused of doing the sane thing?” Tony finished as he closed the lid on his box. “Dang it, I’m out of tape.”

“Here,” Loki said, bringing over his own roll and sealing the box shut. Tony glanced around the room, surprised to see that the shelves were completely bare now. He hadn’t realized how much time he’d need to get through the sordid affair.

Loki took a seat beside him, setting the tape on the floor as he whipped out a marker and began scribbling on the box lid in a script that was either some foreign language or the messiest cursive Tony had ever seen in his life. “You’ve been through quite a lot,” Loki remarked as he capped the marker again.
“Mhm.”

“Is that why you let me move in? Kindred spirits and all that?”

Loki’s tone was both curious and wary, and much as Tony had done earlier his attention was focused on the box in front of him. It was as if Loki couldn’t fathom anyone willingly choosing to let him live in their space and needed Tony to provide an answer. And all Tony could come up with was, “Well kinda, but it’s more like...I don’t know exactly what you went through with Thanos, but I’m pretty sure it was bad. Fair assessment?”

“Yes.”

“Right. If you’re like me, trauma changes things. Like it’s going to mess with your head, and even if it doesn’t alter everything about you, it definitely shifts some priorities around. It’s like...maybe some Asgardians or whoever don’t get you suddenly wanting to be a hero and stop Thanos, but I do. When you go through something awful like that and come out mostly intact, it’s hard not to do whatever you can to stop things like that from happening again.” Tony sighed and slumped sideways, head coming to rest on Loki’s shoulder. “Does that make sense? I don’t know if that made sense. My brain is fried right now.”

“I understand the point you’re trying to make,” Loki confirmed in a soft whisper, leaning back against the wall behind them and being careful not to dislodge Tony from his perch. “You’re right; my time with Thanos has definitely ‘adjusted’ some of my personal goals, shall we say. Winning the throne from Thor hardly compares to stopping a galaxy-wide genocide of all creation.”

For someone who’d downed the better part of a wine bottle, Loki was shockingly coherent and sober, not to mention far more awake and alert than Tony. On some level, Tony realized that he should probably sit up since he was definitely invading Loki’s personal space and not drunk enough to use alcohol as an excuse, but the day’s exhaustion had caught up to him completely and he didn’t want to move yet. Loki would probably shove him off when he got tired of Tony’s antics anyway, so he might as well enjoy his headrest for now.

“Does this do it for the packing? Besides the kitchen stuff I mean,” Tony asked, changing the subject.

“The important supplies, yes,” Loki replied. “I’m planning to leave behind everything but the boxes we’ve packed and the table. You’ve provided me with furnishings in your guestroom, so there’s no need to bring anything from here.”

Tony frowned at that. “Isn’t there anything you’re attached to? Like a favorite mug or something?”

“Well...I suppose I’ve grown rather attached to the chaise lounge.”

“Then it’s coming with us,” Tony decided.

“Anthony-”

“Look, we’re already going to need a huge truck to get the table and all the boxes out of here,” Tony explained. “Adding your weird couch thing isn’t going to be that big of a deal. Plus you have like no furniture. Seriously, how do you not have at least a card table or something?”

Loki cleared his throat, shifting slightly in his seat. “There may have been a table at one point.”

Tony perked up slightly, tilting his head back to look up at Loki. “At one point?”
“When my search wasn’t producing the results I wished for, I...may or may not have cracked the table in half by flipping it over.”

“...”

“Also there might have been some curtains in here at one point, prior to a very localized fire.”

Tony burst into laughter at that. “So that’s why there’s nothing in here. Not even IKEA furnishings can withstand the wrath of a god.”

“I have no idea what this IKEA is, but if it’s half as insulting as I’m assuming then you’re going back out into the cold without your shoes.”

“All right, all right, I’ll back down,” Tony promised as his laughter finally subsided.

For a while Tony and Loki simply sat there, looking around the room at the myriad of boxes that had been packed and stacked over the course of the day. Any other time, Tony might have felt some excitement as seeing such tangible proof that their plan was moving forward. Due to the late hour, however, Tony’s attention was entirely focused on trying to keep his eyes open. “God, I’m tired,” he muttered, leaning further into Loki’s side.

“No need to be so formal, Loki is fine.”

Tony snorted. “Smartass.”

“Come on, then,” Loki said as he gave Tony a firm shake. “Up.”

Tony finally lifted his head and began rising to his feet, only to suddenly be struck by a horrific realization. “It’s freezing outside.”

“More than likely,” the god agreed as he climbed to his feet.

“Loki...”

Loki cast Tony a suspicious glance. “Yes?”

“Please don’t make me go back out into the cold.”

“I’m not going to teleport you into the house, Anthony, that’s a waste of magic. Besides, it’ll only be a few moments out there at worst.”

“But what if I’m locked out and no one hears me knocking? C’mon Lokes, could you really live with that on your conscious? Kicking me out into the cold to freeze to death, alone and-”

“Fine, you may stay here,” Loki sighed. “I’ll get you a pillow.”

Tony grinned and sat down on the chaise lounge, tucking himself in under the blankets as Loki disappeared down the hallway. He stretched out and was unconscious before his head even hit the cushion.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is loosely dedicated to chrisgraver, who specifically asked if Harley would
make an appearance. Here you go!

Honestly this chapter was a blast to write, but it took forever because it's been nigh on impossible to find more than 10-15 minutes to write at a time (plus now that I've hopped aboard the long chapter train I can't seem to get off. Oi). Next time; the continuing adventures of the Avengers in Yellowstone!

N.B.: It has been brought to my attention that the animals I refer to as buffalo are bison, a term that I have always used interchangeably. Due to sheer laziness and the fact that the word "buffalo" feels more comedic to say than "bison," this error will not be corrected.
Wherein Plans Go Awry from Start to Finish

Chapter Summary

Of course nothing could ever be easy. In terms of emotions, Loki remains an unmitigated disaster.

Kudos and comments are loved and appreciated! No, seriously guys, you have all been so wonderfully kind and consistent with your feedback and critiques, and it truly motivates me to keep writing this story.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time Loki located an extra blanket and pillow in the back room and returned to the living room, Anthony was already passed out on the chaise lounge and snugly tucked beneath the blanket Loki typically used. Tsking, Loki quietly lifted Anthony’s head and tucked the pillow beneath it, lest he wake up tomorrow morning and complain about a neck cramp. “You’re lucky I’m in a charitable mood, Anthony,” he whispered, more from force of habit than a true warning delivered with any real menace behind it.

Anthony’s behavior in the recent past had been inexplicably magnanimous towards him. JARVIS and Loki might have concurrently agreed that him staying in Avengers Tower during their anti-Thanos efforts was the most logical of choices, but the god was under no illusions about the fact that Anthony still could have thrown him out with a few choice words, and the other Avengers would have supported that decision. Instead, Anthony had accepted this sudden intrusion into his home without a hint of resistance, even offering Loki a bed on his own floor. Granted, Loki’s little discussion with him over drinks doubtlessly played a part in solidifying that particular arrangement, but that didn’t change the fact that the option had been made well before then (or at least, that was how Loki was interpreting Anthony’s offer of shower and clothes in his own personal quarters). Loki had been grateful for the safe haven, assuming that his presence in the Tower on a more consistent basis might cause friction with the rest of the Avengers and he’d occasionally need to make himself scarce. He knew that they’d been willing to grant him shelter immediately after the bunker incident, but that didn’t mean they were necessarily eager or happy about it. And yet, the expected turmoil had yet to manifest.

The last few days had been shockingly calm and domestic. It was odd, thinking that six months ago Loki and the Avengers were sworn enemies actively attempting to destroy one another. Yet he’d spent a large part of this past Thursday quietly sitting on the living room’s loveseat while Bruce and Anthony argued over the merit of replicating a dish they’d seen on some cooking program (Bruce had insisted on an identical recreation since the chefs likely knew what they were doing, whereas Anthony was certain that “food chemists” had found some way to improve on its design). It had been very reminiscent of the dinner in Bruce’s floor weeks earlier, allowing Loki to be an indirect part of their amicable evening as a welcomed guest instead of an unwanted intruder. Even Steve seemed more at peace with Loki now, though whether he’d truly accepted the mage into their ranks or was simply giving in to Anthony’s whims remained to be seen.

Loki knew that Anthony’s friendship had been his lone saving grace as of late. Without the man’s
promise of shelter and resources, Loki’s plans to defeat Thanos would be dead in the water, likely because he himself would have perished after his failed reconnaissance and retrieval mission. Anthony’s willingness to give Loki time to heal, to provide transit and bring Loki’s property back to the Tower and to subsequently assist in the hunt for the Infinity Gems, and to do all of this with a smile on his face was far more than Loki deserved from him. When this mess was over and done with, Loki would have to think long and hard about undertaking any future endeavors that would pit him against the Avengers, if only for Anthony’s sake. He owed the man a great debt, of that there could be no doubt.

On the other hand, Anthony was currently monopolizing the only bed in his possession, and Loki’s gratitude tended to wane in the face of overwhelming exhaustion. Besides, if the two of them were going to be living together for the foreseeable future then Loki needed to lay down a few very firm ground rules to prevent Anthony from making a habit of this sort of thieving behavior. Now it was merely a question of what to do. Preferably something that wouldn’t upset the man too terribly, yet also ensure that Loki wouldn’t have to sleep on the floor-

In a flash Loki was struck by a brilliant idea. It would be the perfect blend of impactful yet ultimately harmless, besides providing him with a good bit of entertainment. “Sleep well, Anthony,” he murmured, mischief dancing in his eyes.

-n-

Daylight was seeping into the room through the bottom of the curtains when Loki woke up. The world was remarkably quiet this early; most of the songbirds Loki had grown accustomed to hearing had already left for winter, and the main house sat far enough away that he could never hear the Wisings until they came outside. As he slowly continued to wake up, it occurred to him that the loudest sound in the room was the soft, even pattern of Anthony’s breathing. That made sense, given how Loki was currently curled up on the man’s chest, tucked snugly beneath the blanket and partially obscuring the soft blue glow of the arc reactor.

Loki shifted his body to more completely cover it. The story behind the arc reactor had shed quite a bit of light on Anthony’s forgiving attitude towards him. Anthony understood what it meant to be betrayed by people you loved, to have the rug ripped out from under you after realizing that so much of your life was built on lies, and most importantly how impossibly difficult it was to try and pick up the pieces after your entire world was violently turned on its head. Oftentimes Loki had assumed that Anthony’s behavior towards the other Avengers was simple friendship mixed with a dash of loneliness; now he could see the underlying protective streak present in his actions as well, guarding and providing for the Avengers in a way that no one had ever done for him. Not that he needed the protection, of course. Anthony was doubtlessly capable of looking after himself, Loki would be foolish to deny that, but still-

“Mmm…”

Loki’s attention was immediately redirected by the feeling of Anthony shifting beneath him. He must be waking up; time for Loki’s trick, then. Slowly he began sliding upwards until his head was peeking out from the blanket, silently watching and waiting for Anthony to actually drag himself into consciousness.

Anthony wriggled again, this time raising his arms in a lazy stretch as he yawned and popped his back. It took everything in Loki’s power to remain perfectly still during this, lest he spoil the fun too soon. Anthony’s arms dropped back down with a thump, softly muttering “Too early.” At that, Loki crept forward ever so gently until he was mere inches from his friend’s face. He raised his head up, holding himself eye level as Anthony froze and opened his eyes, clearly confused by the movement.
on his chest. “What the-”

And that was how Anthony was woken up by a familiar green snake flicking its forked tongue against his nose.

The results were everything Loki could have hoped for. Anthony screeched at a ridiculously high pitch and sprang off the lounge with such force that he very nearly launched himself into a nearby wall. Loki of course went flying as well, and the sight of a large serpent going airborne in the wee hours of the morning sent Anthony into another shrieking fit as he fell to the floor and began blindly grasping for something to defend himself with. Loki landed on the foot of the lounge and barely managed to transform back into his Aesir shape before he too was on the floor, tears rolling down his face as he shook from laughing so hard. Norns, he hadn’t enjoyed a prank like this in ages.

“Wha-LOKI?! You asshole!”

In a heartbeat Anthony was standing over him and smacking him with a pillow, but Loki was still cackling too hard to care. Even when Anthony began peppering his attacks with a few more expletives Loki couldn’t get himself under control, barely gathering the effort to throw up an arm to shield his head from some of Anthony’s better aimed attacks. He was about to call for a truce, when the side door swung open to reveal Steve. “Hey Loki, breakfast-”

Everyone froze: Anthony, standing over Loki with a pillow pulled back over his head in preparation for the next swing; Loki, sprawled on the floor beneath the assault of said pillow and naked as the day he was born; and Steve, still in his pajamas and boots, face a frozen mask of shock as he attempted to process all this. There was a pause as Anthony and Loki both stared at Steve, waiting to see what the man would do. And then, between one blink and the next, Steve blurted out “Breakfast is ready,” and hurriedly shut the door before presumably beating a hasty retreat back to the house.

Another pause. Slowly, Anthony and Loki turned their heads to meet one another’s eyes. That was all it took to set off a fresh bout of hysterics in both of them, Loki snickering madly as Anthony collapsed onto the head of the chaise lounge and laughed himself breathless. Every time one of them looked towards the other the laughter began anew, often peppered by “Steve,” or “Did you,” before communications broke down entirely. Needless to say, it took quite some time before either of them were able to get themselves under control.

“Oh man,” Tony gasped, wiping at the tears rolling down his cheeks. “Steve’s face...holy crap Lokes, I think you scarred him for life.”

“Who exactly was the one attacking their defenseless and naked ally, hmm?” Loki retorted, finally pulling himself into an upright position and crossing his arms to rest them and his head on the foot of the lounge as he stared up towards Anthony. “Perhaps he was simply taken aback at such overt cruelty from one of his dear teammates, Anthony,” he teased.

Anthony rolled his eyes so hard Loki was shocked he didn’t strain them. “And whose fault is that? I don’t remember asking for a snake alarm at...whatever o’clock in the morning it is right now.”

Loki did his best to look affronted at the scolding. “Why Anthony, it was never my intention to wake you. You were simply monopolizing the only bed I have; transforming myself into a snake was necessary to make sure that both of us could sleep comfortably.”

“And the tongue thing?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Oh, you haven’t had your coffee yet; you must be seeing
“Uh-huh, suuuure.”

Still grinning impishly, Loki rose from his seat on the ground and made his way towards the back room. “I’m going to get dressed and then join the others for breakfast,” he called back to the other room. “You can go on ahead of me if you’d like.”

Anthony didn’t reply, and Loki turned his attention to getting dressed, pulling fresh clothing out of one of the few boxes they hadn’t taped shut yet. When he returned to the living room he found that Anthony had straightened the bedding and was seated on the chaise lounge waiting for him. He’d slipped on his house shoes and was quietly drumming his fingers against the lid of a nearby box, lips pursed thoughtfully. “It shouldn’t take too long to get all this loaded up onto a truck tonight,” he remarked. “You and Steve can probably manage the table and chaise lounge, and then Bruce and I can figure out the best way to stack the boxes. We get the truck to the airport tomorrow, load everything onto the jet, and then it’s back to New York in time for Sunday dinner.”

There was some emotion in Anthony’s tone that Loki couldn’t quite place, and he had a niggling suspicion that it was doubt. “If you’re having second thoughts-”

“-What? No, it’s not that! Just…thinking.”

“About?”

“I’m pretty sure you’re moving in to the Tower with the most stuff out of anyone. Besides me, obviously.”

Loki gave Anthony a look of disbelief. “Truly?”

“Yeah, it’s…look, we can talk about that later, but right now I just want some coffee and something to eat with it so Bruce doesn’t give me another ‘you need basic nutrition’ lecture. You ready?” Loki nodded prompting Anthony to rise from his seat and walk to the door. “Great, then let’s…oh.”

“What’s wrong?” Loki asked, before he saw what lay outside the door. “Oh.”

Apparently the snow had started back up at some point during the night, because now there was white as far as the eye could see. That accounted for the sudden surprise at Steve’s arrival; the snow must have insulated any sounds from the outside world, including Steve’s trek to the guest house. Based on the depth of his footprints and how much was piled up against the wall, Loki estimated that they’d received at least a foot of snow overnight.

“Well this is going to suck.”

Loki glanced back to see the displeased way Anthony was eyeing the snow. Even following the tracks that Steve had already made, it would still be a cold, wet march back to the main house in only cotton pants and what were essentially slippers. Unless…

“Loki? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Loki fought to tamp down his grin before speaking. “I was just thinking that there might be an easier way to the house than us tromping through the snow.”

“Ok…”

“And I do believe I owe you, after the fright-“
“Nope.”

Loki raised a brow. “No?”

“Exactly, I don’t know what you’re plotting but you definitely have a plotting look. That face? That is the face of someone who is planning to do terrible things to me. Things that will take years off my life-”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Loki interrupted. “I assure you, what I have planned will bring you no harm.”

Anthony gave him an incredulous look, but eventually the desire to stay warm and dry won out over his suspicions. “Fine. But remember, I know where you live-WHOA!”

In the midst of the threat Loki hefted Anthony off the ground with one arm, holding the man against his chest with ease as he began crossing the snow-covered yard. Anthony’s hands immediately went to grab Loki’s shoulders, trying to find purchase before he realized that Loki had a firm grasp on him and didn’t need the help. “Warn a guy next time!”

Loki stopped walking and looked up at Anthony, now a head above him thanks to their position. “Next time?”

“You know what I mean!”

Loki chuckled. “Do I? Because it certainly sounds like you’re expecting this to become a more regular form of transportation, in which case we’ll need to discuss things like base fees, standard hours of operation-”

“I deeply, deeply regret telling you that it’s getting easier to know when you’re fucking with me.”

Loki couldn’t help but laugh at that, hefting Anthony a bit higher up to get a better grip as he resumed walking. “Calm yourself. At least this way one of us can stay dry.”

“Fine.” There was a moment of silence as Anthony made peace with his lot in life. And then: “Hey, Loki?”

“Hm?”

“How much effort is it taking you to carry me right now?”

“Very little,” Loki answered honestly. He might not have the sheer brute strength of someone like Thor, but years of physical training and his natural physique still put his strength in a class above nearly every Midgardian (not to mention a good number of Aesir). Carrying a mortal like Anthony was as strenuous as carting around a loaf of bread.

“Huh.” If Anthony had anything else to add Loki never found out, because at that point they’d reached the back porch. A wave of Loki’s fingers cleared off the doormat, and a moment later Anthony was back on his feet and none the worse for wear. “Thanks,” Anthony said as he opened the door. “Let’s never do that again, my heart can’t take another morning like this.” Nodding in answer and verbally promising absolutely nothing, Loki followed Anthony inside.

Breakfast was well underway by now, if the scents of coffee and maple syrup in the air were anything to go by. Bruce and Steve were seated together at one end of the table, Bruce sipping at his coffee while Steve practically inhaled a plateful of syrup-covered pancakes stacked nearly six inches high. Sophie stood in front of the stove as bacon sizzled in her cast iron skillet, peering over her
shoulder and giving the newcomers a wave as they entered. The only other person in the room at the moment was Harley, slouched down at the far end of the kitchen table and sleepily picking at bacon and pancakes. However, he quickly perked up when he noticed that Loki and Anthony had arrived. “You’re up!”

Loki nodded in acknowledgement, taking a seat at the table while Anthony made a beeline for the coffee pot. Sophie was already pulling down two more plates from the cabinets, and past experience had taught Loki to expect more than enough food to satiate the both of them, wonderful soul that she was. He’d left a sizeable payment for her months of generosity in the guest house; hopefully it would be enough.

A cough from Steve caught Loki’s attention then, and he turned to see the Avenger’s captain looking rather nervous as he set down his fork. “Loki, I just want to apologize for walking in on you and Tony-”

“Don’t apologize to him, it’s all his fault,” Anthony cut in, taking a seat beside Loki. He’d brought over a second mug filled to the brim with coffee and set it down in front of Loki, for which the god was rather grateful. Loathe as he was to admit it, living with Anthony had made coffee a constant in his life, and he was already developing a habit of enjoying a cup at breakfast each day.

Steve didn’t look convinced. “Still, I should have knocked-”

“I told you, that was a complete accident,” Loki replied as he innocently sipped at his coffee.

“Uh-huh,” Anthony mumbled through his own sips, giving Loki a firm look of disbelief.

“Pancakes!” Sophie jovially announced just before two plates were plopped down in front of Loki and Anthony, containing the promised pancakes along with several strips of bacon. Loki thanked her and began eating; this was going to be a long day and they needed to start strong.

While the two of them were eating, Harley moved to sit beside Anthony. “Hey, you wanna see Loki’s runestones now?”

Loki didn’t even need to look, he could feel the way that Harley’s words immediately captured the attention of every Avenger at the table. “Uh, sure kid,” Anthony replied, and a moment later Harley had bolted from the table and was scurrying down the hall. Loki was fairly certain that if he made eye contact with any of the others right now then a torrent questions would start, and frankly he was far more interested in eating his breakfast at the moment, particularly since Harley would probably do a sufficient job explaining when he returned. And so, Loki kept his eyes glued to his plate until he heard the clomping sound of Harley running back into the kitchen.

Loki silently watched out of the corner of his eye as Harley gently placed an ornate silver box on the end of the table, making sure that all the Avengers could see exactly what he was doing. “Ok, so the way Loki explained it is that all formal spells are written with a specific set of runes, right Loki?”

“Mhm,” Loki agreed through a mouthful of breakfast.

“And more advanced magic involves using different combinations of runes, but if you combine the wrong runes or...put them in the wrong order, I think? Bad things happen. So mages have these little reference boxes to help when they’re still learning, and-hold on, I’ll just show you.”

Harley gingerly opened the box and began taking out the stones one by one, being very careful to
ensure that the stones didn’t touch each other once they were laid out on the table. That had been one of the first rules Loki had drilled into the boy when he initially showed Harley the runestones many months ago; it was good to see him consistently following instructions.

Harley ceased his extractions once a dozen of the stones were set before them, closing the lid of the box and reaching for the stone with ‘fire’ inscribed on it. “Ok, now hold out your hand,” he instructed, directing his command towards Anthony. Anthony tacitly did as instructed, and Harley dropped the stone into the center of his palm. Loki paused in his chewing, not wanting to miss the moment when Anthony understood the magic behind these stones.

It took a few seconds of Anthony turning it over in his hand before he startled, eyes darting between Loki, Harley, and the stone. “Wait, is this...it’s actually radiating heat, isn’t it?”

“Yeah!” Harley affirmed as he took the stone back and replaced it with another inscribed with ‘water.’ “Ok, now feel this one,” he demanded, passing the first runestone to Bruce.

It clicked a bit faster for Anthony this time. “It’s wet,” he stated. “Wait, so do these actually feel like what they’re supposed to represent?”

“Exactly!"

“They’re mostly given to younger mages who are still learning basic spellwork,” Loki informed him after finishing the last bite of his food. “My set became mixed in when I was gathering other supplies I took from Asgard, and it seemed a poor idea to throw it out here and risk some halfwit Midgardian sorcerer stumbling across it.”

That explanation wasn’t quite true. Loki had taken the box from his room while hurriedly snatching whatever he could grab and tuck away into his bag’s pocket dimension, yes, but carrying off the runestones had been less of an accident and more of an impulse. He’d been reaching for a specific tome that sat next to it on a bookshelf and caught sight of the silver box in the process. A memory had rushed unbidden to him then: the long-ago morning he’d received this present from a smiling Frigga who promised it would make him a better mage one day, and when Thor had curiously reached out to try and take the box Odin had rapped his knuckles and said No Thor, that’s Loki’s, we made it specially for him-

Of course at that exact moment the alarm was raised and the entire kingdom was after him, and Loki had swept both the book and box into the pocket dimension in his panic. He hadn’t even thought about it again until he’d been unpacking those things at the Wisings and left it sitting on a countertop where Harley could see it through the guest house window. One dinner conversation later, and Loki had brought out the stones and handled them for the first time in centuries.

By this point in his musings both Anthony and Bruce were huddled over several of the stones and excitedly talking with one another, while Steve gently traced the rune on another with his fingertips. All three were handling the stones very delicately, and it was only Sophie’s reappearance and chastising them to finish their breakfasts which finally broke their concentration. Sheepishly, Anthony replaced the stones he’d been marvelling at and returned his attention to his pancakes before they could turn cold. “So, what’s the plan for today?”

“Fredric and Elise are clearing the driveway right now, but after that we should be good to head into town and get a truck,” Bruce explained. “Though with the roads the way they are, another day at Yellowstone is probably out of the question. It’ll take ages to get the truck back here and then get to the airport after.”

“Wait, it’s only Saturday. We weren’t planning on leaving until Sunday!”
"Weather’s calling for an actual factual blizzard, starting Sunday morning and probably going all week. If we don’t go today we won’t be able to dig ourselves out and get back home until next week,” Steve explained, and Loki could tell from his tone that he was disappointed by this turn of events.

Anthony shrugged, quicker to make peace with their situation. “Oh well. Gives us an excuse to come back when the weather’s nicer. Not that we really needed one, with hosts like this,” he stated with a wink towards Sophie that somehow resulted both Bruce and Steve shooting him a disappointed look, to Loki’s amusement. Fortunately Sophie took his behavior in stride and simply smiled as she began packing up the leftovers.

“You’re really leaving?” Harley asked, a bit of his earlier excitement obviously deflating at the mention that Loki was about to leave his grandparents’ home for good.

Loki was already fishing for some half-formed promise to placate the boy when Anthony piped up. “Sorry kiddo, we need him right now back in New York to help save the world. But once that’s sorted? You can bet we’re all going to be back here for a long vacation.”

The ‘we’ of that statement briefly caught Loki off-guard. The manner in which Anthony had so casually said it, and how the other two heroes seemed utterly unperturbed by his remark suggested that they had collectively assumed Loki would remain their ally even after Thanos was defeated. Why? Perhaps they believed that other, worse adversaries might appear in the power vacuum Thanos left behind, and that his skills would be required to protect Midgard in those confrontations? That would be sensible, but surely it would be sufficient for them to keep Loki’s contact information on hand and not have to bother with the god living in their home still. He’d need to ask Anthony about this later. Preferably much, much later, and with a good bit of alcohol involved to help loosen the Midgardian’s tongue and calm his own nerves.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening and Fredric yelling, “Drive’s clear!” from the other end of the house.

“Honestly dad, you’re going to give yourself a heart attack one day if you keep going like this,” Elise scolded as the pair of them reappeared in the kitchen’s entryway, already peeled out of their outerwear and faces still bright red from the cold.

“Elise, hun, it’s an electric snow blower, I barely even have to nudge it.”

“If you’d like-” Tony began.

“-Absolutely not,” Bruce snapped. “Whatever you’re planning to do to that poor snow blower, no.”

