Absolutely Cuckoo

by Mireille

Summary

On his way home from a disappointing hookup, Tony meets a guy who turns out to be the perfect one-night stand. Or short fling. Or friend with benefits. Call it what you want, as long as you don't call it a relationship, because Tony isn't getting involved with Loki. Nope. No way. Never.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
About a year ago, I ran across a list of "meet ugly" (as opposed to "meet-cute") prompts, one of which was something about two characters meeting one another on their respective Walks of Shame, and I started writing something that I thought would be five to ten thousand words of essentially PWP. (Two scenes, I figured: they meet, they have sex, the end.)

It... is a lot longer than two scenes. It's twenty-two chapters, in fact. The second draft was about 77,000 words, so as posted it'll be somewhere in the 75K-80K range.

This fic is complete. I've written the entire thing, and it has all had at least one rewrite. I plan to post a chapter a week, usually on Thursdays, but it *is* completely finished (it's not completely edited, but I've reached the point where I won't be making any major structural changes), so it will definitely all be posted--and before A4 comes out in the US.

The title comes from the Magnetic Fields song of the same name, which fits this fic pretty well.

Eternal thanks to soft_princess, my spouse and my partner in crime, who has been cheering me on since the day I shared the prompts list with her and said, "Tony and Loki, college AU."

If you want details about the "Minor or Background Relationships" tag, skip down to the end notes for this chapter.

Right now, Tony needed just five things: about a gallon of coffee; a handful of Advil; a hot shower; clean underwear--make that any underwear at all; he seemed to have forgotten his in his hurry to get dressed, and these were the jeans that chafed--and eight or ten hours in the robotics lab, long enough for him to forget completely about both this stupid fucking morning, and stupid fucking Scott.

Not to mention the fact that stupid fucking--you know, now that Tony thought about it, his name might have been Shaun, not Scott. Or Samuel. Or Seth. It definitely started with an S. Sherlock? No, he decided as he got in the Kirby Hall elevator and pushed the button for the lobby, he'd definitely remember if it had been Sherlock. He also would have been laughing too hard to ever get naked with a guy named Sherlock, even if the guy had been as good-looking as the guy Tony had met last night at that party. (Whose party, Tony wasn't completely sure--he'd heard about it from a girl he'd had linear algebra with last year, but since she'd arrived there an hour after he did, she obviously wasn't the host--but it had been a good party, anyway.)

Anyway, the point was, stupid fucking what's-his-name who was sitting upstairs in his dorm room looking confused and disappointed and--what was the word? Oh, yes, stupid--had completely
ruined Tony's memories of what had otherwise been an enjoyable one-night stand.

Correction: there were six things he needed, because he really needed this elevator to move faster so he could start working on the rest of the list. Tony kicked at the side wall just as the door opened, because the universe was always happy to make Tony look like an idiot.

The guy who got in pushed the button for the lobby before looking Tony over with a smirk. “Not your morning?”

Tony scowled up at him--he had a few inches of height on Tony. He also had longish black hair that could use a comb, vividly green eyes, and a couple of livid suck marks on the pale skin of his neck. Tony had left some marks on definitely-not-Sherlock last night--those shoulders were meant for biting down on, even if they were attached to a dumbass--but these were pretty damn impressive. Also understandable, because just on the strength of fifteen seconds' irritating acquaintance, Tony could see the temptation that neck could present under the right circumstances.

“You would not believe how much it isn't my morning,” he muttered.

“You haven't shaved, your t-shirt is ripped--” Tony glanced down and saw the tear at the neck, then remembered strong fingers yanking at his shirt to get it off him faster. Damn it, and Tony liked this shirt. “--and if your eyes are normally that bloodshot, I'd suggest going to the student health center. So yes, I'd probably believe it.”

Fair enough. “I just had the most embarrassing one-night stand of my life,” Tony admitted. “And believe me, there's a lot of competition.”

The elevator doors slid open then, and Tall, Dark, and Well-Fucked stepped out and headed for the front doors. Tony followed, and if he checked the guy's ass out, well, that was only reflex. He wasn't going to do anything about it. After the Seth-Simon-Stanley experience, he wasn't going to fuck any strange guy ever again.

Well, at least not until Tuesday or so.

Even with that vow in mind, the ass was good enough--not as perfect as Shaun-Scott-Sebastian's, but good--for Tony to be at least a little glad that they both turned in the same direction when they left the dorm. Tony's apartment was within easy walking distance of this end of campus; convenient, since he usually wasn't fit to drive when he stumbled out of the lab--or out of somebody's dorm room--in the middle of the night, and since it was only early September, the worst weather he'd have to contend with would be a rain shower. And wherever this guy was going, it was across the quad, not in the direction of the parking lot.

It was also good enough for Tony to be willing to keep the conversation going, though admittedly, Tony could keep a conversation going when he was alone in a room. “So, what about you? Looks like you enjoyed your Saturday night.”

The guy grinned. It wasn't a very warm and friendly grin, but what the hell, if Tony wanted warm and friendly company, he'd get a puppy. Or get a puppy for Pepper and visit a lot, anyway, because Pepper would probably be able to keep a dog alive, and Tony frequently forgot to feed himself. “And my Sunday morning.”

“So, not a totally embarrassing one-night stand?”

“Oh, no, I think 'embarrassing' is putting it mildly. Just not for me.”

That sounded like a story Tony wanted to hear. Hell, he could use some commiseration about his
own morning, too, from someone other than his friends. Pepper tended to look kindly and non-
judgmentally sad every time she was reminded that Tony had better things to do than get himself 
tangled up in some kind of committed relationship. Rhodey never said anything about it, but when 
Pepper got started, he did shake his head in a way that suggested that he thought she was right. 
Tony didn't like getting that look from either of them, even though he wasn't quite enough of an 
asshole to complain that his friends actually cared about him.

And he wasn't going to do anything stupid, because he'd given up sex until at least Monday 
afternoon.

He could also still use that coffee. “I'd love to hear about it,” he said, “but I require caffeine. 
There's a great coffee shop about three blocks down that way--my treat.”

Again, that not-very-nice grin. It seemed that not-very-nice grins were one of Tony's turn-ons, 
which probably shouldn't have surprised him. Even Pepper could manage a frankly poisonous 
smile when she was sufficiently pissed off. “My mother always told me not to let strange men buy 
me drinks,” he said.

“So don't drink anything. Did she say anything about muffins? They have muffins. Also, I'm Tony. 
There, I'm not a strange man.”

The guy raised an eyebrow. “You seem unjustifiably confident about that, but it isn't as if I ever 
listen to my mother, anyway. And it's Loki.”

“What?”

“My name. Loki.”

Okay, maybe last night's guy could have been named Sherlock, because apparently stupid names 
weren't enough to distract Tony if the guy was hot enough.

Maybe he should change the expiration date on that vow of celibacy to Monday morning.

****

Half an hour later, Tony was working on his third cup of coffee--the first had been gulped down 
while he was still standing at the counter waiting for the rest of their order--the sight of Loki's 
breakfast wasn't making him queasy any more, and even his headache was retreating slightly. All 
was right with the world, or as right as it could get until the point where he could get home to his 
shower and a handful of painkillers.

They'd gotten all the small talk out of the way as they walked, the usual “what's your major?” crap 
that Tony rarely bothered with. Loki was a physics major, which had surprised Tony. From his 
looks--the long hair, the graceful slink of his hips as he walked, the etched gold chain around one 
wrist--Tony would have guessed art, or drama, or something equally pointless. Blurt that out 
had gotten him a scornful look and a brief summary of chaos theory, which Tony had heard of but 
never paid much attention to. He had never been as big a fan of theoretical science as he was of 
applications; that was why he'd gone into engineering.

“I'm all about the practical experience,” he'd said; “something I can get my hands on.” And holy 
shit, it had been a long time since he'd made an unintentional double entendre. Possibly not since 
he'd hit puberty.

Loki had just held his gaze for a little longer than necessary before looking down at Tony's hands. 
“There is a lot to be said for hands-on experience,” he agreed, and Tony did not flush, because
Tony Stark didn't turn red like some stammering kid just because a good-looking guy was giving his hands a speculative look.

At least Loki hadn't commented on Tony's red face, and by the time they'd reached the coffee shop, that, at least, had gone back to normal. By the time he'd finished his second cup of coffee and an explanation of what he was doing with the engineering school's “individualized major” option, he'd even stopped kicking himself for his brief loss of every shred of cool he'd ever possessed.

“So,” Loki said, taking a sip of his own coffee, “I believe you were going to tell me about the most embarrassing one-night stand of your life.” That smirk of his could start to get annoying, Tony thought, but it wasn't like he'd have to put up with it for very long. He'd sworn off sex until tomorrow morning, after all, so after they finished their coffee, he and Loki would go their separate ways. “What happened?”

“It's not so much what happened as that I completely missed the signs that this guy is a fucking mess,” Tony said. He wasn't concerned about announcing that his hookup last night was another guy--first of all, he didn't fucking care what people thought of him; but also, Loki had come out of the same men's dorm at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning.

The part that was hard to admit was that he'd been stupid. That he'd let the fact that a guy was hot and very eager to let Tony do a lot of filthy things to him convince him to look past all the wide-eyed wholesomeness that said guy had practically radiated, and to believe that hooking up with him wasn't going to wind up biting him in the ass.

Loki gestured impatiently. “Name five people on this campus who aren't fucking messes.”

“Yeah, but this guy was something else. I mean, it was fine last night, when we were both--not drunk, exactly--” Tony's alcohol tolerance was pretty high, and what's-his-name had said he'd only had a couple of beers--”but at least pretty happy. The sex was great, we made each other laugh, everything was fine.” Fine enough that Tony hadn't been irritated with himself for falling asleep afterward, because that left the possibility of a repeat performance in the morning open.

“And then this morning he got weird on me. But first, I need more coffee,” he added, grabbing his cup and Loki's and going up to the counter for refills.

“Smooth,” Loki said when he came back. “Were you trying to create suspense? Because this story seems drearily predictable. Let me guess. He sobered up, and suddenly Mr. Great Sex became Mr. Rabidly Homophobic?”

“Actually, no,” Tony said. “He became Mr. Let's Talk About What We Both Want From This Relationship. And when I pointed out that the only relationship I was interested in having was between his dick and my ass, and that I couldn't even remember his name--”

“Steve,” Loki said, and Tony set down his coffee in surprise. Yeah, that was it: Steve.

“I take it you know him.”

“Some kind of art major, looks like he bench-presses minivans, has an American flag hanging in his dorm room, right over the picture of his mom?”

“I didn't ask his major, but yeah.” He vaguely remembered kicking some sketchbooks off the bed, too, so “some kind of art major” seemed plausible.

“That sounds like Steve. On the bright side, he does take 'no' for an answer; he's not going to start stalking you or anything.” Loki paused, then added, “You may want to avoid him for a while,
though, unless your tolerance for quiet, manly tears is higher than mine.”

Quiet. Manly. Tears. Oh, fuck no. “Why is it so hard to find somebody who's only interested in my body?” Tony grumbled.

Loki sniffed the air, his upper lip curling. “Because your body smells like a still?”

“So I need a shower. Tell me something I don't already know,” Tony said. Not to mention some clothes that hadn't had beer spilled on them. “Unless you're offering to wash my back?”

“I haven't finished eating.” Loki took another bite of his muffin to underline his point.

“That was not a no.” Besides, hadn't he taken a vow of chastity until dinner-time tonight? It wasn't even ten a.m. yet; he'd have plenty of time for a shower. Maybe he could convince Loki to hang around until dinner. “Anyway, it's not like you did any better last night, did you?”

“Oh, really? As I said before, any embarrassment isn't on my part.” He licked his lips, chasing a stray crumb, and Tony found himself watching Loki's mouth so closely that he lost the thread of the conversation for a moment.

Fuck, he needed more coffee. He needed that shower. He needed to stop imagining Loki's mouth wrapped around his cock, which was continuing to remind him that it was present and in working order.

Until something Loki said penetrated the haze of Tony's thoughts, bringing all the pleasant fantasies to a screeching halt.

“You-- Wait. You had sex with your brother?”

“Believe it or not, it was an accident,” Loki said. He still looked pleased, almost proud, like accidental incest was something that had taken great brilliance to pull off successfully.

“How do you accidentally fuck your brother? Only child here, so there's probably something I'm missing, but it seems like the kind of thing that would be hard to do by mistake.” Holy shit, he was never going to call himself depraved again in his life. This was some next-level dysfunction, right there. This was--

“First of all, Thor is my stepbrother,” Loki corrected him. “And I've never met him before in my life. I've only ever seen a couple of pictures of him, and in the most recent ones, he's about two years old. To tell you the truth, I didn't even remember he existed until I ran into him. My stepmother doesn't talk about him, at least not to me.”

That made a little more sense--in terms of being not completely bug-fuck crazy, at least--and when Loki's smirk faded for a moment, Tony even had a split second of actually feeling bad for whatever fucked-up family situation Loki had going on before remembering the key point of the conversation.

"You accidentally-on-purpose fucked your stepbrother."

The smirk was back, and Loki hadn't corrected the "on purpose" part. "I suppose I should probably tell him at some point that we aren't actually related. I may have failed to correct his impression that she's my biological mother as well as his."

Damn it, Tony was never going to forgive Loki for making him spit out perfectly good coffee. "You walked out of there leaving him thinking he had sex with his half-brother?” He grabbed a
napkin and rubbed at the coffee stain on his shirt. All it did was leave little wads of paper on the shirt along with the coffee. If he'd had any hope that this shirt wasn't a total write-off, it was gone now.

"I thought about telling him, but then he set off on his guilt trip before I could say anything, and... well. It was more entertaining this way." Loki broke off a piece of his muffin and ate it, just like he'd been talking about the weather instead of seriously fucking with someone's head. Then he licked a crumb off his thumb, just like he wanted Tony to spontaneously combust.

"You are a complete asshole," Tony breathed, and he wasn't quite sure whether it was the mindfuck or the licking he was talking about. Maybe both.

Loki inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment. "Thank you."

"That wasn't--" Tony paused. "Actually, now that I think about it, it might have been a compliment. I've been called an asshole before, with a lot of justification, but I am nowhere near your league." Also, the knowledge that Loki was cheerfully telling him that he'd just devastated some poor sap's life because it was more entertaining that way probably should have acted as a warning sign. There ought to be alarms going off in his head right now.

Instead, the only signal going off in Tony's head was the "blood supply to brain being diverted southward" one, because no matter what Tony's--admittedly somewhat underused--conscience was telling him, his dick was telling him that conniving sons of bitches were, in fact, exactly Tony's type, at least when they looked like Loki. And apparently while someone willing to commit honest-to-god incest was just a little bit too "Dueling Banjos" for Tony's tastes, his dick had zero problems with "no, really, he's just my estranged stepbrother."

Sometimes Tony thought his dick really, really hated him.

"Of course I'm out of your league. You should have been able to tell that at first sight," Loki said, and dodged the napkin Tony threw at him.

****

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who want more information about the "Minor or Background Relationships" tag--there are a lot of those! First of all, despite the fact that there is more than one pairing featuring Loki or Tony in this fic, and there's a lot of overlap in the pairings in general, there's no infidelity in the fic. They're either short-term relationships, pairings that don't involve any kind of commitment to one another (so no cheating), or involve characters in open/polyamorous relationships.

(Also, side note: Loki and Thor are not related by blood in this fic, nor were they raised together. They are technically step-siblings, but they don't know one another.)

Aside from the ones tagged above (romantic/sexual relationships only; I didn't list any of the minor platonic relationships):

* Tony Stark/Steve Rogers (brief; also note: I love Steve. Tony's opinion of him in this fic is not mine.)
* Pepper Potts/Happy Hogan (background)
* James Rhodes/Carol Danvers (background)
* Thor/Jane Foster (mentioned very briefly)
* Jane Foster/Darcy Lewis (mentioned very briefly)
* Steve Rogers/Bucky Barnes (brief appearance)

(If I missed anything, let me know and I'll add it.)
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

He wasn't going to marry the guy, or even date him. He just wanted to have sex with him, though splitting a pizza wasn't completely out of the question, either. The thrill would probably wear off by Wednesday at the latest. Or maybe Friday. Still, that meant this wouldn't even interrupt his regularly-scheduled Bad Decision Weekends.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who's left kudos or a comment! I hope you continue to enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

Two hours later, Tony had worked through a reasonable amount of his to-do list. He'd had a double dose of Advil and enough coffee to make himself feel human; he'd spent a long time in the shower--and then an even longer time, because once he finally felt clean (weekends of going from the lab to a bar or party and then back to the lab were always a mistake, but drunk Tony was not a good listener) he decided he needed to stand under the cold water for a while, considering that he'd just spent nearly an hour with someone who could eat a cranberry-orange muffin with apparent obscene intent. He was wearing clothes that were neither ripped nor dirty--and if he was still going commando, well, that was okay, because he'd chosen pants that didn't chafe, and underwear wasn't strictly necessary.

It was also just going to get in his way. At least, it would unless Loki decided that it'd be more fun to stand Tony up than to actually come over here and fuck him cross-eyed, which wasn't strictly how Tony had phrased the invitation, but had been the obvious subtext. (That was the reason behind the cold shower; Tony didn't mind seeming eager, but there was a limit.)

But now there was nothing to do but wait, and hell, if Loki didn't show up, Tony could pretend that he'd actually intended to swear off sex for forty-eight hours, instead of the forty-eight minutes or so before he'd realized that climbing Loki like the proverbial tree was a much better option.

In an attempt to appeal to his common sense, Tony tried reminding himself that he was used to being the biggest asshole in the room and that wasn't likely around Loki, but to be honest, the change sounded pretty good to him. He even tried reminding himself that Pepper would probably worry about him if she realized he was having sex with someone who somehow had less concern for other people's feelings than Tony himself, but Pepper was going to worry about him anyway. Besides, he wasn't going to marry the guy, or even date him. He just wanted to have multiple rounds of spectacular sex, though splitting a pizza wasn't completely out of the question, either. The thrill would probably wear off by Wednesday at the latest.

Okay, or given how fast he jumped off the couch when the door buzzer sounded, maybe by Friday. Still, that meant this wouldn't even interrupt his regularly-scheduled Bad Decision Weekends.
A text message arrived just then—*Downstairs, let me in*—so instead of hitting the intercom button, Tony just buzzed the door open and tried to relocate his cool before Loki got upstairs.

He shouldn't have bothered, because it evaporated a couple of minutes later when Loki looked him over from the doorway and gave him a slow smile. “That's a definite improvement over the last time I saw you.”

Tony could say the same. Loki's hair, damp from the shower, was pulled back, and that plus the V-neck of his soft green shirt revealed that the marks Tony had been admiring earlier extended further up: past his ear and down to his collarbone. Only on one side, though; plenty of room for Tony to give him a matching set. “Yeah, I clean up great.”

“Still a midget, but I suppose there isn't much you can do about that.” Loki didn't actually have to brush against him to get into the apartment; Tony had moved back a step or two to let him in. Loki definitely didn't have to press against him to get into the apartment, but Tony couldn't really complain about the fact that he did.

“I'll have you know that I'm average height for an American male,” Tony muttered, scowling at Loki. “Just because some people are freakishly tall—”

Loki closed the door behind himself, then moved closer to Tony again, so that Tony took another step backward, until he felt the door to the coat closet against his back. Loki's hands came to rest on Tony's shoulders, and for a moment, Tony felt trapped, fighting against a flare of panic. He didn't know Loki. He *did* know that Loki was kind of an asshole. This might have been incredibly stupid.

Then Loki leaned down, his lips just a millimeter or two from Tony's, so that Tony could feel their movement when Loki spoke. “Don't worry, Tony, I'm sure there are plenty of things we can do even if your cock is proportional to the rest of you.”

“Fuck you.” The panic subsided; Tony grabbed fistfuls of Loki's shirt, pulling him closer. He kissed Loki, hard, nipping at Loki's bottom lip, the kiss getting slower and deeper and dirtier until Tony was grinding against Loki's hip.

“You first,” Loki murmured, “but if you're a good boy, you'll get your turn.” He angled his hips slightly, and then his dick was pressed against Tony's, leaving Tony gasping. Jesus, this was ridiculous; he was usually more in control than this.

Or maybe his voice only sounded desperate to his own ears, because when he came back with, “And what do I get if I'm bad?” Loki's eyes went dark, green swallowed up by black.

“You're about to find out,” he said, breath hot against Tony's ear. His tongue darted out and traced along Tony's earlobe.

Tony grinned. This was more like it; no small talk, no pretending to be interested in the other person as a human being. Just “Hi, you're hot, let's get naked.” With, okay, maybe a hint of, “I'm only eighty-six percent sure you're not a serial killer, but I'm all right with those odds,” thrown in. He ground against Loki again, hearing Loki's breath stutter and hitch, and then said, “Bedroom's that way,” with a wave of his hand in the direction of the hall.

“I admire your efficiency,” Loki said, which proved his good taste since Tony had been admiring it as well. He led the way into his bedroom, glad that the cleaning service came in on Fridays and he hadn't slept at home since then. Given that Loki's last partner lived in the dorms, Tony figured clean, eight-hundred-thread-count sheets would make a positive impression. Not that Tony cared what Loki thought of his apartment, but any little thing--anything at all that might make it less
likely that Loki would decide that wrecking Tony's life would be entertaining--couldn't hurt, right?

Loki didn't really give the bedroom a second glance, but that wasn't a bad thing, because all his attention appeared to be focused on Tony himself. His fingers hooked into the collar of Tony's t-shirt, pulling it down to give him unfettered access to Tony's throat. "I've seen you looking at my neck," he said, licking at the hollow of Tony's throat. "Shall I give you your own marks?"

"Fuck, yes," Tony said, scrambling to pull his shirt over his head, to bare as much skin as possible for Loki's mouth. Then he grabbed Loki's arm and tugged him over to the bed; not having to rely on his legs to support him seemed like a great idea considering that Loki's kisses had already made his knees feel a little wobbly. Wobbling was not an attractive look.

Loki offered no resistance, only kicked off his shoes before joining Tony on the bed. "Greedy, aren't you?" he asked, his voice almost warm with amusement.

"You know it," Tony said cheerfully. "It's one of my better qualities."

Loki must have agreed, because he moved to straddle Tony, one knee on either side of Tony's hips. He began licking and biting a trail down Tony's neck, sucking hard enough on the sensitive skin that Tony was sure he could feel it on his dick. That was hot enough, but then Loki started talking. "You look absolutely gorgeous like this," he whispered, punctuating his words with kisses and nips. "I can't wait to spread you open, get you slick and ready for me."

Tony's dick throbbed, and he fumbled to undo his pants. Tight jeans might make his ass look great, but right now, he just needed them out of his way. "Talk's cheap," he muttered, then groaned when Loki bit down on his nipple.

"I wonder if you'll be able to be this much of a brat when my cock is buried deep inside you." He managed to make it sound like idle speculation, like having Tony writhing and moaning underneath him wasn't getting to him at all.

Asshole.

"Just so you know," Tony said, "my ass is fantastic enough that most people lose the power of speech when presented with its greatness."

Loki didn't bite down this time, just continued his path down Tony's chest to his stomach, but he raked his fingernails across Tony's shoulder. Jesus, he was going to be a mess in the morning--bites and hickeys and scratches covering his torso. He wasn't going to be able to move without remembering this. It was going to be great.

"For the record," Loki said, "the last time I got tested was about a month ago. I'm clean. I mean, I'm not fucking you without a condom, but I thought you'd want to know."

For the record, Tony definitely appreciated someone who could have this conversation without a hint of embarrassment. Especially when it didn't distract him from licking a stripe down Tony's stomach, then blowing on it to watch him shiver. "Me too," Tony managed to say. "About six weeks ago."

"Good." Loki punctuated that by leaving tiny bite marks, light enough that Tony was sure the redness faded almost instantly, along the path of one of Tony's ribs.

Tony was achingly hard now; he tried to slide a hand into his pants to touch himself, but Loki swatted his hand away. "If you'd rather jerk off," he said sharply, "I can always see myself out."
Oh no. Hell, no. Tony had been promised a thorough fucking, and he was going to get it. “Just get on with it.”

That got him an impatient huff, but Loki moved off Tony's thighs. “Then you're overdressed.” While Tony squirmed out of his jeans, Loki peeled off his own shirt, then stood to take off his pants.

Was Tony imagining things, or did the pale skin of Loki's chest turn slightly pink when he realized how intently Tony was watching him? It didn't matter; Tony was going to look unless Loki asked him to stop. He'd suspected Loki would look good naked, and as usual, he'd been right; lean and elegant, the flush of his cock contrasting with the pale skin of his stomach.

From the curve of Loki's lips--Tony couldn't quite call it a smile--he liked what he saw as well, though all he said was, “At least something about you is average-sized. Well... almost.”

“Such a jackass,” Tony muttered, turning onto his side so that he could get the lube and condoms from the nightstand. “Maybe I should send you home.”

“Your call, little man,” Loki said, but he was already coaxing Tony back into position, pushing his knees apart, like it was a foregone conclusion.

Which it probably was, because Tony didn't even have to think about angling his hips upward, tossing Loki a pillow. “Put that under me.” Loki had promised to spread him open, to impale Tony on his dick, and yes, Tony wanted that. He was pretty sure Loki wasn't going to be gentle or careful, and while Tony wasn't in pain as such, he appreciated a good hard fucking.

After the pillow was under Tony's hips, Loki poured lube into his hand, warming it up a little. “No touching yourself, or I'll stop,” he warned.

“What kind of rule is that?”

“The kind that leads to you getting fucked, so maybe think twice about bitching?”

Well, when he put it that way--and when Loki was slicking him up with skin-warmed lube, and then sliding two fingers into him--Tony could see his point. Bitching was unnecessary.

As soon as he'd adjusted to the intrusion, Tony pushed back against the fingers, trying to draw Loki further in. He whimpered as Loki found his prostate, and clutched tightly at the bedspread to fight off the urge to wrap his hand around his leaking dick, because he didn't want this to stop--not the movement of Loki's fingers deep inside him, or the quiet, dry commentary just at the edge of his hearing.

“That's right--god, you are such a slut, you're perfect, I can't wait to fuck you...” Loki leaned down to kiss Tony, still whispering filthy praise against Tony's lips, and then it was all too much, and Tony screamed something that didn't quite manage to be English before coming so hard he thought for a second he was going to black out.

Loki's smugly triumphant expression as he looked down at Tony might have been annoying if Tony wasn't feeling so very good. As it was, he just grinned up at Loki and said, “That was more-or-less adequate.”

“Adequate? I'll show you adequate.”

Tony let his gaze flick down to Loki's crotch, then back up with a smirk. “When?”
And oh, when Tony was in a mood like this, there was nothing better than a guy with ego issues. “Now, that's when,” Loki said, and Tony spread himself open, trying not to let Loki see how much he desperately wanted to be fucked, to be filled up, to make Loki's eyes go dark and wide again.

It wasn't like Tony didn't know he was fucked-up, that somebody--pretty much anybody--wanting him was enough to get him to go along with just about anything. He generally wasn't bothered by it. There were worse things to be into.

But he didn't necessarily want Loki to figure him out; something told Tony that could be a catastrophically terrible idea. Better just to go with the flow and wait ever-so-patiently--minus a few dramatic sighs--for Loki to put on a condom and apply more lube.

Tony was relaxed enough right now that there wasn't any discomfort as Loki entered him, only a feeling of being gloriously full again. “Give me a second,” he said before Loki could start to move; he made himself take a few deep breaths, making sure everything really was okay. He had a tendency to get carried away and regret it later, and he didn't want to do that this time. He just wanted to be able to look back on an afternoon of excellent sex.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, great, just needed a minute. You know, to figure out whether I could feel anything or not.”

Loki's response was to thrust deep into Tony. “Can you feel that?”

Tony was unable to do anything but whimper and arch his back, but that was enough; Loki began thrusting into him with a steady rhythm, and Tony lost himself in matching the pace. His hands were resting on Loki's thighs, fingers digging into the muscles; so far, Loki hadn't objected. He hadn't really objected to anything Tony had done, to be fair, except when Tony had told him his dick was too small, and what guy would like that?

He definitely didn't object when Tony clenched tight around him, only let out a cry that almost sounded like a howl. “Fuck, yes, Tony.” Tony was hard again himself, and Loki wrapped one hand around Tony's dick, stroking him along with his own shuddering thrusts.

It was over way too soon for Tony, but even with Loki flopped on top of them so that they made a sweaty, sticky pile, Tony couldn't keep from grinning. That had been phenomenal. So damn good that--

--that he realized he was waiting for the other shoe to drop. This was going to get weird somehow. It always did. The better the sex, the weirder things tended to get, in fact.

Loki moved off him, getting rid of the condom and standing beside the bed, looking down at Tony.

Yep. This was exactly when things tended to go wrong. Tony braced himself for whatever it was going to be. At least he was pretty sure Loki wasn't his secret brother.

But Loki only smiled at him and said, “Would you mind if I grabbed a shower before I go? I worked up a hell of a sweat.”

Which was pretty much what Tony dreamed of his hookups saying. That was why he almost never brought anyone home--because hardly anyone knew how to make a prompt exit.

So he had no idea why he heard himself saying, “Sure, it's through there, but you don't have to leave if you don't want. I was thinking we could get a pizza? Besides, you promised that if I was good, I'd get to be on top.”
Loki chuckled. “I'm not sure you were *that* good. Then again, the thing I like about undersized men is that they try so hard.”

“That's a yes, isn't it? Buried in there under all that bullshit?”

“That's a yes. I still want that shower, though.” Tony waved toward his bathroom again, and Loki nodded and disappeared through the doorway.

What the hell had he just done? His hookup had wanted to leave right after sex, and Tony had asked him to *stay*, like an idiot. He'd sent Loki to the master bathroom, which meant Tony was going to have to use the guest bathroom down the hall. *And* he'd forgotten to ask what Loki wanted on his pizza.

At least he could solve the pizza issue by ordering one with just cheese, and there *was* a second shower for him to use.

The “holy shit, I'm an idiot” problem, he suspected, was going to be a lot trickier.

****

Chapter End Notes

Next week: Second verse, same as the first, because Mir likes writing smut.
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

The second half of Loki's visit to Tony's apartment on Sunday afternoon.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to all of you who are reading. I'm a bit slow answering comments; I only tend to check my AO3 inbox once a week or so. But I do appreciate them (and kudos! and readers in general!), and they will be answered. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

“So, where's your roommate?” Loki asked. They were on the couch with pizza and beer; Loki had left his shoes and socks off and was resting his feet on Tony's lap. Tony was trying hard to hate it, without much success.

“I don't have one,” he said. “I don't play well with others.”

Loki waved a hand--still holding a slice of pizza--around in the air. “So how many extra student loans did you take out to be able to afford this place? My apartment is a slum compared to this, and I'm going to be in debt until I'm sixty, at least.”

Oh. He had just introduced himself as “Tony,” hadn't he? He shrugged, taking a drink of beer before speaking. “None. My father pays for it.”

“Must be nice. Mine helps out, and that keeps me in groceries, but it doesn't stretch to this.”

“Yeah, well, it'd look pretty shitty if Howard Stark made his kid live in a dorm room, so here we are.” And, okay, maybe that wasn't a hundred percent fair to his father. Tony got his own apartment, complete with housekeeping services, because Tony was in college and needed a place to live. His father--or more likely his father's assistant--probably hadn't considered any other living options, or what people would think if Tony lived in the dorms. But Tony didn't really feel like being fair to his father most of the time.

“Your father is Howard Stark?”

Tony cringed. It sucked when people sounded that impressed by his father, especially since Tony had gotten over being impressed by him a long time ago. “Yeah. Just to save time: no, I can't get you an internship with Stark Industries this summer, and no, I don't really want to talk about him.” He took a long drink of his beer to give himself a reason not to say anything more, bracing himself for the questions that he was sure were coming. It didn't matter how many times he told people he didn't want to talk about being Howard Stark's son; they were going to ask anyway.
All Loki said was, “Next time, I'm not going to insist on paying for half the pizza,” and took the last slice of pepperoni.

“Huh. You sound pretty sure there's going to be a next time,” Tony said. “I mean, that was great, but it's not like you're a sex god or anything.”

“You're the one who wanted to be on top.”

“Next round, maybe. Next time implies that we're going to see each other again. And since I've been here for over two years and haven't ever run into you before this morning, I wouldn't be holding my breath.” Tony finished his drink and set the can down on the table. “Either move your feet or shove the pizza this way.”

Loki went with “both,” though wriggling his toes against Tony's crotch wasn't exactly what Tony had had in mind there. At least he could reach the pizza now. After a few bites, he went on, “Anyway, shouldn't you be going somewhere to reassure that poor sap that he didn't actually have sex with a blood relative?”

“Eventually.”

“You're just going to let him suffer until then? I mean, he's probably really freaked out.”

Loki shrugged. “But if I don't tell him, then he can't ask any questions about his mother, and I don't have to talk about family bullshit. You ought to understand that.”

“That bad, huh?”

“That boring. She's all right, really. It's just ancient history that doesn't have anything to do with me.”

Tony frowned. “Yeah, but I can kind of see his point. I mean, it sounds like his mom pretty much abandoned him, right? That'd have to suck.” He wasn't all that close to his own mother--a side effect of her being married to his dad, not anything she'd done or not done--but still, she was his mom and he loved her.

“From what I gather, it's his father's fault. When she left him, he had her declared an unfit parent and managed to get a court order so she couldn't even visit. I only know that much because after she married my dad, she tried to adopt me, and she couldn't.” He stretched and reached out for another can of beer. “With your budget, you could buy better beer than this.”

“It's the best the pizza place carries, and I can't remember what pocket I left my fake ID in.” The pizza place had asked for it once, two years ago, and never again. “Besides, why bring out the good stuff? I've already impressed you.” Shit, had he been trying to? This was--they were talking about their families, for fuck's sake. Like they were friends, or like this was a date, or--

No, rewind. Friends. Okay, they were friends, or potential friends, or at least friendly people who liked sex. Tony was a friendly guy. Loki... really didn't seem like one, but maybe Tony was just awesome enough to win him over.

This was just two friendly guys, having pizza because refueling was definitely needed before another round, and then they were absolutely not going to see one another again, because Tony was done with anything resembling a relationship. He'd tried it once, it had crashed and burned, and while Pepper was now basically his second-favorite person in the world (after himself), that didn't mean that he wanted to try that clusterfuck again.
But there were another two beers left in the six-pack, and Tony figured they might as well let their pizza digest for a while before doing anything strenuous, so there was nothing wrong with putting on a movie for a while. They could always pause it if they got distracted.

To his surprise, they made it all the way through one movie and partway through a second without getting distracted at all. Well, maybe a little. There'd been a couple of boring stretches—a courtroom scene and some cheesy romance crap—that they'd livened up by lazily making out, neither of them in any hurry to go anywhere with it, just appreciating the slide of skin against skin and the heat of a mouth pressed against theirs.

Then, in the middle of a car-chase sequence that went on too long even for Tony, who usually enjoyed them, Loki got up and disappeared down the hall for a few minutes. Tony didn't think anything of it, obviously, until he returned wearing a smirk that had Tony wondering whether he should have the place searched for explosives when Loki went home.

When Loki rejoined him on the couch, he pretty much draped himself over Tony. “So, I think you said something about fucking me?” he murmured into Tony's left ear, punctuating it with a sharp nip to Tony's earlobe that sent a jolt of electricity down his spine. “I hope you were serious, because I got myself all slicked up and ready for you.”

Tony swallowed hard, trying to find a response that wasn't just the incoherent sounds of a once-brilliant mind melting into a pool of lust. Once he got his verbal ability back online, he grinned. “Okay, who's the slut now?”

“I just want to make sure you take your promises seriously,” Loki said.

“Oh, I do,” he agreed. “So should we move back into the bedroom?”

“I was thinking you could bend me over the arm of the couch and fuck me right here.” He tugged at the zipper of Tony's jeans. “I brought out a condom and the lube.”

“Well, aren't you a regular Boy Scout?”

“That depends. Do they give merit badges for sodomy?”

Tony laughed. “If you're good enough, maybe I'll get one custom-made for you.”

Loki had conquered both the zipper and the button of the jeans by now, and slipped his hand inside to stroke Tony's cock. “You should never wear underwear. I'm sure the world will appreciate easy access.”

“I thought my dick was too small to be worth bothering with,” he grumbled, raising his hips slightly to push against Loki's hand. He was half-hard already, and while it was tempting to make Loki take his time, something told Tony that would be a bad idea. This was all feeling very comfortable, and Tony did not do comfortable.

Also, he should probably not be finding himself enjoying this guy's personality, given that he was an asshole. If Tony wanted to spend time around people, it should be people nicer than he was himself, right? To encourage himself to be a better person? Loki was definitely not encouraging him to be a better person.

Loki was encouraging him to kiss him, though, deep hungry kisses that left Tony breathless and clutching frantically at Loki's shirt. That was a hell of a lot more appealing at the moment than any kind of self-improvement, and so was letting Loki keep stroking and teasing him into hardness.
“Bent over the couch, huh?”

“Unless you're worried about the upholstery.”

“Pretty sure the cleaning service Scotchguards it,” he said, which wasn't as casual and nonchalant as he might have hoped, but you couldn't have everything. “We're good.”

With one more kiss that left Tony's lower lip feeling bruised, Loki stood up. He started to pull his shirt off, but Tony shook his head. “Just get your pants far enough down that I can fuck you.”

Loki's answering grin let him know that he was playing this right. He unfastened his jeans, moving to stand at the end of the couch before pushing them and his boxers down to his knees. “How's this?”

“Bend over the arm and let me see.” Tony stood behind him and just looked for a moment, appreciating the view. He could see finger marks on Loki’s hips; he hadn't really been looking before, when they were in the bedroom, but they must have been there. They were too dark, the hands that made them too large, for them to have been from Tony.

Shit. It shouldn't have been so hot to see proof that another guy had been fucking Loki, and none too gently, not that long ago.

Shouldn't have been.

Definitely was.

Rather than telling Loki to move, Tony nudged his legs apart a little more, pushing Loki’s jeans further down to get them out of his way. Looking at him like this, Tony saw that Loki had been telling the truth; he could see the lube glistening between his spread cheeks. “I hope you did a good job slicking yourself up,” he said, “because I'm not planning on going easy on you.”

“You'd better fucking not,” Loki muttered, twisting to look at Tony over his shoulder.

“You know I'm going to take that as a challenge,” he said. “Where's that condom?”

“Coffee table.”

Tony grabbed it and the bottle of lube. His jeans were already undone, and he decided against taking them off, just ripping the condom packet open and putting on the condom. Just in case Loki hadn't been generous enough with the lube, Tony made sure to use more than he usually would; he wanted to fuck Loki into next week, but he didn't want to actually hurt him.

He put his hands on Loki’s hips, trying to make his fingers line up with the bruises there. Jeez, the guy must have been huge.

“You really like those marks, don't you?” Loki said. “And the ones on my neck. Like seeing proof that somebody was there before you?”

Kind of, yeah--it was definitely hot. But he also liked knowing that Loki had basically the same attitude to sex that Tony had: it was good, it should be done as often as possible, and it wasn't anything to take all that seriously. “I like the way they look on you,” he said.

“You can make more, you know.”

Probably not like that. Tony wasn't a weakling, but he didn't have hands like catcher's mitts, either.
Still, he tightened his grip on Loki's hips for a moment, just to let him know that Tony was in favor of the idea.

Then he took one hand away, holding Loki in place with the other while he guided his cock into position. “Let me know if you need me to stop.”

“I need you to start,” Loki grumbled, and Tony laughed.

All right, then, that was an invitation if he'd ever heard one. He took Loki's word that he was ready for him, positioning himself and then pushing inside with a swift thrust. Loki tensed at the intrusion, letting out a muffled gasp, and Tony made himself hold quite still, smoothing his hand over the curve of Loki's ass. He kept still even after he felt Loki start to relax, waiting until he heard, “Would you fucking get on with it?”

“Charming,” he said, but he gripped Loki's hips tightly and began to move. Fuck, that was good; Loki was hot and tight around him, and he pushed back against Tony's thrusts in an attempt to pull Tony in deeper. Not that Tony could get any deeper; with every thrust he was pulling nearly all the way out of Loki's body before slamming in again, feeling Loki's muscles clench around him.

He had to slow down for a moment or this was going to be over way too fast, and he'd never be able to get Loki out of the apartment quickly enough to avoid being mocked for it. So he leaned forward to kiss and lick at the back of Loki's neck, murmuring, “I bet you're just aching for me to touch you right now, aren't you? Want my hand on your cock?” He reached underneath Loki's body, rubbing his thumb over the head of Loki's erection. “Oh, yeah, you do,” he said, and when he took his hand away, he brought it up to his lips, licking off the drops of pre-come, then sucking at his thumb to make sure he got every last bit.

He made sure to pull his thumb out with an audible wet pop, just to make sure Loki knew what he'd done. “You taste so good,” he said. “Maybe I should have sucked your dick first, but I'm no good at delayed gratification, and I've wanted to fuck you since I saw you in the elevator this morning.”

Loki squirmed, trying to thrust against the couch, but Tony brought his hands back to Loki's hips and pulled him back. “Nah,” he said cheerfully. “I don't think I want to let you get off yet.” He chuckled at the frustrated whine that brought forth, but then added, “If you don't like what I'm doing, tell me, and I'll stop. Or do something different.”

“If I don't like what you're doing, you'll know,” Loki said. “I'm not likely to suffer in silence.”

“Good. I really don't want you to be silent. Though a little begging might be nice.”

He could picture the glare being directed at the couch cushions right now. But Loki only asked, “You mean like this?” and then, a second later, in a softer, needier voice, “God, please, Tony, fuck me harder, please, I need it....”

Tony knew Loki was just putting on an act to see if it got to him, but it was really fucking working. Tony started thrusting again, paying careful attention to the precise angle that made Loki whimper and struggle not to squirm, until all he could focus on was heat and friction and the tremors in his thigh muscles as he tried to make this last longer.

And maybe he could have, if he'd been willing to pull back, to slow down and recite the digits of pi in his head and not think about the fact that Loki had started in with the begging again, though it was mostly just “please” and his name, over and over. But he wasn't, and he couldn't, and he really didn't give a damn, because it was so fucking good to clutch at Loki's hips and thrust in one last
time before coming with a yell loud enough that he was vaguely glad the living room didn't share a wall with another apartment.

He wanted to just collapse across Loki's back until he could breathe again, but instead, he pulled out--oddly gratified by Loki's whine--and disposed of the condom. “I'll be right back. Stay there,” he added, running his hand over Loki's ass and squeezing slightly.

He went down to the guest bathroom and cleaned himself up, bringing out a warm washcloth. “Want me to clean you up some?” he offered; at Loki's nod, he did his best to remove the traces of drying lube before saying, “I want to watch you jerk yourself off.”

Loki lifted his head, grinning up at Tony. “I think you've earned that.” He straightened up, stretching before sitting down on the couch--gingerly, Tony noticed, and couldn't help feeling pleased.

Tony considered sitting on the coffee table for a better view, but decided he'd rather be close enough to touch and chose the couch. Loki must have approved; he slid back into the corner of the couch so that he could angle himself more toward Tony.

“You like to watch, huh?” Loki said, reaching for the bottle of lube and pouring some into his hand, then taking hold of his cock.

“What can I say? I'm a visual kind of guy.” He'd always liked this. He'd liked it even more with Pepper, once he knew her well enough that he could stay focused on her face and still know just what she was feeling, how close she was getting, just from the changes in her facial expression. Not that it was worth all the rest of the crap that went with a relationship, just to have that again. Especially when it wasn't exactly bad to sit here and watch Loki's hand sliding up and down his cock. He wasn't putting on a show for Tony, not now, too eager to finally get to come.

“I could tell that from the way you can't take your eyes off the marks on my neck. You don't seem to mind talking much, either.” Loki's grin looked a little less self-satisfied than usual; distraction looked good on him. “It'd be fun to tie your hands and make you listen to every single detail of how I got these marks. Not touching you, not letting you touch yourself, just seeing how crazy I can drive you just by talking.”

Oh, hell, yes, it would be. But that would mean a repeat engagement, and Tony wasn't looking for that. “You might have a few new marks to remember me by,” he said instead, trying to steer the conversation back to something safer. He'd done his best, anyway, digging his fingers into Loki's hips.

“I won't mind.” Loki fell silent now, tipping his head back as he worked his cock faster, his thumb rubbing over the slit every time his hand moved up to the head. Silent, that was, except for the slight clinking of the chain around his wrist and the gasps and groans that--even as satisfied as he was--made Tony's cock twitch.

“Fuck, you look gorgeous like that,” Tony breathed. “I knew I wanted to be able to watch you come. Maybe I should have had you ride me. Best of both worlds that way.” He kept thinking of things they could have done, probably would do if there was ever another time, but that wasn't going to happen. Focus on what was happening now, because what was happening now--

Loki closed his eyes, his hand ceasing its motion as he came.

That asshole, Tony thought. Even his O-face didn't look stupid. If Tony spent any more time
around him, he would really get to hate Loki.

He hadn't realized he was still watching--technically, maybe, staring--until Loki opened his eyes again and grinned lazily at him. “Like the show, did you?” He didn't give Tony a chance to answer; instead, he brought his hand up to his mouth and began licking his fingers clean, keeping his eyes locked on Tony's the entire time. The evil, teasing bastard.

When he'd finished--when Tony was biting his tongue to keep from suggesting that they do this again sometime--he got up, kicked his jeans and underwear off the rest of the way, and carried them with him into the bathroom. Smart move, Tony thought; he'd watched more than one guy trip over his own pants before. Not that he was looking for trivial reasons to approve of Loki, because that smacked of trying to find a justification for seeing him again.

Not happening.

Tony occupied himself by clearing up the pizza boxes and beer cans until Loki came out.

“Have you seen my shoes?”

“Under the coffee table.”

“Thanks,” Loki said, putting them on and then getting his jacket from where he'd tossed it on a chair earlier. “I should probably be going; I have a paper due in the morning.”

“Yeah, I should hit the lab,” Tony said, even though he'd almost forgotten how much he'd been longing for uninterrupted lab time earlier.

Loki shrugged on his jacket, then came over and kissed Tony. That wasn't all that much of a surprise, but what did rock Tony back on his heels a little was that the kiss was slow and almost soft, nothing like the way they'd been kissing all afternoon. Loki cupped Tony's face in his hands, thumbs stroking over Tony's temples, and Tony resisted the urge to lean into the touch. It wasn't fair to give people expectations that Tony had no intention of fulfilling.

“See you around, Stark,” Loki said as he let Tony go.

“Just as long as there aren't any quiet, manly tears involved,” Tony replied; he could still hear Loki laughing when the door closed behind him.

****

Chapter End Notes

Next week: Tony spends some time with his friends, and is absolutely and totally done with Loki. (He clearly didn't notice that "3 of 22 chapters" in the fic header.)
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

Tony spends some time with his friends, and finds out that one of them already knows Loki, or knows of him, at least.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everybody who's been reading and commenting! I've been living with this story for nearly a year now, and so it's a bit nerve-wracking setting it free on the Internet. It's nice to know that there are other people who enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

By Wednesday, the marks Loki had left—at least the ones that showed when Tony was wearing a shirt—had faded a lot, although a few of the ones on his chest and stomach were still pretty dark. But “faded a lot” and “disappeared completely” weren't the same thing, and when Tony pulled up a chair next to Rhodey in the student center snack bar, both Rhodey and Pepper noticed before Tony had taken the wrapper off his straw and stuck it in his drink.

“I heard you had one hell of a Saturday night,” Rhodey said, “but I didn't need to see proof.”

Tony stifled his urge to correct Rhodey--no, it was Sunday afternoon--by taking a bite of his cheeseburger. “And hello to both of you,” he said. “How's your week going? Me, I'm fighting an asshole grad student for space in the lab, and I still can't figure out why I have to waste my time in Introduction to Poetry.” He probably should have gotten all that general education crap out of the way freshman year, but he'd been hoping putting it off would make it go away. It hadn't, and while Tony had been able to test out of a lot of it, apparently he was stuck reading poetry three mornings a week this semester.

They both ignored him. “Saturday night?” Pepper said to Rhodey. “Do I even want to know?”

“No, but I had to hear about it, so I'll share. It seems someone picked up a guy I know from ROTC.”

“He didn't say anything about being a cadet,” Tony blurted out. He'd have avoided Steve if he'd known that--well, he'd have avoided Steve if he'd known much of anything about Steve other than that he'd been hot and interested. But specifically, he tried to keep the mess that his personal life sometimes became from splashing on to Rhodey in any way, which meant, among other things, not sleeping with any of the Air Force ROTC cadets, no matter how hot they were.

“He's not, really,” Rhodey said. “He's just in a couple of the classes that are open to anybody.” Rhodey kept trying to get Tony to take one of those as an elective. Tony had always thought “because Orienteering sounds boring as fuck” was a good enough reason to say no, but now he had
an even better one. “At least he doesn't seem to know we're friends. He just moped about this fantastic guy he met this weekend who totally blew him off. I'd guessed it was you before he even mentioned your name.”

“Oh, come on,” Tony said, “there has to be at least one other fantastic guy on campus.”

They both glared at him. “Let me guess,” Pepper said. “Tony picked him up, they had sex, and Tony ran out of there like his ass was on fire.” She shook her head. “I have no idea how we managed to date for almost a semester and a half without Tony transferring to the University of Fiji so he never had to talk about his feelings.”

“Because you are a saint among women,” Tony said, grinning. “Besides, did you ever think you might have spoiled me for all other relationships?”

“No,” she said flatly. “I love you, Tony, and I'm glad we stayed friends, but I'm not going to take the blame for your issues.”

“You wound me, Pep,” he said. “But you're also right. Anyway, your summary of my Saturday night left out Sunday morning, when Rhodey's good buddy Steve wanted to Talk About Our Relationship.” He did his best to pronounce the capital letters--that was definitely the way it sounded when Steve had said it.

“Oh, shit,” Rhodey said, laughing. “Even for a normal person, that would have been rushing things a little. Since we're talking about you, I'm honestly surprised you didn't move to Fiji.”

“Exactly,” Tony said. He'd finished his fries, and he didn't remember whether he'd had dinner last night, so he stole a couple off Rhodey's tray. Pepper always got some kind of salad for lunch, probably to make her food un-stealable, the fiend. “Also, now I have to make sure to avoid him for the next few weeks, because I've been warned that there will probably be 'quiet, manly tears' if I don't.”

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “He seemed fine,” he said. “Just annoyed that you took off like that.”

“Who warned you?” Pepper asked. “Tony, you didn't sleep with someone while his roommate was home, did you?”

Well, at least she didn't add again, even though all three of them were clearly thinking it. “Nah. I was talking to someone about my weekend, and it turns out he, um, knew Steve.”

“Biblically, I assume,” Rhodey said, swatting Tony's hand away when he reached for another fry.

“You know it.” Damn, he was hungry. Okay, he definitely hadn't had dinner last night. He'd have to make sure he didn't do that again tonight. Or maybe just get another cheeseburger after Rhodey and Pepper finished giving him a hard time. “And believe me, he's worth knowing.”

Pepper got that look on her face again. The “I'm not telling you how to live your life, but I just want you to be happy, Tony,” look. The one that never went away even when Tony told her that he was. At least Rhodey didn't worry about him. Not that way, at least. About Tony's eating and sleeping and drinking habits, but not his love life.

Rhodey groaned. “Okay, I can tell you're dying to brag. Which is downright cruel of you, Stark; I haven't even had time to think about dating this semester.”

“Yeah, but I don't date,” Tony said. “It's way more efficient.” Loki had appreciated his efficiency in getting them to the bedroom. Tony had enjoyed that; so few people did appreciate that about
“You're smiling,” Pepper said, then gave a little gasp. “Tony, did you meet somebody?”

“No!” Tony said immediately. “I mean, yes, in the sense that I hadn't ever seen him before, and then I had, but not the way you mean. All that happened was that Loki and I had sex. A lot of sex, but that was all it was. Then he went home, and I went to the lab, and I probably won't see him again unless we both spend the night with guys in the same dorm some weekend.” Pepper's pleased expression faded partway through his speech, and by the time he finished, she'd gone back to looking worried again.

“You didn't hook up with Loki Laufeyson, did you?” She'd started fidgeting with her napkin. That wasn't good. Pepper didn't usually fidget unless Tony had done something amazingly stupid and she was struggling to not call him a moron.

He shrugged. “Damned if I know. I didn't get his last name. Hell, I'm impressed that I remember his first name; I didn't remember Steve's until Loki reminded me. But given the fairly low odds that there are two people on campus named 'Loki', probably?”

“Don't see him again,” she said. “Please? He's bad news.”

“I don't plan to, and I already know that.” He wondered if Loki had gone back to his stepbrother and told him the truth yet. He wondered how hard his stepbrother had punched Loki when he did. “But I didn't know you knew him.”

“I don't, not really. But I know his ex. You remember Clint Barton? We did that big marketing project together last fall?”

Tony thought he vaguely remembered Pepper bringing a guy to lunch with them a few times. That was during the time when sitting at a table across from Pepper had still been painful, some days, so he hadn't paid too much attention, but the name sounded right. He didn't remember a lot about him, though, except maybe—“Wait, is he the one who... he's really good at some weird sport, right?”

“Archery,” Pepper said. “He almost made the last Olympic team.” She chewed on her lower lip. “And now, who knows. He's a mess. He's taking some time off from school to get his head together, but we talk online sometimes.”

“Stress is a bitch,” Tony said, “but how is that Loki's fault? I mean, I can't imagine that he'd be a great boyfriend, but what did he do, exactly?”

She shrugged. “Exactly? I don't know. I know he wasn't great when they were together--Clint says his friends never liked Loki and tried to talk Clint out of dating him--but Clint didn't seem miserable. Mostly I think he was just a jealous, moody asshole.”

Tony was about to say that that didn't sound too bad--not great, but pretty common--until she went on, “But then they started having problems, and things obviously got bad. We were in the same project group in a class last spring, too, and I wound up doing most of Clint's work--which wasn't like him, or I'd never have worked with him a second time. He just totally fell apart. Clint didn't like giving me a lot of details, but seriously? He's seeing a therapist, he took time off school. This wasn't just your average bad breakup.”

Okay, that didn't sound awesome, but it also didn't sound like Pepper really knew what happened. It was an ugly breakup. Hell, he and Pepper had had a pretty ugly breakup freshman year, for that matter. They got over it, and Tony, at least, hadn't needed therapy afterward; if Pepper had, she'd
never said anything about it. But they'd been shitty to each other, and they went a few months
without talking after they split up. They hadn't really started trying to be friends again until last fall,
and it had been spring semester, nearly a year after their breakup, before things were really okay
between them. So a bad breakup didn't mean that someone was a terrible person.

Not that he was doubting that Loki had been a world-class asshole. He'd been around the guy for
less than eight hours, and he was already sure that whatever happened, most of the blame probably
wasn't this Clint guy's. He'd seemed okay, and Pepper liked him, so he probably was a lot less of a
son-of-a-bitch than Loki. But when you got right down to it, it didn't matter.

Rhodey frowned. “That does not sound good,” he said. “Nobody is hot enough to be worth letting
that into your life.”

“He's not in my life,” Tony protested. “We fucked. It was good. It's over. I mean, I agree with you,
Pepper. Dating him would be a terrible idea, but I'm not going out with him. I might bump into him
in line at Starbucks or something, but one of the key points of a one-night stand is that they only
last one night.”

And even though he'd kept the text Loki had sent him so that he still had Loki's number, he was
going to delete that ASAP. Maybe he'd been considering a repeat performance, but not if it was
going to bring melodramatic bullshit into his life. He could get enough of that by just being
himself.

****

“Thanks for coming with me tonight,” Pepper said as Tony paid his cover charge and stuck his
fake ID back into his pocket.

“Any time.” They moved further into the bar. Pepper hated to go out dancing alone, even if she
knew half the people who'd be here tonight, and to be fair, Tony couldn't blame her. There was a
particular flavor of creep who was only put off by the thought that the girl he was hitting on was
the property of some other guy, and Tony was perfectly willing to pretend to be that other guy.

Besides, it was Ladies' Night, and it wasn't like it was a hardship to have a few drinks and dance
with a few women. They'd done this several times over the past year or so, once things had gotten
sufficiently un-weird between them that they were sure that they both knew this was not the
prelude to getting back together, even if they danced together once or twice and Tony chased off
any persistent scumbags.

In fact, more than once, Tony had seen Pepper safely to her Uber before going home with a girl
he'd met that night. Yet another reason why this was not exactly a chore.

Pepper was already swaying to the music as she made her way over to the bar, and Tony watched
her with a smile. They might not have made a good couple, but she was still one of the most
beautiful women he knew.

Tony pushed through the crowd to follow her, scanning the room as he did. He recognized quite a
few people--some by name, some as “that guy who's always here,” two or three as former hookups
of his. None that had ended badly, so that should be fine. Nobody he remembered as being a
problem for Pepper when they'd been here before, so he might be able to get a drink and dance for
a while.

“I got you a beer,” Pepper said when he caught up to her, handing him a longneck. “I know you
like Scotch better--”
Tony shuddered. Even the call brands in this place were barely drinkable; he was pretty sure they refilled empty bottles with the cheap crap. “Beer's good, thanks.” He took a long swig. “So. Down here, or do we head upstairs?” There was music downstairs, and some room to dance, but this floor was mostly the territory of pool players and serious drinkers, and the music was canned playlists piped out over a sound system. Upstairs was a stage for live music nights and a DJ for the rest of the week, a bigger dance floor, and a smaller bar.

Pepper usually preferred upstairs. For that matter, so did Tony. If he wanted to sit and drink, he could do that at home, or in Rhodey’s apartment, or half-a-dozen other bars with better alcohol. Sometimes he spent the evening playing pool, but tonight he felt like dancing, and that meant upstairs.

“I want to dance,” Pepper said, echoing his thoughts, so he led the way up the narrow, twisting flight of stairs.

The music was better up here, rock rather than bubble-gum pop, and once they'd finished their beers, Tony let Pepper grab his hand and pull him onto the dance floor, in front of the empty stage; they only had live music on the weekends, when they could count on pulling a crowd. Tony wouldn't have called himself a great dancer, but he didn't embarrass himself, either, even if Pepper giggled a little when he really got into the music. Let her giggle; he was so damn glad that Pepper's attitude toward him had gone from “hurt and angry” to “fondly amused” that she could laugh all she wanted. Besides, there were women out here on this dance floor tonight who'd appreciate those hip-thrusts.

Speaking of which, Tony scanned the crowd, considering the question of who to ask to dance after this song ended. He'd feel bad about that, but he knew Pepper was doing the same thing. She liked to dance, and she liked to change partners regularly so that nobody got the wrong idea.

Funny how something that seemed perfectly sensible to her when a dance floor was involved turned into her giving Tony those worried looks when the action got moved to a bedroom. Still, it wasn't like having a friend who cared about him was a bad thing.

Tony thought he could feel someone watching him; that was always promising, so he turned a little to get a better look. There was a a muscular blond surfer-looking guy blocking his view; Tony couldn't be sure, but he thought it was probably Surfer McBeefcake's dance partner who was focusing so much attention on Tony. He couldn't see much of her, only a glimpse of dark hair.

The music ended, and he and Pepper moved apart. She nodded in the direction of a group of her friends. “I'm going to talk to Maria.”

