A wise man gets more use from his enemies than a fool from his friends. – Balthasar Gracian

After Loki unexpectedly saves his life, Tony suddenly finds himself in a bizarre arrangement with the God of Mischief. There is an impossible challenge to solve and a mysterious conspiracy threatening his life, but mostly Tony just wants to figure out what the hell is Loki up to this time.

This is the second part of my Liar to Liar series. You don't need to read the previous story to understand this one, but it will give you a better idea about Loki's motivations.

This fic is my attempt to write an Iron Man story that incorporates the events of both Thor and Captain America movies. It takes place a few years after the Avengers movie and ignores Iron Man 3 (though I borrowed a few elements from it). It will be very long (probably over 100K words) and focuses mostly on Tony's relationship with Loki. It is also a lot more explicit than my previous stories, so make of that what you will.

Disclaimer: The characters depicted in this story do not belong to me and I'm making no money off them. I just occasionally borrow them for my own nefarious purposes.
Another night. Another party hosted by someone rich and important whom Tony probably knew but couldn’t be bothered to give a crap about.

He tossed back another glass of scotch and leaned back against the bar, his eyes lazily scanning the crowd as he pretended to listen to whatever inane thing the woman on his right was trying to tell him. She was a classic Californian beauty – tan and blonde, with boobs you could use as a trampoline and grabby octopus arms that had so far managed to thwart each one of Tony’s escape attempts.

The blonde pressed herself closer to his side, smushing her breasts against his arm to try and get him to look down her cleavage and Tony suppressed a sigh, mentally calculating the amount of time he would have to remain at the party before he could finally leave.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like blondes, he told himself as he subtly tried to rescue his arm out of her grip. It was just that she was so grabby and pushy and annoying and…not Pepper. And that was the key, wasn’t it? Ever since Pepper had walked out on him a month ago, he’d had women (and sometimes men) throwing themselves at him left and right. Dozens of people flocking around him, drawn in by the glory of the Iron Man, all trying to get a piece of Tony Stark. If this had happened in his pre-Pepper days, he would have jumped at the opportunity, but now it all just felt incredibly hollow, the attention of the people as fake as their beaming smiles.

If he had to remain here for another hour, he might as well get plastered, Fury be damned. It had been the Director who had roped him into this, so let him deal with the PR nightmare that was a drunk-off-his-ass Tony Stark. He finally managed to slip from the grasp of the octopus lady and when she reached for him again, he gave her a hard look.

“Sorry, sweetheart, but you’re really not my type. Maybe we can try this again when I’m more drunk and less choosy,” he told her and watched with satisfaction as she stomped away on her six inch heels, no doubt to find the nearest gossip mag reporter and complain about his lack of manners. Predictable.

Tony turned back to the bar and signaled the barman, asking for a double whisky. This place was posh enough not to water the drinks down too much, so he felt fairly confident that he would be able to at least achieve a pleasant buzz before the whole thing was over.

He was on his third drink of the night when a familiar figure slid onto the seat next to him. Tony didn’t need to look twice to know there would be trouble.

“Hello, Stark,” Loki greeted, smirk firmly in place.

Tony almost did a double take when he realized that Loki was wearing a regular business suit instead of his Asgardian armor. There was a green scarf around his neck, breaking the black and white monotony, but otherwise he didn’t look the slightest bit out of place among this gathering of the rich and powerful. It looked like he was trying to blend in tonight, which put Tony on instant alert. Outwardly he didn’t move a muscle though, calmly sipping his drink.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on Asgard? Getting eaten by ravens or chained in a dungeon or whatever medieval thing you guys do as a punishment?”
Loki’s smirk widened. “As far as my jailors are concerned I am on Asgard. Technically. But you of all people should know that no prison can hold me forever.”

Tony nodded at the barman to bring him another glass. “What are you doing here? Come to kill me?” If he was going to get thrown out of a window again, he might as well enjoy the booze while he could.

“You don’t seem very alarmed by my presence.” The god gave him an assessing look. Tony shrugged.

“You’re not terribly intimidating. Besides, I figured - if you really wanted to kill me, you would have done it already. Since we’re in a public place and there is a suspicious lack of theatrics involved in this scenario, I assume you’re here because you want something from me. What is it?”

“Actually, I’m here to warn you,” Loki said, surprising him a little.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Really. This should be good.”

Loki’s gaze swept over the crowd. “There is someone here tonight who has been ordered to kill you. Unless you leave now, you will be dead in less than ten minutes.”

Tony turned on his barstool to face Loki fully for the first time. “Why are you doing this?”

“I have my reasons.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“Oh, please, drop the mystery act. There has to be a reason for this. What do you get out of it? Even if what you say is true – which I doubt - it would be much easier for you to just let the assassin do your dirty work. Let him get rid of me for you.”

Loki inclined his head. “It would be easy, truly, but not terribly interesting.” He fixed Tony with a stare that seemed to permeate into his very bones. “Out of all the mortals I have met on this world, you are by far the most entertaining one. It would be a shame if you were to die prematurely.”

“Really.” Tony’s voice was dripping with sarcasm. “You’ll excuse me if I don’t particularly believe that. The last time we met, you seemed pretty happy to throw me out of a window.”

He finished the last of his drink and slid down from the stool, nonchalantly making his way through the crowd. He rather felt than saw Loki slip after him, following a few inches behind.

“Yes, that was an…unfortunate incident.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, you can call it that. Why are you doing this again?”

“I have my reasons.”