“Your lack of faith wounds me deeply, Bruce,” Anthony stated, hand dramatically clutched over the arc reactor. “Besides, I’d only make a few minor adjustments, really, you wouldn’t even notice that I’d touched the thing…”

The topic of discussion now turned into a debate between Anthony (along with Harley, eager young spirit that he was) who wanted to spend a bit of time working on making “improvements” to the snow blower and Bruce, who presumably understood the dire consequences that came with allowing Anthony free range in engineering better than their hosts. Eventually Steve settled the debate by pointing out that they still had to fetch the rental truck that he’d reserved before breakfast, and the entire moving process would take hours longer now that snow had to be factored in. With a disappointed sigh, Anthony let the matter drop. Engineering marvels would have to wait for another day.
It turned out that Steve was right; it took them nearly three hours to get out to the rental lot, drop their SUV, and then drive back to the Wisings in the truck. Once they got back, it took another hour to load up Loki’s meager possessions in a manner that wouldn’t result in any unwanted explosions or permanent injuries. The table had to be packed in to the truck extremely carefully, obviously, but there were also a fair number of boxes which needed a bit of extra padding to avoid being jostled on the drive to the airport, besides the brain frying logic puzzle of trying to properly organize various containers which absolutely could not be placed next to one another under any circumstances. Finally, however, everything had been stacked and wedged to Loki’s satisfaction, and the four of them were ready to depart.

“You sure you won’t stay for lunch?” Sophie inquired once more, giving the group a concerned look.

Steve smiled and politely shook his head yet again, having already rebuffed her offer several times by this point. “Your cooking is amazing, ma’am, but we can’t impose on you any longer. Besides, the people at the rental company mentioned that the blizzard is going to be moving in even earlier than we thought; we can’t risk the airport grounding us.”

That finally settled things. Everyone said their goodbyes before loading up, Steve and Bruce in the front while Anthony and Loki would stay in the back to make sure the cargo remained secure. Just before they left, however, Harley shuffled his way down the stairs to Loki and held out the runestone box. “You forgot this.”

In that brief moment, part of Loki truly wanted to be a good, charitable person. He had no use for the runestones at his age, and they’d spent the better part of a millenium gathering dust on a rarely-used bookshelf. Truly, the most attention they’d seen in recent times was in the Wisings’ living room whenever Harley came to visit and begged to handle them, since such rudimentary magic was still capable of amazing the boy. It wouldn’t be any sort of hardship or significant loss to Loki to let Harley keep them on a permanent basis; if anything, such a gift would likely further endear this family to him, which could be very beneficial if his arrangement with the Avengers imploded in the future. But…

But…

At his core, Loki was a selfish and greedy creature. It didn’t matter that the stones no longer held any sort of practical value, what mattered was that they were his. And after spending a lifetime trudging through a world where most things were either Thor’s or expected to be shared between the two of them, something that was uniquely Loki’s (moreover, something deliberately crafted and gifted to belong only to Loki) still held a great deal of personal value to him. And so he took the box out of Harley’s hands with a soft, “Thank you.”

Yet for all his determination to keep these stones, his stomach still twisted at the way Harley’s face fell, as though the boy had sincerely held some hope that he’d been allowed to keep them. Loki thought for a moment, then asked, “Remind me; what is your favorite color?”

Harley’s crestfallen expression was replaced by one of slight confusion. “Cobalt blue. Why?”

Loki gave him a very soft smile. “Oh, no reason.”

He could see the moment the realization clicked on Harley’s face and quickly turned to climb into the back of the truck before any questions could be asked. A flick of his fingers towards the doors had them closed and latched; moments later Steve started the truck, and the vehicle began to move. They
“Let me guess; a certain kid you’ve taken a shining to is going to wake up to a surprise runestone-y present in the near future?”

Loki rolled his eyes at Anthony, who was currently seated between two boxes on the floor across from him. “The Wisings have provided me with shelter and sustenance for the majority of my time on Midgard. It would be impolite not to repay that hospitality in some way, particularly when making another set of stones would be a simple task for someone like me.”

Tony hummed but said nothing, though Loki could tell from the look on his face that he was still harboring certain thoughts about Loki’s indirect offer to Harley. It was dangerously close to the insufferably smug look Thor used to get when he believed that he’d figured out one of Loki’s plans, and Loki was sure if they didn’t change the subject soon he was going to become snappish. Settling on the floor near one of the table’s legs, he asked, “Did you enjoy your time here?”

“Surprisingly, yeah. Aside from the run-in with the murder cows, anyway.” Anthony slid himself forward so that he’d be able to see Loki, because at the moment a stack of boxes was partially obscuring his line of vision. “Mostly I’m just happy we had a little downtime before we have to get back to work at the Tower. Oh, actually, this would probably be a good time to talk about what we need to do once we’re back in New York.”

“In what context?”

“You’ve got a way to track the Infinity Stones, but it’s more being tugged in a general direction thing than knowing exactly where the Stones are, right?”

“Essentially,” Loki agreed. “At this point I can calculate the distance and direction I’d need to travel to investigate a particular lead, but I’ve yet to learn your Midgardian boundaries well enough to know which countries that investigation will take me across or into.”

“Ok, so is it more like your magic radar knows that some cursed amulet is 200 miles away, south by southwest?”

Loki winced at the theory. “Nothing so precise. It’s more of an intuitive feeling that this object is a short distance away, whereas this item would necessitate a great more deal of seidr to reach. As far as direction...I suppose if it was truly necessary, I could discern if it was north or south of me, or such. Again, it’s a pulling feeling, so I’d direct things in terms of it being to my left or right and such.”

“Let me guess; figuring out cardinal directions with the spell was one of those things you never learned because you never needed to?”

“Correct,” Loki confirmed. “I’ve never needed to map out my travels since I can move rather freely, particularly in this realm. East and west has little meaning when your travels are mostly accomplished in terms of ‘here’ or there.’”

Anthony considered this for a moment. “Going back to the short vs. long distance sensor for a bit—”

“I’d rather you didn’t refer to it as a sensor, my seidr is not some type of machine—”

“can you give me an approximate range for that? Like, I know when you’re in top shape that popping between New York and Montana isn’t a big deal, so would short distance be like 1-10 miles or 1-100?”
“The trips to and from Belgrade can be rather taxing,” Loki admitted. “Part of the reason you don’t see me in the city every day.”

“Ok, so is that more a medium or long-range trip?”

Loki considered. “Medium. The trip to the bunker was definitely on the uppermost end of what I can do without the aid of additional resources to boost my own abilities.” Technically that was true, under normal circumstances; although by that point in his exhaustive hunt Loki had only been able to successfully teleport to the bunker thanks to a few potions which definitely weren’t good for his stomach lining, but Anthony didn’t need to know all the specific details.

“Ok, that’s good.” Anthony pulled out his phone and began tapping at the screen. “So Belgrade to NYC is a little over 2000 miles, and from NYC to the explosion JARVIS picked up was about 4600 miles...Christ almighty Prancer, those are huge parameters!”

“You expected less from a master seidmann?”

“God no, but this is a huge range with very little hard data, Gandalf.”

“Why do you want to know, anyway? It’s not as though I’ll run the risk of wearing myself out again.”

“Because it would help me and JARVIS if you could map out some of the leads you need to look into. Ideally, if you could nail down a couple points of interest to a radius of a few miles then we could send out our own search parties and figure out whether we’re looking at an actual magic space rock or just a colossal waste of time.”

“You would...help me search?”

“Well yeah, were you expecting us to sit on our hands while you did all the work? Nat and Clint are masters of infiltration and recon, that’s part of the reason we don’t let them play capture the flag with us during training exercises anymore. Besides, with a little more data about what we’re looking for JARVIS could find out pretty quickly if a person of interest made any shady purchases in the last few months. There’s no reason you have to keep tracking down every lead on your own now, and frankly I think it would be a big waste of your time.”

Truthfully, Loki hadn’t even considered that possibility. He knew that the Avengers would fight on his side during actual battles in the future, and he’d gotten the impression that they’d need to take point on the Stark Expo scheme, but Loki had been operating under the assumption that he’d be responsible for carrying out most of the grunt work prior to those confrontations. It was how these matters always played out; Loki would lurk behind the scenes, doing reconnaissance work and gathering supplies before Thor and his band of merry men (plus Sif) charged headlong into battle and claimed the glory for the more overt aspects of Asgard’s successes. It was a modus operandi that had been deeply ingrained in him for centuries, so perhaps he couldn’t be faulted for expecting the same with a new band of warriors.

“Loki?”

Oh yes, Anthony was likely expecting some sort of response. Loki absolutely didn’t want to delve into the history of his time with the heroes of Asgard and patterns developed over centuries, and quickly thought up a lie to cover for himself. “I was just speculating on ways to make our searching easier, if I have a guarantee of your assistance,” he said. “JARVIS was able to analyze the type of magic I used during our little contest in your workshop, correct?”
"Yeah."

"I've acquired a number of magical artifacts in my search thus far; nothing that could compare to the Mind Stone, but powerful in their own rights. The Infinity Stones will all have magical signatures that are utterly distinct from anything either I could produce or what these lesser items contain. If we could train your system to filter out certain types of magic-"

"Nat or Clint wouldn’t have to bring back every little thing they found, they could have JARVIS give an immediate yes/no," Anthony concluded. He bit his lip, eyes glued to his phone screen as he began to rapidly tap away at the glass. "Ok, based on JARVIS’ initial scans...if we had a few more data points we should be able to...yeah, yeah..."

Loki quietly watched Anthony work, marvelling at how readily the man put his faith behind Loki’s propositions. His willingness to take Loki’s suggestions into consideration, unquestionably deferring to Loki’s judgement in a subject for which he had no background was a sharp contrast to the warriors of Asgard. There were those like Frigga who heeded his advice with calm acceptance, but so many others were prepared to second-guess or offer up half-witted suggestions to Loki, as though they assumed he was still a novice in the magic arts even after all these years. Stranger still, Loki was confident that when Anthony presented this plan to the other Avengers that they would follow it without question (excepting Thor, most likely, but that was a battle to be fought at another place and day). For the first time, Loki allowed himself to consider the possibility that his efforts to fight Thanos wouldn’t hinge entirely on his personal efforts.

That being said, Loki would absolutely still need to take point on this operation, multiple sessions of D&D as well as fights on an actual battlefield had taught Loki that the efficiency and capabilities of these people tended to wax and wane like a particularly fickle moon. But still, having the weight lessened was a relief.

The remainder of the drive to the airport was spent with the two of them in quiet conversation, Loki discussing which charms or trinkets would be safe for JARVIS to analyze (the list was rather fresh in his head, thanks to the recent packing) while Anthony began his plans for various tests and scans that the A.I. could run once they were back in the Tower. With any luck, this would help Loki accelerate his hunt for the Stones and possibly event locate the Mind Stone before any further experiments were carried out by their still-unknown adversaries. Finally the truck slowed and came to a stop before the engine was shut off. Loki assumed that they had finally arrived at the airport and raised his hand to unlock the door, when a thought occurred to him. No one had been expecting the Avengers when they landed here, but now that the world was aware of their presence in Yellowstone there might be cameras, or at the very least people hoping to catch a glimpse of the heroes here. Having Loki in their midst might present something of a challenge to their long-term success; time for a disguise.

When Steve and Bruce opened the doors moments later they saw Anthony and a stocky, middle-aged man with brown hair and an utterly forgettable face. Loki relished in the confused looks on their faces before Bruce asked, “Loki?”

“For the time being, call me Liam,” Loki suggested as he reached for a nearby box. “If anyone asks tell them I’m with the rental company and am here to help you load up your souvenir shopping. Understand?”

Fortunately, no one bothered them during the loading process. The threat of additional inclement weather left Bozeman deserted, save for the ATC personnel and luggage handlers scuttling about on another runway. There were few planes and fewer people than when they’d landed, unusual for a Saturday; Anthony had mentioned on the drive over that a number of flights scheduled for later in the day had been “grounded” already according to JARVIS, so time was of the essence.
Mercifully, loading the aircraft took less time than packing the truck had. Steve and Loki made short work of the table, and Bruce and Anthony both had far more space to store Loki’s boxes and chaise lounge in the belly of an aircraft than the back of a rental truck. Sufficiently wedging them was easier as well, given that the plane had plenty of tie downs and nets to prevent the baggage from shifting too severely in transit. Still, the sky had darkened significantly by the time they had secured the last box and closed the ramp to the cargo hold of the plane. “Looks like it’s a good thing we didn’t hang around for lunch,” Bruce remarked. “We’ll be lucky to get off the runway before ATC grounds us too.”

Steve nodded, eyes on the sky as well. “All right, I’ll drive the truck to the rental lot and see if they’re ok with us leaving it here instead of in town. You guys go ahead—”

Suddenly a crack reverberated through the air and Steve jerked backwards. It took Loki precious seconds to comprehend that there was a rapidly growing blotch of red on the right-hand side of the man’s chest; he heard another crack as Steve was shot a second time, now in the stomach. He swayed briefly before collapsing to his knees, mouth opened in a shocked ‘oh.’

Anthony swore as Bruce fell to his knees, lowering Steve to the ground in a controlled fall backwards. Loki threw a shield around the group on impulse; even with his seidr still in recovery he would likely be able to block most Midgardian weaponry. His eyes darted around the tarmac and counted more than a dozen men, some wearing ATC uniforms, rapidly approaching the four of them with guns drawn. This wouldn’t end well. Steve was down and if Bruce transformed then they’d never be able to escape on the plane before the weather trapped them here to face Norns knew how many more foes. “Anthony, where is your armor!!” he demanded.

“Fuck, I just stuck it on the plane—”

Loki’s magic was already reaching out to find the case, vaguely remembering Anthony storing it in the cargohold alongside some of the final boxes they’d loaded up. Seconds later it was in his hands, and he quickly tossed it to the engineer, rapidly calculating how much more magic he could portion off to fight these men without utterly depleting his own energy. Defending Steve remained a higher priority than confronting the enemy though, prompting Loki to sling his travel bag at Bruce and say, “There’s a small bandage with a red border in there, cover his wounds with that.”

By now several of the approaching fighters had drawn their weapons and taken aim, and just as Loki gave Bruce his directions they began to shoot at the shield. Loki sucked in a breath, feeling the walls try to syphon off more of his seidr to compensate for the damage it was sustaining. It would seem that he’d slightly miscalculated exactly how much power would be required from him in this battle. “Bruce, keep yourself and Steve as low to the ground as possible, we’re going to lose my shield soon,” he warned.

“In about sixty seconds that’s not going to matter,” Anthony announced in a metallic voice, and when Loki briefly turned his head it was to see his friend in full Iron Man armor.

“You need to take them out before they start shooting the jet,” Bruce said, having finally dug the bandage out of the bag to press against Steve’s chest. “If they—”

“Anthony, I’m going to collapse the shield in a moment,” Loki interrupted, not wanting to consider the possibility of them losing their only means of transport. “Be ready.”

“Do it.”

The minute Loki snapped his fingers to undo the spell saw Anthony charging forwards, immediately drawing the enemies’ attention to himself. In the blink of an eye Iron Man was upon them, barreling
headfirst into one before incapacitating another two with twin repulsor blasts. The few soldiers who’d yet to properly engage them now turned their attention completely towards Iron Man; most braced themselves and attempted to concentrate their fire on the new target, but a few attempted to beat a hasty retreat in the face of such overwhelming firepower. Whether they were planning to call for reinforcements or simply fleeing for their lives was of no consequence to Loki.

A flash of green precipitated him appearing in front of one, dagger materializing in his hand simultaneously. The impostor airport worker barely had time to process what was happening before Loki had slit his throat with a practiced slash of his arm, blood spurting across his sleeves as the man fell dead. Loki let the momentum carry him into a full heel spin and flung the dagger at another escapee, embedding the blade straight into his ribcage and directly through his heart. Quickly Loki summoned a second dagger and sought out additional retreating soldiers, but by the time he located another the target had already been cut down by a shot from Iron Man. Anthony fell back after this attack to stand over Bruce and Steve in a defensive position, both arms raised in anticipation of another attack.

Loki, meanwhile, rapidly surveyed the tarmac for any additional combatants who might have escaped the counterattack. This paltry number of armed soldiers was utterly insufficient to incapacitate the Avengers, even with their usual forces halved. There had to be someone or something else here, some trump card that hadn’t been played just yet-

Loki found it a moment too late: a long rifle barrel poking out from the midst of the luggage on a nearby baggage cart. He heard the gunshot, saw the recoil, and from behind him heard Bruce’s distress cry of “Tony!” before Iron Man heavily dropped to one knee next to Steve’s prone form.

-n-

Once, when Loki and Thor were children on the cusp of adolescence, they’d decided to go hunting for wild boars in the forest all on their own. They were both ill-equipped and far too inexperienced to attempt such a hunt of course but youthful arrogance banished these concerns until they were already deep in the woods, far from the eyes and ears of any who might have given the boys help. They’d found a massive boar foraging for food in a clearing, easily standing six feet tall at the shoulder and sporting tusks as thick as Loki’s forearm. It saw the pair of them and let out a screech the likes of which Loki had never heard before, charging at them full tilt with enough force to shake the ground beneath their feet. Loki had frozen then, too terrified and panicked to move his legs, nevermind think up a proper spell to defend them or attack the beast. At the last second he’d been knocked out of the way by Thor, sending him crashing to the ground with a clear view as the animal gored his brother on its tusks before flinging his limp body through the air. For all of Loki’s life, including his fall from the Bifrost and time as Thanos’ captive, that instant had stood as the single most horrifying, agonizing moment he’d ever experienced.

This was worse.

Immediately Loki teleported to the cart, grabbed the sniper by the back of his neck with a snarl, and flung him to the ground with enough force to bounce him off the pavement. The rifle was clipped to a strap on the man’s torso; seething, Loki jerked it free, ripping apart the holster as though it were tissue paper, and flung the gun as far across the tarmac as he could.

The assailant barely seemed to register the impact, however; he made no sound, vacant blue eyes showing no emotion above the mask covering the lower half of his face. Already his legs were moving, likely trying to gain some traction to free him as one hand reached for a handgun on his belt. Loki halted his progress by stamping down on the hand so violently that several bones broke under the weight of his heel, before he readjusted his stance to hold the man in place. Still the sniper
persisted, balling his free hand into a fist and slamming it into the side of Loki’s knee with a sonorous ‘thud.’ Loki hissed at the impact, leg nearly buckling from the force of the blow. He was shocked to realize that the arm which had struck him was solid metal, and it was already winding up against for another punch. In a fit of rage Loki latched both of his hands around the enemy’s forearm and utterly destroyed the limb with a single wrench backwards, viciously separating the lower part of the arm from the rest of his body at the elbow before hurling it in the same direction as the gun. This time the sniper let out a small yelp of pain as the broken stump sparked and crackled in the cold winter air.

Not finished yet, Loki dropped down to pin the man in place with a knee on his chest, recalling one of his daggers to slit his throat-

“Loki!”

The god froze. Quickly his head jerked to the side and confirmed that yes, it was Anthony who’d called out to him. Blessedly, Anthony was still hovering over the others on one knee, perfectly conscious and alert. Loki immediately noticed that the bent leg was completely devoid of its normal light and leaking some sort of fluid, likely due to the bullet hole square over the suit’s right hip joint. Mercifully the man himself seemed uninjured; his faceplate was up and he didn’t appear to be in any pain, though his face was horribly white and his eyes were wide with terror. “We need to get Steve help!” he screamed, and it was then that Loki registered that Bruce was frantically yelling at their fallen friend, and that even with all this commotion going on, Steve was still lying completely motionless on the ground.

Loki glanced between his captive and his allies and eventually decided that the former was of far less concern to him than the latter. He wrapped a firm hand tightly around the sniper’s throat, lifted the man up with him as he stood, and finally hurled him thirty feet through the air to crash into another baggage cart, denting the metal from the force of the impact before his limp body slowly slid onto the ground.

Between one blink and the next he was back to the Avengers, hurriedly bending to scoop Steve into his arms. “Bruce, take my bag. We need to leave,” he stated, though that was quite obvious to all present.

“No shit!” Anthony snapped. “JARVIS already has the plane ready, we just need to get on it!”

“Then hold on.”

With no small amount of effort, Loki managed to hurriedly teleport the entire group onto the plane (albeit in a rather rough landing, given that Tony immediately fell sideways and crashed into the table with a destructive ‘crunch’). He laid Steve out on the floor and snatched his bag from Bruce as JARVIS fired up the jet’s engines and began taxiing them down the runway. Steve was shivering at this point, though whether from the shock or cold was anyone’s guess. Loki removed the magical bandages over Steve’s injuries and ripped through the front of his clothes to expose the wounds, swearing at what he found. The first shot had likely gone into his lung, given the placement of the hole and blood trickling from Steve’s mouth, while the next was lower on his belly and could have penetrated any number of organs. Loki briefly ran his hand under Steve and withdrew it, frowning when he saw that it was completely clean. No blood, meaning no exit wounds, meaning that both bullets were still floating around in Steve’s body.

“JARVIS, is there a medkit on board?!” Bruce yelled over the rumbling of the engines, already on his knees and tearing through the nearby cabinets to try and find any supplies to aid Steve.

“Negative Dr. Banner; this aircraft is outfitted solely with a standard first aid kit.”
Anthony swore as he finally scrambled out of his armor. “Then get us out of here, J!”

Anthony needn’t have bothered with the order. Already the plane was gathering speed and the engines roared down the runway; moments later Loki could feel the telltale incline of the craft as it left the ground and soared into the heaves. For the time being, they were safe from any additional attacks. Unfortunately, that didn’t mean all of them were entirely out of the woods yet.

“Damn,” Loki whispered. His fingers tingled with magic as he rested them over the first bullet wound, praying that he remembered how to do this spell without causing further injury to his ally. “Apologies in advance, Steve,” he murmured, placing his other hand firmly over the Midgardian’s sternum.

“Loki?” Bruce asked. “What-”

In that moment Loki began his work and Steve let out a wordless scream, twitching beneath Loki’s hold. Slowly, so as to avoid any additional trauma to the man’s internal organs, Loki drew the bullet to the surface and tossed it across the floor before moving down to the other wound and repeating the magic. Blood began to pour out of the bullet holes now, and Loki tried not to think about how much fluid Steve had already lost.

“Calm down, the worst is past,” he murmured, trying to reassure Steve in the tones he’d used so often before in healing other warriors. “I’ve got them out, we just need to close the wounds, you’ll be all right. Fandral, I need-”

Fuck.

Loki took a breath and tried again. “Bruce, hand me the vials of orange powder and white liquid.” He extended his free hand out towards where he last remembered Bruce sitting before the plane took off, keeping his other hand firmly on Steve’s chest to help ground him. There was a rustling sound before Bruce said “Got them,” and dropped both vials into Loki’s hand. Loki one-handedly uncorked both of them, muttered another apology to Steve, and then sprinkled the powder into the wounds before dripping the liquid on top.

There was a sizzling sound as smoke began to rise from the wounds. Steve swore and slammed his fist into the floor so hard he dented the metal, entire body tensed up from the shock. Loki was far more concerned with the injuries however; he’d never tried to use these particular medicines on a Midgardian and hadn’t been entirely certain that they’d do more harm than good. Much to his relief, however, the bleeding had stopped and the holes were already closing up; by the time another minute had passed, they had essentially scabbed over. “See, it’s all right,” he stated, leaning back on his heels.

As soon as he’d moved back Anthony and Bruce rushed to both sides of Steve, alternately muttering words of comfort and telling him to keep still, don’t try to talk, etc. Loki scooted completely out of the way, giving the three of them space to look after one another. As soon as the jet leveled out he rose and quietly walked to the bathroom at the back of the aircraft, shutting the door behind him. He turned on the sink and began scrubbing at his hands, mind whirling as he tried to process what had just happened.

Someone had been waiting for the Avengers at the airport. The attackers had been armed and thoroughly disguised by the time their party had arrived, suggesting that this had been a planned ambush. That made sense; Anthony’s constant tweeting provided frequent updates regarding their plans and movements over a weekend trip, including their unexpected early departure to avoid the coming blizzard (accompanied by a message for their Midwestern fans to stay safe, because it was Anthony). Whoever was behind this likely assumed that the Avengers would be leaving specifically
from Bozeman, given that the SI jet had been parked there since they landed. Furthermore, Bozeman would have a low number of civilians present as this was the offseason and more inclimate weather was expected later in the day, based on what he understood from Anthony. All right, so the enemy took some time to plan this and needed the attack to happen at the airport specifically, where there would be few witnesses to the ambush.

But what had been the true scheme, exactly? They’d chosen to shoot Steve first, and (given the careful planning which went into the rest of this operation) there had to be a reason behind that choice. Well...Steve had the most hand-to-hand combat training among the three Avengers present, so incapacitating him first would have made sense in close quarter combat. All right, follow that thread.

Shooting Steve would doubtlessly prompt the other two Avengers into action. Bruce would probably try to keep his monstrous side in check to tend to Steve, while Anthony protected them. But why fire on the Hulk and Iron Man once their guard had been raised?

No, an immediate attack on the remaining Avengers hadn’t been what happened. Loki recalled a pause in the gunfire between when Steve had fallen and the others had moved, only broken when his own shield had been erected; his presence hadn’t been factored into the plan, and so the attack restarted to compensate for his interference. Their enemy had planned for only the three of them. After all, why wouldn’t that be the case, given how Anthony had very carefully cropped Loki out of every vacation picture from this trip? So they hadn’t been expecting his protection. All right, adjust the scenario with that information.

If Steve was seriously injured and Bruce was doctoring him (because of course he would, it was widely known that Bruce had the most medical training out of all the heroes), then Anthony would have to fight. The pause had been deliberate, designed to give Anthony time to retrieve the armor he always fought in since they hadn’t assumed he would have already loaded it onto the plane because they wouldn’t have known about moving Loki’s belongings. Even with these unexpected changes of plan, the sniper waited patiently to shoot until his allies had been taken out by Iron Man; ergo, they’d been decoys to distract from Anthony from the real danger. But why wait until Anthony was in his armor? Why not be quick and take out both Steve and Anthony right from the beginning? The enemy had possessed the element of surprise, they could have made the assault quick and deadly if they wanted to do so. What was there to be gained from dragging out the fight, other than-

Loki froze as the answer suddenly came to him. “Stress. They needed stress for Bruce.”

Go back to the start of the scenario, as the enemy planned it. Steve is so seriously injured that he requires immediate aid in the form of Bruce. Bruce tends to the wounds while Anthony protects the both of them, having to walk a fine line between calm to look after his friends and hypervigilance to protect them from further attacks. Bruce relaxes once he believes Anthony has successfully fended off the assault, only to immediately panic once another adversary appears and incapacitates Iron Man. At this point, Bruce would perceive himself as backed firmly into a corner, his allies in danger from an unknown amount of enemies, and he would have to transform into his monstrous other in order to protect them.

By why in the Norns’ name would anyone wish to provoke the Hulk?!

Loki was missing something. Summoning the Hulk would incite destruction and confusion throughout the airport, assuming that the beast felt the need to run rampant in order to protect the others. As far as Loki knew there was nothing particularly worthwhile about Bozeman that made it worth destroying, so confusion would have to be the end goal. For what reason, though?

Drying his hands, Loki ran through the attack again, starting with the two shots that took out Steve.
Something didn’t sit well with Loki about that initial assault; their enemy had the element of surprise, and the behavior of the sniper suggested a veteran warrior. Why aim for the lungs and stomach, as opposed to the head or heart? Why not kill Steve outright, instead of-

At that, the final piece fell into place.

Loki burst out of the bathroom with enough force to crack the door as he swung it open. Bruce and Anthony both started, and even Steve made a weak effort to sit himself upright at the commotion. “Loki?” Anthony asked, halfway to his feet and turned to lunge towards the damaged armor.

“Kidnapping,” Loki blurted out.

“What?”