That meant Tony was free to edge around the dance floor, until the blond guy wasn't standing in his line of sight, and Tony could get a good look at--

Not her. Him. And not just any “him,” either: a “him” Tony had just seen on Sunday afternoon.

Loki looked in Tony's direction just then; their eyes met, and then Loki turned his attention back to his dance partner, moving closer to him and looking up--the guy was even taller than Loki--into his eyes.

Tony had not been expecting to run into Loki here. Definitely not Loki dancing with some guy. This bar was okay--safe enough, Tony figured--but overwhelmingly straight. Not the place Tony would have chosen to put on ass-hugging leather pants and grind against another man, but he wasn't going to criticize Loki's life choices.
Especially since those leather pants looked really good on him. Tony felt vaguely cheated that he hadn't had a chance to see them at a time when he'd be able to peel them off Loki, to be honest.

Oh, well. One-night stand, he reminded himself, and turned to a blonde woman standing by the bar. “Want to dance?”

She did, so Tony put Loki completely out of his mind.

Well, in theory, at least. In practice, he found his eyes drawn in Loki's direction more than once, and blaming it on the leather pants still wasn't much of an excuse. There were other great asses in this bar right now, even excluding his own. The girl he was dancing with had one, for that matter, and a bright, sunny smile that he was pretty sure didn't hide a mean sense of humor.

Tony tried to focus on her, and it must have worked, because before they separated, she'd put her number in Tony's phone.

Over the course of the evening, Tony danced with, bought drinks for, or generally flirted with at least a dozen women, got seven numbers, and deleted five of them (three were Pepper's sorority sisters, one had gone out with Rhodey for a while freshman year, and one of them was just entirely too sweet and innocent). He had ignored Loki grinding against the surfer-dude; Loki making eye contact with him while doing obscene things to the neck of a beer bottle; and Loki calling his name as he passed their corner of the dance floor, on his way to give a Tony Stark Death Glare (U.S. patent pending) to an asshole who kept putting his hands on Pepper's ass even after she'd made it clear that she didn't want him to.

“Ugh,” Pepper muttered. “I hate that. I told him to fuck off, and he didn't. Maria told him to fuck off, and he didn't. But you show up and just give him a dirty look, and what does he do? Fuck right off.”

“It sucks,” Tony agreed, “but at least he's gone.”

“Yeah. And I've been trying to get your attention anyway,” she said.

Tony had an uncomfortable feeling he knew where that one was going. “What's up?”

She jerked her head quickly in the direction of Loki and the blond guy. “I take it you've noticed who's here tonight.”

Yep, that was where he thought that had been going. “He's kind of hard to miss.” Especially when Loki kept making eye contact with you, and was doing his best to make you want to jump him on the dance floor, but Pepper didn't need to know that.

“I noticed,” she said dryly. “I don't like him, but I'm not going to argue that he's difficult to look at.”

“Especially dressed like that,” Tony said, and wished he hadn't when she raised an eyebrow at him. “No, it's cool,” he said quickly. “I agree, he doesn't sound like anybody I need to get tangled up with, and I don't want to get tangled up with him, but I can see that he's hot, Pepper. I don't try to sleep with everyone I think is hot.”

She chuckled. “Not twice, anyway?”

“True. Not nice, but true.”

Pepper put her hand on his arm. “I'm sorry. I just don't want to see you get hurt.”
“I’m not going to get hurt,” he promised her. You had to give a damn to get hurt, after all, and that wasn’t something Tony planned on doing any more. Not for a long time, anyway. Maybe in twenty years he’d want to meet someone nice and settle down, but even that was a big “maybe.” As for now, he had some good friends, he had his classes and his research. He was good. Better than good.

“And,” he added, “I’m planning to stay far away from Loki.” Pepper winced, and Tony had a sinking feeling in his stomach. “He’s--”

“Right behind you,” Loki said, almost in Tony’s ear.

Shit. Tony hadn’t realized that he was spending the evening in a cheap sitcom, or he’d have been prepared for something like this to happen.

“Oh. Hey,” Tony said, turning around to see that Loki had also brought his--date? Boyfriend? Random hookup?--along with him.

“Hey,” Loki said, smirking at him. Tony hadn’t missed that smirk, even if his experience of it had so far been associated with mind-blowing sex. “I won’t keep you. There’s just someone I want you to meet.” He waved toward Surfer Dude. “This is Thor. Thor, this is Tony.”

“Thor,” Tony repeated. “Like, the guy you--” He broke off; “the guy you let believe you were his biological brother” probably wasn’t the most tactful thing to announce, especially not in public. “The guy you told me about?” He grinned up at Thor, who seemed okay enough. “Nice to meet you.”

Thor grinned back at him. “Are you a friend of Loki’s?”

“Kind of,” Tony lied, because this guy hadn’t done anything to him, and there was no reason to tell him the truth: that he was the guy Loki had gloated to about fucking with Thor’s head. Not if Thor really liked Loki, and he seemed to. If he’d forgiven Loki for letting him believe they were actual brothers, forgiven him enough that they were here now, dancing together the way he had been, he’d have to really like Loki. “And this is my friend Pepper,” he said, because that, at least, was a safe topic of conversation.

“Hi,” Pepper said, making it very obvious that her warm smile was meant only for Thor when she added, with a sharp glance at Loki, “Loki and I have met. You might not remember? I’m a friend of Clint’s.”

Okay, maybe not such a safe topic.

“Of course I remember you,” Loki said smoothly, but his eyes were narrow and just as sharp as Pepper’s. “It’s good to see you again.” His expression didn’t soften when he looked at Tony. “Thor and I should probably be going,” he said, running his arm possessively over Thor’s bicep.

It didn’t bother Tony even a little bit. They’d hooked up once; why would Tony care if Loki was all over some other guy now? Even if he hadn’t promised Pepper he’d stay away from Loki from now on, he wouldn’t care.

He was willing to admit that he could have cared, at least a little, but considering that was completely pointless and stupid, Tony wasn’t going to let that happen. “Yeah, okay. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” he said, managing to give Loki what he hoped was a convincing leer. “C’mon, Pepper, I like this song.” He took Pepper’s hand and pulled her onto the floor, keeping his back turned to Loki the entire time.
“What was that?” Pepper demanded, leaning in close to be heard over the music.

“I have no idea,” he said. “I mean, I saw him earlier, but I didn't say anything to him. I might have checked out his ass, but you can't blame me for that.”

“I can't stand the guy, and I checked out his ass,” she said. “So no, I don't blame you. But why would he want you to meet the guy he was with tonight?”

He shrugged. “How the hell should I know? Showing me that he upgraded?” Probably enjoying knowing that Tony was aware of the whole story with Thor while Thor had no idea Loki had told anyone. But Pepper didn't need to know that, for a lot of reasons--one of which being that Thor seemed like an okay person, as much as Tony could tell from three minutes' acquaintance, and Tony didn't want to humiliate him. “Trying to make me feel sorry that I didn't call him, I guess.”

“Do you? Feel sorry, I mean?”

“No way.”

On the dance floor, every time he'd looked up, Loki had been watching him, his gaze following Tony everywhere he went.

He'd kept looking up.

And he hadn't deleted Loki's number from his phone yet, either.

****

Chapter End Notes

Next week: It has been 7 DAYS since Tony did anything stupid.

Also, note: next week's chapter will go up on Wednesday instead of Thursday, due to the holiday Thursday in the U.S. (This is just a one-time change.)
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Loki does his impression of a bad penny. There is smut, because it's been a whole chapter since we had some of that. And it has been 7 days since Tony did anything stupid.

Chapter Notes

In case you missed the note last week, I'm posting on Wednesday this week so that I can be offline Thursday for the holiday in the US. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

Tony looked critically at the picture he'd just snapped: the chalkboard in the corner of the main robotics lab, with heavy lettering that said, "It has been 7 DAYS since Tony did anything stupid."

Depending on your definition of "stupid," anyway. He'd gone to his fluid dynamics seminar on Thursday with a bottle of orange juice spiked with vodka, both to see if he could get away with it (he had; even Rhodey hadn't noticed) and to give him something to get him through the extreme dullness of listening to some of his classmates ask questions about the same homework problem the professor had just worked out for them. And he'd spent all weekend in the lab, living on coffee and whatever the semi-functioning snack machine in the basement of the engineering building produced--he could crack it open one night and fix it, but he kind of liked the randomness. Those were kind of stupid, but for him, they were pretty damn tame. He hadn't even gone out partying this weekend; he'd spent the whole time in the lab.

And he still had Loki's number, even though he'd lied to Pepper and told her he'd deleted it. But that was only stupid if he used it, and he wasn't going to do that.

So, yeah, seven days since he'd done something stupid. He erased the board before someone came in. The dining halls were open for dinner right about now, which was why Tony had picked now to come in to use some of the equipment he didn't have in his assigned workspace, but panicking students trying to finish assignments before Monday morning could be back any minute. Then he sent the picture to Rhodey and Pepper; they both liked confirmation that Tony was still alive when he disappeared into the engineering building for days on end.

Before Tony had packed everything up and locked it up in his usual lab space, both of them had replied, Rhodey with an eyeroll emoji and Pepper with "LOL" and a long line of thumbs-up. Tony grinned at his phone before sticking it in his pocket. He'd get so much crap about that sign tomorrow night--Mondays were the only nights they all had time to get together for more than just a quick lunch, and even then they didn't always manage it--but it was worth it to have documented evidence that he could go a week without making any really terrible decisions.
Despite the fact that it was pouring down rain, he was still in a cheerful mood as he headed up to his apartment, taking the stairs because a weekend spent mostly in one room left him feeling restless. He'd grab a shower, order some food, then figure out how he was going to spend the rest of his evening. Probably trying to work out the kinks in the voice-recognition module he was developing, but there were also a few other things he wanted to play around with.

That mood lasted until he saw that there was someone sitting in the hall outside his apartment. That wasn't supposed to happen. Damn it, the only person he shouldn't have to buzz in was Rhodey, and that was because he'd given Rhodey the code for the outside door and a key to his apartment. (Pepper probably still remembered the code, but she never used it any more, and she'd given him back her key when they split up.)

Loki fucking Laufeyson should not be in his building, sitting with his back against Tony's door like he belonged there and had just forgotten his keys this morning.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Tony demanded, pulling his phone out of his pocket in case he needed to dial 911, and ignoring the fact that while he was definitely annoyed to see Loki there, his first thought when he'd realized who it was in the hall had been, Awesome.

Loki looked up at him, grinning and getting to his feet. "Hey," he said. "One of your neighbors let me in."

"That's not what I asked," Tony said. "Why are you even here?"

"Can't I just have wanted to see you?"

"You couldn't have just texted 'DTF?' or sent a dick pic?"

"I don't know," Loki said. "Would you have answered?"

"Hell, no, I wouldn't have answered," Tony lied. "That's not the point."

"Your girlfriend doesn't approve of me," Loki said. "Is that it?"

"She's not my girlfriend. She's my friend. And you're standing in front of my door, so would you move?"

Loki stepped aside, not even taking the opportunity to invade Tony's personal space, and Tony unlocked the door.

"Do you want me to leave?" Loki asked.

"I want you to have never come here in the first place," Tony said, "but leaving will work, too."

He didn't know what he'd expected Loki to do. Turning around and starting down the hall to the elevator was not on the list of possibilities, though, and that was what Loki did, without a single argument.

"Wait," Tony called, and Loki stopped, though he didn't turn back. What the hell was he doing? Tony wondered. He'd intended to stay away from Loki, and Loki was leaving. He should be happy.

"You don't have to go," he said, because it didn't matter what he knew he ought to be doing. He wasn't good at doing what he should, anyway. What he was good at was doing what he wanted, and he wanted Loki to stay.
When Loki turned around, it was with a bright grin that was only a little bit terrifying, and that was mostly because Tony wasn't used to anyone looking that damn happy to spend time with him.

Well, no. It was mostly because Tony wasn't used to seeing anyone looking that happy to spend time with him--anyone but Pepper and Rhodey, at least--and not reacting by wanting to run like hell in the other direction.

*It has been 0 DAYS since Tony did something stupid.*

****

"I did text you," Loki said once they were inside the apartment. "More than once. I guess I should have included that dick pic to get your attention?"

Tony pulled out his phone to check. Yep, three texts from Loki, the first from Friday evening and the latest one from just a couple of hours ago, all some variation of *WTF was your problem?*

Tony thought about what Loki must have overheard Thursday night at the bar, his promise to Pepper to stay far away from Loki, and wasn't all that sure what the fuck his problem *was*, to be honest.

"Okay, but then you showed up at my door. You're not even supposed to be able to get in--and yeah, I know, the neighbors let you in. What bullshit did you tell them?"

Loki shrugged. "That you weren't home and I wanted to wait for you inside where it wasn't raining? So... more or less the truth."

"More or less?"

"I wanted to wait for you inside because I figured if I was at your door, you'd at least talk to me." He peeled off his jacket, tossing it over the back of the couch. "And you'd been ignoring me all weekend."

*Great, sure, make yourself at home,* Tony grumbled to himself, but he had invited Loki in, after all. He couldn't get pissed now because Loki had taken off his jacket.

"I wasn't ignoring you. I was in the lab. I don't check my phone when I'm working." Technically, that was probably "ignoring," but he ignored *Rhodey* when he was working, so ignoring a guy he'd known for barely a week--and barely knew, for that matter--didn't really count.

Tony took his own jacket off and pulled his laptop out of his bag, putting it in its usual place on the desk, because that was what he did when he came home. It wasn't because that made it easier not to look at Loki. It certainly wasn't because looking at Loki made it harder for Tony to remember he'd promised Pepper to stay away from him.

*It has been zero days since Tony has done something stupid,* he thought again.

"You were in the lab all weekend?"

"Yeah? It's kind of what I do. Sometimes I go out at night and get wasted and pick up guys who want me to propose marriage before I've learned their last names, but even then, I spend the rest of the time in the lab. And this weekend, I didn't make it any farther away than the vending machines in the basement and the bathroom on the fourth floor, where the hot water works."

"No wonder you were so grungy last weekend," Loki said, which was not the most flattering
"Yeah, well, we've already established that I clean up good," Tony said. "And we're getting away from the point, which is that you do not fucking turn up in my hallway."

"Why not? Assuming that your neighbors let me into the building again, and I'm not picking the lock or anything similarly nefarious."

"Because I don't like it. That good enough for you?"

"What about the lab? Can I turn up there?"

No, Tony thought he should probably say. No, Loki shouldn't turn up at the robotics lab. He shouldn't turn up anywhere, and in fact, he should go ahead with Plan A after all, and leave now. "If you bring food, you can turn up at the lab," Tony heard himself saying, and Loki gave him that grin again, the one that ought to make Tony want to run the hell away.

On the other hand, just in case that hadn't been a bullshit question, a hot guy turning up with sandwiches while Tony was in the middle of an engineering bender was nothing to sneeze at.

In fact, anyone, no matter how attractive, turning up with food was sounding like a great idea. Tony tossed his phone to Loki. "I'm getting a shower. Order from Thai Gardens; they have an app. Repeat my last order, plus whatever you want. I mean, if you're planning to stick around long enough to eat."

"I have some time," Loki said, sounding like that was a big admission.

"Yeah, I figured, since you had time to skulk in my hallway. There's beer and soda in the fridge. I'll be out before the food gets here." Unless I come to my senses and escape through the bathroom window.

He hadn't actually lied to Pepper, Tony decided while he was washing his hair. Though "I didn't technically lie" seemed like a pretty weak excuse, even to him. He hadn't intended to call Loki. He might have thought about it a lot, and--if he was completely honest--he probably would have done it eventually, on impulse one night when he was bored and horny (so, probably by next Tuesday), because impulse control was one of the few things he wasn't good at. But he hadn't intended to.

He'd wanted to, though, even if that wasn't a very comfortable thought. And Loki was here, right now, ordering Thai food and going through his refrigerator and probably poking around to see what Tony had watched on Netflix lately, and the only thing that Tony didn't like about that was the feeling that he shouldn't like it at all.

So yeah, Pepper was not going to be thrilled about this, and Rhodey was going to think he was making a huge mistake, and he probably was making a huge mistake because Loki showed clear signs of being an asshole to multiple people in multiple ways.

On the other hand, Tony was pretty comfortable making huge mistakes, especially where his personal life was concerned, so he finished his shower, got dressed--sweats and a tank top, for both ease of removal and a chance to show off his biceps--and went back out to the living room.

He'd been right: Loki had turned the TV on and was scrolling through Tony's Netflix account, his shoes off and his feet propped up on the coffee table. "Good to see you made yourself at home," Tony said.

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Was I not supposed to?"
"No, it's good." Tony went into the kitchen area, getting down a bottle of Scotch and taking a glass out of the cupboard. "Want a drink?"

"I've got one, thanks." Loki held up a can of sparkling water, the stuff Tony kept around for when Pepper was over. Tony decided not to make that comparison out loud.

"Suit yourself." Tony poured his own drink and brought it over to the couch. "ETA on the food?"

Loki glanced at the time on his phone. "About fifteen minutes."

"Damn. We should probably stay dressed." Tony gave a melodramatic sigh.

"That still leaves us a lot of options, you know."

"Hm. I like the way you think." Tony took one more swallow of his drink and set it down, sliding closer to Loki on the couch. "So, you wanted to see me, huh?"

"I don't know why," Loki said. "I could obviously do better." But he turned toward Tony, letting himself be drawn into a kiss.

Tony brought his hand up to rest on the back of Loki's neck, tangled in dark hair. He'd expected this to be like last time, bruising kisses and sharp teeth, but Loki's mouth was soft against his, the kiss deep and slow. It was good, but not good enough; he needed to get closer. Maybe, if-- he had a flash of inspiration, repositioning himself so that he was straddling Loki's lap, knees on either side of Loki's hips. "This work?"

"It could be worse." Loki was laughing, but when Tony leaned in to kiss him again, he could feel Loki's cock, half-hard where it pressed against Tony. "I mean, it's a good thing you're tiny. I wouldn't want Thor on my lap, but--" He broke off when Tony put his hand over his mouth.

"Don't start with that crap," Tony said, though he was laughing too. His laughter stopped when Loki pulled his head just far enough away to be able to capture one of Tony's fingers in his mouth, but after a second (time he used to squirm closer to Loki on his lap), he resumed talking, only a little distracted by the way Loki was sucking on his finger. "Just because I'm not built like a Mack truck, that doesn't mean you get to call me 'tiny.' Besides, I thought we settled that last time you were here."

Loki let go of Tony's finger. "I agreed that your cock wasn't tiny. You, on the other hand...." He kissed Tony again, and Tony could still feel him vibrating with laughter. At least somebody thought Loki was funny.

The intercom buzzed, and Tony jumped; he'd temporarily forgotten that they were waiting for dinner. "I'll get you for that later," he promised, getting up and going over to the door. "Either find something for us to watch or turn that off, okay?" he added over his shoulder, waving toward the TV. "I don't want to see another promotion for Fuller House. Definitely not while I'm trying to eat."

Loki turned the television off. "It isn't as though I'm going to let you pay attention to it once we've finished eating, anyway."

Now that was the kind of thing Tony liked to hear.

Once he'd let the delivery guy into the building and paid for the food, Tony set the bags on the coffee table. "They always forget forks. I'll get some." While he was in the kitchen, he grabbed the Scotch, too; he was going to need a refill sooner or later. Maybe later, given that Loki had plans for
him after dinner, and he did want to get some work done after Loki went home, so he didn't want to drink that much, but... what the hell. He brought some paper towels with him, too, in case they'd forgotten to put napkins in.

Loki was rummaging through the bags, opening containers and setting Tony's aside. He took the fork and a couple of paper towels from Tony. "They did remember a soup spoon, at least," he said, taking the lid off a bowl of tom yum. It smelled good, but Tony had fallen asleep on the couch mid-dinner too often on Sunday nights for him to trust himself with soup.

Not that he was going to fall asleep tonight. At least, not during dinner.

"So, anyway," he said, once they'd divided up the food and condiments and had made a start on eating. "Speaking of guys built like a truck--and if you'll think back, we were--I'm guessing there aren't two guys named Thor in your life?"

"Just the one," Loki agreed.

"So you told him."

"No, he decided that what he really needed in his life was to date his brother." Loki rolled his eyes. "Of course I told him. I talked to him right after I left your place on Sunday. Who knows what he might have done if I'd left him to stew in his guilt forever? I reserve that kind of treatment for people who piss me off."

"Looks like he forgave you," he said, which was more than a little surprising. Tony wasn't sure how easy it'd be for him to forgive something like that.

Then again, kind of not all that surprising, because he had a feeling that Loki was very good at getting people to forgive him for all kinds of bullshit. Not that Tony could say Loki had actually manipulated him into getting over finding Loki waiting for him in the hall, for example, but Tony hadn't had much problem dropping the subject. (As long as it didn't happen again, Tony thought. If he decided he wanted Loki to have that kind of privileges--which he was definitely not going to do--he'd give him a key and the code for the outside door.)

Loki shrugged. "He was so damn relieved that I don't think it occurred to him to be angry."

Somehow, Tony suspected there was a bit more to it than that. Maybe Loki had phrased things to make it sound like he hadn't realized until later that they couldn't possibly be blood relatives. Maybe he'd come up with another angle. But for Thor to be feeling positive about Loki just a few days later, he had to have come up with something.

"The thing is," Loki went on, "once he found out that he hadn't actually had sex with his brother, it turns out he sort of likes the idea. Not enough that he'd have seen me again if we were really related, I'm sure, but enough that he calls me 'brother' a lot when we're fucking."

Tony picked up his Scotch. He looked at it for a minute. Then he drained the glass, set it down on the table, and refilled it. He was probably going to need it to get through this conversation. "You do know you're one seriously fucked-up individual, right?" He was grinning as he said it, but that didn't mean he wasn't at least a little bit serious.

"Birds of a feather," Loki replied cheerfully.

"Not that fucked up."

"I'd have been perfectly content to never mention it again if Thor hadn't suggested it," Loki said.
"Whereas you are dying to hear all the sordid details."

Tony scowled and picked up his fork again. "I don't want to hear about you fucking anybody else," he said, then, quickly, added, "I don't care if you do it, but I don't need the details." Liar, he thought. Sure, the whole scenario sounded like bad porn, but--maybe that was the appeal, actually. He knew someone--he was fucking someone--whose real, honest-to-god sex life sounded like the plot of a porn movie. It was only human to want to know more.

And Thor might not have been his type, but picturing him and Loki together had definite visual appeal. Tony thought about the marks of big, strong fingers left on Loki's skin last weekend, and wished he wasn't wearing sweatpants. They sucked when you wanted to hide how much you did want the details.

"All right, then. Suit yourself." They ate in silence for a couple of minutes until Loki asked, "You're sure? Because Thor had this whole scenario he wanted to play out where his innocent younger brother comes to him for advice about what to do in bed with a guy, and he's so damn helpful he just has to demonstrate..."

"I'm sure," Tony muttered, once he'd recovered from inhaling a forkful of pad siew. Jesus Christ, there was no way he could possibly listen to that without spontaneously combusting. "But I refuse to believe you could pull off 'innocent' without being struck by divine lightning or something. I've met you."

"I wasn't auditioning for Shakespeare. I was convincing enough for the situation. At least, Thor didn't have any complaints."

"Yeah, well, he wouldn't. Who complains when someone's willing to play out your dirty little fantasies? The guy didn't look that stupid. All I'm saying is that you couldn't really look innocent if your life depended on it. You probably couldn't look innocent back when you were actually innocent. If you ever were."

"You don't think so?" Loki set his food down on the table, then looked away from Tony for a few seconds before turning back. The smirk was gone, replaced by a wide-eyed, softer expression.

"Why don't you believe me, Tony? I just need a little help. You're so smooth and sophisticated; I bet you always know what to do..."

"I don't think so?" Loki chewed on his bottom lip for a second before speaking. His voice was softer, too, more hesitant. "Why don't you believe me, Tony? I just need a little help. You're so smooth and sophisticated; I bet you always know what to do..."

"Okay, you win. You can totally play 'confused little virgin'. But maybe don't? It's not really my thing."

Loki chewed on his bottom lip for a second before speaking. His voice was softer, too, more hesitant. "Why don't you believe me, Tony? I just need a little help. You're so smooth and sophisticated; I bet you always know what to do..."

"That's a little more like it," Tony admitted. That was a lot more like it, but Loki didn't need to hear that.

Loki clearly knew it already.

"You should have come to talk to me at the bar the other night," Loki said. "You were the last person I expected to see there, but as soon as I did, I couldn't stop thinking about last weekend. I
know the bartender upstairs; he’d have let me use the back room. I could have sucked you off right there in the bar, and nobody would have had any idea."

"No," Tony said. His mouth was so dry it was hard to get the word out.

"Don't worry about Thor. We're not together, really. He has a girlfriend at another school, for that matter. And--as he pointed out in more detail than I gave a damn about, she has a girlfriend, too, so it's fine by her." He smirked again. "Though I'm not sure how she feels about incest roleplay."

"I don't give a fuck about Thor," Tony said. "I'm just saying that I didn't get a chance to blow you last week, and I really fucking want to. If anybody had been on his knees in the back of the bar, it'd have been me."

Loki's eyes went wide again--not with fake-innocence, but with genuine surprise. "Oh," he breathed. "Then why aren't we doing that right now?"

Tony thought that was an excellent question. "Because we were hungry," he said, "or at least I was."

"Tell me you're done eating."

"I'm done," Tony said, "and you already know the way to the bedroom."

They started down the hall, but when they turned the corner, to the bit of hallway that led to the master bedroom and the laundry closet, Tony stopped, pushing Loki against the wall. "Never mind the bedroom," he said. "I keep thinking about blowing you in the back room of a bar. There wouldn't be a bed there." He reached for the waistband of Loki's jeans. "I'd have to back you against a wall instead."

He kissed Loki, fingers still working to get Loki's pants open. "You're going to have to be quiet," he said when he had to stop to breathe. "I don't want anyone to find us." He grinned up at Loki, who smiled back.

"I'll try," he said, and Tony was glad they weren't really in the bar right now, because he didn't trust that "try" one little bit.

Tony dropped to his knees--maybe not as gracefully as he might have hoped, but he didn't hear Loki complaining--and tugged Loki's pants down. He might not have wanted to risk it if they'd really been in danger of getting caught, but he was going to take some poetic license right now and not get scraped by a zipper. "I can't believe you wore those fucking leather pants for Thor and not me," he muttered.

"Take me dancing and I'll wear them for you," Loki said. "I'm not putting them on just to eat takeout on your couch."

"How about just to have me take them off? I'm not sure how long I could resist if I could get a good view of your ass in them." He stroked Loki's cock; slowly, lazily, rubbing his thumb over the head, wanting Loki to be hard and aching before he got Tony's mouth on him. That was how it would have been in the bar, Tony thought, the two of them teasing one another until neither of them could stand it any longer.

His own cock throbbed, and Tony pressed his free hand hard against his crotch, trying to regain some control. Soon, he promised himself. Loki would return the favor, or they'd fuck, or something. But first, he wanted this.
He slid his hand down to grip the base of Loki's cock before taking Loki into his mouth, as deep as he could. They wouldn't have time for protracted teasing, no matter how willing the bartender was to help out a friend--Tony idly wondered how many people Loki had taken into that back room over the past few years--so he wasted no time before beginning to suck, pumping Loki's cock with his hand while it slid over his lips.

Tony looked up, wanting to see Loki's face; Loki had his fist against his mouth, biting down on his hand just like they really did need to keep this quiet. The muffled whimpers that escaped him might have been almost inaudible, but they sent electric shocks through Tony's body just the same.

He let Loki's cock slip out of his mouth. Loki scowled, his hand falling back to his side. "Why did you stop?"

"Trust me," Tony said, smirking up at him. He licked his index finger, trying to get it as wet as possible, and watched as Loki made the connection.

Loki shifted position a little, planting his feet a bit wider apart, and Tony grinned. "Good thinking," he said, before lowering his head again.

He reached around Loki's hip, slipping his finger in between Loki's cheeks, finding the puckered ring of muscle and pushing his way inside. Spit wasn't the best lube, but it'd work well enough for his purposes.

That earned him a loud groan, breaking off as Loki stifled it with his fist again. Tony grinned to himself, as much as he could around Loki's dick, and traced along a vein with his tongue.

"If you don't want me to come in your mouth," Loki said, breathing hard, "stop."

Tony worked his finger a little deeper and did not, definitely did not, stop sucking, because why the hell would he not want that? That was the whole point of this, that was what he'd wanted to do for a week--which was a long time for Tony to delay gratification; he practically deserved a medal.

He knew he'd been right not to trust that "I'll try," because if they'd actually been in the bar, Loki's cry of "Oh, fuck, Tony," would definitely have attracted some attention. If it had been in one of the moments of silence between songs, half the bar would have heard him. Half the building probably heard him now, though Tony didn't really care about that, because he was swallowing, trying to capture every last drop as Loki came.

Tony carefully withdrew his finger from Loki as he let Loki's softening cock slip out of his mouth. "You asshole," he said, shaking his head. "That's your idea of being quiet? I think my ears are ringing."

Loki didn't answer, just pulled Tony up to his feet. "You missed some," he murmured, and then--holy fuck, how the hell was that so hot?--he leaned in and licked the corner of Tony's mouth clean.

Tony was suddenly, blissfully glad that he hadn't decided to take the stairs down from Steve's dorm room last week.

"Come on," Loki said, pulling up his jeans. "Bedroom."

"What, you want more?" Tony certainly did; he was painfully hard, and there was a damp patch on his sweats where they covered the head of his dick. But that didn't mean he couldn't give Loki shit for being insatiable.

"I want something better than your finger in me," Loki said. "Have any ideas?"
"I'm Tony Stark," he said. "I have nothing but ideas." He led the way into his bedroom, continuing through to the bathroom. "I want to wash my hands," he said. "Go ahead and get comfortable."

When Tony came back out a few minutes later, he saw that Loki had interpreted "comfortable" just the way Tony had hoped: as "naked."

Tony had stripped too, and he didn't miss the appreciative way Loki looked him over. "So, you let me shove you against a wall and suck your cock," he said. "It's only fair to let you decide how you want to do this."

Loki's grin was equal parts pleased and predatory, if Tony was any judge. "Lie down on the bed, then."

Tony walked over to bed and lay down. "Just so you know, though? I'm not sure I'm going to be able to last all that long, so if you're planning anything elaborate--"

"Not right now," he said, picking something up from the nightstand. A condom, and not the brand in Tony's drawer. Yeah, merit badge for sodomy, definitely deserved, and Tony was really going to have to get right on that when he had a spare five minutes. "Unless riding you counts as 'elaborate.'"

No, but it counted as fucking brilliant. And, apparently, all he had to do was lie back and let Loki put the condom on him, close his eyes and try not to buck into Loki's hand as he slicked Tony's cock with lube.

"It'll be faster if you do me," Loki said, pouring a generous amount of lube into Tony's hand, and yes, okay, Tony was enjoying "brilliant." Taking his time was fantastic, he'd have to do that again later--he'd stopped telling himself that there wasn't going to be another time; of course there was going to be another time as long as nothing terrible happened today--but today he just needed.

By the time he had Loki slick and ready for him, Tony had to take a moment to breathe; it would have been fine, but Loki had whimpered and squirmed and pleaded, and he'd been completely right back in the living room: nothing got to Tony like someone wanting him that much.

But finally, fucking finally, Loki was lowering himself onto Tony's cock, and Tony was clutching at the bedspread underneath him, twisting it in his fists.

"Just let me do the work," Loki said, clenching tight around Tony, and Tony tried to do that, tried to lie there and look up at Loki, at the sheen of sweat on Loki's skin and the flush on his cheeks and the way his cock had started to harden again as he impaled himself on Tony.

But it was too much; he had to move, to thrust, to try to drive himself deeper into that tight, slick heat.

"God, yes," Loki groaned. "I'd have let you fuck me at the bar, too, after you sucked me off, turned around and braced myself against the wall and let you do whatever you wanted to me. I can't get enough of you; hell, just watching you on the dance floor got me so turned on I couldn't even wait until Thor and I got back to his place. It's a good thing there's a lot of room in his front seat."

Tony thought about Loki watching him at the bar, the hot, hungry gaze that seemed to follow him everywhere; Loki was watching him with the same expression now. "You should have come after me," he gasped, thrusting hard into Loki.

"You were ignoring me," Loki pointed out.
Well, he wasn't ignoring Loki now, couldn't remember why that had seemed like such a good idea at the time. But he couldn't find the words to say that, because his body was tensing as he slid closer to the edge, and all he could make himself say was Loki's name, over and over, as Loki tightened around him again and he came.

****

When Tony woke up, it was fully dark, but he'd left his phone in the living room, so he had no idea what time it was. Probably way past the time he should have woken Loki up and sent him home. Then again, if he stuck around, there could probably be more sex in the morning, which would at least give him something to think about in Intro to Poetry instead of, well, poetry.

Besides, Tony didn't really care what Loki was doing right now, because he'd woken up with an idea of how to fix the friction problem in the robot arm that was one of the things he was working on kind-of-sort-of-not-really for his robotics seminar, and he needed to get his thoughts down before he lost them.

He pulled on a clean pair of boxers and padded barefoot out to the living room, where he grabbed his phone--it was 10:17 PM--and turned on his laptop. By the time he'd opened up the most recent schematics for the arm and settled down to work, he'd almost forgotten there was another person in his apartment.

"What are you doing?"

Tony didn't yelp. He made an involuntary noise of startlement, as was only normal when you'd forgotten there was actually someone else around and it was now--he checked his phone again--12:04 AM, but he was much too cool to yelp.

"Working," he said. "I had this idea--" and it had turned into three different ideas about the articulation in the arm, and fine-tuning the gripping capability, and he'd almost cracked it, he was sure.

Loki listened to the entire explanation without interrupting, then shrugged. "You need coffee," he said. "Hell, after listening to all that, I need coffee." He went into the kitchen. "Where are the K-cups?"

"The drawer under the machine," Tony called back, before focusing on his work again.

The next time Loki got his attention, it was by setting a mug of coffee down in front of him.

"Thanks," Tony remembered to mumble. Then he looked up at Loki and frowned. "You're dressed. Why are you dressed?"

"I need to get something out of my car," Loki said, going over to the door and starting to put his shoes on. "Will you let me back in?"

"Sure, sure," Tony said. He needed to do something about the pressure sensors in the "fingers"; right now, anything more delicate than a tennis ball tended to end up squashed. He might just have to completely redesign them...

He reached for his coffee, only to find the mug was missing. "Hey!" He looked up; Loki was standing just out of reach, holding his coffee.

"Listen to me, or I pour this out," Loki said. "I want to go down to my car for a minute. Will you let me back in, or should I just go ahead and drive home?"
"Yeah," Tony said, reaching for the coffee.

"Not an answer."

"Yes, I'll let you back in," Tony said. "Just give me my damn coffee."

Loki handed him the cup. "If I have to stand outside buzzing you for half an hour because you got distracted, I'm never letting you fuck me again."

That was unnecessarily harsh, in Tony's opinion. Still, he kept a fraction of his attention on the intercom while he worked, and when it buzzed a few minutes later, he went over and let Loki back into the building.

Apparently, what Loki had wanted was his backpack. He dropped it on the couch and went back into the kitchen; he must have started coffee for himself before he went downstairs, because he came back a few seconds later holding a cup.

Tony must have looked confused, because Loki nodded toward his bag. "If we're working, I need my stuff," he said, taking a tablet and a notepad out of the bag and curling up on the couch with them. "I need to get this paper in good enough shape to submit to a conference before next week."

"Let me read it?"

"How much do you know about theoretical physics?"

"I'm a fast learner." It wasn't like he was totally ignorant about physics, and by the time he finished with Loki's paper--and any associated reading he needed to do to understand that--he'd know enough to keep up.

"When I'm done, then."

Tony grinned. Awesome. He was making a lot of progress tonight, and he'd have some maybe-cool physics stuff to read about soon. Please, let it be cool. Let Loki not be some huge dumbass masquerading as a smart guy. That he was submitting a paper--Tony knew how it worked; undergrad conference papers weren't the same as journal publications, but they were still impressive--was a good sign, but once Tony had a chance to actually see how the guy's brain worked on some subject other than giving Tony a lot of top-quality orgasms, he'd know for sure.

It occurred to him that he was going to be really disappointed if Loki wasn't smart. Not as smart as Tony, he could handle--a lot of people weren't as smart as he was, a few were smarter, that was just how it was--but not smart at all? That'd be a deal-breaker, even though Tony wasn't even sure if there was a deal to break in the first place.

He turned back to his work, leaving Loki to his paper, and didn't even look up until Loki tapped him on the shoulder.

"Come on," Loki said. "It's around 4:30 in the morning. Let's go back to bed."

"For sleep, or--" Tony gave his most theatrical leer, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Sleep first. 'Or' when we wake up, so set an alarm."

Oh, hell yes, he was setting an alarm.

****
Next week: Tony spends time with Rhodey. Also, Loki thinks he’s hilarious. (Someone has to.)

Also, we'll be back to Thursday posting.
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Rhodey gets filled in on Tony's totally-not-a-boyfriend situation.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

"Okay," Rhodey said, once he'd hung up his jacket and got himself a can of soda out of Tony's fridge. "How have you fucked up, and what can I do to help?"

Tony settled back down to the chemistry assignment he'd been working on when Rhodey arrived. "Who says I fucked anything up?"

"You." Rhodey pulled out his phone and tapped the screen for a few seconds. "11:14 AM: 'Oh shit Rhodey this is so fucked up.' 11:17 AM: 'Maybe not. Idk? Maybe awesome. Maybe fucked. Maybe both?' 11:22 AM: 'Come over early 2nite. Can't talk w/ Pep there.'"

He sat down next to Tony and opened his drink. "Anything you won't talk about in front of Pepper either involves your dick in a 'should I go to the clinic?' way, or is pretty major."

"If it involves my dick in a 'go to the clinic' way, it is major." Also, okay, Tony had almost forgotten the texts he'd sent. Not that he'd sent them, but exactly what he'd said in them, except "come over early"; he'd started panicking in his lit class that morning, and panic wasn't great for his memory.

"Go to the clinic, then. Problem solved." Rhodey grinned at him in a way that suggested that only his relative maturity stopped him from sticking his tongue out at Tony.

Tony had no delusions about his own maturity; he did stick out his tongue. "My dick is fine. My dick is great. I can't remember the last time it was this happy with me, to be honest."

Rhodey groaned. "I knew this was coming. I knew it. This is about that guy, isn't it. The one Pepper hates."

"Loki," Tony confirmed, then backtracked quickly. "I mean, the guy Pepper hates is Loki. I don't know if 'hate' is the right--" He thought about the look on Pepper's face on Thursday night, and changed his mind. "Hate sounds about right. Not, like, homicidal hatred, but yeah, she hates the guy. But what makes you think this is about him?"

"Basically, not being stupid." Rhodey reached over and smacked him on the arm. "You spent all of Wednesday lunch talking about him, and you almost never talk about the people you hook up with
unless there's a funny story involved. You passed up a chance to rant for twenty minutes about that asshole who keeps taking too much lab space, even. And Pepper told me what happened Thursday night."

"How did you get from 'someone introduced me to his boyfriend'--" Okay, an exaggeration, but how exactly did you summarize Thor in one word? "--to anything else?" Just then, an email notification from his school email account popped up on Tony's phone, and he opened it up. Not because it was from a "laufeyso.l" campus address. Just because it was email, and it was better than this conversation.

Just sent this to Dr. P for his opinion, so I guess it's done. There was an attachment--ConfPaperD1.docx, so no question what "this" referred to. Tony opened up the paper before looking back up at Rhodey, who was watching him and shaking his head.

"You're grinning at email."

"It was porn," Tony said. "Barely-legal Russian mail-order brides."

"Mail-order brides are funny now?"

"Mail-order brides with a great sense of humor are funny now," Tony corrected him. "It's highly-targeted spam marketing."

"Yeah, okay, right. So that wasn't an email from Loki."

"I hate having friends," Tony groused instead of answering directly. "You let somebody get to know you, and what happens?"

"We call you on your bullshit," Rhodey said. "And you love us for it. Or me, anyway."

Okay, Rhodey might be at least a little bit right. But only about himself. He was still mostly off-base about Loki. "You're making too big of a deal about this Loki thing," Tony said.

"Then tell me what you meant when you told me 'this is so fucked up, or maybe awesome.' I'm willing to admit that I might have been wrong, but not until I actually know what dumb-ass thing you did." Tony must not have done a very good job of concealing his grin, because Rhodey rolled his eyes and added, "With only the level of detail needed for me to understand."

To tell the truth, the thought of being able to talk about the past couple of days to someone else sounded good. And at least Rhodey didn't already have much of an opinion about Loki one way or another. "So, you know about Thursday."

"I know what Pepper told me about Thursday. Loki was there with some guy, he came over and was creepy at you two for a minute, and then left."

Tony realized there was still coffee in his mug. It was cold, but cold coffee was still drinkable coffee. He gulped it down before going over to make another cup, raising his voice a little so Rhodey could still hear him. "Accurate, but incomplete. Loki was there with the guy he'd been with last Saturday--I told you that, right? We met on the elevator in Kirby Hall on Sunday morning."

"Jesus, Tony, only you."

"Clearly not only me. There was someone else in that elevator." He came back with his coffee and sat back down. "So, yeah. That's the guy he was there with. He was also there with a pair of black leather pants that are probably illegal in most states south of the Mason-Dixon line." Tony closed
his eyes reverently. He was going to get Loki to wear those pants for him one of these days. And then Tony was going to peel them off of him. And then--

And then Rhodey interrupted that line of thought, though Tony was sure he'd be returning to it later, once he was alone again. "The guy wore leather pants to Carla's Pub on a Thursday night? Isn't the usual idea of 'club wear' at Carla's more like cargo shorts?"

"I have never worn cargo shorts in my life."

"You've never worn leather pants to Carla's, either."

"Okay, but if you had seen--no, you probably wouldn't care, because you, my friend, are a clueless straight boy," he added, grinning when Rhodey elbowed him. "Anyway, let's just take it as read that I am one hundred percent in favor of Loki wearing those anywhere he wants, as long as I can stand behind him and stare."

"Duly noted. Leather pants aside, is there anything else that needs to be added to Pepper's version?"

"I don't think she noticed, because it was after she and I had gone our separate ways, but he'd been trying to get my attention? You know, lots of staring, lots of attempting to make eye contact. But I was there with Pepper and I'd already told her I'd stay away from him, and I didn't want him to get the idea that I was interested in more than a one-night stand, so I ignored him." Even though he hadn't wanted to. Even though he really wished he'd actually let Loki drag him off to the storage room behind the bar.

"Which is why he came up to talk to you when you were with Pepper."

Sometimes--not often, but sometimes--Tony wished he had a dumber best friend.

"Yeah, probably. It was weird, it was uncomfortable, he walked up just as I was telling Pepper I planned to stay away from him forever, it sucked. Then he left."

"You know," Rhodey said, "I'm not getting 'this is fucked but maybe awesome' vibes from this story. Especially not since Thursday was four days ago and you just got around to freaking out this morning. What are you conveniently forgetting to tell me?"

Tony glared at him, folding his arms across his chest. "I'm not forgetting to tell you. I just haven't gotten there yet."

"So, tell," Rhodey said. "What incredibly stupid thing did you do? ...No, wait. I know what incredibly stupid thing you did. You fucked him again, didn't you?"

"That wasn't stupid," Tony protested. "That was the best sex I have had in my life. Like, we should hire ourselves out as consultants, that's how good the sex is."

"Yay for you? And yes, before you say anything, I'm jealous."

"Hey, I've offered to have sex with you before."

"And like I've said every time, one, I'm straight, and two, I can't see that being anything but a giant train wreck waiting to happen anyway. So, thank you very much, but no thanks."

Tony had to admit that Rhodey was right on both counts. Had to admit it to himself, anyway. To Rhodey, he just said, "Yeah, you keep saying that, but all I hear is, 'You're too hot for me, Tony, so
"I'll just pine away in silence."

"Anyway. Jealous of 'best sex in my life,' mostly because I have no idea how you even find the time, let alone the energy, not jealous because I secretly want you. Or your leather-pants-wearing boyfriend."

"My secret is coffee. And no sleep. And being a genius, so I don't have to spend that long doing homework. Also, he's not my boyfriend. He's a guy I have had sex with twice. I've taken two lit classes, but no one would mistake me for an English major."

Rhodey shook his head again, then looked at the can of Coke in his hand. "I need a beer. You want one?"

"Are you going to make me keep talking about Loki?"

"You're the one who asked me to come over early so you could talk to me," he pointed out as he crossed over to the kitchen. "So, unless this features some kind of surprise twist, yeah, you're going to have to keep talking about Loki."

"Then fuck, yes, I want a beer."

Rhodey grabbed a couple of beers, then added an apple from the bowl of fruit on the breakfast bar-slash-room divider, the bowl that the housekeeping service replaced every week even though Tony didn't think he'd eaten any of it in at least a year. It'd be a lot more practical for them to just replace it with something artificial, since Tony kept forgetting that it wasn't fake in the first place. "Fuck it, you need fiber," Rhodey said, and picked up a second apple.

"Thanks, Mom," Tony said when Rhodey handed him the beer and the fruit.

"I hear scurvy's a bitch."

"I eat fruit," Tony argued.

"Only because sometimes the vending machine in the engineering building gets confused and spits out an applesauce cup instead of Doritos," Rhodey said, and Tony shut up until he could think of a good rebuttal to the literal truth. "And you're stalling. As of Thursday night, the situation between you and Loki--also, what were his parents thinking?--didn't sound especially fucked-up. You hooked up, he seemed interested in hooking up again, he got annoyed when you weren't, but he went away. So how did it get from that to you fucking him again?"

Tony took a bite of the apple, even though he knew Rhodey was just going to feel smug about it, because it gave him a second to figure out how to explain yesterday. "So, when I got home yesterday, he was in the hall."

Rhodey groaned. "You did not give him the code to your front door."

"I'm not that stupid," Tony said. "But one of the neighbors obviously is, and they let him in. And I got pissed, and told him to leave, and he did."

"Not seeing how this leads to sex," Rhodey said. "I know, I know, you're notoriously gifted at making things lead to sex when they probably shouldn't, but that usually involves the other person still being in the same room as you."

"Maybe he didn't leave," Tony said. "He started to, but then I called him back."
"Or he managed to totally manipulate you into letting him stay and thinking it was your idea in the first place," Rhodey said. He took a drink from his beer, and Tony wasn't sure if he was waiting for Tony to say something, or if he was just trying to figure out the best way to yell at Tony about this.

"How is this not setting up ten thousand red flags in your brain?" he continued after a minute, so obviously, it was the latter. "You usually have a better sense of self-preservation than this."

"He left," Tony repeated. "No argument, nothing. And when I called him back, he agreed not to do it again."

"And you believe him?"

Tony shrugged. "Maybe? I mean, yes, I believe him, because I don't have any reason not to yet. If he does it again, then that's it, we're done. And if he turns up after that, well, I'll call the police. My last name is on at least three buildings on campus; I'm pretty sure even the town cops are going to be anti-Howard Stark's only child being stalked."

"So," Rhodey said, in between bites of apple. "He came back. And I'm guessing this is where you can start skimming over the details."

Tony put his own apple down and opened the can of beer. "This is where the fantastic sex comes in, yeah. Well, no. First I took a shower and we ordered food. Then sex. Then--" He shrugged. "We fell asleep. I'd been in the lab all weekend, and it was really good sex."

Rhodey blinked at him. "You let someone fall asleep in your apartment? In your bed? You?"

"Hey, I've done that before!" Tony protested, realizing too late that it was a really bad idea.

"Yeah, I know," Rhodey said. "With Pepper. Who you were in love with at the time."

And that was why bringing that up was a bad idea. "That's not it," he said. "I mean, yes, I was in love with Pepper, no argument there. But that doesn't mean that's the only reason I might possibly not care if someone falls asleep in my bed after we have sex. Besides, I hardly ever even let people come to my apartment to have sex in the first place, so it's not like you have enough data to say what I normally do when that happens."

"Stop digging, man--hey!" Rhodey yelped as Tony punched him lightly on the arm. "I'm not the one who keeps pointing out all these things you do not let people do, but you're making exceptions for Loki. Like bringing him back to your apartment. Like not kicking him out of your life forever for coming over here uninvited. Like letting him sleep with you."

Tony shrugged. "I really like having sex with him. Letting him sleep over meant he was convenient for more sex in the morning."

"Sure, okay," he said. "And all the grinning at your email? Tell me that wasn't from him."

"It was," Tony said, "and you fucking knew that already, asshole. But I'm not grinning because it's from Loki. It's a physics paper, for fuck's sake, I'm just interested in reading it."

"Whatever lies get you through the night, dude. So, anyway. He stayed over last night?"

"Yeah. And I know Pepper says he's a complete asshole--" He thought about that for a second, and added, "--and she's probably not wrong. But he didn't even get pissed off when I got up after a while and came out here to work." Tony tried his best not to smile, because it would be just like Rhodey to give him shit if he looked happy talking about Loki. He didn't think he was all that
successful.

"When he woke up, he got his bag from his car and worked on his own stuff. It was kind of nice," he confessed. "Not the way you're thinking, though. Just... nice."

Rhodey just looked at him. Tony could practically hear what he was thinking, but he wasn't going to dignify any of it with a reply, because it was totally wrong. Sure, he liked Loki. He liked a lot of people.

And yes, he'd decided that there was no need to limit himself to a one-night stand in Loki's case. It wasn't like he had some kind of philosophical objection to seeing someone more than once. It was just that most of the people he met weren't people he wanted to have sex with more than once--or at least, not more than three or four times--and sticking to a strict policy of one-night stands meant that nobody was going to get the wrong idea.

Well, nobody except fucking Steve, but that was one specific instance where he'd totally misread the situation, as opposed to all the times when he'd been right that the other person was fine with a casual hookup.

But as long as he made it perfectly clear to Loki that they weren't dating--that maybe they might work their way up to "friends with benefits," but that was as far as it was going to go--then they'd be fine.

If he could explain that they weren't actually dating without having to explain why they weren't dating, that'd be even better. Loki didn't seem to like Pepper any more than she liked him, so "There's no fucking way I am letting anybody tear my heart out again" was dangerous conversational ground.

Implying that given a chance, Loki could be somebody who could potentially tear his heart out was--in addition to not being true--also dangerous conversational ground.

It seemed like everything was dangerous conversational ground these days. "We aren't going out, or anything," he insisted. "Or even spending time together when we aren't planning to have sex."

"Uh-huh," Rhodey said. "Well, as long as you're clear on that."

"And that's why there's no reason to tell Pepper. She'll just worry that Loki is going to break my heart or ruin my life or something, and she's not going to believe that it's fine because it's just sex." Tony finished his beer and set the can down. He eyed the apple thoughtfully, but decided his body wouldn't know what to do with any more vitamins and fiber and left it on the table.

"Uh-huh," Rhodey repeated.

"If you don't stop--" Tony was interrupted by a godawful noise coming from his phone. "What the hell is that?" he demanded of the world in general while he scrambled to shut it up.

The text from Loki it had accompanied was nothing but a stupid smiling emoji, so clearly it was just meant to call Tony's attention to the ringtone.

"Technopop?" Rhodey suggested. "Really shitty technopop. Jeez, Tony, I thought you had better taste than that."

"I do! Someone must have changed my ringtone." Somebody, of course, being Loki, who really was a fucking asshole. He must have done it when Tony was in the shower yesterday.
What did you do to my phone? he sent.

This song makes me think of you, the message read, which made Tony grimace in disgust. On the one hand, it wasn't a sappy love song that would make him have to re-evaluate his decision to keep having sex with Loki, but but on the other, it sounded like it was fucking eighties technopop with staggeringly stupid lyrics, which also ought to make him re-evaluate his decision to keep having sex with Loki, but hadn't yet.

Asshole, he texted back. Then, to Rhodey, "Do you know what that song is?"

"Give me a second," he said. "I'm Googling the part of the lyrics I heard. 'Disco dollies' ought to be enough to find it, right?"

That gave Tony a chance to send another message: You complete and utter asshole, I hate you so much right now.

The reply came back quickly: So you know the song?

"How long does it take to Google?" Tony demanded.

"Hold your--" Rhodey broke off, doubling over with laughter. "Oh my God, that's brilliant." He held his phone out so that Tony could read the search results.

You are a fucking dead man, he sent, while Rhodey repeated, "Sex Dwarf," over and over again in between howls of laughter.

****

By the time Pepper texted him that she was on her way, Tony had changed Loki's ringtone back to one of the preset ones (though he was considering setting up a custom one that announced Loki as "Asshole!" once he had the time, because Loki so was); and Rhodey had stopped laughing. Mostly because Tony had showed him some of the video he'd taken of the motion tests this afternoon in the robotics lab, and they were too busy being excited that the freaking grasping arm finally fucking worked. (Mostly. He hadn't had a chance to redesign the pressure sensors, so you didn't want to give it anything squishy.)

"That's brilliant," Rhodey said, as Tony pulled up the schematics for him.

"I know I'm a genius," Tony said. "Tell me I'm pretty."

"Get your boyfriend to tell you you're pretty and let me see those drawings."

When the buzzer sounded, Tony was proving that he could deliver a friendly slap to the back of Rhodey's head and talk two hundred miles an hour about the advantages of servomotors over stepper motors--"I know stepper motors are cheaper, but they're not better, not for this, and why would I waste all this time designing a piece of crap? When I get to the point of stripped-down versions for industrial applications, maybe, but not this little guy. Nothing but the best for my baby-" and he kept on talking as he went over to buzz Pepper in.

Nights like these always fell into a comfortable pattern. They spent a while catching up. Texts and phone calls went a long way, but it wasn't the same as getting to see Pepper's face as she told the story of how she and her partner pulled off a successful presentation despite so many technical failures she'd started to think they'd offended the god of electronics--"Nope," Tony proclaimed; "you and I are still good. I had nothing to do with that."--and some asshole guy heckling them with questions that revealed that he thought marketing ability was located in the testicles.
It wasn't the same as laughing along with Rhodey about the guest lecturer in his aerodynamics class who had spent forty-five minutes giving them a talk aimed at middle schoolers--"I got in a nap, so it was all good," Rhodey admitted--and it definitely wasn't the same as Tony showing off all over again, this time so Pepper could see it.

His phone buzzed several times while they were talking, but Tony ignored it. He'd check his messages later, when they were watching TV.

Then they ordered food, and Tony poured drinks. Rhodey wanted another beer, but Pepper was always willing to let him try out a new cocktail recipe, as long as he promised to mix it for normal people, and not to his own tastes; today's involved watermelon nectar and rum. Not bad, as long as he added another slug of rum to his own glass, he decided, as they made themselves comfortable. Pepper took the big chair in the corner, the one Tony always thought of as "Pepper's chair" because nobody else ever used it. The one she'd started sitting in once she'd started coming back to TV nights, a few months after she and Tony broke up.

Tony didn't mind. It had made things easier at first to have that distance between them, and now it meant he'd be able to look at his phone without anyone looking over his shoulder. Not that she'd do it on purpose, but the couch wasn't that big, and Tony wasn't that good at being sneaky. He'd never seen the point, because he usually wasn't embarrassed by anything he was doing.

Once they were settled and the TV was on--first the anime that Rhodey was inflicting on them because he was a sucker for anything involving flying robots; they'd watch the non-terrible stuff after they ate--Tony checked his phone.

You don't hate me.

Then, ten minutes later, I sent you a physics paper, how can you possibly hate me.

Fifteen minutes after that, Are you reading the paper? Need me to explain anything?

And the last one, five minutes ago: If you hate me I'll never let you suck my dick again.

That one made Tony laugh. I don't blow ppl I hate, he messaged back, so nbd.

Then since Loki had had no problem double (triple, quadruple) texting, he followed up with, No time to read. Later tonight.

The response was almost immediate. Hatesex is really hot though.

Somehow, I'm not surprised that you know that.

Want to find out for yourself?

No. I only hate you a little. Later, okay? People over. He tossed the phone down on the table. If he kept texting, he was going to get drawn into a conversation with Loki, and tonight wasn't the night for that. Tonight was for his best friends, not his definitely-not-boyfriend.

"Something up?" Pepper asked, nodding toward his phone.

"Scheduling a hot date for later," Rhodey suggested.

"Shut up, Rhodey." Tony glanced toward his phone; he'd put it on the table face down. Good. Even if Loki kept texting, he wouldn't get caught in a lie. "And no. Remember Bruce, from my o-chem class last year? He hung out with us a few times? He's thinking about picking up a few engineering
classes next semester, and he had some questions."

Rhodey shot him a very suspicious look, but he didn't say anything until an hour or so later, while Pepper was out of the room. "That was not Bruce from o-chem."

"As I said, shut up." Tony shrugged. "You know who it is. He wants to talk about his paper, which I'm not going to read until after you guys have gone home, so no, I'm not scheduling anything for later."

"You're going to have to tell her one of these days."

Tony rolled his eyes. "If this is ever anything that matters, which it will never be, I'll tell her. Until then, fucking drop it."

"Fine. You go ahead and make a terrible decision."

"It's what I do best."

Rhodey shook his head. "Man, I wish that was an exaggeration."

****

Chapter End Notes

"But Mir," I hear you saying, "It's completely ridiculous for a guy born at the very end of the 20th century to be familiar with a technopop song from 1981 that wasn't even a huge hit."

And yeah, it is. But it's also completely ridiculous that I know every song the original lineup of the Kingston Trio ever recorded, despite being not being alive at the time, and yet, I do. (Thanks, Dad.) In other words, it's very possible that someone--maybe Loki's stepmother--was a Soft Cell fan, and it's amazing the things your brain will pop up with. And sometimes, it's amazing the lengths you'll be willing to go to for something you think is funny.

Also, it has consistently made me laugh since I wrote that bit a year ago, and while "kill your darlings" is generally sound advice, if you can't be a little self-indulgent in college AU smutty fanfic, where can you be?

(Also also, if you don't know the song--and most sensible people do not--you can listen [here](link). [If you're reading from the future, let me know if that link dies, and I'll find a new one.])

**Next week:** Justin Hammer is, unsurprisingly, the worst.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Justin Hammer is The Worst, and nobody should ever even think about going out with somebody who has a weird-ass name.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everybody who's reading along! A short chapter this time, but that's how the chapter breaks worked best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

Can I call you? I'm in the lab, so I need my hands free.

The reply came back pretty quickly, which was a relief. Tony was perfectly capable of venting without an audience, but it always felt more cathartic if there was someone on the other end. Even if they were just nodding and making "mm-hmm" noises while playing Candy Crush, Rhodey. But Rhodey was out with the ROTC cadets on some five-thousand-mile run or something, and Pepper was in class, and Tony was royally pissed off.

Not right this second, but I'll call you in ten minutes or so?

Tony sent a thumbs-up and put his phone down on the workbench. Ugh, this fucking day. He'd barely had any sleep; not that Tony wasn't used to that, but it didn't make a shitty day any easier to get through. After Pepper and Rhodey had gone home, he'd tried to read Loki's paper, which meant he spent a lot of time reading other papers and bits of physics textbooks so that he understood Loki’s paper. Which meant great, he now had a pretty thorough understanding of chaos theory and its relevance to modern physics, but he also didn't get to go to bed until eight a.m. and even then, he'd had so much coffee that he just lay there and quietly vibrated at supersonic speeds until his alarm went off.