“You’re not gonna tell me, are you?”

Loki gave him a smile full of teeth. “No.”

They made it two floors down and into one of the side corridors leading to the entrance, which was suspiciously deserted. Tony shot the god a side glance. “Are you setting me up? Because if you are, you won’t like what I will do to you once we’re out of he- Whoa!”

He barely jumped out of the way of the blast that somebody shot at him from the other side of the
corridor. Loki gave him an amused look.

“What did I tell you?”

“You can gloat later.” Tony glued his back to the wall, his mind running a thousand calculations per minute as he pulled a miniature repulsor from his pocket and hastily started putting it together in his hand. “Let me get rid of them first. JARVIS, are you following?”

“You, sir? Always,” the computer chimed in his ear.

“Awesome. Let’s do this.”

He rounded the corner with a sharp move, disposing of the two mooks before they could even press a trigger. The third nearly caught him by surprise but thanks to JARVIS’s timely warning he was able to dispose of him as well. When he turned back to Loki, he found the god leisurely propped against the wall, watching the fight with a small amused smile.

“You could help, you know,” Tony couldn’t help but remark. Loki’s eyes glittered.

“Oh no, that would be too much hassle. I prefer to just watch. It’s quite entertaining.”

“Thanks for nothing, asshole,” Tony gritted out as another guy in a mask rounded the corner and got thrown into a wall by a repulsor blast. “Where are they all coming from anyway? This is supposed to be a charity function, for fuck’s sake.” He shot another one. “Oh, this is getting ridiculous. Let’s get out of here. JARVIS? Have my car meet me outside.”

“Already done, sir.”

“I knew I keep you around for a reason.” He started to walk towards the exit but only managed to walk a few feet before he suddenly found himself with his back pressed against the wall, Loki standing only a few inches away.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” the god whispered in his ear. “Unless you want a new hole in your forehead. From what I’ve seen, you mortals don’t recover well from those.”

It took Tony less than a second to spot the tell-tale red dot on the opposite wall. “A sniper?”

“I told you that there was an assassin here tonight. The men in the corridor were just a distraction to keep your attention away from the real threat.”

Tony looked in dismay at the long corridor lined with high glass windows that stood between their hiding place and the exit. “How am I supposed to get away from here? The guy has a great view of the whole corridor.” And, judging by the rapidly approaching footsteps from the direction they had come from, they were getting surrounded from all sides. Awesome.

Loki’s hand reached down and wrapped a hand around his left wrist.

“Do you trust me?”

Tony shot the hand a glance before he looked back up at the god’s face.

“Hell no. But I’m open to suggestions.”

“I can get you out of here, alive and whole.”

Tony inclined his head. “For the sake of argument, let’s say I agree. What do you want from me in
return? Clearly, you’re not doing this out of the goodness of your heart.”

A slow smile spread over Loki’s face. “No, I am not the type for that.” His thumb ran over Tony’s wrist in a slow, deliberate caress. “If I save your life, you will owe me a debt. The time and manner of its payment will be left to my discretion.”

“Having an Avenger in your debt. Clever.” Tony licked his lips, feeling his pulse spike a little under Loki’s touch. He gave the god a smirk. “You know, I should really decline your offer and find a way to get out of here on my own. It would be the reasonable thing to do.”

“From what I have heard of you, Stark, reasonable is rarely your typical course of action.”

“No, it’s not,” Tony admitted. “You’ve done your homework on me.”

“A wise man makes it a point to study his enemies.” The touch continued, thumb making small circles against Tony’s pulse. Even though Tony knew it was pure manipulation on Loki’s part, an attempt to make Tony more agreeable to the god’s offer, he still couldn’t help the little thrill of excitement that ran through him at the contact.

“How do I know that it wasn’t you who orchestrated this whole thing?” he couldn’t help but ask, trying to distract himself from the fact that they were still standing uncomfortably close together.

One dark eyebrow shot up. “And why would I do that, pray tell?”

“You just said that I will owe you a favor if you save my life. It would be the perfect scam – hire the guys, let them rough me up a little then swoop in and save my life in some grandiose way. Boom! Favour granted. That’s what I would do, anyway.”

Loki showed his teeth. “Oh, you’re good. That would be a wonderful plan, but sadly, no. I did not hire those men and do not know who is threatening your life.”

“And now you’re feeding me bullshit,” Tony pointed out. “You know very well who those people are, you just can’t be bothered to tell me. But hey, whatever. Normally I would be pissed, but right now I just want to get out of here.”

Loki let go of his wrist and offered him a hand instead. “I can get you out of here instantly, but first I want your word. Do we have a deal?”

“I know I will regret this,” Tony said, but he was already reaching for the god’s hand. He briefly saw Loki’s eyes widen at his easy acceptance but then the world turned into a swirl of green and disappeared. The next thing he knew, they were standing on the balcony of Stark Tower, the city lights bright beneath them.

Tony took a moment to ponder the sheer surrealness of the situation before he turned to Loki.

“You know, I was actually supposed to be back in Malibu tonight, but whatever. It’s nothing a half an hour flight in my suit can’t fix and I’m not about to turn down a free ride home.” He set off to walk inside, the glass doors opening automatically as he approached. Loki followed him at a slower pace.

“I see you have redecorated since my last visit,” he said pleasantly when they walked in.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “I had to make some renovations after our jolly green giant rearranged my floor with your head.”
“Welcome back, sir,” JARVIS chimed pleasantly.