“The attack. They weren’t trying to kill us, they wanted to capture you and Steve along with your armor. That’s why they shot him in non-vital areas, and that’s why they waited until you had your armor on to attack you.”

Loki hurriedly explained his line of reasoning to the others as the details coalesced within his own mind. The Avengers had to be attacked at the airport because it was the quickest and easiest way to ensure that they could be transported to another distant location. Their enemies had disguised themselves as ground personnel; it was likely that there were others present at the airfield in the control tower and some small aircraft to help remove Steve and Anthony while the Hulk went on a rampage. They’d needed Steve injured but alive; the shot that had hit Anthony’s armor had hindered the suit’s movement capabilities yet left its pilot uninjured. Presumably without Loki’s interference the entire suit would have eventually been incapacitated with a few more shots, leaving Tony trapped inside. Such an attack would have resulted in two Avengers that were alive but unable to escape, leaving them completely at their enemy’s mercy.

By the time Loki finished his explanation Steve had forced himself into a sitting position, albeit wincing as he did so. “Why would they need to capture us?” he asked, and his tone was one of confusion more than disbelief.

“I don’t know,” Loki admitted. “But I cannot imagine any other reason for leaving you alive when it would have been so much easier to kill both you and Anthony.”

Anthony started like a jolt of electricity had just gone through him. “JARVIS, where are Clint and Natasha?!”

Bruce sucked in a breath and Steve swore, while Loki tried to keep the rising tide of panic at bay. It suddenly seemed that there might have been a truly horrific reason for the pair’s silence over the past few days.

“I am unable to locate either Agents Barton or Romanov at this point,” JARVIS admitted. “I shall begin a search-”

“Call Coulson,” Anthony interrupted.

“You want to get SHIELD involved?” Steve asked incredulously.

“No, I want to get Coulson involved,” Anthony snappishly corrected. “Name one person on this entire planet who’s better at hunting down Avengers when we don’t want to be found-”

“Coulson speaking,” a voice cut in through JARVIS’ speaker system.
Steve snapped into action at once. “Phil, there’s been an emergency. We were ambushed at Bozeman airport and have reason to believe whoever came after us—”

“Shit, are you guys ok?!” Clint’s voice suddenly broke in.

“Clint?!” Bruce exclaimed. “Why are—”

“Long story, basically Nat and I ran into some fairly deadly people a few days ago and now I’m worried they might’ve been friends of the guys that went after you,” Clint hurriedly answered. “Don’t worry, we’re fine, Phil rolled in like a total bamf and saved us, no seriously, there was a hit and run involved—”

“Steve, I’m going to make this quick because I don’t know how secure the line is,” Phil interjected. “Natasha and Clint are both with me and safe, we’re trying to head back to New York but we’re taking the long route for security’s sake. Don’t tell me where you are or how long it’ll take, but we’ll see you then.” There was a click, followed by JARVIS announcing that the call had disconnected.

Steve collapsed back to the floor again, hissing as the motion jostled his injuries. “Ok. So previously there was a chance we were dealing with possible Nazi-era villains performing human experiments using stolen SHIELD property. As soon as some of us start looking into that angle, we’re all collectively attacked in the course of a few days. I think it’s safe to say that we are definitely dealing with HYDRA.”

“But why would they try to kidnap you and Tony?” Bruce wondered.

“If we’re dealing with human experiments, and it sounds like we are, then they wanted Steve for the serum,” Anthony stated. “As for me? Weapons. They’ve got the Mind Stone and presumably the scepter it came with, they probably think just bonking me on the head with it is enough to take over my mind because they don’t know about the arc reactor’s resistance, that’s not something I ever put down in a SHIELD report. I’m betting they just want me to build a few more killing machines for them. Oh, slight tangent, I’ve got a little issue with your kidnapping scenario Loki, no offense.”

“And what might that be?”

Anthony jerked a thumb towards Bruce. “The whole, ‘set it up so that Bruce can rampage and provide cover while we escape’ plan seems a little off. There’s no way they could predict that Mean ‘N Green wouldn’t accidentally take out some of the agents or whatever getaway vehicle they had ready to go.”

“So what’s your explanation?” Loki inquired, possibly a bit more defensive in his response than Anthony deserved for his scrutiny.

Anthony shrugged. “Honestly? I don’t think there was a plan to deal with Brucie bear. I’m buying that HYDRA wanted Steve and me, because you’re right, there’s no other reason for them not shooting to kill. But now that we know Natasha and Clint were attacked too, I’m thinking their plan to snatch us was supposed to happen further down the line of whatever scheme they’re cooking up. But, since the superspies pretty much confirmed that HYDRA is still going strong and actively infiltrating SHIELD, I think they had to expedite capturing us before the others could get back home and spill the beans. This was a rush job, and they botched it.”

“So they didn’t intend to set off Bruce,” Steve concluded. “They just knew it was a risk, and the potential gain from capturing us outweighed however many casualties a fight with the Avengers would cause.” He closed his eyes and sighed, long and deep. “That’s HYDRA. Why worry about the little guy when you could just replace him?”
“So what should we do?” Bruce inquired.

Steve took a moment to think. “Realistically, they only had the one chance to try capturing us. Now we know that they’re after us and we can take precautions to keep ourselves safe, especially once we’re back at the Tower. They’re going to need to regroup.”

“So we get back home ASAP and batten down the hatches, aye aye Cap,” Anthony said.

“Tony-“

“But seriously, JARVIS, the Tower is now on lockdown for all intents and purposes, freeze all SI hirings and get me the life story of everyone the company’s hired since I took over, even if they’re not working for us anymore. Nobody gets in or out of the Tower without a squeaky clean record. Bruce: suggestions?”

While Anthony and the others began discussing security for their home, Loki quietly made his way towards the rear of the jet again, this time going straight to the sleeping quarters in back. He needed a moment alone to think.

The entire point to him moving in with the Avengers had been to make his hunt for the Stones easier. Yet now it appeared that he would actively be joining forces with a group being targeted by an organization which was currently abusing the powers of the Mind Stone, at the very least. On the positive side, such an alliance would drastically increase his chances of encountering the current owners of the Stone. On the downside, he’d accidentally acquired a host of new enemies at a time when he really couldn’t afford to burn any more bridges.

His one hope was that this HYDRA group hadn’t made the connection between him and the Avengers, despite his earlier display of magic. He’d been disguised, of course, but his shapeshifting abilities had made it into Midgardian mythology, so there was still the possibility of them discerning his true identity (besides any evidence they might have salvaged from the bunker of his infiltration). And if their reach extended as far as Steve feared, then Loki was going to have an even worse uphill battle acquiring hard to find supplies from underground sellers.

Loki sank down onto one of the beds with a sigh. Of course it would be his luck that, just when it appeared things were turning around, a fresh bout of hardships would befall him. Nevermind fighting an intergalactic Titan and staying hidden from the throne of Asgard, now he also had to contend with insidious Midgardian organizations meddling with powers beyond their control or comprehension that were actively trying to destroy his only allies. Delightful.

“Loki?”

Loki turned to see Anthony standing in the doorway. “You kind of ran off without saying anything,” Anthony stated. “Everything ok?”

Loki shot him a look.

“So, dumb question, my bad,” Anthony said, taking a step into the room to stand at the foot of the bed. “Let me try that again. Penny for your thoughts?”

“I was just considering how much more difficult this is going to make our plans,” Loki admitted. “A small deranged band of lunatics would be manageable, but it sounds as though we’re dealing with a well developed and far-reaching organization that has a vested interest in the Avengers’ demise. Rather more of a challenge than I was hoping for when I agreed to join forces with you lot. Granted, I wasn’t exactly expecting an easy time, but I was hoping to at least avoid potential kidnapping and
attempted murder until I’d unpacked.”

“Just our luck, right?” Anthony grumbled. “We finally start making headway on the space invaders thing and it turns out there’s a brand new boss fight we have to get through first.”

“I have no context for either of those references.”

“Forget it, not important. Hey, uh…”

“Yes?”

“Do you know you’re still wearing your disguise? Or, you’re transformed into your disguise? Honestly, I don’t know if this look is an illusion or full shapeshifting like the snake thing, what verb even applies here?”

Loki had completely forgotten. In a blink he’d changed back to his normal appearance, though with a bit more effort than he would have liked. This morning his seidr had been nearly fully recovered, but he’d used it quite a bit more today than any other time in the past week. Hopefully there wouldn’t be much further need of his powers today; at this point, Loki absolutely couldn’t afford any sort of setback in his recovery.

Anthony seemed to relax a bit after the transformation. “Much better. It was weird talking to you when I recognized the voice but not the pretty face that goes with it.”

“Flatterer,” Loki quipped, though the current mood prevented him from injecting any jovility into his response. A moment of silence passed between the two as Anthony awkwardly stood nearby while Loki waited for him to either speak again or leave. When it finally became clear that he intended to do neither, Loki asked him, “Do you need help with preparations for our return?”

“What? Oh, no, we’ve pretty much got that worked out between JARVIS and Happy. It’s, um…”

Loki watched as Anthony circled around the side of the bed and took a seat beside him. He folded his hands in his lap, wringing them nervously with his head bowed and eyes glued to the floor. “I don’t really know how to say this, so I’ll just say thank you.”

“…”

“Seriously, thank you. I know you said that they were probably just trying to capture us, so long-term he’d have been fine, but when we were on the runway and I heard the shots and...saw him go down...I…”

By now Anthony’s shoulders were trembling softly. He put his hands against his mouth and slowly inhaled and exhaled through his nose, blinking rapidly as he tried to get his emotions back under control. It took him a few minutes of suppressed sobs, but finally he dropped his hands back to his lap and continued speaking. “It’s different when we’re suited up. Then, I know Steve’s wearing his protective vest or how Natasha has about two dozen different weapons stashed all over. But back at the airport we were all completely vulnerable. For fuck’s sake, I went ahead and stored the armor on the jet like an idiot-”

Loki cut off Anthony’s self-flagellation by wrapping his hand around one of Anthony’s wrists, trying to ground the man the same way that he himself had been calmed in the past. “We had no reason to suspect an ambush,” he reminded Anthony, forcing the man to meet his eyes. “This was meant to be a simple trip to fetch my belongings, under the guise of a vacation. There is no possible way any of us could have foreseen a surprise attack as we were preparing to depart for home.”
“But-”

“We were attacked, and that cannot be changed,” Loki firmly stated. “We were able to escape, and everyone is alive and well. All we can do at this point is ensure that we are better prepared next time.”

“I mean, I get that,” Anthony agreed, eyes still glued to the floor. “Doesn’t make it any easier.”

“I know,” Loki murmured, stroking the skin of Anthony’s wrist with his thumb. If the man became emotional again Loki wasn’t entirely certain what he’d do.

Fortunately, his motions seemed to calm Anthony, and the tension slowly but surely drained from his shoulders as he relaxed beside the god. “...Hey Loki?”

“Yes?”

“Who’s Fandral?”

Damn. Loki had been hoping that his little slip-up would go unnoticed by the others in the heat of the moment. Well, when it rains it pours and all that. Best to just rip this bandaid off now, as the Midgardians liked to say. “Fandral is one of Thor’s shield brothers,” Loki explained. “If there was ever a time after battle when I needed to tend to one of the others and had my hands full, Fandral would put up the least amount of resistance when I requested something from my bag. It seems I unintentionally slipped back into that mindset and reflexively asked for him.”

“Did that happen a lot?”

“Often enough,” Loki vaguely answered, because now was not the time to reminisce on former allies and days gone by. “Not matter how badly off they were or how much medical attention was clearly needed, I could always expect some modicum of resistance.”

“Why would they fight you on that?”

“Pride and bragging rights, mostly. If they were seriously injured in combat then they’d want some sort of scar to show off to the others back in Asgard afterwards, nevermind the fact that I was trying to pack their intestines back in.”

“Seriously?!”

“Well, perhaps never that serious. However, I do remember one instance where Volstagg refused to let me treat his arm until he could show his wife the extent of his injuries, and by that point Thor had to re-break it so the actual healers could set it properly.”

Anthony was looking up at him with wide eyes, completely incredulous. “So you got dragged along on Thor’s misadventures to god knows where for centuries, even though they berated you for using your magic and basic strategy every time, to the point that if they needed your help to not die, you still had to fight them on that?”

It sounded like Anthony had made his own interpretations of Thor’s recollections of their youth. “I wasn’t dragged along, Thor never held such sway to force me into something I didn’t wish to do.” And if Anthony was right about the rest, Loki didn’t need to give him that validation.

“How...how did you not snap, like, five hundred years back?”

“It wasn’t that awful in the grand scheme of things,” Loki tried to assure him. “They’d fuss a bit but
usually I could get them to submit to treatment-”

“You shouldn’t have to force them, they should have been fucking grateful that you were treating them instead of, I don’t know, bleeding out at the edge of a volcano or wherever you ended up!”

Loki withdrew his hand then, clasping both of his hands together on his lap in an effort to keep his own temper in check. “And what would should I have done? Complain to Thor and his lot that they needed to offer up a little more gratitude? Perhaps register a formal complaint with the king that his warriors ought to be a bit more concerned with self-preservation than who has the best story to drunkenly espouse in a tavern?”

“Well no, but-“

“That is the way things are in Asgard, Anthony,” Loki snipped. “The warriors break themselves for the sake of glory and the mages patch them up afterwards, ignoring their token protests because we can recognize that they want the help even if they’ll never ask for it or thank us for the effort. I’ve grown used to it and certainly don’t need you to become upset because you imagine my feelings have been hurt or some such nonsense. And may I also remind you, none of this even matters anymore given my fugitive state from Asgard very effectively excluding me from treating any of their warriors, ingrates or otherwise.”

Anthony sat on the bed in silence, staring at Loki with a frown. Several minutes passed in uncomfortable silence like this, until Loki began to wonder if perhaps the man was expecting an apology for Loki’s outburst. There was a slight chance that Loki might’ve spoken a bit too harshly in response to Anthony’s concerns, but the past hour had put him on edge and Anthony was unintentionally digging into old wounds with these questions. Before Loki could speak again, however, Anthony turned in his seat and leaned in a bit closer. “You’re right. I have no idea how Asgard works or what’s going on to make them so averse to magic. But if that’s the way they treat mages, and you’re already on the outs with them? Fuck ‘em. Stay here with us. Permanently.”

Loki sucked in a breath and clenched his fists so tightly the knuckles turned white, anxiously waiting for the moment when Anthony would realize exactly what he’d suggested and retract the offer with either a joke or flustered apology. Long moments passed in tense apprehension until Anthony finally said, “I’m going to interpret your silence as tacit agreement, just fyi.”

“You cannot.”

“Sure I can. You’re already moving in, we’re just changing the length of your stay from ‘until universe has been saved’ to ‘indefinite,’ which I can totally do because it’s kind of my house-“

“We would be found out,” Loki argued. “Someone, either from your company or government or SHIELD would eventually realize that I’m living in the Tower and there would be Hel to pay.”

“By then we’ll have leverage, based on your efforts to help stop the apocalypse,” Anthony countered with a dismissive wave.

“You are being a short-sighted dolt,” Loki snapped, trying to keep his hands from shaking now. “You haven’t even told the others that they’ll have to host me for the duration of our fight against Thanos, and now you plan on changing it from a temporary to permanent stay? Your teammates will despise you for this, and in the worst case lose all trust they have in you besides!”

“Loki-”

“And supposing you could somehow convince Thor to put aside his ‘noble sentiments’,” Loki spat
out contemptuously, “and not immediately disclose my location to Odin, consider the fact that he has always been a loose-lipped oaf who couldn’t keep a secret after three drinks! The moment Thor returns home to Asgard for any reason and gets a bit tipsy you’ll have half the Einherjar in your living room with weapons at the ready.”

“That’s.”

“To say nothing of the fact that you and I are practically strangers to one other!” Loki ranted, and now he’d sprung from the bed and stomped to the other side of the room to put a bit of distance between himself and this fool of a Midgardian. “Do you even realize that the majority of our acquaintanceship has been spent as adversaries?” he persisted, speaking to the wall because if he tried to make eye contact right now there was no telling what the consequences might be. “Total up all our shared game nights scattered over several months, Anthony, and even including the past several days we’ve barely been on friendly terms for more than a few weeks altogether! You cannot unilaterally decide that we’re compatible enough to live together long-term based on that, particularly when the consequences of that cohabitation will be catastrophic enough without factoring in future animosity!”

On some level, Loki knew that he’d likely said more than enough to convince Stark to retract his offer, and continuing on with this tirade (especially at his current volume) was likely to draw unwanted attention from the others. But now he’d built significant momentum to this argument, mind having already come up with a list of half a dozen other reasons that Anthony couldn’t (rather, shouldn’t) offer to let him stay beyond the duration of their previously agreed upon arrangement. He turned around, prepared to dive back into the fight, only to find that Anthony had suddenly moved across the room to crowd into his personal space. Loki got as far as, “Anthony-” before he was trapped in an embrace, Anthony’s arms folded around his middle in a tight hug.

Loki froze, trying to process what was happening. “What are you doing?” he asked, cursing how small his voice sounded at a time when he needed to be firm and commanding.

“Making sure you listen,” Anthony answered, head tilted back and up towards Loki to avoid mashing his face into the god’s shoulder. “You are not a mistake. You are not a bad decision I’m going to regret making. Associating with you is not going to be my undoing, so please stop the melodrama.”

“Melodrama-!”

“You’re my friend,” Anthony declared. “I don’t care that it’s only been a little while of us being on the same side, because I’ve been paying attention to everything you’ve done for us in those weeks. Loki, you’re the one who told us who exactly we need to be fighting and how to beat him. You’ve healed busted ribs and gunshot wounds for me and Steve, and you’ve covered for the Avengers multiple times when we needed the help. If we’re keeping score, Prancer, you’ve got at least a few IOUs from us in your column. Giving you a permanent home would be the least I could do.”

“That doesn’t mean-”

“But we’re not keeping score, because that’s not what I do with the people I care about.” Anthony pressed on. “Instead, I put a roof over their heads and complain that they’re using all the hot water or eating the last of my potato chips, and then I go to bed at night reasonably certain that everyone is safe and will probably be alive and in one piece the next morning. I don’t give a damn if the government thinks Bruce needs to be on permanent lockdown, or if Fury has concerns about the superspies having a conflict of interest living in the Tower. Really, if Asgard gets it collective panties in a knot about you living with me that’s just a drop in the bucket.”
“...”

“And don’t try that whole spiel about me getting tired of having you around, you threw me off the top of a skyscraper and I still invited you back to play Dungeons & Dragons. Dirty dishes in the sink or random potions lying around my floor aren’t going to be a dealbreaker.”

Anthony finally relaxed his hold and stepped back, hands sliding down Loki’s arms to gently tangle their fingers together. “Think about it, at least? Today has been...an absolute clusterfuck, really, and I sprung this on you pretty suddenly so I’m not expecting a final answer right now. But you don’t have to cut and run when the dust settles from this, ok? You’ve got people here, Rock of Ages.”

Loki sincerely didn’t know what to do with any of this. It never stopped. Anthony’s need to look after his own went beyond any kindness that Loki had ever witnessed. The man lived in a constant state of looking after the people in his immediate vicinity and defending the rest of mankind, even to his own detriment. All he had to hear was that Loki had been wronged in ages past by warriors of Asgard, and immediately he was willing to risk war with the entire realm to protect one person whom he cared about.

This went beyond Anthony’s need to ally the Avengers with someone who had a degree of magical proficiency in order to save the world. He had opened his home to Loki and offered him companionship in spite of every wrong Loki had committed against this realm in the past. When Loki needed a safe haven to retreat into, Anthony had gifted him food and a place to rest without any hesitation or regret. Moreover, he’d validated Loki’s concerns about Thanos and extended his own resources to help in the coming fight. And when Loki had announced the necessity of retrieving additional supplies from Belgrade? Anthony had immediately offered up transportation and a cover story.

In all of his thousand years, Loki had never met anyone remotely like Anthony anywhere across the Nine Realms. This was a warrior who had no qualms about throwing himself headlong into impossible situations if it meant protecting his own. Anthony meted out punishment and offered forgiveness in equal measure, viciously fighting against Loki to protect his city only to later ally with the god in order to protect the world. Moreover, he was himself a flawed creature and willing to acknowledge his own myriad of failings and consciously make an effort to change himself for the better (and my, wasn’t that becoming rarer and rarer). Loki had read all about the history of Stark Industries and the significant changes the company had made following Anthony’s captivity in Afghanistan; now, after their late night chat, he finally understood the impetus for that change. Anthony could outthink, outfight, and outlast any force that would see the world made a worse place for its involvement, and somehow Loki had managed to earn a place among the cherished loved ones in his life.

In that moment, Loki was absolutely certain the he would never, for the rest of his life, meet another soul who was quite as inexplicably forgiving, protective, and overwhelmingly loving as Anthony.

“Loki?” Anthony whispered, face close enough now that his warm breath ghosted over Loki’s cheek.

Loki leaned closer, bending his head down towards Anthony-
“LOKI! Something’s wrong with Steve!” Bruce screamed from the other room.

In a split second the moment between them was broken, and Loki was abruptly reminded of exactly where they were and what misfortune had befallen the Avengers barely an hour ago. Anthony had already broken free of his hold and was running back towards the front of the jet, calling for Steve as he went. Loki followed a moment later, praying to whatever forces might be listening that the Midgardian would be all right and hadn’t suffered some truly horrific side effect of the medicine.

They arrived to find that Steve had managed to make his way to the couch, but was now leaning over the side of it and vomiting directly onto the floor. Loki wrinkled his nose as he approached; it appeared that the good captain had already emptied most of his stomach contents onto the carpet and was now only dry-heaving. “I didn’t know what to do,” Bruce explained as he kneeled in front of Steve, clutching what Loki belatedly recognized as an ice bucket. Charitably, he resisted the urge to make a comment about it being too little too late.

Instead, Loki pressed a hand to Steve’s forehead and another to his neck, checking the man’s temperature and pulse respectively. “You’ll be all right,” he finally deduced, trying to sound encouraging in the face of Steve’s obvious suffering. “The medicine I gave sometimes causes nausea; I suppose in your case it’s rather full-blown vomiting.”

“Anything you can give him?” Anthony pressed, worriedly hovering over the pair of them and thoughtlessly wringing his hands.

“Unfortunately you’re going to have to ride this out, as the saying goes,” Loki replied with a frown. “There’s nothing I can give you from my supplies to address the vomiting, and even if I did have something I’m not sure that the side effects would be any better than your current state.”

“So what should we do?” Bruce asked.

Loki waved his hand and vanished both the puke on the floor and its revolting stench. “This nausea and vomiting should pass in an hour or so,” he stated, now briefly turning his attention to the others. “Until then, we stay put and monitor him to make sure that his condition doesn’t worsen.”

“Urgh,” Steve groaned. “Forgot how much being sick sucks.”

“Urgh,” Steve groaned. “Forgot how much being sick sucks.”

“That’s it?” Anthony demanded incredulously. “Just watch him and hope he doesn’t puke all over my jet again?”

“‘That’s all we can do,” Loki insisted. “Don’t worry Steve, I have this under control and won’t allow you to suffer any worse effects.” He briefly glanced towards Anthony, giving the man a pointed look. “I’m not going anywhere for the time being.”

Whatever he’d been about to say or do when he and Anthony were alone needed to be forgotten. At best, it would have been desperate action brought on by temporary insanity thanks to a decidedly stressful state of affairs. There was no point in dwelling on things that might have happened in moments like those.

Instead, Loki had to look to their more immediate plans going forward. Someone was trying to use the Mind Stone to manipulate and alter live human beings, along with destroying the Avengers one hero at a time. Very well, then. Loki would throw himself entirely into destroying such an organization down to its very roots. More than that, he would crush them in such a manner that any other would-be world conquerors in days to come would forever hesitate before they even considered crossing the Avengers. And when everything with Thanos was said and done...perhaps, if Anthony so desired it, Loki would stay. Doubtless an extended alliance with the Avengers would
be worth it, if only to see what the future held in store for such a unique being as Anthony Edward Stark.

Chapter End Notes

Behold, the "there was only one bed" trope, but with a twist! What, you mean this isn't how you wanted naked Loki sleeping with Tony?

Also, for those of you trying to track Winter soldier, the attack on Clint/Natasha would have been late Thursday, meaning that 1) there was definitely time for HYDRA to move him further north, but 2) he wasn't up for much of a fight after being violently Coulson'd so recently.
Wherein Tony's Attempts at Meaningful Communication Have a Domino Effect

Chapter Summary

Everybody talks. Words are hard.

Kudos and comments are loved and appreciated! Another huge thank you to everyone that's taken the time to comment on this story so far, your words motivate me and help my writing grow!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As a rule, Tony Stark was not a believer in supernatural forces beyond human reason or explanation. The existence of ancient Norse gods did little to dissuade him of this notion; he merely adjusted his baseline for how long organic creatures could live and expanded his database of what types of energy existed in the universe to include seidr. In the world according to Tony Stark, there was no great puppet master operating some master plan on a cosmic scale, or fate being written in stone or woven into a tapestry by ancient crones, or any kind of mystical forces driving people together or tearing them apart for some unknowable purpose. Every action or event had to have some sort of logical impetus behind its happening. And yet...there were times in Tony’s life when he experienced what could only be described as a ‘click.’

When three-year-old Tony had discovered the power of running electricity through a tungsten filament to illuminate a light bulb, something had ‘clicked’ in his mind which forever turned his attentions and energy towards creating mechanical wonders. When Rhodey had cleared off space on his own dorm-issued desk at MIT to make room for Tony’s (then) paltry record collection, the ‘click’ happened again, and Tony knew he’d found his life-long best friend. And the first time Tony had flown in the Mark I suit, even amidst the chaos, bloodshed, and terror surrounding his escape, it ‘clicked’ that his life would forevermore be entwined with the hero who came to be known as Iron Man. There was no rhyme or reason to what prompted these fundamental shifts in his perception of reality, or what might cause the next one to occur. They simply happened.

He felt it on the plane after the Avengers and Loki had escaped from Bozeman. When Tony embraced Loki mid-panic, clutching him tight and feeling the god’s rabbiting heartbeat against his chest while he promised Loki a home and more, it clicked for him how wonderful this simple intimacy felt. He’d been close with others and loved Pepper, but this...this was different. This was right.

The exact weight of his epiphany didn’t have much time to sink in. Only a few seconds after he’d finished speaking and stepped back to give Loki room to breathe, Tony was yanked forward to press against Loki’s chest once again. The god was observing him with a expression of undisguised shock and amazement, and Tony’s mind was racing a mile a minute to puzzle out what might have caused that. He’d tried to say something else then, tried to ask what Loki wanted, but the god had unintentionally halted his words when he bent his head down like he...well, when you tilt your head at that angle and lean in that close to someone else’s face, it’s pretty obvious what you’re going for.
Of course at that exact moment Steve, doubtlessly sensing that something unwholesome and downright un-American was about to take place mere yards away from where he lay, started throwing up, effectively shutting down whatever Loki had been planning to do. Bastard.

And ok, maybe Tony could stand to be a little nicer considering how Steve had recently been shot twice and stitched back together with magical Krazy Glue, but getting cock-blocked from a private moment with a literal god apparently brought out the worst in him.