And texted Loki, who had been awake--not "not asleep yet," but awake and functional and goddamn it, morning people needed to all die horribly. Even hot ones.

It was more like five minutes before Loki called; Tony answered, set it to speaker, and set the phone back down. He had a lot to do, because he had to fix the motherfucking bullshit that-- "That asshole," Tony growled in lieu of a greeting.

"And hello to you, too," Loki said.

"You're also an asshole. You're just the superior asshole right now."

Loki chuckled. "If you say so. Who's the inferior asshole, and should I be jealous?"
"This--okay, I don't know how the physics department works, but over here, there are some labs we can all use for our projects. Most of the time, except for the intro classes where you have to sign up for a lab section, you don't even have a scheduled lab time; we just have to find the time to get things done."

"Which is why you apparently eat, sleep, and breathe robotics over the weekends; I get it."

"Yeah, well. There are some labs mostly reserved for grad students, because you get an assigned workspace and don't have to pack everything up when you go home for the night. But occasionally, upperclassmen get space in one of those labs. If you're good enough to be doing work they think merits it."

"I'm sure you're good enough," Loki said, "but the fact that you have class in the Howard Stark Engineering Complex is probably not hurting that, either."

"That's how I got space when I was a freshman," Tony admitted. "After that, I earned it." He paused, waiting for Loki to argue, but it didn't happen. "And so, I'm sharing a lab. With a couple of people, but the asshole is a grad student named Justin." Tony grimaced. "And like you, he likes to point out that the only reason I have lab space is that the school wants its most famous living alumnus to keep giving them money."

There was silence on the other end for a moment. "Not true," Loki said eventually. "Sure, at first, that was probably the reason, like you said. You were a freshman, and they hadn't really had a chance to see what you could do. But these days, I'm sure it's more because your weekend robotics binges--especially after you've taken a break or two for alcohol and sex--disturb the rest of the undergrads, and they don't want to scare anybody off. Grad students are less easily frightened."

Tony laughed in spite of himself. "Grad students are dicks," he grumbled.

"Of course they are. Undergrads are dicks. Professors are dicks. High-school kids are dicks. Isn't there some kind of rule about that? Ninety percent of everything is dicks?"

"I think that's 'crap.' Ninety percent of everything is crap."

"Huh. I like dicks better." There was another pause, and then Loki said, "Okay, you let that slide without even a hint of a laugh, so this must be serious. Tell me about Asshole Justin and what he did."

"Stole some of my motherfucking prototypes, that's what he did. I had servomotors on my work bench. They're gone. The casing I had them in is on his work bench, and funnily enough, he suddenly managed to solve the problem he's been having with joint articulation." Tony glowered across the room at Justin's area. "I'd have given him the damn diagrams if he wanted them. I'd have built him one if he asked; now that I've solved the grasping issues, it's not hard. But he fucking took them."

"You're sure it's him? You said there were other people in your lab."

"Yeah, but one of them's currently working on facial recognition--there's no reason she'd even look at what I'm doing, let alone take it--and the other flew home to India last week because his father died. This happened last night or this morning. Also, I've known Justin most of my life. His father and mine play golf together. He's also one of Stark Industries' major competitors, but apparently in their business, that also means they're kind of friends."

And Tony had given in to his father's insistence that Tony do his undergrad work at Howard's alma
mater--despite the fact that there were other, better options available--in part because he'd known Justin hadn't gone there. And then the asshole showed up last year as a grad student.

"He and I haven't ever been able to stand each other, but he's also just an arrogant prick. I mean, I'm kind of an asshole, but nowhere near on the same level as Justin fucking Hammer."

"Justin Hammer? ...shit. I know him. You're right, he's the worst."

Tony cringed. "Please tell me that when you say 'know,' you don't mean--"

"That's disgusting. I may have fucked you, but I do have some standards. No, I mean he lives in my building, and he's a jackass neighbor. Throws unbagged garbage in the bins so they draw more bugs and raccoons, plays loud music in the middle of the night--loud, shitty music, to be accurate--parks in other people's assigned spots because they're closer." Then Loki paused. "But if his dad's as rich as yours, how come he's living in my building? You'd think he could afford somewhere less squalid."

"From what I gather, because his dad is pissed that he wanted to go to grad school in the first place and has cut off the money until Justin comes to work for him. Which is probably another reason he hates me, since my dad has already said he'll be happy to let me get my doctorate if I want." Probably to postpone the happy day when Tony came back home--not that Tony was actually planning on coming back home after college, but his dad didn't have to know that.

"That sucks," Loki said, "and I'd almost feel sorry for him except that one, welcome to my world of part-time jobs, Top Ramen, and shitty apartments; and two, he's a complete asshole."

"At least you hate him as much as I do."

"I despise him. But tell you what, I'll hate him extra for your sake if you want."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me. The nicest thing that wasn't about my dick, anyway."

Loki laughed. "That may be the nicest thing I've ever said to anybody that wasn't about his dick. Now. Are you plotting revenge?"

"No. I'm plotting redoing everything I spent the past four days working on, instead of designing new pressure sensors. Revenge will have to come later." At least he didn't have an actual deadline. He got signed up for a one-hour independent study in robotics every semester, just to qualify for the lab access, but it was just a formality. Which... okay, to be fair, that part might be because his last name was Stark, but he didn't care.

His in-name-only instructor didn't care, either, because he was accumulating a stack of publications based on Tony's work that were going to get him through his tenure review. Tony just wanted something to do that wasn't boring, or stupid, or pointless, and in general, he'd found that if he wanted that, he had to assign the projects to himself.

Mostly, though, he just wanted a robot. And not a glorified Roomba like the one Justin was working on.

Tony kept working and kept bitching about Justin for a while, until Loki said, "Look, it's been... interesting, anyway, if not actually fun. But I have to go to work."

"Oh. Okay. Hey, I'm probably going to be here until late, so if you want to stop by--"
"I don't get off work until midnight," he said, "and I have class in the morning. Also, I'm not allowed to stop by the lab without food."

"Who told you that?"

"You, idiot."

Oh, yeah. He had, hadn't he? "Fine, go to your boring job and miss all my brilliance. Just find some time to hate Justin for me, okay?"

"It's a deal."

Tony hung up, feeling a lot better.

He was _never_ telling Rhodey about this conversation. He'd never hear the end of it.

****

"You look happy," Pepper said, setting her tray down on the table. Tony glanced at it. Bacon cheeseburger, fries, nothing resembling either a fruit or a vegetable--not even a bottle of orange juice or a leaf of lettuce on the burger. That could only mean one thing: Pepper was in a terrible mood.

"I'm not happy," Tony replied immediately. He definitely wasn't happy. He'd been up half the damn night redoing work he'd already _finished_, for god's sake. (He might also have fucked up Justin's work in many subtle ways that would be easy to fix if you'd built the servos in the first place, but that would probably take _Justin_ by complete surprise, but that was only a small bonus.)

Rhodey raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything, just directed his attention to the mystery casserole on the tray in front of him. "The next time I decide I want a hot meal," he said, poking at it gingerly with a fork, "I'm coming over to use your kitchen."

"You have a kitchen in your apartment," Pepper said. "I've seen it."

"I also have roommates who don't clean," he said. "Tony at least pays somebody to do the cleaning for him."

"Tony's dad pays somebody to do the cleaning," she corrected.

"Damn right," Tony said. "If I paid them, they'd wear French maid uniforms."

She scowled at him. "Don't be gross, Tony."

"I don't know," Rhodey said. "If he paid me enough, I'd probably clean his apartment in a French maid uniform."

"Would you shave your legs?" Tony asked. "Because if so, let's talk."

Rhodey smacked him on the shoulder, probably because Pepper was still glaring at them. "But enough about Tony. We already know he can be disgusting. What's up with you?"

"Ugh, nothing," she said. "At least, nothing that I should be taking out on you guys. It's not your fault men are terrible."

"I'm not terrible," Rhodey said.
"You're not," she agreed, "but we're not dating, so that doesn't matter."

"You're dating somebody?" Tony said, looking up from his sandwich. He was pretty sure she'd dated a few guys since they broke up, but nobody for very long. He just knew she sometimes stopped having as much free time to get together with him and Rhodey, and the nights when she wanted one or both of them to go out with her got less common.

She didn't generally tell Tony. He liked to tell himself, at least in his more emotionally needy moments, that it was because she secretly wanted to get back together with him, but to be completely fair, it was probably more because she was afraid he'd make things weird.

He was, after all, pretty good at making things weird.

"Yes. No. Not really, because he's terrible and he didn't call. On the other hand, a creep in my econ class messages me every hour on the hour."

"That's disturbing precision," Tony said.

"I'm exaggerating, but he messages me like six times a day. Or did, before I blocked him, but still, why do only the wrong guys call?"

"That's not possible," Tony said, in what he hoped was an encouraging, not at all making-things-weird tone. "Good guys definitely call. If they don't call, they suck."

"How many people have you called for a second date?" Pepper asked.

Oh, no, they were not turning this into an attempt to fix his personal life. His personal life was fine. Better than fine, lately. For the past ten days or so, it had been great. "My point exactly. I suck. You deserve better." He nodded firmly. "Besides, sometimes the good ones call. It's a scientific fact."

"Oh yeah?" Rhodey said. "I want to hear about this science. You've been running experiments?"

"People fall in love all the time. They get married and have small sticky people and get in the newspaper for reaching their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Therefore, some guys must call."

"Probably true," she said around a mouthful of cheeseburger. "Not comforting, but probably true. Never mind me. I'm just in a bad mood, and I want to sulk about my future of dying alone surrounded by cats."

"Not going to happen," he said firmly.

Rhodey was watching him. Hell, Tony would have been watching himself, too, because this was the kind of opening he usually took to make things weird with Pepper. He had been getting a lot better about that lately, but after they first broke up--well, after Pepper started hanging around them again, anyway--it had been a regular thing. He didn't want it to keep being a thing.

"You're more of a dog person," he finished. "You'll die surrounded by Yorkies."

Pepper laughed, and Rhodey went back to stabbing his mystery glop, so maybe he'd succeeded in not being weird about this after all.

"In the grand scheme of things," Pepper said after a minute, "Happy not calling me isn't that big of a deal, right? I mean, if he's just going to flake on me, better to find that out now than after twenty years, two kids and a mortgage." She must have noticed the way Tony was looking at her, because
then she frowned. "What?"

"You went out with a guy named Happy?" Tony said. "Who's next on your list: Sleepy, Dopey, or Doc?"

"It's a nickname." She rolled her eyes. "And seriously, you're critiquing the names of people I go out with now?"

"Absolutely," Rhodey said. Score one for bro solidarity, Tony thought, but then Rhodey kept talking. "Nobody should ever even think about going out with somebody who has a weird-ass name. Right, Tony?"


"Uh-huh," Rhodey agreed. "Anyway, Pepper, you can call him, you know."

"I know I can; that's not the point. He said he'd call. He didn't. That's the point, but the point is also that I'm moving on with my life." She smiled sweetly at Tony. "And resisting the urge to remind you that I've already dated Grumpy."

"His resemblance to a dwarf has been noted before," Rhodey agreed.

"I hate you so much right now, James Rhodes," Tony said.

"Yeah, but I'm also your best friend in the world, so I'm pretty sure you'll get over it," Rhodey said, grinning at him.

Tony was, too, but he wasn't giving Rhodey the satisfaction of admitting it. "What I'm over is this lunch. Pepper, call him and yell at him for forgetting you. Just because you're not going to put up with Tony-Stark levels of crap from a boyfriend doesn't mean you can't give the guy a second chance. Rhodey, just shut the hell up." He shoved the last couple of fries in his mouth and, with his mouth still full, said, "And now, I'm going to the lab, where nobody's going to call me any kind of a dwarf, which should make a nice change."

And also where he could send Rhodey a dozen texts bitching at him for giving him crap, even thinly-veiled crap, about Loki while Pepper was right there. Dammit. This was getting complicated, and Tony only liked complicated in engineering projects.

****

Chapter End Notes

Per this post, AO3 is going to be making updates to their login code soon, and next Thursday is the earliest that it could happen. (They do say they'll inform us 48 hours in advance when they know the exact day.) If it turns out that the update might affect my ability to be able to post next week's chapter on Thursday, 13 December (as in, the update is scheduled for that day), I'll post on Wednesday again just to make sure the chapter is there on time! Otherwise, Thursday as usual.
Next week: Tony might regret telling Loki he can show up at the lab if he brings food. Or he might really not regret it at all. (Also, there's smut.)
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Just some Saturday-night smut.

Chapter Notes

I got twitchy checking and rechecking AO3 to find out when the code update is going through, and in the end, I just decided that just going ahead and deciding to post early was the best thing for my anxiety. (I mean, it looks like the code update isn't coming for a few days, since they haven't announced it, but hi, I'm Mireille, I get anxious about things not going according to plan.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

***

Three days later, Tony was still in the lab.

Oh, he'd left several times--for class, to sleep, to get completely blown off by Loki because he had "other plans"--but it was Saturday evening, he didn't feel like going to a bar, he hadn't heard about any decent parties, and at this point, he expected to be in here for at least the next twenty-four hours.

Not only was he getting a lot done, but everything was so much less annoying in here. Nobody thought they knew better than Tony did how he felt about things, nobody had plans with muscle-bound twits when Tony wanted to see them, and nobody was going to be incredibly pissed off at Tony if they found out who he'd been spending time with. He wasn't quite at the point of declaring that only his robots understood him, but he'd have been lying if it hadn't crossed his mind once or twice.

So when someone knocked on the door, he had no hesitation in yelling, "Go the fuck away." If they had any business being here, they'd have a key.

"Open the door, Tony," Loki yelled back. "You said I could come in if I brought food."

Damn. He had said that, hadn't he?

He opened the door; he might as well at least take the food. "What do you want?" he demanded, reaching for the brown paper bag Loki was holding.

Loki sidestepped him, both keeping the food out of Tony's reach and getting past him into the lab. "You're not answering texts, and your phone goes to voice mail. I figured you'd be here, and you said that if I wanted to visit you at the lab, I had to bring food. So I brought food."

"You know, I can get food for myself," Tony said. "In fact," he went on, hoping Loki couldn't tell
that he was lying through his teeth, "I was just about to leave, grab something to eat, and then go out for the night." He forced a grin. "Maybe we'll run into each other in an elevator?"

"Sure, if that's what you want," Loki said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. "Or we could eat the food that's already here, you can show off your lab, and then we can go back to my place--it's not as nice as yours, but it's closer--and fuck each other's brains out."

That wasn't the worst suggestion Tony had ever heard. "Well, if you're sure you don't have anything better to do." He started clearing up his workspace; he wasn't getting crumbs in something important.

Loki rolled his eyes. "This is about the other night, isn't it? Look, I shouldn't have texted you a comparison of your dick and Thor's, I admit that, but the temptation was too great to resist. Besides, I did say I liked yours better."

"No, it's not about the other night," Tony lied again. "I don't care who you fuck." Of course he didn't; he just didn't want to hear about it. If Loki hadn't sent those stupid texts, Tony wouldn't be bothered at all by knowing he was still seeing Thor (well, maybe a little, but that wasn't jealousy, it was knowing a train wreck when he saw one). They were both free to do whatever they wanted. Also whoever they wanted.

"Good. After all, it's not like we're dating or anything." Loki opened the paper bag and started dividing up the food: sandwiches, bags of chips, bottles of soda. "I don't know what you're calling this, but 'fuckbuddies' sounds about right to me. And I don't think fuckbuddies get to expect monogamy."

"Never said they did," Tony said, twisting off the cap of his soda bottle with unnecessary force and taking a swig, then rummaging in the back of the side drawer in his work table. He produced the small Listerine bottle he kept back there, opened it, took a sniff--last semester, one of his lab-mates had used his "mouthwash," felt bad, and helpfully replaced the bottle. He'd gotten a hell of a surprise when he'd poured actual Listerine into his coffee instead of Jack Daniels--and poured a generous slug into his Coke. "Want some?" he offered, holding it out to Loki.

"Not even if that's not mouthwash," Loki said. He unwrapped his sandwich and took a bite, chewing thoughtfully while Tony put the bottle away. "I have a reputation to live up to," he said after a minute, "and whiskey-dick is definitely not part of it."

Tony snorted. "Lightweight."

"Just don't expect sympathy from me when you can't get it up," Loki said.

"Not going to be a problem," Tony assured him. It never had been before, anyway, but now he was going to be paranoid for the rest of the night. Maybe he'd send Loki away after they ate and not risk it.

Nah. He wouldn't get drunk from this. Loki was just being pissy for no good reason. He might tell Loki to go home after dinner anyway, but that was just because Loki was being kind of an asshole tonight. Just because Tony didn't want to hear anything about Thor's dick. Just because Tony had been disappointed that Loki had had plans with Thor when Tony called him the other night.

And this was why he shouldn't have called Loki back when he'd started to leave last Sunday. And why he shouldn't have called Loki on Tuesday when he'd been in a bad mood. It was giving him a false impression of what Tony wanted from this.
"You don't actually want me to show you around, do you?" Tony said after they'd eaten in silence for a few minutes.

Loki frowned. "Why wouldn't I?"

Tony waved a hand around the room. "It's not really much to look at."

"You idiot. I want to see what you're working on, not the room. Also possibly what Justin is working on, so we can make fun of it."

Tony grinned. "Seriously? Because I'm warning you, most people regret asking after five minutes or so."

He shrugged. "I already know you're a nerd. If I had a problem with that, I'd have left after you abandoned me in bed to get up and work the other night." Then Loki smiled. "Also, you not only read my paper, but you read all the suggested background reading I sent you. And every paper I cited in mine. And you sent me a giant email full of comments afterward. I think I can listen to you talking about robots for a while."

"Don't say I didn't warn you." The only people who actually wanted to listen to Tony talk about robots, other than his professors and some of the other engineering students, were Rhodey and Pepper, and that was because they were his best friends--not to mention that Rhodey was also an engineer. Loki was going to get bored and stop listening after a few minutes, but that would just give Tony the chance to say "I told you so," and he did enjoy being right.

****

It was a good thing that Tony also enjoyed people listening to him and asking non-stupid questions, because he didn't get to be right. What he got to do was go on about his projects for forty-five minutes, complete with circuit diagrams, demonstrations of how various bits worked, and wild speculation about what he was going to do next, to an audience who might not have known very much about mechanical engineering, but did pay attention, remember what Tony had said five minutes ago, and get enthusiastic in all the right places.

To top it all off, by the end of the forty-five minutes, Loki understood enough of what Tony had been showing him to be able to recognize without being prompted that Justin's feeble attempts at building his own robot were clearly inferior.

"I don't get it," Loki said, peering at the schematics that Tony probably shouldn't have been able to access even if they were on the shared server. "If I can see that this thing isn't going to do half the things he says it can, how does he expect anyone else to believe it?"

"Exactly!" Tony said. "It's one thing to try to do something and have it not work. It's another to not even try it and claim it's going to work anyway. Unless he thinks he can wave some kind of magic wand and add an entire suite of functions to this thing, he's up to something."

He grinned. "Which is why after what happened the other day, I decided to use weaker passwords on a lot of my files. Files that just happen to be full of diagrams and notes about things that turned out not to work. Either Justin will be able to solve a problem I can't--and as much as I hate the guy, if he can do that, more power to him--or he's going to waste a lot of time stealing research that won't help him."

Loki had the weirdest smile when he looked over at Tony. It wasn't bad, mind you; it was just weird, with a kind of intensity that made Tony suddenly need to look down at his shoes. "Has
anyone ever told you you're a devious asshole?" Loki asked, which wasn't what Tony had been expecting him to say—not that Tony was quite sure what he'd been expecting.

"The asshole part, all the time," he said, shutting down his computer. "'Devious,' a lot less often. I'm usually pretty straightforward. Justin just pissed me off."

"Well, tonight you're definitely both."

Tony locked the final drawer—he'd put a lot of stuff away before he ate, so it was mostly a matter of putting back the things he'd been showing off to Loki. He wasn't leaving components out for anyone to "borrow" any more—and turned back to Loki, who had rolled his chair closer to Tony's. Now Loki leaned in close, very close—close enough that Tony wanted to apologize for all the failings of personal hygiene that generally accompanied a weekend engineering bender. At least he'd gone home to sleep last night, so he'd had a shower before coming back to the lab.

"'Devious asshole,' by the way, isn't an insult," Loki said, his mouth just millimeters from Tony's, and then kissed him.

No, Tony thought, "kissed" wasn't the right word. Loki practically fucking devoured his mouth, hard and hot and greedy, and Tony kissed him back just as eagerly. And why shouldn't he, he thought. It had been almost a week since--

No way had he missed Loki or anything. He'd just been too busy to find anyone else to hook up with.

Tony's chair rolled back, purely by accident, interrupting their kiss. He laughed. "Okay, this might not be the best place to do this," he said.

"There are other places," Loki suggested. "And don't try to tell me you were planning to stay here and get more work done. I watched you shut everything down." He grinned. "You just didn't know if you were going home alone or not."

Tony snorted. "Oh, I definitely wasn't going home alone. I just didn't know if I was going home with you."

"Well, now that you know you are," Loki said, not rising to Tony's bait, "should we get going? Like I said earlier, my place is closer."

That sounded like a great idea, actually. Not just because it was closer—although he knew that so far he and Loki hadn't been great at delayed gratification—but because that was more like his usual style. He didn't bring people back to his place. If he went to theirs, he didn't have to worry about tactfully kicking them out before they got too clingy. He could just bail the minute things started getting awkward.

And that was what this thing with Loki needed: for Tony to put it back on his usual track. Then it could run its course—Tony was sure they'd get tired of one another eventually—and Tony's life could get back to normal.

"What are we waiting for?" Tony asked, getting up and shrugging on his jacket.

Loki tossed a last piece of crumpled wrapper into the trashcan and stood up as well. "I walked over here, so if you drove..."

Tony shook his head. "I walked." The last two weekends aside, he really did spend a lot of weekends bouncing between the lab and various parties, and neither lack of sleep nor his usual
weekend blood alcohol level made driving a good idea. Besides, he didn't mind the walk even when he was wide-awake and sober.

"Good. There's not a lot of parking around my place anyway." Loki headed for the door.

Tony picked up his backpack and slung it over his shoulder. Before following Loki out, he noticed his soda bottle, still mostly full, sitting on his table. He quickly checked to make sure Loki wasn't looking--this wasn't about anything he'd said, at all--and dropped it in the trash.

****

"It's not much," Loki said, unlocking the door to his apartment, "but--no, really, that's all. It's not much."

It wasn't bad. Tony had gone back to apartments that should have been torched by the Health Department decades ago, apartments where the cockroaches and the fruit flies had developed a complicated society in the kitchen and were about to discover the secret of space flight.

This was just a studio apartment decorated in a style Tony recognized as Early Thrift Store. "It's fine," Tony said. "At least I don't have to try to think of a subtle way to ask you where the bedroom is."

Loki waved toward the couch, a lopsided greenish monstrosity. "Behold, the bedroom. It folds out." He went over to it and started removing the pillows piled on one end.

"Want some help with that?"

"Nah, I'm used to it. Just hold these." He shoved a couple of pillows into Tony's arms, then proceeded to pull the couch out into a double bed. "I'm not trying to rush things," he said when he took the pillows back from Tony, "but I've learned from experience that the one time you wait until you really want the bed, it's going to refuse to cooperate and you'll wind up on the floor."

Tony nodded. He kicked off his shoes and tossed his jacket over a kitchen chair, then sat down gingerly on the bed. These things were never comfortable; he was glad he didn't actually have to sleep on one. "I don't actually mind picking up where we left off in the lab."

Loki was already on the bed as well, sitting with his back resting against the sofa cushions. "Come up here, then," he said, patting the mattress next to him. "I don't mind, either."

Tony moved up toward the head of the bed, close enough to Loki that he could feel the heat where Loki's thigh pressed against his. "Let's see," he said, grinning. "Where did we leave off, exactly?"

"Well, if you can't be bothered to remember, you might not deserve any more," Loki said, but he kissed Tony again anyway.

The kiss was different this time, a little less frantic, a little less aggressive; Tony parted his lips for Loki's tongue without any hesitation, and he slid his arms around Loki, pulling him closer.

"I remember what I was about to do before my chair interrupted," he said, "and it'll work a lot better on a bed than an office chair anyway." He leaned back, tugging at Loki until Loki was partly sprawled on top of him, and then laughed. "In my head, I was going for 'get Loki to sit on my lap' but this works, too."

"Oh, is that what you wanted?"
"I want you. I'd kind of like tonight to go to a place where you're fucking me, but first, I wouldn't say no to kissing you for a while longer. And if you have other ideas, I'm listening."

Loki shifted position, moving until he was in Tony's lap, turned to face him. Tony suspected the maneuver could have been accomplished with a lot less squirming than it actually had been, but he wasn't going to complain, because he wasn't stupid.

"I like a man who knows what he wants," Loki said. "And that lines up quite well with my own ideas about tonight."

Tony put his arms around Loki again, this time sliding them down so that his hands were resting on Loki's ass. "So," he said, in between kisses, "I'm kind of glad you came by the lab."

Loki's immediate response was to kiss him again, pressing close to him with more of that unnecessary squirming. "Only kind of glad? I must be losing my touch."

"Maybe you should try harder." He slid one of his hands upward, under Loki's shirt, to trace along the column of Loki's spine. "I have faith in you. You can probably convince me."

"I wouldn't want to push you into anything," Loki said. The next kiss was accompanied by hands cupping Tony's face, thumbs stroking over his cheekbones. "If you'd rather try your luck at someplace like Carla's, all you have to do is say so." He pulled back a little, though he didn't take his hands away, and smirked. "We could even go together. You might pick up a few pointers."

"Oh," Tony said, "you mean because you managed to bring a guy like me home, and the best I've done lately is you?" He grinned, his hand still skimming lightly over Loki's skin. "I'll stick with the sure thing, anyway.

Then, seized by a sudden, disastrous impulse, he kissed Loki, slowly and deeply, and then murmured, "Besides, there's nobody else I want." Only a second later--as soon as he realized what he'd just said--he quickly added, "Tonight, anyway" and hoped that would make things clear.

"That's convenient, then," Loki said, "since I'm right here." Another kiss, soft and open-mouthed and deep, and then his mouth moved downward, along Tony's jaw and down to his throat. When he reached Tony's T-shirt, he paused. "Let's get this off you."

Tony was only too happy to cooperate, pulling the shirt over his head and dropping it onto the arm of the couch, the better to locate it when he was trying to make a graceful exit. "What about you?"

"If you want, yeah."

Tony reached up to unbutton Loki's shirt, slowed down by Loki's insistence on kissing him once for every button he undid, like that was an accomplishment that deserved a reward. But soon enough, the shirt was hanging open, and Loki shrugged it off.

That earned Tony a kiss, too, even though he hadn't been the one to do it, and then Loki was kissing his way down Tony's throat again, this time on the other side. He worked his way downward, licking at the hollow of Tony's throat and then along the collarbone, giving Tony a bright, predatory smile when he shivered.

"That's good," Loki murmured. "Show me what you like." He kept traveling downward, tonguing Tony's nipple, then taking it into his mouth. When Tony moaned, he bit down lightly, making Tony arch beneath him, his mouth falling open in a silent gasp at the unexpected jolt. "You look so fucking hot like that."
Tony couldn't quite summon up a response, not when Loki went right back to what he'd been doing, so instead, he just reached up to run his hands over Loki's chest.

"Just lie back," Loki said. "Let me make you feel good. You can return the favor in a little while."

Tony wasn't sure that he liked that idea, exactly--he generally wanted to take a more active part in the proceedings than that--but then again, it wasn't a bad thing. Especially not when Loki brought a hand up to the other nipple, rolling and pinching it between strong fingers.

"Oh, fuck," he blurted out. He squirmed under Loki, arching up against him again, but he was trying to lie back and let Loki do what he wanted--and it had been worth it so far, anyway--so he kept his hands at his sides.

Loki smiled down at him. "Good," he said. "I'm pretty sure this isn't your usual thing, but I promise, it'll be worth it. It's just hard to really enjoy watching how much you like what I do to you when you're driving me crazy, and you're definitely worth watching."

Tony shrugged a little. "If you say so." Not that he was generally modest, but he was used to his participation being expected.

"I do." He took Tony's hand then, pressing it to the front of his jeans. "Feel that and tell me I don't like watching you."

Tony palmed the outline of Loki's erection, grinning. "Because you're so incredibly difficult to get going."

"I'm almost as easy as you," Loki said. He changed positions, so that when he leaned down to return his attention to Tony's nipples, his thigh pressed into Tony's cock, rubbing against him whenever Loki moved. "Do you want something?" Loki asked, which answered Tony's question about whether Loki had noticed how much Tony was struggling not to thrust against the hard muscle, craving friction.

Fuck me, Tony wanted to say, but it came out, "Kiss me again." He couldn't be sorry, though, not when Loki gave him a smile that didn't have a trace of smirk in it, and then gave him exactly what he'd asked for: another slow, deep, messy kiss that left them both breathing hard. Loki's mouth was red and wet when he lifted his head, and Tony suspected his own was just the same.

Then Loki pressed against Tony's cock again, rocking back and forth with relentless, dizzying friction. "I'm going to come; you should stop," he gasped.

"Is that really what you want?" Loki murmured, his breath hot in Tony's ear. He bit down on Tony's earlobe, and Tony's hips bucked, up and against Loki until he slipped over the edge.

For a minute, he couldn't even bother to be embarrassed that he just came in his pants like an overeager fifteen-year-old. Only for a minute, though, because as soon as he came back down to earth and saw Loki's amused expression, he could feel his face getting hot. "God damn it, Loki," he muttered. "You couldn't let me get my pants off?"

"Not really, no," he said, kissing Tony again. "Not when my other option was getting you so worked up you couldn't control yourself."

All right, when he put it that way, Tony could see the merit of the argument. "Okay, fine. Can you at least get me something to clean up with?"

"Fine, I guess I could do that," Loki said, getting off the bed and disappearing into the bathroom.
Tony got out of his jeans and underwear quickly, then, realizing he wasn't putting the underwear on again until it went through the laundry, balled them up and used them to wipe away the worst of the mess.

Then he decided he looked stupid standing there in nothing but his socks, so he figured he might as well strip off the rest of the way.

"Well, now I feel overdressed," Loki said from the doorway.

"You could fix that," Tony suggested, getting back on the bed and reclining back on his elbows.

"In a minute, after I've taken care of you." He crossed back over to the bed. "Scoot over a little."

Once Tony did, Loki knelt next to Tony on the bed. Tony reached for the washcloth Loki was holding, but Loki pushed his hand away. "Let me do it?"

"You don't have to--"

"I want to."

It wasn't a big deal, so Tony just shrugged. "Okay, sure." Really, it was kind of nice to just lie back and let Loki clean him off with the warm washcloth, to enjoy being touched in a way that wasn't directly about getting off. "I still can't believe you made me come in my pants," he grumbled.

"If you really hated it, I won't do it again." Tony was pretty sure he was completely clean by now, but Loki was still dabbing at him with the cloth, and as he waited for Tony's answer, he lowered his head and placed a kiss on Tony's hipbone.

"It's just embarrassing, that's all. Like I have absolutely no self-control."

"Yeah, but that's what I wanted," Loki said, his mouth still against Tony's skin. "It's not like you came too fast when we were fucking or something. I was deliberately trying to get you off, and it worked. And," he added, nuzzling at Tony's thigh, "you looked absolutely gorgeous doing it."

Tony gave into an impulse and brought his hand up to stroke the strands of Loki's hair that had escaped from his ponytail. Maybe that was dumb, too sentimental for what this was, but Loki just leaned into the touch without saying anything, so Tony figured it was probably okay.

"So," he said after a moment, "I have zero problem being selfish, but what about you?"

"I don't, either." Loki looked up at him and grinned. "No, I know what you meant. Are you still okay with me fucking you, or should there be a change of plans?"

"Damn right I'm still okay with it," Tony said. "I'm pretty sure I'm never not going to be okay with it."

"I won't hold you to that, but for right now, that sounds like a plan. Just let me finish getting my clothes off." That only took a moment; soon he was back to kneeling on the bed beside Tony, pale skin and sharp angles and that wolfish grin that Tony was starting to associate with all the very best things.

"Hold this for me?" Loki asked, holding out a condom packet, then, when Tony took it, "Thanks. And spread your legs? Oh, good, that's perfect."

"What happened to 'just barely adequate'?" Tony asked, laughing. "I'm not sure how I can handle
"Maybe I like you today," Loki said. "Or maybe I just want to make sure you don't change your mind before we have sex." He shrugged. "And besides, I've made no secret of the fact that your looks and your performance are both very much to my tastes." He leaned down to kiss Tony, still grinning. "Your personality may leave something to be desired, but right now that's only a minor problem."

"That sounds more like you," Tony said.

"And I'm still not happy that you changed your ring tone back," Loki went on, as he uncapped a bottle of lube and squeezed some onto his fingers.

"It was terrible technopop!" Tony protested, raising his hips a little to give Loki better access. "Not to mention that it was ancient before either of us was born. And Rhodey wouldn't stop laughing at me."

"So," Loki went on, ignoring the interruption, "I think you should be very grateful that I feel like being nice to you at all, in any way." He pressed one slippery finger into Tony.

Tony hissed at the sudden intrusion, closing his eyes for a moment as he got accustomed to the feeling of being stretched open. When he opened them again, Loki was watching him, but he quickly looked away.

"Ready for more?" he asked; when Tony nodded, a second finger joined the first.

Tony bit his lip, waiting for the burn of protesting muscle to ease. Before it faded completely, Loki began to move his fingers, stretching him further.

"There you go," Loki murmured. "You'll be ready for me soon. I just want to open you up a little more."

Tony pushed back against his fingers, trying to speed up the process, and was rewarded by a crook of Loki's fingers that put them in just the right spot to strike sparks behind Tony's eyes. "Come on," he urged. "I want you."

"You can take one more finger," Loki said, and fuck, yes, Tony could, of course he could, but as good as it felt, it wasn't quite enough.

"You're being so patient," Loki said, which made Tony laugh at how obvious of a lie it was. He definitely didn't feel patient.

"I want you all slick and loose and ready for me," Loki went on, because he was obviously trying to see if he could kill Tony just by talking at him. "It's your own fault, you know. If you weren't so damned pretty when you're desperate, I might not make you wait so long."

Tony shook his head. "Why do you make it so hard to argue with you?"

"Because I like to win?" he said, and Tony had to laugh.

But finally, Loki must have decided that he had enough; he pulled his fingers free, only smirking a little bit at the involuntary whine Tony let out, and nodded toward the condom that was still in Tony's hand. "I'm ready for that now."

Tony handed it over, watching Loki roll the condom on and apply lube, trying his best not to
demand that Loki hurry the fuck up, damn it. Loki would just tell him how much he liked hearing Tony beg, and Tony would roll his eyes and tell Loki that he was an asshole, and somehow, he still wouldn't be getting fucked, so it was all a waste of effort.

"I can practically hear you thinking," Loki said, settling back between Tony's legs. "And yes, I am going to get around to fucking you."

Then Tony could feel the head of Loki's cock pressed against him, and no matter how pointless it was, he had to mutter, "Get on with it."

"Since you asked so nicely," Loki said, and then, finally, Tony got what he wanted, Loki hard inside him, filling him up.

"I'm okay," Tony said, when Loki stopped, not moving, once he was fully inside him.

Loki gave him a wry smile. "I'm not," he said. "Or, I really, really am, to the point where this is all going to be over in about thirty seconds if I'm not careful."

"Turnabout's fair play," Tony said, and clenched his muscles tight around Loki. It was extremely satisfying to see Loki close his eyes and grit his teeth at that, but he really didn't want Loki to come this fast, so he relaxed again and waited.

Loki breathed slowly for a few more seconds, then opened his eyes. "You little shit," he said, though his voice was soft. "You feel so good, though, I almost didn't want you to stop." He started to move, slowly pulling almost completely out of Tony before thrusting in again. "But that would have been a shame, when this is so much better for both of us."

Tony couldn't really argue with that, so he concentrated on moving along with Loki, hips rising up to meet his thrusts, again and again.

"Yes, fuck, just like that," Loki gasped, leaning down to capture Tony's mouth in a kiss. Tony put his arms around Loki, trying to keep him close as possible while Loki shuddered and came.

After Loki was completely spent, after he'd got rid of the condom and used the other leg of Tony's much-abused shorts to clean them up a bit, he collapsed on top of Tony again, his face buried in the crook of Tony's shoulder.

"Stay tonight?" Loki mumbled without looking up.

He should go home. Hadn't he just been telling himself that coming here was the perfect plan since it made it easier for him to make a quick exit when they were done? And staying over meant sleeping on Loki's lumpy sleeper sofa. He'd already been congratulating himself earlier on escaping that.

But Loki was warm and loose-limbed and planting kisses on Tony's neck, which made it a lot more tempting to just say, "Yeah, all right," and close his eyes.

****

Chapter End Notes

This is why last week's update was short--it didn't fit well with either chapter 6 or
chapter 8, so it needed to stand on its own.

**Next week:** Spaghetti is made, and Tony is doomed.

And unless there's ongoing AO3 weirdness, we'll be back to Thursday posting.
Tony held a finger up to his lips as he opened the door. "Yeah, Pepper," he said into his phone, making sure to stress her name as loudly as he could without making her suspicious, "tomorrow night's good. Try to convince Rhody to come with us, okay? He's working too hard lately."

Loki made a face at Pepper's name, but stayed silent as he stepped past Tony into the apartment. He settled down on the couch, opening his backpack and rummaging around until he produced a textbook and notepad.

"I've got to go," Tony said. "That was the delivery guy, and I want to eat before my food gets cold. I'll see you at eight tomorrow. No, I won't forget. Bye." He ended the call and took the spot next to Loki on the couch. "That was Pepper," he said, for lack of anything better to say.

"I noticed," Loki said dryly. "And I'm the pizza guy. You do know that outside porn, the pizza guy only delivers pizza? So don't plan on getting laid any time tonight."

"Did you bring pizza?"

"Do you see a pizza anywhere?"

"Then you're not much of a delivery guy, and you might as well moonlight in porn." Tony grinned. "I know you're only here because you wanted a quiet place to work, but I should at least get a kiss to reward my generosity."

Loki closed his book, using his pencil as a bookmark. "Tony." He paused, shaking his head. "Yeah, they're tearing down the building across the street from mine, and it's really loud in my apartment. But I know where the library is, given that I work there, and there are at least three coffee shops in my neighborhood." He turned toward Tony. "So, yeah, I guess I'm willing to kiss you," he said, and followed the words with action.

"I really do have to finish this problem set, though," he said when they broke apart, though Tony decided to believe that he sounded reluctant.

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "I mean, yeah, I have three chapters in my fluid dynamics book to read." Ordinarily, he'd be fine with just skimming it, but it was his bad luck to get a professor who liked
to ask ridiculous, petty, nit-picking questions on exams. "So I'll let you work." He picked up his book from the coffee table, where he'd tossed it when Loki had buzzed him from downstairs.

Loki nodded, already opening his own book again. Tony settled back on the couch and started to read. After a few minutes, Loki turned to put his feet up on the couch—which, given the length of his legs, basically meant on Tony's lap. It was a definite invasion of personal space, but it wasn't like Tony minded. To be honest, he was getting used to Loki doing it.

After half an hour or so, Tony had not only read the chapters he'd been assigned, but also felt confident that whatever stupid question turned up on the next exam asking about the caption on the diagram on page 247, he'd be ready for it. Loki was still working, and Tony considered getting up and finding something else to do, but then again, he was comfortable where he was.

All right, he also just didn't feel like disturbing Loki. This afternoon was turning out to be kind of nice, really. It was almost as comfortable as doing homework with Rhodey, except with the additional possibility that Loki might be convinced to stay the night. Definitely not a bad thing.

So instead, he pulled out his phone. He answered a couple of texts--very deliberately giving Rhodey a vague excuse for why he wasn't free that night, and then trying to shoot down Rhodey's reasons for not going out with them tomorrow--and then checked his email.

Most of it was pretty run-of-the-mill: spam, notices sent to the entire campus-wide mailing list, a couple of classmates wanting notes from a class they missed or suggesting they work on a project together. Those were easy to answer: "I don't really take notes, sorry," and a lot of "thanks, but no"; they were all from classes Rhodey was in, so Tony was all set for project partners who could pull their own weight and keep up with him.

Then there was the one with the subject line "you lying asshole."

"Well, okay, then," Tony murmured under his breath. He didn't recognize the email address--it was from freaking Yahoo; who used Yahoo these days?--but his malware protection was good, so he opened it up.

He'd barely got two lines in when he started laughing. "I am so awesome," Tony said.

"That's the narcissism talking." Loki looked up from his work. "Something good happen?"

"Something great happened. I just got email. From Justin. Using a personal email address, presumably because he doesn't want anyone to be able to prove it was him without a subpoena."

"Did he threaten to kill you? Or dismember you? I feel quite strongly about keeping you alive and intact, and I know where he sleeps."

"Not exactly, no. He just discovered that all of the 'research' I've been putting on the shared server is deeply flawed, at best." He grinned. "He's calling me names I'm pretty sure some people pay good money to hear, so when this engineering thing doesn't work out for him, he can always go into phone sex."

Loki shuddered visibly. "I think his essential Justin-ness would come through the phone."

"Yeah, maybe." Tony held out his phone. "You can read the email if you want. He didn't come right out and say that he was going through my research to steal it, but it's obvious."

Loki raised an eyebrow, but took the phone. "I'm surprised you'd let me touch your phone after what happened the last time I got my hands on it."
"I'm watching you, though," Tony said. "And if any disturbing ringtones show up, you're going to be going without sex for at least two weeks."

"Without sex from you, you mean. It'd be disappointing, but not that dire."

Oh. Yeah. Tony had forgotten for a minute.

Loki scrolled through the email, shaking his head and laughing quietly. "It's amazing how much righteous indignation someone can work up when what they really mean is, 'you're interfering with my ability to cheat.'"

Tony took his phone back, making a very big show of checking to be sure Loki hadn't changed anything on it this time. "I wonder what he'll do when he realizes I'd have helped him any time he asked. If he'd asked, instead of being a dick about it. But no, he'd never ask a lowly undergrad for help, even if that undergrad is doing work miles more advanced than he is. Asshole."

"It's really tempting to start striking up a conversation with him when we run into one another at the mailboxes," Loki said. "Just so that I can actually watch how outraged he gets every time you're smarter than him."

"Go for it," Tony said. "I mean, people are going to think you have terrible taste in friends, but--"

"--If they've seen me with you, they think that anyway?"

"Yeah, exactly." Not that anybody had seen him with Loki. The engineering building was generally deserted on Saturday nights except in the spring, right before senior projects were presented, and beyond that first day when they'd gone out for coffee, they'd spent all their time together here or Loki's apartment.

Maybe they should do something about that. But then maybe word would get back to Pepper, and she'd be furious with him, and he'd lose one of his best friends for nothing, because she'd never believe that he wasn't actually dating Loki.

Because, okay, maybe he kind of was. Just not the way Pepper would take it. Tony had made too many exceptions to his own rules--rules that weren't Pepper's fault, exactly, but were definitely inspired by what went wrong between them--where Loki was concerned. She'd never believe that they were just fuckbuddies. Friends who had sex. Really good sex, sex that left Tony walking around grinning like an idiot for the next day or two, but just sex.

Hell, for that matter, Pepper wouldn't even be crazy about him being friends with Loki. And she'd be even less happy about him lying to her about it--not directly, but Rhodey was right: not telling Pepper the truth was still lying to her.

So maybe things were good enough as they were.

They sat there in silence--more or less; Loki muttered to himself as he worked, and Tony occasionally laughed or grumbled at something he saw online--for a while longer, until Loki set aside his books and stretched. "Fucking finally. That was the biggest waste of time since--"

"Justin?"

"Yeah, all right. That was a real Justin of an assignment, but at least it's done." He swung his legs off Tony's lap and sat upright. "You know you didn't have to sit there while I worked."

"Like I'd have stayed there for a minute if I hadn't wanted to," Tony said. "So, were you planning to
stick around for a while? I mean, it's fine if you weren't. I was just curious."

"You could just ask me to stay over, you know. Who knows, I might even say yes."

"Or you might have a hot date tonight, and my ego wouldn't be able to stand the rejection." He grinned at Loki, but he didn't seem to appreciate the joke.

Loki sighed heavily. "For fuck's sake, Tony. I don't have any plans for tonight, I'm not currently too annoyed with you to want to be in the same room--though that's subject to change--and, just in case you're still not clear on this, I have clothes for tomorrow and a toothbrush in my backpack. Now, is there anything you might want to ask me?"

"I have no idea why you're making such a big deal about this," Tony said. "But okay, fine, if you want me to spell it out for you: I wouldn't mind if you wanted to stay over."

"I suppose that's the best you can do," Loki said, still frowning. "And all right. I wouldn't mind staying over, either."

Tony thought about arguing, because there was absolutely nothing wrong with anything he'd said, but figured that if Loki was in this kind of incredibly touchy mood, he might as well drop the subject. Otherwise, the evening was probably going to end with them yelling at each other and Tony going to bed alone.

"Great," he said, and from the way Loki's expression softened, he'd said the right thing.

"Tell me you have food in the house, though," Loki said. "I'm hungry."

He shrugged. "Maybe? In the freezer. The housekeeping service does that." Tony didn't usually care what he ate. He ordered food if he was hungry, or heated up one of the meals the service left in the freezer, or made a sandwich or a bowl of cereal. Whatever seemed easiest at the time.

Loki shook his head. "You don't even buy your own food."

"Sure I do. I even tip the delivery driver."

Loki got up and went into the kitchen area, opening the freezer. "Okay, I had no idea they made fancy TV dinners for rich people," he said. "But they're still TV dinners. This is sad, Stark. I mean, my kitchen is full of packaged crap because I have one burner, a mini-fridge, and a microwave, but you have an actual kitchen. Do you even own a pan?"

"Probably." He knew he did, for that matter. Whichever one of his father's assistants who had furnished the apartment for him had made sure the kitchen was stocked with a lot of stuff Tony didn't plan to use, ever. He had used one of the pans, though, because sometimes he wanted eggs. Or grilled cheese, though he usually just used the microwave to melt some cheese on toast instead. "And since when are you into cooking? We had cold cereal the other morning at your place."

"We haven't known each other for a month," Loki pointed out. "There are a lot of things I'm into that you don't know anything about."

Tony smirked.

"Shut up, that isn't what I meant." He paused. "Well, mostly not what I meant. But some of us like to eat semi-regularly, and don't have a freaking domestic staff to keep our fridge stocked."

Tony shrugged, wandering out into the kitchen to join Loki. "You can poke around all you want,"
"Idiot," Loki muttered, opening a cabinet and peering inside.

"Hey, I can use my time and energy to be a brilliant engineer and damn good in bed, or I can cook dinner for myself every night. You pick."

"You're overestimating your skills in bed," Loki said. "You could probably maintain them and heat up a can of soup occasionally. Also, you have actual food in here. It hasn't even expired." He pulled out a couple of packages. "You don't have to be a good cook to make spaghetti—which is lucky, because I'm not one."

"You're giving me shit, and you're not even a good cook?"

"I'm making you dinner, and you're going to give me shit?"

"I can just order food for us," Tony offered.

Loki banged a cabinet door shut. "Or you could not, because some of us can't afford to return the favor very often, and I fucking hate feeling like I owe you. So I'm going to make food, and you're either going to help, or get the fuck out of my way. Either way, you're not going to say anything else about it."

"You don't owe me," Tony said. "That's not why I do it. It's just not a big deal."

"Yeah, well, neither is making spaghetti with sauce from a jar. Any idiot can do it. There are instructions on the box."

"Why are you making such a thing out of this today, though? It didn't bother you before."

"I didn't know that this was going to be something we did regularly, though." He got a pan out of the cupboard and filled it with water, putting it on the stove, then got out a second, smaller pan and dumped the sauce into it. "And I know, it's still your food that I'm cooking, but it's not like you were ever going to do it." He turned away from the stove to look at Tony. "So, which is it: getting out of my way, or helping?"

Helping turned out to not be so terrible. Loki didn't trust him with much—not that there was much to do, really—so they finally settled on having him make toast that they could pretend was garlic bread. Toast was something Tony was confident in his ability to make, even if he got distracted.

It didn't take that long before they were sitting on the couch, plates of food on their laps. "That didn't look that difficult, really," Tony said.

"That's because it isn't. This is incredibly basic cooking. It's the kind of thing you teach your twelve-year-old how to make so he can eat dinner when you're working late," Loki shrugged. "You're totally incompetent with a stove because you don't want to know how to cook, not because it's actually hard."

"I don't know," Tony said in between mouthfuls of pasta. "This was kind of fun." It wasn't all that bad, either. Maybe if he was picky about his food, he'd have some kind of complaint, but it tasted fine and it was maybe, possibly, a little bit nice that they'd made dinner.

He hadn't made dinner with Pepper. Probably because he was, as Loki said, totally incompetent in the kitchen, and Pepper had insisted that she wasn't going to wind up doing all the "women's work," which seemed fair to Tony. So they'd mostly gone out, and they'd both been okay with that.
It was just nice that there was a thing he and Loki did that he and Pepper hadn't. He didn't compare Loki to Pepper, really, but he suspected from the faces Loki made when Tony mentioned her that Loki thought he did.

"You made toast," Loki said. "And you burned it. Don't rush to change your major to Culinary Arts just yet."

"I like my toast like this," Tony said.

"Of course you do. You have no idea what you're eating half the time, do you?" Loki didn't really sound annoyed, though, just warm and exasperated and kind of happy, like he couldn't think of anything better to be doing than sitting on Tony's couch with him, eating spaghetti that was a little bit watery because they couldn't find anything to drain it with and had to make do with using the pot lid to hold the spaghetti in while they poured off the water.

(Tony had already left a note for when the housekeepers came on Friday--"Do I have a colander? If not, please buy one"--while Loki pointed out that there was a perfectly good Target half a mile from campus and Tony could just go out and get one. Which was true, except Tony didn't want to go out and buy a colander. If he went, he'd have to take Loki with him, because Loki would probably have opinions about kitchen utensils; and if he took Loki shopping for kitchen utensils, this was all going to start feeling domestic and weird, and besides, Pepper shopped at that Target. )

Come to think of it, though, Tony couldn't really think of anything better to do than to sit on his couch with Loki and eat imperfect spaghetti and toast that was browned to perfection and not even the least bit burnt.

Okay, fine, Tony thought. This wasn't an actual relationship or anything, but he'd done a terrible job at keeping things "just sex."

He didn't really mind, and while he wasn't going to risk asking, he was pretty sure Loki didn't, either.

****

"This is not a good time," Tony said, wishing he'd locked the door to the lab when he'd come in there.

"No," Loki agreed, "it's really fucking not." He closed the door behind himself and looked around the room. "Which of these workstations belongs to the guy who's out of the country?"

"He's back," Tony said, returning to his computer. Damn it, he really didn't have time for Loki right now. He was working. And he'd just seen Loki yesterday. They'd made dinner together again--it was getting to be quite the habit, and Tony had started leaving a shopping list for the housekeeping service that had more on it than "coffee" and "bourbon."

He'd been seeing Loki a lot over the past several weeks--most nights, unless he had plans with Pepper and Rhodey, or Loki had to work (or had plans with someone else). That was fine--that was great, in fact--but it did mean that when Tony was working, he needed to work.

"Fuck," Loki muttered. "I need a place to work. The power went out in the physics building, and I don't have time to go home."

"The physics building is closer to your apartment than it is to here," Tony pointed out.

"Yeah, but I have a class in the math building at four, and that's just across the courtyard." He
shook his head. "Never mind. If it's going to be a big deal, I'll go someplace else. I just know you're not a pain in the ass when I'm trying to get work done."

Huh. They had been working together--or at least, in the same room--a lot lately. And they were pretty good about not distracting one another. It was weird, since the rest of the time, Tony was terrible about keeping his hands off Loki, and vice versa, but it worked.

"Oh, fine," he said. "Find a spot and don't mess with anyone's stuff but Justin's. I think they're all teaching this afternoon, and they probably wouldn't mind anyway, but if they come back and complain, I'll have to kick you out."

Loki looked around for a moment. Then, apparently not finding anywhere that he could sit without having to move someone's notes or equipment, he shrugged, sat down on the floor, his back against the base of Tony's worktable, and got out his laptop.

Other than holding his laptop cord up for Tony to plug into the power strip on top of the table, Loki didn't say anything--though he did shake his head when Tony obviously and deliberately put his earbuds back in and turned up the volume; Tony wasn't sure if that was because of the overdone "don't bother me" gesture or just because he liked pretending to hate Tony's stellar taste in music--just settled down, got his own headphones out, and got to work.

In the end, when someone broke the silence, it was Tony. "You know, all that work you've been putting in to make friends with Justin so you can enjoy his impotent ravings about me is going to be wasted if he sees you in here."

"What?" Loki turned down his music, and Tony repeated himself.

"Oh, Justin. I thought about that. I'll keep my head down, so he doesn't see my face. If he asks, you'll just claim I'm your boyfriend and not introduce me, he'll be too weirded out that your boyfriend is sitting at your feet like a dog to look at me too closely, and we'll be fine. And if not, it's not like it's that thrilling of a plan. I can scrap it." Loki waved a hand impatiently. "Seriously, though, working. I have to send my project adviser an outline of my conference presentation by five."

"You're presenting?" Tony was definitely impressed. Also wondering how weird it would be if he showed up at a physics conference, but the answer he kept coming up with was "extremely weird and borderline stalker," so maybe not.

"They have a session for poster presentations from undergrads."

"Still, they don't invite just anybody," Tony said. He knew how academic conferences worked.

"You can tell me I'm brilliant later. Working now."

And that was that, until about three forty-five, when Loki packed up his computer and got to his feet. "Done. Just in time," he said, tapping Tony on the shoulder so that he'd take his earbuds out.

"Going to class?"

"Yeah. Listen, I work tonight, but I'll see you tomorrow?"

Tony shook his head. "I have plans with--"

"Let me guess. Pepper."
"And Rhodey," he said defensively. Why the hell was he getting defensive? It wasn't like he was doing anything wrong. Hell, even if Pepper hadn't been his ex, they'd made it very clear a few weeks ago that they could do whatever they wanted, with whoever they wanted.

Still, he did want to get to see Loki this weekend. "So... Friday?" He could always go to the lab on Saturday morning instead. It was starting to be a habit with him--spending at least Friday night, if not Saturday night as well, with Loki instead of in the lab. The thing was, he wasn't making any less progress on any of his projects. Clearly, this thing with Loki was very good for his efficiency.

And, just possibly, the fact that he'd gotten rid of that bottle of "mouthwash" locked in his drawer had had some effect, but he wasn't going to admit that in a million years.

"Friday," Loki agreed, kissing Tony before slinging his backpack over his shoulder. "And now I have to run or I'll be late to class."

Even after Tony was alone in the lab again, he realized he was still grinning. Yeah, this was a good thing. A really good thing. Sure, Pepper was probably right and Loki was extremely bad news; Pepper's friend Clint had probably thought things were great right up until they weren't. That was why Tony was still determined to keep things mostly casual between them.

But until the inevitable happened, Tony was also determined to enjoy the hell out of this.

****

Chapter End Notes

Next week: Pepper has questions.
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

Pepper's getting suspicious.

Chapter Notes

I really hope this will be the last week I need to post early. AO3 has tomorrow's upgrade scheduled for what is the very early morning for me, but in all my years of dealing with the internet/computers/etc., no upgrade has ever been finished on time. Thursday's a busy day for me, so if I can't post the new chapter first thing in the morning, I can't really count on posting it at all. And I'd hate to be late (not because I think you're all on the edges of your seats, but because I hate missing even self-imposed deadlines), so here it is on a Wednesday.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

"Come have a drink with me," Pepper said, putting her hand on Tony's elbow.

Tony looked over his shoulder, perplexed. "I thought we were here so that we could dance with people who aren't, you know, each other." Which was what Tony had been about to do; he'd been talking to a redhead he'd just met, planning to ask her to dance as soon as the music changed to something a little less slow and sappy.

"True. But they'll all still be here in fifteen minutes. Come downstairs so we can talk."

Tony looked out over the dance floor, trying to catch Rhodey's eye. Rhodey hadn't been able to get out much this semester, and he was clearly making up for lost time; he was slow-dancing with a blonde girl he seemed to be getting along with pretty well. Finally, Rhodey noticed him, and Tony mouthed, "Help. Me."

Rhodey looked from him to Pepper and shook his head, grinning at Tony. Damn him. It was a good thing that Rhodey was such a good friend, because this tendency to let Tony fend for himself when Pepper cornered him would be totally unforgivable otherwise.

But Pepper didn't look angry about anything, not that Tony could think of anything that she'd be angry about. Well, except for Loki, and he was sure that Pepper didn't know about him and Loki. She wouldn't have found out here, and she'd never have gotten this far into the evening--the three of them had gone out for dinner before coming here--without saying something about it. That was one of the things he'd always liked about Pepper; she'd never made Tony play the "guess what I'm upset about" game.

So with a regretful wave at the redhead whose name he hadn't quite caught--Natalie, maybe?--he followed Pepper down the stairs into the quieter part of the bar. "Find us a place to sit, then, if you
want to talk," he said. "I'll get the drinks. Beer okay?"

"Great," she said, scanning the room for an empty table. "I'm going to check over there, past the pool tables."

Five minutes later, Tony had acquired a couple of longnecks and Pepper had found them a booth in the corner, between the pool tables and the jukebox that had been broken for as long as Tony had been coming here.

"So," Tony said. "You want to talk. Are you okay? Do I need to hire a hit man to deal with Dopey or Sneezy or whatever his name is?"

"That's never going to be funny, Tony. But yes, I'm okay. I'm good." She took a drink of her beer, then said, "And Rhodey's good, too, it looked like. Haven't I seen that girl somewhere before?"

Tony hadn't gotten a good look at her face. From the back, she hadn't looked familiar; of course, he might have seen her a hundred times on campus and never really noticed her. "Maybe? I don't know."

"I think she's in ROTC with Rhody," Pepper said. "Anyway, I'm glad he's having fun. He's been working too hard lately." Another swallow of beer, and then she put her hand on top of Tony's. "And so have you. I worry about you both."

Tony reached for his own beer and took a long swig. "I agree about Rhody, but I haven't been working any harder than I ever do." Less, in fact, because he'd been spending so much time with Loki.

"And you always work too hard," she pointed out. "Or too long, anyway. There's dedication to your research, and then there's driving yourself into an early grave, and I'm never sure you know the difference."

"I'm good," he promised. "I sleep. I eat. I leave the lab on a regular basis. Cross my heart." He matched the words with a gesture. "I'm even learning how to cook," he added, although that was putting himself in dangerous territory.

Pepper raised a skeptical eyebrow. "You. Tony Stark. Learning to cook," she repeated. "You know that instant oatmeal doesn't count as cooking, right? Neither does toast."

"I made tacos on Sunday," he said defensively. Without any help, even, because Loki had decreed that he required food but that Tony had left him far too exhausted to help make it. It had been surprisingly easy. He was sure that if he ventured beyond things that had clear directions written on the package--or the burgers he and Loki had made Tuesday night, which were pretty self-explanatory--he'd rapidly be out of his depth, but at the moment, he was having fun.