“I’m not here,” Tony told him at once. “As far as you’re concerned, I was never here tonight. I refuse to explain to Captain America how I managed to get from LA to New York in less than a minute.”

“Very well, sir. I will not notify the Avengers of your presence.” He made a delicate pause. “Sir, I detect a hostile presence in the room. Do you want me to alert SHIELD?”

“No, that won’t be necessary.” Tony shot a look at Loki. “Unless he tries to kill me again, we should be fine.”

“As you wish, sir,” JARVIS sounded rather doubtful. “I will keep the alarm off for now. Nevertheless, let it be noted that I do not think this is a wise course of action.”

“Yeah, yeah, you disapprove, I get it.” Tony waved him off. “You can save the “I told you so” for the next time someone tries to kill me in my own home.”

“Does that happen often?” Loki looked amused by the notion.

“Let’s say it happens and leave it at that.” Tony had no desire to touch this particular topic.

“Your servant seems more concerned by my presence than you are.”

“He worries too much,” Tony said tersely.

“He’s wise to be concerned.” Loki looked around. “Where is he hiding?”

“He’s my A.I. Artificial Intelligence,” he added at Loki’s confused expression. “He’s a computer program that I made to run my house and do anything else I might need.”

“An invisible servant. Clever,” Loki said, eyes flickering over the walls and ceiling. He didn’t say anything else, instead seemed to be content with exploring the apartment.

Tony was starting to feel a little ill at ease. Here he was, alone in a room with Loki. It was one thing to banter with the Asgardian in the heat of the battle, when he was riding an adrenaline high, but now that the danger had passed, he had no idea what to do with the god. Throwing him out seemed a bit risky – Tony still had vivid memories of the street below flying to meet him, those endless seconds of freefall before the armor snapped safely around him feeling like eternity. He had no wish for a repeat of that particular experience.

“Is anyone home?” he asked JARVIS instead, hoping that hearing about the Hulk’s presence might serve to quell any latent homicidal tendencies the god might be harboring.

“Doctor Banner is asleep in his rooms and Captain Rogers is currently in the gym,” JARVIS said. “Do you wish for me to contact any of them?”

“That won’t be necessary.” Tony shot a furtive look at Loki, who was currently examining a coffee machine.

“Miss Potts is in Washington D.C. tonight,” JARVIS continued.

“Of course she is,” muttered Tony, trying not to feel resentful about that. Ever since they had broken up, she had done a marvelous job of avoiding Tony. He suspected JARVIS had something to do with it too, that traitor.
Loki chose that moment to look up from his perusal of Tony’s kitchenette.

“The Avengers live here with you?” he asked, curious.

“Some of them,” Tony grudgingly admitted. “They mostly come and go, but all of them have an apartment here to use, if they wish.”

“How generous of you,” Loki sounded only half-sarcastic.

“I’m the very soul of generosity,” Tony told him flippantly, trying to move without making it obvious that he was putting a marble counter between himself and Loki. Loki, being the perceptive bastard that he was, naturally noticed.

“Am I making you nervous?” he asked with a small, predatory grin. “I am, am I not? I made you uneasy before, but you hid it quite well. Now, however, not so much.” He stalked slowly over to where Tony was standing by the counter. “Tell me, Stark,” he said when he was a foot away. “Are you afraid of me?”

It took all of Tony’s willpower not to take a step back. He wasn’t normally one to be easily intimidated, but there was something about Loki that set his teeth on edge.

“You’re really enjoying this, aren’t you? This little power-play of yours.”

Loki’s grin widened. “Yes. More than I expected. It is amusing to watch your courage fight with your instincts.”

“Yeah, the entertainment is free. Is there anything else you wanted?”

Loki’s eyes flickered to the liquor cabinet. “I believe you still owe me a drink.”

Tony suppressed a groan. “I did offer you one, didn’t I?” He took the opportunity to put some distance between them. Reaching for two tumblers, he asked: “What do you want? I’ve got whisky, bourbon, wine, vodka…pretty much anything you can think off.”

“I will leave that choice to you,” Loki said. “Considering your wealth and general fondness for alcohol, I doubt you have anything truly distasteful.”

“You’d be surprised what some people are willing to drink,” Tony said, pouring two glasses of whisky. Damn, he really needed that drink. He handed the second glass to Loki. “There you go.”

“What shall we drink to?” Loki asked, raising his glass.

“Daring escapes from death?” Tony suggested. That earned him a pleased smirk.

“Excellent suggestion,” Loki said. “I hope you won’t forget it.”

Tony didn’t say anything to that, sipping his whisky instead. It was his fifth drink of the night and he was slowly starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. He wasn’t anywhere close to being drunk yet, but he was just buzzed enough to be in a good mood. He fervently hoped Loki would leave soon, because if he didn’t, there was a real danger that Tony would start to notice the way Loki’s well-tailored suit hugged those long, lean muscles in all the right places. That was a road he really didn’t wish to take.

“This is surprisingly good,” Loki broke the silence. “May I have some more?” He waved the empty glass at Tony, who wordlessly gestured to the bottle. Loki poured himself a full glass this time and
leaned against the window, savoring the taste. “Sometimes I wonder how Asgard could survive for thousands of years on nothing but mead. One gets tired of it after a while.”

“You don’t have other drinks?” Tony asked, incredulous.

Loki grimaced. “We also have ale and wine, but there is very little variety.”

“And you guys thought we are primitive.” Tony made a few steps away from the bar, gesticulating with his glass. “You know, if you took a walk through the streets below, you would find over a hundred different drinks in any random bar. We might not have a fancy rainbow bridge, but we can be really creative when it comes to ways to get drunk.”