However, as the flight to New York continued on and Loki calmly monitored Steve’s progress, Tony realized that he probably needed to be thankful for Cap’s interruption. Adrenaline and emotions had been running high after Tony made his offer, and neither Tony nor Loki had been in their right minds at the time. Scant minutes prior, Loki had made the absolute worst Sherlock Holmes deduction concerning the motives behind the airport attack, and that was itself following his piecing Steve back together after being unable to protect his allies. Tony had exacerbated matters by digging into mage and warrior politics of Asgard, before abruptly insisting that Loki permanently defect to Earth and live with the Avengers. He wasn’t even surprised when Loki snapped and began to verbally lay into him.

Had it been anyone else, Tony would have taken Loki’s vitriolic response to heart and assumed his offer was genuinely being rejected for the myriad of problems it was bound to cause (because despite the reassurances he gave Loki, yeah, once the bigwigs found out exactly who was consulting with the Avengers they were probably all going to end up shot through the head in the middle of a field and subsequently buried face-down in shallow graves). But underneath the anger and condemnation being slung at him, Tony had heard the fear in Loki’s voice. He understood the trepidation, the overwhelming dread that yet another potential good thing in life was destined for failure, and failing to go ass over teakettle in the near future only meant suffering would come knocking in the months or years ahead.

Tony had set Loki up to be in an incredibly vulnerable position, and then dangled emotional comfort in front of him immediately thereafter. There was no way that Loki had been thinking clearly when he leaned in to do... something, and going through with it would only amount to Tony having taken advantage of one of his close friends for personal gain.

Oh lord, what if that was the real motivation behind Loki’s actions? Maybe he assumed that Tony expected some sort of compensation for longterm housing and protection, and he’d been intending to pay it physically?! Oh god, did that make Tony some kind of ultra exploitative sugar daddy? At the very least, they’d almost become the setup for a particularly bad porno.

Besides how morally reprehensible that kiss might’ve been, Tony had to consider the other Avengers. If Bruce or Steve had walked in on them during a... something, and then afterwards heard Tony’s plan to keep Loki in the Tower indefinitely, they might have assumed Tony only wanted Loki around for sexual favors. Word would eventually spread through the entirety of the Avengers, and the sheer disapproval from Steve and Natasha’s combined might would probably cause him to spontaneously combust. On the other hand, explaining that there was something more brewing between Tony and Loki than pure physical attraction likely wouldn’t do him any favors. Tony was already going out on a pretty shaky limb with his request to let Loki stay in the Tower under present circumstances, and he would be unbelievably lucky if that limb didn’t snap when he asked for an indefinite extension for Loki in their home. Throwing in this developing...whatever it was?

Clint would never forgive him, first off; Tony was still relatively certain that he was just waiting for Loki to turn traitor on them again. Steve would throw himself wholeheartedly into trying to talk his friend out of what he’d see as a catastrophic life choice, whereas Natasha would...honestly Tony didn’t know, but he was willing to bet it would involve enlisting the help of Pepper or Rhodey using
a warning that Tony was about to get into another disaster of a relationship. None of this would matter, of course, because the moment Thor heard about it he was going to reduce Tony to a fine pile of electrocuted ash for besmirching Loki’s honor, or whatever Asgardians called it.

Bruce would take up for him at least. Science bros had to look out for one another like that. Maybe he could get the man to at least attempt to buy him a head start against Thor. Tony might even last until the end of the week under those circumstances.

Basically, trying to pursue anything with Loki was likely going to spark chaos within the Avengers, assuming Loki had even been trying to kiss him (which, now that Tony really thought about it, probably wasn’t what the god had been going for at all, good lord what a ridiculous notion). After all, there wasn’t any tangible proof that Loki was attracted to him in a physical and/or romantic sense. Just because Tony had the hots for him wasn’t grounds to assume that those feelings would be reciprocated. Maybe it had all been in his head. Tony had to remind himself that wanting Loki’s movements to herald being kissed didn’t automatically mean a kiss was coming his way. From top to bottom, this was a terrible plan which deserved to be sealed away in a titanium box and encased in solid concrete five hundred meters below the earth, never to see the light of day again.

But…

Maybe…

The others had accepted Loki into game night, to the point where he was now a welcome and expected presence among their ranks. They’d made peace with his visits to the Tower already; and considering how Loki was inarguably responsible for saving half the team in what was almost certainly a HYDRA attack, Tony would have more leverage in convincing them that having a second god on duty wouldn’t be a total disaster. Maybe, if he and Loki could keep things quiet for a little while until they found their footing, slowly ease the others into the idea of their being together and start with easier teammates (i.e. Bruce) then this-

Well, this entire scheme still hinged on the impossible notion that Loki would even be halfway interested in him, and wasn’t that a fucking leap of faith. But if there was even a miniscule, microscopic, one-in-a-million chance of Loki reciprocating what Tony felt instead of hurling him out a window, wouldn’t it be worth taking the risk?

Or would this just make interpersonal work awkward and difficult at a time when the literal fate of the entire galaxy was at stake?

For the reminder of the flight, Tony continued to vacillate wildly between wanting to approach Loki about what had happened in the jet’s backroom vs burying that particular topic of conversation for the remainder of all time. His internal strife was only interrupted by JARVIS’ announcement that the plane was beginning its descent, and so everyone needed to take their seats and buckle themselves in for landing. All of his efforts now had to be diverted to making sure Loki didn’t find out about his little internal meltdown once the god settled in not two feet from Tony. Fortunately, he already had a good excuse for his nervous demeanor. “How’s Steve?” he asked.

“Better,” Loki answered. “He should make a full recovery by tomorrow, between the medicine and his own accelerated healing abilities. It’s a side effect of the serum used on him, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“Fascinating,” Loki murmured. “I can understand why these HYDRA people are so taken with him. I’ve never seen you Midgardians successfully develop anything remotely as potent.” He turned to face Tony, liking intending to ask further questions about the serum, but something stopped him. He
studied Tony for a moment, then said, “You still look worried. What is it?”

“Nothing,” Tony answered, far too quickly to sound believable.

Loki frowned down at him. “Recall that I am the god of lies, Anthony. That wasn’t even a worthwhile attempt to deceive me.”

Damn it. Regardless of whether or not Tony wanted to discuss his most recent realization vis a vis being attracted to Loki, this was not the place or time to have that conversation. “It’s nothing world-ending, I swear. Just...planning things out for the future.” Ok, still not exactly forthright and honest, but hopefully that would be better than a straight-up lie.

Loki apparently disagreed, frown deepening as he sat back in his seat, angling himself away from Tony. “Do let me know when you feel up to divulging what’s actually causing you such distress,” he snipped, and yikes, that was not a good tone. “In the meantime; you said that JARVIS and...Happy, was it, had worked out the transportation?”

Bless Loki for the change of topic, even if he clearly wasn’t pleased about it. “Yeah, JARVIS sent a message to my driver, Happy.”

“-surely that isn’t the man’s given name.”

“Well no, his real name is Harold, but who wants to be called Harold anymore? That’s an old man name, it’s a name you give to someone who’s going to top out at middle management and have a midlife crisis in the form of a Jersey mistress by 47.”

“...If you say so.”

“So anyway, I call him Happy,” Tony went on. “He’s amazing at the whole, ‘follow directions now, ask questions much much later’ thing. JARVIS found a little airfield in upstate New York that shouldn’t have too much traffic, and I told Happy to rent a moving truck ASAP and drive it straight there, no questions and absolutely no telling anyone where he was going or why.”

“And you trust this man?”

“With my life,” Tony assured him. “The guy isn’t like the rest of us, he doesn’t have any special training or powers and he’d still take a bullet for me. He’s absolutely loyal.”

Loki seemed to accept this information. “All right. But will he still trust you when he notices me?”

Tony winced. “I think so, yeah. He might not be thrilled about it and he’ll definitely have a headache-inducing amount of questions to answer, but he won’t rat us out to Fury.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a thud as the plane finally landed, JARVIS informing them that he could find no evidence of anyone being present at the airfield other than the two ATC personnel operating the lone tower on the far end of the facility, and he’d already vetted them thoroughly before settling on this location as the best spot to touch down.

Even assuming that HYDRA would need to retreat and lick their wounds after the Bozeman fiasco, it was still far too risky to attempt a landing at the same airport they’d originally departed from. The new location JARVIS had picked was barely more than two narrow, paved airstrips for personal aircraft to utilize on weekends in rural New York, but the chances of HYDRA trying to attack them here were so low as to be statistically insignificant. Of course, this meant that they’d have to add about two hours worth of driving time to what was already going to be an incredibly stressful trip back to the Tower, but it was the best they could make of a decidedly bad situation. Speaking of
Tony sincerely felt guilty as he disembarked from the jet to see Happy already standing on the runway, having rolled up the ladder to the door as soon as the craft came to a complete stop. This was supposed to be the man’s day off, and technically he didn’t even work for Tony anymore since Pepper was the one who signed his paychecks each month. And yet he’d dropped everything and come running as soon as Tony said the word ‘help.’ Forget Christmas bonus, this year the man was getting an all-expenses-paid vacation to the Mediterranean with a healthy shopping budget thrown in too. Presuming Happy ever wanted to speak to him again following this gross breach of trust.

Tony knew the moment the jig was up by the way Happy’s face shifted from tentative joy to incredulity and finally outright fear. “Mr. Stark, get down!” he screamed as he reached for a handgun clipped to his belt.

Before Tony could try to smooth things over Loki had teleported to stand directly in front of Happy, looking completely unimpressed. Taking advantage of the man’s shock, he ripped the gun out of his hand and hurled it god knows where across the airfield. “I just patched up several gunshot wounds on the flight home, and I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t create more work for me,” he ground out, now looming over Happy with near-malicious intent.

Tony bolted the rest of the way down the stairs and hurriedly insinuated himself between the two of them, back towards Loki and arms spread out in a protective manner. “Whoa, Happy, it’s ok, he’s with us!”

Happy looked back and forth between Tony and Loki again and again, trying to make sense of a situation that clearly didn’t add up in his head no matter how many times he did the math. Mercifully, Loki had backed off at Tony’s intervention and was no longer looming quite so menacingly, and the others were already disembarking from the plane. Hopefully Tony could get Steve to use some of the ol’ Captain America charm before they had to drive back-

Tony yelped as his jaw caught a right hook from Happy and stars danced across his vision. Between one blink and the next Loki was back in front of him, suspending Happy in the air with a hand around his throat (holy crap, how strong was he?) and looking intent on murdering Tony’s friend. “What did I just say?” he hissed, grip tightening and causing Happy to choke and flail as his fingers vainly clawed at Loki’s hands, trying to pry himself free of Loki’s ironclad grasp.

“Loki!”

It was Steve who shouted this time, running up to the trio with his bloodied parka only halfway pulled on. “Put him down, he’s not a threat!”

“Speak for yourself, what the hell Happy?!” Tony barked out, rubbing at his jaw and wincing. Damn, that was going to bruise.

Begrudgingly, Loki released his hold and dropped Happy back onto the ground, albeit as far from Tony and himself as arm’s reach would allow. Happy gasped for air and coughed, massaging his throat as his eyes continued to dart between Loki and Tony. “I just...I thought he did that brainwashing thing to you,” he wheezed out. “You said Clint came out of it when he got hit in the head-”


Loki’s attention was back on him at once. He spun around and batted Tony’s hand away in order to inspect the tender flesh of Tony’s cheek and jaw, fingers gently ghosting over the injured area.
“Nothing appears to be broken; a little swelling, but you should be all right.”

“You planning on fixing it?”

“An injury of this caliber doesn’t need my intervention, Anthony.”

“Ow, actually, I think he might have knocked a few teeth loose and, yup, definitely seeing spots here, must be concussed after all—”

“God of lies, Anthony.”

“Seriously, what the fuck?!” Happy bellowed.

“We’ll explain in the truck,” Bruce promised, trying to redirect Happy’s attention away from Tony and Loki. “But right now there are some boxes we need to get off the jet and taken back to the Tower, before we end up getting attacked again.”

“Again?” Happy finally seemed to notice Steve’s bloodied and disheveled state, which very nearly sent him into another fit of hysterics. “What the-?!”

“Loading now, explanation later,” Steve ordered, and yup, that was his Captain America tone coming out now, complete with military posture and patented stern parent look which few mortal men were immune to.

Happy finally gave up on trying to make any sense of this situation and simply nodded, already circling around to the back side of the jet where the rear doors would open. Bruce stayed close by his side, whispering something that Tony hoped would reassure Happy, because they really didn’t have time for any additional delays or fights. Loki was likely in a similar state of mind, if the tension in his arms and tight-lipped frown were any indicators. Tony waved off Steve before he could ask any questions (also something Tony didn’t need right this second) and moved to stand directly in Loki’s line of sight. “It’ll be fine,” he whispered. “Happy was just a little surprised, that’s all. I didn’t explain everything to him—”

“Clearly,” Loki brusquely said before storming up the stairs of the jet. Tony watched him go, briefly debating whether chasing after Loki would be a good idea before ultimately giving up on that plan. Truthfully, if Tony had been a little more forthcoming on some details (or at least, gotten a firm promise from Happy not to do anything drastic when the team landed) then they could have avoided that entire confrontation. Loki was well within his rights to be angry; but for the time being, Tony needed to focus his attention on soothing other ruffled feathers.

JARVIS was now lowering the rear door, and Tony circled around to join the others just as it finished opening completely. Steve was already directing Happy towards some of the less dangerous cargo, unable to carry anything thanks to his still-healing injuries, while Bruce began taking up the boxes which would need a more ginger touch. Tony moved to grab a box from the stack beside Happy, figuring that now was as good a time as any to start explaining himself. “Ok, so you remember the fight we had with Loki back at the zoo a few months ago? Well…”

Tony gave Happy a general overview of Loki’s time in the Avengers’ company as they unloaded the cargo from one vehicle to reload into another, a story which ended up being far more difficult to relate than he originally anticipated. Turns out, there’s no sane way to explain how an entire team of superheroes decided that the only way to salvage their DnD campaign was by enlisting the help of a former enemy mage. It was a little easier when he recounted the fight with the Alternator or dinner with Bruce, because those snippets made it seem like the Loki situation was more of a friendly alliance with team benefits and less of a crazy Tony Stark idea that had spiraled out of control.
At the same time, there were memories like his and Loki’s couch confessions or the night they’d shared in the guest house which he either glossed over or omitted entirely. Those were private moments between the two of them; shared instances of vulnerability, the intimate details of which Happy (and the other Avengers, for that matter) didn’t need to know. Much as it didn’t sit well with him to withhold information from the team, he knew it would be worse to betray the trust that he’d spent so long building up with Loki.

It took multiple trips between the jet and the truck Happy had brought for them (perfectly nondescript, thank god the man understood Tony’s demands for something low-key) to get the entire story out, or at least as much as Tony was willing to divulge. Steve and Bruce occasionally contributed their own commentary, which doubtlessly bolstered their case. Tony could tell that Happy was all but sold by the time Steve got around to the part where Loki had defended them at Bozeman, followed by doctoring Steve on the jet afterwards of his own volition. “So you’re sure about him?” Happy asked when the last box had finally been wedged into place and the table was strapped down.

“As sure as we can be,” Steve answered honestly.

Happy glanced from one hero to another and finally shrugged, letting the matter drop. “You guys know him better than I do. Plus he’s pretty protective over you, Mr. Stark, and we’re always willing to enlist a little more help on that front.”

“What do you mean, we?” Tony demanded. “Wait, it’s you, Pepper, and Rhodey, right? I knew it, you people do talk about me when I’m not around!”

Happy wisely held his hands up in the universal gesture of ‘I have no idea what you’re on about’ before beating a hasty retreat and walking to the driver’s side of the truck.

“Oh that is such bull, I knew Rhodey and Pepper used to tag-team me back when I was CEO, but since I moved to R&D-”

“Where’s Loki?” Bruce inquired.

Tony had been so focused on trying to explain himself to Happy that he’d completely missed Loki’s absence during the move. Swearing softly, he ran back to the jet and scurried up the steps, hoping to find Loki onboard. He hadn’t seen the god disembark yet, and with any luck a little space from the others would have given Loki a chance to cool down.

Sure enough, Loki had settled himself into one of the seats near the middle of the plane, calmly running his fingers over the fabric of his travel bag. He glanced up upon hearing Tony’s approach, expression perfectly blank. “Are we ready to go then?”

“Um, yeah, everything’s loaded up. But…”

“But what?”

Tony seated himself beside Loki. “Are you ok?”

Loki closed his eyes and took a single controlled breath. “I should not have reacted the way I did,” he stated. “I knew that whatever ally you brought to aid us would likely react negatively to my presence, particularly if they care for you. But seeing someone strike you…particularly after the mess in Belgrade-”

“Hey, no, Happy was out of line too,” Tony assured him. “Like, pretty sure I mentioned that the mind control thing makes a person’s eyes go all weird and day-glo blue, that one’s on him for
jumping to stupid conclusions.”

Loki scoffed. “Conclusions like the only possible explanation for you and I becoming allies was forcible mind control on my part?”

“Really, really stupid conclusions,” Tony amended, because he could read the hurt beneath Loki’s biting remark. “But I set him straight, and he’s on our side now.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, something about liking the way you jumped in to defend my honor? Which, honestly, I’m not too upset about either, feel free to preemptively protect my honor from any more punches you see coming my way.”

“Oh, is that what we’re calling your jawbone now?”

“Only you, Prancer,” Tony retorted with a smirk. That at least got a small smile from Loki, and Tony felt some of his tension release at that. “We’ll be ok. You’re still moving into the Tower, you’re still not a mistake, and I’m still in awe of how ridiculously strong you are. All good?”

“You left out the part about you still being a colossal fool for doing this, but otherwise I believe you captured the jist of our situation,” Loki said. “Now then; you might want to stand back.”

“Stand back?” Tony asked, even as his legs did as they were bid and backed up several paces. Moments later, he got his answer as Loki crossed over to the crushed end of the table and hefted the Mark V up and over one shoulder. “Holy...holy…”

“Are you about to take my name in vain, Anthony?” Loki asked, and there was definite amusement in his voice now. “I’m not sure whether to be flattered or offended.”

Tony couldn’t find it in himself to cobble together a coherent response. The suitcase armor wasn’t nearly as heavy as some of the other suits he’d designed, but it still wasn’t what the average joe would describe as light. Tony had put a lot of work into very questionable physics and gravity manipulation to ensure that the suit would do a decent job protecting him with heavier materials, yet not be so impossibly cumbersome and heavy that he couldn’t take it with him while traveling in suitcase form. But now all those modifications were off; what Loki was currently carting around weighed more than an average adult man, yet he barely even seemed to notice the burden. What he did notice, however, was the way Anthony froze up at his display of strength. “Anthony?”

“Nothing. No, wait, not nothing,” Tony corrected, because he’d just gotten Loki in a better mood and didn’t particularly want to reignite that fight. “Once we’re back at the Tower and get everything unpacked, would you mind if we had dinner and a talk? Just you and me, no Avengers or chauffeurs or anything? Since now is a really bad time to do anything but run for safety until we get back to basecamp.”

Loki seemed more than a little befuddled by Tony’s line of thinking, but the promise of a more in-depth discussion was enough to placate him. He nodded once in quiet agreement and then walked towards the exit, carrying his belongings across one shoulder with Tony’s armor draped over the other. It was time to go.

-n-

Tony had to give himself credit; he made it exactly five minutes and thirty-eight seconds into the car ride home before the panic really set in. His mind was still trying to reason its way to the best course of action regarding what to do about his and Loki’s... something (god he probably needed a better
term for it at this point), only now there was a hard and fast deadline of ‘as soon as Loki was moved in we’ll talk’ to contend with, thanks to his big mouth. Oh, and if he made a move after all their chat, Loki might think it was just because Tony had some kind of lifting heavy objects kink. Never mind that Loki showing off his superhuman strength did in fact do things to him (learn something new every day), but there was a time and a place for sexual awakenings and today was not it!

No, calm down. There was no need to break down yet, he could still salvage this. First, Tony needed to focus on the elements which were still working in his favor. Time, for one thing. The drive back would require at least two hours all on its own. Unloading the truck at the Tower would take a while because they’d have to carry everything off the truck, through the garage, onto the elevator, and finally get it all set up in the workshop. Realistically they’d probably finish things up by dinner, plenty of time for Tony to ensure that Loki was completely relaxed and in a good mood before they had to chat. Maybe then they could start with some friendly small talk, and he could ply Loki with a tiny smidge of alcohol (damn, what was the brand of wine Loki had been drinking? Never mind, Tony would be able to find a decent red somewhere in the Tower) and…

This was where the plan hit a snag. Tony could use this time as preparation to try and feel out Loki’s sentiments, maybe see if the god even swung that way; no, forget it, this was Loki, he’d see through Tony’s machinations in a heartbeat-

“Tony!”

Steve was trying to get his attention, completely oblivious to the tormented chaos swirling about Tony’s mind at the moment. Steve had chosen to ride in the passenger seat of the truck and position Tony in the middle by Happy, who was driving for them as usual. Bruce and Loki were currently riding in the back end, ostensibly to keep the boxes and furniture from shifting too much in transit. Tony vaguely recalled that there had been some reason why Steve wanted him to ride up front (away from Loki) on the drive home, but for the life of him he couldn’t remember what the reason might have been. “Hmm?”

“Happy wants to know what we should do about security around the Tower,” Steve informed him, in a tone that suggested at least mild disappointment with Tony’s shoddy memory. “It’s your building, so you get final say.”

Oh. Well that answered Tony’s question. “What are you thinking?”

From the way Happy perked up and immediately chimed in, Tony got the impression that he’d been dying to make these changes even before Tony gave him an excuse to crack down on SI security in New York. “Hire more people, change up the order and lengths of the security shifts, add a few more cameras to the exterior and install extra security checkpoints for anyone going to a higher level floor.”

“Hmm...no.”

“Mr. Stark-”

“Happy, I get where you’re coming from, but all that’s going to do is add a ton of new construction and new faces to Avengers Tower when what we need to be doing is closing up whatever holes already exist in our current setup,” Tony explained.

“I think the external cameras would be all right,” Steve stated, attempting to find a compromise. “But I agree with not hiring more guards or putting in extra checkpoints. It’d be easier to ask Pepper to host any important meetings somewhere else for a while.”
“Speaking of Ms. Potts...when are you guys planning to tell her about public enemy number one living with you? Because she’s going to have thoughts and opinions Mr. Stark, and in case you forgot her aim’s pretty accurate with a high heel-”

“-Up to thirty feet away, I know. And I’ll tell her eventually,” Tony vaguely promised. He needed to fight this war one battle at a time, and Pepper Potts was the entire western front all on her own. The longer he had to strategize the better.

“We’re working on it,” Steve stated, and Happy seemed a bit more reassured by him than Tony (rude). “But in the immediate future, I’m more concerned with keeping her safe than telling her about Loki. HYDRA’s already gone after most of the Avengers, and since the direct attack failed I’m worried they’ll try to go after people associated with us next.”

A horrific thought came to Tony then. “Fuck, the Wisings!”

Steve’s eyes widened. “Tony, did you post any pictures of their house?!”

Tony was already scrolling through the photos saved to his phone. “No, I got distracted by Loki and didn’t think about taking any pictures until we’d already left.”

Steve bit his lip, and Tony recognized the expression on his face as the one he wore while planning under duress. “Ok, Bruce booked us under a pseudonym, so they shouldn’t be able to trace anything back to the family that way,” he reasoned. “And Loki said he put some kind of spells on the house to keep it safe; would he know if they were broken?”

“Maybe? I haven’t asked him how they work yet,” Tony lamented.

Steve drummed his fingers on his thigh, mouth set in a thin line. “I don’t think HYDRA’s going to go after them,” he finally stated. “We were their targets, and attacking a civilian family would just draw unwanted attention to their operations. If the Wisings are hurt or...worse, then all we have to do is announce to the world at large that HYDRA’s on the hunt again and they’re at an immediate disadvantage.”

“You sure about that?” Tony worriedly asked, because he was about thirty seconds away from hiring an entire security team specifically to camp out in front of the Wisings home for the next six months.

“Pretty much, yeah.”

Tony made a mental note to relay this entire conversation to Loki and drop a few hints that the Wisings’ home might need a little extra protection in the future. He could see the logic behind Steve’s reasoning though; the Avengers were HYDRA’s target, and as such whatever move was made against them next would probably happen in their headquarters: New York. Right now, the people living in or near the Tower were the ones who were likely in the most danger. “Ok, we put extra security on Pepper, make sure Happy’s got better equipment than whatever SI doled out to you...Rhodey’s with the Air Force, we can’t exactly slap extra protection on him, but JARVIS needs to run a background check on everyone operating within a hundred miles of him.”

“Anyone else?” Happy wondered.

Steve thought for a minute. “Most of the other people close to us work for SHIELD, and we can’t give them any kind of help without risking the HYDRA double agents figuring out what we’re up to.” He sighed and leaned against the truck door. “We should wait until the others get back home before we do anything else.”

Tony agreed, much as he hated to sit around and wait. Subterfuge was Clint and Natasha’s forte;
trying to take action without waiting for their input was more likely than not to damage their work in the long run, and the Avengers had enough trouble as it stood. For the time being, all Tony could do was settle in for what felt like one of the longest car rides of his life.

-n-

Thankfully the universe granted the Avengers a peaceful drive back to the Tower, and they were able to pull into the garage and park the truck without falling victim to further havoc. Happy volunteered once again to help move Loki’s belongings, while Steve contented himself with walking a perimeter around them in the garage since Tony wouldn’t let him so much as lift a tissue box and risk undoing Loki’s work. After the airport they were all on edge, even being back in the safety of the Tower. Loki dictated the order of transit, though eventually his directions boiled down to setting the boxes somewhere out of the way in the workshop and leaving them alone for him to unpack later. The need for multiple elevator trips slowed the entire process down too much for Tony’s liking, but there wasn’t anything they could do to expedite the process. Besides the immense number of boxes (which Tony would swear had multiplied at some point during the trip), Loki’s table had to be taken down on a separate equipment elevator by itself due to its massive size, and the chaise lounge had to be transported all the way up to the penthouse along with the few personal effects Loki packed in a smattering of boxes. By the time it was all said and done, the Avengers were ready for dinner and Happy was eager to bow out. “I’m expecting a nice bonus at Christmas this year, Mr. Stark,” he called out as he climbed back into the truck.

“You don’t even work for me anymore,” Tony shot back, though most of his comment was drowned out by the engine turning over. He stuck around long enough to wave off Happy as the truck slowly pulled out of the garage, the building’s doors shutting tightly behind him. Worry over his friends would be a constant feature of his life for the foreseeable future, but with any luck HYDRA would need a little time to recover from the damage the Avengers and Loki had doled out. If Tony and the others were reading the situation correctly, including the bunker in his calculations HYDRA had lost one substantial hideout and failed two assault missions within the last week. The smart move would be going to ground and taking some time to recuperate; Tony didn’t even want to consider how badly outmatched the Avengers would be in their current state if HYDRA didn’t need a breather after sustaining that amount of damage. Theoretically, Tony and the others could take a breather for the next day or so.

Mind made up, Tony decided to focus on getting the others fed and rested. The whirlwind trip to and from Yellowstone would wear out any normal person, and throwing in an impromptu gunfight as well was more than enough to tucker out the Avengers plus Loki. “Chinese sound good?”

“Sure,” Steve readily agreed.

Bruce gave him a worried look, clearly recalling Steve’s earlier state on the jet. “You good to eat? Should we check with Loki first?”