It was kind of disgusting how much fun he was having. All it took was Loki giving him a hard time for being incompetent at something, and Tony's competitive nature kicked in to make him do unnecessary things like cooking.

"Really?"

"You don't have to sound so skeptical," he said. "They print very simple directions on the box." He grinned at her. "I'll cook dinner on Monday when you and Rhody come over," he said. "I make really gr--" No, there were some things he couldn't lie to Pepper about. "Really edible spaghetti."

"I'll look forward to it," she said. "You might want to warn Rhody, though, or he'll die of shock."
She squeezed his hand lightly. "So you're doing good? Really?"

"Yeah, I'm great. What's with all the worrying about me?"

"You haven't quite seemed like yourself lately. Not bad, just--" She shrugged. "When was the last time you made me and Rhodey listen to stories about who you picked up at a party over the weekend? I know I complain about the details you inflict on us, but--"

"But secretly, you miss the thrill," he said, and took another drink.

"I really don't," she said. "It's just a very sudden change, and I'm worried there's something going on with you that you haven't told us about."

Tony wanted to crawl under the table at that. There was definitely something going on with him that he hadn't told Pepper about. But seriously, how was he supposed to tell Pepper about Loki? That was going to worry her even more. "I'm good," he said. "It's not like I've been staying at home reading a good book. I've just been cutting back on the overshar ing, that's all."

She took her hand away and sipped at her beer for a while. "Is there... Tony, you're not seeing somebody, are you? Because if you are, you can tell me. I know I'm your ex, but we're friends now, and I just want you to be happy."

"It's not like that, Pepper."

It looked like that, he knew, but it definitely wasn't. He and Loki weren't a couple. It wasn't the kind of thing that you told people about. Rhodey knew, of course, but even then, Tony didn't talk to him about Loki. He didn't talk to anybody about Loki, because that would make this thing with Loki seem more serious than it was.

"If you feel weird telling me," she went on, "at least talk to Rhodey, okay? He's probably worried about you, too."

"Rhodey's not worried about me," he argued. "He knows I'm doing just fine. But I promise, if I wind up dating somebody, he'll be the third person to know about it." He grinned. "Or maybe the fourth, if I meet the right set of twins."

That had been exactly the right note to strike; Pepper made a face and smacked him lightly on the hand. "Pig," she said.

"You know it," he agreed cheerfully. "And now, can we maybe get back to having fun? I came here to drink beer and dance with girls, and my beer is almost gone."

Though, it occurred to him as he made his way back upstairs minus Pepper--she'd spotted a friend waiting for her turn at the pool tables and had stopped to talk--while he'd been doing all right at dancing with girls tonight, he hadn't gotten any of their numbers.

He hadn't even tried. A couple of girls had handed him their phones, all set up for a new contact to be input, and he'd put in his number, but he hadn't offered up his own phone in return. Hell, he hadn't even called the numbers still in his contacts list from the last time he'd come here.

There'd been nothing wrong with the girls. Absolutely nothing. They'd been pretty and at least reasonably smart (ranging upward to "almost as smart as he was," and "as smart as he was" was hard to come by) and he'd had fun talking to them. Ordinarily, he'd have texted them, and they would have at least felt one another out on how they felt about casual hookups. And yeah, the next time he'd gotten together with Rhodey and Pepper, he'd have had a couple of stories for them.
But he hadn't gotten in touch with any of them; he hadn't even wanted to, and the one who'd messaged him first had been answered with, "Sorry, life's exploded on me, too busy to get together," which was a pretty uncontroversial excuse on a college campus. Because somehow, this thing with Loki that wasn't even supposed to be a thing at all had expanded to swallow up all his available spare time. It had even managed to find him some extra spare time, when that hadn't been enough.

Spending time with Loki hadn't gotten in the way of seeing his friends, of doing his classwork, of working in the lab. The only thing it was really interfering with was the "getting drunk and partying" part of his regular schedule of activities, and if he wanted that, he could always start going out with Loki. It was a thought that had occurred to him more than once.

But Pepper was noticing that Tony wasn't hooking up with a different person every weekend, and that was bad, because what else was she going to notice soon? Pepper cared about him. She wasn't going to like knowing that Tony was spending so much time with a terrible person who was going to break his heart. (Rhodey already knew that, but Rhodey, as his best friend, had seen Tony make decisions that were at least equally as bad, so he could be more sanguine about it.)

Tony didn't really like knowing that he was spending so much time with a terrible person who was going to break his heart, either, but the thing was, when he was around Loki, that didn't seem like something he needed to worry about.

And spending less time with Loki just wasn't going to happen. Tony was having too much fun.

****

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter this time, I know, but it's another case where this bit fit better on its own than it did with either the previous or the next chapter.

**Next week:** Rhodey, meet Loki.
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

Rhodey, meet Loki.

Chapter Notes

We're halfway through! Thanks to everyone who's stuck around this far.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

Are you home?

Tony picked up his phone; the message was from Loki. *Yeah, I'm here.* It was ten-thirty at night on a Sunday; where else would he be? Even he had usually left the lab by then.

Can I come over?

I thought you had plans with Thor.

I did. They're done. So?

Right, like he was going to turn that down. He hadn't expected to see Loki again until Tuesday; Loki had had plans tonight, and he was spending most of tomorrow with Rhodey. *Sure.*

Tony just barely had time to throw on a pair of jeans--it wasn't that Loki had never seen him wearing just a pair of faded boxers, but he didn't like answering the door in them--before the buzzer sounded. He hurried out to the living room and pressed the intercom button. "That was fast."

"I was in the parking lot."

"You must have been pretty sure I would let you in."

Rather than snark back, Loki just sighed. "Just open the door, okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Let yourself in the apartment if I don't answer." Tony went over and unlocked the front door. He really wanted to brush his teeth, not to mention check for any smears of Cheeto dust on his face. He'd been watching old episodes of *Top Gear*; his brain needed a little time to percolate through some of the ideas he'd had lately before he was able to take them to the next logical step, and watching middle-aged men incompetently try to modify cars--not to mention the segments with supercars that Tony itched to drive--tended to be remarkably soothing at times like these.

He didn't take much time in the bathroom, but when he got out, Loki was on the couch, and the
door had been locked behind him. "This is unexpected," Tony said.

Loki shrugged. "It's early, and my plans didn't quite happen as planned."

Tony snorted. "Whatever happened to brotherly love?" he said, throwing himself onto the couch next to Loki. Bad timing, because that meant Loki was in place to smack him on the arm.

"We're not actually brothers," Loki reminded him.

"Yeah, but 'estranged stepbrotherly love' doesn't have the same ring to it, and anyway, you're the one who forced me to know how much Thor likes to pretend."

"Just let it go, okay? I know that's asking a lot, but... just for tonight, could you fucking let it go?"

"No problem." When Loki seemed perfectly prepared to sit there without saying anything else, Tony decided to give in to his curiosity. "What's wrong?"

"Honestly, nothing." He shook his head. "Everything's actually fine, so I don't really know why I'm here."

"Because I'm irresistible." Tony grinned at him and was rewarded with a tight smile. "And maybe," he said, settling himself more comfortably, "you wanted to tell me all about how 'actually' fine everything is."

"Probably," Loki agreed. "I must have felt like gloating." To Tony's complete lack of surprise, Loki settled himself so that his legs were dangling over the back of the couch and his head was in Tony's lap.

"Gloat away," Tony said. "You interrupted an exciting evening of junk food and *Top Gear*."

"I hate to tear you away from overpaid idiots trying to blow themselves up."

"It's on Netflix. They'll still be idiots tomorrow." He didn't pet Loki's hair, not exactly, but he twined one of the long strands around his fingers. "So. What truly excellent thing happened that means you're over here instead of there?"

"My mother--well, my stepmother. Thor's mother. She's going to be on campus in a couple of weeks."

Tony didn't know all that much about Loki's family--except for his stepbrother, about whom Tony knew way too damn much. It didn't sound like parental visits were a big thing in the Laufeyson family, though. "Is that good or bad?"

"Neither, really." He closed his eyes, tilting his head to lean into Tony's touch. "She's giving a guest lecture for the comparative lit department on the *Prose Edda.*" Tony had known Loki's stepmother was a college professor; his dad was too, for that matter. It was one of the few things Loki had told him about them.

"And she wants to see you?"

"Yeah. She usually does; she did this lecture my freshman year, too. I think she's friends with someone in comp lit. And sometimes she's in town for other reasons. She takes me to dinner, you know, the usual boring parental stuff."

Tony really didn't know, since if his parents had set foot on campus since Tony had enrolled here,
they hadn't let Tony know about it. But he could assume. "That sounds nice?" he tried.

"That's a fair description. It's nice." Tony knew that Loki's stepmother had been around most of his life and suspected Loki was closer to her than he generally let on, so "nice" had been a safe guess. "I told her about meeting Thor, and she wanted me to ask him if he'd be willing to see her. You know, now that he knows she didn't mean to abandon him."

"That could get messy." Tony only vaguely remembered what happened--something about Thor's dad being a total dick who wouldn't let her see their kid--but it wasn't like he needed details to guess that much.

"Probably. But Thor says he'll try talking to her." He grimaced. "I am not cut out for this kind of thing. There's way too much pretending to give a shit about other people's feelings for my taste."

Tony tugged gently on Loki's hair. "Yeah, I know, you suffer. Have you guys made plans yet?"

"No. Her lecture's on a Thursday, but she's staying in town until Sunday, so she and Thor will have plenty of chances to get together and shout at each other. Hopefully, without me."

"Okay," Tony said. "I'm not complaining, but I don't see why that means you're here instead of..."

He trailed off, because yes, he did see. "It finally got too weird, huh?"

"You could say that," Loki agreed. "We decided that it was one thing when we'd never met and Thor barely remembered Mom. Stepbrothers or not, though, it's different when there's a good chance we're going to end up looking at one another over the table at Thanksgiving at some point."

Tony's fingers had stilled; Loki nudged at them with his head until Tony started stroking his hair again. It was like having a damn cat, Tony thought, but he didn't complain.

"Anyway," Loki went on, "I was getting tired of him. It was fun while it lasted, but I don't think it would have lasted for more than a couple more weeks. And this way I can claim I ended it for good and noble reasons, instead of out of boredom."

You didn't end it at all, did you? Or if you did, you weren't happy about it; you just didn't want to let Thor do it first, Tony thought. Not that he was going to say anything about it. He really couldn't, not when there was part of him that was really glad that he'd have Loki all to himself.

A stupid part, because there wasn't anything stopping Loki from going out and finding someone else. At least it was statistically unlikely that whoever it was would look like he just stepped off the cover of a cheesy romance novel about Vikings, so that was some consolation.

"So, right," Tony said instead, cheerfully. "Great news all around, then."

"Exactly. So, naturally, I came here to share."

"Naturally," Tony agreed, sure that Loki knew he didn't believe a word of it. "Well, that and the thing where I'm irresistible, like I mentioned earlier."

That got him another small smile. "You keep saying that, but I don't have any trouble resisting you."

"I haven't turned on the full force of my charm yet," Tony said. "Just you wait. You'll be throwing yourself at my feet."

"In all the weeks I've known you, I've never been tempted to throw myself at you. To throw
something else at you, frequently."

"You do say the sweetest things."

Loki sat up, leaning against Tony's chest, which conveniently put him at a better height for Tony to kiss him. "I really am fine, you know."

"Apart from missing me, right. I get it." He kissed Loki again. He knew better, of course; Loki said a lot of things he didn't mean, especially on topics like "feelings" and "interpersonal relationships," and Tony was getting good at not arguing while also not acting like he believed a word of it. "Are you staying here tonight?"

"That depends. Are you planning on bodily throwing me out into the hall?"

"Probably not. I usually seem to be able to resist the urge, as tempting as it can be."

Loki's smile was a little less strained than before. "More of that famous Tony Stark charm?"

"You know it."

"Well, in that case, I'm staying," Loki said. "Since you've practically begged me, and everything."

Tony put his arms around Loki's waist, pulling Loki back against himself. "I don't know why I put up with you," he muttered.

"I bet if you think about it very hard, you could figure it out."

Tony would have bet that he wouldn't have to think about it all that hard, not really.

****

What with one thing and another--well, mostly the one thing, because even in the (perfectly fine, of course) mood he'd been in, Loki could be phenomenally distracting--Tony had completely forgotten about his plans with Rhodey.

He was reminded at around nine-thirty in the morning when Rhodey let himself into the apartment while Tony was in the shower. "Haul your ass out of bed, Tony," he yelled. "I didn't cut class just to wait for you."

Tony came out with a towel wrapped around him and water streaming down from his hair into his eyes. "Five minutes," he said. Then he remembered that Loki was still asleep in his bed. "Maybe ten." At least he'd been awake and getting out of the shower when Rhodey had turned up. He really didn't like to think about Rhodey coming into the bedroom to physically drag Tony out of bed. He'd done it before; there just usually wasn't anyone but Tony in the bed at the time.

"Yeah, fine," Rhodey said. "Hurry up; I'm hungry."

Tony went back into the bathroom to towel his hair dry and brush his teeth. He was postponing the moment when he had to wake Loki up as long as possible. Loki was a morning person if he woke up on his own, but Tony had already learned that making him get up before he was ready was a pleasant experience for nobody. Maybe, if he waited long enough, the noise of Tony moving around the room would have woken him already, and Tony wouldn't have to start his day being snarled at.

When he came out of the bathroom, calling, "Hey, Loki, we have to--" he realized that he was
talking to an empty bed.

Shit.

If he listened carefully, he could hear voices down the hall.

Double shit.

At least nobody was yelling. That was a good sign. Tony wanted pancakes and then to spend the day working on Rhodey's car. Nowhere in that plan was stopping Rhodey and Loki from killing each other.

Tony quickly got dressed in a pair of ratty jeans and an oil-stained t-shirt, then went back out to the living room. He stopped in the hall to listen to the conversation, just to get an idea of what he was walking into.

"Look, we're just going to fix my car, nothing exciting, but we're going to get something to eat first, and if you want to come along--"

Tony wasn't sure whether he wanted to hug Rhodey for that or strangle him. He'd liked keeping his friends and his... well, and Loki, separate. On the other hand, it'd be nice if at least one of his friends didn't hate Loki.

"No," Loki answered quickly. "No, I just came out here to find my pants, and then I need to go."

There was a brief pause, and then he added, a little awkwardly, "Thanks, though."

Tony decided this was as good a time as any to come out into the living room. "Stop talking about me, I'm here," he announced loudly as he came in. "Unless it's something good, in which case, speak up so I can hear you."

"We were talking about you," Rhodey said. "How could it be good?"

Loki had obviously found his pants--Tony had taken them off him before they'd moved from the couch to the bed, and nobody had felt the need to tidy up on the way--and was pulling them up. "I was just getting around to telling him how terrible you are in bed," he added, with a smile for Tony that had barely any edge to it at all. "I don't mind if you hear, though."

"You tell me that enough as it is," Tony agreed. "That's my shirt, by the way." The vintage Iron Maiden t-shirt fit Loki well enough--a little tight, but Tony considered that a plus--but he'd never seen Loki in anything even vaguely like it.

"I had guessed that, since it was in your drawer," Tony had a vague recollection of at least one button popping off Loki's shirt last night--he might have been just a little too enthusiastic--so he supposed it was reasonable for Loki to borrow one of his. Maybe he ought to be pissed that Loki had taken it without asking, but as long as he got it back, he couldn't be bothered.

"You don't get to keep it. I like that shirt."

Rhodey stood watching them with an expression Tony recognized as trying to not burst out laughing. A good sign, maybe? At least a sign that Tony might be allowed to get at least one cup of coffee into his system before Rhodey started in on him about this.

"You can get it back tomorrow night," Loki said, putting on his shoes. "And now, since some of us actually have to go to class, I should go." To Tony's surprise--since there was someone else in the room--Loki came over to him and kissed him.
Also to Tony's surprise, he didn't mind. Then again, he thought, what was he going to mind about? Rhodey already knew about them. Rhodey had been relatively unfazed by Loki wandering out wearing his underwear and one of Tony's shirts. (Tony had no doubt that Rhodey was going to give him so much shit about this morning, but that wasn't the same as being fazed by it.) And he didn't object to Loki kissing him. He could have lived without the morning breath, but that wasn't the worst thing ever.

"Talk to you tonight?" Tony said, and Loki shrugged.

"Maybe. If I'm not too busy." He grinned at Tony and let himself out.

Tony looked over at Rhodey. "Not. One. Word."

Rhodey held his hands up in front of him. "Do I look like I'm saying anything? I just want food, and then I want to figure out why my car's not working. Coming over here convinced me that I really don't want to have to keep taking the bus."

"Just keep it that way." Tony grabbed his jacket and led the way out.

Rhodey managed to keep his mouth shut on the way to the restaurant, though he kept looking over at Tony, shaking his head, and grinning like an idiot. He even managed not to say anything until their waiter had taken their orders and delivered their first cups of coffee.

"So," Rhodey said after Tony had drunk about half his coffee, "that was the boyfriend."

Tony scowled at him. "I said I didn't want to talk about him."

"Too bad. I'm talking. You can stick your fingers in your ears and pretend you can't hear me, if that makes you happy." He put sugar in his own cup and stirred it. "I don't see why you don't want to talk about him. He seemed--no, okay, he didn't seem nice, he asked me what the fuck I thought I was doing there, but he seemed to like you, anyway."

"He's not my boyfriend," Tony muttered. "We're friends. Who have sex."

"Okay, fine, then. He's your sex friend. Is there a reason why you don't seem to want anybody to know about your sex friend?"

"I don't know. Is there any reason why you aren't telling me about that blonde you were all over at the bar the other night?"

"Who, Carol?" Rhodey set his coffee cup down. "There's nothing to tell, at least not yet. We went out this weekend, we don't know each other very well yet, I'll tell you if there's anything to tell, and you're changing the subject."

"And I'll tell you if there's anything to say about Loki," Tony said. "But there's not. You know everything there is to know."

Rhodey's reply was delayed by the arrival of their breakfasts, but as soon as they were alone at the table again, he shook his head. "I know a hell of a lot more than you do, it looks like. You've been seeing this guy for a couple of months now. You're looking happier than you have since you and Pepper broke up. He stays over at your apartment. You didn't even bitch that he was wearing your clothes. He kissed you in front of me, and you didn't seem to mind. You don't act like that around any of your hookups, and God knows I've seen you with enough of them. Why the hell are you still acting like you barely know him?"
"I'm not," Tony argued as he poured syrup on his pancakes. "And maybe if it was anybody else, things would be different. But it's not; it's Loki, and that makes things complicated."

"Because Pepper doesn't like him," Rhodey said, because Tony really needed dumber friends sometimes.

He shrugged. "Pepper has good reason not to like him. And I trust her opinion about people. He's an asshole."

"Tony, I'm saying this with love, but... you're kind of an asshole too, sometimes. Not a bad guy, but you do piss a lot of people off. So maybe--"

"You heard the stuff Pepper said about him and his ex, right? Do you really think I want to go through that?" Again? he thought, but didn't say it. It wasn't fair, anyway. Pepper hadn't hurt him on purpose. They just hadn't been good together.

Rhodey paused in the middle of spreading some jelly on his toast. "And if he breaks up with you, do you think you're not going to be miserable just because you're claiming to just be in it for the sex?"

"It doesn't matter one way or the other," Tony said. "We've both agreed that's what it is." It was bullshit, he knew it was bullshit, but that was what he and Loki had said. Neither of them had said any differently.

And at least this way, Loki wouldn't be tangled up in his life. He'd lost one of his best friends when he and Pepper had broken up. Luckily, they'd managed to become friends again, but it had taken a long time, and he didn't want to have to do that again. If he kept Loki separate from everything else in his life, then when things went to shit between them, everything else would be just fine, and Tony wouldn't fall apart.

"And you don't want Pepper to worry," Rhodey said.

"That, too," Tony said in between bites of egg. "And she would. She was worried enough about me when she found out we'd had sex once."

"So it's definitely a great idea to see this guy behind her back, so that she'll forget she's worried about you and focus on how pissed she is that you've been lying to her." He shook his head. "I get it, I don't want to see her worried either. And all I know about him is what I've heard, and those five minutes back at your place. I wasn't crazy about him, but he didn't seem that terrible, and you do act like you're crazy about him."

"I can't," Tony said. "I'm not going to put myself in a position where I have to choose between him and Pepper."

"Does he make you happy? Because it looks like he does. Hell, you're even drinking less; Pepper and I have both noticed. And you look like you've had more than two hours' sleep in the past week. He's good for you, dumbass."

"If I want something good for me, I'll start eating vegetables," Tony muttered.

Rhodey groaned. "Fine. Make yourself miserable. I wash my hands of it." He set his cup at the edge of the table and signaled to their waiter for more coffee. "Let's just finish eating and get started on my car. Consider the subject dropped."

Tony wasn't good at dropping things, though, so even though he stopped arguing with Rhodey
about it, he couldn't stop worrying about what Rhodey had said.

Maybe things ought to change, at least a little.

****

"I don't know," Loki said, "the last time we were out in public you pretended I was invisible."

Tony glared at the phone lying on the pillow next to him. "We hardly knew each other, and you were there with Thor. Besides, we've been out in public since then."

"Your lab doesn't count as public, and neither does walking from the lab to the parking lot."

All right, then, maybe they hadn't been out in public. "We haven't really had a 'going-out' kind of relationship," Tony said. And maybe Rhodey had been right; he did really like Loki, and if Pepper had never said anything about him, Tony probably would have been going out with him regularly for weeks now.

Not getting serious about him, obviously, because Tony still wasn't going to do that. But they could have dinner out sometimes. Or go to a party, or a bar. Or on nights like tonight, when Pepper and Rhodey were over for dinner and bad TV, Loki might have been there, too, and then Rhodey wouldn't have given Tony significant (and ridiculous) looks every time Tony took a bite of the salad he'd served alongside the spaghetti and garlic bread.

Which was one of the things that had gotten Tony to pick up the phone tonight and call Loki. Pepper had just been impressed that there was something green on the table, even if it had come from the supermarket salad bar (but then, Tony had actually gone to the supermarket, for once), but Rhodey had made cracks about Tony getting domestic all of a sudden.

Then he'd made comments about Tony eating his vegetables and doing other things that were good for him, and that had gotten Tony thinking that maybe Rhodey had a point, after all, and he should try acknowledging that yes, he wanted to spend even more time with Loki than he already had been.

"I've noticed." Loki's voice was sharp.

"Look, if you don't want to go out with me, you don't have to. We can keep things the way they are. I just thought--"

"I didn't say I didn't want to go. I just don't want any bullshit. If you see someone you know--"

"Did I do something wrong this morning? If we see someone I know, I'll probably say something like, 'hey, how are you doing, do you know Loki?'" He closed his eyes for a moment. Damn it, this shouldn't have been this difficult. He knew that. But it was that difficult, and he knew why.

"And what if it's Pepper?"

Yep, that was why. "She has a night class on Tuesdays," Tony said. "And she doesn't cut class unless she's really sick."

"I see." The sharp voice again, and Tony felt like he'd just walked into a minefield.

He decided to just keep going. If everything exploded, well, then it did. "So what do you say? Tomorrow night?"
"Oh, all right. It's about time, anyway."

"You can wear the leather pants," Tony suggested.

"I don't wear those for anyone who hasn't earned them; they get too hot. And you definitely haven't earned them."

"I'll do anything you want when we get back here afterward," he offered.

"Can you seriously tell me you wouldn't do that anyway?"

Tony sighed dramatically. "Okay. You win."

Still, maybe this was a good idea. Maybe things shouldn't just keep going on the way they had been. Even with Loki getting weird and prickly about things, Tony couldn't help but look forward to tomorrow night.

****

Chapter End Notes

The plot is going to be thickening *considerably* in the near future.

**Next week:** The international code of fuckbuddies, and so much doom you'd think you were in Latveria.
"So," Loki said as Tony started the car, "I think that meal might have been a violation of the international code of fuckbuddies."

Tony waited until he'd backed out of his parking space before answering, though he hoped Loki had noticed the dirty look he was being given. "By definition, fuckbuddies are friends who have sex. Friends can have dinner together. I had dinner with Rhodey and Pepper yesterday. I made dinner for Rhodey and Pepper yesterday, even," he added, trying not to sound proud of himself for something that basic.

"Friends go out for pizza, or get burgers. Or at least, even if they go out somewhere nicer, they each pay their own way. Friends don't take their friend out to a restaurant that friend can't afford because he works part-time for minimum wage, and then pay for dinner. You're breaking the code, Tony."

Shit. He might have fucked up. Tony hadn't thought about that. He'd asked, so he assumed he'd pay. And it wasn't like it was a five-star restaurant. Or even a one-star restaurant, really. But this was the thing with cooking dinner at Tony's apartment instead of getting delivery all over again, wasn't it?

"Technically my dad paid for it," Tony said. "And since I can't stand my father, we can just assume that paying for your dinner is just another way to annoy him, if you want." God, his father would hate Loki. Not that he was ever going to meet Loki, if Tony had any say in the matter.

"Or, you could just admit that you're intentionally breaking the fuckbuddy code. That would work, too."

When Tony turned his head to look at Loki, Loki was staring out the window, so that all Tony could see was the back of his head and the tense set of his shoulders.

He took a deep breath. "You mean, like admitting that this could pass for an extremely belated first date?"

"Third date," Loki said. "Haven't you ever heard that you shouldn't put out until the third date?"

Tony laughed. "We fucked a few hours after we met."

"But that wasn't a date."
"Is it me, or does that seem really arbitrary?"

"I don't make the rules." Out of the corner of his eye, Tony could see that Loki was facing forward again, at least, rather than avoiding Tony by looking out the window. "All right, I did just invent an entire international fuckbuddy code, so it's possible that I do make the rules in this case."

"So if this is our third date, what were the first and second?"

"If you're going to nitpick," Loki said, "I'll go back to this being our first date, and you can go home by yourself tonight."

They'd reached their destination, and Tony parked the car on a side street. They got out, Loki looked around, frowning. "There's nothing on this block except Carla's. At least nothing that's open after six p.m."

"Nope, there's not," Tony said, cheerfully. "You were pissed that I wouldn't pay any attention to you the last time we were both there, so now you get my attention."

"Well, you're making an effort, I'll give you that," Loki said.

"Bet you're regretting not wearing those leather pants." Tony grinned hopefully at him. Not that he had any real complaints, himself, because Loki had opted for skin-tight jeans.

"It's a good thing you can afford to lose a lot of bets. Come on, then, if we're going." Loki started off down the sidewalk, leaving Tony to follow him.

Once Tony was inside, he realized that this might have been a bad idea. Pepper wouldn't be here, but it wasn't like he didn't know at least half these people. Not very well, granted, but he knew them.

On the other hand, Tony Stark at a bar was not something unheard of, and while he didn't usually do it here, Tony Stark dancing with--or making out with, for that matter--a guy wasn't a new thing, either. It wouldn't be worth commenting on.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Tony said. "Or do you want to go up to the dance floor?"

"I want to play pool."

Well, that was a surprise. Then again, it wasn't like he'd ever had a chance to find out whether or not Loki played pool before.

Then Loki grinned at him. "Correction. I want to kick your ass playing pool."

"Good luck with that." Tony put his quarters down on the edge of a pool table and went over to the bar to get them a couple of beers. When he came back, Loki was sitting on the corner of a table, talking to a blonde girl in a tight green dress.

The girl turned a megawatt smile on Tony as he handed Loki his beer. "I don't think we've been introduced."

Loki rolled his eyes. "You know damn well who he is, Amora. Tony, this is Amora. Amora, this is Tony. Keep your hands off him."

She pouted at him. "He's not as pretty as the last one."

Loki laughed, putting an arm around Tony's waist and pulling him closer. "No, but he has other
things going for him. And if you think Thor's so pretty, he probably has some free time in his schedule these days. Go find him."

She smirked at him. "I plan to," she said, "but he's not here tonight."

"Well, you don't get to flirt with my date," Loki said, though he didn't seem particularly bothered by the prospect.

"Hey, don't I get to have an opinion about that?" Not that Tony wanted to flirt with Amora. If he was here alone, sure, maybe. But he was here on a date, and the last thing he wanted to do was flirt with someone else. That was the whole reason he'd decided to take this step in the first place.

"No," they both said at once.

He shook his head. "Fine, then." He took a drink of his beer. "Looks like our table's about to be free, though, so if you want to flirt, you'd better do it quickly."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," Amora said, laughing. "Loki might never forgive me. I just wanted to meet the famous Tony, after hearing so much about you." She patted Loki on the arm. "He's been extremely boring since he met you."

"Oh, really?" He might have asked for more details—even though Loki was glaring at both of them—but the pool table was open, and so instead, he let Loki draw him away.

"She seemed nice," Tony said while they picked up their cues and racked up the balls.

"Amora?" Loki shrugged. "I wouldn't call her nice, but I wouldn't call you nice, either."

"You can break," Tony offered. "See? I'm nice."

"You're positively gleeful every time you get Justin to trip over his own dick," Loki said. "Don't get me wrong, I like that about you, but it's definitely not nice." He took the cube of chalk from Tony. "I've known Amora since we were kids. If she decides she does want to go after Thor, he's not going to know what hit him."

"Lucky Thor," Tony said. "I guess you weren't 'extremely boring' about him to Amora."

"I barely talked about him to Amora." Then, quickly, he added, "Of course, I mostly complained about you, so don't start feeling like you're special."

"I never do," Tony promised, but he was smiling anyway as Loki took his first shot.

It turned out they were pretty evenly matched at pool, which was a relief since Tony hadn't looked forward to acknowledging that he wasn't as good as he might have implied. He was good enough not to embarrass himself, but that was all.

Loki wasn't any better, really—he might not even have been quite as good, but it was hard to tell, because he cheated.

He cheated like it was his job, and Tony would have been pissed off if he hadn't been impressed by Loki's dedication to it even after Tony started calling him on it.

The distraction attempts were one thing. Not really surprising, and it wasn't like Tony minded. He'd have tried them himself if he'd thought of them, less to win the game and more because it would have been fun to "accidentally" grope Loki when he was taking his shot. Besides, that wasn't
outright cheating. Not playing fair, but not cheating.

"You hit the nine ball with your cue," Tony said, after watching the nine connect with the two and send it into the side pocket. That, on the other hand, was outright cheating.

"Did I?" Loki asked innocently. "I really don't think I did. The cue ball hit it."

Tony rolled his eyes. "I'm watching you."

"I certainly hope so," Loki said, winking at him with ridiculous obviousness. "I'd be wasting my time here if you weren't."

It wasn't all that surprising that Tony lost--what with all the blatant cheating and all--but it didn't really matter. And now he knew never to actually bet anything when he played against Loki. When he played anything against Loki. Unless he wanted to lose, and he could probably think of a few wagers where losing would be just as enjoyable as winning. "I'm not playing you again," Tony said flatly. "You cheat too much."

"Is there an amount of cheating that wouldn't be too much? Not that I was cheating, but just for future reference."

"An amount where I still win." He grabbed Loki's hand. "I feel like dancing, anyway. Let's go upstairs."

"Pushy, aren't you?"

"Is that news?"

"Not really." Loki leaned in close, so that he didn't have to raise his voice to be heard. "It generally works for me."

"I've noticed." Tony led the way upstairs and straight out to the dance floor. Not quite to the middle; it was too crowded. Off to one side, opposite the stairs and the bar, would do fine. All they needed was enough space to move.

"How much of a scene do you want to make?" Loki asked during a lull in the music.

He moved in closer, grinning up at Loki. "A big one." They wouldn't, really; nobody had really given a damn about Loki and Thor dancing. This might have been a basically straight crowd, but it'd be fine. And--Tony glanced around at the other dancers--it wasn't like anything short of actually fucking on the dance floor was going to raise any eyebrows.

And, for at least two songs, they weren't anywhere close to fucking on the dance floor. Not that Tony had any reason to complain. He liked dancing, and he liked watching Loki move, and the point where Loki reached out, hooked his fingers in Tony's waistband, and pulled him close for a kiss convinced Tony that this whole "date" thing was a good idea.

Then Tony found himself being turned around, so that Loki was pressed against his back, his hands gripping Tony's hips. Tony grinned to himself and ground back against Loki, feeling hot breath on the back of his neck.

The roll of Loki's hips brought his cock snugly against the cleft of Tony's ass, and Tony was suddenly very aware that there were only a few layers of fabric between their bodies. He tipped his head back against Loki's shoulder, inviting Loki to kiss and bite at his exposed throat.
"Just wait until I get you home," Loki murmured into his ear.

Tony wasn’t in a good position to be able to reply, at least not verbally, so he just rocked back against Loki, rubbing against Loki’s hardening cock. Get me home, Tony thought, suddenly a lot less interested in dancing. He usually enjoyed it the same way he enjoyed flirting, without necessarily intending it to lead anywhere, but something about Loki both put a definite destination in mind, and made him impatient to get there.

The music ebbed for a moment, and then swelled again: another fast song, and Tony was content to remain as they were, with Loki all but plastered against his back, his hands still resting at Tony’s hips, the long fingers reaching toward Tony’s cock but never actually getting close enough to touch.

"People are looking at us," Loki said, his lips brushing against Tony’s skin. "They're looking at you."

He turned his head so that Loki had a chance of hearing him. "It wouldn't be the first time," he said. Hell, the night before he’d met Loki, he’d been so wasted at that party that he’d basically climbed Steve like a tree. This was nothing, especially since there were at least half a dozen other couples who were dancing just as closely.

"There's always that stockroom." It took a minute for Tony to remember what Loki was talking about, the back room he'd talked about wanting to drag Tony back to the last time they'd both been here.

Tony shook his head. They’d have to be far too fast, and when he got Loki to himself tonight, he wanted to be able to take his time. He pulled away from Loki, turning around to face him. "I'm going to go get another drink, and then I'm going to find some girls to dance with. You should, too."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Tired of me already?"

"Not at all," Tony said. "But unless you’re ready to go home right now, I'm thinking that we might want a little bit of distance in between us for a while."

That got him a wicked grin. "As tempting as it is to just say 'fuck it' and drag you out of here, I'm thinking it might be more fun to make you wait."

Funny, Tony had been thinking the same thing. "Let's get that drink, then," he said.

Twenty minutes later, he was dancing with Amora--"Loki's probably furious," she said, simpering up at Tony. "He doesn't trust me."--and, across the dance floor, he could see Loki with a dark-haired girl. It wasn't the same kind of thrill that dancing with Loki had been, obviously, but there was something about the occasional moments when he caught Loki’s eye, like it didn’t even matter that they were both dancing with other people.

It had been a long time since he’d felt that kind of connection to anybody, and Tony was forced to admit, in spite of himself, that he liked it. This had definitely been a good decision. Not that he was ever going to tell Rhodey that he’d been right.

****

"Goddamn it, Loki, let me get the door open," Tony muttered, fumbling with the lock. He'd never had this much trouble opening a simple door when he was sober before. On the other hand, he'd never had Loki draped over his back, grinding against Tony's ass, while he was trying to get a key
into a keyhole.

Unsurprisingly, it was really fucking distracting. "I don't want to fuck in the hall," he added, which was at least eighty-five percent true.

One long-fingered hand snaked around Tony's waist and skimmed over his cock. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes!" Tony insisted as the door finally gave way and swung open. He turned around and grabbed the front of Loki's shirt, hauling him inside the apartment. With his free hand, he shoved the door closed behind them and pushed Loki against it, kissing him hard.

"You are the worst cocktease in history," he said, "and I hate you so much right now."

After a little while, Loki had really gotten into the idea that he could make Tony lose his mind by dancing with other people.

Not that Tony was jealous. (Tony was willing to admit, to himself anyway, that he'd been jealous as hell of Thor, even as fucked-up as that whole situation had been. But he wasn't jealous of random women on a dance floor.) Not that kind of "losing his mind."

The kind where, while Loki wasn't anything like the best dancer Tony had seen, he was definitely the best at conveying the idea that dancing was basically vertical, clothed fucking, at least if you did it right.

Loki had been doing it right, and he'd been doing it while making eye contact with Tony at every opportunity, and Tony felt like he deserved a goddamn medal for not bodily dragging Loki out of the bar after fifteen minutes or so of watching that, and instead lasting for two hours.

He deserved another one for holding out until Loki was the one who suggested that they leave.

"I don't think you hate me," Loki said, in between kisses. "But does that mean that you don't want me to reward you for your patience and self-control?" He shrugged slightly. "I'd been thinking I'd like to get started by sucking you off, but if you don't want that..."

Tony leaned in closer, pressing his aching cock against Loki's thigh. "It sounds like a really good start on your apology for being such a filthy tease," he said.

"I'm not sorry." Loki grinned at him. "Not even slightly. It's had such impressive results, after all." He shifted position a little, giving Tony a few seconds of friction, and smirked. Then he managed to turn them around so that it was Tony whose back was against the door. "So that meets with your approval after all?"

"Hell, yes," Tony said, and then decided it couldn't hurt to add, "please."

"Patient and polite," Loki murmured, dropping to his knees.

Tony helpfully got his pants open, shoving them and his underwear down to mid-thigh.

"So eager, too," Loki said, laughing softly. "And so damn gorgeous." He ran a finger along the length of Tony's cock, smiling when Tony shivered. "Perhaps I should be kind and generous, and not tease you," he said.

"You mean, not tease me any more," Tony growled.
"True. What can I say, though?" Another little shrug. "I like it when you look at me. And it's not like you couldn't have given as good as you got."

He couldn't have, though, not really. He had, a little, dancing with Amora, because he knew that for all her flirting and her wandering hands, she was well aware that Tony wasn't even a little bit interested in going home with her.

But he didn't want to give anyone else the wrong impression, because he was an asshole, but not that kind of an asshole. And it wasn't like he didn't already have a well-established reputation for going home with women he'd just met, so any expectations he might have raised wouldn't have been unreasonable ones.

So he'd contented himself with watching Loki; he'd already known Loki liked being the focus of Tony's attention, and it wasn't like that was any hardship at all. "I'll look at you as much you want," he said, his fingers threading through Loki's hair.

"Will you? I wonder." Which was a little more cryptic than Tony felt prepared to deal with, at least not right now with the door against his back and Loki's breath hot on his cock. Loki's tongue darted out to lap at a bead of moisture at the tip, and for a second, Tony had to fight to keep his hips still.

"Easy now," Loki murmured, his hand rubbing over Tony's hip. It might have been a soothing gesture except that it just reminded Tony how much he wanted Loki touching him.

And then Loki bent his head so that he could swallow Tony down to the root in one practiced movement--and if Tony was going to be jealous of the other people Loki fucked, he really ought to enjoy the results of that experience a little less, but he never claimed to not be at least a little hypocritical--and Tony tipped his head back, eyes closing briefly in pleasure, and groaned.

He cupped Loki's jaw in his palm, thumb stroking over the hollow made in Loki's cheek when he sucked; the hand in Loki's hair tugged, just a little, almost involuntarily, and then went back to just sliding through the dark strands.

"Fuck, Loki, I--" He broke off, not even sure where he'd been going with that sentence. It didn't matter anyway, because he could feel Loki's throat working around the head of his cock, and words stopped being possible. Loki's lips were stretched wide around him, and when Tony's thumb brushed over the corner of Loki's mouth, it came away wet with saliva.

"Fuck," Tony said again. "Loki." And maybe that was enough; it seemed like it had been, anyway, because Loki's eyes fluttered closed, and he tilted his head slightly, leaning into Tony's touch.

I am so completely fucked, Tony thought, as his heart gave a terrifying, dizzying lurch.

He'd care about that later. Right now the only thing he could really care about was in front of him.

He leaned back heavily against the door, letting it hold him up; he was getting close now, the hours of teasing and Loki's mouth--the way Loki knew by now exactly what Tony liked--making it impossible for him to hold back.

He tugged lightly at Loki's hair again, just to get his attention. "Close," he gasped, because words were still ridiculously complicated. Loki nodded a little, redoubling his efforts, and Tony groaned, the sound feeling like it was being pulled from somewhere deep in his chest, as he came.

Loki kept working his cock until Tony was sure he'd gotten every single drop of come out of him, then pulled back with an obscenely wet noise. He sat back on his heels, looking up at Tony and licking his lips.
Tony reached down and pulled him to his feet, wrapping his arms around Loki and bringing him close enough to kiss. *Don't get all possessive,* he warned himself. That wasn't what they did, and anyway, it would just lead to disaster. But Loki wasn't a mind-reader, so if Tony couldn't quite stop himself thinking of Loki as *his,* it wouldn't hurt anything.

"You," he said when his head had cleared enough to make coherent sentences, "are the hottest guy I have ever seen, let alone fucked, and if I don't get over to the couch soon I'm going to fall over."

Loki laughed. "And they say romance is dead."

"Did you go down on it? Because if I were five years older I'd probably have keeled over from a heart attack, personally." Tony managed to kick off his shoes and get out of his pants—trippling would definitely put a damper on the mood—before Loki half-led, half-dragged him over to the couch.

Tony sprawled heavily on the cushions, grinning up at Loki. "Take me, I'm yours," he said, waving his arms in a dramatic gesture.

"You're absurd," Loki said, "and the naked-except-a-shirt look isn't great on you." His smile was soft around the edges, though, and so Tony just grinned more and started to peel off his shirt.

Then he stopped. "You're dressed," he said accusingly.

Loki looked down at himself. "So I am. Should I do something about that?"

"You said you like when I look at you. Give me more to look at." He threw his shirt over the back of the couch. "And then come here. I want to do more than look."

"If I could take back that reward for being patient, I would," Loki said, halfway through taking off his own shirt. "Demanding little brat, aren't you?"

"Maybe," Tony said, "but I rarely hear you complain."

"That's because you keep demanding what I want." Then Loki was standing next to the couch, stretching languorously in a way that was obviously intended to show off.

Tony reached for him. "C'mere," he said, tugging until Loki was lying with him on the couch. Well, mainly on top of him, but one, it was a couch, there wasn't that much room; and two, Tony was very okay with that.

Loki kissed him deeply. "I love seeing you like this, all dazed and happy," he said. "Kissing you when you can taste yourself in my mouth."

Tony was having minor difficulties getting close enough to Loki. He let his hands skim over Loki's back and along his sides, feeling Loki shiver under his touch. Loki was hard against Tony's hip, and Tony clutched Loki to him tightly, pressing himself against Loki's cock.

Loki groaned. "You know, at one point I think I had the idea that I wanted to take things slowly tonight."

"Was that before or after you nearly fucked me in the hallway?"

"Before, definitely. By that point I just wanted to rip your clothes off. But earlier, I'd been planning this long slow process that left you begging for me."
"Fuck that," Tony said, laughing. "We can do slow later. I'll beg if you think it's hot, though."

Loki kissed him again, shifting his weight so that he was riding Tony's thigh. "I think you're hot," he said. "Just now, when I was blowing you? Fuck, Tony, the only reason I didn't come in my jeans was--"

"--because I came way too fast for you to have the chance?" Tony laughed again, a little sheepishly, but it wasn't like that hadn't been the effect Loki had been going for.

"You said it; I didn't," Loki said, laughing with him.

"Well, you put forth a lot of effort into making it happen."

"It's possible." He rocked against Tony, his words punctuated by kisses. "You were getting so worked up on the dance floor. I thought at first it was just jealousy. Imagine my surprise when I realized it was more than that."

Tony bent his knee slightly, raising his thigh up to press more firmly against Loki's cock, and smiled when Loki gasped. "You had to know that would happen."

"I thought you didn't want to know anything about what I did with anyone else."

"I don't want--" Tony began, and then stopped himself. "I don't want to hear details, that's all." He didn't want to hear details about Thor, anyway, because Thor had been--in some very weird way--important to Loki. In general, details were kind of hot. But there was no way he could explain that to Loki, because that would require him to admit that he'd been jealous of Thor, and he wasn't going to do that.

The look Loki gave him was far too searching for Tony to think he'd gotten away with it, but Loki only shrugged. "No details, then. You'll have to make do with your memory."

It hadn't been a sight Tony was likely to forget, so no problem there. "I could always settle for the real thing," he suggested.

"Oh, could you?" Loki's attempt to sound detached failed miserably when Tony began kissing Loki's neck, licking and biting on his way down. He rocked against Tony again, looking down into Tony's eyes.

"I think so, yeah." He reached between them, fingers encircling Loki's cock. "Let me help you out with that."

If Loki's groan was any indication, he didn't object; he thrust into Tony's fist as Tony began sliding his hand up and down Loki's cock.

Tony kept watching Loki's face, studying the minute changes in expression that told him when he'd found just the right grip, the perfect rhythm. Loki talked a lot of crap--he was possibly even worse at expressing his emotions than Tony was--but his face was a lot more honest, and Tony was learning to read it.

"You're staying tonight, yeah? Because I really want to fuck you later, and that's going to be hard if you go home. Unless you take me with you."

He was talking absolute nonsense, he knew it, but it was the best way to blank out the thoughts that were hammering at his brain, the ones that led back to I am so fucked, and not in the fun way, the ones that wanted Tony to invite disaster by sharing them, for fuck's sake. "So, yeah, that's a backup
plan. Plan A, you stay here; plan B, if you leave--"

"Oh, God, stop talking," Loki said, giving him an exasperated kiss.

Which was good, obviously, he liked kissing Loki--hell, he liked exasperating Loki--but didn't do anything to still the panicked ramblings going on inside his brain.

And that meant that when Loki kissed him again and came, hot and messy on Tony's hip, Tony's thoughts were entirely taken up with, I don't. I can't. I don't love you, dammit. And even if I do, I'm not going to say so.

****

Chapter End Notes

**Next week:** Are we surprised that Tony is Rhodey's example of "How Not to Be"?
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

Really, Tony should be everybody’s example of How Not To Be.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everybody who’s been reading, commenting, and hitting the kudos button. You're all so appreciated!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

"I'm not sure what I hate more," Loki said, dangling his legs over the arm of the couch and staring up at the ceiling, "that my mother convinced Thor that it would be a good idea for her to take 'both her boys' to dinner together, or that you're happy to let me suffer."

Tony looked up from his phone. "I don't want you to suffer. I'm just not sure that--I mean, that's your mom. I don't think we're at the 'meet each other's parents' stage." Nope. They definitely weren't. He wasn't going to meet Loki's mother, even if she was only his stepmother; Loki didn't talk about her much, but it was obvious that she was important to him. He'd gone and sat through a comp lit lecture for her sake; of course she was important. (He'd tried to get Tony to sit through a comp lit lecture for her sake. She was important enough to make Loki dumb.)

And Tony was not going to give Loki's mother the wrong idea about him. Or Loki, for that matter. Sure, they'd progressed to the point where they were actually, if non-exclusively, dating, not just fucking. (At least, that was the agreement, though Tony still wasn't interested in other people, and if Loki was, he'd stopped telling Tony about it.) They'd been out another couple of times, even--once just for dinner, once to the movies--although that was getting harder to find time for as it got closer to the end of the semester.

But meeting the parents was something you did when you were serious, and that was the one thing they weren't.

Loki snorted. "Good God, I don't want you to come with me. I'm already worried that Thor's going to forget the official story about how we got to know one another. The last thing I want is you glaring jealously at the guy who is supposed to be my casual-acquaintance-slash-long-lost-stepbrother."

"I'm not jealous of Thor."

He reached over to pat Tony on the knee. "If you say so, dear," he said, in a tone that managed to be both long-suffering and mocking at the same time.

"Oh, fuck you," Tony grumbled. He tried to shove Loki's hand off his knee, but Loki turned his
hand palm-up and laced his fingers through Tony's. "I'm not."

"Not any more, anyway?"

That was a little too close to the truth, so he decided to change the subject a little. "So what did you want?"

"Sympathy. A potential emergency text to get me out of there if it gets awkward--which it might, since they've got about eighteen years' worth of mommy issues to deal with. I don't think that having dinner the other night would have done more than scratch the surface."

He tilted his head back to grin at Tony. "And a promise that when it's over with, I can come over here, rant for a while about how terrible it was and how much I hate my family, and then get my mind taken off the whole debacle in some way involving some combination of your mouth, your ass, and/or your dick."

"When you put it that way," Tony said after a moment's reflection, "it sounds almost impossible to say no to."

"Well," Loki said, "it's one of my ideas. I can be very persuasive when I want to be."

"Nah." Tony grinned. "I'm pretty sure I can resist you whenever I want." His gaze strayed down to their linked hands, and he squeezed Loki's hand, just to emphasize how little resisting he actually wanted to do.

Loki sighed and muttered something under his breath; the only word Tony could catch sounded like "noticed," but he wasn't going to acknowledge that Loki was making fun of how obvious it was that Tony was terrible at resisting Loki. Which, of course, went double when it was something Tony wanted to do anyway.

But before Loki moved on to full-on mockery, Tony said, "So if I'm promising to take your mind off things, does that mean you'll do me a favor in return and bring my shirt back?"

"You're not getting that shirt back," Loki said.

"It doesn't fit you and you hate Iron Maiden," Tony argued. "What was it you said, they were talentless has-beens before either of us was even born?"

Loki didn't respond to either of those claims, just repeated, "You're not getting that shirt back."

He let go of Tony's hand, shrugging as best he could while lying on his back. "I should never have gotten involved in this," he said. "If she wanted to get in touch with Thor, she could have just asked me for his number. There was no need for me to get into the middle of it."

"Too late," Tony pointed out. "Anyway, it's not exactly a capital crime to like people and try to make them happy."

"It's all going to blow up in my face."

"It's not, though. You and Thor met at a party. You got to talking. You were in his dorm room. You saw the picture of him with his mother and realized who he had to be. Thor's not going to fuck that up, because he's not that stupid and because it's the truth. It's not the whole truth, but Thor doesn't want her to know that any more than you do."

He took Loki's hand back again. "She may even guess that you went back to his room for the
actual reason you did, but she's going to think you saw the picture before you had sex, and you're both going to happily let her assume that for the rest of her life."

Now it was Tony's turn to shrug. "And anything that goes wrong between her and Thor is their problem, not something you have to get in the middle of."

"Yeah, you're right."

"God, I love it when you say that."

"Remind me why I like you, again?" Loki shook his head. "But you are. I just can't quite shake the feeling of impending doom. Probably because Thor is an idiot."

"Nah," Tony insisted. "It's all going to be fine. The forecast is a hundred percent doom-free."

Well, not exactly true. He was doomed, he'd already figured that out. But Loki didn't need to know about that.

****

"Pepper isn't stupid."

Tony looked up from the problem set that he and Rhodey were theoretically supposed to be working on together. "That was random. No, Pepper isn't stupid; got any more pointless truths you want to lay on me?"

Rhodey's eyes narrowed. "Don't bullshit me, Tony. You know what I'm talking about. Pepper's not dumb, and she has a lot of friends. And hell, probably a few frenemies who'd love to tell her all about her ex-boyfriend's new boyfriend."

"He's not my--" Tony began, and then broke off. He kind of was now, wasn't he? "It's not that interesting."

"Maybe not, but are you really planning to just assume that in no way is Pepper ever going to find out that you're actually dating the guy she is still freaking out about you even knowing because she thinks he's some kind of evil soul-destroying mastermind?"

"He's really not," Tony argued.

"Yeah, he's just an asshole, we've been over that a few dozen times. But so are you because you need to just tell her you're dating him and let her deal with it however she wants to." Rhodey picked up his pen and started working again, so Tony did likewise.

That lasted at least five minutes, before Tony said, "She's gonna hate me, Rhodey."

"She's not going to hate you. She's going to worry about you, and she might even yell at you for hiding things from her, but seriously--even if she hates you, you aren't doing anything wrong. Not by dating Loki, anyway. If she hates you for it, that's all on her."

He shook his head. "I can't do that." He couldn't risk losing Pepper as a friend, too. He'd realized a long time ago that they really were completely done as a couple, but he didn't want her to be totally out of his life.

Even if he'd been going behind her back for a long time now. Even if he knew he could have handled this ages ago by breaking things off with Loki, he hadn't wanted to, still didn't want to.
"So you're just going to go around trying to keep Loki away from all the rest of your life."

"Yes! Are you done with problem five yet?" he asked, in a desperate effort to stop this conversation.

"No, because somebody keeps talking crap at me. Give me a minute." He worked for another minute or so, then announced, "The Mach number is 2.47."

Tony glanced down at his own work. "We agree, so you're right." He ignored Rhodey's rolled eyes. "And I'm not talking crap."

"All I can say is that right now, I'm using you as my example of 'How Not to Be' where Carol's concerned."

"You're breaking my heart," Tony said, clutching at his chest. "I thought I was your example of 'How Not to Be' where everything is concerned."

"Going to have to up your game for that," Rhodey said.

"So... Carol. Things are good?"

"Pretty good. And yes, I'm introducing her to my friends. I would suggest that we double-date, but..."

"'How Not to Be'?

"Exactly." Rhodey sighed. "You know it's not fair to him, either? I got the feeling, during our very short and incredibly awkward conversation, that he's really into you. Maybe he deserves better."

"He's fine with things the way they are," Tony said. Loki didn't say anything about it, anyway. Dropped some hints sometimes, maybe, but he didn't say anything, and if he had that much of a problem, he'd have said, right?

Oh, yeah, because Loki is so direct about things, Tony thought, and then promptly told himself to shut up.

"Sometimes I don't fucking know why I like you," Rhodey muttered. "Mostly I'm just glad I was never tempted to date you."

Tony shook his head. "You don't know what you're missing."

"Bullshit and heartbreak, it sounds like." He sighed again. "Look, forget I said anything. Let's just get back to work."

"That's what I'm here for," Tony said. He definitely wasn't here to have this conversation. The longer it went on, the more he started wondering if Rhodey didn't have a point. Rhodey usually did have a point; that was the problem.

But what was he supposed to do? If he kept things the way they were, he still had Loki and both of his best friends. And things were good with Loki the way they were. They were both happy with the status quo, weren't they?

Rhodey was right; this whole situation was fucked up. But at least he could avoid actively making it worse, and rocking the boat would definitely do that.

And, right now, he had more important things to worry about anyway, like getting this work done.
Everything else could wait until the end of the semester.

****

"Why couldn't I be an orphan?" Loki demanded.

Tony closed the door behind him and shrugged. "Just unlucky, I guess. Was it that bad?"

Loki considered for a long moment. "I suppose not. Just awkward. And boring as hell."

Tony smirked. "Does that mean that there was a lot more talking about Thor and a lot less talking about you than you approve of?"

"Asshole," Loki said, but he kissed Tony.

"So that's a yes." He laughed when Loki smacked him lightly on the chest. "A definite yes."

Loki sat down on the couch, waving impatiently until Tony joined him. "I'm surprised you're even home," he said. "It's Saturday evening, why aren't you in the lab?"

"I was. I'm back. I did promise you that I'd be around tonight." He grinned. "Besides, I was just leaving stuff around for Justin to fuck with. I'm pretty sure he's trying to sabotage my projects, and I wanted to make sure he had plenty to work with."

"Oh, he's definitely trying to sabotage you," Loki said. "He rants at me over coffee at least twice a week, and that's pretty obvious even if he doesn't come right out and say it. He hates your guts, and he's desperate for someone to listen to him say so."

"Or he thinks you're hot," Tony suggested.

"Of course he thinks I'm hot," Loki said, "but too bad for him. Anyway, he wants you kicked out of the lab. Maybe out of the program, but definitely out of the lab. He still thinks you bought your way into special treatment."

"He thinks everyone is as incompetent as he is," Tony muttered. That wasn't actually fair, because from what Tony could tell, when Justin wasn't trying to cheat his way through, he was actually not bad. Not on Tony's level, but--well, call him a narcissist if you had to, but there weren't all that many people who were on Tony's level. Justin had been good enough to get into the program, so he couldn't actually be terrible. He was just an asshole with a grudge against Tony.

"Probably."

"And," Tony said, "I'm supposed to be listening to you ranting about your idiot stepbrother, not talking about asshole grad students."

"There's not a lot to rant about, though," Loki said, sounding a little disappointed. "I mean, I left when they started talking about seeing a family therapist, because one, boring, and two, not something that is ever going to involve me."

Tony snorted. "Yeah, there's absolutely no reason why anyone might think you and Thor would ever need professional help."

"Okay, you might have a point," Loki conceded, chuckling, "except no, not really, I think we're both fine. And done. Definitely done." He grinned. "Seeing the family resemblance between him and my mother put the last nail in that coffin, because hell, no."
"Good," Tony said immediately. "I mean, good because that's obviously just going to lead to disaster. I'm still not even remotely jealous of Th--" He broke off, shaking his head. "And you don't fucking believe a word I'm saying."

"Nope," Loki said, reaching up to tug him down for a kiss. "I can see right through you, Tony Stark."

"If you say so." He didn't actually believe Loki; if he was that transparent, Loki would have been laughing his ass off at how pathetic Tony had gotten, so quickly. But then again, an argument wasn't really what he'd been hoping for tonight, so he'd leave it at that.

"I did, but I could probably be persuaded to stop saying it." He grinned up at Tony. "You know, with a suitable motivating factor provided."

"That sounds a lot like blackmail," Tony said.

He was surprised when Loki frowned, but then it got a lot less surprising when he went on, "It was supposed to sound exactly like blackmail. And no, not even you have enough money, but you can pay me with your body."

"You evil bastard," Tony said through his laughter. "I'm not that kind of guy."

"Then whose apartment am I in? I was looking for Tony Stark's place, and believe me, he is definitely that kind of guy."

Tony considered that for a moment. "Yeah, okay, I might possibly be that kind of guy. Should we go in the other room and check that out?" He gave Loki an exaggerated wink.

"Sometimes," Loki said as he got up from the couch, "I find myself wondering why I like you."

"Funny, people keep saying that to me," Tony said, letting Loki pull him to his feet and then following after him.

****

Chapter End Notes

**Next week:** "We need to talk," from Pepper, couldn't possibly be good. Or, in other words, this is the point where you all start hating me.
"We need to talk," from Pepper, couldn't possibly be good.

We need to talk. The text was from Pepper, and just those four words. Shit.

Pepper didn't say things like "we need to talk," at least not any more. Even in texts, Pepper said, "Can I talk to you for a second?" or "Got a minute?" or "I want to ask you something." "We need to talk" would have made his gut clench even if he hadn't had any idea what this was about.

And, unfortunately, he had a very good idea. OK, talk, he replied. **In person. That cafe I like, on Elm? In 30 min?**

OK.

Great. Sure. That was exactly how Tony had planned to spend his Sunday morning. There'd been nothing on the agenda that resembled "make sure Loki is thoroughly de-stressed from his dinner with his mom and Thor" or "continue paying off that 'blackmail.'"

He looked over at the pile of blankets on the other side of the bed, poking it until Loki's head emerged.

"I hate you," Loki growled. "And if you're waking me up for sex--again--the answer is 'go to hell.'"

Was it pathetic that Tony smiled at that? Yeah, probably a little, but he decided not to care. "Yeah, listen, I have to go out. Probably for a few hours, so... just lock up when you leave, okay?" He leaned over and kissed Loki. "I'll see you tonight, though, right?"

"Sleeping," was the grumpy reply before Loki pulled the blankets up again, so Tony gave up on conversation and just got up to get dressed.