“No wonder Thor liked staying here so much,” Loki said quietly. He noticed Tony hovering by the stairs. “You can come closer, if you wish. I am not planning on killing you today or any time soon.”

“Well that’s reassuring,” Tony muttered, but nonetheless came over to the window. For a brief moment he had a vivid flashback of freefalling through the glass, but a second later his vision cleared and he was once again standing in his penthouse, the glass pane before him intact. He noticed that Loki was watching him and turned his attention to the city instead.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” he nodded at the lights below. “And you wanted to destroy it.”

“It does have its charms, I admit,” Loki said. He took a few steps closer, until he was standing next to Tony and looked out at the streets pulsing with life, even in the late night hour. “When I visited Earth before, centuries ago, it had always been dirty and primitive. Uneducated masses crawling around in the dirt, people living little better than animals. This, however,” he gestured to the city below, “is closer to Asgard than I had expected.”

“We’ve grown,” Tony told him. “We evolve. You guys have stayed the same for centuries, unchanging, stuck in your ways. You’re not trying to improve anything, because you are convinced that you’re the best at everything. And when you think that you’re the best, it’s always a shock when someone comes along and proves that they are better.” And didn’t he know that.

“Speaking from experience, are you?” Loki asked with a smirk.

“You can say that,” Tony admitted. “But I was thinking more about you. You came here with all your talk about superiority and glory and got your ass handed to you by a bunch of guys whom you thought were so beneath you. Must have been embarrassing.” Loki didn’t say anything to that, so Tony continued. “And now you’re stuck in prison for god knows how long, probably bored out of your mind. You should give some thought to reworking your business model, you know. This whole evil villain shtick doesn’t seem to be working too well for you.”

“And become what? A defender of justice and goodness?” Loki asked sardonically. “Like you?”

“Nah, it wouldn’t suit you.” Tony waved a hand and went to pour another glass since Loki had managed to empty the second one, too. “And as for me, I’m mostly just protecting my own interests. The whole hero image is just a nice bonus.”

“I am not joining your little band of do-gooders.”

“Of course you’re not,” Tony said. “Nobody would believe it, anyway.” He poured himself another glass and drained half of it in a single gulp. “But there are miles between Captain America and a mustache-twirling homicidal megalomaniac. Just because nobody wanted you as the good guy doesn’t mean you have to do a one-eighty degree turn and go full villain.”
“What do you suggest I do, then, O Wise Midgardian?” Loki asked, sounding only half-sarcastic.

Tony shrugged. “That’s your problem to figure out. Prison should provide you with plenty of time to think about your choices. Maybe you’ll come up with something.”

“Maybe I will,” Loki said quietly, getting lost in thought. Tony was wishing fervently that Loki would leave soon, because the god’s pensive mood and sudden friendliness were creeping him out. There was no way to call for the suit without being painfully obvious about it, so he could only stand there, effectively being held hostage in his own house. Loki didn’t look particularly murderous right now, but Tony knew all too well just how quickly his moods could change.

Finally, Loki drained the rest of his glass and straightened up.

“I suppose it’s time for me to go,” he announced. “My jailors might get suspicious if I stay away for too long. Thank you for your hospitality.” He gave Tony a nod and started walking out towards the balcony.

Tony watched him leave, feeling like a mouse that had just managed to escape from the clutches of a boa constrictor. He was almost ready to call JARVIS and have him prepare a suit when Loki suddenly stopped in the doorway and looked back, as if a thought had just occurred to him.

“There is something that I wish to know, before I leave,” Loki said. Tony bit back a curse. Why wouldn’t the asshole just leave already? “How did you end up working for SHIELD? You do not seem like someone who enjoys following orders. Did they blackmail you? Bribe you?” He seemed genuinely interested in the answer.

For a second, Tony contemplated lying, but in the end decided to go with the facts.

“No. They presented me with an impossible challenge and gave me a key to solving it. By a happy coincidence, they also helped save my life in the process. It wasn’t enough to put me fully aboard the Avenger train, but it made me willing to listen to future requests. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, I suppose it does,” Loki said. “Good night, Stark.”

He was almost out of the door when Tony remembered something.

“Thanks, by the way,” he said quickly, wanting to get it over with. Loki turned around, frowning. “You know,” Tony continued, “for the whole ‘saving me from a sniper’ thing.”

A flicker of surprise briefly appeared on Loki’s face before he smoothed it out again.

“You’re welcome,” he said with a gracious nod. “I will be back to collect my debt.”

“I bet you will,” Tony muttered.

Loki finally strode out onto the balcony, where he stood for a few seconds before he got enveloped in a halo of golden-green light and disappeared. Tony waited until he was sure that the god was really gone, then slumped against the bar and ran a hand over his face. His heart was beating wildly in his chest and his legs felt a bit unsteady.

With Loki gone, the events of the previous hour (had it really been so long? Jesus) started to feel like a really weird dream. From Loki’s mysterious appearance to the awkward conversation over whisky, the whole scene felt totally surreal. If it wasn’t for the second glass standing on the counter, Tony would write the entire encounter off as a drunken hallucination.
“Get me out of here, JARVIS.” He drained the rest of his glass and walked out to the balcony, where the Mark VII armor stood waiting for him. For a moment he just closed his eyes and enjoyed the way his armor enveloped him with comforting familiarity, the plates sliding into their place with ease. If he left now, he would be back in Malibu well before dawn. With luck nobody would even notice his absence.