“My stomach’s feeling better, and I should be ok by the time it gets here. But right now I’m going to head upstairs and lie down for a little while. JARVIS, can you let me know when the food arrives?”

“Of course, Captain.”

Tony turned to ask Loki what he’d want to do, only to find that the mage had vanished at some point. “J, where’d Loki go?”

“Mr. Liesmith is currently in the workshop. I believe he intends to unpack his things.”

That made sense; Loki had been rather prickly about letting anyone else try to unpack the boxes.
Thinking about it, Tony himself had a number of his own bags which needed to be seen to tonight, otherwise he’d never get around to doing it. Tragically for him, the Avengers had been so focused on moving Loki’s possessions into the Tower proper that none of them had transported their own luggage upstairs yet, meaning that Tony was going to have to haul his perfectly reasonable amount of bags up to the penthouse after thoroughly wearing himself out. “Hey Bruce-”

“Nope, you’re on your own,” Bruce declared before wheeling his single carry-on to the elevator without so much as a backward glance towards Tony.

“One day I’m going to make you pay rent!” Tony threatened, which only garnered him a dismissive hand wave from Bruce. “JARVIS, I’m starting to think no one takes me seriously anymore.”

“Would you like to threaten Dummy with the community college again, Sir? I’m sure he could drum up the appropriate amount of terror to soothe your concerns.”

“Maybe later.” Tony looked over his baggage and sighed. “This is going to take a while, isn’t it?”

“Shall I go ahead and put on a bit of unpacking music for you?” JARVIS inquired, because for all his sass the A.I. still occasionally held his creator’s best interest in mind.

Tony grinned as he began shuffling his things towards the elevator. “Cue up Paranoid, J.”

-n-

By the time everything had been brought upstairs, the clothing hung up or put in the laundry basket, and most of the suitcases stored back in the closet, Tony was halfway ready to admit that maybe, just maybe, he might have possibly packed a few too many things for a weekend trip. Fortunately that train of thought was derailed by JARVIS’ announcement that the food had arrived and everyone should make their way to the common floor at their earliest convenience. Tony finished putting up his final suitcase and took the elevator downstairs, finding Bruce and Steve already in the kitchen and opening up the cartons of takeout, while Loki was noticeably absent. “J, Loki heading up yet?”

“Mr. Liesmith has stated that he wishes to remain in the workshop for a bit longer,” JARVIS answered after a momentary pause.

Tony recalled his promise to speak to Loki over dinner and decided to kill two birds with one stone. He probably had a few bottles of wine downstairs (maybe?) that could help lighten the mood if need be, but with any luck a little small talk mixed with greasy food would get their conversation off on the right note. “That’s fine, I’ll just take the food down to him.” He snatched some silverware and a few containers off the table (one of which was immediately snatched back by Steve, because the man would straight up fight you for a good spring roll when he was hungry enough) and exited the kitchen. JARVIS had already opened the elevator doors for him, and a moment later he was heading downstairs.

“Mr. Liesmith has stated that he wishes to remain in the workshop for a bit longer,” JARVIS answered after a momentary pause.

Tony arrived in the lab to see the vast majority of Loki’s boxes still unpacked and stacked around the walls of the room, while the god himself was sprawled out against one arm of the sofa in the room’s far corner. Tony stopped in the doorway, glancing back and forth between the boxes and Loki in confusion. “Um…”

“I tried to unpack,” Loki explained, head tilting to look away from the ceiling and focus on Anthony. “But upon opening the first box I realized you didn’t have adequate shelving for my supplies. I didn’t want to clear off any of your bookshelves or tables without consent. JARVIS mentioned that there were other shelves I could bring here from storage, but…”
“But?”

“This has been a disastrous and exhausting week,” Loki bluntly stated. “I am quite done with anything bearing a passing resemblance to physical or magical effort. I’ve put your minions in charge of guarding my supplies for the time being; acquiring bookshelves or locked cases can wait.”

Tony couldn’t help but grin as he saw that You, Dummy, and Butterfingers were currently wheeling their way around the boxes in lazy circles, though whether that was out of curiosity and a need to inspect the new arrivals or rather born from some wish to obey Loki would forever remain a mystery. Careful to give the bots a wide berth (Dummy on a mission was not something he liked to stand in the way of), Tony strolled over to the couch and held out one of the boxes of lo mein for Loki to take. “Soup’s on.”

Loki slowly sat himself upright and took the container from Tony, who sat himself on the other end of the couch and passed a fork to Loki. Several containers ended up resting on the ground between the two of them as they dined, quietly nibbling and occasionally trading cartons as they worked their way through sizeable helpings of Chinese takeout. They ate in silence for the majority of the meal, too worn out by the events of the day to break a comfortable silence with pointless small talk. Eventually Loki finished the last of the egg rolls, set down his emptied box on the floor, and returned his full attention to Tony. “You said we’d talk.”

Tony nodded and swallowed his last bite of lo mein. Guess they’d have to skip the wine. “Yeah.”

“Before we begin, may I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“This morning, you said I was moving in with more belongings than anyone else. Elaborate.”

Tony settled himself further into the couch after depositing his trash onto the floor. “I mean, it’s pretty self-explanatory. Bruce had been on the run for a couple years before he joined the Avengers, that kinda limits how much stuff a guy can acquire. Clint and Natasha were both living in SHIELD barracks and Steve had a rinky dink apartment with like, nothing in it. I know Clint and Nat didn’t keep a lot of stuff because the whole spy business doesn’t exactly earn you a long lifespan, and Steve had just woken up seventy years in the future so he probably didn’t even know where to begin with furniture or making his place more homey. And Thor...well, he usually bounces back and forth between the Tower, New Mexico, and Asgard. No clue how much stuff he’s got stashed around here, but I know it’s not much.”

“And you...bought them furnishings for their rooms?”

“Not really,” Tony admitted. “The spies and Steve still get a paycheck from SHIELD, and I made sure that everyone gets a cut of the Avengers-themed merchandise Stark Industries is selling (side note, you would be shocked at how popular Iron Man plushies are with the kids), but if there’s something big they want but can’t find or if it’s a little out of their budget, I don’t mind getting it for them.”

“So how shall we structure the payments between you and I for furniture? Assuming that I might...desire to stay here beyond our battle with Thanos.”

Tony had to bite back the impulse to say that Loki didn’t need to pay him anything, he didn’t need the money and was just ecstatic at the possibility of getting Loki to stay that much longer. True as it might be, his message and intentions wouldn’t come across the way he wanted them to. Loki was a prince and a proud soul besides, he would never accept a handout or any sign of pity (and that’s
exactly how Tony knew he’d perceive free room and board). At the same time, Tony wasn’t about
to demand actual money from Loki, under penalty of torturous death. His mind raced into overdrive,
trying to find some compromise that both Loki would accept and would prevent him from feeling as
though he was abusing Loki’s current state of affairs. “How about this,” he finally said. “Bruce and I
still want to figure out how seidr and magical energy work, and at the moment our only direct source
for that info is you. We’re already going to have JARVIS scan some of your stuff to help track
down the Stones, but what if you did a few demonstrations with them too, or just used your own
seidr for a couple experiments? Maybe throw in smoothing out a few issues with the written research
we’ve done so far.”

Loki looked skeptical. “That seems to be an uneven trade, Anthony.”

“Well, look at it this way: you are one of a select few individuals on this entire planet using actual
magic right now, and as far as I know all the others are allied with or controlled by HYDRA. That
makes anything you share incredibly valuable. And come on, that’s more than anyone else is paying
anyway, seriously, if I could publish an actual paper backing up the idea that magic is a wave I might
actually be able to pay for Steve’s grocery budget without going into the red for one month.”

Tony could tell from the expression on Loki’s face that he was beginning to wear the god down; one
of his many talents, after years of negotiating with Pepper and the Board of Directors. “Listen, if you
want to renegotiate things later on, that’s fine,” he suggested, because he was coming to realize that
the best way to corner Loki was to make sure the god still felt like he had an out available before
finalizing anything. “As long as we’re fighting an organization bent on magical world domination
with an Infinity Stone under their control, having a magical expert on hand is worth its weight in
gold. All right?” he asked, holding out his hand.

After a moment of consideration, Loki clasped his hand and shook it, sealing their arrangement.

“Very well. I accept your terms for the time being.”

Tony smiled as he took back his hand. So it was a done deal then. Loki was going to stay here with
the team: working in the lab, eating in the common area, and sleeping on the penthouse level just a
few doors away from him. He couldn’t keep the dopey smile off his face, try as he might.

“Now then; what was troubling you on the jet?” Loki inquired.

Damn. Time to bite the bullet; Tony had promised him a conversation, and a conversation they
would have. On the bright side, at least the workshop didn’t have any above-ground windows Loki
could send him flying through. “Ok, let me start by saying that if I’m off-base here, just tell me to
shut up and drop it, seriously, no hard feelings, sometimes I’m an idiot, most people who’ve been in
a room with me for longer than five minutes will vouch for that.” He swallowed, trying to will his
heart to slow because now was not the time for fight or flight reflexes to kick in. “I...sometimes,
there’s these moments where things that don’t make sense begin-wait, no, it’s more like things did
make sense, if you looked at them from a certain angle, but then you change your perspective a little
bit and bam! Now it’s all lined up in a new way, but that way seems even better than before. Like, it
just clicks, you know? Like someone’s building the engine of a car but you don’t really see how
amazingly all the parts work together until you turn over the key in the ignition. You just blink and
this hunk of metal is doing something incredible, and it always could but you just didn’t understand it
until that exact second!”

Loki was blankly staring at Tony in complete silence, utterly flummoxed by the man’s convoluted
attempt at forming a coherent simile.

“Ok, let me try that again,” Tony said, absentmindedly wiping his palms on his jeans. “I like having
you around the Tower. So do the others, don’t get me wrong, but you being here on movie night or
game night or whatever night specifically makes my world better. And part of it’s because we’re both smartasses with a similar disregard for authority and strict moral conduct, but some of it’s just...you and me. And I think you get that too.”

Loki remained silent.

“When we were on the jet together, after you read me the riot act…” Tony paused, taking a minute to gather his nerves before pushing on, “There was a second, right before Bruce called for you. When you grabbed me and...and it really, really felt like you were leaning in to kiss me.” Well, moment of truth time. “And I’m bringing that up because on the way home, I was thinking that if that’s what you’d been trying to do...I would have kissed you back.”

This is what a genius IQ and a playboy reputation got you in the presence of a literal god: a stuttering, clutishly stitched together confession worthy of middle school romance. In Tony’s defense he honestly couldn’t remember the last time he’d admitted to sincere attraction, or tried to draw someone in with anything other than a pickup line designed to lure them back to bed for a fun one night stand. He was deeply regretting being so out of practice now, because Loki had shown no reaction whatsoever and only continued to intently observe him, frigid with unnatural stillness. Tony fought down the urge to take the words back, to try and close the lid to Pandora’s box after he’d deliberately opened it and let everything come flying out into the universe. No point in lying to the god of lies after all.

At length, Loki finally spoke. “Was it an impulse?”

“What?”

“A one-off. A singular event,” Loki clarified as he slid closer to Tony, now positioned within easy reach. “Or if I were to make another attempt, could I expect similar results?”

Loki hovered over Tony, one arm braced against the back of the couch and his other hand resting listlessly on the cushion between them. He’d rotated his body so that one leg was resting on the couch, his knee close enough to brush against Tony’s thigh if he leaned in just a little more. And yet he made no further move towards Tony, restraining himself in his current position. Like he wasn’t entirely sure if he could believe what he was hearing. He had the same expression on his face Tony had seen earlier on the jet, only now Loki’s eyes were very clearly wandering down to Tony’s lips before jerking upwards again to meet his gaze. Tony understood then; Loki wanted this, but he needed Tony to want this as well.

And so it was Tony who ultimately closed the gap between them, tilting his head up and pulling Loki down with a hand on the back of his neck to press a kiss to his lips.

Sweet. It was sweet, and soft, and gentle in a way Tony hadn’t kissed anyone in ages. He leaned in closer to Loki, wrapping one hand around the god’s upper arm and scooping close enough to press against Loki from thigh to chest, letting the god take some of his weight as he closed his eyes and sank into the kiss. The subtle pressure of Loki’s lips against his own, the ticklish puff of Loki’s breath against his cheek, the feel of Loki’s muscles flexing beneath his fingertips...Tony could die happy like this.

Slowly, he pulled back just enough to look up into Loki’s eyes. “Ok?”

Loki’s face was flushed, beholding Tony with something akin to awe. “Yes,” he whispered, and now his hand came up to wrap around Tony’s jaw and reel him back in. And that was when Tony discovered what it was like to kiss Loki when Loki kissed back.
Two strong hands wrapped themselves around Tony’s waist and hauled him up and over until he was straddling Loki’s lap. Tony adjusted his grip on Loki’s shoulders for balance, wholly pressing himself against the god’s chest as Loki slid a hand into his hair and tilted his head so they could look each other in the eye. “All right?” he whispered, tightening the hand on Tony’s hip as he spoke.

“God yes,” Tony murmured before shutting his eyes and leaning forward, and it took a shocking amount of effort not to moan when Loki kissed him again, demanding lips sliding against his and stealing away his breath. He eagerly ran his hands down Loki’s chest, tracing and admiring the toned muscles beneath him that could toss him around with such ease. Oh and there was an idea, maybe he could talk Loki into doing something with that strength, he’d said holding Tony up wasn’t a big deal so what about pinning him against a wall or-

Tony’s hips bucked up at the thought, making Loki stop and break off their kiss to look up at Tony (albeit still keeping one hand tangled in Tony’s hair to prevent him from going anywhere). “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, had an idea, great idea, you and me and various surfaces in this room,” Tony babbled. Loki looked as though he was going to ask for details, and words were for a time when Tony wasn’t straddling a god of chaos’ lap. Before Loki could speak again Tony bent down and pressed his mouth against Loki’s neck, gently sucking on the skin and scraping his teeth over it as strands of Loki’s hair tickled his face.

The results were immediate. Loki audibly sucked in a breath and dug his fingers so firmly into Tony’s hip that it would be a wonder if it didn’t bruise, thumb absently slipping beneath his shirt to rub against his hip bone. His other hand ran itself through Tony’s hair, keeping his lips pressed against Loki’s neck with a commanding hold. That was good, that was more than good, Tony was happy to work with that.

Eventually Tony pulled back, wanting to admire the impressive hickey he’d made above the collar of Loki’s shirt. Uh-oh, in retrospect that probably should have been something he asked about before marking up the god. “Hey, hypothetical question. How do you feel about hickies?”

“About what?” Loki dazedly murmured and, oof, that breathy whisper voice was going to be a problem for Tony and tight jeans in the long run. Tony leaned back a bit more so that Loki could reach up and run his hand against his neck, feeling Tony’s handiwork for himself. He finally processed what Tony was asking when his fingers alighted over the damp patch of darkened skin Tony’s mouth had so recently been attached to. “Oh.”

“For the record, I think it’s a good look on you, a look that you should try to pull off with a lot more regularity, specifically with my assistance-”

Hands came up to cup both sides of Tony’s face. “You would wish to do this again?”

“Well yeah. And also maybe get dinner, see a movie, do a weekend in Monaco too if you’re up for it.”

“Are you...Anthony, what are you asking for? Specifically?”

Tony’s anxiety returned tenfold at the question. He’d thought Loki was on the same page as him, considering how upfront he’d been with the god only moments before and how eagerly Loki had responded to Tony’s confession. Apparently there were still a few details they needed to iron out. Slowly, he lifted himself off of Loki so he could slide over and sit beside the god, only to be stopped by Loki’s hands hastily re-attaching themselves to his hips, trying to keep him in place. Loki had tensed slightly, and it occurred to him that Loki had likely assumed Tony had become upset by
Loki’s question and was now trying to leave. “Hey, relax Rock of Ages, I’m just moving next to you since this probably isn’t a conversation we should have while I’m straddling your lap, much as I’d like to stay here.”

Loki allowed Tony to reposition himself on the couch then, relaxing when Tony insisted on slipping his hand into Loki’s. “Ok, I guess I didn’t make it clear a second ago, but I’d like to take you on a date. Or, wait, do Asgardians even use ‘date’ and ‘dating,’ I think I’ve only ever heard Thor say he’s courting Jane?”

“...That’s what I was meant to interpret from your engine tirade?” Loki incredulously asked.

“Well yeah,” Tony replied, trying to tamp down the hurt he felt at Loki’s reaction. Maybe this hadn’t been the best plan to get his meaning across, particularly when he’d jumped Loki’s bones over the offer of a simple kiss. In fact, there were a lot of things he probably should have clarified before doing that, but hindsight was 20-20. “I don’t want this to just be physical, I’m sorry if I didn’t make that more obvious. And just so we’re perfectly clear, this isn’t something I’m doing spur of the moment, or because I think we’re going to die from HYDRA or Thanos so it has to be now or never, and also I’m not trying to coerce you into doing this as like, some weird payment scheme for rent, really I kind of wish we’d had this talk before that one because now it just feels weird—”

“-Anthony-”

“-Also I’m sorry if I’m doing this wrong, I don’t know how Asgardians do romance and I couldn’t ask Thor because, well that would be idiotic, so maybe I fucked it up already, I mean we both seemed to like kissing but should I have held off on that? And we’re both tired, crap, we shouldn’t even, I should have waited until we’d gotten some sleep but I promised you we’d talk and I’m trying to be better at keeping my promises, ask Pep, she’ll back me up...”

This was rambling that was slowly but surely devolving into utter incoherency, and a wiser man than Tony would have silenced himself by this point. Regrettably his mind had latched onto the notion that he’d somehow fucked things up with Loki already, and the best way to handle his misstep was clearly to try talking his way back into Loki’s good graces. And if words didn’t work? Just keep piling on more of them. Surely the proper ones would come out eventually; that’s how language worked, right?

It took a few minutes more of this embarrassing hodgepodge of apologies and Tony attempting meaningful adult communication before Loki finally had mercy and stopped him with a soft “Anthony.” Once Tony fell quiet he asked, “To clarify, you wish to court me?”

“Yes.” Ok, simple yes or no questions was apparently where they were at now. Tony could work with that.

“Exclusively?”

“Also yes,” Tony confirmed, because at this point he was pretty much gone on Loki and Loki alone, and he couldn’t imagine that changing any time soon.

Loki smiled then and leaned back against the couch, head tilted away from Tony so he could look up at the ceiling. He sighed softly. “I could argue with you about the merit and logistics of such an arrangement. Come up with a very well-thought out list of reasons why such a relationship will ultimately end in tragedy and chaos, among other things. But...”

“But?”
“I believe I’m beginning to realize the difficulties that accompany fighting with you once you’ve made up your mind about something. And honestly? I’m far too tired to put up much of a fight over this.”

“...Wait, so is that a yes or no?”

Loki’s answer was to pull Tony closer and press a sweet, close-lipped kiss to his temple. Tony sucked in a startled breath as he felt a tingling warmth spread through his body from their point of contact, starting at his head and slowly working its way downward, flowing along his arms, rippling through his chest, and seeping all the way down to the tips of his toes. It was the sensation of a hot drink on a cold winter’s night coupled with the first ray of sun hitting your face after weeks of rain, and Tony knew without having to ask that this could only be Loki’s seidr reaching out to touch every inch of his being.

The whole event lasted mere seconds, and the warmth was already draining away by the time Loki pulled back. “Does that answer your question?”

Yes, but it also raised about a dozen others that Tony intended to discuss at length with cameras and a lot of other recording equipment running in the background in an effort to collect more magic data for JARVIS. Mercifully, Tony had enough common sense to realize bringing up his desire to experiment and record might spoil the moment, so he just smiled in a totally suave, not at all dopey way and got out a very eloquent, “Yeah, yeah, uh-huh.”

“Good.”

Tony properly settled himself against Loki’s side then, pleased when Loki’s arm came up to wrap around his waist as he rested his head on Loki’s shoulder. He wanted to climb back onto Loki’s lap and resume kissing (possibly with a little more touching and a little less clothing) but it appeared that exhaustion was again catching up with both of them. A glance towards one of the clocks in the room announced that it was closer to 10 than 9 p.m. now; they’d need to think of going to bed soon. However, Tony was quite comfortable where he was at the moment and not at all inclined to disentangle himself from a newly acquired significant other; Loki could be the one to decide when they needed to leave.

As it turned out, JARVIS was the one to make the decision for them with a sudden announcement. “Pardon me, Sirs, but Miss Romanov and Mr. Barton have just been spotted approaching the premises. I am estimating that they should be within the Tower and on their way to the common area in minutes.”

A wave of adrenaline had Tony jerking fully upright. “How they looking, J? Do we need to get one of the medkits?”

“They are both moving independently and without obvious injury, though without further data I cannot tell you anything more definite about their current health.”

“In that case we should make our way upstairs to greet them,” Loki stated, already rising from his seat on the couch. Tony was behind him a split second later and making a beeline for the elevator. Time to check on their teammates.

-n-

JARVIS must have relayed the message to other Avengers as well, because Bruce and Steve were already hovering outside the elevator when Loki and Tony arrived. “Don’t look so disappointed,” Tony quipped as the pair of them stepped out and moved over to get out of the way.
“You think they’re really ok?” Bruce asked, ignoring Tony’s question and nervously wringing his hands. No one would outright say it, but Tony could feel a palpable anxiety floating through the air. Any situation that necessitated Phil running over someone with a car was not one that boded well for the safety and wellbeing of their friends. “JARVIS said they looked fine, but there was that one mission in Italy when Nat refused to tell anyone she’d dislocated her shoulder for three hours-”

“What?”

“Long story Blitzen, abridged version is that superspies are like injured antelope, they hate showing any sign of physical weakness,” Tony explained.

“Tony,” Steve chastised, but there was no true heat to it. The Avengers were all far too worried about Clint and Natasha to bother with genuine infighting right now.

There was a breath of relief when JARVIS announced that the superspies had finally made their way onto the elevator, and Steve was already moving towards the door after it chimed but before the doors could slide open. In a blink the five reunited Avengers had clustered themselves together (Tony saw Loki head towards the kitchen in his peripheral vision but let it go), all hurriedly asking some variation of “Are you all right?” while not so subtly looking each other over for injuries that might have been missed by their owner. “Tell us everything,” Steve finally ordered, herding the group towards the living room like a particularly determined sheepdog.

Clint groaned as he flopped down onto the loveseat, arms and legs stretched wide. “First off, Tony, you’re going to be getting a pretty big bill from Enterprise, and I swear it wasn’t our fault.”

Tony, Bruce, and Steve all listened with rapt attention as Clint and Natasha related the details of their trip to North Dakota. Their report confirmed what Loki had already told them and what Steve had suspected: namely, that the Mind Stone was no longer in the custody of SHIELD proper, and that the people who’d taken it weren’t above lies, blackmail, and even murder to try and cover their trail. While they were speaking, JARVIS was able to discover that Rory had been taken to the hospital after SHIELD arrived at his house, and no one else was present at the house upon the EMTs’ arrival. He’d been taken into surgery for the gunshot wounds as well as smoke inhalation and was currently recuperating in the ICU under the care of 24/7 guards. Tony wasn’t sure how much good it would do the man, given that there was a very real chance at least one of his defenders was also on the HYDRA payroll, but he knew getting the Avengers further involved with him would truly be an awful idea. Rory had made his choices; now he’d have to live with the consequences.

“I swear we drove across half the backroads in the state, but Phil finally got us into the city. We took the subway and a cab, and now we’re back home,” Clint finished with a flourish of his hand, having relocated himself to his normal perch on the back of the loveseat by this point. “God I’m beat.”

“I’ll go put on the coffee, we’re going to be up for a while,” Bruce suggested, and the man had a point. They hadn’t even started the Belgrade story yet, which both Clint and Natasha would be desperate to hear, and no one was liable to sleep tonight if they didn’t at least try come up with a plan to establish a few more precautions against future HYDRA attacks. This was going to be a long night.

As Bruce was rising from his seat, however, Tony heard the familiar sound of the coffee maker percolating. He glanced over from his seat on the sofa to see Loki hovering in the doorway; that explained what he’d been doing in the kitchen, then. “I went ahead and brewed a pot,” he informed them, motioning behind him. “It seemed as though we might be up for a little while.”

“Oh. Thanks Loki,” Bruce said, awkwardly hovering between standing fully upright and sitting back down.
Tony realized what was causing his friend’s struggle and motioned for Bruce to retake his seat as he himself stood up. “I’ll get it, milk and sugar, right?”

“Yeah,” Bruce confirmed, finally seating himself once again.

“Anyone else?” Hands went up all around the room. “On second thought, I’ll just pour it black for everyone and bring the milk and sugar out here. Merlin, you mind helping?” Loki pushed himself off the doorframe and walked into the kitchen with Tony following after. The rest of the group remained in the living room, Steve asking the spies to go over a few details of their account once more.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Loki had already extracted half a dozen mismatched mugs from the cabinets and had them neatly lined up on the countertop, like porcelain soldiers getting ready to march out (oh dear, that was the lack of caffeine kicking in now wasn’t it). “Honestly, would it kill you people to have matching dishware?” he muttered as he dug around another cabinet for the sugar bowl. “It’s as though you’re running a secondhand shop in here.”

Tony rolled his eyes and walked to the fridge to get the milk. “We have actual dining sets, but mugs from Nat’s floor sometimes make their way into the communal kitchen, and then Bruce borrows a colander because he can’t find his own, and Steve never has any clean dishes on his own floor, seriously, he grew up during the Depression and hates to waste water so he refuses to run the dishwasher until the whole thing’s stuffed so he has to take one of mine and replaces it with a different one two weeks later-”

“So what you’re telling me is that any semblance of order here would be a fool’s dream,” Loki concluded.

“Yup,” Tony cheerily confirmed as he carried the milk over to the mugs. He reached for the coffee pot to pour the drinks, pleased to see that Loki had brewed enough for everyone with a little left over besides. “On that note, do you want your own set of dishes or are you just going to borrow mine?”

“Depends. How well do you wash the plates and cups that end up in your lab?”

“Really? We’re back to this? Because honestly, nothing down there was so bad that a little hand soap and water-”

“I want my own set and I’m enchanting them to repel you.”

“HEY!” Clint yelled out, interrupting their conversation. “You guys bringing the coffee or what?”

“One sec!” Tony called back as he finished pouring the last cup. Then, turning his focus back to Loki as he replaced the coffee pot on the warmer, he said, “Also I’m putting a ban on enchanted kitchenwares, I don’t need my coffee mug back-talking me or literally running away off the side of my table.”

Loki smiled in a most mischievous way, snapping his fingers and causing the mugs, milk, and sugar to all vanish from sight. Presumably they’d been transported to coffee table in the living room, judging from Clint’s startled squawk which immediately followed their disappearance. “Why Anthony, I would never dream of doing anything so pedestrian. Perish the thought.”

On a deeply spiritual level, Tony knew he was going to regret bringing up enchanted housewares again, and now it was only a matter of time before something truly unpleasant and hubristic befell him. On the other hand, Tony was still riding the high of getting Loki to agree on dating him and couldn’t be bothered to kick up a fuss for much else. Instead he leaned up to give Loki a peck on the
cheek (and oh, being the cause of that surprised look on Loki’s face was going to be so much fun while it lasted), and strolled back into the living room.