He was late to meet Pepper, but only by about ten minutes, and she didn't even look like she'd gotten impatient. In fact, she had her patient face on, the one that she used when she explained that Tony really needed to straighten out his life.

She'd almost stopped doing that recently (since a couple of weeks after he met Loki, to be honest), but it looked like it was due for a revival.

Again, absolutely fucking great.
"Hey, Pep," Tony said, sliding into the booth. "Did you order coffee? I need coffee. So very much coffee. I was still in bed when I got your text."

"Yes, there's coffee coming. Late night last night?" she asked. She sounded sympathetic, so maybe this wouldn't be too bad. She wasn't furious, at least. "Sympathetic and patient" would be incredibly hard to swallow, but at least it wasn't likely to be friendship-destroying.

"Not that late," he said. "And no, no hangover. I just didn't feel like getting up early on a Sunday." There was a moment of awkward silence, and Tony found himself rushing to fill it. "So, how've you been?"

"I'm good."

"Classes going okay?"

"Yes." The patient look was starting to wear a little thin. "That's not why--"

He rushed to interrupt her. "And Happy? You guys doing okay?"

This time, the patience slipped altogether. "I'm fine, he's fine, we're fine," she said brusquely. Then she took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and smiled at him again. "You're the one I'm worried about."

"No need to worry; I think that's our coffee." The waitress arrived, and Tony charmed her into leaving them a pot of coffee. They ordered some food--Tony went for a bagel on the grounds that he felt like it would be easy to pick apart without actually eating anything. He suspected he wasn't going to have much of an appetite.

"Be serious, Tony," Pepper said once they were alone again.

"I am serious. I told you the last time you asked--I'm fine. Things are going really well. In fact--" he began, thinking that maybe, just maybe, he could slip in the information about Loki first, so that he could get credit for telling her without being literally forced to.

No such luck. She sighed heavily. "I know Rhodey and I have both told you that you should try finding someone you actually want to date, not just have sex with, but that doesn't mean--" She paused for a second, considering her words. "Loki? Really?"

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Loki," he said firmly. "Really."

"He's such a terrible guy, though."

Yeah. Tony knew that. Tony might know that better than Pepper, for that matter, because Pepper had never seen the gleeful look on Loki's face when he'd explained to Tony how confused and flustered he'd left Thor on the day they'd met, or heard him mimic Justin's whining.

The thing was, Tony wasn't the greatest guy on earth, either. "He's not that bad," he argued. "He's not terrible to me." Not really. In ridiculous ways, yes, but that didn't actually count.

"He's not terrible to you now," Pepper corrected him. "Clint didn't think he was terrible, either, until they started fighting and broke up."

Tony stared down into his coffee. "Pepper, when Loki and I break up--and yeah, I don't have any delusions; it's 'when' and not 'if'--you can say 'I told you so' all you want."
"I worry about you," she repeated. "I don't like thinking about you getting hurt. Especially not by a bastard like that, who'll do it on purpose."

Tony shook his head. "All you've ever said is that they had an ugly breakup. We had an ugly breakup, and neither one of us is evil."

She sighed. "Clint said he used to get moody and jealous and weird. Loki didn't like Clint's friends, and Clint says he resented the time Clint spent with us. Is that what you want? Somebody getting angry when you spend time with Rhody, or with me?"

Tony had been about to argue, because Loki's only comment about Rhody had been that Rhody seemed all right, and he never grumbled about Tony and Rhody having plans. Granted, he and Loki hadn't really been a couple most of the time, but--

But Loki did get weird about Pepper.

And Pepper had seen the look on Tony's face. "You know I'm right," she said. "That night at the bar--he was angry because you were there with me, wasn't he?"

"He wasn't angry," Tony said. And whatever he had been, it was because Tony had completely ignored him, not because he'd be there with Pepper.

"He was something. Even though he was there with someone else, himself." She fell silent while the waitress brought their breakfasts. Once she'd gone, though, Pepper picked up right where she'd left off. "He was jealous of Clint's archery, too, Clint said. He didn't like the amount of time he spent practicing. It was one of the things they fought about."

Tony pulled a piece off his bagel and contemplated putting cream cheese on it. He decided not to bother. He was probably just going to be rolling it into a little bread ball and setting it aside, anyway. There was a huge knot in his stomach that was taking up far too much room to allow for food. "I'm not exactly an Olympic hopeful," he pointed out.

"So there's nothing you do that takes up a lot of your time and attention, that someone might, just possibly, feel like you spend too much time on?" She cut off a bite of her omelet.

"There's something I do that you used to complain that I spent too much time on," he muttered. But Loki didn't get angry about the time Tony spent working.

"Tony," Pepper said softly, "I just worry about you. And deep down, you know I'm right to be worried. If you didn't feel like this was wrong, you wouldn't have kept it a secret for so long." She reached over and patted his hand. "You know I'm right."

He scowled and started focusing on making another little ball of wadded-up bagel. "I didn't tell you because I knew we were going to have to have this kind of conversation," he said.

"You're just being self-destructive again," she said. "Instead of spending every weekend finding another person to have meaningless sex with, you've just found a single person who's going to hurt you. Rhody and I are both concerned."

He didn't believe the part about Rhody; Rhody thought Loki was good for him. The thing was, though, overall, that sounded like a thing that he might, possibly, do. He didn't feel like that was what was going on here, but he was also notoriously terrible at being self-aware. If he'd doubted that before, the way that he'd managed to just wander cluelessly into this thing with Loki would have convinced him.
"I don't know," he said. "I just... look, I get that you're saying all this because you're my friend and you care about me. I just don't think it's fair that I'm supposed to believe all this stuff--" which, honestly, was mostly not the kind of obnoxious thing he was used to Loki doing-- "without ever asking Loki about his side."

She nodded. "Then ask," she said. "That's fair. But just remember, I'm on your side. I want you to be happy, that's all."

"If you wanted me to be happy, you'd never have brought this up," he said. Suddenly, he couldn't bring himself to sit there any longer. He got out his wallet and threw some cash down on the table. "Enjoy your breakfast, Pepper. I've got to go, sorry."

He had an appointment with his workshop, some loud music, and possibly a blowtorch. He either had a lot of thinking to do, or a lot of thinking to avoid, and his first step was going to have to be working out which.

****

Chapter End Notes

A short chapter, but I like to prolong the agony. (No, really, chapters are as long as they need to be, and this felt like it needed to stand alone. I didn't torture you on purpose.)

Next week: This fic earns that "angst" tag that's been inaccurately up there since October.
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Summary

Tony talks to Loki, and things go to hell.

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to everyone who's commenting, leaving kudos, or just continuing to read!

FYI: this chapter features a scene of consensual, but angry, sex.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

I know we were going out tonight, Tony had texted from the lab, but could you just come over to my place instead?

As long as your next text isn't 'we need to talk.' :)

Tony hadn't known how to answer that one, and he obviously took too long debating, because another text from Loki came in after a few minutes. Let me guess: it isn't that NOW?

Just come over tonight.

fine, was the reply. No caps, no punctuation--and Loki usually used both in texts--just four letters that might as well have spelled "disaster."

And then they'd both had a terrible feeling about this evening. Wasn't there some stupid old saying about a problem shared being a problem halved? What complete and total bullshit. A problem shared was a problem that couldn't be ignored any more, and unless it involved science and/or screwdrivers, "ignoring" was Tony's favorite way of dealing with problems.

And now that Loki was actually there in Tony's apartment, sitting there on the couch looking at Tony apprehensively, Tony was wishing that he'd just gone with "ignoring."

This was going to be fine, though. He was going to be a goddamn adult about this. He was going to tell Loki about the conversation that he'd had with Pepper, and Loki was going to laugh at all of Pepper's ridiculous concerns, and then they were going to order Chinese food and have incredibly hot sex and everything was going to be just fine.

He wanted to skip the talking, to just laugh off what Pepper had said and go straight to, "We're fine, really, so do you want orange beef again?"

But the phrase "how not to be" kept crossing his mind. If it had just been Rhodey--well, Rhodey was mostly joking about that. Pepper wasn't, though. She'd been telling Tony for as long as he'd
known her that he had terrible judgment, and she wasn't wrong.

So he couldn't let himself just shrug this off. He needed to hear directly from Loki that it was ridiculous; then he could let it go.

"Let's just get whatever this is over with," Loki said, his voice already sharp. "I haven't had the best afternoon."

"What happened?"

Loki rolled his eyes. "I don't know, someone might have sent me an ominous text?"

Oh. Yeah. He took a deep breath. He might as well get this over with and put both of them out of their misery. "I had breakfast with Pepper this morning."

"I hate being right," Loki muttered. "And? It's not like I don't know what you're going to say, but you're going to have to come out and fucking say it anyway."

"You know she's friends with your ex, right?"

"If you mean Clint, yes. I know. She reminded me of that when you introduced us. What does that have to do with anything?" He'd moved back a little, so that he was almost pressed against the arm of the couch, and when Tony glanced down at the hands resting on Loki's knees, the fingers were digging into the fabric of his pants.

This was going wrong already, and Tony wasn't sure why. "You never really talk about him."

"Because he's my ex. I've only seen him once since we broke up, and that was when he brought me some stuff I left at his place. Some of us," Loki added, still in that sharp voice, "don't spend all of our time hanging around with our exes."

"I don't do that either," Tony argued.

"...Yeah. Okay. Let's pretend that's true, just for the sake of an argument. I don't talk about Clint because we broke up, and there's nothing to say about him. If there was something you wanted to know, you could have just asked."

The thing was, there wasn't anything Tony had wanted to know. Tony hadn't cared what had happened between Loki and a guy he only knew as someone who Pepper sometimes talked about. If he had cared, he'd have asked.

It was just this conversation with Pepper that had him wondering. Or not even wondering, but wanting to clear the air. "Pepper says your breakup was really ugly."

Loki shrugged. "We fought, we made up, we kept making one another miserable, we fought some more, we broke up. It wasn't nice, no, but I've seen worse. Nobody called the police, nobody hit anybody, nobody even cheated."

"That's not really how she made it sound."

Loki's eyes narrowed. "Well, she wasn't fucking there, was she? What does Pepper say I did? Beat him up?"

"Fucked him up. Completely ruined his life. His whole damn future, maybe. Just because you guys were having problems."
"Oh, is that all?" Loki snorted. "And how am I supposed to have done that? That's a pretty impressive skill."

"She said you pushed him into giving up archery."

"I didn't make Clint give up archery!" Loki actually looked confused, not defensive, and that made Tony pause for a moment. "Why the hell would I do that? It was boring as shit to watch, mind you, but I never asked him to give it up. He loves it--and he's really good."

"She says you hated how much time he spent practicing."

A little of the tension seemed to go out of Loki's body; he leaned back against the couch, stretching his arm out along the back. "I used to get pissed off because he'd make plans with me and conveniently forget he had practice until the last minute. Not the same thing. That problem could have been solved if he'd learned how to use a calendar."

That was definitely believable, but Pepper had seemed so sure that it had been malicious. "Well, he took time off from school, and he's probably not going to make the Olympics now, and according to Pepper, it's because you guys broke up."

"Oh, well, if Pepper says so," Loki sneered.

"Don't."

"Of course not. I wouldn't want to say anything negative about your darling Pepper." The p's in her name made it sound like Loki was spitting. Loki looked angry enough that he might as well have been spitting.

"So that isn't what happened?" He realized he wanted Loki to tell him just that. No, it didn't happen that way. No, Pepper was wrong. No, Loki wasn't going to break Tony the way he'd broken Clint Barton. No, Tony wasn't wrong to trust him.

Loki shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe the breakup did fuck him up a lot. People do stupid things when they're unhappy. And I've already admitted that we weren't nice to each other, there at the end. I'm not going to claim I was good to him. But I didn't make him do it. I never even asked him to."

"You were jealous," Tony persisted. "P--" He caught himself before he could start the next sentence with "Pepper says."

"You didn't like his friends, and you hated that he spent so much time practicing, and--"

"When the fuck did I do that?" Loki demanded. "Does that even sound like me?"

"I don't know," Tony said. "I didn't know you then."

"Have I ever tried to get you to stop building robots? I mean, for longer than it would take to have a nap, or eat a sandwich? Or to fuck, I guess, but that's your idea more often than not."

He gave that some serious thought, but couldn't remember it happening. He could remember all the times they'd worked side by side, focused on their own work but enjoying being close to one another. He could remember the times Loki had showed up at the lab with food and kept Tony company while they ate--and that when Tony was on a roll, he'd leave for a few hours to let him work until he decided it was time for Tony to get some sleep. He could remember Loki responding to Can't talk--working texts without getting pissy.
Tony would have run like hell if Loki tried to keep him away from his work. "No. I guess you haven't."

"Damn right I haven't. And I didn't do it to Clint, either." Loki sighed. "I didn't like most of his friends, and most of them didn't like me. But that wasn't a big deal, and I didn't keep him away from them. We didn't have to be joined at the hip. And I did a lot of shitty things to Clint--and he was shitty right back--but I didn't try to fuck with archery. I like people who are good at what they do. So much better than spending time with incompetents."

He took a deep breath; Tony thought he could see a muscle twitching in Loki's jaw. "Yes, I hooked up with you the first time because you were hot and funny and looked like you'd be a good fuck. I kept hanging around you because you're you, though, so why would I want to change that?"

"You're jealous," Tony said, because that was another thing Pepper had told him: Loki with Clint had been "moody and jealous and weird." Loki had been angry that night at the bar when Tony hadn't paid him any attention. Loki resented that Tony was friends with Pepper. It all added up to Loki being even worse than Tony about not being the center of attention.

"Okay, first off, like you have any room to talk about jealousy. But also--hell, yes, I'm jealous," Loki admitted immediately. "Of Pepper." Again with the sounds like spitting her name onto the floor. Tony wanted to spring to her defense, but instead, he forced himself to stay quiet as Loki went on.

"Not of your robots, or any of your other work. Not of the fact that you have friends. Not of the fact that you've screwed half the student body. Hell, go screw a few more and let me watch, if you want." Loki sighed, running a hand through his hair. "And as far as I know, I won't be jealous of anyone but her, because she's the only one of your exes you're still in love with. And even then, have I ever tried to convince you not to spend time with her?"

"She's my only ex," Tony protested, and then realized what Loki had actually said. "And I'm not still in love with her."

Loki let out a huff of laughter. "I may not be on your level, but I'm far from stupid, Tony. If she snapped her fingers, you'd be running back to her in a heartbeat."

"I'm not in love with Pepper." He watched Loki's hands, long fingers plucking at the back of the couch in agitation, and at the sound of Pepper's name, gripping it tightly, white-knuckled.

"I'm really not," he repeated. He would have said it automatically anyway. He'd been saying it for eighteen months or so now, since he got as far over their breakup as he thought he was likely to get. This time, though, he realized he meant it. Completely. "She's one of my best friends, and that's not going to be changing. I care about her. But I'm not in love with her, not any more."

"That's not just bullshit," Loki snarled; "that's weak bullshit. I'd have to be an idiot to believe that. I've seen you with her. Hell, I've sat here pretending I'm not here while you talk to her before. I know better."

That was true, too, as far as it went, but Loki hadn't seen Pepper and Tony together since that first Thursday night at the bar, and somewhere along the line, without Tony noticing, things had changed. He'd been walking around still just a little bit in love with Pepper for so long that he hadn't even noticed when he'd stopped, and started just loving Pepper in basically the same way he loved Rhodey.

"It's not bullshit," Tony protested.
There was a long moment of silence. Then Loki shook his head. "You know what? Fuck it. I was trying to be honest with you, but it's just not worth the effort. If you want to fuck, great. Let's fuck. Otherwise, I'm just going to go. The night is young, and I'm sure there are at least a few hundred equally adequate lays in this town. And I'm sure Pepper will be glad to hear that you sent me on my way."

No. Loki was not fucking walking out of here, not like this. If he wanted to leave, he'd have gone by now, so he must be waiting for Tony to tell him to stay. Tony jumped to his feet, taking hold of Loki's arm. "No need for you to go anywhere," he said, and Loki's answering smile was tight and bitter.

"Great." He let Tony pull him to his feet, but when Tony tried to kiss him, he turned his head. "Let's skip the part where we pretend we give a shit. It's starting to get tiring."

Tony kissed him on the corner of his mouth anyway, feeling that muscle in Loki's jaw jump again when his lips brushed it.

Loki pulled away. "We both know what this is."

Well, Tony had thought he knew what this was. He'd thought this was going to finally put all of the worries Pepper had passed on to him behind them, but now he was starting to think he had no fucking clue. "What is it, then, Loki?" A disaster? It was really looking like a disaster.

"From where I'm standing--a hot guy I don't like all that much anymore, but who's fairly good in bed." He smiled at Tony again. "And it's easier than going out to find somebody new."

It turned out that Tony really hated Loki's smile. Huh. You learned something new every day.

He pushed Loki back against the wall; Loki didn't resist, just kept smirking at Tony until Tony halfway wanted to punch his face in. More than halfway, maybe.

The smirk faltered a little when Tony yanked Loki's pants open and shoved his hand inside, and Loki's breath hissed sharply as Tony began roughly stroking his cock, but then it returned, just as fucking annoying as ever. "Let's get on with it," he said, reaching for Tony's waistband.

Tony pushed his hand away. "Not like this," he said. "I want you to fuck me." He wanted so much, but no matter what he said, it was going to turn out wrong, just like everything else he'd said tonight had turned out wrong so far, so he might as well focus on what he could have. He couldn't have Loki, but he could have this--and who knew whether or not they'd ever want to do this again, after tonight? It was looking like Loki wouldn't want to be in the same room with him.

"Are you sure? I don't feel like being gentle with you tonight," Loki warned him.

"No shit," Tony muttered. He already felt raw, and Loki hadn't even touched him. How much worse could it get?

He didn't want to look at Loki, didn't like the way Loki was looking at him, and so he kept his focus on Loki's cock, on getting Loki hard enough to fuck him. They were good in bed, Tony reminded himself, and that was what he'd kept saying he wanted from Loki, anyway. Everything would make sense again if they just forgot about anything but the sex. Everything would be fine once Loki was touching him.

While Loki's cock was stiffening under his touch, Loki was silent except for his breathing, his face completely unreadable, and Tony took that as a challenge. He redoubled his efforts, trying everything that usually had Loki moaning and squirming and begging, and was finally rewarded by
a groan that sounded like it had escaped from between clenched teeth.

He was just about to build on his triumph when Loki's hand closed tight on his forearm. Startled, Tony looked up, only to be faced with that fucking smile again.

"Are we going to fuck, or do you want to waste more time?"

What he wanted was to start this whole damned evening over again, but that didn't seem like an option—*Note to self: invent time travel*—so he went with, "Fine. Come on, then," and stalked off toward his bedroom.

He could hear Loki's footsteps behind him, so he didn't even turn to look at him when they reached the bedroom, just began pulling off his clothes. Everything seemed so stiff and unfriendly, somehow. There was no kissing, no fumbling caresses, no talking, no laughter. Just the rustle of clothing—his own and Loki's—as they undressed, and then the creak of springs as Tony climbed onto the bed and got on his hands and knees.

They hadn't done it this way before, with Tony on all fours. He'd had Loki like this, and bent over the couch, but Loki always wanted Tony on his back; he liked Tony to be looking at him during sex.

Well, fuck what Loki wanted. If he didn't like it, he could go home; Tony wouldn't stop him. There was no way Tony was going to be able to keep an erection looking at that smirk the whole time. Tony wasn't even sure he'd be able to keep his temper, looking at that smirk the whole time.

"Afraid if I take time to think, I'll change my mind?" Loki said, going to the drawer and getting out a condom and the lube. "Don't worry. I've decided to stick around. For now, anyway."

Tony winced, closing his eyes. Dammit. This was what he'd been trying to avoid all along. This was why he should never have slept with Loki a second time. "Lucky me. I could always jerk off to porn, but then I'd be deprived of your charming personality."

"I'm not here to listen to you talk," Loki snapped. "I've had too damn much of that already tonight. Last time I'm going to ask: do you want to do this, or not?"

Of course he did, but not like this. But if he said that, Loki was going to leave. And if he tried to talk to Loki—well, trying to talk to Loki was what put them in this position in the first place. He should never have talked to Loki to begin with. He should have ridden down that elevator in silence. Then this wouldn't be happening, and he wouldn't feel like the world was ending.

"I'm not the one stalling," Tony said. He heard Loki tearing the condom package open, and waited.

Loki pushed one thumb inside Tony, cold and slick with lube, twisting it roughly before pulling it out. Tony realized that was all the prep he was likely to get and braced himself.

He bit his lip as Loki thrust into him in one movement. Fuck. Fuck, that hurt—not enough for him to ask Loki to stop, but enough that he was glad that once Loki was deep inside him, he held still for a moment. At least he'd used plenty of lube, Tony thought, breathing deeply and trying to force his muscles to relax.

"I'm okay," Tony said, once he adjusted; he tried moving his hips, pushing back against Loki, but instead of being met with the enthusiastic thrust he'd expected, Loki gripped his hips tightly, holding him still.

He did at least start to move, pulling out and then thrusting into Tony again, hard and deep. His
second thrust was at a slightly better angle, enough to make Tony moan.

"God, yeah, right there, Loki, that's great--"

"Stop it," Loki snapped, and Tony stilled. "I told you--you've said enough for one night. Just... shut up and let me fuck you, or tell me to go home."

Tony swallowed hard. Well, he'd been reminding himself for months that Loki was only around because the sex was good. It just hadn't been quite so blatant before. Maybe that was what Loki meant about not pretending any more.

And it wasn't like Tony had ever claimed to want anything more than this, either. No matter what he really wanted. No matter how much every word out of Loki's mouth fucking hurt.

He thought about telling Loki to stop. But hell, this was better than nothing, and those were his choices, weren't they? Loki'd probably leave anyway after this, leave and not come back--just like Tony used to think he wanted--but at least he could put it off for a little while.

Besides, once he fell silent, Loki's hand slid around his hip, cool fingers closing around Tony's cock. "That's better," Loki said. "Don't worry, I'll make sure we both get off."

Tony whimpered as Loki started to stroke him in time with the pounding rhythm of Loki's cock inside him. It was good, it was always good, but this time it wasn't right. If things had been like this the first time, there wouldn't have been a second. Not even a second time that same day.

This time, things swung wildly between impersonal--Loki fucking him almost silently, jerking him off like it was a polite obligation rather than reveling in driving Tony wild--and angry. "Pepper can't do this to you," Loki said, so quietly Tony wasn't completely sure he heard correctly. "Or did she? Did she strap on a dick and fuck your ass for you? Is that who you're thinking about right now?"

Tony opened his mouth, trying to make himself answer. No, for fuck's sake, I'm thinking about you. Thinking about how I ruined everything with you. Wishing I'd left well enough alone, because at least then you were here. You--fuck you, it's been you since you got on the goddamn elevator; I thought you knew that.

But none of that would come out, because he couldn't stand the thought of Loki throwing it back into his face. He buried his face deeper in the pillow and pretended not to notice that his cheeks were wet.

It seemed like it took Loki longer to finish than usual; Tony felt sore by the time Loki finally came. Tony was still hard; he expected Loki to leave him to finish himself off, but instead, Loki's hand sped up on his cock. Tony felt Loki's weight pressing against his back; he thought Loki was going to say something. Instead, he just felt a faint brush of lips against the back of his neck, before Tony bit down on his knuckles to keep silent as he came.

Loki pulled out of Tony, getting off the bed and leaving Tony feeling cold and empty. Tony didn't move to get up himself, just lay there, not wanting to watch Loki get dressed and walk away.

"It's been an unforgettable evening," Loki said. The edge in his voice sounded sickeningly final to Tony.

"Yeah," Tony agreed dully. "Guess I'll see you around?" he added, desperately hoping Loki would call him an idiot and remind him that he'd see him tomorrow for lunch, like they'd already planned.
"Sure. It's a small world," Loki agreed, and Tony felt that last bit of hope evaporate.

Tony waited until he heard the front door close before he got up. He stripped the sheets from the bed and remade it, since the cleaning service wouldn't be there until Friday. Then he got in the shower, standing under the spray until the hot water gave out.

He pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt he didn't remember Loki ever having borrowed, made fun of, or pulled off him; once he was dressed, he grabbed his phone and sent a text to Rhodey and Pepper--I'll be in the lab. Don't worry if I don't text. Then, because he felt stupid and pathetic and miserable, he sent one to just Rhodey--definitely not Pepper, because this would make Pepper proud of him and he didn't think he could stand it--he sent, I fucked up so hard and I don't even know how.

Then he sent one more that just said, I'm sorry. He thought about adding another line, but figured that Loki wouldn't have wanted to hear that yesterday, let alone now.

Then he got the rest of his stuff together and headed for the front door, but stopped with his hand on the doorknob.

He was going to drive over to the engineering building, but it was late enough he'd probably be alone in the lab. Nobody would care if he stayed there all night and then walked to his morning classes. And nobody would raise an eyebrow if he started keeping a bottle locked in his drawer again, so he dug out an unopened bottle of Scotch from the cabinet and stuck it in his backpack.

There. He was all set.

He hadn't been spending enough extra time in the lab lately, anyway.

****

Chapter End Notes

Whoops, sorry for the relative lateness of this post. I would pick an unusually rushed/busy morning to have forgotten to get the chapter ready to post yesterday!

We're 7 chapters from the end now.

Next week: We should all have a friend like James Rhodes.
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary

Everyone should have a friend like Rhodey.

Chapter Notes

Hello, and thank you for not killing me after last week's installment. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

"What did you do?" Rhodey demanded, keeping one eye on the line where Pepper was waiting to pay for her lunch.

Tony looked up from the french fries he was shoving around on his plate. He hadn't gotten around to putting any of them in his mouth yet, but that didn't matter; he wasn't hungry anyway. "I don't know what you're talking about," he lied. He should never have sent that text to Rhodey.

Then again, there were a lot of things he should never have done.

"Bullshit. You sent me a woe-is-me text on Sunday night, then disappeared into the lab. You weren't even in class yesterday."

Yesterday. Fluid dynamics. Why hadn't he gone?

Oh, yeah. He had come back to the lab after going to the vending machines (and maybe, possibly, falling asleep in the bathroom while he washed his hands, but he wasn't going to admit that to anyone--Tony Stark did not need sleep) and found a paper bag sitting on his chair. It had "STARK" written on it in Loki's handwriting, and inside was his Iron Maiden T-shirt, freshly washed. No note. Nothing. Just the shirt, the one that Loki had said he was never getting back. He'd felt sick, realizing that this was Loki's attempt to remove the last traces of Tony Stark from his life.

He'd shoved the bag down into the bottom of his backpack so that he didn't have to look at it. Then he'd poured himself a drink and gone back to work.

"I was sick," he said. It was kind of true, anyway.

"What did you do, Tony?" Rhodey repeated, but just then Pepper finished paying for her lunch and started toward them, waving so they knew she'd seen them. "Never mind. But we're talking about this after lunch."

"Oh, happy day," Tony muttered, and started picking sesame seeds off his hamburger bun.

"Hey, guys," Pepper said, sliding into the seat next to Tony. "What's up?"
Rhodey opened his mouth, then looked over at Tony and closed it again. "Not much," he said after a few seconds. "Hey, are we still on for Friday night? I really want you to meet Carol."

She beamed. "Yeah, that sounds great. I'm looking forward to it."

Tony gritted his teeth and wished he'd spiked his Coke. It was great that both Pepper and Rhodey were dating somebody. It really, genuinely was. He just didn't want to think about it. Or hear about it, or talk about it. Not right now. Not when Tony had just fucked up his life beyond all repair.

"So, Tony," Rhodey said--maybe he'd picked up on what a bad idea that topic was; Tony might not have told him that he and Loki had broken up, but it wasn't like Rhodey was an idiot--"were you the cause of all that drama in the engineering building yesterday?"

Tony shrugged. "It wasn't that dramatic. The asshole isn't even getting kicked out of the program, because they can't prove he wasn't just incompetently trying to help me."

"Okay, but what happened?"

He'd almost forgotten about it, to be honest. "One of the other grad students in our workspace came in on Monday and caught Justin Hammer trying to sabotage my work. Which I'd been sure he was going to do, so I took precautions. No real harm done."

It hadn't felt all that good to be right, even before he'd found out that the only thing that was going to happen was that Justin was going to be kicked out of their lab and have to scrounge space with the undergrads for the rest of the academic year.

It would have felt better if he'd been able to call Loki and tell him about it. He almost had; he'd had his phone out and was halfway through typing a text when he remembered that Loki didn't want to hear from him any more. Loki hadn't even bothered to tell him to fuck off, at least not directly. He'd just stopped giving a damn about Tony, if he ever had, and it sucked that Tony couldn't just do the same thing.

"You don't sound very excited about it," Pepper said. "I thought you hated him."

He shrugged again. "He's an asshole. It's no big deal." A week ago, he would have been triumphant. Of course, a week ago, his life had been pretty decent. A lot better than he'd realized at the time, to be honest.

That was before he'd fucked everything up.

Pepper and Rhodey moved on to other topics of conversation; Pepper tried a few times to get Tony to participate, but eventually gave up when she couldn't get any enthusiasm out of him. Rhodey left him alone, or at least didn't try to get him to talk, though he did keep giving Tony worried looks.

After fifteen minutes or so, Tony got tired of pushing his lunch around his plate. "I should really get back to the lab," he said, scooting his chair back and standing up.

Rhodey and Pepper exchanged a look. "I'll walk with you," Rhodey said, getting up as well. "I'm going that way anyway."

"Sure, if you want," Tony said, shrugging. "See you later, Pepper."

She reached over and took his hand for a moment, squeezing it briefly before letting go. "Take care of yourself, Tony."
He forced a smile. "I'm fine, Pep. I promise."

Rhodey didn't say anything until they were on the steps outside the student center. "I told you we were talking about this after lunch."

"And you were right. If the Air Force doesn't work out for you, maybe you should consider a career as a Magic 8-Ball." Tony started walking faster in what he knew was a futile attempt to discourage Rhodey from following him.

"I already know you guys broke up," Rhodey said. "That's obvious. But why? You were really into him. It looked like he was into you, too. And now you're walking around looking like you're staring into a basket of puppies with cancer."

"I fucked up," Tony said flatly. "I-- listened to Pepper, he almost said, but no, he didn't need to blame Pepper for this. It was his fault, and his alone. "I said some stupid shit, he got mad, I said more stupid shit, we broke up. Or we decided to stop fucking, anyway. Not like there was anything to break up from, really."

Rhodey put his hand on Tony's arm. "Cut the crap, Tony," he said. "I've been putting up with this I-don't-care bullshit from you for a long time, because I get it, breaking up with Pepper did a number on you. But you really liked this guy, and you just broke up. You're allowed to feel bad about it."

"It doesn't matter," Tony snapped. "Feeling bad isn't going to do anything to fix it. I just need to get over it and get back to work."

"Hell no," Rhodey said. "That's the last thing you need. You barely ate anything at lunch. You look like you've been living in a dumpster for the past few days. You missed class, and you never pass up a chance to show off in that class." He leaned in closer to Tony, sniffing. "Have you been drinking? It's one o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon, dude, that's not good."

"It's not like it matters," Tony mumbled.

Rhodey groaned. "I don't have time for this." He pulled out his phone and made a call. "Hey, Carol? I'm not going to be able to meet you to study after all. Tony's kind of..." He looked Tony over and grimaced. "Going through some shit right now," he concluded. "Yeah, I'll call you tonight, I promise," he added after a pause. There was another minute or so of desultory conversation, then Rhodey hung up and turned back to Tony. "Okay, we're going back to your place."

"I'm fine, Rhodey," he muttered, but he gave in and started following Rhodey to his car.

"Don't fucking tell me you're fine," Rhodey said. "I saw you after you and Pepper broke up. You were a mess then, and you were still better off than this."

Tony decided to change tack. "It's only been a couple of days. It's not like I've sunk into a pit of despair."

"Then hanging out with me this afternoon should be no big deal, right?"

"Call your girlfriend back and tell her you can see her after all," Tony suggested. "I'm good. I'll go home and take a nap, even, if you insist, but I don't need a damn baby-sitter."

"No," Rhodey said, "you don't. But you do need a damn friend, and I'm not walking off and leaving you like this. You don't have to talk about what happened with Loki if you don't want,
that's fine, but I'm not going to leave you on your own."

"Fine," Tony groaned. "I hope you enjoy your thrilling afternoon of watching me work and/or sleep." They were at Rhodey's car now, and Tony got in without any argument. He was too tired to argue anyway, even if he wanted to. And he didn't really want to; what he wanted--

Never mind what he wanted. All he wanted was something he'd never really had in the first place.

Tony slumped in the passenger seat, staring out the window and ignoring Rhodey's attempts to involve him in conversation, until they pulled up outside Tony's building. "You really don't have to do this," he tried one last time.

"I really do," Rhodey said. "I should have done it after Pepper dumped you--"

"She didn't dump me," Tony muttered. "We decided it wasn't working out."

"Hey, I'm not attacking her," he said. "She's my friend, too. And I'm not even saying she was wrong to do it, because I'd have dumped your ass way before she did. But man, she dumped you, and we both know it." He grinned at Tony. "Like I said, I should have done this after she dumped you, and I feel kind of guilty that I didn't, so you're not talking me out of it now."

Tony got out of the car. "Come on, then. Just be prepared for a lot of boredom."

"Huh. Never been around you when you were boring before. Might be a nice change."

They went up to Tony's apartment; Tony definitely didn't harbor any faint hope that he'd find Loki sitting in the hallway waiting for him, and he wasn't at all disappointed to find that Loki wasn't there. Hell, he'd told Loki never to do that again. He didn't want Loki to do it again.

"I'm going to get a shower," he said. He didn't bother telling Rhodey to make himself at home; that went without saying at this point.

"Yeah, good idea. Change your clothes, too. You really do look like shit." Rhodey went to the couch and got out a can of soda, then frowned and peered back into the refrigerator. "Dude, there's actually food in there."

"Yeah," Tony said. "Some of it's probably still good, if you're hungry."

"I ate lunch, like, twenty minutes ago," Rhodey said. "And besides, 'some of it's probably still good' is the same thing as telling me I'm going to be playing food-poisoning roulette."

"Suit yourself," Tony called over his shoulder as he started down the hall.

He wouldn't have admitted it to Rhodey, but the shower did feel good. It hadn't been that long--Sunday night wasn't even three full days ago, and half the student body went longer than that during midterms and finals--but he came out of the bathroom feeling a little more human. Clean clothes--sweats and a sleeveless shirt, since it was obvious that Rhodey was going to sit on him to keep him from going back to the lab today--helped, too.

When he came back out to the living room, Rhodey had found a movie to watch--a third-rate monster flick, either something on Syfy or a dead ringer for one of their crap movies--and was dividing his attention between that and some of his class notes.

"This okay?" he asked when he saw Tony. "I know you said you wanted to work--"
"It's good," Tony said, waving his hand. He went into the kitchen and got out a glass and a half-empty bottle of whiskey. "Want anything?"

"Middle of the afternoon, dude," Rhodey said. "And I'm trying to study."

"How does that saying go? It's always five o'clock somewhere?" Tony poured a generous amount of whiskey into the glass, but--since Rhodey had already mentioned twice today that it was too early to be drinking--he left the bottle on the counter. He could always come back out to the kitchen later, and at least Rhodey wouldn't be considering an intervention every time he caught sight of the bottle.

"I thought you really cut back on the booze," Rhodey muttered as Tony sat down at the other end of the couch.

"I did," he acknowledged. "And then I didn't."

"So it was because of Loki."

He shrugged. "Kind of. And hey, maybe I'll quit drinking again. But right now, I want to be numb, and this is the easiest way to get there." He held up his glass in a mockery of a toast, and then took a swallow.

"You could just tell me what happened," Rhodey said, still looking at his notes. "That might help."

"It really wouldn't," Tony said. "Then there'd just be two of us who think I'm a stupid asshole."

"For fuck's sake," Rhodey said, "how long have I known you? I already think you're a stupid asshole, and I still like you."

"Shut up and watch your movie," Tony grumbled, taking another drink.

Rhodey left him alone for a while after that. The movie ended, and a new one came on, with a different giant and unconvincing creature menacing a different group of D-list actors; Rhodey got up and got himself another can of soda at one point, then pulled out a second notebook from his bag and started flipping through it.

Tony finished his drink and went back into the kitchen to refill his glass. Rhodey raised an eyebrow when he came back, but didn't say anything. He felt like he should be working; he didn't know what to do with himself if he wasn't, especially not now, but it was too damn much effort. Easier to lean back against the couch and not-watch the stupid antics on the screen.

Even easier to ignore the movie once his eyes drifted shut. He'd told Rhodey he was going to try to take a nap, but he didn't feel like he could let himself sleep, either. He drained his glass and set it down, then settled back again, enjoying the pleasant haze.

"You really want to know what happened?" he said after a while, because why not ruin the first halfway-decent afternoon he'd had this week? He looked up at Rhodey, halfway hoping he'd say no.

"If you want to tell me, yeah, I want to listen." Rhodey set his notebook aside on the arm of the couch.

Tony frowned, waving his hand toward the notebook. "Keep doing whatever you were doing. I don't want you... I don't know. I don't want you paying that much attention."
"Okay?" Rhodey shook his head, but he picked up the notebook again and opened it up.

Tony shut his eyes again. Easier to do this if he pretended he was talking into an empty room. "I was stupid," he said flatly. "It wasn't Loki's fault. Well, mostly not his fault. I just..." He sighed. "Pepper texted me on Sunday morning wanting to talk. About Loki."

"I'm sure that went great," Rhodey said dryly. "I get that she can't stand him, and I get why, but he really didn't seem that bad."

"He isn't," Tony said, and then thought better of it. "I don't know. He's an asshole. But in a way I like. And not really in the way that Pepper thinks."

"So you talked to Pepper, and that made you decide to break up with Loki?" Rhodey sighed. "Dammit, Tony, could you at least try to be less hung-up on Pepper? I thought you guys deciding to try to be friends again was a good idea, but if you're going to throw away a perfectly good boyfriend--okay, a weird boyfriend, but he was good for you, Tony--because Pepper doesn't like him, then maybe it wasn't."

Tony glared at him. "Why does everybody think I'm hung up on Pepper? I'm over her. I'm completely over her. Rhodey, I swear, if she called me right now and told me she'd made a terrible mistake and I'm the love of her life, I'd--" He shrugged. "I'd tell her I'm sorry, pour myself another drink, and go back to being miserable about Loki."

"Okay, fine, great, you're over her. I'm glad. So now tell me why talking to Pepper has led to... well, this."

"Because she's right--not about Loki, I don't think, but about me. I have terrible judgment and do all kinds of stuff that's probably not good for me, so me thinking Loki isn't as bad as she says he is doesn't really mean anything."

Rhodey frowned. "How bad does she say he is? I mean, I know there's some shit about his ex, but what did Loki do to the guy?"

"I don't know. Pepper says Loki cut him off from his friends, made him stop training for the Olympics, shit like that. And that really does sound like bad news. But he says that's not what happened, and he didn't do any of that with me." He paused. "Except that he can't stand Pepper. He'd probably be happy if I never talked to her again."

Rhodey snorted. "If Carol was as close to one of her ex-boyfriends as you are to Pepper, I wouldn't say anything about it, but it wouldn't make me sad if she didn't talk to the guy any more, either. And that'd go double if the ex disliked me as much as Pepper dislikes Loki."

"Well, Loki didn't have a problem saying something about it. He accused me of still being in love with her."

"Which you're not," Rhodey said.

That was definitely Rhodey's "sure, Tony, I totally believe you" voice. "I'm not," he said, rolling his eyes. "Okay, I was, for a while. And for a while longer, I was... I don't know. Still kind of hung up on the idea, even after I knew I didn't even want to date her any more. But I'm not any more."

"And you know this because?"

"God damn it, Rhodey, don't make me do this."
Rhodey reached over and put his hand on Tony's shoulder. "Yeah, okay. I get it. God forbid you should actually admit you're in love with the guy who just broke your heart."

He shook his head, then shrugged Rhodey's hand away. "It doesn't matter any more. We're done."

"Yeah, but why?"

"Because I pretty much accused him of being exactly what Pepper says he is. And it pissed him off, and that pissed me off, and then..." He sighed. Rhodey didn't need to know the details. "And then everything went to hell. And then he left."

Rhodey pushed his books completely aside and slid over on the couch. This time, instead of just resting his hand on Tony's shoulder, he put his arm around him.

"Why, Rhodey, I didn't know you felt that way," Tony said, but it came out halfheartedly. He was too exhausted to even give Rhodey shit; what the hell was his life?

Rhodey snorted. "Don't," he said. "Just don't even start with the bullshit."

"Okay," Tony muttered. Okay, fine, he could definitely let his best friend hug him without making a joke about it. At least somebody didn't hate him.

"Have you even tried talking to Loki?" Rhodey asked.

"Kind of? I sent him a text Sunday night apologizing. He never answered, but yesterday he left the shirt he borrowed from me in the lab while I wasn't there. So I'm guessing that was 'apology not accepted.'"

Now it was Rhodey's turn to mutter under his breath, something that sounded like "bullshit drama," which was probably fair. "What did you say when you texted him?"

"I apologized," Tony repeated. "I said I'm sorry."

Rhodey sighed. "Maybe you should try again."

"It's not going to work," Tony insisted. "He hates me now. He doesn't want to talk to me."

"Okay, then he can not talk to you. And if he hates you, it's not like trying to talk to him is going to make things any worse."

"It's not going to make things any better, either."

"You don't know that."

He did. Loki was not exactly the forgiving type; that much was obvious. He'd been hurt and angry, and Tony was pretty sure that being pointedly ignored was the best possible outcome when Loki felt that way.

"What's the worst that could happen?" Rhodey went on. "He still hates you--I mean, if he does, which he probably doesn't. I believe he's incredibly pissed at you, but--" He paused. "Okay, did he do anything like the shit Pepper said he did with the ex? Because if so, then forget everything I just said."

"No," Tony said quickly. "No, he was just mad. And hurt. And we were kind of shitty at one another, but he didn't...we just said a lot of things we can't take back." He'd let Loki take them back. He was pretty sure he'd have no trouble believing that Loki had said a lot of things he didn't
really mean, because Loki never said what he meant.

Rhodey nodded. "I figured. So try to talk to him. The worst that can happen is that you're still broken up, and you can go right back to wallowing in your misery."

"I'm not--" He broke off at Rhodey's raised eyebrow. "Okay, maybe I am, a little."

"Yeah. Just a little." Rhodey's arm tightened around his shoulders for a minute, then he pulled away. "If I order food for us, will you eat it?"

Tony shrugged again. "Maybe, yeah." He hadn't been intentionally not eating; it just seemed like too much effort. But he felt a little less terrible now that he'd talked to Rhodey, and if food showed up... "Yeah, I could eat."

"Great. I'll order food, we can put on another movie--" He paused. "And I think I'm going to crash in your spare room, because I am dragging your ass to fluid dynamics tomorrow morning."

"Fine," Tony said. "You know I never understood why you don't just move in here. It's a lot nicer than your place."

"Because you're my best friend," Rhodey said, "and I want you to stay my best friend, and if I had to be around you twenty-four/seven, we'd drive each other batshit in two weeks. You know it." Then he grinned. "Also because I have faith that you're going to work this out, and I can happily go the rest of my life without seeing Loki in his underwear again."

"Asshole," Tony said, punching him lightly in the arm. For the first time since Pepper texted him on Sunday, he started feeling like everything was going to be okay.

****

Chapter End Notes

Next week: Tony takes Rhodey's advice.
**Chapter Seventeen**

**Chapter Summary**

Tony takes Rhodey's advice.

**Chapter Notes**

I had not realized when planning out the posting of this fic that this chapter would fall on Valentine's Day. Um, sorry? :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

It wasn't like Tony had no reason to be in the physics building. Granted, he wasn't taking physics this semester, but this was the first term since freshman year that he hadn't been. And he knew a lot of physics majors; science and engineering had a lot of overlap in course requirements. So it was perfectly reasonable for him to be here.

Which, of course, was total bullshit, because he hadn't been in the physics building since finals last spring, and it wasn't like he was good friends with any of the physics majors he knew. He talked to them when they ran into one another on campus--and okay, he'd slept with a couple of them--but even the few that he occasionally spent time with weren't the kind of friends where he'd go hang out to wait for them to get out of class.

On the other hand, he was getting desperate.

He'd taken Rhodey's advice and tried to get Loki to talk to him. He'd sent texts, which had gotten no response. He'd sent emails, which for all he knew, Loki had filtered right into his spam folder. They didn't get answered, anyway, which was the important part.

To nobody's surprise, Loki hadn't answered his phone when Tony called, either, and when he'd borrowed Rhodey's phone to try, Loki hadn't even let him finish saying "Don't hang up," before hanging up.

He'd started trying to get through to Loki on Wednesday night. It was Tuesday. If a full week of trying didn't get him even a conversation with Loki, it would be time to give up. This was his last chance, which was why he'd decided that he needed to show up in person.

Loki should be getting out of his afternoon class any minute now, and then Tony would be able to talk to him. To apologize.

He'd spent a lot of time rehearsing his apology. He wasn't sure Loki was going to believe it, let alone accept it, but at least Tony would be able to say that he tried. That was, if Loki would listen to him long enough to hear the thing.
And if Tony stuck around long enough to find him. He felt kind of stupid and obvious standing near the entryway, even though he knew that if anyone noticed him at all, they wouldn't have thought anything about it. There was a guy leaning against the opposite wall looking at his phone, and a couple of girls sitting on the floor comparing what looked like exam papers. He wouldn't stand out, no matter how much he felt like he did.

Then he saw a familiar face. "Bruce!" he called, waving. He and Bruce Banner had two semesters of organic chemistry together, and the second semester, they'd been lab partners. They'd even hung out a few times. He'd liked Bruce--they just didn't have a ton in common outside of being, basically, nerds. And then this semester, Tony had spent a lot of time focused on Loki, and apart from short conversations when they'd run into one another on campus, he hadn't really thought much about Bruce.

Bruce blinked at him for a minute, and then said something to the girl he was walking with before turning away from her and heading over to Tony. "Hey, Tony. I thought you were done with physics?"

"Probably," he said, "though you never know what I'll feel like signing up for. No, I'm just here waiting for somebody. How've you been, though? I haven't seen you all semester."

"Pretty good. Busy. I'm taking an overload this term, so between that and working, I haven't had a lot of time to keep up with anybody, sorry."

"Oh, yeah? What classes are you taking?" Tony half-listened to Bruce's answer, asking a few more uninspired questions just to keep him talking. He felt kind of bad about it--he did like the guy--but today, he just wanted Bruce to talk so that it didn't look strange that Tony was hanging around near the main entrance to the building, watching people go by.

He was about to give up, though--figuring he'd pretend he saw the person he was going to meet, and suggest that he and Bruce get together another time (he wouldn't actually mind that; maybe Rhodey would want to hang out, too)--when he saw a familiar profile in the middle of a small group of people, and lost track of his train of thought.

It had been over a week since he'd seen Loki. Tony didn't know what he was expecting, but not the sudden, very short-lived burst of happiness. Fuck, he missed Loki. He knew that, that was why he was here in the first place, but he hadn't realized just how much until just now.

"I have to go," he blurted out, interrupting Bruce mid-sentence, and started toward Loki. There were a couple of other guys with him--a black guy Tony didn't know, and a good-looking, fair-haired guy who looked kind of familiar until he turned so that Tony could see him straight on, and then looked really familiar.

Oh, great, of course he'd have to do this in front of somebody Tony had gone home with one night last year. What was his name? Fandral, that was it, and maybe Tony shouldn't make fun of Pepper's boyfriend's name any more.

Oh, even more great: Loki's hand was resting on the small of Fandral's back, and as Tony came closer, Loki leaned in to murmur something that made Fandral chuckle and punch him lightly on the arm.

Shit. Maybe there wasn't any point to doing this, because Loki was glad to be rid of Tony, hadn't waited more than a couple of days before moving on. Maybe Loki had been telling the truth when he said Tony hadn't meant anything.
But he was already here, looking like a dumbass, so he might as well find out for sure. Loki had to have seen him, but just in case he was too wrapped up in Fandral, Tony called, "Loki?"

Loki’s attention didn't even flicker in his direction until the third guy elbowed him in the ribs and, when Loki turned to see what he wanted, nodded in Tony's direction.

Then Loki looked at him, though he still didn't say anything.

It should have made him feel better to see that Loki didn't look any happier than Tony, but it didn't. It made him feel like shit. Loki looked exhausted--well, that could be that it was the last few weeks of the semester, but Tony didn't think so. He was paler than usual, his cheekbones looking sharper, dark bruise-like smudges under his eyes--and that was Tony's fault. All because Tony hadn't trusted the things he knew about Loki, or at least about Loki and him, no matter what Pepper said.

All because Tony was too much of a fucking asshole to just admit that he had, despite his best efforts, fallen hard for the jackass he'd met in an elevator one Sunday morning.

"What do you want?" Even his voice sounded tired.

Tony took a deep breath, and then said, quickly, "I know I was a complete asshole, but can we just talk about it? Please?" Fuck, he sounded pathetic. He sounded like he was begging for Loki to forgive him.

And really, Tony realized, if that was what it took, he'd do it. He wouldn't even mind, if it worked.

But Loki just stared at him for another few painfully long seconds, and then said, "No," before stalking off in the direction of the exit.

****

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for such a short chapter this time! I placed my chapter breaks with an eye to the flow of the story, not to any kind of consistent length, but I acknowledge this is probably a bit short. :)

**Next week:** Fake it 'til you make it, Stark.
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

Fake it 'til you make it, Stark.

Chapter Notes

Look, I swear, the misery won't last forever. Honest. I promise. Would I lie to you?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

The third time Tony got a text alert within as many minutes, he finally picked up his phone from the coffee table. "Go away," he muttered as he reached for it. "Let me die in peace."

Not that he was lucky enough to have anything fatal. He hadn't even managed to give himself alcohol poisoning last night, just to get drunk enough that he'd wound up with a killer hangover. He had not missed those over the past several weeks.

There were a few messages from earlier; he'd expected some of them, like Rhodey and Pepper asking him why he'd canceled their weekly lunch, but to his surprise, there was also one from Bruce about the guest speaker the chemistry department had scheduled for tomorrow afternoon. And then, starting about five minutes ago, three--no, four; another message came in while he was scrolling--messages from Pepper:

Are you okay? I'm coming over.

I'm right outside your building. Buzz me in, okay?

Come on, Tony. I already checked the lab, and your car's here.

I still know the door code. Let me in, or I'll come in and bang on your door until you open it.

And then one more message: At least tell me to go away so I know you're alive in there?

Tony sighed and texted back: Give me a second. The room spun nauseatingly when he got to his feet, but it righted itself quickly, leaving him with just the general baseline of queasiness he'd almost gotten used to since waking up a couple of hours ago. Oh, and the headache, of course, but he figured he probably deserved being kicked in the head by someone wearing cast-iron boots.

He made it over to the door and buzzed Pepper into the building, then looked down at himself. Pants. He needed pants before she got there. He was still wearing yesterday's clothes, and he'd passed out on the couch instead of going to bed, so there was a good chance that... yep, there were his pants, halfway under the couch. He extracted the jeans (ugh, bending over was not doing his headache any favors) and pulled them on, buttoning them just as Pepper knocked.
"On my way," he called, tugging up his zipper as he went to the door and hoping he didn't look quite as much like warmed-over roadkill as he felt.

From Pepper's face when he opened the door, that hope was completely unfounded. "Are you okay?" she asked, putting her bag down and then giving Tony a very concerned-looking once-over.

He shrugged. "It's just a hangover."

"No shit, it's a hangover," she said. "That's not what I asked. Are you okay?"

Another shrug, because what the hell was he supposed to say? "I'll live." If pressed, he'd have to admit that he would probably be fine, eventually. He wasn't going to wallow in self-pity forever, but it hadn't even been twenty-four hours since he'd had to acknowledge that yeah, he and Loki were permanently done. He still had a few hours of prime wallowing time owed to him.

He went back over to the couch; Pepper followed him and sat down—not in her usual chair, but next to him on the couch.

"I'd offer to open the blinds," Tony said, "but more light isn't exactly going to make me any prettier."

She shook her head. "How bad is the headache?"

"On a scale of one to ten? Maybe a seven."

"After painkillers?"

"I haven't bothered."

"Ugh, Tony, seriously, at least try to take care of yourself?" She got up and went to the kitchen, pulling a bottle of water out of the refrigerator before looking through her purse. When she returned, she pushed a couple of blue capsules at him and held out the water. "Advil. And I'm sure you're not drinking enough water, so drink the whole bottle."

He wanted to shove the pills and the water away, but then again, he hadn't been drinking enough water and the cottonmouth was getting almost unbearable. And if he was going to take the water, he might as well take the pills, too. He popped the capsules into his mouth, then followed them with a gulp of water, cold enough that chugging down half the bottle left his sinuses throbbing.

"Thanks, Pep," he said, "but what are you doing here anyway?"

"You didn't show up to lunch."

"I texted you guys to let you know I wasn't going to be there," Tony protested. It had been the first thing he'd done when he woke up around ten. "It's not like it's the first time any of us have skipped out on our lunch date."

"Tony, the last time you missed was when you were packing up to go to that robotics conference," she said. "The time before that, you had the flu and a fever of a hundred and four. It's natural that we'd worry."

Tony leaned back against the couch and closed his eyes. "I don't see Rhodey threatening to beat down my door."

"Rhodey's got some cadet meeting this afternoon. I told him I'd check on you." She sighed.
"Besides, he said he knew what was wrong, and there wasn't much he could do about it if you weren't going to listen to him."

Tony laughed. He meant it to sound bitter and scornful, but really, he thought it mostly sounded like he was trying not to cry. (Which was ridiculous. He might be completely miserable, but he wasn't that pathetic. Not now that he'd sobered up, anyway.) "I did listen to him. It didn't fucking help." He massaged his temples, hoping to ease his headache a little. "But I'm fine. Just too hungover to deal with lunch."

She put her hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly. "Tony, I'm not dumb. I know you're upset about Loki--"

"I'm hungover and in a shitty mood. I don't want to talk about Loki when I feel like this. Actually, I don't ever want to talk about him again." He'd tell Rhody how badly his advice had failed—not that it was Rhodey's fault; he just deserved to know how things had turned out. But that was it. As far as Tony was concerned, he was done talking about Loki Laufeyson for the rest of his life.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But isn't it better that you guys broke up now, instead of after you had a chance to get really emotionally involved? Before he had a chance to hurt you the way he's hurt other people?"

Tony jerked away from her, getting to his feet and glaring down at her. "I said I didn't want to talk about him. And I definitely don't want to hear you talking about him."

Pepper sighed, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt and not meeting Tony's eyes. "You were going to get hurt anyway. At least this way you can make a clean break. It's going to hurt for a while, but then you can--"

"No," Tony said, struggling not to yell. "Stop it, Pepper. You don't get to tell me that I'm better off without him. First of all, it's not even true. Secondly, you're worried about me getting my heart broken?"

He shoved his hands into his pockets and took a few deep breaths. "You really do not want to get into a discussion of people who've broken my heart and left me devastated, because as it stands, you're the only name on that list."

"Are you going to keep throwing that in my face forever?"

"I'm not throwing it in your face now. I'm not angry at you, Pepper. I'm not even sad we broke up, not any more. What we had was good, for the first couple of months, anyway, but then it seriously wasn't. We're a lot better off as friends."

He made himself smile at her, even though smiling was the last thing he wanted to do at the moment. "But if you want to start talking about people I love who hurt me, you need to take a long hard look in the mirror before you ever start bringing Loki into it."

Now Pepper didn't look uncomfortable any more; she looked pissed, folding her arms across her chest as she scowled up at him. "How dare you compare me to that creep, Tony? I broke up with you because we were both--"

"No," Tony said. "Stop telling me you did it for my own good. I get to decide what's good for me. I know you think I'm kind of shitty at it, and maybe I am. Listening to you turned out to be the worst mistake I ever made, though, so I'm not doing it anymore."

He sat down on the arm of the chair; easier to look Pepper in the eye from that angle. "You broke
"up with me because it was the best thing for you, which is what you should have done. It turned out to be good for me, too, but that doesn't matter."

"Hey, I'm not the one who forgets to eat and sleep and shower because I'm working. There's a reason why I don't think you're good at taking care of yourself, and--"

"All nagging me about it ever did was make me think I was incompetent at being an actual person," Tony snapped back. "It didn't make me any better at taking care of myself. You know what did? He stopped himself; he really didn't want to get into that. It wasn't the point, and it didn't matter anyway, because even though Loki showing up at the lab with food had reminded him to eat, it was still letting somebody else decide what he needed.

And fuck that. He was done with that. "It didn't help, Pepper. All it did was leave me thinking that you knew better than I did what would make me happy, and we were both wrong about that. I know what was making me happy, and I fucked it up."

She rolled her eyes. "So it's my fault you and Loki broke up?"

"No! It's my fault. I was an asshole to him, and that's on me, not you. But that's the thing. Overall? I was the asshole there. Not just the other night, but for a long time before that. So if you want to go and tell somebody that it's better that we broke up, that he was only going to get his heart broken, I can give you Loki's number. He's the one who deserves that speech, not me."

"I doubt that," Pepper said. Then she sighed. "And you're right. I broke up with you because dating you was making me miserable. It looked like it was making you miserable too, but that wasn't the reason."

He nodded—carefully, to try to minimize the headache. "It was totally the right thing to do, I swear. But at the time, it felt like you'd pulled the ground out from under me. I'm good now, though. Being your friend is working a lot better than being your boyfriend did."

"Maybe in a few months you'll start feeling like that about Loki," she suggested. "Not necessarily about being his friend, but like breaking up with him was the right thing to do."

"I doubt it."

"You probably doubted it two weeks after we broke up, too."

"It was different." At Pepper's skeptical look, he went on, "I know, that sounds dumb, but even when I was insisting to myself that you and I were definitely going to get back together, I would think things like, 'Sure, we had a lot of problems, but--' or 'I know things have been kind of rough, but--' And that just wasn't the case with him. We were good. We could have been really good, except I kept trying not to get involved with him because obviously, you were right about him even if I wasn't seeing any of the stuff you warned me about."

He sighed. "We could have been great, except I wouldn't even tell him how I felt about him."

"How do you feel about him, then?"

"How do you think?" He shrugged. "It doesn't matter, though, because he can't stand the sight of me now, and since I accused him of basically being a creepy abusive boyfriend, I don't even blame him. I wouldn't want to date me, either."

Now she got up from the couch, going over to him and putting her arms around him, hugging him close. "I'm sorry, Tony. I shouldn't have interfered—but also, I'm sorry you're so unhappy."
"Thanks." Tony closed his eyes for a moment, wishing the hug felt more comforting. "I'm not mad at you; I'm mad at myself. But right this minute, looking at you just reminds me of how stupid I was. So can you just let me wallow for a while? I promise I'll show up to lunch next week."

Pepper let go of him and straightened up, wiping her eyes quickly. "Yeah. Try not to be too hard on yourself, okay?"

"I make no promises," he said, "but I'll try."

He let her out, then looked around the apartment. "Okay, asshole," he said out loud. "You just said you weren't going to let other people tell you what's good for you. Pretty sure the best way to get them to shut up about that is to get a fucking grip."