Tony took off from the balcony, flying high into the darkness to avoid any curious eyes watching below. Since JARVIS was taking care of calculating the flight path for him, Tony had plenty of time to think. The conversation with Loki kept playing itself in his mind on a loop, each repetition making it look more and more absurd. Had he really promised the Asgardian a favor? There hadn’t been much time to specify just what kind of favor it was supposed to be.

As it was, Loki could ask practically anything of him and Tony wouldn’t be able to say no. If Loki decided to ask him for a nuke or something equally disastrous, they were all in deep shit. And if he refused, he was as good as dead. No matter which way he looked at it, he was fucked and there was nothing he could do about it.

He could only wait and see what Loki was up to. He wasn’t looking forward to finding out.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

As I already mentioned, this story will be pretty long - probably over 100K words. I’ve already written 60K words for it, so the updates should be fairly regular – once a week or so.

Since I don’t have a beta for this and my own English tends to lean more towards the British version, there might be a few mistakes in this. I tried my best, but if you see any words that don’t belong (Britishisms, phrases that an American wouldn’t use), please feel free to point them out and I will correct them. It’s my first time writing for a fandom in American English and the switch between the vocabularies is hard sometimes.

I hope you like the story so far. The second chapter should be up next Friday. Comments and kudos are welcome as always :)
Late Night Visitor

Chapter Summary

In which Thor brings the Avengers some unexpected news and Tony proves he’s a shitty grief counsellor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Months passed without a sign of Loki.

Life went on and Tony was as busy as he’d ever been. There were buildings to rebuild, charities to fund and new inventions to patent, so Tony rarely ever thought about the guy. That strange winter night now seemed more like a drunken hallucination than anything else, and if it weren’t for JARVIS’s recording of the whole thing, Tony would be half-convinced it never happened.

Needless to say, Tony was pretty happy with Loki’s continued absence. After more than half a year had passed without the guy showing up again, Tony figured his “favour” wasn’t all that urgent and decided to forget about it. It niggled in the back of his mind sometimes – mostly on the nights when he couldn’t sleep, but he’d spent his entire life ignoring uncomfortable things, so it didn’t take him much effort to ignore this as well.

Tony spent most of his days by driving between Malibu and Los Angeles, coming up with new designs for his projects and valiantly ignoring the growing requests to visit New York. It wasn’t that he didn’t like the city, he told Steve one night after the guy called him yet again to ask why Tony hadn’t moved to the Avenger Tower yet. He liked the New York well enough. He was simply too busy in Malibu to think about moving right now.

The truth was that he didn’t want to deal with all the memories that staying in New York always brought him.

Even now, two and a half years after the Chitauri attack, he could barely look at the city without getting flashbacks of death and destruction. He was sure he would be able to live there eventually, walk through the bustling streets again without seeing shadows of all the dust and blood and shattered glass, but he wasn’t ready yet. He could survive the occasional visit (like the surprise debacle with Loki in his penthouse), but the thought of staying there permanently made him break out in cold sweat.

Because of this, he wasn’t too happy when his phone rang one morning, just as he was driving to a Stark Industries Board of Directors meeting in L.A. Cap’s picture on the screen meant one of two things – either there was an Avengers emergency because yet another lunatic was trying to destroy some piece of American urban infrastructure and/or an important historical monument, or Steve was calling because he wanted to have one of those heart-to-heart talks he loved so much.

Tony could understand that Steve was lonely, really – waking up after seventy years to find that everyone you had ever known was dead must have sucked – but it made him uncomfortable that Steve had chosen him as one of his new friend-replacements. The guy was nice and they had started to get on better after the initial clusterfuck on the helicarrier, but there were some days when Tony
couldn’t help but feel that he had preferred it when Steve looked at him with contempt instead of respect. He had no idea what that said about him. Probably nothing good. His shrink would have a field day with this - if Tony ever bothered to visit her, that is.

He picked up the phone on the third ring.

“Hey, Cap, what’s up?”

“Hi, Tony,” Steve said in his typical polite way. “How are you?”

“Never been better. How’s my Tower? Barton hasn’t drunk all my whisky yet, has he?”

“No, he hasn’t touched it, as far as I know. He may have stolen some of your vodka, though.”

“That was probably Natasha. Barton is more of a beer guy,” Tony said. “How’s Bruce? Still holed up in the lab?”

“He seems happy enough in there. You can ask him about his experiments yourself when you come here.”

“Cap-” Tony started, intent on explaining that there was no way he was coming back, but Steve spoke over his protests. “Tony.”

Tony sighed. “What?”

“We need you to come to New York tonight.” There was a note of seriousness in his tone that he only used when he was issuing orders and Tony didn’t like it one bit.

“Do I have to? I’m kind of in the middle of something right now.”

“Thor is coming,” Cap told him. “He should be here in a few hours. He said he has important news and wanted us all present. Can you make it?”

Tony did a quick mental calculation.

“I’ve got a meeting that started twenty minutes ago and I was supposed to be at some movie premiere tonight, but I guess I can make the time.”

“We appreciate it,” Steve said and this time Tony could hear faint movement from Steve’s side of the speaker. There was someone else in the room with him. Tony’s bet was on Natasha.

“All right,” he conceded. “I should be there around seven, unless JARVIS decides to commit mutiny and make me crash somewhere over Colorado.”