Once everyone was resituated and had made up their own drinks, it was Tony and Bruce’s turn to relate what had happened at Belgrade to the superspies, while Steve filled in what he remembered before getting shot. Everyone agreed that HYDRA must have been using Tony’s social media to track the four of them, which would account for them not knowing that Loki was present. Botching the job on Clint and Natasha had absolutely been what forced HYDRA to launch their second failed attack, based on their understanding of each group’s timeline. Natasha and Clint both marveled at the speed of Steve’s recovery and agreed that the Avengers’ situation would have been much more dire without Loki’s swift intervention on their behalf. Tony tried to tamp down his overt joy at their reaction; it was about time Loki saw more people appreciating his work.

“It’s sounding like you guys were attacked by the same Terminator who shot me and Steve,” Tony commented as they wrapped up the report on the Bozeman fight. “Any clues who it could be?”

“I have some ideas and a few contacts that Phil’s looking into tonight,” Natasha answered. “With any luck he’ll have a little more information for us tomorrow morning.”

Steve hummed to himself at that. “Well I guess the next thing to sort out is what we’re going to tell Phil about the battle, because he’s going to have questions and our story’s going to have some holes in it after editing Loki out of it.”

Natasha and Clint both shared a look, communicating in the silent, near-telepathic manner unique to the two of them. Natasha finally turned back to Steve, and the expression on her face was decidedly grim. “Phil knows.”

“What?!” Tony gasped, very nearly sloshing his coffee all over himself in distressed shock.

“We held out as long as we could, Captain,” Clint grimly informed them, and the sad thing was Tony truly believed him. “But Phil had us locked in the car with him for hours, and he…uh…”

“You don’t get to be a handler in SHIELD unless you can be very persuasive,” Natasha tactfully elaborated.

“What’d he say?” Tony pressed. “Is SHIELD on the way? Do we need to put the Tower on lockdown?”

“I thought we were already on lockdown,” Bruce said.

“Triple secret lockdown then!” Tony snappishly retorted. Nothing Bruce said had really merited such a harsh tone, but Tony was already experiencing visions of being disappeared like in old spy dramas and perhaps could be excused for his overreaction.

“Actually, and I know this is going to sound weird, but he was pretty calm about it,” Clint interrupted. “And I don’t think he’s going to rat us out; honestly? He was really adamant about us not telling anyone else from SHIELD what was going on.”

“Why?” Steve asked, thoroughly confused.

“Probably because he’s in this almost as deep as us,” Natasha reasoned. “He’s supposed to be keeping an eye on us for SHIELD, so if we’ve been in cahoots with a former supervillain for months and he didn’t even notice then it’s going to be his head on the chopping block along with ours.”

Bruce sighed into his mug. “So now Phil’s in on the conspiracy too.” He sipped at his drink
thoughtfully, then chuckled. “I know the expression says two can keep a secret if one of them is dead, but I’m not sure formerly dead really counts.”

“Not the time, Bruce,” Steve grumbled, rubbing a hand at his temple. “Ok, so in all likelihood Phil is going to come back here tomorrow with a lot of questions, and we’re going to need to give him a better explanation than the slapdash one we gave Happy earlier.”

“Wait, Happy knows?” Natasha questioned.

“Oh yeah, we didn’t get that far,” Steve recalled. “When we got back we needed someone to pick us up from the airport with a rental truck, and Happy found out about Loki then.”

Clint gaped at Steve in utter disbelief. “Seriously? Does everyone around us know Loki and Tony are shacking up?”

“What?!” Tony shouted at the same time Loki’s coffee mug tumbled out of his hands to spill across his lap and roll onto the floor.

Now everyone’s attention was on the pair of them, surprised by the outburst. Clint, however, had the audacity to roll his eyes at Tony, as though he hadn’t just made an outrageous claim that bordered on the insane. “Yeah Tony, we know. You guys aren’t subtle about it, we cottoned on weeks ago.”

“Weeks?” Tony parroted, and it felt like a grenade had exploded and the entire world had gone topsy-turvy on him, because there was no way possible that the Avengers were insinuating what he thought they were insinuating. That would be...insane didn’t begin to cover it, but even the mind of a genius couldn’t function properly and formulate the right words under these conditions. He glanced over to Loki for help, but nope, coffee was seeping unnoticed into his pants and the couch cushions, his face a frozen mask of shock and fingers weakly grasping at air, Loki.exe has stopped working. Tony was going to have to navigate this land of madness on his own. “You...what?”

Now the exasperation on Clint’s face was giving way to befuddlement. “You and Loki. Being together. It’s really obvious.”

“I noticed you two were moving in that direction when Loki cleaned up your lab, and I told the others,” Bruce explained gently. “We’ve seen the way you act around one another on game night, and...well, Loki said he didn’t want to have sex in your lab because it was filthy, Tony, you can’t get much more direct than that.”

“Wha-no, he was just saying the lab was gross! The naked thing was not about sex, trust me, if there had been any chance of it being sexual I would know!”

Now Clint and Bruce both looked rather confused. “But...you two...there’s a hickey on his neck!” Clint declared with a pointed finger.

Fuck, Tony had completely forgotten about that. His mind raced, trying to find some way to clarify that this was all one big misunderstanding, but he needn’t have bothered. Loki had finally rebooted and decided to join the conversation, thank god. Sitting as straight-backed and regally as one could manage with a lapful of spilled coffee, Loki calmly informed them, “Yes there is. And it is from Anthony, and it is also the first one I’ve received from him since we did not agree to court one another until a few hours ago.”

In that moment, Tony was absolutely certain that he could have knocked the rest of the team over with a feather. Clint and Bruce were both wide-eyed and slack-jawed, Natasha was perfectly rigid and unmoving in her seat, face paler than Tony had ever seen before, and Steve was rapidly looking
back and forth between Loki and Tony like he was trying to determine if they were lying. “But...you flirt. All the time! And you’re always together whenever we do anything, you share food, you cuddle, I keep walking in on you (here he pointed to Loki) naked with him (now he pointed to Tony), besides the fact that you’re moving in together!”

Loki’s attention turned itself towards Tony. “Anthony, have we been courting by Midgardian standards?”

Clint broke. That was the only verb which could possibly describe the unhinged shriek that erupted from him at Loki’s inquiry, arms flailing atop the back of the loveseat so strongly that he actually toppled backwards onto the floor from his perch. Steve swayed dangerously to the side, collapsing onto the recliner which sank beneath him with a great creak. Natasha was still motionless; Bruce was the only one capable of speech now. “You...you’re sure you haven’t been dating?”

“Bruce,” Tony countered, “in what possible universe would I be dating Loki and not constantly talking to you about it?”

Bruce’s eyes grew impossibly wide. “Oh dear god you two aren’t dating.”

“Weren’t,” Tony hurriedly corrected. “But now, definitely are.”

“You believed that Anthony and I were romantically entangled?” Loki asked, eyes glued to Bruce.

“Yes. Although now I definitely feel bad for not getting confirmation on that, but in our defense-”

“You all believed that Anthony and I were together,” Loki said, tone clearly conveying his disbelief. “And you did nothing to stop this? Every one of you simply accepted our supposed union?”

That query gave Tony pause. Suddenly a number of pieces fell into place for him, and quite a few things his friends had said or done over the past few months made a great deal more sense. “That’s why you tried to hire someone to clean the lab?!” he burst out.

“We wanted to support you,” was all Steve could manage, voice distant and eyes vacant in a thousand-yard stare like he’d just stumbled out of the trenches and had been irrevocably altered by the experience.

“You...you people...”

“Does Thor know?” Loki demanded, and if Tony wasn’t mistaken there was a hint of panic to his voice. Oh lord, what if Tony had been right about the whole death via lightning strike over besmirched princely honor?

Natasha finally came back to life and quickly dismissed his worry with a wave of her hand. “We unanimously decided that telling him was not in our best interest. We’re not exactly sure what the Asgardian policy is on shooting the messenger, and considering we haven’t even told him that Loki’s playing D&D with us consistently...”

“So Thor is still completely in the dark?” Tony inquired, because this was something he absolutely needed a concrete answer to. “No idea about any of this whatsoever.”

“Actually Sir, that’s not entirely correct,” JARVIS broke in. “Mr. Odinson is quite aware of Loki’s participation in the Dungeons & Dragons sessions; though based on my data, I do not believe he thinks anything amorous is-”

“Wait, how does he know about game night?!” Tony demanded, and now he was on his feet. “Why
does he know about game night?!”

“…”

“Just A Rather Very Intelligent System, fess up,” Tony commanded.

“Mr. Odinson expressed a great deal of regret that he was unable to see his brother in action during the first session,” JARVIS explained. “As my systems are designed to record all activity throughout the Tower excepting restrooms, and the videos of your Dungeons & Dragons game had not been made private, I allowed him to watch the recording. On subsequent game nights he requested permission to watch the sessions live, and as there was nothing in my protocol to ban this I did not stop him.”

Tony could hardly believe what he was hearing. “J, download yourself onto an external hard drive, I’m having Dummy mail you to a community college. Clearly we need to start the household A.I. project over from scratch.”

“At once, Sir.”

Tony now returned his attentions to the shell-shocked members of his team. “So to make sure I’m understanding this right, every Avenger in this room besides me is an absolute idiot who thought Loki and I were up to the cohabitation/kitchen sex part of the relationship; Thor, the only Avenger not laboring under that delusion, has been creepily spying on us from afar with the help of my soon to be deleted A.I.; and Phil is presumably kicking ass and taking names across the better part of the tri-state area, while also laboring under the delusion that Loki and I know each other in the Biblical sense. Did I miss anything?”

“We love you and support your choices?” Clint offered from his place on the floor.

“Go jump off the helipad.”

“Tagging in,” Natasha announced, gracefully standing from her place on the loveseat. “It is very late, we are all very tired, and the past few days have been...a lot. Right now, I suggest that everyone get changed into pajamas and meet back down here in thirty minutes. We’re doing a sleepover. I realize Thor isn’t home yet, but none of us are going to get much sleep on our own floors. Clint and I both need to shower; Steve, can you and Bruce bring a mattress down here?”

“Sure thing,” Steve hastily agreed as he hopped out of his seat, clearly grateful to have something to do that wasn’t sitting in the living room and having his entire understanding of the world inverted yet again. Really though, you’d think the man would be used to that by now. Bruce was already fleeing the room like a bat out of hell, no doubt embarrassed at the shame he’d brought to the science bro code by making unfounded assumptions like this. Well, maybe not completely unfounded...

“Come on Clint,” Natasha beckoned, all but hauling the archer off the floor and out of the room while very carefully avoiding eye contact with either Tony or Loki. Once they were gone Tony and Loki were alone in the living room, staring at the closed elevator doors through which the others had so recently departed. “What the…” Tony shook his head, collapsing back onto the couch with a sigh. “I quit. I can’t take this stress anymore. I’m moving back to Malibu with my bots and my cars and absolutely no Avengers making crazy assumptions about my love life.”

“…”

Tony looked at Loki, who was still sitting on the couch drenched in coffee. “Loki? You all right?”

“They approve,” Loki stated, as though he couldn’t quite believe was he was saying. “They’ve had
ample opportunities over the past few months to see me permanently barred from your home, and yet they’ve done nothing. They’ve allowed us to sleep together in their presence, they accepted my coming to live here…” Loki shook his head over and over as it bowed forward and came to rest in his hands.

Tony reached for Loki but stopped just short of touching, unsure what was happening and if his touch would even be welcomed. “Loki?”

There was a minute where Loki neither spoke nor moved; he simply sat there beside Tony, nearly doubled over with his hair obscuring his face from Tony’s vision. And then, for no obvious reason that Tony could discern, he righted himself and climbed to his feet, standing tall and looking utterly nonplussed. A wave of his hands vanished both the mug and spilled coffee; if Tony hadn’t known better, he would never have suspected that anything was amiss. “Come along. Natasha’s tagged in, that means her word is law, yes?”

“Yes…”

“Then we need to change and regroup with the others. It’s nearing midnight, and I do believe she’s right; we’re all in need of rest.”

Tony could recognize a forcible change of subject when he saw one. If Loki didn’t want to discuss whatever was going through his head right now, then Tony was willing to let the matter drop. Frankly Tony was about five seconds away from just flopping over and passing out on the couch without another word, and he doubted that Loki was in much better shape now. They were all safe and sound within the walls of the Tower; any conversation they might need to have could be brought up later. And so instead of pressing Loki for further details, he rose and followed the god to the elevator.

-n-

By the time Loki and Tony returned to the common floor (Loki sporting borrowed pajamas, having been too lazy to dig one of his own sets out of the still-unpacked boxes), everyone else had already settled in. Clint and Steve were face-down on a mattress laying in front of the TV, and judging by the snores coming from their general direction they were both sound asleep. Natasha was cozily nestled in the recliner surrounded by a bevy of blankets, and she merely nodded her head in acknowledgement when she saw the two of them. Bruce was stretched out on the couch, eyes drooping as the last dredges of caffeine from his half-drunk coffee wore off. Someone had already geared up a Lifetime movie on the screen, the volume turned low as the Avengers settled in for sleep.

Tony awakened somewhat at the realization that the only place for him and Loki to comfortably sleep would be the couch, unless one of them wanted to try fighting Steve for a section of the bed. And yeah, he and Loki had slept together before, but this was different. There was a whole romantic angle at play now, and Tony had no idea how Loki would feel about co-sleeping this early on in the relationship, and what if he rolled over on top of Loki in the dead of night and Loki thought he was trying to make a move-

“I’ll be taking this,” Loki announced as he plucked a pillow out from beneath Steve’s outstretched arm. Steve, for his part, didn’t even budge; the man was out like a light. Loki set the pillow on one end of the couch before retrieving a blanket out of the basket in the corner of the room. Within minutes he’d set up a rather comfortable-looking bedding arrangement, and tucked himself in for good measure. It was only at that point when he looked back to Tony, holding up one corner of the blanket to let the other man join him underneath. “Coming?”

Right then, no amount of awkwardness or internal hysteria could have outweighed Tony’s desire to
curl up with Loki while surrounded by friends in the security of their home. He quietly ordered JARVIS to dim the lights and tiptoed his way across the room, crawling in beside Loki just before the lights faded completely out. Loki dropped the blanket over him seconds later, making Tony’s panic resurge anew. What was he supposed to do now?

Loki quickly picked up on his discomfort. “What’s wrong?”

“How major. Just, umm, since we’re dating now and...like, if you don’t want us to sleep together, I can definitely move, Clint’s not the worst person to sleep beside, he barely kicks anymore.”

“Anthony, if you are insinuating that anything sexual is going to take place tonight, let me be very clear; I am exhausted beyond reasonable belief, and you will be responsible for a minimum of 95% of the work.”


Loki smiled then, gently sliding his arm around Tony and pulling him ever so slightly closer. “So if you’re too exhausted to do anything, and I am likewise quite worn out, then tonight will be nothing but sleeping with one another in its most literal sense. Is that acceptable?”

“...Yeah,” Tony agreed, and even though Loki was just stating the obvious it still helped settle his nerves. Right. This was just like sleeping with the other Avengers on a regular night. No funny business, just snuggling with one particular person and hoping that Steve would already be awake and cooking by the time you got up. He could work with that.

Finally allowing the last vestiges of tension to drain away, he shut his eyes and burrowed his face into the pillow Loki had stolen for them. “Night, Loki.”

“Good night, Anthony.”

Chapter End Notes

Wowsers, this was long but I just had to get this all down.

When I began this story I had a few concrete scenes and ideas in my head, and the big one was that I wanted Loki and Tony to get together without a near-death situation or a jealous post-date reaction prompting it. I wanted this to be a sweet and simple moment of, "I like you, you like me. Let's try to make this work."

Anyway, you guys finally got your kiss! More adventures next time.
Wherein Tony and Loki are Terrible Enablers and Natasha Still Just Wants to Run Her Campaign

Chapter Summary

Phil pays the team a visit. Loki and Tony have a perfectly healthy relationship with work, thank you very much. Natasha deserves better players than this.

Terms to know:
Will score: treat this like a character's willpower to do/resist something
Circumstance modifier: an ability modifier based on a specific condition (e.g. trying to make a campfire in a thunderstorm gives -modifier)
competence modifier: a modifier based on how good you are at a certain skill (e.g. a seamstress trying to repair clothing would have +modifier)
litch: big bad monster
search roll: self-explanatory
Smuggler's locket: locket that can hide a small amount of something.

Chapter Notes

We're back! Kudos are loved and appreciated, comments are hoarded in a dragon-like fashion to use as future motivation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony was abruptly awoken via tumbling off the couch and crash-landing on the floor. He hit the ground with a muffled “Oof!” and swore softly at the pain coursing through the arm he landed on. It hadn’t been much of a fall, but face-planting on the ground with no chance to brace for impact wasn’t exactly a gentle process.

Sitting up and blearily looking around, he quickly realized that only a few hours could have passed since he fell asleep. The room was still completely dark, he could hear the snores of his friends (Steve, mostly), and at some point the TV had been shut off. It took a few more seconds of processing before Tony realized that his fall was less an accident and more a slumbering Loki shoving him off the couch. Loki was still completely conked out though, face-down and stretched out in an ungainly sprawl with their blanket kicked down to his waist and one arm hanging over the side of the couch. Tony had a vague recollection of them falling asleep facing one another on their sides; clearly Loki was an unruly sleeper when he wasn’t completely knocked out from seidr depletion.

Too tired to do much except grumble internally, Tony climbed back up off the ground, albeit this time wedging himself between Loki and the back of the couch. The god barely seemed to notice, even when Tony had to shove him over a few inches to give himself enough space to sleep. Eventually he positioned them so that he could lie on his back with Loki half-draped on top of him, and if the god took issue with that come morning then Tony was going to have some choice words about what a lousy co-sleeper Loki could be.
Tugging up the blanket and shutting his eyes, Tony drifted back to sleep.

-n-

The next time Tony woke up was also Loki’s fault, albeit nothing so dramatic as being shoved out of bed by a wayward limb. Tony merely felt the couch shifting beneath him this time, followed by an absence of warmth on top of him. He grumbled sleepily, one hand weakly fumbling for the blanket that had been pulled away and left him exposed to the cold morning air.

“Shh,” someone hushed him, followed by the blanket being tucked around him and a gentle kiss being pressed against his forehead. Tony drowsily allowed the ministrations, burrowing down into his pillow and drifting off once again. This time he didn’t fall back into a deep sleep; more of a light doze that was occasionally broken by the sound of voices in the next room or the clattering of silverware on plates. Ultimately, it was the glorious scent of brewing coffee that brought him properly to consciousness and provided the real motivation to properly get up some time later.

Blearily, Tony freed himself from his blanket cocoon and sat up, stretching and wincing as his spine loudly popped in several places. He was getting too old for crashing on furniture this stiff; next time he’d either need to persuade Steve or Clint to trade him for a spot on the bed or go ahead and replace this couch with a comfier model. But that could wait for another time. Tony had other priorities at the moment.

Tony shuffled his way into the kitchen to discover Bruce and Natasha already seated at the table, both looking at something on Bruce’s tablet and absent-mindedly nibbling pieces of ham off Nat’s plate. Steve was naturally hard at work on the stove, flipping pancakes up and over his shoulder while Clint duck and dove to catch them, softly cheering as he caught yet another atop what could only be described as a tower of flapjacks. Tony narrowed his eyes at them in disgust. Morning people. At least Bruce and Natasha had the decency to look less than enthused at being awake at this hour.

Steve glanced towards the door and noticed him then, smirking for some reason which Tony’s brain was incapable of processing this early. “There. Told you turning on the coffee machine would work.”

“Duly noted,” Loki replied.

Tony turned to see Loki leaning against the counter by the coffee maker. He’d already freshened up and was dressed in his own clothing, meaning he’d probably gone upstairs earlier in the morning and now looked far too put together and alert for someone awake at (here he glanced to the oven’s clock) 7:14 in the morning. Lord, no wonder Tony felt so groggy.

Loki, utterly unaware of Tony’s internal judgement of his circadian rhythm, smiled at him and pointed to a few empty mugs that were sitting on the counter. “We’ll have coffee in a moment. Be patient.”

Tony briefly considered the merits of making his way over to the table and sitting down besides Natasha as he waited, but that seemed like an excessive amount of effort which would only result in far too much distance between himself and coffee. Instead, he shuffled closer to the coffee machine and ended up leaning heavily against Loki’s side, though the god might as well have been a marble pillar for all the attention Tony gave him. He kept his body clumsily angled towards the machine and only had eyes glued for the stream of percolated caffeine slowly dripping into the pot below.

Loki tsked at him and wrapped a hand around his waist, likely for support given how badly Tony could feel himself lurching to the side. “You really are quite useless this early in the morning, aren’t
you? Excepting when certain means are taken to help awaken you, of course,” he commented, and oh, Tony could hear the smirk laced in that comment.

Tony wriggled around in Loki’s hold to groggily glare up at the amused god. “Nu-uh. No m’ snakes. No.”

Loki merely chuckled at Tony’s demands. “All right. No more transformation magic until you’re relatively conscious.”

There were a significant number of concerning loopholes in that statement which Tony needed to address sooner rather than later, but his brain was finally coming online and putting together several other things. Of immediate importance was the fact that he and Loki were now dating. It hadn’t been a dream or a particularly vivid hallucination, he’d actually manned up enough to pop the question and Loki had agreed to go out with him. Fantastic work, past Tony. And that meant...meant...

Loki was looking at him again, brows raised at Tony. “Yes?”

It was the gentle breath dancing over his lips that prompted the cylinders to start firing in Tony’s head. They were dating, and there had been kisses, and an expressed desire for future kisses, all of which meant that Tony could have morning kisses to go with his coffee. Yes, perfect, sound logic. And they were already standing so close; all Tony had to do was tilt his head up to get one. Also great work, past Tony. Slowly, he raised his head, stood on his toes, and...

Barely managed to get his mouth on Loki’s bottom lip, landing more on the god’s chin than not.

Loki’s amusement had now melted into confusion at Tony’s actions, though his grip hadn’t abated. Tony, for his part, could only narrow his eyes at Loki, unsure where exactly his amorous efforts had gone wrong. “Dang it,” he grumbled.

Someone snickered behind them, and Tony had the distinct feeling that it was Bruce. Loki, meanwhile, merely rolled his eyes and directed Tony towards the dining table with a gentle nudge to his back. “Perhaps try that again when you’re a bit more awake,” he suggested as he picked up the pot and began pouring the coffee.

This was how Tony found himself seated in a chair besides Natasha, who set about feeding him ham and eggs as Clint finally dropped off his veritable pancake mountain in their midst. Loki served the coffee before taking his seat on Tony’s other side and digging in to his own plate, thigh gently pressed up against Tony’s. Soon, everyone was dining at the table besides Steve, who was still cooking yet more food for himself.

By and by Tony became more aware of his surroundings, properly coming alive as he often did once the coffee kicked in. While the others continued making small talk and passing around the plates of food to one another, Tony’s mind was already desperately formulating various plans in order to better protect the Avengers from their newfound enemies.

At this point, you’d have to be an idiot not to realize that HYDRA was clearly targeting the Avengers, for both kidnapping and far more insidious plots beyond that. Mercifully HYDRA had been beaten back by the team and Loki three times in the past week, and Tony was both ready and willing to press that advantage to the fullest. He’d need to do a little bit of investigative footwork for the Avengers regarding potential leaks, and if there was so much as a questionable nudge against the Tower’s firewall in the next month then Tony was content to shut down all of SHIELD’s servers indefinitely. In all likelihood Tony would probably be spending the next several days barricaded inside the lab, dividing his time between that and improvements to the team’s gear; at the very least,
Steve would need a bulletproof vest comfortable and versatile enough to wear on a regular basis whenever he left the Tower. And this was all besides whatever help Loki might ask for as he got to work hunting up the Stones, which would have to be priority number one for obvious reasons. On that note, Tony needed to make sure he had the proper recording equipment set up for Loki’s spell work. And there was something else too; something that Tony couldn’t quite place his finger on-

“Excuse me everyone,” JARVIS piped up, “but Mr. Coulson has arrived at the elevator and is requesting immediate entry to the common floor. What should I tell him?”

Oh yeah, that.

Mercifully, Steve knew better than to expect anything from Tony at such an early hour and immediately took charge of the situation. “Nat, Clint, you’re sure Phil isn’t about to charge in here with arrest warrants for all of us?”

“I’d bet my life on it,” Natasha promised.

Steve looked up to the nearest camera in the kitchen, shutting off the stove at last. “Might as well get this over with, then. Send him up, JARVIS.”

Tony finished his coffee and turned to Loki, expecting that the god might need a bit of assurance to avoid bolting in the face of what most people would consider imminent doom. Much to his surprise, however, Loki appeared to be more concerned with clearing off the table and carrying everyone’s dishes to the dishwasher. Tony was finally awake and alert enough to process how unusual all this was; his experience with Loki had led him to assume that the god would be above doing such mundane household tasks. Yet here he was, puttering around the kitchen like one of the team-

Oh.

“What is it?” Loki asked as he resettled himself at the table.

Tony knew better than to suggest that Loki might be trying to make a good impression on the rest of the Avengers by helping out around the house; there was always the chance Loki would react negatively to someone pointing this out, possibly even prompting an overreaction involving defenestration. For the sake of self-preservation, Tony instead held up his mug and simply requested, “Coffee?”

Loki narrowed his eyes at Tony. “You couldn’t have asked while I was still up?”

“Whoops,” Tony said, and he probably should have taken a bit more effort to sound sorry about it.

“I’ve got it,” Steve offered, already pouring the coffee and completely ruining the moment as he refilled everyone’s drinks with the coffee he’d brought over. “Think Phil’s going to want a cup?” he asked the room at large.

“Mr. Coulson has arrived,” JARVIS announced.

“Guess we’ll find out,” Clint remarked, though Tony noticed the he couldn’t completely hide the tension in his body behind his flippant tone. Natasha had likewise squared her shoulders, and Tony recognized the manner in which Bruce was breathing as a relaxation exercise the man liked to use when the Hulk was getting a little too close for comfort. For all the reassurances Clint and Natasha had tried to provide the night before, nothing could fully ease the tension building over Agent Coulson’s arrival.

The jovial atmosphere in the kitchen had already started to diminish after JARVIS’ announcement,
but the mood died completely as they heard Phil’s footsteps trekking through the common area into the kitchen proper. He was wearing a normal business suit and seemed perfectly awake and alert without so much as have a hair out of place; if Tony didn’t know better he’d say the agent was here on normal SHIELD business. His face and appearance gave away nothing, and it was anyone’s guess exactly what he’d gotten up to after the spies had been dropped off the night before. Phil paused at the doorway, allowing Tony to notice a sizeable manila envelope tucked under one arm, but otherwise seemed completely unarmed (though Tony knew that was a remarkably stupid assumption to make, Phil was second only to Natasha with respect to one’s ability to conceal a small arsenal on their own person).

A tense moment passed, and then Phil finally walked into the room to stand by the counter, eyes glued to the group huddled around the table with an unreadable expression on his face. “Avengers. Loki,” he greeted with a slight nod.

“Phil,” Steve responded with a nod of his own. “Can I get you anything?”

“No, I’m fine. Never better, actually,” he stated, and now Tony was sure that Phil was getting as close to glaring at Loki as the man ever came to glaring at anything.

Likely sensing that things were about devolve into unpleasant recollections about stabbings which should probably be brought up never, Natasha jumped in. “Did you find anything?”