Anyway, he could only wallow for so long, and he and Loki were going to be broken up forever. Maybe it was just that the ibuprofen Pepper had given him were starting to kick in, but he could see Operation Pretend You're Over Loki taking shape in his mind, and step one of that was to start trying to convincingly fake that his life wasn't any more of a mess without Loki in it.

That'd probably be easier if his apartment—which hadn't had anyone else in it, except Pepper just now, for a week--didn't look and smell like there'd been a small but extremely booze-soaked party in it.

It was a place to start, anyway.

****

The first forty-eight hours of "fake it til you make it" had gone pretty well, in Tony's opinion. He'd made it to all his classes--not that he'd skipped all that many in the previous week or so, but still, he hadn't skipped any since Wednesday. He'd even gone to that chemistry lecture, much to Bruce's surprise; he'd clearly assumed Tony's "yeah, text me with the information" on Tuesday had been a brush-off.

At the time, it had totally been a brush-off, but once he'd looked at the information on the department website, it had sounded interesting, and Tony was free, so why not? And it had been interesting; not stuff he was likely to have time for at the moment, but he'd made a mental note of the name of the speaker and which university he was from, just in case he ever wanted to look into the topic further. That was a lot more engaged than Tony had been with anything but his personal projects in a while. (Twelve days, to be more precise.)

And now here he was, at two on a Friday afternoon, sitting in the student center with a grilled-cheese sandwich and the notes for his stupid final paper in his stupid literature class, just like a functional human being. He'd finish the paper this afternoon, and then maybe tonight he'd put in a few hours in the lab. Probably not an all-nighter, but if he wrapped up the paper quickly enough, he could get a good four or five hours in before it got too late.

It was a good thing noise didn't interfere with Tony's ability to concentrate, though, since the student center was unusually full for a Friday afternoon, even right before finals. From the buses in the parking lot, there was some kind of event for high school kids going on. They must have been on a break, because the entire building seemed to be overrun with them.

He was starting to regret not having just bought his paper off the internet, but that would be like admitting that he'd been defeated by stupid poetry, and he wasn't about to do that. Anyway, he'd been doing fine in the class—it wasn't for English majors, just one of the basic general classes, and the fact that he knew what all the words meant and could string coherent sentences together
counted for a lot. Also, he'd been lucky enough to get an instructor who seemed to find his essays on why a particular poem was ridiculous bullshit entertaining.

But he was scribbling a few notes in the margins of his textbook (ugh, and who made people buy a giant brick of a paperback poetry anthology, like it was still the twentieth century? E-books existed, damn it) when a shadow fell across the table.

He didn't look up, even when the guy said, "Hey, is someone using this chair? There's only one open table, and most of the chairs are gone."

"Sure, fine, take it," Tony said, waving impatiently at the chair.

The shadow didn't move away, though. "Tony? How's it going?"

Tony looked up (and up, and up--he'd forgotten how massive the guy was) right into the face of... what's-his-name. Steve. (Steve, of the quiet, manly tears, and shit, it hurt even to remember laughing with Loki about that.) "Steve," he said, hesitantly. He really wasn't up for any weird emotional drama.

But Steve was grinning at him in a perfectly friendly manner, so Tony figured everything was fine. "I'm good," Tony went on. "How about you?"

"Great," he said. "I mean, end of the semester's coming up, so busy, but--" He broke up as a second guy came up, slipping his arm around Steve's waist.

Not bad looking, Tony noticed almost reflexively. A little less massive than Steve, but still a big, solid guy, with long dark hair (points off for the stupid man-bun, though).

"If you can't get a chair, I think there might be another table over there, down past the bookstore," the guy said.

"Yeah, no, we're good, Buck," Steve said. "I just realized I knew Tony, and we were, uh, catching up a little."

"Okay. Want me to take the chair back?" He didn't wait for an answer, just picked up the chair and nodded to Tony. "Nice to meet you."

"Yeah, same here," Tony said. Steve was grinning goofily at the guy, but given that his answering smile was almost as goofy, it looked like things were going to work out okay there.

"Bucky and I went to high school together," Steve said, like Tony had asked.

"Good for you?"

"Anyway," Steve said, "I know things got weird between us, and I wanted to apologize. I was just--" He shrugged, his gaze drifting off in Bucky's direction.

Oh, for fuck's sake, Tony really didn't give a shit about Steve and his high-school boyfriend. He wouldn't have cared much on a good day, and this was not a good day. "Don't worry about it," Tony said. And then, because he couldn't make himself want to be a nice person today, he added, "I'd forgotten all about that night until I saw you just now, so it really didn't hurt anything."

Even if they both agreed that their hookup had been a mistake, that had to sting the ego at least a little bit. "Oh," Steve said. "Okay, then. Well, I'll let you get back to--" he waved at Tony's books. "Bucky's waiting, anyway."
He probably looked pretty calm, Tony told himself. He'd just looked back at his book and started making more notes. Or, well, digging his pen into the margin of the book, ripping through the tissue-thin paper they printed the anthology on so that it didn't weigh twenty pounds.

Ah, fuck it, he deserved a break from this crap. Tony pulled out his phone, scrolling through various notifications and his Twitter feed. Hey, Rhodey had remembered he had Twitter, maybe... oh. Pictures of Rhodey with Carol. Which was great. It was really great, and Tony hoped they were happy, because Rhodey deserved a fantastic girlfriend who adored him. And Tony was looking forward to getting to know her, just not now.

Fine. Fuck it. He'd go to the library. He wasn't likely to waste time drinking or moping in the library; his phone barely got any bars in the downstairs study area (where you were also allowed to have food and drinks, so he could grab a coffee on his way out of the student center); and there were plenty of plugs for his laptop when he got to the point of actually writing the paper. It was perfect.

And for a few minutes, it really did seem like the plan was going well. The line at the coffee shop downstairs in the student center was pretty short--the teenagers must have been called back into whatever competition they were here for--so Tony was able to get his drink and go within a couple of minutes. The girl making drinks had been in one of his classes last year, and he must have made a good impression, because she even gave him an extra shot of espresso in his coffee, and a phone number scribbled on the cup.

Okay, then. He still had it. His inability to convince Loki to give him another chance was a Loki problem, or a "he'd been an asshole" problem, not a "you've suddenly become unattractive" problem. Good to know. It wasn't knowledge he really wanted to make use of right now, granted, but it was still good.

It was a nice day out, bright and sunny, and given that Tony wasn't even hungover, he was able to enjoy it. Sunlight was good for you, wasn't it? In moderate amounts, anyway. Vitamin D and all that. Good for mild depression--he remembered Rhodey telling him that after he'd broken up with Pepper. So, fine. He'd walk over to the engineering complex in the sunshine, soaking up nature's antidepressant. He was doing a *fine* job of acting like a normal, not-at-all-devastated person.

Fuck, there were a hell of a lot of people with the same idea--walking around campus, lounging on grassy areas with a book, generally just enjoying the fresh air. Which would be fine, except they seemed to all be doing it two by two, and *fuck*, could he just not be surrounded by so damn many couples? Rationally, he knew that people weren't going around being happy *at* him, but he didn't feel like being rational right now.

Especially not when one of the couples walking toward him was familiar. Well, half of it was. Tony had only met the guy once, but it wasn't like Thor was easy to forget. The other half was some girl Tony hadn't ever seen before, holding Thor's hand while he pointed out such fascinating campus landmarks as "the administration building" and "the stoned art students playing frisbee."

Which was about the time that Rational Tony decided to quit for the day, and Irrational Tony took over, silently fuming about how fucking unfair it was that some people broke up with Loki Laufeyson and were *totally fine about it* (never mind that Thor and Loki's whole deal had been weird from beginning to end) until Tony realized that if he did go to the lab, anything he did was likely to have to be redone when he calmed down.

Fine, he decided. He'd finish his paper later that weekend. Rhodey kept trying to convince him he needed more exercise. He'd see if Rhodey wanted to go to the campus gym and play racquetball. It wasn't that bad as sports went, and being able to smash something against a wall repeatedly had a
certain appeal right about now.

****

Chapter End Notes

I love Steve (and Steve/Tony), I swear! (My other MCU fic will back this up.) He's just convenient for this fic.

FYI: I'm going to apologize in advance for this--while I'll be answering comments, they're probably all going to be along the lines of "thanks." I'm in the middle of some pretty incapacitating health issues at the moment.

One request: I really don't like misogynistic insults like "bitch." They showed up the last time Pepper appeared, and I didn't say anything, but I realized when I got to this chapter that I was kind of dreading seeing them appear again. So in the interest of not making a poor author cringe at reading her comments, could you guys maybe not this time? Call her names all you want, just not ones that are based in her gender. Thanks.

<3

Next week: Tony starts getting back to normal. For some value of "normal," anyway.
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Summary

Tony starts getting back to normal. For some value of "normal," anyway.

Chapter Notes

Okay, you were all SO sweet in the comments. I'm doing a little better (I'm not "better"--I'm chronically ill; it's not going away--but the string of "very bad days" I've had for the last few weeks has eased up a bit), and I appreciate all the well-wishes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

Tony had been here for about ninety seconds, and he was already regretting it.

He'd never been to this club before, because no good bars were located in a Ramada. But when he'd decided that he wanted to get back to having a normal social life and had called Christie--better known in his mind as Coffee Shop Girl--to see if she wanted to get together, she'd suggested this place, and Tony had gone along with it. So here he was, on a Friday night, in a crappy club, waiting for a girl whose name he could barely remember.

In other words, back to business as usual. It was about time.

The place was pretty bland--a bar, a DJ, a big dance floor, not much else--and while Tony hated the slickly-packaged Top-40 pop music, you could, at least, dance to it. He started scanning the crowd, looking for Christie; he was a little early, but she might be, too.

"Tony Stark." The voice in his ear was familiar, but not Christie's perky giggle. He turned his head to see who it was.

"Amora." Reflexively, he went back to checking out the crowd, this time looking for someone less cute, blonde, and female.

"He's not here," she said, folding her arms across her chest.

"I don't know who you're talking about," he bluffed.

She snorted. "Right. He's not here, and if he were here, I don't know if I'd let you get within ten feet of him."

Tony sighed. If he were Amora, he probably wouldn't let himself get within ten feet of Loki, either.

"How is he?"

"He's great. Never better. Glad to have finally ditched the dead weight from his life." Amora held her beer bottle up to him in a mock toast. "Cheers, dead weight." She took a drink. "Anyway, that's
what he tells me. I don't know if you've noticed, but he's more the 'let everything fester until it
explodes' type than the 'talk about his feelings' kind."

That called up some really gross images in Tony's mind, but he shrugged it off. "I'm here to meet
somebody tonight," he said, "but give me your number; we should really meet up sometime." And
why not? He thought. He could probably get along with Amora. He could get along with just
about anyone sufficiently attractive, at least for a while.

"Well, aren't you just moving on without a moment's hesitation," she said, and if he'd thought she'd
been thawing slightly toward him over the past minute or so, he'd obviously been thinking wrong.
"And no, we shouldn't 'meet up sometime.' Loki knows where I live."

Tony was about to argue that Loki wouldn't care, but she went on. "And I wouldn't do that to him
anyway."

His eyes narrowed. "Do what to him?"

She rolled her eyes. "Inflict you on him, even once removed," she said quickly, but it sounded
wrong. "But go, meet your 'somebody.' I hope you're happy." The way she said it, it didn't sound
like a friendly wish.

Amora turned away, moving off into the crowd. Tony scanned the room again, looking for
Christie (would he even recognize her outside of class or the coffee place? He wasn't so sure, since
his mental image of her involved a hairnet and a baseball cap with a cup of coffee embroidered on
it), when his phone buzzed in his pocket, and he reached for it.

There was a text from Christie: My car won't start. Can u come get me?

He could. He definitely could. It would be the nice thing to do.

He didn't want to be nice. He wanted--okay, he knew what he wanted. But of the things he could
have, what he really wanted to do was to go home. He didn't feel like working tonight--his lit paper
was going to have to wait some more--but he also didn't want to be around any of the people who
wanted to be around him.

I'm not feeling so great, he replied. Let's just do this some other time?

U could come hang out instead?

Sorry, think it might be food poisoning. Another time.

After all, "Some time after the end of the universe as we know it" was another time. And it wasn't
Christie's fault. It was his; he never should have suggested a date. He wasn't that
over everything.

He'd try again in a few weeks, maybe after winter break. Maybe he'd go out with friends--sure, he'd
be a fifth wheel if Pepper and Rhodey brought their dates along, but he could always ask someone
else to come too. Bruce, maybe. Not as a date, because Tony wasn't going to feel like dating
anyone any time soon, but just so Tony didn't stick out like a sore thumb. It'd probably do the guy
good to actually go out and have fun for once. Tony didn't know what he did in his spare time, but
he was sure Bruce didn't get out much.

Right now, he was going to go home and try not to picture the way Loki's lip would have curled
into a sneer when he called Tony "dead weight."

Good luck with that, said a voice in his head that sounded a lot like Amora.
By Wednesday, Tony felt like he had this "acting normal" thing down pat. He went to class; he spent reasonable (by his standards) hours in the robotics lab; he'd gone to a movie with Rhodey on Monday night; he'd stayed mostly sober (a beer on Sunday night and another when he and Rhodey grabbed dinner after the movie was basically nothing)--all behavior guaranteed to make it look to Pepper and Rhodey like Tony was doing just great. A little sad, yeah, but great.

And, to be honest, with exams looming, being able to convince himself that he was doing pretty great wasn't a bad strategy, either.

So while he still felt terrible and still didn't sleep anything like enough (again, even by his standards), he was pretty confident when he slid into the chair across from Pepper in the student center that she and Rhodey were both going to believe that he was fine.

That confidence lasted until Pepper saw him and the smile froze on her face.

"What?" Tony asked, trying to sound casual. "I can't have spinach in my teeth; I don't remember the last time I ate spinach, but I think it was before my baby teeth fell out."

She shook her head sadly. "Nothing. It's good."

Rhodey shrugged. "If you want to look normal, you might want to stop smiling like that."

"It's just a smile."

"No, it's creepy-fake. It's not even your usual fake smile, the one you use when you're trying to get out of trouble or impress people you hate. It just looks..." He trailed off.

"Like a really terrible clown," Pepper chimed in. "One who flunked out of clown college."

"Or a small-town politician at a fundraiser right after the town gossip found out he's a pervert," Rhodey suggested.

"With friends like these..." Tony muttered, but he toned down the smile anyway. It was making his face hurt.

"Much better," Rhodey pronounced, in between bites of his sandwich. "So, are we on to study tomorrow night?"

"You don't need to panic about fluid dynamics," Tony said. "You know more than anyone in the class besides me. Possibly more than the TA."

"I'm not panicking," he insisted. "I'm studying. Exams are next week, and not all of us are mega-geniuses."

"Okay, fine," Tony said. "My place, your place, or the library?"

"Yours," Rhodey said, just like there'd really been any question. "Too many roommates at my place, and it's not like we're going to need the library for anything. Your couch is more comfortable than a plastic chair. I'll even bring dinner."

"Deal. Around six?"

"Six-thirty. I have a meeting at five, and I'll have to stop and pick up takeout."
"Sure, that works." He looked at Pepper and concentrated on not smiling like a freak. "You're welcome to come." They hadn't had any classes in common since their first semester, when they'd met Pepper in their required public speaking class, but sometimes she came over and studied anyway.

She shook her head. "You guys have fun. I have an econ study group."

The rest of lunch went much the same way: nobody talked about anything much, but it was still comfortable, and nobody felt the need to ask Tony how he was doing or try to cheer him up. In other words, as well as could be expected.

Pepper finished her lunch and glanced at the time display on her phone. "I should get to class," she said, standing up. "Walk with me, Tony?"

Tony frowned. "Not really in the mood for a lecture," he warned her.

"No lecture," she promised. "I just want to talk to you."

"Go ahead," Rhodey said. "I should get going anyway."

He shrugged. "Okay, then." They ditched their trash, and then started walking toward the building where Pepper had her next class. "So what non-lecturey thing do you want to say?" he asked.

"So," she said after a pause, "Clint posted to a group chat from last semester. He's coming back to school, and apparently he's been practicing pretty hard lately. His coach thinks he might be able to salvage his career."

Tony had never really given a fuck about Loki's ex-boyfriend, and at this point, it was more like giving negative fucks about him. "Well, good for him."

"Anyway, I got to talking to him. You know, about him and Loki."

"Pepper," Tony said, feeling his shoulders tense up. He didn't want to hear any more bullshit about how lucky he was that he and Loki had broken up. Not from anyone, but especially not from Pepper. He thought he'd been pretty clear about that last week, but maybe not clear enough.

"Hear me out," she said quickly. "I don't want to rehash everything we said, but it turns out I might have been a little biased? And also," she said, with obvious reluctance, "a little wrong. Don't misunderstand me, I still think Loki's an ass. But I probably should have realized that someone who just got broken up with isn't exactly interested in painting an accurate picture of events. And Clint himself told me that as far as him pretty much having a breakdown goes, he was heading in that direction anyway, and the breakup with Loki was just the final straw."

Tony shrugged. "I don't know why you're telling me this."

"Because--I don't know. Because I'm sorry? Because I probably wouldn't have pushed you so hard to break up with Loki if I hadn't jumped to a lot of conclusions based on a few things Clint said when he was depressed and miserable?"

"I probably would have fucked things up with Loki anyway," Tony said, "so don't take this like I'm blaming you. I'm really not. But what good does any of this do me? We're still broken up. He still won't talk to me."

"I'm just sorry," she repeated. "And next time I'll mind my own business."
He sighed. "We're good. I promise. Apology accepted, and please, next time, mind your own business. I mean, if there ever is a next time, which isn't feeling all that likely at the moment. But it isn't your fault. I could have told you where to shove your opinion. I'm just so used to letting you and Rhodey push me into things for my own good--and don't get me wrong, they usually are good for me--that I didn't argue even when I knew you were wrong this time. That's on me."

She stopped walking, and when Tony stopped beside her, she flung her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. "I'm so sorry," she said, one last time.

"Me too."

"It's going to be okay. I promise."

"Yeah," Tony said, trying not to give her the fake smile she'd declared was so creepy. "Everything's going to be fine. It's just going to take some time, that's all."

He'd said that often enough that he was really starting to believe it.

****

"You want that last piece of pizza?" Tony held it out, just to demonstrate that he was totally willing to share.

Rhodey waved it way. "Ugh, no. If I eat that, I'm going to need a nap, and I could have done that at home."

"Suit yourself." He took a bite of the pizza; it was the first food that had actually tasted good in--well, in a while, he'd leave it at that.

"You about ready to start studying?"

He nodded, and then, once his mouth wasn't full, said, "Yeah. Go ahead and get your stuff out. I'm going to finish this." He grinned. "It's not like I need to study."

Rhodey snorted. "One of these days, that overconfidence is going to bite you in the ass, you know."

"Maybe. Not any time soon, though." He shrugged. "I'm just here to help you out when you get confused."

"Yeah, you're a fucking saint." Rhodey paused, looking at Tony for a few seconds before he spoke again. "You're looking better lately."

"I'm doing better lately," he admitted. "Not good, but better." He shrugged. "Guess it helps to know that there's no point hoping he'll change his mind. I'm not saying I'm over it, but... anyway, the semester's almost over. It'll be good to get away from this for a while."

"I thought you were staying here over break."

"That was the plan, but I might get away for a little while. I mean, I'm definitely not going home, but it's a big world. I have other options. And even if I'm going into the lab most days, it's different between semesters." Less chance of accidentally running into Loki, for one thing. Not that he'd done that, other than the accidentally-on-purpose meeting in the physics building, but Tony had seen him at a distance a few times and intentionally gone in the other direction.

"And when we come back, it'll all be different?"
"I'd settle for it all being back to normal."

"God help us all. I was going to say that I should start bringing Carol around, even if you are a living example of How Not to Be, but if you're going to go back to fucking your way through the student body...." Rhodey grinned at him. "Eh, just as long as you don't try to steal my girlfriend."

Tony gave him an exaggerated leer. "Maybe I'll try to steal Carol's boyfriend instead."

Rhodey whapped him on the arm with a spiral notebook. "Carol's boyfriend has much better taste than that, dumbass."

Tony pressed the back of his hand to his forehead in a melodramatic swoon. "You wound me," he said, laughing.

Actually laughing. Actually having a good time letting Rhodey give him shit.

Maybe he really was going to be okay, after all.

"Hey, Rhodey?" he said, once they'd both stopped laughing enough to breathe, at least. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"Not getting sick of me even when I do stupid shit."

This time, instead of smacking him with a notebook, Rhodey just punched him lightly on the shoulder. "You have done much dumber shit than this. We're good."

Tony finished his pizza, and then he and Rhodey started working through the old finals the professor had put up on the internet, and for the first time in a long time, everything felt normal.

****

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everybody for respecting my request last time to please *not* use gender-based insults when telling me how annoyed you are with Pepper. (That goes for this chapter, too.)

In other news, the final chapter is now in my editing rotation (I'm usually working on four chapters at a time, at different stages in the editing process, so this past week I worked on chapters 19-22). We're nearing the end!

**Next week:** Tony gets a surprise.
Chapter Twenty

Chapter Summary

Tony gets a surprise.

Chapter Notes

Most of you have been so patient while Tony angsted his way through the last few chapters. It's finally starting to pay off.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

Tony actually hadn't meant to spend all weekend in the robotics lab, not this time, but then he'd remembered that he needed to do his end-of-semester write-up and submit it to the professor who was supervising his independent study. So while he did make it home to sleep on Saturday night, he'd left again early Sunday morning and didn't come trudging back home until around six p.m., looking forward to crashing. Finals started on Wednesday, and then this entire shitshow of a semester would be over.

He stepped out of the elevator and turned toward his apartment, only to stop short in the middle of the hall.

There was someone sitting against his apartment door. Someone tall and lean, with long dark hair partly hiding his face.

Someone who could not possibly be Loki, because Tony had told him that he didn't fucking like it when people turned up outside his apartment like that.

And also because Loki didn't want anything to do with Tony any more, so it made absolutely no sense for him to be here.

Loki--because of course, no matter how little sense it made, it was Loki--looked up at the sound of Tony's footsteps, and got to his feet. "You really need less trusting neighbors," he said. "Anybody could have gotten in."

"Anybody did."

"Would you have answered if I called you?" Loki asked, and Tony had to swallow hard and blink away the memories of that first Sunday afternoon when Loki had turned up uninvited.

Tony considered that for a moment. He wanted to say "Of course I would," but suddenly, he wasn't quite sure. His pride might not have let him. In fact, he was pretty sure it wouldn't have. Loki had already made it clear that he was done with Tony, and Tony wouldn't have opened himself up to another round of rejection.
"Maybe not," he admitted. On the other hand, that didn't give Loki the right to just barge in here.

On the third hand, wherever that one came from, Tony was so damn glad to see him that he was willing to let it go. And anyway, he should have given Loki the door code ages ago. And probably a key. He and Pepper had only been dating for a few weeks before he'd done that.

"I went by the lab earlier, around noon, but you weren't there."

Tony thought back. "Coffee run," he said. He was standing in front of his door now, close enough that if he reached out, he'd be able to touch Loki. He curled his hands into loose fists, shoving them into his jacket pockets, to be sure he'd resist the temptation. Loki wasn't his to touch any more.

"And with the end of the semester coming up, I didn't want to wait around just hoping to run into you, so I figured it was worth the risk of pissing you off."

God, Loki looked worse than he had the day Tony had tried to talk to him in the physics building: tired and even paler than normal and without a single glint of humor in his expression. It was probably mostly end-of-semester blues, but that didn't stop Tony from feeling guilty about it.

Tony sighed. "I thought you didn't want to talk to me again."

"I didn't." Then Loki shook his head. "Well, maybe I did, but I wasn't going to let you know that. I was too busy being angry at you."

"So what changed?"

Loki scowled. "Pepper came to talk to me."

"She what?" Okay, how exactly was that Pepper minding her own business where his personal life was concerned? What the hell did she think she was doing, anyway? Tony's fingers closed around his phone. He should call her right now and ask her--

No. No, he shouldn't, because Loki was right here and Tony wasn't going to risk getting distracted by being annoyed with Pepper. Loki could get tired of waiting around and leave again, and this time Tony was sure he wouldn't be back.

"I was as shocked as you are." Loki shrugged. "Would you mind if we had this conversation somewhere other than the hallway? I feel stupid enough just coming here, without the possibility of your neighbors coming out to watch the show."

"I guess it wouldn't hurt," Tony said, unlocking the door. "If you want to talk, then yeah, sure, we can do it inside."

It was weird, letting Loki into his apartment like this. Most of Tony's memories of opening his door with Loki standing behind him involved Loki's breath warm on his neck, Loki's hands on his hips; the two of them pulling each other through the doorway, desperate to get inside the apartment and into Tony's bedroom.

This, on the other hand, was polite and awkward; Loki stood aside until Tony got the door open, and then followed him in.

"Make yourself comfortable," Tony said, setting his stuff down and turning on the lights.

Loki went over and sat in the chair; apparently, that was the official chair of "I have broken up with you and don't want to get too close to you any more." Tony couldn't even pretend that didn't sting--
even though Loki had no way of knowing that Pepper had done the same thing--but he sat down on the couch, angling himself so that he could look directly at Loki, even though he suspected this might be easier if he didn't.

"So," Tony said, after thirty seconds or so had passed without Loki opening the conversation. "Pepper, who you can't stand, went to talk to you, and you... what? Listened to her?"

"Like I said, I was as surprised as you are. She came to see me at work and asked me if I'd meet her to talk. I was curious, so we had coffee." Loki gave him a faint smile. "It was a lot less enjoyable than having coffee with you and listening to you whine about Steve."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Steve has found someone who doesn't mind the clingy," he said. "I wanted to punch him in his perfect teeth."

"That seems a little violent," Loki said, "but he was kind of annoying, so fair enough."

"It wasn't that long after you wouldn't talk to me," Tony confessed. "My tolerance for happy couples was at an all-time low."

"Ah." There was another long silence, and then Loki went on. "To get back to the subject, Pepper convinced me that your asinine behavior had a lot to do with her working hard to convince you that I was a domestic-violence PSA waiting to happen, and that I should at least listen to what you had to say for yourself."

"It wasn't Pepper's fault," Tony said automatically. "She didn't make me do anything."

"No, she didn't," Loki agreed. "Which is why the only thing I'm here to do is listen. This isn't me begging you to take me back, because that's never going to happen."

"Then why are you even--" Tony began, but Loki interrupted him.

"But maybe, depending on what you have to say for yourself, I'd be willing to try again." He looked straight at Tony, not smiling. "Maybe."

"I don't have all that much to say," Tony admitted. "I mean, 'I'm sorry,' obviously, and also 'I was an asshole,' and... fuck. I don't know. Look, there's this thing Pepper and I fell into back when we were dating, where she'd patiently point out why I was making a terrible decision, and--" He ran a hand through his hair.

"And I started out not listening at all," he went on, "but sometimes I really was making a terrible decision, like the times when I stay in the lab all weekend and live on black coffee, bourbon, and Kit Kat bars from the vending machine. It never feels like a bad decision at the time, but yeah, in hindsight, it's always a mistake. But then it's Friday again and I completely forget what a terrible idea it is."

Loki nodded slightly. "I've known you long enough to be well aware of that particular terrible decision."

"So I started--okay, not listening to her. Not in the sense where I usually did what she thought I should. But in the sense where I thought that Pepper, and sometimes Rhodey, had a better idea of what the right thing for me to do was than I ever did." He shrugged, not wanting to meet Loki's eyes. "And you don't have to say anything. I know it's kind of pathetic."

"I wasn't going to call you pathetic." Tony didn't say anything, and after several seconds, Loki went on. "I was going to call you a dumbass, not pathetic."
That was believable. "I'll also accept 'dumbass' as a description," Tony said. "The thing is, I've always made some pretty stupid decisions, usually because I either got really focused on the thing I wanted to be doing and didn't consider anything else, or because I was pissed off at someone--usually my dad, but not always. So having someone who I actually did trust to give a damn about me telling me that I was making terrible decisions? Seemed pretty plausible."

It didn't make him seem like any less of a dumbass, though. Even he could see that. "And for a while I convinced myself that this was actually the mature thing to do. Outsourcing my decision-making the same way I pay somebody to clean my apartment. I made the big decisions, like what projects I was working on and what I was going to study, and other people could make the rest, like whether I was sleeping enough."

"And who you get to date?" At least Loki didn't look angry. Confused, maybe--probably by how much of a fuckup Tony managed to be.

The guy who accidentally slept with his stepbrother, and then intentionally slept with his stepbrother, thought Tony was a fuckup. That was--well, that was something, anyway. Just not something that said anything very good about Tony.

"No!" Tony protested, but then he sighed. "I mean, my answer should have been no. I should have listened to what Pepper had to say, and agreed that hey, if you show any signs of being that kind of asshole, I'd kick you to the curb. But since you never did, I wouldn't have had to, and we could be... I don't know, happy? Were we happy?"

"Occasionally." Was that a smile? Just a hint of one, maybe? Maybe Loki was finding him humorously pathetic instead of just pathetic. That had to be some kind of improvement, right?

"Occasionally happy is better than completely miserable, though," Tony said, and Loki nodded.

"It was."

"But I blew it."

"But we blew it," Loki agreed. It took a second for the change to register with Tony.

"We?"

"It's within the realm of possibility that I overreact where Pepper is involved," Loki said. "Just slightly."

"There are probably some people who might say that, yeah," Tony agreed. "Look. I'm not trying to turn this into 'but you were also wrong, so I'm off the hook.' I fucked up. Badly. I usually don't fuck up the same way twice, but I can't guarantee that I won't find a new and different way to make you want to kill me."

"I'm willing to bet that you will, in fact," Loki said. "You can be really damn annoying when you try."

"So I guess there's not much reason to keep going with this conversation, huh?" Tony sighed. "I miss you. A lot. But there's not a lot I have to offer, and most of it is something you can get elsewhere. A guy who looks like you ought to have no trouble finding mediocre sex."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Tony, you can't take anything I say when I'm pissed off seriously, or this will never work. And no, I'm not going to sit here reassuring you that you're good in bed. That's a job for your boyfriend, and I'm not your boyfriend."
"No," Tony said quietly. "I know that."

"At least, I'm not your boyfriend right now." Loki pushed his hair out of his eyes. "I need to think about this, okay? I believe that you're sorry. I believe that you're going to try to do better. I'm not sure if I can do better, if it comes down to that, and I probably need to turn the Pepper hate down to a nine out of ten, at least, if I'm going to be with you. And that's after I decide whether 'trying to do better' is going to be enough."

Tony frowned. "So, what? I'm supposed to just hang around forever waiting to find out if I've passed some kind of arbitrary test and you've decided to give me another chance? Because to be honest, I think I'd rather just let you hate me."

"Oh for fuck's sake. Nobody's asking you to hang around forever. Can you wait for maybe--I don't know, an hour? I know your attention span is pretty damn small, but is sixty minutes for me to actually think about what you just said too damn long for you?"

Tony opened his mouth to snark back at Loki, but then realized that this is how they wound up here in the first place, snapping at one another instead of stopping to think. "I can do sixty minutes," he said instead.

Loki looked surprised; he'd obviously been expecting Tony to yell back at him. "Okay, then. I'm going to go. I'll call you in a little while. Or, I don't know, if you decide it's not worth it, you can call me and let me know?"

"I will," Tony said. "I mean, I won't, but that sounds fair."

"Okay, then." Loki got up from the chair. "I can let myself out." Maybe he'd felt just as awkward at the door as Tony had, earlier. Tony didn't know if that was a good sign, or not.

But there was a chance, Tony thought as the door closed behind Loki, that an hour from now, Loki would have accepted Tony's apology. That they'd be--maybe not okay again, but possibly on the way to "okay."

He wasn't going to get his hopes up too high. But at least for the first time in a while, he had hope.

****

Chapter End Notes

The boys talk some more. Better late than never?
Forty-five minutes later, Tony was definitely not nervous.

He'd spent the time by making his bed, shoving his dirty clothes into the hamper, moving the dishes from the sink to the dishwasher (if nothing else came of today, the housekeeping service would at least appreciate that he was making their lives a little less disgusting than he had been the past couple of weeks), taking a shower, brushing his teeth, and changing his clothes. There was nothing in any of that to suggest that he was nervous.

Or that he was hoping that Loki wouldn't just be willing to forgive him, but would be coming back over tonight.

Nope. He was as cool as the proverbial cucumber, though hopefully a lot less bland. And that simile had kind of gotten away from him, so maybe there was a little justification behind the idea that he was just a bit nervous.

Especially when he practically jumped a foot into the air when his phone rang.

And damn it, it was Rhodey.

"I can't talk," Tony said without giving Rhodey a chance to say anything. "I'm waiting for a call."

"Okay," Rhodey said, "but I just wondered if I'd left my--"

At this particular moment, Tony couldn't have given fewer fucks what Rhodey had left anywhere. "I'm waiting for Loki to call," Tony said, and then hung up on him.

He got a string of texts starting a few seconds later:

Okay, good luck with that.

Could you at least LOOK for my debit card, though? I kinda need it and you know how much your couch likes stealing it.

Tony sighed. But since Loki wasn't calling right now, he took a minute and dug under the cushions at the end of the couch where Rhodey usually sat. He was forever forgetting to put his card back in his wallet and not shoving it deeply enough into his pocket, and it was forever getting swallowed by Tony's couch.

And yeah, there it was, along with a quarter, three dimes, a Canadian penny, and weirdly, a bus
token. Tony hadn't ever taken the bus. But fine. Problem solved.

*It's here, I'll bring it to campus tomorrow.*

*That works. And I mean it. Good luck?*

*Thanks.*

Tony had just sent the last message when Loki called. He stared at his phone for a few seconds before remembering how to answer it. "Yeah?"

"It's me," Loki said, and Tony didn't point out that he knew it was Loki, since they were living in the twenty-first century when phones could tell you who was calling. It wasn't like he'd have been any less awkward.

"And?"

It only took a few seconds for Loki to answer, but it felt like forever; Tony's heart pounded in his chest, his throat tightening as he waited.

"And," Loki said, "I'll be outside your apartment in fifteen minutes. Meet me downstairs. We're going out again. In public. No pretending you don't know me."

"Where are we going on a Sunday night?"

"Just to get something to eat," Loki said. "And to talk more. Less chance of a scene if we do it in public."

"I'm not going to make a scene!"

"I wasn't worried about you," Loki said, and Tony thought he could hear Loki's smile. "Anyway, you're going to have to start being seen with me, so this is the test run."

That "start being seen with me" part sounded promising, even if Tony didn't really like the sound of "test run" and "talk more." "Have you actually decided anything yet, or is this still you figuring things out?"

"For fuck's sake, Tony, are you going to be downstairs in fifteen minutes, or not?"

"Okay," Tony said. "I'll be there."

He was downstairs in five minutes, not fifteen; just the time it took for him to get his keys and jacket and get down to the parking lot.

Then again, Loki pulled up no more than two minutes later, so Tony was glad he was early.

He didn't park the car, just pulled up in front of the sidewalk where Tony was standing and waited for Tony to get in. "You're going to have to be seen in a twenty-year-old Honda, too," he said when Tony had closed the door behind him.

He leaned over, though, and kissed Tony. It felt like it had been forever since they'd done that, and Loki must have felt the same way, because he grabbed fistfuls of Tony's t-shirt, pulling him closer. Tony had been trying to fasten his seat belt, and he couldn't get into the right position to hold onto Loki, but he kissed back, eagerly, and hoped that made his feelings on the matter clear enough.

Just in case it didn't, when Loki finally let him go, he said, "If you're going to do that every time I
get in, I could probably survive the humiliation of riding in this car." Then he grinned. "But only if you bring it over here one weekend and let me and Rhodey tune it up. It sounds terrible."

Loki smiled back. "So you are good for something after all."

He shrugged. "I like cars. Not necessarily this one--" though really, it wasn't that bad; he wasn't wild about the color, a sickly green, but other than that, it just needed regular maintenance-- "but in general. And if this car comes with you in it, I'll be happy to take the package deal."

"I'm going to turn you into a normal person yet," Loki said, shifting the car out of park (Tony was not going to say anything about the inferiority of automatic transmissions) and starting toward the street.

"Do you even know any normal people? Because I know you're not going to try to tell me you are one."

Loki considered for a moment, then frowned. "I hate it when you're right."

Tony laughed. "I've got some terrible news for you, then."

"If you're going to try to tell me you're usually right, save your breath. You forget, I've known you for a while now. I already know how completely ridiculous you are." He was silent for a moment, as he pulled out into traffic, then said, "It's one of the reasons I decided you deserved a second chance."

"Because I'm ridiculous?" Tony rolled his eyes. Ordinarily, he'd be huffy about that--or at least pretending to be--but he felt like tonight wasn't a good night for being touchy about anything, and definitely not for any feigned annoyance. If something Loki said genuinely bothered him, he'd probably say so, but making a big deal out of nothing was, he was pretty sure, exactly the wrong move here.

"Because you're ridiculous," Loki confirmed, "and because I missed you being ridiculous all over my life. What, exactly, is wrong with me that I'd miss a guy who gets out of bed in the middle of the night--a bed with me in it, might I add--to try to redesign robot parts? It's not like there's nothing else you could be doing if you couldn't sleep, given that I was right there."

He grinned at Tony. "So, yeah, when I missed someone who does things like that? I figured maybe there was something about you--some tiny, insignificant, infinitesimal good qualities--worth keeping around."

"I have this horrible feeling you're just working up to calling me short again."

Loki burst out laughing. "Would I do that? Specifically, would I do that when we're supposed to be having a serious conversation about our relationship?"

"Yes," Tony said immediately. "If we weren't supposed to be having a serious conversation, you'd have gone straight to telling me that I have a tiny, insignificant, infinitesimally small dick, instead, because you are an asshole."

"But you love me anyway," Loki said. His tone was light, the same way Tony might have said the exact same thing to Rhodey, but Tony wasn't stupid. He didn't look at the way Loki was smiling. He looked at the way that, when they drove under a streetlight, he could see that muscle in Loki's jaw twitching; at the whiteness of Loki's knuckles on the steering wheel.

And as terrifying as it was--because Loki might not be the guy Pepper thought he was, but that
didn't mean that he couldn't hurt Tony again, just like Pepper had hurt him--Tony made himself swallow hard, turn to look at Loki, and say, "Yeah. But I love you anyway."

Loki sighed. "You didn't--I shouldn't have said that. I didn't intend to try to get some kind of confession out of you. You'll either get there or you won't, and if you do, you'll either say it or you won't, and it's not like the words are all that important."

"I may have a level of emotional maturity not commonly seen outside of a preschool classroom, but even I know that's bullshit," Tony said.

"If you have to ask, how can you trust the answer?"

"You didn't ask," Tony said. "And I could have just shrugged it off. Hell, I say things like that all the time, sometimes to people who most definitely do not love me in any way, shape, or form. But I said it anyway. You don't have to believe me."

"I'm not saying I do believe you," Loki said. "But hypothetically, if I did, you know that doesn't mean I'm going to start being nice to you or anything."

"Oh, God, no," Tony said. "That'd just be weird."

The restaurant Loki had chosen was on the other side of town from campus, a chain monstrosity in the parking lot of a strip mall. "I know, not your kind of place," Loki said as he pulled into a parking space.

"Still trying to turn me into a normal person?"

"Nah," Loki said. "That's a lost cause. But I can afford this kind of place; also, it's getting late on a Sunday evening, so most of the non-crappy-chain choices are either closed or getting ready to. Come on. They cook better than we do, at least."

"Some might say there are poisoners who cook better than I do," Tony said, but he got out of the car. "But this is kind of out of the way, isn't it?"

"Oh. Yeah." Loki shrugged. "Everyplace closer to campus is going to be full of people panicking about finals, remember? Not exactly the best place to talk."

This particular restaurant wasn't full of people panicking about finals, or people in general, though the number of tables with dirty dishes stacked on them suggested that they'd just missed a crowd. They wound up seated not far away from the only other diners in the place, one family with a couple of tween-aged kids, and another table full of teenagers wearing matching church youth group t-shirts.

Tony grinned. "Looks like we're going to have to behave ourselves."

He slid into the booth, and Loki sat down across from him. Which, again, was a sign that they were actually intending to behave themselves. Tony could do that. Even after that kiss in the car, Tony could definitely behave himself long enough to have whatever serious conversation Loki was intending to have.

He made no promises once they were back in the car, though.

"Tony?" Loki said. "I know I once offered to let you blow me in the back room of a bar--that offer still stands, for the record--but I do have standards, and they don't stretch to any restaurant that has reproduction ads for Ipana toothpaste on the walls, no matter who else is around."
Tony sighed dramatically, but picked up his menu. "I'm hungry, anyway."

"Of course you are. Did you eat today?"

"Yes," Tony said smugly.

"Did it come from the vending machine?"

"No."

"I'm impressed. But here's the tough question: how long ago was it?"

He had to stop and think for a moment. "Breakfast?" he guessed.

"Idiot," Loki muttered under his breath, kicking lightly at Tony's ankle under the table. "But I was expecting that. It's why I decided we'd come here to talk, instead of just going out for coffee or something."

"We could have talked at my apartment."

"No. We would have fucked at your apartment, and then we'd have avoided talking because hey, we fucked, everything's fine, and while I know you're thinking that sounds great to you--and it doesn't sound bad to me, either--that's how we broke up in the first place."

"I'm really going to have to work on being less obvious," Tony grumbled as their server came up to the table.

"Well, you can try," Loki said, closing his menu and smiling up at the server. Tony tried hard not to snicker when the girl—if she was out of high school, it was barely, which made her three or four years younger than them—blushed and turned a megawatt smile of her own right back onto Loki.

They ordered—Loki had apparently eaten actual meals today, because he stuck with a basket of fries, but Tony gave into the demands of his empty stomach and got himself a burger—and then, when they were alone again, Tony said, "Flirting with waitresses already?"

"Jealous?"

"Not today." Then he frowned. "Wait, I don't even know if you like girls. How the fuck do I not even know--" He shook his head. "What did we even talk about?"

Loki shrugged. "Mostly nothing important."

Well, that was true. And anyway, it wasn't like Tony had ever come out and said he was bi. It was just obvious, what with Pepper, and then all the sex with Loki. Whereas with Loki, everybody in his past that Tony knew about had been male, so... "So do you?"

"You know, I'm going to overlook, just this once, that you sound like a twelve-year-old when you ask me if I like girls, and just answer the question you're really asking: I'm gay."

"I'm not," Tony said.

"If Pepper hadn't been a clue to that, the way you stared down Amora's cleavage would have been," Loki said, grinning. "I'm okay with that. Are you?"

"With you? Yeah. Sure." So Tony only had to be jealous of half the world, not all of it. That was a plus.
And no, that wasn't fair. He was only jealous of people Loki was actually sleeping with who weren't him. He didn't even know if there was anybody in that category right now. He wasn't sure if he got to ask that question yet.

They kept conversation light until their food arrived, though Tony couldn't stop himself from grinning stupidly at Loki every time he looked over in his general direction. Once they had their food, though, Loki said, "There's one thing I need to make absolutely clear, though, if we're going to do this again."

"Yeah?" Tony asked, trying not to sound like he was dreading what Loki was going to say next.

"We're not hiding this. Correction: you are not hiding this, since everyone important to me already knew you existed--yes, including my mother. If you're not going to acknowledge that we're together, then that's fine; we just won't be."

Tony started to open his mouth, but Loki held up a hand to stop him. "People being the assholes they are, there are obvious exceptions for situations where you don't think it's safe. But your friends, at the very least, have to know I exist."

Then he paused. "I know you don't get along with them, so you don't have to tell your parents. But in general, if someone's safe to know you're bi, they can know who I am."

That sounded pretty damn reasonable, actually. "Okay," he said, and went back to eating. He'd gone for onion rings with his burger, but Loki's fries looked pretty good. Maybe he ought to consider stealing a couple.

"Just--okay? No argument?"

Tony frowned. "I don't actually have a problem with people knowing about us. I did, but it was specifically about Pepper. That's over with."

Loki relaxed visibly. "I was expecting you to put up more of a fight."

"Nah. I mean, I didn't usually introduce the guys I slept with to my friends, but I didn't usually introduce the girls I slept with to my friends, either, because nobody wants to meet their friends' one-night stands. That gets awkward." Tony reached out to snag a fry off Loki's plate, only to find Loki brandishing his fork toward his hand.

"Eat your own food. This is mine," Loki said, moving the plate a little closer to his side of the table.

"We've been dating for like forty-five minutes and you're already hiding your fries from me," Tony grumbled. "I hate to think what it's going to be like after forty-five days."

"By then maybe you'll have mastered civilized behavior," Loki said. "That should make things go more smoothly."

"Speaking of civilized behavior," Tony said, "I feel like there's another thing we need to get clear before this goes any farther."

"No, I'm not giving you my food," Loki said, "but if it's something else, I'm listening."

"It's something else," Tony said. Then, imitating Loki's ultimatum, he said, "We're not going to fuck other people. Correction: you're not going to fuck other people, because it's not like I've done that since the day we met."
There was a long enough silence that Tony was suddenly afraid that he'd stumbled onto a deal-breaker. He could probably--well, he could try to get over it. He wasn't sure how good he'd be at it, but he could offer to make an effort.

He was about to take it all back when Loki said, "You haven't? I sort of assumed you had been."

"No," he admitted. "I know we never said--in fact, I'm pretty sure we specifically said that we could, but I didn't. At first I just didn't--I mean, there was you, the sex was pretty good, I do have other things that occupy a lot of my time--and then..." He shrugged. "Then I didn't want to." Then he took a deep breath. "But if that's a problem for you, we can--talk about it, I guess."

"No," Loki said. "It's not a problem. We weren't actually together--you kept saying so. But even then, after Thor and I stopped--whatever the hell we were doing--well, you're kind of a lot, Tony. Who has the energy to deal with anyone else?"

"Oh," Tony said. "Really?"

"Yes, you really are kind of a lot."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know. And yes, really."

"Oh," Tony said again, because that was a surprise. He'd figured--well, so had Loki, apparently, and if Loki could be wrong about that, Tony supposed he could, too.

Then he thought about the way Loki had leaned in close to say something in Fandral's ear, that day in the physics building, and decided he wasn't going to ask. That was after they'd broken up, anyway, so it didn't count. "So," he went with instead, "you can live with that?"

"I don't know," Loki said. "I mean, it's a tentative yes, but you might need to take me back to your place and demonstrate that it's going to be worth my while."

Suddenly, Tony wasn't at all hungry any more.

****

Chapter End Notes

Next week: The end.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Summary

I could not leave that miserable breakup sex as the last smut in this fic, so have some smut, some ridiculousness, and the promised happy ending.

Chapter Notes

Here it is, the final chapter! Thanks to everyone who's stuck around until the end.

(Yes, this really is the final chapter of the story. I know the total number of chapters went up this week--see the end notes for an explanation.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

"Next time," Tony grumbled as he punched the door code into the keypad, "don't pick a restaurant that's fifty miles away."

"It was a ten-minute drive," Loki argued. "Don't whine so much." But once they were in the lobby of Tony's building, he pushed Tony against the wall and kissed him, so Tony wasn't prepared to admit the drive hadn't been too long.

"It was so much longer than ten minutes." Though some of that might have been the time they spent in the parking lot of the restaurant, because Tony had refused to go a minute longer without kissing Loki again. Or that one light where Loki hadn't noticed it turned green until someone behind them had honked at them, because Tony's hand had been steadily working its way up his inner thigh.

Okay, a lot of the delay--and Tony hadn't checked the time, but he was very convinced that there had been a delay--might possibly have been his fault.

"Upstairs," Tony insisted, though he kissed Loki again, slowly and deeply, before finally letting him go. "Now." He started for the stairs, but Loki shook his head.

"They're faster than the elevator," Tony protested.

"I can't kiss you and climb stairs at the same time," Loki said. "Not without getting slowed down, anyway."

Oh. Loki had a point there. "Elevator," he agreed, and let Loki pull him inside.

"We should have just done this that first day," Loki said, in between kisses.

"What? Made out in the elevator?" He laughed. "I'd have probably wound up hitting the emergency stop button and jumping you between floors."
"You don't think much of your own powers of restraint, do you?"

"Not really," he admitted cheerfully. "Pretty sure that, cliched as it is, the phrase 'climb him like a tree' was running through my mind the whole time. But if we'd done that--even if we didn't get caught when maintenance came to get us out--we'd probably never have done it again, and I wouldn't have had the chance to find out that I actually like you. You know, as well as the aforementioned tree-climbing metaphor."

Loki smirked. "So, tell me. Exactly what, in your twisted mind, does climbing me like a tree entail, precisely?"

"For God's sake, don't give it that much thought, you'll ruin it. The only time I remember actually climbing a tree, I fell out and spent six weeks with my arm in a cast."

"I think we can skip that part."

"Yeah, I'm planning on it."

The elevator reached Tony's floor, and he led the way to his door. "Remind me to give you a key before you leave," he said as he unlocked it. "I've got a spare one stuck in one of the drawers in the kitchen. The door code, too, so you don't have to give my neighbors a sob story next time you want to drop by unexpectedly."

"You don't have to do that," Loki said.

"Yeah, but I want to." He shrugged. "It's really not a big deal. But if you're going to be spending some nights here, it'll be easier if you can let yourself in and out."

This time, unlike earlier that day, coming into the apartment with Loki didn't feel awkward. Tony locked the door behind them and grinned. "So, do you want to watch a movie, or..."

"And how much would you complain if I said I did?"

"So much. Unless it was porn. I'd probably be okay with that." He took a step forward toward Loki, steering him backward until Loki's back was flat against the door. "But really, my feeling is that there should be a lot less watching and a lot more doing." He kissed Loki, slow and deep and as dirty as he could, pressing his body against Loki's and tugging at Loki's shirt to pull him downward.

When they separated, Loki smiled down at him. "Less watching, more doing? I could get behind that."

"Yeah, I was hoping you'd say that," Tony said, slipping his hand between them to palm the bulge of Loki's cock through his pants, smirking as Loki pushed forward into his touch. "How do you want to do this? Because I'd be perfectly happy to just get on my knees for you right here, but if there's something else you'd rather do, I'm open to suggestions." He squeezed gently, feeling Loki arch against him and hearing a soft, wordless gasp.

"Bedroom," Loki said, his voice impressively steady for a man who was simultaneously squirming under Tony's hand and groping Tony's ass. "Not that your offer isn't tempting, but that's not what I want right now."

Tony kissed him again, licking his way into Loki's mouth. "Going to fuck me?" he asked, striving to sound casual.
"If you want," Loki said, with that same forced casualness. "I know last time wasn't exactly great, so..."

"Last time was only bad because we were pissed off at each other," Tony said. "There wasn't anything wrong with what we actually did. Are you pissed off now? Because I'm not. I mean, unless you decide we need to stand out here and talk about our relationship some more, at which point I might get a little testy."

"Did anyone ever tell you that you're a pushy little shit?" Loki said, his hand slipping into Tony's as he tugged Tony toward the hallway.

Tony laughed. "Pretty much everyone tells me that. You're going to have to be way more original if you want a reaction out of me."

"Anyone ever tell you that you're my pushy little shit, and I'm not planning on letting you fuck this up again?"

Tony stopped in the middle of the hallway, pretending to think. "Actually... no. You'd be the first."

"There. Originality," Loki said. "Now come on, if you're coming."

"That's the plan," Tony said, just to see Loki roll his eyes at his stupid joke.

Tony wouldn't have bothered closing the bedroom door--why would it matter, with no one else in the apartment?--but Loki pushed him against it once they were through the doorway, and it swung shut of its own accord. Tony didn't think it was intentional; it was just that Loki was abruptly very intent on getting Tony's shirt off him, and until Tony caught on to what was happening and started to help out, it was a little awkward.

And then Tony's shirt was on the floor at his feet, and Loki was kissing a path down Tony's throat to his chest.

"Is this the point where you call me a midget and imply that my dick's too small to be worth bothering about?" Tony asked, even though Loki's mouth had just closed over his nipple and Tony didn't really want him to stop to give an answer.

"Not today," Loki said. "Maybe next time, since you obviously missed it so much. Today--" he flicked his tongue over Tony's nipple, then started undoing Tony's jeans. "Today," he repeated himself, "is the point where tell you how much I like looking at you. Come on, get your shoes off so I can get you naked," he added impatiently.

Tony was not a man who believed in wasting time, so he kicked his shoes off and, once Loki had his jeans open, shoved them, and his underwear, down far enough that he could step out of them. "How's that?" he said, as he bent down to pull off his socks.

"Good," Loki said. "Damn near perfect." He reached out and ran a finger along the length of Tony's hard cock, making him shiver. "This is going to be so much better than last time, I promise."

Well, no shit it was going to be better than last time, Tony thought. They weren't in the process of breaking up. It would have to be better than last time. Having said that, though, there were still some flaws in this scenario. "You're still dressed," he protested.

"Get on the bed and I'll take care of that."

He wouldn't have minded helping out, but he didn't exactly mind a show, either. Not that Loki was
doing anything intentionally sexy, but Tony wasn't sure he was ever going to reach a point where just seeing Loki's body wasn't going to be sexy. Not any time soon, at least.

He decided to be helpful and fished condoms and lube out of the drawer—he hadn't been quite confident enough in how this was going to go to set them out earlier when he'd been waiting for Loki to call, but he'd at least made sure he had them handy and broken the plastic seal around the new bottle of lube instead of hoping that the dregs of the last one would be enough.

That meant he missed the moment where Loki finished peeling off his clothes, but only by a second or two; he still got to see Loki striding intently toward the bed, grinning at Tony.

It wasn't a nice grin. In fact, it was a distinctly predatory grin. But Tony loved it all the same. (Loved the jackass grinning at him, too, and he'd admitted it without the world ending. Who'd have thought?)

"Look at you," Loki said—practically purred, if Tony was going to be honest, and he might as well be. The way Loki was watching him made him feel a lot more exposed than just being naked on the bed did.

"Naked on the bed" was normal. That was a thing Tony had done a lot of times, with a lot of people. Most of them didn't look at him the way Loki was doing, though, and he hadn't wanted them to.

(Pepper had—well, Pepper hadn't ever looked predatory, but the way she'd looked at him had made Tony feel like this. That gave Tony some hope that his feelings really weren't one-sided, or at least really lopsided.)

"Why?" Tony asked, reaching for Loki as he got onto the bed, pulling him into a tight hug. "Do you like what you see?"

Loki looked him over again. "I love what I see," he agreed, the grin disappearing for a moment, replaced by an expression of complete seriousness. "I mean that, Tony."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Prove it," Tony said, because he felt like a bottle of soda someone had shaken up, like all of the stuff he was feeling right now was going to burst forth if he wasn't careful, and probably make a hell of a mess in the process. But needling Loki—that relieved the pressure a little, just enough that he felt mostly normal again.

Loki smacked him in the shoulder. "You are such an idiot," he said. "But if fucking your brains out will prove it to you..."

"Impossible," Tony said. "I'm a genius. There's no way you could manage that. You couldn't keep it up for long enough."

Loki's groan was mostly theatrical, Tony was sure. Maybe not entirely. "Fine, then. Fucking you to the point that you can't do differential equations any more?"

Tony considered that. "You're welcome to try."

Then Loki was kissing him, laughing and telling Tony he was absolutely the worst thing ever, he didn't know why he even bothered with him. That conversational topic carried him through until he
was settled between Tony's legs, two lube-slick fingers working their way inside him, and Tony had decided to stop being a pain in the neck for a few minutes in case it distracted Loki from his very important task.

"You are the most annoying, frustrating, ridiculous person I know," Loki said, in a tone that made it sound, to Tony, like he was saying something else entirely, "and I'm fairly certain I deserve a sainthood for this."

"But you love me," Tony said.

"But I do. Clearly, I have a weakness for sexy smart-asses." He twisted his fingers inside Tony, making him shudder and push back against them. "Fuck, I've missed this the past couple of weeks."

"Less talking, more doing," Tony reminded him, then whimpered when those long fingers found his prostate.

"Ready for more?" Loki asked, reaching for the lube lying on the bed next to them.

"Ready for you to fuck me," Tony countered. Maybe he wasn't as stretched out as he usually was before they fucked, but it was enough, damn it, and if he really felt this tomorrow--well, he wasn't going to mind.

Loki laughed. "Okay, greedy, I guess we can get right to that."

"Let me get you ready," Tony offered, grabbing the condom from the table and tearing the packet open.

Loki made him stop once, after the condom was on and Tony was getting him slicked up; Tony lay back against the pillow and watched Loki breathe deeply for a few seconds, his eyes closed. When he nodded for Tony to go ahead, Tony finished up quickly.

"Now, for god's sake, come on and fuck me," Tony said, drawing his knees up again and spreading his legs further.

He was rewarded by the feeling of the head of Loki's cock against him, and then, as Tony hissed, "Yes, damn it, yes," the glorious feeling of Loki sliding inside him, the welcome burn and stretch of muscle as Tony's body adjusted to the fullness.

"God, you're good," Loki said, starting to move slowly; Tony arched up toward him, trying to encourage him to go faster. There'd be time for a long, slow fuck tomorrow, and next week, and with any luck next year. Right now, Tony just needed this, now.

"That's how I kept you around so long," Tony said, and then winced, because that sounded a little more pathetic than he meant to.

"It's not, you know," Loki replied, but he started to move faster, thrust deeper, so Tony must not have gone that far wrong. "It's a damn good bonus, don't get me wrong."

"Same here," Tony admitted, and then he--well, he didn't stop talking, because Tony wasn't sure of a situation that would get him to stop talking. But what Loki was doing did get him to stop talking about anything much, rather than just a fairly random assortment of "God," and "Please," and "Loki," that probably got his point across even if it wasn't all that coherent.

His cock was throbbing, aching for attention, and Tony reached for it, but stopped, his hand still in mid-air, when Loki shook his head.
"I mean, you can," Loki said. "I won't stop you. But I'll make it worth your while if you wait." He licked his lips, then swiped a finger through the trail of pre-come on Tony's stomach. "I promise." He put his finger in his mouth then, sucking it clean, and Tony groaned, letting his hand fall back down to the bed.

"It's not going to be long," Loki added, and Tony clenched tightly around Loki's cock, just to help make certain of that. Loki gave a few more quick thrusts, then shuddered and came, collapsing onto Tony and kissing him again.

Tony kissed him back, moaning a little in protest when Loki pulled out, but then grinning up at him in anticipation. Loki got rid of the condom before settling back down on the bed, smiling back at him.

"Want something?" he said, already leaning forward far enough that Tony could feel warm breath on his cock.

"You did promise," Tony reminded him. God, he was so turned on this wasn't going to take more than a minute or two anyway. Still, they were going to be a really good two minutes, at least, and while Loki would probably give him shit about how long he (hadn't) lasted, it wouldn't feel right if Loki wasn't giving him shit about something.

"So I did," Loki agreed, and then Tony's cock was engulfed in wet heat, almost to the root.

Shit, two minutes was probably giving himself way too much credit.

Tony didn't care; Loki was sucking him now, his cock sliding over Loki's lips as that devastating mouth worked on him.

"God," Tony gasped.

Loki pulled off--leaving Tony both feeling cold and grumpily abandoned--long enough to say, "Well, if you insist, I'm certainly not going to argue."