“Sir,” JARVIS protested, “that was uncalled for. If I were to ‘crash you’ as you put it, I would at least attempt to give you a nice view in the process. I heard the Great Lakes are quite lovely this time of the year.”

Tony heard faint snickering from the other side of the line.

“Do you hear that?” he asked them. “Mutiny. If he ever goes full on Skynet, I’m blaming you, Barton.”

“How did you know I was here?” Barton spoke up.

“You have an annoying giggle,” Tony said, grinning. “It’s very distinctive. Or maybe it was
Natasha, I don’t know.” He decided to end the conversation before Natasha found a way to murder him over the phone. He wouldn’t put it past her.

“Anyway, I’m already in the L.A. headquarters, so I’m gonna hang up. See you guys tonight.”

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In the end he decided to take his private jet instead of the suit for the flight to New York. If he had to travel across the entire continent, he might as well be comfortable in the process. The small plane touched down on the JFK airport shortly after seven and Tony didn’t even bother calling for a driver. Instead he put on his suit and enjoyed the short flight over the city lit by the last rays of the setting sun. The Avenger Tower stood tall and proud in the distance and for a moment he felt a small pang of regret for not being able to stay there more often. He pushed the thought away a second later, irritated with himself for the sentiment.

Tony landed on the balcony of his penthouse five minutes later and made his customary walk down the disassembly line, letting the mechanism pull the armor off his body until he was standing there only in his business suit. He gave himself a quick once-over in the reflective glass of the balcony doors before he strode in, addressing JARVIS.

“Is Thor here yet?”

“He hasn’t arrived yet, sir,” JARVIS informed him. “Indeed, it appears that you are early for once. Should I alert the press of this momentous occasion?”

“Has anyone told you that you’re getting horribly snarky lately?” Tony walked into the private elevator, not even bothering to punch in the floor number. JARVIS would do it for him. “I should do a personality wipe on you, really, this is getting unbearable.”

“I am merely taking cues from you, sir. It is said that imitation is the highest form of flattery.”

“Well, I’m not flattered. Frankly, I’m a bit disturbed. You were supposed to be polite and obedient.”

“I am polite, sir.” JARVIS made a delicate pause. “When it is deserved, that is.”

Tony opened his mouth to make a sharp retort, but the elevator doors opened at the same moment, revealing a room full of Avengers. They were all seated comfortably in the large living room on the shared floor. Bruce and Steve were on the large red sofa while Natasha had claimed one of the armchairs as her own. Barton was perched on the armrest of her chair, his eyes flitting over the room. The all looked up when Tony entered.

Tony shot the camera in the elevator a sharp look before stepping out.

“Hello, Tony,” Steve greeted. The others echoed various greetings of their own.

“Hi Cap, guys,” Tony replied. He pointed a finger at the ceiling. “That conversation is not over, JARVIS. You and I need to have a serious talk about your attitude.”

“I will be looking forward to it, sir,” JARVIS said in perfect deadpan.

“No you won’t, you dirty liar,” Tony muttered.

“Is JARVIS giving you trouble?” Steve asked, helpful as always.

“Nah,” Tony waved a hand. “He’s just being his usual bitchy self.”
Steve frowned in puzzlement. “He is always perfectly polite with me.”

“Of course he is,” Tony said. “You’re Captain America. You probably fold your handkerchiefs into perfect squares and sort your socks by color. Of course he adores you.”

Before Steve could reply, Bruce spoke up. “You know,” he said with a hint if a smile, “talking to inanimate objects is usually considered the first sign of madness.”

“It’s not madness if the inanimate object talks back,” Tony pointed out and went to pour himself a martini. “Did Thor say when he’s supposed to arrive?”

“He said he’ll be flying in tonight,” Barton answered.

“Flying in as in a plane, or is he riding the lightning?” Tony didn’t even have time to feel pleased by the Metallica reference, because a few seconds later the sky darkened and a deafening thunder rumbled through the sky.

“Lightning it is,” Tony muttered as he walked over and sat down into one of the free armchairs. If he had to sit through this heart-warming get-together, he might as well be comfortable.

There were several more flashes of lighting and cracks of thunder before they saw a streak of red pass the window. A few second later Thor landed on the balcony with a heavy thud before straightening up, hammer in hand. His unusually serious expression lightened up a bit when he saw them through the balcony door and he raised his hand in greeting, stepping inside.

“Greetings, my friends!” he boomed. “It’s good to see you again.” He gave them a warm smile but despite his boisterous hello, he looked uncharacteristically subdued.

“Good to see you too, Blondie,” Tony joined the others in the chorus of welcomes. “You look like someone shat in your cornflakes. What’s up?”

Thor gave him a puzzled frown, obviously unfamiliar with the expression.

“You mentioned over the phone that you have something important you wished to tell us,” Steve took pity on him.

“Aye.” Thor’s expression went from subdued to outright sad. He put the hammer on the ground and sat down heavily into the nearest empty armchair, staring at the carpet. A full minute passed before he spoke again. “You may be gratified to hear that my brother is dead.”

There was a beat of stunned silence.

“What the-” Tony said at the same time as Steve said: “Are you serious?”

“Aye,” Thor said gravely.

“Loki’s dead?” Barton asked in disbelief. “You do mean Loki, right?”

“I do not have any other brother,” Thor confirmed.

“Holy shit.” Barton looked a little stunned by the news.

“What happened?” Steve inquired.

“He fell fighting a vicious beast that was threatening my life.”
Tony frowned as he remembered something. “Wait, wasn’t he supposed to be in prison? Why was he fighting monsters with you?”