Phil kept his attentions on Loki for a minute longer, before finally setting down his folder on the counter and extracting a much smaller, second envelope from his suit breast pocket. “Unfortunately our hunch was right, from what I’ve been able to gather. Masked assassin, quiet and efficient, notably inhuman strength and reaction times alongside preternatural responses to attacks which ought to kill a lesser man. Combine that with none of our usual suspects taking credit for the attack on two Avengers—”

“Five,” Bruce corrected. “We all got to talking and we’re pretty sure you guys ran into the same man who came after us in Belgrade.”

Phil raised his brows as he set the envelope on the counter. “Well, make that two attacks on your team in as many days, and I’d say we’re almost certainly dealing with the Winter Soldier.”

“Who?” Tony asked.

“The Winter Soldier,” Natasha repeated. “Basically he’s the boogeyman in the world of assassination and espionage. All the accounts surrounding him are disturbingly similar: start with a target so powerful or protected that killing him or her seems impossible. Then, from nowhere and with no warning, an armed man in a mask with a metal arm appears, making the kill and leaving behind nothing but a trail of bodies. Once the job is done he vanishes into the night without a trace; no one’s ever been able to so much as figure out how he gets paid for his work, or even who’s financing and outfitting him to begin with.”

“Well if our HYDRA theory is right, that explains who’s employing him and how he’s getting around undetected,” Steve reasoned, mouth pressed together in a thin line and arms tightly crossed over his chest. “From the sound of it they’ve either managed to make a knockoff of Erskine’s formula or given their hitman enough of a mechanical upgrade to make up for the difference between a supersoldier and a normalgrunt.”

“And he’s the one who attacked you?” Phil pressed. “You’re sure it was the same person?”

“Mask, metal arm, seemed hell-bent on murdering us,” Tony ticked off on his fingers. “Yeah, I’d say
it’s a pretty safe bet.”

Phil sighed at the reply. Quietly, he pulled out a chair from the counter and took a seat before extracting a small notebook from yet another pocket. He snatched up a nearby pen and flipped open the notebook to a clean page before returning his attention to the group. “Tell me everything.”

It was easier to recall the exact details of the assault this morning, having already gone over the story once with Clint and Natasha. Phil didn’t seem nearly as impressed with Loki’s heroics as Tony thought he should be, but that might also have just been masked by Phil’s concern over hearing that both Steve and Tony were shot. He scribbled down little snippets now and again in the shorthand Tony knew was unique only to him; whether he was taking notes on their account of events or making a new plan of attack was a mystery, though. By the time everything was said and done the look of Phil’s face was decidedly grim, which didn’t exactly inspire a great deal of serenity among the Avengers and Loki.

Phil closed his notebook was a decisive snap before tucking it back inside his suit. “I’d assumed the Winter Soldier went after Natasha and Clint because they were getting too close to the truth about whatever schemes HYDRA has in play right now. Turning around immediately after that defeat to attack the arguably better-equipped half of the Avengers is very concerning.”

“We’re assuming it was a desperation play,” Steve explained.

“Which means now they’re even more desperate,” Phil concluded. “We went over every inch of Rory’s property and only found a motion-activated camera by the head of the driveway. They must have kept him under surveillance even after they threatened him, and that’s what tipped them off to your arrival.”

“But we couldn’t have been there for more than an hour, if that,” Natasha reasoned. “Either the Winter Soldier was already nearby and happened to be ready to fight, or HYDRA was watching Clint and I before we even got to Rory’s and moved in response to us.”

“The second one’s way more likely,” Tony reasoned. “A lot of cities don’t think to set up security for their traffic cams, and most people don’t even realize CCTV cameras can be remotely turned on and moved around if you know what you’re doing. Loki’s little trip into their bunker probably put the whole organization on red alert, and when they saw a couple of Avengers running off due west for no apparent SHIELD-based reason…”

Steve sighed, head tilted up towards the ceiling. “So now we need to operate under the assumption that the whole team is going to be under near-constant surveillance outside the Tower. Terrific.”

“Which is exactly what they’re going to focus on now, because functional surveillance is all they have going for them at the moment,” Phil reminded them. “The direct approach to fighting the Avengers failed twice. HYDRA lost a fairly sizeable base where they were experimenting with the Mind Stone, god only knows where it’s ended up now and how long they’ll need to restart their operations. Besides all that, one of their more lethal agents has apparently been taken out of commission thanks to a Norse god flinging him into a baggage cart.”

“He’s been rather thoroughly disarmed,” Loki agreed with a predatory smirk.

Tony winced at the accuracy of the comment, but let it pass. Phil finally rose from his seat at the counter then, picking up the large envelope and carrying it to the table. “Which brings us to you.”

“Phil.” Tony began, only to be cut off by the agent raising a hand for quiet.
Once he had both total silence and the attention of everyone in the room, Phil started in on them. “For what it’s worth, I think that this is a terrible idea. Then again, you people have a long and proud history of terrible ideas working out for you in the long run.”

“Hey!”

Phil remained firmly unpersuaded by Tony’s protests; if anything, the exasperation on his face solidified as he stared him down. “Personally testing flying suits of armor.” His gaze shifted to Bruce. “Questionable safety standards with gamma radiation experiments.” Now his eyes were on Steve. “Flew a plane into the ocean.” Finally, he looked to both Natasha and Clint in turn. “Budapest.”

Unsurprisingly, no one had a sufficient counter to Coulson logic.

“What concerns me the most right now are the numerous breaches in SHIELD security JARVIS found,” Phil explained. “None of what’s happened to you in the past week would have been possible without a lot of people working to keep HYDRA’s plans hidden from the higher levels of SHIELD; honestly, if JARVIS hadn’t told me where to look I’d still be in the dark too.”

“Any time, Agent Coulson,” JARVIS chimed in, and Tony could hear a distinct note of pride in his creation’s voice.

“So what do you want us to do?” Clint asked.

Phil tossed the larger envelope onto the center of the table with a heavy ‘whump’. “That’s everything I’ve been able to dig up about the Mind Stone since it was handed over to SHIELD custody after the Battle of New York. Save that somewhere before HYDRA has a chance to torch their paper trail. More importantly, we can’t let SHIELD know that you’re searching for the rest of the Infinity Stones. If HYDRA’s started to figure out how to operate one stone then they wouldn’t object to a few more falling into their laps with SHIELD’s help. We need to move very, very carefully until we can get a better idea of how badly the HYDRA issue is going to affect your plan.”

“What do you suggest?” Steve asked.

“Technically your team is still under Director Fury’s purview, even though Stark Industries is currently providing most of the funding for the Initiative.”

“If you people didn’t keep cheaping out on the gear,” Tony began, only to be silenced by Natasha’s hand on his shoulder. That was a fight for another day.

“I can’t imagine Fury being compromised,” Phil went on. “He’s too concerned with the greater good to buy into HYDRA’s ideology. I can’t make the same guarantee for the people working in his immediate vicinity though, so we’ll need to be careful and probably keep him in the dark for a little longer. And that means hiding you,” he concluded, pointing at Loki.

Loki gave Phil a disappointed look. “I wasn’t planning a public declaration of my allegiance to your favorite band of heroes, Agent.”

“HYDRA knows you’re after their Stone,” Phil went on, as though he wasn’t trying to argue with an ancient god of chaos over coffee in the middle of the Avengers’ home. “You said you fought them at the airport?”

“But he was in disguise,” Tony recalled. “And no one was at the airport where we came back, so they shouldn’t know about him.”
“Or they wouldn’t if you hadn’t yelled his name in the middle of the fight,” Bruce reminded him.

Tony felt the little spark of hope he’d had for Loki’s anonymity wither and die. “Fuck.”

“It can’t be helped, then,” Loki dismissively said, though Tony could read the stress in Loki’s body language. He must have forgotten the slip of the tongue as well. “If any of them were still conscious (or alive) at that point, or they had any kind of recording equipment on hand, then they know I’m in league with the Avengers.”

“Precisely why we have to keep you hidden,” Phil stated. “If HYDRA’s fully infiltrated SHIELD then it’s not impossible for them to have made their way into other places like the offices of a few Congressmen or news networks.”

“What’s your point?” Tony asked.

“There’s going to be a brief cooling off period while HYDRA takes some time to lick their wounds. But after that? They’ll want to get you out into the open so they can capture and/or kill you,” Phil explained. “We’re already dealing with the usual security risks; it would just take one disgruntled employee at a charity dinner to leave the kitchen door unlocked, or one clueless hot dog vendor telling a ‘journalist’ about how Steve runs past their stall every morning for his daily jog to give HYDRA an opening. But Loki’s the perfect way to force your hand. Imagine some ‘concerned citizen’ posting a picture that shows an Avenger fraternizing with the enemy. The news picks it up, adds in a few well-placed words to whip their audience into a frenzy, and suddenly we’ve got your entire team summoned to Washington for another Congressional hearing on the merits of the Avengers’ continuing existence.”

“Which, if HYDRA has gotten their claws into the right people there, means we’d be walking straight into an ambush,” Bruce concluded.

Phil nodded. “For right now, Loki needs to stay in the Tower whenever possible. If you have to go out, absolutely do not get within fifty feet of any Avenger.”

Loki narrowed his eyes at Phil. “You expect me to abide by these restrictions?”

“Oh no,” Phil admitted. “But I’d feel guilty if I didn’t at least make the effort to tell you to keep a low profile. And now, I’m off.”

“Wait, what?” Clint asked, and he wasn’t the only confused face at the table.

“Clint,” Phil began in a tone that suggested he was trying to explain things to a particularly dense child, “at the moment I am currently withholding the following information from my superiors: first, that I am aware of double agents successfully infiltrating SHIELD; second, that this information was brought to my attention by two agents under my direct supervision, who went rogue on a personal mission; third, that this mission was spurred on by information disclosed to them by a wanted supernatural criminal entity; and finally, that the afore-mentioned entity is currently in cahoots with the entire Avengers and romantically/sexually entangled with one of them.”

Tony was about to protest, but a quick look and head shake from Steve convinced him to keep quiet. Trying to explain the subtle nuances of his and Loki’s not-dating almost certainly fell into the category of information that could wait to be shared on another day.

“Point being,” Phil concluded, “the less I know about the hare-brained plots you’re hatching around here the better. Whatever you do with the information I’ve provided is entirely up to you; keep me out of it, for everyone’s safety. Oh, and word of advice? It would be a good idea for you people to
“figure out some way to prevent SHIELD from sending you out of the tristate area for a while.”

“So you’re...fine with Loki being here?” Steve asked warily.

Phil spared the briefest of glances at Loki before looking pointedly at the rest of the team. “Why not? You people already put him through the floor once.” And with that, Phil departed for the elevator.

-n-

Slowly, it dawned on the team that Phil had actually given them his tacit blessing to keep working with Loki. Once upon a time Tony might have been happy about having one less battle to fight, but currently the only thought going through his mind was how incredibly awful the SHIELD situation must be for one of their most loyal agents to be ok with an Avengers/Loki team up. Speaking of whom... “You ok?” Tony asked Loki.

Loki shrugged, his eyes failing to meet Tony’s. “All things considered, that was the best reaction I believe we could have received.”

“So Phil’s going to stay out of it then,” Bruce stated. “Honestly, that’s probably for the best. Gives us free range to work with his intel but leaves him enough plausible deniability to hide us if Fury gets suspicious and starts poking around.”

“With any luck it won’t come to that,” Steve said with far more confidence than anyone else at the table truly felt. “Well, let’s see what he dug up for us.”

Agent Coulson’s absence did little to ease the tension in the room, and with good reason. Natasha and Steve both pored over the envelope Phil had left in the middle of the table while Clint began thumbing through the Winter Soldier info on the counter. Tony sat back with Loki to watch this play out; intelligence and recon was definitely not his wheelhouse, particularly this early in the day. “Not good,” Natasha remarked as Steve frowned beside her. “Very not good.”

“What’s the plan, Cap?” Tony inquired, needing something to do.

Steve glanced up from the papers. “Loki, is your table good to go?”

“Yes,” Loki confirmed. “I was planning on restarting the search today after I finished unpacking; though now I believe that can wait a bit longer.”

“I’ll help out. There’s work I needed to get done today in the lab anyway,” Tony volunteered, because if he didn’t find some way to make himself useful in the next five minutes he was going to start disassembling things in the kitchen just to give his hands something to do. Tony never did well during the calm before the storm, particularly when it was difficult to know exactly what he was planning for.

“Perfect,” Steve said. “Clint, you and Bruce look over the information Phil dug up on the Winter Soldier, make sure it’s our guy and see if there’s anything in there that can help us out. Nat and I will see if we can piece together what HYDRA’s up to.” He shook his head at the file. “This is going to be a long day.”

Tony and Loki stuck around just long enough to finish tidying up the kitchen before taking off for the workshop. Once they were in the elevator, Tony sighed and leaned back against the railing; it wasn’t even ten yet and he was already exhausted just by the sheer volume of work he knew was waiting to be done. “We need better armor,” he remarked aloud, mentally grounding himself and giving him a starting point for today’s work. “Something lightweight that won’t chafe so it’s easy to wear whenever we go out.”
“When you go out,” Loki corrected, “seeing as I am expected to stay locked in your Tower like a Norns-forsaken princess from a fairy tale.”

Tony openly scoffed at that. “Please, like you haven’t already thought up at least a dozen different ways to sneak out and stay hidden.”

“…Fourteen.”

“Case in point. Besides, we don’t know what HYDRA did to the Mind Stone to get it to work for their freaky experiments. Even if you stayed home for everything else we’d still need you to come along for the actual retrieval mission, seeing as I’m pretty attached to my brain and don’t want it scrambled like an egg.” Loki rolled his eyes at the suggestion, but Tony could see the way that a smile was tugging at the corner of his mouth. “You can shapeshift when you’ve got the energy for it, right? We’ll just make sure that any time you need to leave the Tower you look like someone else. It wouldn’t be too hard to pass you off as a temp worker; I can make you a fake nametag and everything.”

Loki hummed in agreement. “Honestly, staying here won’t be a great hardship. In the past few weeks I barely left the guest house for anything except food and game night. The work is rather demanding with respect to time and energy.”

“Well you’ve got us now. Should make things easier,” Tony reassured him, even as niggling doubts began to creep into his mind. It had been so easy to promise Loki help from JARVIS during their trip to the airport, but now he began to wonder about the actual likelihood of his being able to keep that promise. Would JARVIS’ sensors truly be able to find some common, magical energy running through Loki’s spells and personal artifacts that could actually be traced across the planet?

Or would the search end up being Loki doing the bulk of the labor while Tony sat around like a bump on a log?

Tony’s train of thought was interrupted by their arrival at the workshop. He could feel his nerves calming almost as soon as he stepped off the elevator; being here always did his mind and soul good. “Hey bots,” he called out as he stepped into the workshop proper. “Still guarding Loki’s dragon gizzards?”

You and Butterfingers both chirped at him as they continued to merrily circle Loki’s boxes.

“Fear not, Sir; they’ve been guarding Mr. Liesmith’s possessions from any unwanted eyes or hands that might have somehow managed to infiltrate Avengers Tower at the deepest levels,” JARVIS informed him in a voice as dry as a stale Saltine.

Speaking of unwanted attention, that reminded Tony of JARVIS’ little confession from the night before, specifically his own creation’s betrayal. “Shouldn’t you be shipping yourself off right about now, J?”

“Rest assured, Sir, I shall formally tender my resignation from your services the very instant Dummy finishes downloading my data onto an external hard drive and attaches the appropriate shipping label and postage to it.”

Dummy’s concerted efforts to plug a disconnected phone charger into Tony’s recycling bin failed to inspire a great deal of confidence in the likelihood of this outcome.

Tony threw up his hands in resignation. “This is why you should never bother with minions!” Butterfingers and You quickly rolled over to stand by him at the sound of his shout, bobbing their
arms and beeping at him in concern. “No, you two are fine, you’re the reason this outfit still has a fifty perfect success rate of decent robotic creations. Well, maybe more like thirty-five or forty percent, your smoothies collectively leave plenty to be desired.”

“Clearly having underlings is quite a hardship for you,” Loki dryly remarked as he sauntered over to inspect his boxes. “Now then; you said you wanted to help me, yes?”

“Yeah, definitely,” Tony promised. “I’m just…not really sure what the best way to help you out might be. What’s there to do?”

Loki took a moment to consider. “We can start by unboxing some of the less dangerous magical items that have made their way into my possession,” he decided. “Storage can wait for now since you wanted to get some readings on them first. I’ll show you how to handle them so that JARVIS can properly analyze them. I assume he’s ready to record us again?”

“I am,” JARVIS stated. “Although if I might be so bold, the testing room next door is better equipped to record data and contain any potential damage than the main area of the workshop that you are currently in. Might I suggest moving your more volatile pieces in there?”

“Sounds good, J.” Tony’s eyes fell on Loki’s boxes. “Where do we start, Prancer?”

-n-

Hours later Tony had become utterly absorbed in his analysis of an amulet which possessed the power to summon thunder and lightning from the heavens at will. The amulet’s ability itself wasn’t too impressive (side effect of living with the literal god of thunder, what can you do), but the data Tony was able to pull and parse from it was astounding.

Loki had taken a good bit of time to demonstrate several of the pieces in his collection for Tony’s benefit. Very few of the items were pieces which he’d brought from Asgard, since Loki had been worried that any data gleaned from them would be compromised due to centuries of their residing on a realm totally immersed in magical energy. As a result, most of Tony’s raw data had been pulled from the relics Loki had scavenged during his time on Earth. He’d initially been concerned that the artifacts wouldn’t impress Tony, but that was all before the figures started coming in on the computer screen.

Tony could sell off his entire stock in Stark Industries and then build a completely new company completely from scratch, and it would be ten times as successful as S.I. based on this information. It seemed as though every time he checked the figures again yet another law of physics was being rewritten to accommodate for magic-based exceptions, and Tony loved it. Better yet, JARVIS was starting to notice a few similarities between the energy signatures of several items, and while it wasn’t quite enough to help expedite the quest for the Mind Stone at this stage, it was a definite start.

“J, finish running the scan on the storm necklace and compare the results against the widow maker,” Tony demanded, referencing a knife which had a long and sordid history of killing foolish young men on their wedding night. JARVIS gave him an affirmation as Tony stood and stretched; that scan would take at least another half hour to finish up, and Tony needed to get to work on some projects of his own in the other room.

Tony re-entered the main area of the workshop to find Loki hunched over the glowing table, eyes half-closed and unseeing. Tony had panicked when Loki initially activated the spell, inadvertently breaking Loki’s concentration and causing the entire seidr-work to collapse at his interference. Loki had very patiently yet firmly assured Tony that everything was fine, that was how seidmenn looked doing more advanced spellwork, and so if Tony was going to have a conniption might he kindly take
it into the next room?

Ok, so those hadn’t been Loki’s exactly words, but the sentiment was definitely implied.

Tony knew he needed to get used to this eventually; Loki already dealt with enough judgmental crap from the common people of Asgard about using his seidr, he didn’t need to hear more of it on Earth from his newly-acquired allies. And so instead of panicking or even making a joke about Loki’s current state, Tony went straight to one of his workstations and began designing new sets of armor for both Natasha and Clint. Out of all the Avengers, those two were the ones whose health Tony needed to make an immediate priority in case Fury decided to deploy them soon.

The work quickly absorbed him; everything else fell away from Tony in a haze of numbers and angles, calculating the risks of using this polymer layered to that thickness and so on until Loki was interrupting him with a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Anthony.”

“Huh?”

“JARVIS has just informed me that we’re approaching dinner time.”

Tony glanced towards a clock on the wall; good lord, when had it gotten so late? Still, he wasn’t exactly dying of hunger yet; he could probably get in a few more hours of work before he needed to take a coffee/energy bar break. “Thanks for the heads up, but I’m going to keep working. You’re welcome to get dinner on your own-“

“There is nothing in your fridge since you haven’t purchased groceries recently, and I have no credit card to order food for myself online,” Loki interrupted. “So unless you’d like me to violate Coulson’s request so that I might run out and bewitch someone into thinking I’ve already paid for my meal-“

“-Wait, that’s how you’ve been getting food?!“

“Only in New York. I usually gave the Wisings a shopping list and a pinch of gold to cover expenses in Belgrade, Anthony, I’m not a complete lout,” Loki assured him. “But here…”

Right then. If Tony wanted to keep Loki in everyone’s good graces, it would probably be to his advantage to set the god up with one of his own credit cards to order food in the future. For now, though… “Burgers sound ok to you?”

It ended up taking them a fair bit of time to look through the menu of one of Tony’s favorite burger joints and put in their order, and that of course was accompanied by Tony deciding that maybe he really could afford a food break for the sake of a good meal. Roughly an hour later the two of them were camped out on the couch with burgers and fries spread out on napkins between the two of them, eating in a comfortable silence and sipping on water from two (relatively) clean mugs that Tony had been able to dig up for them. It was likely the mugs which triggered a memory in Tony from earlier that day and caused him to startle in his seat. “Kisses!” he blurted out, very nearly sending most of his fries toppling to the floor.

Loki lunged for the food and saved it at the last second, shooting Tony a look like he couldn’t understand what exactly had come over the man. “What?”

“You said-breakfast, before I had coffee, when I kissed you and it didn’t quite…land,” Tony settled on. “You said…try again later…why are you giving me that look?”

“Norns, you truly did just forget until right now, didn’t you?” Loki remarked in a tone caught somewhere between utter despair and incredulity.
“…No…”

“God. Of. Lies.”

“In my defense, you tried to relay very important information to me before coffee. The fact that it wound up somewhere in my memory at all is a feat in and of itself.”

“Regardless, consider the offer retracted,” Loki said. “Your burger was covered in onions and all manner of mystery condiments, at the very least your teeth need to be brushed.”

“Priss,” Tony scoffed, but Loki wasn’t budging. “Fine. But hear me out on this one; what if, instead of making me go all the way upstairs to get my toothbrush, you used some magic to freshen up my breath instead?”

“Absolutely not. That is a complete waste of my powers—“

“-Excuse you, that is a use of your powers which would result in us making out, I am insulted you’d call it a waste—“

“-besides the fact that I’m thoroughly worn out from searching for the Mind Stone.”

Tony paused to take a good look at Loki now. The god looked a bit worse for wear, slumped heavily in his seat and eyes drooping as he settled deeper into the couch. Abruptly his own good mood deflated; Loki was using his magic to try and save the world here, and Tony was treating his powers like a convenient parlor trick. “Oh. Right, sorry. I shouldn’t have…yeah, sorry.”

Loki glanced at Tony from the corner of his eye, silently observing him. “How much longer are you planning on working tonight?” he asked softly.

Tony was a bit surprised by the sudden change of subject, but refrained from pointing it out to Loki. “I think I’m close to finalizing the design for Natasha’s new equipment, but I want to fabricate a few more samples and run a few more practical tests on them before making a whole suit.”

“By which you mean wanton destruction in the other room,” Loki concluded.

“In so many words.”

Loki glanced to his own work area. “It’s going to be at least a few more hours before I even think of calling a halt. I’m beginning to suspect HYDRA has managed to find some way to hide the Mind Stone—“

“What?!”

“All traces of it have vanished,” Loki gravely informed him. “But the only thing that can adequately hide magic is additional magic. No matter how well they attempt to ferret the Stone away I’ll be able to track it eventually.”

“JARVIS should be done with the scans soon,” Tony reasoned, trying to calm himself back down. “Once I’ve cleared out of the test room we can start scanning the next batch of artifacts while J and I process the first round’s data.”

At that, Loki and Tony shared a very pointed look. “We’re going to be here for a while, aren’t we?” Loki asked, although they both already knew the answer.

“I’ll go get the toothbrushes from upstairs.”
‘I’ll get started on the coffee.’

‘A while’ turned out to be four solid days of scans, tests, diagrams, and inventory work in Tony’s workshop. Tony had been concerned that spending such an extended period of time together so soon after moving in would wear on the both of them, maybe even sour their relationship. But much to his shock (and delight), he quickly discovered that he and Loki were exceptionally compatible in sharing their space.

It only took them a few more hours to clearly demarcate which areas of the workshop were exclusively for Loki’s current magical experiments, and which ones needed to be left alone for Tony and the bots. Around the 23rd hour mark Tony set aside the schematics for Clint’s new boots and refocused his efforts on making shelves for Loki, seeing that the god was going to give himself a cramp from all the bending over he was doing to gather necessary materials from the boxes scattered about the room and replace the artifacts Tony had already processed.

Loki was remarkably strict about making sure that they ate at regular intervals, even if it was just a few bites while waiting for JARVIS to finish rendering a new model for them. Tony wasn’t sure if this was actually typical for Loki or if he was just rebounding pretty hard after the bunker and Belgrade, but he didn’t comment. At least this way Tony could honestly tell the team that he’d been eating regularly during this engineering binge, which is more than he could say for his sleep schedule.

The couch in the living room they’d shared could sleep two people, albeit a big snugly, but the one in Tony’s lab was a strict ‘one person at a time’ piece of furniture. Loki and he rotated sleeping on it for a few hours at a time when rest was absolutely needed, though they both seemed to be like-minded about only taking brief catnaps until they made a little more headway on the Mind Stone location/destroying HYDRA fronts. Sure, a few concessions had to be made while sharing the space (Loki had very, very strong thoughts and feelings about blaring heavy metal at a deafening level), but overall Tony was delighted in how well they worked together. It was amazing to have someone so brilliant working alongside him in his lab, bouncing ideas off one another and making small talk during the scant times that they timed their food breaks to last longer than a few minutes. Tony couldn’t remember the last time that he’d been so simultaneously happy and productive in the middle of a crisis.

Unfortunately Natasha wasn’t as big a fan of his and Loki’s current arrangement and let him know via her declaration of, “This is a sorry state of affairs,” as she marched into the workshop.

Tony glanced up from the welding he was doing for Loki’s shelves in one corner of the workshop, and it was probably not good that he needed to blink a few times before she properly came into focus. “Hey Nat. What brings you here?”

“Getting a headcount for dinner,” she explained. “I tried to get JARVIS to pass on the message to you and Loki, but he informed me that you put the lab in ‘Do Not Disturb’ mode hours ago, and I thought it might be a good idea to use my override code and investigate.”

“Well as you can see, we’re doing fine.”

“Tony, look around.”

It had been a very long time since the workshop had been in this chaotic of a state. Sample sections of armor were scattered across two separate workbenches with an obscene amount of holograms hovering around them, waiting for Tony to jot down additional notes as the new samples rendered in
the manufacturing area. At some point an oil canister had overturned, and Dummy’s effort to mop it up had only succeeded in smearing it around the floor like a pungent modern art piece. Half of Loki’s boxes were emptied and overturned, their contents haphazardly scattered on the two shelving units that Tony had managed to finish yesterday (this morning? Some time recently) while the other two waited nearby, only half assembled by Tony at this point. Takeout containers were sprinkled throughout the workshop, though there was a small ring of them surrounding the couch where Loki was currently asleep, face-down in a cushion and legs dangling over the edge of the couch. The number of coffee mugs littered around the room was beyond count.

Tony shrugged. “I don’t see the problem.”

“Well I can smell the problem. When was the last time either of you showered?”

“Err…”

“We haven’t seen you since breakfast four days ago. JARVIS, how long have they been down here?”