"Yes, okay, fine, you're the god of blow jobs, just keep going."

Loki was still laughing when he took Tony back into his mouth, the vibrations translating into a further buzz of pleasure on Tony's cock as Loki went back to driving Tony absolutely insane.

"If you don't--" Tony had to pause for a second, just long enough that he could catch his breath, and then tried again--"don't feel like swallowing today, this would be a good time to stop."

Loki's only response was to pull back enough that he could flick his tongue over the tip of Tony's cock, provoking a truly embarrassing sound from Tony as he came.

Afterward, Tony tugged Loki further up the bed so that they could sprawl, legs tangled together, while they kissed lazily. "See?" Tony said, as he brushed away the strand of Loki's hair that was tickling his nose. "So much better than last time."

"Definitely better than last time," Loki agreed.

"You know," Tony said, after a few minutes of quiet, "we should throw a party."

Loki snorted. "If you throw a party every time we have good sex, we're never going to get anything else done."
Tony shoved at Loki's shoulder, trying to look annoyed. "No, dumbass. I mean that it's almost the end of the semester. We should have a party after finals are over. I still have friends you haven't met." Not close friends, true, but friends. And Tony was not going to be accused of trying to keep Loki a secret from anyone. Except probably his parents, at least for a while yet.

Loki didn't say anything, so Tony added, "Obviously you can invite yours, too. I mean, if you have--hey!" Tony yelped, as Loki smacked his ass.

"I have friends," Loki said, sharply.

"I know that. I've met them. Some of them, anyway. Amora, and those guys you were with in the physics building. And Thor, of course."

"You want me to invite Thor?"

"Why the hell not?" Tony said. "I'm not jealous of him." At Loki's sceptical look, he added, "Any more."

"More believable," Loki agreed.

"Hell, I'm likely to just go inviting random people I see on campus, at this point. 'Come to this party. There'll be good booze, and you can watch me be disgustingly sappy about my boyfriend.'"

"You? Disgustingly sappy?"

"Yeah. I might even tell people I don't hate you."

"Revolting," Loki said. "You're practically turning into something from the Hallmark channel."

Then he started laughing, until Tony had to laugh too.

Okay, maybe they weren't the Hallmark channel, but then again, Tony didn't want the Hallmark channel. He wanted this: sex and late-night study sessions and Loki coming into the lab to do his homework and laughing and cooking marginally-adequate dinners and maybe, sometimes, doing things with Rhodey and his girlfriend, or Amora and whoever she brought along, or even Pepper and whichever of the seven dwarves she was dating.

And, Tony thought, as Loki kissed him--both still laughing even though it hadn't been that funny--it looked like, maybe, that was exactly what he had.

****

Chapter End Notes

So, since I wrote this entire story from a single point of view, every now and then in the writing process, I felt that I needed to make some notes about things that happened when Tony wasn't present. And being me, I made those notes in the form of writing very quickly sketched-out scenes from Loki's point of view.

Once I was done writing the entire fic, I thought, "You know, I really could go through and flesh those scenes out..." So I did, and wound up with eleven "bonus scenes" that I then polished up a little (though not as much as I normally do) and decided to share
with you all--partly because I had fun with them, and partly because I don't want to start posting another multi-chapter fic as we head in to April and *Avengers: Another Broken White Boy*. (I have another Loki/Tony fic in the editing pipeline that I'll start posting once I've recovered from that damn movie.)

**The story is complete as it is; you're not missing anything significant if you stop here.** These are just little scenes that fill in some gaps as far as what Loki was doing/thinking/saying when Tony wasn't around (and once when he was). I'm leaving them at the end, though I'll include notes so that you know where they belong in the narrative.

I'm going to be posting them 3x/weekly, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, until all 11 of them are posted. And then it really *will* be the end.

**Next week:** posting of the bonus scenes begins on Monday.
Bonus Scene #1: Before Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Events shortly before Loki gets on that elevator.

Chapter Notes

A "bonus scene" from Loki's point of view. This scene happens immediately prior to chapter 1.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

This wasn't his apartment.

That was obvious before Loki even opened his eyes, because the metal bar going across his sofa bed, underneath the ridiculously thin mattress, wasn't digging into his lower back, and its twin wasn't grating against his shoulder blades.

Once his eyes were open, he remembered where he was: Thor's (presumably he had a last name, but they hadn't had that kind of conversation) dorm room. Thor's bed. And as he woke up enough to really take in his surroundings, he could regard the sleeping man next to him with some degree of--well, fondness was taking things a bit too far, but maybe tolerance? Mild liking? Whatever it was reasonable to feel about someone who had been partly responsible for your having a really good night.

Even if he snored. And took up most of the bed, but it was a twin and Thor wasn't a small guy, so Loki wasn't going to hold that one against him, not really.

Still, mild liking wasn't enough to keep Loki hanging around here all day; he got out of the bed, evading Thor's attempts to cling to him in his sleep, and started looking around for his clothes. His underwear and jeans were easy enough to locate, and his shirt turned up on Thor's desk after a little investigation, but one of his socks seemed to have made a break for freedom.

They were a buck a pair at the dollar store, though, so Loki decided he could live without them and went over to retrieve his shoes from the other side of the room, in front of the milk-crate bookshelf that was a near-duplicate of the one in Loki's apartment.

There was a corkboard--well, cork tiles stuck to the wall--hanging above the bookcase, and Loki couldn't resist the urge to snoop. Hockey practice schedules, boring. A calendar of dates for the school's Habitat for Humanity chapter, eh. Thor was a nice guy who liked playing hockey. He knew that already. That had been covered in their "getting to know you" conversation.

The pictures--printed out on plain printer paper, for the most part--were a little more interesting. Thor, with his arm around a slim brunette girl Loki assumed was the girlfriend Thor had told him
about, just before assuring Loki that it was all right, they had an open relationship. (Loki had been around enough to know better, but it wasn't his problem if Thor cheated on his girlfriend.)

The same girl, this time with another girl--a little geekier looking, but still pretty--pulling her close and kissing her dramatically. Maybe Thor had been telling the truth about the open relationship and his girlfriend's girlfriend at whatever college it was in whatever state it was that Loki hadn't listened to Thor talking about.

He was about to turn back to the bed to sit down and put his shoes on when another picture, half-hidden by a flyer for Double Pizza, caught his eye. It was a picture of a woman in her late twenties or early thirties, dressed in a flannel shirt and a pair of jeans. She was holding a kid, a baby really, probably not even two years old--at that age, it was hard to tell if it was a boy or a girl, especially with the shaggy blond hair. Unlike the other pictures tacked to the corkboard, this one was an actual photograph, not just a trimmed-down printout. It was creased, and one of the corners had been torn off, a fragment of Scotch tape clinging to the torn edge.

And it looked familiar.

Loki pushed the pizza flyer aside, frowning. He definitely knew that woman, and he knew that picture. A framed copy of it or something almost identical had been sitting on his mother's dresser for as long as he could remember. He'd asked her about it a few times over the years; the first time was when he was five or so. He remembered that time clearly, because it was the first time he'd really realized that Mom wasn't actually his mother. He didn't remember her not being there--he definitely didn't remember his own mother, who'd died when he was a baby--and so while his parents hadn't made any secret of the fact that Frigga was his stepmother, he hadn't really understood it before then.

She was his stepmother, and the baby in the picture was her son, the one that she didn't get to see any more. She didn't like talking about him--at least, not to Loki; she might have talked to his dad about it more--and always ended up with tears in her eyes when she did, so Loki had eventually wised up and stopped asking.

But she'd told Loki her son's name--Loki had felt some kind of kinship with the kid he'd never met, because they'd both been named by parents who were so fascinated with Norse mythology and literature that they'd named their kids after old Norse gods. (That was how Loki's dad and stepmother had met, at an academic conference; they'd fallen in love over some argument about the Prose Edda. He was pretty sure they'd never get over his choice to major in physics.)

Loki hadn't thought about his mysterious stepbrother in ages. Definitely hadn't thought about it last night, when he'd had a few drinks and been charmed by the buff blond guy flirting with him at the party.

But his name was Thor, and that was clearly not just some weird coincidence, like they'd decided last night when they'd introduced themselves.

_Holy shit, Loki thought. I just had some of the best sex of my life with Mom's long-lost kid. If I didn't know better, I'd think I was making this up._

Well, it wasn't as though they were actually related. Or even real stepbrothers, the kind who were raised together. This didn't have to be a big deal. Mildly awkward, at worst.

He wondered if Thor would take it that way, when Loki told him. Because of course Loki was going to tell him. This was way too interesting for Loki not to tell him.
Thor was stirring on the bed, and Loki went over and sat down on the edge of the bed, putting on his right shoe and tying the laces.

"Hey, handsome," Thor murmured sleepily, reaching for Loki. "It's Sunday morning. You don't have to go yet, do you?"

"I think I do," Loki said. "I think you're going to want me to, in a minute or so."

That got Thor's attention; he sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. Even after Loki's dramatic pronouncement, Thor was still smiling at him.

He really was ridiculously pretty. For a moment, Loki thought about keeping this to himself, pretending he hadn't seen the picture and sliding back into bed with Thor.

For a moment. Because there was no way he was going to be able to resist saying something about this to Thor; he was just evil enough that he really wanted to see Thor's reaction.

"That picture," Loki said. "On your corkboard. The one with a woman holding a baby. Who is that?"

Thor's smile faded, and he looked down at the blankets instead of at Loki. "My mother and me," he said, shrugging a little. "Why?"

It wasn't too late. He could just tell Thor that she looked really familiar, or something, and Thor would probably let the moment pass. He probably wasn't fully awake yet, anyway, so it would be easy enough to smooth it all over.

Telling Thor the truth was likely to cause trouble. The problem was, "it's likely to cause trouble," was a temptation that Loki frequently found difficult to resist. Especially this kind of trouble, where nobody was going to die, nobody was going to really suffer; this wasn't even really incest. It was just awkward and maybe a little embarrassing.

Just like all the trouble he and Amora had caused, back in high school. Most of the time, it was harmless--the exceptions tended to be tricks they'd pulled on people who harassed them, not on innocent bystanders.

And this would be harmless, too. It might upset Thor a little, but in the long run, there would be no harm done at all.

"That's quite a coincidence," Loki said.

"What do you mean?"

"Because that's my mother. That exact picture is on her dresser."

He didn't intend to leave out the "step-" from "mother." He did think of her as his mother. She was the only mother he'd ever had, at the very least. And surely Thor would realize that they were both about the same age; there was no way she could have given birth to both of them, unless they were twins, and if they were, why wasn't Loki in the picture?

Thor sat up even straighter, and now there was no trace of sleepiness in his expression. "What are you talking about?"

"The woman in that picture. She's my mother. I knew the kid in the picture was her son, but I didn't know he was you, obviously. You've changed a little bit." Loki looked Thor over thoughtfully.
"You still need a haircut, though."

"She can't be your mother," Thor insisted. "She's my mother."

"Her name's Frigga. She's a literature professor. She specializes in Norse poetry and sagas, which is why she named you Thor."

Thor shrugged a little. "I don't know what she does. She ran out on me and my dad a couple of months after that picture was taken." He was quiet for a moment; Loki wasn't sure if it was because thinking about his mother was painful, or because things were finally clicking in his mind and he was preparing to freak out.

The former, apparently, since when Thor spoke again, it was to say, "She has that picture?"

"Yeah," Loki said. He didn't really want to be comforting. He barely knew Thor; it was hard not to feel like his mom's history wasn't any of this near-stranger's business, even if it obviously was.

"So. Uh. That means you and I are--oh, God. We're brothers. I fucked my brother," he groaned, because it might have taken Thor a little while to freak out, but when he finally got around to it, he got right to the point.

"You also got fucked by your brother," Loki said cheerfully. The original omission of "step-" might have been an accident, but not this time. He'd tell Thor the truth--that it was just weird, not horrifying--but he was going to let Thor stew for a little while. The look on his face was just a little too entertaining not to.

"How can you--we're related, Loki. We're brothers. And I--you--we--" Thor waved a hand between the two of them, in the absence of the ability to form a coherent sentence. "You can't tell anyone."

Loki snorted. "Who am I going to tell? I wasn't planning on telling anyone that I slept with a hockey player to begin with." Well, nobody except Amora, and she didn't count.

"You can't," Thor said. "If people knew--"

"It's not like we knew," Loki pointed out. "We didn't have any idea, and it was just the one time. And at least neither of us can get pregnant from it. So now we can just pretend it never happened."

It was kind of a pity, really. Last night had been good. He'd been thinking, before he fell asleep, that it might be fun to see Thor a few more times. They weren't compatible, not in the long-term, but as a fling, Thor would definitely have been worth his time.

And now, of course, this. Which didn't bother Loki all that much; it wasn't as though Thor was really his brother, and nobody needed to know about their connection, anyway. Loki didn't have any pictures of his parents in his apartment, and even Amora hadn't ever seen his parents' bedroom--unless she'd gone snooping when Loki wasn't looking, which was possible. But even if she'd seen the picture, and happened to remember it, she wasn't likely to ever see Thor's dorm room. So it would have been fine.

Except, of course, that Thor was still giving him a horrified, stricken look. "I'm so sorry," he said. "I mean, I know we didn't know, but still, we did it, and if I'd had any idea--"

"I know," Loki said. "If we'd known beforehand, none of this would have happened. And when I walk out that door, none of it will have happened, so it's fine, Thor."

"Fine? How is it supposed to be fine? How are you not freaking out?" Thor demanded.
"Perspective?" Well, that and some knowledge that Thor didn't have, but Loki didn't necessarily feel like getting into that just yet. Not while Thor was busy being melodramatic and horrified. He'd actually buried his face in his hands to avoid looking at Loki.

"Maybe I should go," he suggested. When Thor didn't even look up, Loki got up from the bed. "Try not to think about it," he went on. "There's no real harm done, and it's not like anyone is ever going to know about it but us."

"I'm definitely not telling anyone," Thor muttered, still not looking up.

Shaking his head, Loki let himself out.

He was going to have to tell Thor the whole truth, but later. Not much later, but he wanted to go home and make some coffee. Maybe he'd call Amora; she'd seen them leave together, and she'd want to hear about his night.

He probably wouldn't tell her about the brother thing. She'd never keep it to herself; she'd make a point of going to find Thor and making pointed comments about it, and Loki didn't want to find himself beaten up by the entire Kirby Hall intramural hockey team. But she'd want to know what happened, and Loki wouldn't mind telling her. It really had been very good sex.

And then he'd call--oh, shit, he didn't have Thor's number or his last name. Since Thor lived in the residence halls, he could search the school directory, he supposed; there couldn't be that many Thors. And he couldn't convince himself that he could leave Thor to stew in his guilt for more than a few hours. He was an asshole, but not that much of an asshole.

So, yes. Go home, get coffee and breakfast, call Amora, and then call Thor and clear it all up. That sounded like a good plan. Not what he'd expected for his Sunday, but at least it wouldn't be boring.

Loki pushed the button for the elevator.

****

Chapter End Notes

This week's theme appears to be Loki/Thor.

For the sake of my ego, let me point out that these have not undergone nearly the same amount of editing that the story proper did.

There are 11 of these scenes in total (obviously, since that's how many chapters I added, I guess), and I'll be posting them Monday/Wednesday/Friday until they're all up.

Next time: Loki clarifies some things for Thor.
He still could have gone home and called Thor. He could have looked up Thor's number in the campus directory and called him from the car, too.

But instead, Loki decided to pull into the parking lot outside of Kirby Hall and just go straight up to Thor's dorm room. It was easier to persuade someone to talk to you when they were looking you in the eye, rather than on the phone. Easier to convince them you were telling the truth, too, and despite the fact that Loki was planning to tell Thor the truth, he wasn't sure it was going to be an easy sell.

The door opened promptly at his knock, though as it swung open, Thor was muttering, "Damn it, Heimdall, when I said I wanted to be left alone, I meant it. I'll be at--" He broke off, blinking at Loki and frowning. "What do you want?"

"To talk to you," Loki said. "Can I come in?"

Thor hesitated, and Loki went on, "We could have this conversation in the hall, definitely, but I figured you might not want to do that."

"Great. Fine. You might as well come in." Thor stepped aside, grudgingly. The blinding smile was completely gone; Thor looked tired and unhappy. He must have been fretting about this the entire afternoon.

Well, Loki had meant to call him a lot sooner than this. He just hadn't counted on running into somebody as interesting as Tony in the elevator, and he definitely hadn't planned on it turning into an entire afternoon and evening in Tony's company. (All right, he'd gone home to shower before going to Tony's, but he'd had other things on his mind.) And he was here now, after all. He could have left Thor to stew about this forever.

He pulled out Thor's desk chair without asking, turned it around backward, and sat down, folding his arms along the back. He waited for a minute to give Thor a chance to sit down, but instead, Thor just remained standing near the door, his arms crossed, not really looking at Loki.
Fine, Loki thought. He'd just go right ahead. Thor could listen just as well standing as sitting. "I realized this afternoon that I might not have been clear enough earlier."

Thor snorted. "Your mother is my mother. I'm not sure how much clearer you could have been. Trust me, I wish you had been a lot more vague."

Loki let out a huff of laughter, ignoring the way the sound made Thor's expression darken. "I don't think I spelled out to you that the woman I call my mother is, technically, my stepmother."

Quickly, before Thor could get angry at him for not having told him that at the outset, he said, "I assumed you knew--I mean, we're pretty close in age, aren't we? And even if your mother left right after that picture was taken, you'd have to be at least two years older than I am, maybe even three, for her to be my mother, too. So I figured you'd assumed we weren't biological brothers, and it was only later this afternoon that I realized you must not have."

He smiled brightly at Thor, certain that he'd presented his explanation confidently enough that Thor would believe him. It would spoil his fun to have to admit to Thor that he'd wanted to fuck with his head a little bit--not to mention that it would mean Thor would be on his guard around Loki from now on, and that wouldn't be any fun at all.

"Your stepmother," Thor repeated. "She's your stepmother?"

"Exactly. I think of her as my mother, of course; I don't remember my actual mother at all, and she's been married to my dad since I was a little kid. I can just about remember their wedding, but I'm not even sure if I really remember it or if I only think I do because I've seen pictures."

Thor still didn't seem inclined to look Loki in the eye, but he walked over to his bed and sat down on the edge of it. "I'm glad somebody thinks of her as their mother."

Oh, damn. Loki didn't really want to get involved in Thor's abandonment and mommy issues. He barely knew Thor. On the other hand, this was his mom Thor was angry at, biological or not, and Loki found himself wanting to defend her, at least a little.

"She talks about you, sometimes. If I ask her. I think she talks to my dad more, obviously."

"Yeah? She ever explain why she left a two-year-old kid with his asshole father and skipped off to find another family?"

Loki took a deep breath. Yeah, this was exactly why he hadn't wanted to get into this topic. "Not as such, no. But I can put some things together."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that from the little bit I do know--mostly from eavesdropping--she wanted to take you with her when she left, but your dad had her declared an unfit parent and took you back. And I think she's tried to get in touch with you a few times--I used to bring in the mail when I got home from school, and she got a few letters marked 'return to sender.' I don't remember who they were addressed to, but every time she got one, she'd claim she had a migraine and stay upstairs for a day or so. She'd even cancel her classes, and she never did that. She broke her foot once and went straight from the ER to her next lecture."

There. That was all true--not to mention that his mother never had headaches, certainly not migraines--and maybe it would be enough to make Thor think there might be two sides of the story.
"I never got any letters," Thor said. "She just vanished one day. I don't even remember her."

Loki sighed. "I don't know what to tell you. Just that--I don't know, maybe don't hate her? I don't think she'd have walked out on you if she could help it."

Thor shook his head. "I don't hate her. It's hard to hate somebody you don't even know." He paused. "Anyway, my dad hates her, which automatically makes me like her more than I would have otherwise."

Loki laughed at that. "Your dad sounds like a complete asshole."

"My dad," Thor said, "is a creepy, manipulative piece of shit, and as soon as I graduate, I'm never going to go anywhere near him again for the rest of my life." He shrugged, guiltily. "I'm letting him pay for me to go to college, but it's that or spend forever drowning in student loans."

Well, that was something Loki could definitely understand. His own father wasn't that bad, in comparison. He and Loki had decided about a decade ago that they didn't have anything in common and never would--and he was definitely aware that his father would have preferred a son like Thor--but at least Loki didn't hate him. His father was just kind of a jackass sometimes. That was practically nothing.

Thor took a deep breath, raising his arms above his head to stretch. It pulled his shirt up, and Loki let himself look at the lightly-tanned skin it exposed. He didn't care if Thor noticed; it would only prove his point. They weren't brothers.

"We're not brothers," Thor said, just as if he could read Loki's mind.

"We're barely even stepbrothers," Loki agreed. "We only met about twenty-four hours ago, when we were already adults. You didn't know I existed at all; I only barely knew you did. It'd be stretching the point to say that there was any kind of family tie between us."

He could see Thor visibly relax at that. He didn't feel guilty for what Thor must have been going through today; the slightest exercise of logic would have told him that they couldn't possibly have been related, so it wasn't Loki's fault for not telling him. But he did know that he probably should have made a point of calling earlier, so it was a relief to see that Thor was going to be all right after all.

"So," Loki went on, "you don't actually have to run the other way if you see me on campus."

The smile Thor gave him wasn't the same glorious smile he'd given Loki last night, or early that morning, but there was something mischievous in it that Loki had to admit he found appealing. "We're not related. Not biologically, and not even technically, not in any way that counts."

"Well, we're still stepbrothers," Loki pointed out. He knew where Thor was going with this, or at least he hoped he knew where Thor was going, but he did want to make sure that Thor wasn't going to realize that and have another freak-out later.

Thor laughed. "Yeah, but that's not really related. That's why so much of the 'incest' porn out there is about step-siblings."

"...I'm going to have to take your word on that one," Loki said. "Not really my area of expertise."

There was that grin again. "I've got some links if you want them."

"Pass," Loki said. "I can find my own porn." Though that did explain the way Thor was grinning at
him, didn't it?

Though Thor hesitated for a moment. "That's not too far, is it? I mean--too weird for you?"

Loki grinned back at him. "Thor, that's not even all that weird. It'd be weird, if we were actually brothers, but we're not. So no, we're good, I'm fine." It would be interesting to see if Thor brought the incest-porn angle up again, to be honest. And, hell, why not? They weren't related, and anything that gave Thor that slightly wicked look could certainly be fun.

"Great," Thor said. "What are you doing Tuesday night?"

Tuesday. Loki considered for a moment. Class until two, work until six, but after that-- "Going out with you, I assume?"

Now he got the sunny smile again. God, he wondered if Thor knew how easily he could twist people around one of those oversized fingers, smiling at them like that. "Eight o'clock good? I've got hockey practice until seven, and I assume you're going to want me to shower first."

For a moment, Loki hesitated. There really wasn't any reason for him to. Tony hadn't given him any indication that he might call, or that he wanted Loki to call him. And while Loki thought he probably would call Tony eventually, he didn't want to do it right now. He and Tony were on the same page about things, he thought; they were both looking for a fling, and calling Tony in the next day or two would send the wrong message.

Besides, there was no law that said he couldn't have two flings at the same time. If they got in the way of his classes, or if something more serious presented itself--which, in itself, was an impressive thought, because only a couple of months ago, it would have been "if Clint got his head out of his ass and begged Loki to take him back"; clearly, he was finally getting over his ex, thank fuck--then he could change his mind.

"Eight o'clock's great," he said, and the grin he got in return left him sure he'd made the right decision.

****

Chapter End Notes

Still only just barely edited, at least by my standards. (My standards for this fic generally involved eight drafts, so take that as you will.)

Next time: Ridiculous Loki/Thor smut.
Bonus Scene #3: Before Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Ridiculous and gratuitous Loki/Thor smut.

Chapter Notes

A "bonus scene" from Loki's point of view. This scene happens some days after the previous bonus scene, but before chapter 4 of the fic.

Everything in this chapter is a product of Thor's ridiculous imagination, but Thor's ridiculous imagination is fueled by a lot of bad porn, so if you don't like even role-played incest, you might want to skip this one. (This one scene was written less because I needed Loki's POV and more because I was trying to amuse my wife, so it's definitely skippable if the subject matter bothers you.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

"Hey, Thor," Loki said as he opened the door to Thor's dorm room, "can I... is it okay if I talk to you about something?" He stepped inside and closed the door behind himself quickly; just because he'd agreed this sounded like fun didn't mean he wanted Thor's entire dorm to know about it.

Though he was mostly looking at the ground, he was keeping an eye on Thor's reaction. He'd pulled his hair back with a plain black hair tie, rumpled up his shirt, made a few other little changes to make himself look younger and geekier, but most of it was attitude. The guy he was pretending to be right now was shy, hesitant, nervous; none of those were things Loki would ever use to describe himself.

But this was Thor's fantasy, and this was apparently the kind of shit that got Thor going. And Loki was fairly convinced, based on past experience, that Thor was likely to make it worth his while.

"Of course you can!" Thor said, pulling out his desk chair for Loki before flopping back down on his bed. "I just wasn't expecting to see you today."

"I know you're busy," Loki said, because he was supposed to be the dorky freshman brother, a little in awe of his big brother, the jock. That wasn't quite the way he saw this scenario, but even under his rules it was the way Thor would be seeing it, so everything was good.

Thor had taken the news that they were only stepbrothers surprisingly well; Loki had expected relief, but not an offer that this meant they could keep having sex, and definitely not Thor's suggestion that while they weren't really brothers, it might be fun to pretend they were, complete with a detailed scenario that gave Loki way too much insight into the kind of porn Thor liked.

This was going to be fun, and even though role-playing incest wasn't Loki's thing, he was planning
Loki sat down in the chair and looked right past Thor's ear. "So, I was wondering... I have a date," he said. "And I don't want to look stupid."

"You're not going to look stupid," Thor protested.

"Yes, I am, because I don't know what to do and he's going to know I've never done anything with anyone and you have to help me!" Loki approved of the note of panic he'd managed to get into his voice. He realized he was even breathing too fast and too shallowly, and forced himself to take a few deep breaths.

Thor reached over and put a hand on his shoulder. Loki leaned into the touch, just a little. Not enough to make a normal sibling suspicious. Not even enough to make Thor suspicious, and he knew where this was supposed to be going. "Of course I'll help you. What do you need?"

"I've never even kissed anyone," Loki said, his voice a near-whisper. "Can you--can you show me? Please?"

Thor pulled back, gaping at him. "Show you?" He wasn't a natural actor, but Loki would give him several points for enthusiasm, at least. "I can't--you're my brother, Loki, how can we--"

"We wouldn't be doing anything," Loki said. "Not really. You'd just be giving me a demonstration. It's only wrong if you want to be doing it."

He looked up at Thor through his eyelashes, trying to get the right mix of completely innocent and hopeful. "Besides, it's just a kiss. People kiss their families all the time." He got up from the chair then, sitting down next to Thor on the bed. "Please?"

To be honest, he really did want Thor to kiss him right now, because the combination of big bearded jock-type person and watching the tips of his ears go red because someone was willing to give him one of his fantasies on a silver platter was weirdly charming.

He didn't want to find Thor charming, because this was not a relationship that was going to go anywhere, for at least half a dozen reasons, but as long as Thor never found out, Loki figured it would be all right.

Thor was silent for a long time, long enough that Loki started to wonder if he'd decided to call this whole thing off, and then sighed, running a hand through his shaggy blond hair. "You really think this would help you?"

"You know what I'm like," Loki said. "If I get nervous, I'm going to make a mess of everything. This is the only way I can see for me not to be nervous."

"This guy you're dating," Thor said. "He's worth this?"

"Of course he is," Loki said, and tried not to think of dark eyes and a mouth that never stopped talking and the indignant way Tony had squawked when Loki called him a midget. This was some hypothetical, imaginary guy; it had nothing to do with Tony. Nothing had anything to do with Tony. Tony had been one night--well, one afternoon and evening--and maybe a slightly longer fling in the future. "At least, I think he is. I just want a chance to find out."

"Okay, then." Thor leaned forward and pressed his lips to Loki's in a brief, chaste kiss.

"Thor, you kiss Grandma with more enthusiasm than that. If I try that with him, he's going to think
I'm a freak."

Thor tried again. This time, it was better; Thor's hand came up to cup Loki's face, stroking along his jawline, and Loki sighed and opened his mouth a little.

Thor stopped kissing him, but didn't pull back. "Loki," he said waringly.

"I need to know," he insisted. "It doesn't count. It's just practice. Think of it like a play. You're Romeo and I'm Juliet."

"And they both died, Loki, I did pass ninth grade English."

"It's a kiss. Nobody's going to die. Nobody's even going to know but us." He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he reopened them, he said, in a very small voice, "Please, Thor. I know you don't really like me, but you're the only person I can trust with this."

"I like you just fine," Thor muttered.

"Please," Loki whined, and reached for Thor. "I need to know."

Another sigh. Hands through his hair another time. "I should say no."

"But--"

"But I'm not going to." Thor kissed him again, his hands huge and warm against Loki's jaw and neck, and this time, when Loki parted his lips, Thor took advantage of it.

Thor was, in fact, a good kisser. If Loki had actually needed lessons, Thor would have been an excellent choice. And while he didn't have a ton of acting talent in general, he did kiss Loki-his-inexperienced-kid-brother differently than he did Loki-the-guy-he-was-currently-fucking. These weren't the hungry kisses from an hour ago when Loki had arrived, before Thor had explained his plan for the evening. These were tender, slow, gentle, interspersed with whispers of encouragement.

"That's right, Loki," Thor murmured. "Kiss me back, just like--yes."

Loki reached up, twining his arms around Thor's neck, clinging tightly as they kissed. Even when Thor broke the kiss, Loki didn't let go of him, instead curling close and resting his head on Thor's shoulder. "Did I--was I all right?"

"You... God, Loki, you were fine. You were perfect."

He wondered how much of Thor's breathlessness was acting, and how much was genuinely the kiss--well, the kiss and the scenario. Some of it definitely was; snuggling closer to Thor gave him the chance to "accidentally" brush his hand over the bulge in Thor's crotch.

Loki gasped, pulling his hand away as though he'd been stung. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to--"

"It's okay," Thor said, though he slid back a little on the bed. "Don't freak out. It's just--stuff happens. It doesn't mean anything."

Loki nodded, wishing he could make himself blush. He looked down at the floor, mumbling a little as he said, "That could happen on my date, though. So... maybe you should teach me what to do when it does?"

"Loki!" Now Thor pushed him away--not roughly, but very determinedly. "We can't do that."
"Why not?" Loki asked. "I know I probably won't be any good, but I need to learn, and I trust you." He put his hand on Thor's knee, pretending not to notice that when he leaned forward, his hand slid further up the denim-covered thigh. "You won't hurt me, you won't laugh at me--and I promise, I'll never tell anyone, ever. It'll be our secret."

"It's wrong," Thor argued.

"It'd be wrong if you made me do it. Or if I made you do it. But if you're doing it to help me, how can that be wrong?"

Thor buried his face in his hands for a moment, and Loki allowed himself the luxury of a smirk.

"I don't think you understand how messed-up this is," Thor muttered, his face still covered.

"What is it going to hurt?" Loki asked. "And you know I need to learn. I really like this guy."

"You don't have to--you know you don't have to do anything with him, right? Especially not on the first date. And if he won't see you again if you don't--"

"I know," Loki interrupted. "I really do know that. But if the date is good, and we keep going out, eventually, this is something I'm going to want to do. And I hate looking stupid, Thor, you know that." He lowered his voice again, kept his tone soft, shy, uncertain. "I'd--I'd really try to make it good for you, I promise."

"Fuck," Thor groaned, looking up at Loki. "No one can ever know. You have to swear you won't tell anyone. Not even when you're eighty."

"I swear," Loki whispered, and slid his hand that last little bit, until it was pressed hesitantly against the bulge of Thor's cock. "I'll never tell. This is just between us."

Thor whimpered. Thor, who probably had his picture in the dictionary next to "manly," actually whimpered, and Loki had to pretend that he wasn't inwardly shouting in triumph, damn it. Oh, Thor, you are such a kinky little fucker, Loki thought, almost fondly. We are going to have so much fun.

He rubbed his hand over Thor's cock, just lightly, and Thor shook his head.

"Not so gently," he said. "Think about how you touch yourself."

Loki looked at the floor again, still wishing he could make himself blush at will, and nodded. Then he undid Thor's pants. "Can I touch you, please?"

"Yeah," Thor said. "I'll take off my pants in a minute, so you can see what you're doing better, but yeah... touch me. Please."

Loki ran one finger slowly along the length of Thor's cock, then shook his head. "Harder, you said." He curled his hand around the shaft, more gently than he'd have done it normally, but not with the feather-light touch he'd just used.

"That's better," Thor said. "Now just--touch me like you're touching yourself."

Loki began moving his hand, sliding it awkwardly up and down Thor's length. Thor's cock was as big as the rest of him, and Loki figured a nervous virgin would find that a little intimidating. "It's--you're really big," he said. "Mine isn't as thick; it's hard to get my hand around you."
"You're doing just fine." Thor's voice was hoarse, and it shook a little as Loki moved up toward the head, ran a finger over the slit. "Really great," he added, and placed a tiny kiss on Loki's temple.

"Should you take your pants off now?" Loki took his hand away. "I want to be able to look at you." Then, quickly, "I mean--it'll be easier for me to do this again, to someone else, if I can see what I'm doing now."

Thor nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He stood up, kicking off his shoes and stepping out of his pants and underwear. Loki shot a significant (and out-of-character, but seriously, Thor) look at Thor's socks, until Thor got the hint and took them off as well.

Good. Nothing killed the mood faster than a guy who left his stupid tube socks on during sex, and Loki really did not want this mood killed. Thor's brain was such fun. Besides, Loki couldn't wait to see how Thor reacted when Loki pulled out one of the twists he had in mind.

Thor sat back down on the bed, scooting back so that he could lean against the wall, and patted the mattress at his side. Loki slid over, looking up at him shyly. "Maybe you could help me," he said, as he wrapped his hand around Thor's cock again. "Put your hand on mine?"

Thor's hand covered his almost completely; Loki didn't consider himself particularly small-boned, but Thor was a freaking mammoth. When he started moving his hand, Thor guided him, squeezing his fingers to get Loki to tighten his grip, helping Loki to set the pace.

"Everyone's a little different," Thor told him. "So just because I like something, doesn't mean your guy is going to like it. But if you don't go too wild before you know what he enjoys, you'll be just fine." Then he grinned at Loki. "It's hard to give a terrible hand job. A not-great one, sure, but enthusiasm goes a long way."

"I think I can be enthusiastic," Loki said. Even with Thor's guiding hand on his, it wasn't hard to work in a slight twist of the wrist that had always served Loki well before. Including with Thor, the other night.

Thor groaned loudly, and Loki stilled his hand immediately. "Is that--did I do something wrong?"

"No," he said quickly. "Something right."

Loki beamed up at him. "What if I want to try something else?" he asked, trying to decide whether licking his lips would be a bit too much.

"Like what?"

"I want to taste it," he said, looking at Thor's cock and not his face, studying the beads of fluid at the tip. "Can I?"

Thor didn't even offer his token objection. "Do you think it's something you need to know?"

"It's--that's something he might want me to do, right?"

Thor brought his hand up to Loki's face, tracing Loki's lips with one fingertip. "Yeah. You never have to--"

"--if I don't want to, yeah, I remember," Loki chimed in. "But if I want to?"

"Then yeah. He's going to be fucking dying for you to, I promise."
"Then it's something I need to know."

Loki got up from the bed, taking a second to adjust his own cock in his currently too-tight pants before dropping to his knees in front of Thor. "And it's something I want to know," he added, looking down at the floor. "It's something I want to do--to be able to do, I mean."

Thor spread his legs enough for Loki to fit in between them comfortably. "I'm going to need instructions," Loki said, "but first--" He bent his head down, putting his tongue out so that he could lap at the head of Thor's cock. "Weird," he proclaimed, "but not terrible."

"Don't say that to him," Thor warned him. "You don't have to lie and say you like the taste if you don't, but--"

"I'm not stupid," Loki said. "But I can say it to you." He addressed his next words to Thor's right knee, instead of looking up at him. "I can say anything to you."

"Of course you can," Thor said. "I'm your brother. You can tell me anything."

Loki ducked his head again in feigned embarrassment, and returned his attention to Thor's erection, licking the head as he tried to remember how to be bad at sucking cock. Not too bad, obviously, as he very much wanted Thor to enjoy himself, but bad enough to remain in character.

"Take it in your mouth," Thor urged him.

"It's so big," Loki protested. "I mean, I'll try, but..."

"Use your hand, too. And don't try to take too much. I don't want you to choke yourself."

It was really sort of sweet, Loki thought. At least as sweet as a guy teaching his kid brother how to suck dick could possibly be. It might have been nice to have run into someone like Thor a few years ago--not that Loki's first blow job had been a terrible experience, but Thor would have been better.

He wrapped his hand around the base of Thor's cock and took the head into his mouth--not as far as he would have normally, but he figured he should be too intimidated by the size to do that. Thor's hand came to rest at the back of his head; not holding him down at all, but stroking his hair, petting, encouraging.

Loki began to suck, not letting himself settle into a regular rhythm, but doing his best to display enthusiasm.

Thor kept murmuring encouragement and suggestions, and Loki did his best to follow them: falling into a steadier pace, sucking harder, taking Thor in a little deeper, beginning to move his hand as well.

"You're so clever at this," Thor said, petting Loki's hair again. "This guy's going to be so lucky if you do this for him. He's going to love it. He's going to love you."

Loki's response was to tongue Thor's slit again, relishing the shudders and groans he dragged out of Thor.

"Loki," Thor said, breathing hard. "Loki, you need to stop. I don't think you're ready to--I don't want to come in your mouth, not yet."

Loki pulled away with a show of reluctance, though both he and the character he was playing
wanted to smirk at that "not yet." "Did I do that right? Was it okay?"

"Yeah," Thor said. "More than okay. That was amazing, it was--I just don't think you're ready to swallow come."

"Oh. Um. Yeah, maybe--maybe not," Loki stammered. "But--""But nothing." Thor patted the mattress again. "Come up here and sit with me?"

Loki got to his feet, making certain to pull his shirt askew as he did so that Thor could see the erection tenting his pants. He looked away from Thor as he adjusted himself a little, pressing the heel of his hand against his cock. He might have rolled his eyes a little when Thor had explained his fantasy, but maybe Thor had a point; this was definitely hot.

Thor was smiling when Loki looked back at him. "Come here," he repeated.

He sat down next to Thor, leaning against him without any urging. "Natural reaction, right?" he said, grimacing up at Thor. "It doesn't mean anything, like you said."

"I know," he said. "But--I could help you with that. I mean, if you wanted. It'd only be fair."

"It's not fair," Loki argued. "You're still--you didn't get to finish."

Thor was silent for a few long moments, his cheek resting against Loki's hair. "I could, uh. We could take care of both of us at the same time," he said. "If you wanted to learn about something else."

"You mean fucking me, don't you?" He smiled at Thor's surprised expression. "I do know all kinds of words. I'm not a little boy any more."


"I think I'd like that better than the other way around," Loki said, "and I think I want to know what it feels like. If it really hurts--"

"I'll make sure I don't hurt you," Thor promised.

"I know. I trust you." That made Thor close his eyes and swallow again, then kiss Loki softly.

"I know you do," he said, against Loki's lips. "So, let's get you out of those pants."

Loki stood up, and Thor leaned forward to unbutton the fly of Loki's jeans for him, lingering longer than necessary with his hand against the outline of Loki's cock. Once he took his hand away, though, Loki wasted no time in stripping from the waist down, leaving clothes and shoes in a pile on the floor. "Should I take my shirt off?"

"If you'd feel better with it on, leave it," Thor said.

"I think... yeah, maybe." No point giving Thor everything he wanted. Maybe next time, after he'd made big-brother-Thor admit what he really did want, but not right now.

Thor was digging in the top drawer of his dresser, pulling out a condom and a bottle of lube. "Can you get on the bed?" he said. "There's lots of ways we could do this, but for your first time, maybe on your hands and knees? It's... it can be nicer if you can see each other's faces, but it's a little easier to do it this way, and besides. Um. It'll be easier for you to imagine I'm someone else."
Loki bit his lip, but nodded. "Whatever you think is best." He got onto Thor's bed, positioning himself, and waited.

"Okay," Thor said. "Just let me get the condom on." Loki heard him tear the packet, then, a little later, the wet sound of lube being applied. "Now, I need to get you ready. Make sure--if you do this with somebody else, make sure they don't rush things. And use a lot of lube. Pretty sure you can't use too much lube."

More wet sounds, and then a warm hand on the small of his back, a cold, slick finger pushing against the tight ring of muscle. "Just try to relax," Thor said. "I know it's hard, but this will start feeling good faster if you do."

Fuck. He was going to rent Thor out to deflower nervous virgins. "I'm trying."

"I know. And you're doing great." The finger pressed farther inside, and Loki squirmed a little. "Does it hurt?"

"No." He wasn't going to commit that closely to the role. If he told Thor it hurt, Thor would probably freaking stop, because the guy Thor was pretending to be was just that kind of guy. Even if he was also the kind of guy who was totally hot for his little brother. "No, it doesn't hurt, it just feels... weird."

"It'll get better soon." Thor worked his finger deeper into Loki, and Loki groaned. "Was I right?"

Loki tried pushing back against the finger. "It's good," he said. "Still weird, but good."

"Do you think you can take two?"

"Of course I can," Loki mumbled, all injured pride.

Thor chuckled, his hand rubbing circles on Loki's back, and took his finger away. When he brought it back--cold from additional lube--he added a second finger as well. Loki whimpered, and Thor held still. "It's okay," Thor said. "I'm going to take this nice and slow, and you'll be just fine. You're doing great, Loki, I'm so proud of you."

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, if Thor didn't stop that, Loki was going to come now and ruin everything. "Just... let me breathe for a minute."

"As long as you need."

Loki concentrated on breathing slowly, getting himself back under control. "I'm okay," he said. "You can... please. More?"

Thor's breathing had calmed as well; maybe he wasn't the only one who had needed time to come back from the edge. But now he started moving again, working his fingers into Loki, getting him stretched and slick and ready.

"Fuck!" Loki yelped, as Thor's finger pressed against his prostate, sending an electric jolt through Loki's body.

Thor chuckled. "Feels good, doesn't it?" He did it again, and Loki arched his back, letting a needy whine escape. Thor leaned forward, so that he could speak directly into Loki's ear. "Once you can take three fingers, you'll be ready for my cock."

"I'm ready," Loki argued.
"I promised not to hurt you," Thor said. "That means we take it slowly." But he added a third finger, and Loki whined again, relishing the feeling of being filled and stretched. "You're doing so well," Thor said again. "Just tell me if you need me to stop again."

"Please," Loki gasped, nearly sobbing. "Please don't stop. I want, I need to learn, Thor, please." Then, as Thor withdrew his fingers, "No, please don't..."

"Shh," Thor murmured. "You're ready for me now, that's all."

Then Loki felt the blunt head of Thor's cock against him, and willed himself to relax. He might be much more experienced at being fucked than he was pretending to be, but Thor really was big, and he did need to be relaxed to take him.

He kept breathing deeply and slowly, holding himself still as Thor slowly pushed into him, still whispering words of comfort and encouragement.

"Are you all right, Loki?" Thor said, once he was deep inside.

"Fine. Just need to adjust." Then, though Thor couldn't see his expression, he grinned. "How about you? I bet you're feeling pretty good right now. Since you finally got what you want."

Thor froze. Not just holding back to let Loki get used to the feeling of Thor's cock in him, but completely frozen. "What do you mean?"

"I know, Thor. What you want? How you look at me? I've known for years."

"Loki--no--I--"

"It's okay," Loki said. "I want it, too. I want you. Just like you want me." He started to move his hips, pushing back against Thor's cock, encouraging him to start moving.

"You said--" Thor broke off, and Loki almost felt guilty about the genuine confusion in his voice. This wasn't what they'd discussed, but seriously, if Thor just gave in and went along with it, he'd have to see it was much better. This way, they'd have the perfect setup to do this again. And again, and maybe again.

"I didn't lie," he said. "I do want you to teach me everything. Just... not for some other guy. I don't want another guy, Thor, I want you. I've never wanted anybody but you." He lowered his head, burying his face in Thor's blanket. "Never even touched myself without thinking about you."

"Oh, god. Loki--I'm sorry, I never wanted you to know--"

"I wanted to know," he insisted. "I wanted to feel you looking at me. I wanted to feel you touching me, Thor. That's why there's never been anybody else, because they weren't you." That ought to appeal to Thor's inner sap.

It appealed to Thor's inner something, anyway, because he began to move his hips, fucking Loki with long, deep thrusts. "Fuck, Loki. Fuck. You're so fucking beautiful, and I want--I tried not to, but I want you so much--"

"Then take me," Loki gasped. "Please. You can have me. You can have all of me, for as long as you want. Just please, touch me?"

Thor's hot, calloused hand closed around Loki's cock, pumping him in time with Thor's thrusts. "I want to be the first person to make you come," he said. "The only person to make you come, ever."
No one else, Loki, no one but me."

Thor's possessiveness--fictional though it was--was too much for Loki; he thrust into Thor's hand and cried out--the hell with the rest of the dorm, they had to know what he and Thor were doing in here anyway--coming over Thor's hand and onto the blanket.

Thor kept going, still talking: "I love you, you're mine, you've always been mine --" until Loki felt his body tense, felt the stillness that preceded Thor's orgasm.

And then they collapsed together onto Thor's terrible--and now filthy--blanket, sweaty and sticky and both completely exhausted.

Thor kissed Loki, less gently than he had since they started this, and grinned hazily at him. "That was incredible," he said. "We have got to do this again sometime."

"Sure," Loki agreed. He really did agree, but at this point, he would have agreed to just about anything. Although he was totally going to be giving Thor shit about how sappy he got during the role play, because that was going to prove irresistible.

Thor's grin brightened. "Soon?"

"As soon as I can walk," Loki promised. "Now get off me. You weigh a ton."

****

Chapter End Notes

A reminder, for the sake of my own ego, that these haven't undergone anything like the same editing process that the fic proper did.

**Next time:** Yes, Loki really did get bored and text Tony comparing Thor's dick to Tony's.
Bonus Scene #4: Between Chapters 7 & 8

Chapter Summary

Yes, Loki really did get bored and text Tony comparing Thor's dick to Tony's.

Chapter Notes

A "bonus scene" from Loki's point of view. This scene happens between chapters 7 and 8.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

Thor was still sprawled on the bed, grinning up at the ceiling, when Loki got out of the shower. "Your turn," Loki said, and then, when Thor turned to look at him but didn't seem otherwise inclined to move, poked him in the ribs.

"Get a move on," he said. "Or I'll go out and get dinner without you. For some reason, I seem to have burned off a lot of calories tonight."

"For some reason?" Thor repeated, raising up on one elbow. "Let me guess, you have no idea what that reason is."

Loki smirked. "Oh, I don't know, big brother, I think I have some idea." Thor apparently had an inexhaustible supply of enthusiasm for role-play. Which, to be honest, was fine with Loki; it wasn't really his thing, but Thor got so into it that he couldn't help enjoying himself. "Now get up and get into the shower."

Thor sat up all the way, stretching. "You're a bossy pain in the ass, aren't you?"

"I'm the pain in the ass?" Loki laughed. "In the most literal sense, I'm pretty sure that would be you."

Thor's response was to smack Loki on the ass as he got out of bed and ambled toward the door of the bathroom this room shared with the room next door. "Fifteen minutes," he said.

They might not have been doing this for very long, but Loki had already had enough experience with Thor's conception of time to know better. "I won't hold my breath."

He finished getting dressed and then sat down on Thor's bed, leaning back against the wall. He pulled out his phone, scanning his email and reading a few text messages. He didn't really feel like going on Twitter or Facebook; he'd probably just get into an argument with some idiot.

Tony, he thought, grinning to himself. He could text Tony. Tony had wanted to get together tonight--and if he'd heard from Tony before he'd made plans with Thor, he probably would have opted to go out with... well, to go over to Tony's place. He and Tony didn't go out.
So, want to hear how I've been spending my evening? ;)

Tony claimed he didn't want to hear any details about what Loki and Thor got up to, but the way he focused on any scrap that Loki let "slip"—not that it was all that accidental—made Loki strongly doubt that Tony was telling the truth.

The answer came back quickly. Not really. You had plans. What happened to them?

Oh, I'm in the middle of them right now. Thor's in the shower. He got a little messy fucking my brains out.

I do NOT want to know, Loki.

You sure? Because I know you, and I can picture the look on your face when I tell you all about the things Thor can do with his tongue.

I'm busy, Tony responded. Have a good night. Talk to me when you're not on a date.

Loki read that text a couple of times, trying to decide whether Tony was offended by Loki's lack of good manners, or just sulking because Loki was here with Thor and not with him.

Sulking, he decided. Definitely sulking.

So you really don't want to hear that I like your dick better than his?

He waited for a minute, but there was no reply.

His is bigger. You've seen him though. His everything is bigger.

Still no answer.

And he does know what to do with it.

Okay, one more try.

Still, so do you. And like I said, yours is better. If Thor fucks me as hard as I like, I'm sore for days.

There. If Tony didn't answer now, Loki would just give up.

There was a long pause; Loki could hear the water running in the shower and wondered how long it would be before Thor came out.

Then Loki's phone actually rang. Tony's number, of course, so Loki picked it up. "I knew you'd like knowing that."

"I told you I don't," Tony snapped. "I don't want to hear about Thor's dick, I don't want to hear about all the sex you're having while I'm working through a fluid dynamics problem set, I don't want to listen to any of this. And I'm going to turn off my phone now, so you can text me all you want. I won't see them."

Tony hung up now, and Loki sighed. Pushing Tony was fun--one of these days, Tony was going to admit that he was jealous of Thor, and that was probably going to be a very good thing for their relationship, such as it was right now--but it was just barely possible that he'd pushed too far.

He did have a tendency to do that. That wasn't necessarily something he was proud of, but it was also something that was definitely true. He waited a minute or two, while Thor turned the shower
off and then turned the sink on--shaving, maybe, or brushing his teeth; he definitely needed to do the latter, after what they'd been up to.

Then he sent one last text. Tony would have turned his phone off, probably--Loki didn't think he'd say something like that and not follow through. At the very least, he'd thrown it into a drawer or something for the night. But he'd see it in the morning, and maybe it would help.

*Remember how I'm an asshole? Yeah. I didn't think it would bother you, though, so sorry about that.*

There. It might not be the most eloquent apology, but it was an actual apology, which was more than most people ever got from Loki. He hoped Tony appreciated it.

Then the bathroom door opened and Thor came out, a towel slung around his hips, and Loki grinned. And at least he'd have something to distract him from Tony's bad mood for the rest of the evening.

Thor turned out to be an excellent distraction--they went to the diner out by the highway for dinner, and argued about music and whether or not political science (Thor's major) was a huge waste of time or not, and then it was late enough that Loki had gone back to his apartment, because he had an eight AM shift at the library and had already been late three times this semester (all Tony-related).

And so, when Loki finally went to bed at around midnight, he didn't even bother to check his phone. If Tony had read the text, and if Tony had bothered to answer, he could just wait until morning.

Loki managed to maintain that level of indifference all the way until he sat down at the circulation desk the next morning. The actual librarians were all busy elsewhere, and hardly anyone came to use the library this early, so he took his phone out and finally checked to see if he had any messages.

One from Thor, unsurprisingly; Thor *always* texted him the morning (or afternoon, depending on when the date ended) after they'd seen each other. Loki answered that one quickly, and then looked at the rest.

There it was, one message from Tony, sent at about four that morning (so probably when Tony went to bed): *Yes, I remember that you're an asshole. And you're going to keep being an asshole. I've accepted that. (Also, of course you like my dick better; you're not an idiot.)*

Loki smiled and put his phone back in his pocket. He wasn't going to answer that; he'd much prefer to let that particular conversation just fade. He'd text Tony again later that afternoon, maybe, tell him about whatever idiot had come in to annoy him at work.

Someone might possibly get the idea, he thought, that he was getting very attached to Tony Stark.

Someone, Loki realized, would probably be right.

Well, damn. *This* was going to be interesting.

It was probably going to hurt, but it'd be interesting.

****
This week's theme: Loki is doomed.

Insert standard disclaimer: not edited nearly as much as everything else I post is.

Next time: "Tony Stark Is the Worst: Ask Me How!"
Bonus Scene #5: During Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

"Tony Stark Is the Worst: Ask Me How!"

Chapter Notes

A "bonus scene" from Loki's point of view. This scene happens during chapter 9.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

"Hey," Loki said as he fought the daily battle to get his mailbox key to actually open the mailbox, "you live downstairs from me, right? On the second floor?" He hoped he didn't sound as completely insincere as he felt.

He knew damn well where Justin lived. He'd left nasty unsigned notes on Justin's door about the terrible fucking music blasting at all hours of the night, about the garbage dumped in the trashcan... about just about everything Justin ever did, really.

And the last thing Loki would want to do under ordinary circumstances was to have an actual civil conversation with Justin Hammer. But these weren't ordinary circumstances; these were circumstances where he stood a good chance to hear Justin losing his shit about Tony soon, and that was going to be hilarious.

Justin looked deeply suspicious, which demonstrated that at least he wasn't completely stupid. "Yeah. Why?"

"Just being friendly," Loki lied, holding a hand out. "Loki Laufeyson. I'm in 304."

"Justin," he said, shaking Loki's hand. "Hammer. Right beneath you in 204."

"Are you a student? I haven't seen you on campus, but, well, it's a big place." Loki made himself smile, and wasn't sure if he was pleased or nauseated when Justin beamed back at him.

It wasn't that Justin was all that unpleasant to look at. The glasses were kind of nerdy, but that was nothing a trip to LensCrafters couldn't fix. The rest of him wasn't bad--kind of bland for Loki's tastes, but definitely not objectively unattractive.

It was just that he was Justin. He was Loki's annoying neighbor, he was the guy who stole crap off Tony's workbench, he was an irritating little weasel of a man, and Loki didn't want to have to be in a conversation with him.

If this had been Tony's suggestion, Loki probably would have told him the deal was off. But it was his own plan, and calling it off would mean admitting that his plan wasn't perfect, so he was going to see this through. With any luck, Justin would have somewhere to be in five minutes, and would
spend the next year avoiding the creepy, overly-friendly guy from upstairs.

"Grad student, yeah. Engineering. You?"

"Undergrad. Physics."

"Hm. Pure science," Justin said. "Well, it's not for me, but where would engineering be without you guys with your heads in the clouds? You figure out the new theories, we figure out what they're actually good for, yeah?"

What kind of condescending crap was that? God, this guy really was the worst. "Yeah, exactly," Loki agreed. "So, what branch of engineering?"

"Mechanical, mainly. I'm working in robotics. I'm trying to build a prototype for a general household robot, but I'm specifically interested in being able to develop robots that can actually learn new tasks as needed."

And you're failing miserably while trying to steal Tony's work, Loki thought. God, you're such a creep. But he smiled again and said, "That sounds fascinating. I've read a little about robotics, but obviously, I'm not an expert like you are."

Justin beamed, and if he wasn't such an asshole, Loki might have felt bad about this. "Are you interested? I could show you some of what I've been working on, if you want."

He couldn't think of anything potentially less interesting, not after having had Tony show off his work to him, but Loki just kept smiling at him. "That would be...fascinating," he said. It wasn't completely a lie. It would be fascinating to hear the kind of bullshit Justin came up with to cover the fact that he wasn't half as smart as he thought he was.

He got into graduate school, Loki reminded himself, he couldn't be an idiot. But he had to try to show everyone else up, and he didn't have the skills for that, so he resorted to cheating. And stealing from Tony, which automatically put him in the category of "fuck this guy" even if he hadn't also been Loki's most irritating neighbor.

"I was just about to make some coffee," Justin said. "If now's a good time, I mean, and you're not heading out somewhere."

"Now's fine. I just got home, and I'd love some coffee." That part wasn't a lie. It was a chilly, wet day and Loki wouldn't object at all to a hot drink with plenty of caffeine. It was the company that he was likely to find unpleasant.

It wasn't so bad, at first. If he hadn't know that Justin was cheating his way through his project, it would have even been interesting. Justin didn't show him the kinds of detailed schematics that Tony did, but he had some photos and even a few videos of his robot--basic stuff, mostly just motion tests--that Loki would have been intrigued by under other circumstances.

"That's quite impressive," Loki said. "And you invented it yourself?"

To his credit, Justin did shrug and say, "Well, I didn't reinvent the wheel, obviously. A lot of the parts I'm using were manufactured for other purposes. But I've made a lot of refinements, and some new advances."

"Very impressive," Loki said, then realized he was repeating himself. Oh well, Justin didn't seem to notice.
"I wish the department thought so," Justin said.

"They don't? But if they've seen this--"

"They're too busy falling all over themselves to worship this undergrad that they think is the Second freaking Coming," Justin grumbled.


He shook his head. "Damned if I know. Well, I do know, it's because his father gives a lot of money to the department, but I don't know how they justify it to themselves. They gave him lab space! I mean, my lab would still be crowded with three people in it, but they squeezed him in anyway, and he gets some funding for his projects, and every time I meet with my adviser I have to hear about how brilliant Tony Stark is, and how ground-breaking his work is, and how lucky they are that he came here instead of MIT or CalTech or one of the Ivy League schools." He took a drink of his coffee, scowling down at it.

Loki stirred his own coffee, wondering if he'd be able to decapitate Justin with the spoon. It'd be a slow and painful process, but that might well be a bonus. As long as he gagged Justin first; he couldn't stand all the whining. "That must be difficult for you."

"Oh, it is," Justin said. "And to make it even worse, he's out to get me. He's been sabotaging my work."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Really? What did the department say when you went to them about it?"

That would be an interesting conversation to eavesdrop on, since as far as Loki knew, Tony's "sabotage" of Justin's work had involved making it harder for Justin to steal his work, and leaving unhelpful notes around for Justin to "accidentally" open.

Justin flushed angrily. "I didn't go to them, of course. He's their golden boy. They're never going to believe it. They'd laugh if I told them he was jealous of me."

Damn right they would; they knew Tony. "So what are you going to do?"

"Show them all," Justin said. "When my project is successful beyond expectations, and Stark's turns out to be a glorious failure, they'll see that they let themselves be blinded by the promise of Stark money. I'm not saying Tony isn't quite talented, in a limited way, but you know what these prodigies are like; a lot of promise, but he's going to turn out to be no more than mediocre in the long run."

Okay, to be completely fair, Loki didn't know what Tony was going to turn out to be in the long run, but "mediocre" didn't sound that likely. He'd either be brilliant, or he'd fuck up and make a robot army that took over the world.

"He's more interested in partying than in work, anyway," Justin said. "Greatness takes dedication. I spend most of my weekends here at home, working."

"That's a surprise," Loki said, and hoped the sarcasm didn't come across. He couldn't imagine anyone putting up with Justin long enough to want to hang out with him, and as far as dating him went--well. No. Maybe a one-night stand if Justin had taken a vow of silence, but that was about as far as it went.

"Just a typical spoiled little rich kid," Justin went on, obviously not picking up on that sarcasm. Or, probably, anything that Loki had said at all. He was too busy enjoying having an audience for his monologue entitled "Tony Stark Is the Worst: Ask Me How!"
The spoon would be entirely too slow, Loki decided. Not because it would be too cruel to Justin, but because it would mean Justin was around for that much longer. He could throw him off the fire escape, Loki decided. That'd be quick.