“There was an attack on Asgard,” Thor started. “We found out that we were…woefully unprepared for any sort of assault on the realm. The attackers were the Dark Elves, a race of our ancient enemies, who came to Asgard in search of a substance called the Aether…”

He spoke for the better part of an hour, describing the whole debacle with the Dark Elves and the attack on Asgard. Tony listened, the wheels in his mind turning over all the implications and possibilities. When Thor finished, there was complete silence.

“I hate to ask this,” Tony said after a while, feeling like a colossal dick just for posing the question, “but are you sure that Loki’s really dead?”

Steve shot him a sharp look but Tony ignored him. Sure, it was crass to ask someone grieving this, but considering who they were dealing with, they had to make sure that they had exhausted all possibilities.

“I mean,” he continued, “this is Loki we’re talking about. If the guy was able to convincingly fake an amputated arm, there’s a chance he could fake his own death, too.”

“No,” Thor shook his head, looking close to tears. “He is dead. I am certain of it. I saw him take his last breath in my arms, felt him go cold under my touch.” He gave Tony a weary look. “I understand why you might be mistrustful of my words, but I witnessed his death with my own eyes. I can assure you that he is, indeed, dead.”

“All right. All right.” Tony raised his hands to placate him. “We believe you. Right, guys?” He looked at the other Avengers, who nodded. Only the Widow looked a bit skeptical, but it was clear that she had decided to keep her doubts to herself. Tony still felt a small niggling doubt at the back of his mind, but let it go. The poor guy was obviously wrecked by his brother’s death. It would be cruel to grill him any further.

“What about the elves?” Bruce spoke up. “Have they been dealt with?”

“Aye.” This time Thor actually smiled. “My lovely Jane was able to use some kind of device with the help of Doctor Selvig to take control of the portals and trap Malekith in Midgard. She and her Midgardian science were instrumental to his defeat. If you’re interested in the process they used, you will have to ask them, for I am afraid that I understand very little of it.”

“Yes, I’ll do that. Thank you.” Bruce looked rather excited by the prospect.

The Widow chose that moment to get up. “Fury should hear about all this. I’ll go and fill him in on what you’ve just told us.” She shot a look at Barton, who stood up as well.

“Yeah, I think I’m gonna go with you.” He still looked a little shaken by the news. Tony didn’t want to even guess at the mess his brain must have been right now.

Thor gave them a weak smile. “It was good to see you again, my friends. You may now rest easy with the knowledge that Loki is no more. He will never come and threaten your world again.”

“And thank fuck for that,” Tony heard Barton mutter before Natasha shut him up with another one of her looks.

“Thank you for telling us,” she told Thor before they walked out of the room to disappear god-knows-where, as was their habit.
“I’m sorry for your loss,” Steve said. Thor frowned.

“Loki was your enemy. Why do you express regret over his passing?”

“He may have been our enemy, but he was still your brother. No matter your estrangement, his loss must have been hard for you.”

“Aye,” Thor sighed softly. “We may have had our differences, but I loved him nonetheless.

Tony was starting to feel a little uncomfortable with all the emotion in the room. Seeing the demigod almost in tears was…alarming to say at least.

“You know what?” he said loudly to break the weird mood that had settled over their group. “Let’s get drunk.”

All three men looked up at him. Steve with disbelief, Bruce with bemusement and Thor…Thor actually seemed to perk up a bit at the suggestion.

“That solves everything in your book, doesn’t it?” Steve’s tone was biting as he pointedly glanced at the martini glass in Tony’s hand. “You refuse to deal with your problems, so you drink instead.”

Tony laid the now empty glass on the coffee table before folding his arms.

“Just how did this conversation turn from a discussion about Asgard into a lecture about my drinking habits?” Normally he would have happily picked a fight with Steve, but Thor’s tale had made him feel drained and he wanted nothing more than to open a bottle of something good and forget all about Asgard and Loki for a few hours. He shut his eyes and mentally counted to ten before speaking again.

“No, it doesn’t solve problems, but sometimes it sure as hell helps in dealing with them.” He turned back to Thor. “Anyway, the offer still stands. If you wanna get drunk, my bar is wide open. I have enough booze here to flood a small town, so I’m sure we can find something that will get even you totally wasted.”

“That would be…welcome. Thank you.” Thor rose slowly, giving Tony a grateful smile before he went off to explore the liquor cabinet.

“Don’t mention it.” Tony followed after him to show him how to open the generously built bar in the wall. “So, what will it be? Beer? Scotch? Vodka? I’m afraid I don’t have any mead, but I’m sure we could get some if I ordered it now.” He looked back at the other two men. “What about you, guys? Will you join us?”

“I don’t drink,” Bruce said, looking a little apologetic. “Bad things tend to happen when I get drunk.”

“Isn’t that true for everyone?” Tony said jokingly. “You know, you should learn to relax more.”

“That’s what yoga is for.” Bruce didn’t let his resolve waver. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

“What about you, Cap?”

“I think I’ll pass on this one.” He still looked disapproving of Tony’s choice of therapy, but since Steve rarely approved of anything Tony did, Tony didn’t feel terribly bothered by it. “I wouldn’t be able to get drunk, anyway. I’ll be in the gym if you need me.” He followed Bruce out of the room, leaving Tony alone with Thor.
“So, how do you feel about vodka?”

And that was how Tony ended up getting drunk with the God of Thunder.