“You don’t have to answer that-“

“-Mr. Liesmith has not left the lab area in nearly ninety-six hours,” JARVIS unrepentantly stated. “The same could be said for Sir, given that he has only left to pick up their takeout orders and fetch a pair of toothbrushes.”

Natasha raised her brow at Tony, silently daring him to try and argue. “Ok, maybe this isn’t ideal,” Tony admitted, “but Nat, I’ve gotten-“

“Tony, I’m sure you and Loki have gotten plenty of work done, and we’re grateful for that. But this is gross. Frat house, non-air-conditioned, no one knows how to use a washing machine and air freshener is exclusively for getting weed smell out of a car gross.”

“I’m sensing some judgement here.”

Natasha stepped into his space, placing her hands firmly on his shoulders. “Please Tony. Go upstairs, take a shower, and get some sleep in your actual bed.”

“But-“

“We’re doing Mexican for dinner tonight. If you take care of yourselves now I’ll talk Bruce into making his special guacamole with the stir-fried tomatoes in it.”

“…and sopapillas?”

“I’ll even get you some honey to go with them,” she promised.

Tony’s stomach eventually won out. “Fine. But you have to be the one to wake up Loki and tell him we’re moving upstairs.”

“Not a chance,” Natasha immediately replied, and the smirk on her face was far too pleased for Tony’s liking. “Your boyfriend, your job.”

“You’re a terrible person,” Tony informed her, but she didn’t even dignify his comment with a response as she exited the lab. Sighing, Tony properly shut off the welding torch and made his way across the lab to save and close the open projects floating around the room. Maybe Natasha had a point; this particular work binge might have gone a bit far, even by his standards.
Once everything else was taken care of, Tony approached the couch and gently shook Loki’s shoulder. “Hey Lokes, time to get up. Natasha says our hygiene leaves something to be desired.”

“What?”

“C’mon, we need to go upstairs.”

Green eyes slowly blinked up at him. “Why?”

“I’ll explain on the way.”

-M-

Much as Tony hated to admit it, he felt much better that night after a good shower and sleeping for more than an hour at a time. Loki also seemed more alert now; Natasha may have had a point about their needing to get cleaned up. In any event, stepping away from their work for a while, even if it was just to briefly enjoy a meal with friends, would probably do the both of them some good.

However, as soon as Tony and Loki arrived on the communal floor it became very clear that this meal was going to require the better part of their evening. Tony could smell the wonderful spicy scent of Bruce’s homemade cooking drifting in from the kitchen, but the table in the main room (which should have been cleared off already) was buried under a familiar pile of papers and D&D manuals. Natasha and Steve were already seated and poring over a shared notebook while sharing a plate of chips and dip between them. “What the…” Tony began, sincerely confused by this turn of events.

“It’s not Thursday yet,” Loki remarked. “And isn’t this an off week besides?”

“Oh, this is definitely an off-week,” Clint agreed as he stomped into the room with a plate laden down with fried rice, meat, and peppers. “Nat and I are trying to figure out how to follow up leads on HYDRA hideouts without tipping off SHIELD again, Thor’s still AWOL, and the one guy I knew who might know something about the Winter Soldier apparently died of cancer six months ago. Yeah, real fucking off-week.” He set down his plate on the table with a little more force than was strictly necessary before dropping heavily into his chair. “Don’t suppose you two have had any better luck?”

Tony internally winced at Clint’s decidedly miserable state. He and Loki had gotten so caught up in their own work he hadn’t even thought to check in with the others to see what progress was being made on their end. Not a lot, apparently. “It’s going to take a bit longer than I’d like to relocate the Mind Stone,” Loki informed him. “HYDRA has taken some pains to better conceal it this time; I’ve been able to narrow the search to eight potential locations, though they’re spread all over your realm.”

“And once we finish the algorithm I’m working on we can probably narrow that down even more,” Tony quickly added. “Brighter note, I should have some new armor for you and Natasha fabricated by tomorrow so you’re not stuck here forever.”

Clint gave him a humorless smile. “That’s unfortunately the best news I’ve heard all week.”

“Hence game night.” Steve explained. “HYDRA hasn’t made another move on us yet, and Coulson seems pretty certain that it’s going to be a while before they do. We can’t burn ourselves out trying to rush this, and Bruce and I don’t have much to do right now so we’re going stir-crazy.”

“So tabletop RPGs are the answer?” Tony inquired.
Steve looked up at him with a tired smile. “Let me put it this way; JARVIS already had to put in one order this week for more punching bags, and if I don’t do something outside of the gym that’s going to be a double order by Saturday.”

“Grab a plate,” Natasha ordered with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I got Bruce to make the guac you like, as promised.”

“You are a treasure and a magnificent friend,” Tony informed her, and Natasha wasn’t quite able to repress the smile on her face. “C’mon Lokes, let me introduce you to the magic of Brucie-bear guacamole.”

It took a bit of time for everyone to get settled; Clint needed to grab seconds while Tony was debating what drink he wanted to have, and Loki was eager to try a little bit of everything that Bruce had prepared for them, necessitating an extra plate and space at the table. But eventually everybody had properly seated themselves and gotten their character sheets ready. By the time dinner had properly gotten underway Tony was decidedly eager for the chance to focus on anything besides HYDRA for a few hours. After taking stock of the others to ensure that no one still needed to get up for refills or napkins, Natasha cleared her throat and began the night’s campaign. “Now then; Steve has been kind enough to fill me in on what happened while Clint and I were away,” she stated, and there was no missing the disappointment in the look she directed towards her substitute DM.

“In my defense,” Steve began, before he settled on vaguely gesturing towards the players.

Natasha briefly looked them over, silently appraising the lot of them. “Point made.”

Clint, for his part, looked more intrigued than anything else. “What’d I miss?”

“Not much,” Loki answered. “Antoninus seduced his way out of an assassination attempt and into a manor, where we used up our last health potion and drowned the majority of a secret organization beneath thousands of gallons of saltwater and dire sharks. Also you’re currently asleep at an inn with a bound and gagged assassin tied to a chair in your room.”

Clint pouted. “Damn. I miss all the fun stuff.”

“Relax birdbrain,” Tony cut in, pulling up his character sheet on his tablet, “we haven’t even gotten around to looting the bodies yet and we still have to track down Sir Sneaky-Noble-Who-Probably-Furthers-The-Plot. Smart money says there’s plenty more shenanigans—oh damn it Bruce, stop messing with my character sheet between sessions!”

Bruce quietly nibbled on his quesadilla. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Tony narrowed his eyes at Bruce. “Oh really. So it was someone else in this building with access to my tablet’s login credentials, who changed my Will score to have a -2 miscellaneous modifier due to, and I am directly quoting here, a conditional modifier of ‘being an unrepentant lush’.” Loki chortled, prompting Tony to swiftly retaliate by stealing a handful of tortilla chips from his plate. “First off, Bruce, what modifier category would ‘lush’ even fall under, circumstance or competence? Second off, Antoninus is sex-positive, how very dare you slut shame him in such a manner as this, and third, Steve, if being a lush actually affects my stats I should obviously get a dexterity bonus, come on, I’m a level ten bard who gets around, I’m clearly good with my fingers—”

“-Tony,” Natasha interrupted.

“Yeah?”

She pointed a single finger at him. “No. Bad.”
“Wait wait, let’s think about this,” Clint jumped in, eyes alight with mischief. “You said seduction helped pave our way to victory, right?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call your current state a victory,” Steve grumbled from behind the sanctity of his wall of manuals.

“Hear me out,” Clint continued, completely ignoring Steve and the hardships weighing heavily upon the souls of their Captain and his fellow DM. “What if we went for a Mick Jagger build?”

“A what?” Loki inquired.

“We’re not having Antoninus sing and sleep his way to victory,” Bruce immediately countered. “What happens if we run into a lich?”

“...well let’s be reasonable, I mean, how high would my score really have to be to successfully seduce-”

“You cannot seduce a lich!” Steve declared, and judging from the way his fingers were wrapped around the DM manual he was prepared to pull out the paperwork to support his edict.

“Bold of you to assume you’ll last long enough to meet a lich,” Natasha countered, refocusing the group’s attention on her. “Considering that you’re currently under several tons of dirt and stone and you just compromised the structural integrity of the underground lair with your flooding.”

“Oh dear,” Loki said, though he didn’t sound the least bit sorry about this turn of events.

Steve shook his head as Natasha centered herself and began the session proper. “Having shattered the glass tanks and unleashed their contents within the chamber, the walls have been weakened and support structures seem to creak all around you.” In the midst of speaking she rolled her d20, briefly eyeing the number before going on. “Yet the cavern still stands, refusing to collapse for now. The waters have settled, filling out the entire area to a depth of two feet.”

“Wait, can dire sharks swim in water that shallow?” Bruce asked. “They’re classified as huge creatures, meaning we’re talking a minimum of ten feet long and two tons heavy.”

Natasha and Steve shared a look. “Well...no,” Natasha eventually settled on. “They’re essentially stuck wherever they landed after the flooding stopped.”

“Time for XP farming then,” Clint stated in a decidedly pleased tone.

“You can’t, you’re still at the inn,” Natasha reminded him.

Clint’s face fell. “But...dire sharks...”

“More for us,” Tony said, cackling with glee.

“This doesn’t seem very sportsmanlike,” Steve lamented, but the murderhobos could neither be dissuaded nor halted now. The trio of adventurers hacked their way through the disadvantaged sea creatures (as well as a number of guards and critters from the other tank who were still struggling to recover from the surprise attack), and by the time everything was said and done the players had collectively reached level 11. Time for looting. “Natasha, how many teeth do dire sharks have?” Loki asked as Tony and Bruce debated the merits of the bard learning Sleep or Blindness next.

Natasha raised a brow, turning to look at Steve who seemed to be equally confused by the question. “Um...we’ll assume a couple hundred per shark, given the multiple rows of new teeth growing in
behind the old ones. Why?"

“I’m going to loot them to make dire arrowheads,” Loki explained.

“Extracting the teeth would take several hours,” Natasha warned. “Would you still like to take that action?”

Loki considered for a moment. “Bannon, help me put the shark heads into the bag of holding after I chop them off. We’ll extract the teeth once we’re in a safer location.”

“Do we have time for that plus looting the other corpses?” Bruce asked. “You know, given the whole ‘blew out the building’s support structures with our tidal wave’ issue.”

It was Tony who came up with the solution this time. “Bannon, help Loptr load up the heads and the bodies with better gear into the bag; we’ll dump ‘em outside of town later. Except for Mr. Lansdowne here. Search roll...17!”

“You find a letter on his person signed with the sigil of the Black Cats. Unfortunately, due to a combination of water and poor lighting you’re unable to make out much of the contents of the letter, beyond the words ‘payment,’ ‘changelings,’ and ‘Greenich,’” Natasha narrated after a brief glance to her notes. “There is also a small mirror in his pocket.”

“I didn’t touch it!” Tony exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air. “I definitely did not put my hands on that cursed and/or haunted mirror.”

“Detect magic,” Bruce called out.

“You discover a communication spell built into the mirror. At the moment, however, none of you have any idea how to activate it.”

“Ok, who wants to carry the magic mirror?” Tony asked. “Because the bag of holding is getting pretty full.”

“Currently I’m only carrying rations, rope, and a Smuggler’s Locket,” Loki read off. “Toss it here.”

“Great. Now how are we going to get out of here, considering we just killed the guy who owns the manor and reinforcements are probably coming after all the mayhem we caused?” Bruce asked.

All eyes turned to Loki. For his part, Loki only sighed and stole his chips back from Tony’s plate, resigned to his fate as team rescuer yet again. “Bannon, Antoninus, finish gathering up whatever you can fit in the sack, including the nobleman,” he ordered while dunking a chip into the guac. “I have a plan.”

-Loki’s plan resulted in the manor’s guards walking into an underground cavern full of blood-red water, thanks to all the decapitated dire shark corpses lying around. A smattering of other bodies floated in the water as well, minus the lord of the house and more than a few of his most trusted guards. The reinforcements who’d come to investigate were forced to conclude that someone had kidnapped Erik, and immediately sent out search parties to scour the town and nearby countryside. The servants of the house, meanwhile, were left with cleanup duty.

It took them hours to haul all the bodies outside, load them onto the largest wagons that could be found in town, and transport them to the Adder’s Bend’s cesspit where they were dumped. Then, and only then, did Loptr, Antoninus, and Bannon emerge from the belly of the dire shark corpse
they’ve been hiding in. “You crawl your way to freedom in the afternoon sun, drenched in bodily fluids and reeking of death,” Natasha narrated. “Everyone needs to perform at least three constitution saving throws for me to see if you caught any kind of bloodborne diseases.”

“Another day, another victory for the murderhobos,” Tony crowed, though his joy was lessened a bit after the first roll. “Also I might have hepatitis now.”

“Good for you,” Natasha dryly commented. “Meanwhile, the town guards are making their way to the inn to investigate reports of a group of newcomers who just so happened to arrive the night before Sir Lansdowne’s manor was attacked.”

“Oh shit,” Clint uttered. “I’m still in the room with the tied-up assassin and no idea what’s going on.”

Bruce and Tony shared a look. “So, our options are either to charge back into hostile territory, battered and without the supplies we’d need to heal up, or skip town and let the locals pin everything on Clintock,” Tony reasoned. “Hmm. Tough choice there, really.”

“You can’t just leave me!” Clint whined.

“Why not?”

Clint frantically looked over his character sheet. “A-ha! Because I’m the one with the Fist of Midas in my inventory.”


“Oh fuck you both.”

Loki sighed and looked to the heavens. “I need more snacks.” He rose from his seat, giving both Bruce and Tony pointed looks. “Try not to die while I’m away.”

“Oh come on, we’re not that bad,” Tony complained, but Loki had already left the room.

“Nat, I’d like to search for any fresh water nearby,” Bruce requested. “Bannon desperately wants a bath.”

“Search check.”

Bruce rolled. “14, plus 2 skill bonus.”

“You notice a well-trodden footpath that leads you to a nearby stream,” Natasha said as Steve added the stream to their current map. “Having followed the path, you are currently standing upstream of the cesspit. The water is cool and clear, and at this point is nearly knee-deep.”

“I’ve got it!” Tony declared in a tone that was probably a tinge too manic to suggest anything good could follow. “Bannon, prep breathe underwater. Once you’re done, strip and scrub yourself down, then put on the sluttiest tunic you own.”

Steve aspirated his taco as Natasha’s brow went up, though whether from surprise or amusement was anyone’s guess. Bruce, meanwhile, was staring at Tony like he’d grown a second head. “I...don’t have one of those in my inventory?”

“Improvise,” Tony commanded with a dismissive hand wave. “Antoninus and Loptr both need to get cleaned up as well. Let’s see if Loki put any points into forgery...damn, we’re going to have to rely on Glibness.”
“Tony, what exactly is the plan?” Bruce asked, tones equal parts concerned and baffled.

Tony grinned back at Bruce, rapidly scribbling notes on a nearby piece of notebook paper before handing it off to his friend. “Gonna pull a note out of Thor’s playbook, Bruce. This is a little number he likes to call, ‘get help’.”

A few meters away in the kitchen, Loki choked on his sopapilla.

-∞-

Just as the guards were about to storm the inn, a commotion arose at the edge of town. A small posse of soldiers hurried to the gates and immediately found a distressed rogue and half-undressed bard clinging to one another. “Get help!” the bard yelled out. “There’s been a murder by the Black Cats!”

Natasha glanced back to Steve, who could only helplessly shrug. “The villagers seem rather confused by your presence—”

“Bluff check to convince them that we’re the victims of a mercenary attack,” Tony dictated as he rolled. “And with Glibness...35!”

Natasha sighed. “All right, you persuade them that something terrible has befallen the two of you. Now what?”

“I pull some of the guards aside and tell them we were engaged in a sex party with a lord named Erik Lansdowne and his friends, when we were attacked in the dead of night mid-coitus,” Tony boldly declared.

Steve gaped at them, hands shakily hovering over his manuals as though searching for a guide for what to do when your players try to lie about an orgy to cover up mass murder. Clint’s eyes were rapidly ping-ponging between the DMs and Tony, eager to see how this gambit was going to play out. Bruce, for his part, simply shook his head and served himself another spoonful of salsa out of a nearby jar. And Natasha? Well, all she could do was say, “You’re going to need to give me something more elaborate than that. And roll for it.”

“I explain to the captain that we’d been invited into town specifically to indulge Erik in some of his more ‘illicit pleasures’ and went out last night to meet up with a number of other people who’d also been invited. We were attacked around dawn and barely escaped with our lives. It took us this long to make it back to town.”

“And what about the flooded manor?” Natasha pressed.

Tony cocked his head, face the perfect picture of confusion. “Flooded manor? We hadn’t heard anything about that.”

“We even have the letter from him to prove it,” Loki added in a moment of brilliance. “You can’t really make out the exact contents of the letter, to be fair, but that’s clearly his signature at the bottom.”

“Charisma check, both of you.”

Unfortunately for Natasha’s campaign and Steve’s sanity, both of them succeeded in the checks. “You convince a band of guards to come with you to investigate your claims. What do they find?”

“We lead them to the stream, where they should clearly be able to see the obviously dead bodies of
Erik, several half-naked men, and our own cleric floating in the water. I do believe the local innkeep can identify Bannon as a member of our own party,” Tony narrated.

Steve chuckled and shook his head, at last making peace with the campaign going completely off the rails in a flaming trainwreck of debauchery. Natasha shot him a look, to which he could only shrug and grab two tacos at once from his plate. “It’s creative,” he explained. “Awful and an affront to good taste, but creative and within the rules of the game.”

Natasha sighed and briefly glanced to the heavens, as though asking for aid from a higher power that had long since ceased to hear her pleas. “The guards begin hauling bodies out of the water, one by one. It quickly becomes apparent that some of them have drowned and the rest have died from stab wounds, which is consistent with your story.”

“I approach them and ask permission to take Bannon into the forest to give him funeral rites, according to his religious precepts,” Tony chimed in.

“They readily agree.”

From there, the plan was simple. Bannon was dumped in the woods and, not being dead thanks to breathe underwater, made his way back into town. Everyone was so focused on hearing Loptr and Antoninus’ sob stories that no one noticed a certain cleric sneaking into the inn through the back door to head upstairs and retrieve a sickly barbarian from a room. Bannon cut the mercenary loose and gave him a strong warning that he better skip town before the town guards returned. By the end of the day everyone in the manor was driving themselves mad trying to recall exactly when Erik had last been seen by anyone, Clintock and Bannon were safely outside the town walls, and Loptr and Antoninus (following a few more successful bluff checks to dissuade the locals that no, Antoninus most certainly hadn't been the bard singing outside the mansion that morning) were allowed to depart by sundown, after being branded perverts for hire by the locals and told politely yet firmly to never set foot in Adder’s Bend again.

“Not too shabby,” Loki commended at the end of their session. “Though perhaps a bit too intricate; a single botched roll would have sent the entire scheme crashing down around our ears.”

“I didn’t hear a better plan from you,” Tony smugly countered.

“Cast summon swarm on the corpses in the cesspit, alert a few town guards and then take advantage of the confusion to rescue Clintock while everyone draws their own conclusions about the bodies that somehow appeared in the pit and are inexplicably being devoured by rats that came from nowhere,” Loki explained.

Tony thought on that for a moment. “Huh. I guess that would’ve been easier.”

“And arguably in better taste,” Bruce added. “Since it doesn’t cause a local noble to perish with a legacy of being an exhibitionist sex fiend.”

Tony didn’t miss the brief pleased look on Loki’s face before he rose to clear off his place. “As much fun as this has been, I need to return to work.”

“All right. Tony, you mind helping with cleanup?” Steve asked. “Bruce and Natasha did most of the prep with Clint, and I need to clean this up,” he explained, motioning to the D&D setup.

“Sure thing.”

The entire cleanup process took a while, since there were plenty of pans to scrub and leftovers to pack away. Tony utilized the time to catch the others up on the progress he and Loki had made, but
unfortunately it was a lot of “we’re preparing to do such-and-such” rather than “we finished such- and-such and we’re ready to actually do something.” They’d all need to be patient for a little while longer, unfortunately.

Finally Tony packed away the last of the Tupperware and beelined for the lab, having been re-energized by his conversation with the others. Loki was probably elbows deep into his work again, and Tony would be remiss if he didn’t do his part to help out now.

To his surprise, however, as soon as he stepped onto the elevator JARVIS informed him that Loki was currently in the penthouse making a drink. It probably said something about Tony that he got unnecessarily excited at the mere idea of Loki being comfortable enough to help himself to Tony’s liquor cabinet, but he let it pass. He was more interested in seeing what exactly had pulled Loki away from his work again so soon.

He entered the penthouse to find Loki standing by the bar and stoppering a bottle of Tony’s whiskey. “Fancy meeting you here,” Tony remarked, moving to stand beside Loki.

Loki sipped at his drink as he looked to Tony. “JARVIS informed me that the scans he’s carrying out at the moment will need a few more hours, and the model you two have formulated to track magic on Midgard should be ready afterwards. It seemed a waste to get back to my own search when you might be able to make the job a bit easier come morning.”

“So we’re taking the whole night off?” Tony surmised.

“I am. You of course are free to do whatever you’d like.”

That gave Tony an idea. Smirking, he very deliberately circled around to stand in front of Loki, arms resting on the bartop on each side of the god. “Whatever I’d like, huh?”

Loki raised a brow and quietly set his glass down on a nearby coaster, tacitly allowing Tony to keep him pinned against the bar. Ball was in Tony’s court, then. Tony could absolutely work with that. He reached one hand up to wrap around Loki’s neck, gently stroking the skin there with his thumb before pulling Loki down into a kiss.

Loki’s hands were on his hips a second later, gently digging in as he kissed Tony. Tony may or may not have arched his spine into Loki, hands sliding down to run all over Loki’s everything. Suddenly Loki was lifting him and spinning them around, and Tony found himself seated on the bar with Loki standing between his legs. “I believe you mentioned something about us and various surfaces of the Tower?” Loki asked (and oh, whispering in his ear like that was deeply unfair). “Will this do?”

“Great start,” was all Tony bothered to say before his legs went around Loki’s waist, dragging him closer as he reeled the god in for another kiss. Loki was back on him in an instant, demanding lips pressed against Tony’s own as he angled Tony’s head back. Tony was more than happy to roll with this, melting against Loki as he fistfed one hand in the back of Loki’s shirt. God, he wanted to get Loki’s clothes off, wanted to touch bare skin and run his tongue over every inch of Loki’s body and why were they both still completely dressed?

Tony took a chance, reaching for the shirt hem as he kissed his way down the god’s neck, lips settling over where he’d left a hickey the day prior. “All right?” he asked, gently tugging on the fabric as his teeth scraped over the mark.

Loki’s response was to yank his shirt completely off and then pull Tony’s head back up to kiss him hard. Tony groaned into the kiss, hands fervently running up and down every inch of Loki he could reach. He broke their kiss with a breathy exhale, head coming to rest against Loki’s shoulder as he
stared down at the god’s bare chest. Loki might not have been built like Thor but he was decidedly fit, and Tony couldn’t help but gawk. He intended to say something, probably along the lines of “Fuck you’re hot,” when he noticed the scarring on Loki’s side.

The dark marks were faded and barely raised above the skin; Tony had no idea if they’d even be present a week from now. All the same, their mere presence was enough to jog Tony’s memory of the night that Loki had crash-landed in the lab. He slowly ran his fingers over the still-healing wound, recalling when this had all been blood and burned skin, seeping through his shirt as he prayed Loki could hold out until Thor-

Suddenly Loki’s hand was around Tony’s wrist, prompting him to glance up. Loki looked...not exactly upset, but more like he had something he needed to say. “What is it?” Tony asked.

Loki moved back from Tony, keeping him within arm’s reach but no longer allowing them to be pressed fully together. “We should stop,” he explained.

“Oh. Yeah, sure, ok,” Tony agreed, kicking himself for killing the mood. It figured he couldn’t even get Loki halfway undressed without nearly having a mental breakdown; nevermind that Loki probably didn’t want to be reminded of how close he’d come to death, especially in the middle of a makeout session. “Sorry, I should’ve asked before I touched-”

“-It’s not that,” Loki interjected, now stepping a little closer to Tony again and giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. “You were fine. In fact, I would very, very much like to take things further, Anthony.”

“You mean, like…?”

“Having you across every horizontal surface on our floor, to start.”

Tony swore his pants got tighter at that. It was supremely unfair for Loki to say something like that so casually when he was both shirtless and less than two feet away. “For the record, I’m one hundred percent behind that plan.”

“Exactly,” Loki pointed out. “We’d start, and we’d keep going, and between our various desires and willingness to experiment we wouldn’t stop for a week, and then how would our work get done?”

Tony thought on that for a moment, before a horrific realization dawned upon him. “You’re not...are you saying we have to have a sex embargo until we find all the Stones??”

“At least the Mind Stone,” Loki negotiated. “Truly, I don’t think either of us could last until all six were located.”

Well at least Loki was sensible about that much. Unfortunately, Tony could see the logic behind Loki’s point; sex would only serve as an unfortunate distraction from work right now, and the clock was already ticking. For the good of the universe, Tony Stark would have to hold off on getting them completely naked in his bed. Of course this was his life.

On the other hand, Tony had never been above a little teasing. “So, once we get all the Stones…”

“Yes?”

“We wouldn’t stop for a week?” he repeated, grinning broadly at Loki.

Loki’s return smile was far to mischievous to be properly seductive, but damn if it still didn’t do things for Tony. “Of course. I think a little seidr to reduce your mortal limits might not be a terrible
waste of my abilities.”

Tony laughed at that, and Loki finally pulled away completely. Bending down and retrieving his shirt off the ground, Loki asked, “Are you planning on coming to bed, then?”

The offer of sleep was tempting, but… “If I don’t finish the shelves it’s going to drive me crazy all night. The welding should just take an hour or two and I can sleep afterwards.”

Loki seemed to think that was reasonable. “All right. Good night then, Anthony.”

“Oh, hold up.” Tony slid down off the bar and stepped back into Loki’s personal space. Before Loki had the chance to ask what he was doing, Tony had already gone up on his toes and pressed a kiss to Loki’s cheek. “Night,” he said.

Loki caught on then and gave Tony a kiss as well. “Good night.”

Tony waited until Loki had vanished down the hall before he cleared away the empty tumbler and replaced the liquor Loki had gotten out. Once his space was tidied up, Tony headed for the lab. He really did need to finish the shelves, and if he happened to stay a little longer to clean up some of the mess they’d made over the past few days, well, that wouldn’t be the end of the world, right?

“J, pick something to keep me awake,” he directed as the elevator doors opened onto the workshop floor. “This is going to be another all-nighter.”

Chapter End Notes

So, guess who finally got tired of trying to keep up with everyone's abilities in their head and just made up four different character sheets? *Raises hand*

Sorry this took so long to get out to you, everyone! D&D chapters are always the hardest to write, but they’re the heart and soul of this fic so what can you do? Honestly though, there were so many moving parts going on in this chapter that writing/editing it was exhausting. Phil and the bots were particularly challenging to deal with; those sections of the chapter probably went through 2-3 total rewrites each before we got this version. We also had a lot of plot and game night fun to get through before next time; hopefully the next part will come out a bit faster.

Lastly, another huge thank you to everyone that's left a comment or kudos on this! I can’t believe there’s 200+ bookmarks and 1000+ kudos on this story; you readers are the best!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!