"Not like those of us who have to work for everything we get?" Loki said, trusting that Justin wouldn't see any irony in that.

"Exactly. You don't see my father bribing the school to give me special treatment. Or yours."

"My father couldn't afford to bribe the university into giving me an extra helping of meatloaf in the dining hall," Loki said.

"Exactly!" Justin repeated, which settled the question of how Justin was going to step around the issue that his father could, from what Tony said, afford to bribe just as many college administrators as Howard Stark could. He just didn't want to.

Which, of course, was a pretty reasonable attitude; Tony's dad also wasn't buying him special treatment. At least, Tony said he wasn't, and as far as Loki could tell, Tony had more than earned his standing with the department. It was just that Justin seemed to be trying to place himself in the ranks of the downtrodden, which wasn't exactly true. Even this apartment--it was the same cheap crappy one that Loki lived in, but the furniture was definitely nicer. Maybe Justin had had it in his college apartment, back when Daddy was paying the bills, and had moved it here. But there weren't any brick-and-board or milk-crate shelves, the couch looked well-upholstered, and nothing seemed to have come from IKEA.

"If I could just get the department to give me half the support they're giving Tony Stark, I could show them what real genius looks like," Justin went on.

"You'll show them anyway," Loki said encouragingly, and watched Justin brighten.

"You're right, I will," he said.

"But right now, I have to go," Loki said. He got to his feet, carrying his mug over to the sink.

"Thank you," Justin said, getting up, putting his hand on Loki's arm. "Thank you so much. You don't know what it means to me to have someone to talk to."

Loki could probably guess. It was obvious nobody wanted to listen to this guy whine. He almost felt bad for him, but really, he was such a little creep. And it wasn't like Loki was planning to do anything to him. If Justin quit trying to steal Tony's research and focused on his own work, everything would work out just fine for him. All Loki was doing was setting himself up for a front seat at the fireworks if Justin kept fucking around like this.

But he really didn't like thinking about how pathetic Justin was, or the way he was looking at him like Loki was his new best friend (oh, please don't let him be thinking any more than that, Loki thought), so he didn't linger in Justin's apartment.

I hate your friend Justin even more than I did yesterday, he texted Tony once he was back in his own apartment.

He's not my friend, the answer came back quickly.

He thinks he's mine.

Loki's phone rang a few seconds later; Loki answered it, looking forward to telling Tony all about
the immensely annoying hour he'd just spent.

"Looking forward to talking to Tony" was becoming way too large of a part of Loki's day, to tell the truth.

****

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, Mir, we all know, you didn't edit the hell out of these like you usually do.

Next time: How to break up with your brother.
On the surface, this should have been a pleasant evening.

He liked Thor. He liked spending time with Thor, even out of bed, though bed was definitely on the agenda for later in the evening.

Or rather, bed would have been on the agenda later in the evening, except that Loki knew that it wasn't going to be. He couldn't put this off that long, because if he did, he'd be in too good of a mood afterward for this conversation, and he'd put it off until the next time he saw Thor, and then he'd put it off until the next time, and then, well, he'd never get around to having the conversation at all, and he'd promised that he would.

He could wait, he decided, until after they finished eating. No point in ruining everyone's appetite with a conversation about Thor's (justifiable) mommy issues.

So they lounged on Thor's bed, lazily kissing and petting each other, until the pizza got there, and then they ate pizza while a spy thriller played on Thor's tablet.

Thor did his best to keep up the conversation: stories about funny (or "funny," because most of the time, Loki was sure that you not only had to be there, but you had to have taken a few hockey pucks to the head) things that had happened at hockey practice; his plans to go and visit his girlfriend over Christmas because she wasn't going to be coming back to their hometown for the break; interesting things from his reading for one of his poli sci classes. (They were at least marginally interesting; Loki wasn't all that fascinated by politics, but it was better than yet another story about something the goalie said after practice.)

Loki tried to respond normally--though even "normally," he wouldn't have had all that much to say in response to most of that--but instead, he kept thinking, I have something to tell you, and you might not like it.

Finally, when most of the pizza was gone, Thor closed the box and pushed it away from them. "Okay, Loki, what's going on? If you didn't want to come over tonight, you could have canceled, you know."
"It's not that. I did want to come over." Or he had, before this afternoon when his mom had called him, and he'd regretted the evening a week or so ago when he'd finally got up the nerve to tell her that he'd met Thor. "But I've got something I need to talk to you about, and I'm not sure you're going to like it."

Thor frowned a little. "Is it worse than the last thing you had to talk to me about?"

Loki laughed. "No, it's nothing nearly that weird."

"It's that guy, isn't it. The one you introduced me to when we went to Carla's. I know you've been seeing him; are you guys getting serious? I get that not everybody's okay with open relationships, so if we need to walk things back to the 'just friends' level..."

"God, no!" Loki shook his head. "Tony and I aren't--we're not going to get serious. Tony wasn't going to get his head out of his ass any time soon. Pepper had done one hell of a number on him, in Loki's opinion, and now Tony wouldn't imagine actually going out with someone she didn't approve of. And if she was one of Clint's friends, she wasn't ever going to approve of Loki, just like none of Loki's friends would ever approve of Clint.

"So what is it?" Thor reached out and paused the movie.

Loki sighed. "I talked to my mom this afternoon."

"Your mom, as in your stepmother?" Loki noticed that Thor didn't mention that she was also his biological mother. Whether that was more because Thor didn't want to remind himself that they were technically stepbrothers, or because Thor didn't want to think about his mother, Loki couldn't say.

"Yeah. My actual mother's dead, Thor, I really doubt she can get cell service wherever she is." Thor made a face at him, and Loki rolled his eyes before continuing. "She's friends with someone who teaches comparative religion here, and he's asked her to come and give a guest lecture to one of his classes about the Norse pantheon. She apparently does it every couple of years, when he teaches a particular elective."

He shrugged. His mom traveled pretty regularly--not all the time, but for conferences, sometimes to give lectures. His parents only lived a couple of hours away from here, so she could technically come here, give the lecture, and go home the same day or the next morning.

"She wants to stay a couple of days," he went on. "Partly to see me--I stayed in town over the summer, so we haven't actually seen each other since last Christmas." Which ought to tell Thor exactly what a close-knit family they were. Sure, he talked to his mom at least once a week, and every now and then she put his dad on the phone, but he didn't go home on weekends, even if it wasn't really that far. And as soon as he'd moved into an apartment, he'd started finding summer jobs to keep him on campus.

"Partly," Thor repeated warily. "And what's the other part?"

"Last time I talked to her, I'd told her that I met you. Not how I met you," he added quickly, "but that you went to school here, and I knew you."

"Did she even care?"

"Yeah, of course she did. I told you before that she tried to write to you a few times. She said she tried to find you once you were eighteen and could make your own decisions about whether or not you wanted to see her, but she couldn't. You weren't at your old address, and she called the old
phone number she had for your father, but it was somebody else's now."

"We moved when I was in middle school," Thor said. "So if she was writing to the house where she lived with us, yeah. My dad doesn't even live in the same town any more."

"Exactly. And she's not great with online stuff--I mean, she can Google, but I really doubt that she could track you down online. So she didn't even know where to find you, even though now she can contact you without your dad being able to take her to court for it." He shouldn't have had that last slice of pizza; it was sitting in his stomach like a brick.

He didn't want to be in the middle of this. He didn't want to run interference between Thor and his mom. He didn't want to have to defend his mom to Thor--partly because he wasn't sure if defending her was the right thing to do, but mostly because Loki only tended to get involved with other people's personal issues when it was one, something that also affected him, or two, entertaining.

This wasn't entertaining. He loved his mother and he liked Thor, and he didn't want there to be drama. Drama was only fun when he was the one causing it.

"Anyway," he went on, "she asked me to tell you that she'd like to see you when she's here, if you want to. And to give you her number, so at least you can get in touch with her."

Thor shook his head. "What good is that going to do? I needed my mom when I was four. I needed her when I was fourteen. Now, though? I've gotten used to doing without her." He stabbed at the screen of his tablet, starting the movie again.

Well. Apparently he was done with that conversation. Loki would have to tell his mom that Thor didn't want to see her, but he was pretty sure she'd been expecting that. She wouldn't be happy about it, but she had to know there was a good chance that Thor wouldn't want to see the mother he thought had intentionally abandoned him.

On the screen, the hero was rappelling down the side of a building while the bad guys shot at him. Thor watched in silence for a minute or two, then said, "What does she want from me?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. To see you? To tell you herself that she's sorry she didn't figure out how to take you with her? To buy you dinner? Ask her that, not me." He took his phone out and opened up his contacts. "Look, I'm going to text you her number. You don't have to use it. You don't even have to keep it, but at least you'll have it." He sent the text without giving Thor a chance to argue.

"Okay," Thor said, after his phone buzzed. "I have it. Thanks, I guess."

They both stared at the movie for a few more minutes until Thor broke the silence again. "What do you think I should do?"

"I don't know," Loki said. "I'm not you. I know her. She's been a good mother to me. So I don't have your perspective at all."

"That's what I mean, though. You know both of us. Do you think it's worth it?"

"I suppose that depends on whether you think there's a chance you'll ever stop being angry with her for leaving. Or at least a chance that there'll be other things in there along with being angry at her." He shrugged. "At the very worst, you'll get a free dinner out of it? Not from the cafeteria, not crappy delivery from whatever pizza place had five dollar coupons this week. She's come to see me a couple of times since I got here; we usually go someplace decent."
Thor looked to be considering that. Mentioning the free dinner was probably a good idea. Loki had been a student long enough that he knew the power of free, decent food. Not that he thought it would actually be the thing to sway Thor, but it'd be something he could point to if he didn't want to admit that yes, after all this time, he really did want to see his mother at least once.

"I don't know if I want to go," Thor said. "But I kind of feel like I should? Nothing says I ever have to see her again after that, yeah? I'm not making any promises that we'll have a good relationship, or any relationship at all. But maybe I could do dinner."

Good. That sounded like Loki was going to be able to get out of this conversation before he had to cope with Thor's angst. Loki was terrible with sympathy, and he could barely cope with his own angst. (Not that he had any, these days. He was over the breakup with Clint, and he'd already accepted that Tony was a hopeless moron hung up on his ex-girlfriend. So any stress and anxiety in Loki's life was of a purely academic nature, or occasionally related to making sure he got enough hours at work that he could cover his rent and buy food.)

"Okay, then," he said. "I'll let her know. And you should text her or something so that she has your number and you two can work out the details, because I'm not going to be the go-between any more." He sat up a little straighter. "You know what this means, right? For us?"

"Yeah."

"It's one thing to say we're 'not technically related' when we really don't have any kind of family relationship at all, but if you're going to start talking to your mother, there's a chance that one day we're going to be looking at one another across the dinner table at Christmas. So the sooner we break this off and start treating one another like we're normal stepbrothers, the kind who, oh, knew that--"

"I said yeah," Thor said. "I get it. As long as we weren't family, that was fine, but maybe we're going to be, now. And maybe not," he added quickly. "I'm not making any promises." He reached out, putting his hand on Loki's arm. "So we could--I mean, you're already here, we'd already intended--"

Loki shook his head. "Let's just make it a clean break," he said. "I'll tell Mom to expect to hear from you in the next day or two. And I'll see you around."

Thor hesitated. "Don't--you don't have to be a stranger, you know? I know people saw us together so we might not want to advertise widely that we're brothers, but..." He paused. "If we're going to end this because we're family now, then I'm not going to object to the idea of being your family."

That was unexpected, and Loki wasn't sure whether or not it was welcome. He had a family. Granted, that was basically his parents--which meant his stepmother and the father he barely talked to--but he did have a family.

But he liked Thor, in a way that went beyond "he's not bad to hang out with while we're working up to having sex," so...

"Yeah," he said. "I won't forget you exist." That much he could definitely promise. Everything else would probably depend on how things worked out between Thor and his... and their mother.

"Good," Thor said, smiling at him. "And... good luck with that guy you're seeing. I know you said it's nothing serious, but anyway, I hope things work out the way you want."

Loki snorted. "Not likely," he muttered. Tony was fun to be around and great in bed, but he was
also, in terms of any potential relationship, the absolute worst. "But thanks," he added awkwardly, hoping it wouldn't encourage Thor to keep talking about it. He didn't want to talk about Tony. Not with Thor, and not with anybody else, either.

"You want to finish the movie?" Thor asked, gesturing toward his tablet.

"No," he said. "I think I'm going to just go home, if you don't mind." He got up, taking his jacket off the chair where he'd tossed it and shrugging it on.

"Yeah, okay," Thor said, picking up his phone and staring at it. "I should probably. I don't know. Text her?"

Against his better judgment, Loki said, "Not tonight. Call Jane. Talk to her about it. You'll feel better." And then, before he got sucked into an emotional discussion, he let himself out of Thor's room.

It would have worked out so much better for him if Tony had been the one who turned out to be his stepbrother, if Thor had been the one who was completely single and unrelated to Loki's family in any way. Thor wasn't a likely candidate for the love of Loki's life, but he wasn't looking for that anyway, just someone to spend time with for the next couple of years, until they both graduated and probably went their separate ways. And Thor, despite the hockey and the pointless major, would have been good for that.

Tony, on the other hand, wasn't, no matter how compatible they were. Tony was a fling, and Tony wasn't going to be anything other than a fling, and maybe if Loki was getting rid of unnecessarily complicated flings in his life right now, he ought to think about walking away from Tony while he still could. While it would suck, and maybe hurt a little, but it wouldn't be shitty the way that breaking up with Clint had been.

But when he got into his car and pulled out of the dorm parking lot, instead of turning toward his apartment, he found himself turning in the other direction, the one that would take him to Tony's apartment building.

He wasn't going to Tony's place because this evening had gotten to him. He wasn't sad about the end of things with Thor, and if he had been, Tony would be the last person he'd have ever gone to for comfort, or sympathy, or even distraction. He and Tony didn't have that kind of relationship.

As Tony had said once--not about Loki, but it definitely still applied--the only relationship he was interested in was with Loki’s dick, and Loki had agreed to that by continuing to hang around Tony.

He didn't really know why he was going to Tony's place instead of his own apartment. No, that wasn't true; he'd been thinking about going home, and had found himself turning that way.

Shit. He was getting in over his head, and this was going to crash down around him again, just like it had with Clint.

But he pulled into the parking lot behind Tony's building all the same, and texted Tony to see if he was home, because apparently, he never fucking learned.

****
**Next time:** Amora suspects Loki is about to get very boring.
Bonus Scene #7: Between Chapters 11 & 12

Chapter Summary

Amora suspects Loki is about to get very boring.

Chapter Notes

A "bonus scene" from Loki's point of view. This scene happens between chapters 11 and 12.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

****

"You know I'm majoring in Database Management, not computer repair," Amora muttered, frowning at Loki's laptop screen.

Across the room, Loki sat on his lumpy couch, trying to read a textbook on his phone. The screen wasn't big enough for him to see the diagrams, damn it, and they couldn't be enlarged. He wasn't going to be able to complete this assignment until he got his computer back from her. "I just need to be able to print," he said. "It printed fine the day before yesterday. This morning, it couldn't find my printer. I can still print from my phone, though, so it's not the printer."

"Yeah, I know, it's a simple fix. You've got a corrupted driver, is all. Probably a Windows update killed it." She shook her head. "You should have been able to fix it."

"I don't fix computers," Loki said. "I'm trying to understand the fundamental laws underpinning the entire universe. That's far more important." He could feel her glare boring through his skull, so he added, "Also, you know how bad I am at figuring out what's going on once I'm already pissed off and frustrated."

"I know," she said. "That's how I won every game I have ever played against you. I'd get you angry, you'd get stupid, I'd emerge victorious." She grinned at him. "Okay, it's installing. I'll give it a few minutes and then we'll see if that did the trick."

"Thanks. I know you had better things to do than to come over here this afternoon."

"Of course I did." She flipped her blonde hair back over her shoulders and pushed her chair back from Loki's table. "I'm way too busy to make time for you, Loki. You know that."

He grinned back at her. He'd known Amora since kindergarten. They'd been best friends for about half of that time, and worst enemies for the other half; there was never any middle ground with Amora. Or, Loki had to admit, with him, either. But they'd been on the "friends" end of the spectrum since they'd started college, partly because even though they were at the same school, it was easier to avoid each other when they started annoying one another.
"Yeah, I know. And I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule of alternately intimidating all the guys in your department with how much smarter than them you are, and terrifying them by flirting with them."

"Speaking of which," Amora said, "why haven't you told me about that gorgeous blond hunk I saw you with at Carla's a few weeks ago?"

"Thor?" Had it really been that long since he'd spent much time with Amora? Probably. Between getting that paper ready for Dr. Pym, his job, his normal course load, and Tony, he hadn't had a lot of free time this semester.

"Is that his name?" She paused. "It suits him. He does look sort of Nordic. I could see him as a ski instructor."

"He plays hockey," Loki said. "Is that close enough?"

"Ugh," she said. "A jock."

"You didn't have any problem with jocks in high school. You went out with every single football player you ever caught me staring at in class." And every other guy Loki had been interested in, too. Not that he was deluding himself that he'd had a chance with most of them, who were either relentlessly straight or, at best, relentlessly closeted.

She scowled at him. "That had nothing to do with my personal preferences. I did that as a favor to you!"

"Screwing the guy I had a crush on was a favor to me?" That had been the cause of their last bout of Not Speaking, the one that had lasted for most of the junior year and the start of senior year as well.

"I was trying to find out if he was straight," she said. "Oh, the driver's finished installing," she went on, ignoring Loki's sputtered protests. "Let's see if it worked." After a few seconds, the printer on top of Loki's bookshelf whirred to itself and then spit out a piece of paper.

Amora got up and examined it. "Perfect," she said. "Now, tell me about this hockey player of yours."

"He's not mine," Loki said. "Ancient history." Then, because if anyone on campus was likely to find out about Thor's connection to his mother, it'd be the girl from his hometown, he added, "And all we did was go out dancing once."

"Then you don't mind if I steal him?"

"Be my guest. I don't think he's your type, though."

She pouted. "Doesn't he like girls at all?"

"He does," Loki confirmed. "But you just said you're not really into jocks."

"Details," she sniffed. "Anyway, if he's ancient history, where've you been all semester?"

He shrugged. "Class? Working?"

"You've had classes and a job since freshman year, and I still saw you pretty regularly until this term. What happened?" She closed Loki's laptop and went over to sit next to him on the couch.
"Come on, tell Auntie Amora all about it."

"If you were my aunt, family reunions would be a lot more interesting." And they were going to be interesting enough if Thor ever started showing up. Then he shrugged. "I met this guy, that's all."

"Really? Promise me you're not going to get all boring like you were back when you were dating William Tell." She made a face. "'He's so wonderful, Amora.' 'I love him so much, Amora.' 'Let me tell you this cute thing he did, Amora.'"

"I didn't sound like that when I was dating Clint."

"You did for a while," she said. "And then you got even more boring: 'He stood me up again, Amora.' 'We had another fight, Amora.' 'He left me, Amora.' 'I miss him so much, Amora.'"

She might've been mocking him about it now, but Loki couldn't really be pissed at her for it; she hadn't made fun of him at the time. She'd listened, and kept him from getting too stupidly drunk, and even persuaded him that going to Clint's apartment in the middle of the night to "talk about what went wrong" was a terrible idea that might have consequences beyond just the obvious one where Loki would look like a complete idiot.

So after all that, she got to mock him for a while if that was what she wanted.

"I'm not going to do that this time," he said. "I mean, it's been weeks, and you didn't even know until today." He shrugged. "Besides, it's different than Clint. Tony and I aren't dating. We're just fuckbuddies." Then he grinned at her. "And in the absence of Mr. Right, Mr. 'Great in Bed' will do fine for the moment."

She brightened a little. "Ooh, now that I don't mind hearing about. Details? And don't tell me you don't kiss and tell, because I know better. You absolutely do."

Loki hadn't realized how much he wanted to tell someone about Tony until just now. Thor knew about him, but Loki didn't want to talk too much about the guy he was fucking, not to the other guy he'd been fucking. And most of his other friends were people he knew from classes or work, the kind you'd study with or grab lunch with, maybe even invite along to the movies or a bar, but not the kind of friends you called to talk about the guy you weren't even dating.

But Amora would listen, especially if Loki threw in enough details, so he found himself telling her about the day he'd met Tony in the elevator, the great sex, the more great sex... but also about the night Tony had worked on his robot and Loki had curled up on his couch to work, and all the other times they'd studied together. About making barely-adequate spaghetti together. About how fun it was--and how easy it was--to annoy the hell out of Tony, until Tony was at that stage where he couldn't stop laughing, even while he called Loki an asshole.

"So why aren't you and this guy picking out engagement rings?" Amora asked. "I mean, he sounds like exactly what you're looking for. He doesn't even mind your personality, which you've got to admit has been a major obstacle for you in the past." She said the last part with a sickly-sweet smile that in no way fooled Loki.

"Neither one of us is looking for that right now," Loki said. "He's still in love with his ex-girlfriend. I'm just interested in a little fun." And if he kept saying that, maybe it'd be true.

"Uh-huh," she said, because clearly he might have been convincing to somebody, but not to her. "Well, good for you, then. Just--don't go getting boring on me."

"Not going to happen," he promised.
But he knew what she was really telling him, and he also knew that he was definitely lying.

At least Amora didn't seem inclined to call him on it.

****

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: only slightly edited.

Next time: The aftermath of the breakup, from Loki's side.
"Loki? This is a surprise."

Loki could see over Thor's shoulder that he wasn't alone in his room. At least there were enough people there that he probably hadn't interrupted a date. Unless Thor was having a Sunday-night orgy.

Fuck, let him not have interrupted a Sunday-night orgy.

"Yeah, I can go," he said. It had been stupid to come here anyway. It wasn't like he and Thor were friends. And they weren't really family, either. They were... Loki didn't know a good word for what they were, really, but it didn't justify turning up at Thor's room like this, whatever it was.

Thor frowned at him. "What's wrong?"

"Who says something's wrong?" Everything was fucking wrong, that was what. Tony goddamned Stark was fucking wrong. Loki's entire life was fucking wrong.

"You turned up here without calling or texting. And, frankly, you look like shit." Thor's eyes narrowed. "Have you been--"

"No," Loki interrupted. No, he had not been fucking crying, because he was a goddamned adult and he didn't cry because some fucking asshole he'd picked up in an elevator didn't love him.

"Just come in so Volstagg can stop trying to hide the beer. The RA lives across the hall," Thor said, and Loki gave up and did.

There were about half a dozen people in Thor's room already--four guys, other than Thor, and a dark-haired girl who looked familiar. Not exactly the environment Loki wanted to be in right now.

"I'm interrupting," he said, hovering toward the door. If he really wanted to be there, he wouldn't have given a damn if he'd been interrupting, but he didn't. He wanted to go home and... act like a fucking twelve-year-old whose crush had answered "Do you like me?" by checking "NO."

"Somebody give Loki a beer," Thor said.
It was shitty beer. It was the shitty beer that the pizza place Tony always ordered from sold, and no matter how impassive Loki attempted to look as a blond guy handed him a can of it, something must have shown on his face, because Thor said, "And you, sit down and tell me what's going on. I'll kick them out if you want."

"Hey!" the girl protested.

"He's my brother," Thor said, so that settled the question of how Thor was going to explain him.

Loki shrugged. "They don't have to go. Nothing happened." He took the beer from the blond guy and sat down--everyone else was on the floor, so Loki sat there too, and Thor sat next to him. In what was probably a smart move, he didn't actually touch Loki--Loki wasn't sure Thor had worked out what appropriate sibling touching would look like. They were pretty new to it, after all, and Thor had spent a lot of time considering inappropriate sibling touching.

Thor introduced the rest of them while Loki drank his beer and tried to get his face under conscious control again. They seemed to all be on Thor's hockey team. The girl was Sif--and Loki did know her, he remembered now; they'd had Spanish 102 together and she'd been a complete asshole to him (though, he admitted, not without ample provocation)--and the pretty blond guy was Fandral, who was definitely not straight from the looks he was giving Thor. The other three were Volstagg, Hogun, and Heimdall, but which was which, Loki didn't pay attention to. He was too busy staring at the logo on his beer can and wallowing in his own misery.

"It's that guy, isn't it," Thor said finally. "The one from the bar. Tony, right?"

Shit. He had introduced Thor and Tony, hadn't he? Of course he had, because he'd been pissed off that Tony wouldn't even acknowledge him, and Loki had wanted to embarrass the shit out of him. And rub it in that Loki was there with someone who was, objectively, a lot better-looking than Tony even though musclebound blonds weren't really Loki's type.

Because--and it wasn't like this was news to Loki--he was generally an asshole, but he was a truly spectacular asshole when he was unhappy.

See also: Clint Barton.

See also: tonight.

See also: his entire fucking life.

Loki shrugged. "Maybe."

"I feel like as your older brother--"

"You're my stepbrother, and you're three months older than me. Which is about the same length of time that you've known I exist, so cut the crap."

"--I should offer to beat him up for you, if you want," Thor continued, unperturbed.

"Kind of," Loki admitted, "but even for me that'd be a ridiculous overreaction, so don't. He really didn't do anything. We just--" They hadn't broken up, because that would have implied they were dating in the first place, which Tony had repeatedly made clear they hadn't been. He shrugged again. "We got tired of each other. It was basically a string of one-night stands, so it's not like it was any big deal."

"If you say so," Thor said, sounding highly doubtful.
"I do. Plus he's in love with his ex-girlfriend. I hate her. She even has a stupid name. Who the hell calls herself Pepper?"

Fandral leaned forward. "Are you talking about Tony Stark?" Loki hadn't even realized he'd been listening to their conversation.

"I'm trying not to talk about Tony Stark," Loki pointed out. "I came here specifically to not talk about Tony Stark. I intend to spend the rest of my life not talking about Tony Stark, because fuck him."

"You already did that," Thor said, and Loki punched him in the arm because there was no way Thor should be allowed to think he was funny.

"I already did that," Fandral said.

"Everyone already did that," Sif corrected him scornfully.

"No," Thor said. "Pretty sure it's just you two. And Loki, but he did it a lot."

"Thor, shut up," Loki hissed. "You are not helping."

Fandral frowned. "Oh, damn, you didn't fall for him, did you? Bad idea. He's hung up on his ex. And he never calls again, anyway."

He'd called Loki. He'd called Loki to talk about his day, he'd called Loki when he was upset about Justin being an asshole, he'd called Loki when he wanted to get laid, he'd called Loki when it was three in the morning and he couldn't sleep.

Not Pepper—and she was still Tony's friend, he could have called her for most of those things, and at least some of the time she'd have been available. He'd called Loki.

Tony had sworn he wasn't still in love with Pepper any more, and Loki hadn't listened to him. Maybe it was bullshit. It probably was bullshit. But it's not like he hadn't listened to bullshit before. Worst-case scenario, this would have happened a few days or weeks later. Best-case scenario....

Loki took a very long drink of his incredibly terrible beer—how appropriate that it reminded him of the equally terrible Tony goddamn Stark—and said, lightly, "Of course I didn't. He just pissed me off, that's all." Then he smiled at Fandral, making eye contact long enough that Fandral turned slightly pink before smiling back. "But I'm feeling a lot better about things now."

Well. Not really that much better, but at least he thought he could probably fake it for a while.

****

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: Only barely edited.

Next time: Justin comes by for sympathy. Anyone want to place bets on whether or not he gets it?
The last thing Loki wanted right now was anyone showing up to his apartment.

No, that was the next-to-the-last thing he wanted. The last thing he wanted was, specifically, Justin Hammer showing up at his apartment, pounding on the door. "Loki? Are you in there? I really need to talk to you."

Dammit. Well, it wasn't like life could get all that much worse. He might as well let Justin in before the yelling and the loud knocking bothered Loki's other neighbors, he decided, and went over and unlocked the door.

"What do you want, Justin?"

He could see Justin looking him over, and knew exactly what Justin was looking at: he'd skipped class today and hadn't been scheduled to work, so he hadn't bothered getting dressed; there was a coffee stain on his t-shirt, his pajama pants had a hole in the knee, and he hadn't felt like brushing his hair. If he was going to stay home today and wallow in misery, he was going to seriously fucking wallow.

"You look like crap," Justin pronounced as he came into the apartment. "You're not contagious, are you? I can't afford to get sick this late in the semester, especially not now."

"No, it's not contagious," Loki said, not even trying to hide his irritation. "What do you want? This isn't a great time, you might have noticed."

"Everything has gone to shit," Justin proclaimed dramatically.

"You're telling me," Loki said, then, at Justin's confused look, amended it to, "I mean, tell me about it." He looked at the coffee remaining in the pot. He'd kept the burner going all night, and the remaining coffee was thick and almost jet black.

"I'll make more coffee," he said, because even today, he wasn't going to drink that shit. And while he didn't really care about being a good host to Justin, he required either caffeine or alcohol to get through a conversation with him. Since it wasn't even noon, it was too early to drink unless he was planning on going on a bender.
Tony wasn't worth that.

Justin pulled out a chair and sat down while Loki busied himself rinsing out the coffeepot and starting the coffeemaker. "This time, Tony Stark has gone too far," he said.

Even though Loki had been expecting that, pretty much--what else did Justin ever talk about?--hearing Tony's name still felt like a kick in the gut. He was glad he still had his back to Justin, so that he didn't have to explain the way he winced at the name.

"What did he do?" he asked. There weren't any clean mugs, so he decided he could wash a few dishes while the coffee brewed. It meant he didn't have to look at Justin as well as listen to him.

"Got me kicked out of my lab space," Justin whined. "He went to the department with some kind of accusation that I was trying to sabotage his work, like I'd have had to. He just doesn't know what the fuck he's doing. I mean, he's not bad for an undergraduate, but not really on the same level as the rest of us, you know?"

What Loki knew was that he'd like to punch Justin in the face, no matter how furious he was with Tony right now himself. "So they believed him?" They had to have believed Tony, since that was exactly the kind of shit Justin had been doing.

"I'll say. I had to spend an hour having my adviser rip me a new one. He says I'm fucking lucky that there's no solid proof that I was actually trying to sabotage Tony, or I'd be expelled. As it is, I've lost lab space for the rest of the year, I'll be put at the bottom of the list next year after the new students, and according to my adviser, I should 'consider myself fortunate' that I'm in the joint MSE/Ph.D program and can get a job with my dad's company after I get my doctorate, because nobody in the department is likely to recommend me for anything ever."

He slammed his fist down on the table. "And that also means that I'm not likely to get an assistantship next year, either."

To Loki's eyes, that looked like Justin had gotten off almost scot-free. He didn't need a recommendation; he wasn't getting expelled. But before he could say any of that, Justin went on talking.

"The worst part is that he says I should be grateful that Stark doesn't want to make a big deal about it. If he did, they'd probably have had to be harsher with me, even without the proof, but all Stark wanted is to not have to share lab space with me any more. What the hell kind of a game is he playing? Trying to make himself look saintly to the department, like they're not already worshiping at his feet already?"

No, Loki thought. The fun had just gone out of this for Tony, and he didn't care about making sure Justin got his comeuppance. Loki could understand that, because the fun had gone out of this for him, too. All he wanted was the same thing Tony had apparently wanted: for Justin to go the fuck away.

He poured two mugs of coffee and set them on the table, then sat down across from Justin. "Maybe he's just a better person than you are, which wouldn't be hard," Loki said.

"Stark is--"

"Oh, Tony's a complete asshole," Loki said. "And yet, so much better than you."

"You don't even know him," Justin spluttered.
"Sure I do," Loki says. "Tony's a very popular guy. A lot of people know him. He may be an asshole, but he has certain--let's just call them talents."

Justin just gaped at him for a minute. Then, to Loki's surprise, his face crumpled. "I--you know Tony. You're friends with Tony."

"I wouldn't say that," Loki said. "I know him. I'm not actually one of his biggest fans these days, though."

Hope dawned again in Justin's expression. "So you do understand! Tony's a terrible person, he's--"

"You know, as someone who has exactly no reason to love Tony Stark," Loki began, and winced at his own phrasing. No reason to love Tony? That was definitely accurate. But he'd made that stupid mistake anyway, and until he got over it, he was just going to have to live with the fact that he did.

He went on quickly, trying to cover up his hesitation. "I really ought to be on your side, because you're right. Tony is absolutely the worst. He's immature, he's self-centered, he's incapable of behaving like a functional adult human being."

He was funny, he was charming, there was something about the way his face lit up when he talked about his work that even now, in memory, made Loki's chest feel tight. He'd been ridiculously proud of his ability to make crappy tacos and burnt garlic toast. And Loki missed him, despite the fact that he was a disaster.

"But you're not on my side, are you?" Justin said. "You're on his." He actually looked sad about that--sad and surprised--which Loki might have cared about (probably wouldn't, because it was Justin, but might have) on a better day. This wasn't that day.

"I should be sympathetic to you," Loki said again. "But the problem is, you're such a slimy creep that no matter how I feel about Tony, I just can't be."

Justin stared down at his cup of coffee. "I thought we were friends."

"Yeah, you probably did," Loki said. "But we're not friends, Justin. And you should have known that. All you've ever wanted is someone who'll let you whine at them, and that's not friendship."

And then, because he might as well be honest, he added, "And all I ever wanted was to watch you melt down over how much better Tony is than you are, and that's not friendship either."

He ought to have felt better when Justin stormed out of his apartment, looking close to tears. It served him right for being such an asshole, after all.

Fuck Tony Stark for ruining even that for him.

****

Chapter End Notes

[insert standard editing disclaimer here]

Next time: The scene in the physics building, from Loki's perspective.
Loki was either incredibly furious or incredibly touched at the way Thor had responded to Loki's minor breakdown in his dorm room the other day. To be honest, it was generally at least a little of both, but which feeling predominated was a bit of a toss-up at any given moment.

Thor himself was keeping his distance a lot of the time, probably because enough people had seen him and Loki together that they were trying to not make a big deal out of the fact that they were brothers. People's memories would fade in a few months, although Loki still wasn't sure he wanted to say much about it while they were still here in college. Maybe when Loki had gone elsewhere for grad school and Thor was doing whatever poli sci majors did (Work at Target? Flip burgers?), but not yet.

But Thor had apparently convinced some of his friends from the dorm's hockey team to spend time with Loki on a regular basis. Sif had flatly refused, and Loki couldn't blame her; he didn't like her any more than she liked him. Volstagg and Hogun turned up from time to time, but Loki's most predictable shadows were Fandral and Heimdall, together or separately.

Today, both of them had turned up, informing Loki that he was coming to eat dinner in the dining hall with them and then to watch their hockey match against a team from one of the other dorms. Neither activity held a lot of appeal for Loki, but he recognized that he did have to eat, even if he hadn't actually felt hungry since the night he'd walked out of Tony's apartment. The hockey match sounded boring as hell, but going home, doing his homework, and then staring into space for the next several hours until he was exhausted enough to fall asleep didn't sound all that thrilling, either.

Maybe that was how to get him to one of Thor's hockey games: ask him when he was so miserable that even the game didn't sound worse than anything else did.

"Okay, fine," he said, "I'll go watch your game. Happy now?"

"Thor will be," Heimdall said.

"And yes, we're happy," Fandral said, smiling at him.

It was, Loki noted almost absently, a very nice smile. Damn Tony, anyway. Loki couldn't even
appreciate the fact that a good-looking (and not actually stupid) jock seemed to be flirting with him, because Fandral wasn't Tony. Loki knew that feeling would pass, eventually, but for right now, it was just something else to be pissed off at Tony for, right along with the way he always put Pepper ahead of Loki even though Tony and Pepper had broken up and Loki was right there and in love with him.

And then the three of them went through the archway into the lobby, and even though it was crowded, it was like there was some kind of magnet drawing Loki's eyes to one guy standing on the other side of the room, talking to Bruce Banner, who Loki had had several classes with in the past.

But it wasn't Bruce who made Loki's stomach twist and his chest feel tight. It was the fact that Bruce was talking to Tony.

Tony hadn't seen them, or didn't seem to have; just in case, though, Loki put his hand on Fandral's back as they walked, giving Fandral what he hoped looked like a flirtatious smile.

Just in time, because Tony looked in their direction and immediately started toward them, leaving Bruce standing alone, looking perplexed.

No. Loki didn't want to talk to Tony, didn't want to listen to Tony trying to explain how believing Pepper, trusting her instead of talking to Loki about whatever he was worried about, always taking Pepper's side in everything--sneaking around with Loki like they were doing something wrong, for fuck's sake, because Pepper might get upset--was perfectly justified, and Loki was the bad guy for finally having had enough of it.

He didn't want to listen because it was bullshit. He didn't want to listen because he was afraid he might possibly fall for it, and then he'd be letting himself in for another round of Tony's crap, and it was going to be even worse the next time.

So he tugged on Fandral's sleeve, and leaned in and whispered, "Act like I've just said something absolutely filthy to you," and then, when Fandral seemed to hesitate, added, "Please?"

"Anything," Fandral said, chuckling, and punching Loki lightly on the arm. "You're terrible," he added a little more loudly, grinning at Loki.

And oh, it would be so much easier if Loki could just forget Tony and concentrate on trying to make Fandral smile like that at him all the time, for real. But he couldn't, and he didn't want to. He wanted Tony back, and that was the one thing that he really couldn't, shouldn't, let himself even wish for.

"Loki?" Tony said.

Loki made himself keep looking at Fandral, saying something inane about the hockey game tonight and pretending that Tony didn't even exist.

Tony called his name a second time, and this time Heimdall nudged him with his elbow. When Loki looked over at him, Heimdall nodded toward Tony.

It should have been satisfying to see that Tony looked like shit. Okay, in some respects he looked better than Tony did on a lot of Sunday nights, because he'd showered and shaved recently and his clothes looked clean. But he had dark circles under his eyes, and he looked like he'd lost a little weight; Tony forgot to eat at the best of times, and apparently these hadn't been the best of times for Tony, either.

That ought to make Loki happy. He should be pleased that Tony was miserable too. He was, he
told himself. It served Tony right. He ought to be unhappy. He ought to be kicking himself for being an idiot.

Tony wasn't going away. Loki was going to have to say something. “What do you want?”

Tony took a deep breath, and then said, quickly, “I know I was a complete asshole, but can we just... talk about it? Please?”

That's what he'd wanted that night. He'd wanted them to talk, for Tony to be honest about what he thought and felt, instead of just repeating everything that Pepper had told him. But Tony had believed all the crap that had gotten twisted through a stupid game of telephone: Clint complaining about Loki after they broke up, painting Loki in the worst possible light (he'd done the same to Clint, so Loki couldn't be too pissed off about that); Pepper interpreting it in the worst way, then passing it on to Tony with that passive-aggressive "I'm just worried about you" bullshit that Loki had gathered was her favorite approach.

He wanted to talk now, too, but he knew it wouldn't really matter. Tony would apologize, maybe, but it wouldn't change the fact that he was still hung up on Pepper. Nothing would actually get better.

"No," Loki made himself say. Then, before he could change his mind, he walked briskly toward the exit. Fandral and Heimdall could follow him if they wanted to. He didn't really care.

They caught up to him just outside the door, Heimdall putting a hand on Loki's shoulder. "Come on," he said gruffly. "Let's go get something to eat."

"I'm not hungry," Loki said.

"I didn't ask," Heimdall replied. "I don't know about Fandral, but I don't want to have to tell Thor that you ran into your ex, and then we let you go off alone looking like someone just bit the head off your puppy."

Loki grimaced. "That's a pretty disgusting image."

"Accurate, though," Fandral said.

Loki didn't have the energy to argue with them. He let them lead the way to the dining hall and went through the line, picking the least disgusting-looking of a lot of unappetizing options.

Thor and the rest of his friends were already at a table when they came out of the line, and Loki was at least a little grateful; it would mean nobody would expect him to make conversation. They'd be talking hockey, and they were well aware that Loki just barely knew the basics of the game.

He took a seat between Heimdall and Volstagg; Volstagg was loud enough that no one would notice if Loki was quiet. He saw Thor and Heimdall exchanging significant glances--and Thor mouthing, "Tony?" across the table, with Heimdall's answering nod--but Thor didn't try to talk to him.

Loki picked at his food; he'd been making himself eat regularly, but right now his stomach felt too tight to eat more than a few bites. He'd make something for himself at home later.

Abruptly, Loki pushed his chair back from the table and picked up the tray. "I think I'm going to skip the game," he said. "I've got a lot of work to get done."

He walked away before anybody could argue.
Chapter End Notes

[insert disclaimer about lack of editing]

Next time: Loki talks to a lot of people, including Pepper.
Bonus Scene #11: Between Chapters 19 and 20

Chapter Summary

Loki talks to a lot of people, including Pepper.

Chapter Notes

A "bonus scene" from Loki's point of view. These scenes take place between chapters 19 and 20.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

****

Coming here was a mistake; Loki just knew it.

Not changing his number after he broke up with Clint had apparently also been a mistake, because Clint had been the one to tell Pepper Potts how to get in touch with him. And now she wanted to talk to him.

Warning him to stay the hell away from Tony, probably. Well, she'd get what she wanted. Loki and Tony were done. He might be sorry that it ended, and right now he was still struggling with the temptation to call Tony and try to see if they could work things out, but that would pass.

But Pepper had called, and he was curious enough about what she might want from him--because she knew he and Tony had broken up; he was sure of that--that he'd said yes, and so when he'd finished his shift at the library, he'd gone to the Starbucks a few blocks down the street to wait for her.

And now here she was, taking off her coat and hanging it over the back of her chair. "I'm sorry if I kept you waiting," she said. "I was meeting with one of my professors and it ran late." She took a small wallet out of her bag. "Can I get you anything?"

"It's fine," Loki said, then held up his paper cup of coffee. "And I'm good." Then, awkwardly, because if she could be halfway polite, so could he, he added, "Thanks."

"I'll be back in a minute," she said, and went up to order her coffee. The cafe wasn't all that busy; most of the students preferred the cheaper--and often better--coffee shops in the area, and it was mid-afternoon, too soon after lunch for anyone working nearby to have gone on a coffee break. Loki wouldn't be able to put off this conversation for all that long.

Looking at her, Loki had no doubt as to why Tony had ultimately chosen Pepper over him. If he thought he had a chance of getting her back--well, she was definitely beautiful, and poised, and probably intelligent. And, of course, she was someone Tony didn't mind being seen with in public, unlike Loki.
It would have been almost impossible for him not to hate Pepper, he decided. Really, loathing her was the only reasonable course of action.

A few minutes later, Pepper sat down across from him with her own coffee. "You're probably wondering why I wanted to talk to you."

"No," Loki lied. "I assumed you wanted to gloat."

She frowned. "About what?"

"Well, you've won, haven't you? Tony picked you over me."

"I don't want Tony," she said. "We're friends now, and I'm happy with that, but my God, I would never date Tony again, and I'm absolutely sure he feels the same way about me."

Loki shrugged. "But you're happy enough to keep him on a leash. The first time he actually gets into a relationship with someone else, you get him to break it off as soon as you find out about it. Maybe you don't want him for yourself, but you sure as hell don't seem to want him to be happy with anyone else."

Not that this was all her fault. Loki had plenty of blame to spread around, and a lot of it went straight onto Tony. But she certainly hadn't helped, and if Tony hadn't been so worried about her reaction, he wouldn't have been treating Loki like some kind of embarrassing secret this whole time. Pepper would have found out early on, and--one way or another--things would have been settled between them long before now.

"That's not what this was about," Pepper said. "Not that the truth makes me sound all that good, either." She wrapped her hands around her cup as if to warm them; she still hadn't taken a drink from her coffee.

Loki hadn't either, at least not since Pepper had sat down, but that was because his throat felt so tight he wasn't sure that he could get anything down. "So what was this about?"

She was silent for a moment or two, and Loki was starting to wonder if she'd even heard the question before she answered. "I want Tony to be happy," she said. "He swears up and down that he is, but he--you know what he's like. It's not good for him. Drinking that much, never letting himself get close to anybody, not sleeping enough, living on coffee and vending machine snacks...."

Oh, Loki knew all of that. He also knew that by the time they'd broken up, Tony drank less than he had done when they first met. He slept--not enough, but sometimes; at the very least, he was willing to let Loki drag him out of the lab and into bed for other reasons, and sleep generally followed. And they'd eaten dinner together most nights, unless Loki had a late shift at the library. They'd cooked. Nothing elaborate, nothing that took actual cooking skills, but stuff from boxes and things that had clear directions on the label. And they'd had a great time doing it. All of it.

He and Tony had been good together. How dare she imply that they hadn't been?


She looked down at the table, biting her lip. "No," she said. "He's not, and I think you know that. I'm just trying to explain where I'm coming from. I care about Tony, and I want him to be happy. And he has a history of making frankly terrible decisions."

Dating Pepper, for a start, so Loki couldn't disagree. "Go on."
"If it had been anyone but you, I'd have been glad that he'd found someone he wanted to spend more than a few hours with. Especially since he'd seemed happier lately. But... it was you, and I know your ex, and that meant I didn't trust you."

"I don't know what Clint told you--" Loki broke off. "Okay, based on what Tony said, I do know what Clint told you, but that's not what actually happened."

"I know," Pepper said quietly. "I talked to Clint again recently, and it turns out I got the wrong impression of you."

Now, that was unexpected. "I could have told you that."

"I should have realized. I know if you asked some of my friends about Tony, especially right after we broke up, they'd have painted him as basically the devil incarnate, because I'd been venting to them when we were miserable."

"I can understand that," Loki said, in spite of himself. "I know a few people who don't have a great impression of him right now, in fact."

Pepper smiled slightly. "Yeah," she said. "Exactly. The stuff you say right after a breakup might be technically accurate, but it's usually at least a little exaggerated. And even if it isn't, it's only the worst parts." She toyed with her cup some more. "And then when Clint had his breakdown, well, that seemed like even more evidence that you really had been that terrible."

He hadn't even known about that until Tony had told him, but he probably should have seen the signs. Clint had been flaking out a lot, toward the end, and Loki had assumed it had been all about not considering time with Loki to be all that important. Maybe it had been something else. (He could hear Amora scoffing, "Not everything is about you, Loki." Maybe she was right, and only 99.99% of everything was about him.)

"But when I talked to Clint again," Pepper went on, "he told me I'd gotten the wrong idea. That you were, and I quote, 'a complete jerk with a shitty sense of humor,' but that you hadn't done anything to him other than argue with him a lot."

"But you didn't tell Tony that."

"I did," she said. "The day after I talked to Clint. But by then you guys had already split up, because I'd told him that you weren't safe to be around."

"Yeah," Loki said. "Thanks for that, by the way. I always love hearing that the guy I'm seeing expects me to turn into an abusive piece of shit at any minute."

He was glad to see Pepper wince at that. "He loves you," she said. "He told me so."

He snorted. "I'm sure he did, but why should I believe it? He didn't tell me so, and he didn't act like it." At least, not at the end.

"You don't have to believe it," she said. "But he does, and he shouldn't have listened to me. He told me that, too. He may have figured it out too late, but he did get there."

"Okay," Loki said, shrugging. "Good for him and his personal growth. What does it have to do with me? Am I supposed to give him a free pass for all that bullshit because he finally decided that he's a grownup who can run his own life?"

"Absolutely not," she said. "It's his own fault for being an idiot. Although it's also my fault, for
encouraging him to be an idiot. I'm not saying you should just forgive and forget. But maybe you should consider talking to him?"

Loki frowned at her. "So you're still managing Tony's life for him. Now you're just doing it behind the scenes?"

Pepper's face fell. "Oh," she said quietly. "Yeah, I guess it looks like that. Except that's not what I mean, really. I was just trying to fix my mistake. Tony wouldn't have broken up with you--"

"I broke up with him, actually," Loki cut in.

"Whatever; don't interrupt me. You and Tony wouldn't have broken up if I hadn't meddled. At least not right then, and not for that." She got up, putting her coat back on. "Talk to him, don't talk to him," she said. "But don't throw away your chance to be with Tony just to spite me."

"You overestimate your importance."

Pepper didn't reply; she just threw her untouched coffee in the nearby trashcan, picked up her bag, and walked out.

Loki stayed there to finish his coffee. He stayed there for a long while afterward, as well, trying to digest what Pepper had told him, and trying to separate his opinion of Pepper from what she'd actually said.

When he finally got sick of sitting in Starbucks, he wasn't any closer to an answer.

****

"So, what's the problem, exactly?" Amora said, in between bites of her sandwich. He'd gotten her out of bed before mid-afternoon on a Saturday by promising to buy her lunch. "He's apparently in love with you. You ignored everything I told you and fell in love with him. He was stupid because he believed someone who listened to your ex whine about you and decided you were the worst thing ever."

She paused. "You might really be the worst thing ever, but so is he, so you're clearly meant for one another."

"The problem is that he didn't even try to find out if there was another side to things. He accepted everything Pepper said about me without question. Not only that, but he tried to keep me a secret because she might get mad." Loki drummed his fingers on the table, trying to defuse some of the tension that he'd been filled with ever since Pepper's call. "How does that not sound like a problem?"

He'd known Amora longer than anyone but his parents, but he wouldn't just take her word for something like that, especially not since it wasn't even first-hand information. It'd be one thing if Clint had warned Tony away from Loki, but Pepper hadn't even been there. She'd known Clint, but she hadn't been one of his close friends; Loki had only ever seen her a couple of times back then.

He wouldn't have blamed Tony for being wary. But when Tony didn't even really ask Loki what happened, just told him what Pepper said and made it sound like he completely believed her, that was different.

"So yell at him," Amora said. "Tell him he sucks and that he was stupid and that if he ever pulls anything like that again, you're done. Don't just walk away and mope after him for the rest of your life."
"It hasn't even been a month," he protested. "I'll be fine by the time winter break is over."

"Hm," Amora said, obviously not believing a word of it. "Or you could try talking to him? I know, I know, he's an asshole, he broke your heart, he was a crappy boyfriend--"

"He wasn't even my boyfriend," Loki said. "He was just some guy I was fucking."

She laughed. "Maybe officially, but you and I both know better."

"And he's still in love with his ex-girlfriend." Okay, he'd actually believed Pepper when she said she wouldn't want Tony back. He might even believe her that Tony felt that way. "And even if he's not, I'm still catastrophically jealous of his ex-girlfriend."

"That's a you problem, not a him problem. You're a jealous bitch. Work on that." Amora smiled at him. "But call him. Now, not next semester. At worst, you'll be able to say you tried, instead of just giving up the first time he was a jackass."

"You really think that was the first time?"

"The first time he was that much of a jackass, at least." She shook her head. "If you don't want to listen to what I have to say, why did you even ask?"

"I'm wondering that myself," he admitted, and changed the subject to complaining about finals.

****

"You're looking better," Thor said.

Loki shrugged. He looked, in his own opinion, like a guy who realized he was down to one unreliably-working pen the weekend before final exams. He'd decided to overpay at the campus bookstore rather than take the time away from studying to drive to Target.

He was already taking enough time away from studying to debate himself about whether or not he should call Tony.

"Flattering," he said to Thor, "since that implies that I've been looking like crap."

"You're going to tell me you haven't?" Thor shook his head. "That would explain why none of our friends have been following you around worrying about you."

"Your friends, not ours. And for someone who didn't even know he had a brother before September, you've got this condescending-older-sibling thing down really well. It must be a natural gift."

The bookstore must have been short-staffed; they only had one line, for both purchases and textbook buyback, and it was moving incredibly slowly. Finally, the guy at the head of the line finished trying to unload what looked like the accumulation of books from an entire bachelor's degree, and the line moved forward a little; one more person and Loki would reach the cash register.

"You're not in line," he said to Thor. "What, did you just decide the campus bookstore was the hot place to see and be seen this weekend?"

Thor shook his head, holding up a small bag. "I have three papers due Monday," he said, "and the convenience store across from my dorm is out of Red Bull."
The line moved forward again, and Loki put his package of pens (and the Snickers bar he'd picked up, and the new earbuds, and... okay, he was doing a lot of impulse buying today; finals stress was a bitch) down on the counter.

"I'll be outside," Thor said. "Find me when you're done here?"

"Yeah, fine," he said, before getting embroiled in a discussion with the cashier about how he knew things were expensive here, but a package of three ballpoint pens couldn't possibly cost fifteen dollars and seventy-nine cents.

He hadn't expected Thor to actually still be waiting outside; it was cold and it had taken a lot longer than it should have to get the fifteen-seventy-nine voided and his stuff rung up again. But Thor was there, leaning against a pillar, drinking one of his cans of Red Bull. "You waited."

"I said I would," Thor said. "I need to get back to my room soon, though. Walk over there with me?"

It would be easier, Loki decided, to just give in and walk with Thor. It wasn't that far out of his way, and he didn't feel like arguing. "Sure. It's only the weekend before exams. I don't have anything better to do."

"Thanks." They started walking; once they were a few yards down the sidewalk, Thor said, "She asked me to come visit over the holidays. Not for Christmas," he added quickly. "Afterward."

Loki shrugged. No need to ask Thor who "she" was. "Okay? Are you coming?"

"I don't know," Thor admitted. "It'd get me out of my dad's house for the entire break. I'm going on vacation with Jane's family over the actual holiday, but I was going to have to spend some time with him before the semester started. Avoiding that is not a bad thing. But will it bother you?"

He shook his head. "I might not even see you," he said. "I just found out that the library's willing to give me hours over the break, so I'm only going home on the twenty-third, and I have to be back here by the morning of the twenty-seventh."

Thor nodded. "No, we won't be in one another's way. I might go," he offered.

"You should. It'll give you a chance to get to know her." They kept walking; Loki could see Kirby Hall in the distance. "Is there anything else you wanted to talk to me about? You could have texted me about that."

"Just wanted to see for myself that you're doing okay. You've been kind of a mess the last few times I've seen you."

"I'm fine now," Loki lied.

"You know you could tell me if you're not, right?"

"You know you could stop pester ing me about it?" Then he took a deep breath and said, "But I'm fine. Or I'm going to be. Tony and I--I'm going to talk to him." He hadn't even realized he'd decided that until the words came out. "So you don't have to worry about me. I'm going to be fine."

Thor clasped Loki on the shoulder briefly, which meant whacking him in the ribs with a bag containing multiple cans of Red Bull. "I'm glad."

"Hey!" Loki protested, leaning away from the bag. "You don't get to make up for the fact that you
didn't get to beat me up when we were kids by doing it now."

"Sorry." Thor grinned. "Maybe if you mention that your brother beat you up, he'd take pity on you and take you back."

"I dumped him," Loki insisted, even though the idea of getting Tony to take him back was a tempting one.

****

Loki took the rest of Saturday to think about his decision, just to be sure. On Sunday morning, he decided he was as certain as he was going to get. He'd hear Tony out. Whatever happened after that remained to be seen, but he'd at least listen to what Tony had to say.

Assuming that Tony would even talk to him. Loki wasn't going to risk calling; even if Tony answered--unlikely on a weekend--he'd probably hang up again when he realized it was Loki.

It was still pretty early on Sunday, so instead of trying to find Tony at home, he just went straight to the lab. Unfortunately, when he got to the lab space that Tony shared with three--no, two, now--grad students, there was only one person inside, a dark-haired young woman who didn't even look up from grading papers when Loki opened the door.

"No, there's no extra credit now," she said. "You got plenty of chances during the semester."

"I'm not in your class," Loki said, and she looked up.

"Oh! I'm sorry. I'm TAing a section of Intro to Engineering who are apparently getting desperate now that I'm grading their final projects. Can I help you with something?"

"I'm looking for Tony Stark?"

She shook her head. "He left a while ago. I don't know where he went, but he'll probably be back soon. He spends most weekends in here."

"Yeah, I know," Loki said. "Thanks."

"You can leave a note for him if you want. I can lend you a pen?"

"No," Loki said. "That's okay. I'll talk to him later."

Trust Tony, Loki thought, to turn up when Loki didn't want to see him, but to disappear into thin air the minute Loki wanted him.

He was annoying as hell, really. Good thing that seemed to be something Loki liked in a person.

****

Loki was in luck; there was an older man getting groceries out of the trunk of his BMW when he pulled into Tony's parking lot, and as Loki approached him, he realized that the guy looked vaguely familiar. He'd seen him in the hall when he'd visited Tony before, so maybe the guy would recognize him, too.

"Need some help?" Loki offered, holding his hands out for a bag of groceries.

The man squinted at him for a minute. "Do you live here, young man?"
He decided to go for the truth. "No," he admitted, "but you've probably seen me here a lot, visiting Tony Stark? In apartment 701."

"Oh, yes," the man said. "You're the one who needs a haircut."

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "I guess so," he said. "But I could help you get your groceries upstairs." He could probably get it in one load, but he doubted that the man could; he looked pretty frail.

The guy considered it for a few moments, and then said, "Well, if you're going up there anyway, I'd appreciate it. I'm not as strong as I used to be."

Loki took the groceries--all but one bag, which the man insisted on carrying for himself--and followed the guy inside. Really, Tony's neighbors had all the self-preservation instincts of a lemming. If Loki had been up to anything nefarious, they'd have all been doomed.

As it was, Loki was risking making Tony angry enough that he wouldn't want to talk to Loki; he'd told Loki not to come here uninvited like that, after all. And Loki hadn't, until now, but the thought that he might not be able to talk to Tony until after the holidays--well, a lot could happen in a few weeks. He'd take the risk and hope Tony would forgive him.

The man kept up a stream of small talk as they went; Loki answered mechanically, as politely as he could manage--no matter how irritating he was finding the conversation, he might need the guy to let him in again at some point in the future, if he and Tony got back together. But soon enough, the elevator let them out on the seventh floor.

Carrying the groceries to the man's apartment meant Loki could make sure that he was safely inside before Loki went to Tony's door. He knocked on it a few times just to be sure Tony really wasn't home, then settled down to wait.

****

Chapter End Notes

[this is the last time I will make excuses for my lack of editing]

Next time: Nope, no next time. This really is the end.

And wow, it really is the end. I started writing this fic in December 2017; I was just coming off a hugely long dry spell caused by some medical issues that made me take time off fandom/robbed me of my creative spark. (Then I saw Thor: Ragnarok and the "writing" switch in my mind flipped back on.)

I finished the first draft in the summer of 2018, did a lot of editing, and started posting in October 2018. I knew that if I started posting, I wanted to be able to have it completely posted before the then-still-untitled Avengers 4 came out, because I didn't want to be mid-posting when the fandom spent a few weeks being collectively Not Okay. (And I made it!)

I expected maybe six people to read it, counting my long-suffering wife, who's been listening to me talk about this fic since I thought it was going to be a two-scene PWP.
So the wonderful people who've been commenting on this fic for the past six months? Thanks. You're great. <3 I hope you had fun. I did!

I almost don't want to let this universe go, but it's time to move on.

I've got another, more closely tied to canon (Well, it's still AU, but it's canon-divergent instead of this), Loki/Tony fic in the middle of editing right now; I should start posting it in about a month, once the editing's done and I've stopped crying about whatever might happen in Endgame. Hope to see some of you then!

End Notes

You can find me on Dreamwidth--I'm not very active there, but it's a way to reach me off AO3. (Some of my fics have a Tumblr link, but I haven't logged into Tumblr for months and don't plan to.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!