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The first hour of the evening consisted mostly of Tony showing Thor all the different bottles of alcohol in the bar and Thor enthusiastically tasting them one by one. He didn’t speak much - in fact, he had hardly spoken more than five words in total since Steve had left the room - but he seemed genuinely impressed by Tony’s booze collection.

Finally, Tony thought as he watched Thor kick back yet another glass of scotch, someone who can appreciate a good drink.

Thor’s visit made Tony suddenly feel glad that he didn’t live with the Avengers. He imagined Steve giving him a lecture every time he so much as came near a bottle and Bruce watching him drink with a sad, resigned smile and felt grateful as hell that there was nobody in Malibu to police his habits. Pepper had sometimes used to look disappointed when she found him drunk in his workshop, but at least she knew him well enough to not try and change him. Living with Captain Abstinence, on the other hand, would be pure hell.

Thor tried dozens of different drinks before he finally settled on Absinthe. Tony thought it was a bit of an odd choice, especially since he didn’t bother with any of the usual bells and whistles that normally accompanied the drink, chugging the venomous-green liquid straight out of the bottle instead. Tony privately thought that the god may have chosen it because the color reminded him of Loki in some way, but decided to keep silent about it because it was none of his business - after all, he was hardly a guy who could judge other people for their issues.

Tony himself settled for scotch. He had never been a big fan of absinthe, so he didn’t care if Thor drank it all. There were three bottles of the stuff in the tower (mostly for appearances), two here and one in the penthouse upstairs, so he was pretty sure Thor would have plenty to drink. The drink had very high alcohol content, so there was a chance that it might actually manage to get Thor drunk. And hell, even if he did drink it all and wasn’t satisfied yet, there was always vodka.

“This is good,” Thor said after his third sip of Absinthe. “Truly a drink fit for the gods. I like it.” He raised the bottle to the light, watching the liquid slosh around inside. “I have tasted Midgardian beer before, but this is much, much better. What is it?”

So Tony spent the next fifteen minutes describing how Absinthe was made and the different ways of drinking it. Thor looked fascinated by his tale.

“You have so many marvelous inventions in this realm,” he said, making a sloppy arc with his hand to encompass the entirety of the world. “We do not have anything like this drink in Asgard.”

“I know,” Tony said before he could think better of it. It looked like he was drunker than he had thought if his information filters weren’t working properly.

“How did you come to learn about Asgardian drinks?” Thor’s gaze sharpened a bit, his attention switching from the bottle in his hand to Tony’s face. “I do not recall sharing any tales of my drinking exploits with you after our glorious victory.”

Shit. The guy could be perceptive at the worst times. Tony contemplated lying for a moment, but then he remembered that Loki was dead. What harm would it do if he told Thor about the evening in the penthouse? The deal was off. There was no favor to uphold anymore and maybe telling Thor...
about Loki’s visit would help improve the god’s mood a bit.

“The day of the attack,” Tony started, “I flew to my tower to confront Loki in my own home. In between threats of ruin and responsibility I somehow managed to offer him a drink. I didn’t plan on it - it just slipped out when I was trying to hold his attention to keep him from killing me.” He took a sip of his scotch before continuing. “Well, it turns out that Loki took me up on that offer. Less than a year ago, he appeared all of a sudden at a random fundraiser and saved my life from an assassin.”

Bit by bit, he told Thor the story of one of the weirdest nights of his life. Thor said silently, listening to his story with fascination. He didn’t interrupt until Tony finished with “And I haven’t seen him since.”

Thor propped his chin on his hand, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“This is most unusual, even for my brother. Did he say what he wanted from you?”

Tony shook his head. “No. I have no idea if he wanted a weapon, a sports car or a lifelong subscription to Playboy. I suppose we will never find out now.”

That caused Thor’s face to fall again.

“Indeed,” he said, taking another long swig from his bottle. When he set it down, it took him two tries to keep it upright. Tony thought it was high time they moved somewhere more comfortable.

“Come on,” he told the Asgardian as he stood up. “Let’s get to the couch before we’re both too drunk to walk. You can pass out there all you want without risking that you’ll fall off the chair.”

He led the way, with a bottle in one hand and his glass in the other. Despite the five or so drinks he’d had so far, his walk was still fairly steady. After all - he’d had plenty of practice over the years. Sometimes he even worked on his designs while drunk. A few steps over the room were nothing compared to that.

Thor fared a bit worse. He stood up slowly, leaning on the bar for support. Tony thought that the god had probably underestimated the strength of his drink. But then - if he had only tried American beer before, it was no wonder. The Absinthe packed quite a punch, plus one had to count all the drinks Thor had drunk before. The sheer volume would kill five regular guys, but Thor only looked a bit tipsy.

Finally Thor managed to grab a bottle of green liquid in each hand, detach himself from the bar and cross the room to the couch where Tony was sitting sprawled against the cushions. Thor sat down heavily on the other end and put the spare bottle on the floor next to the sofa. He took a few more swallows from the bottle in his hand, frowning at the carpet.

“A part of me still cannot believe that he is gone,” he said after a while. “I have known him all my life – we grew up together, fought side by side for centuries. He was my steady companion on all my adventures.” He sighed. “And now he’s gone.”

Tony didn’t know what to say to that, so he stayed silent. He had never been good at dealing with grief – be it other people’s or his own. Besides, it looked like Thor had forgotten that Tony was even in the room. The god kept staring into space, lost in memories. He surprised Tony a minute later when he spoke again, this time addressing Tony directly.

“You remind me of him sometimes.”

Tony almost spat out his drink. That had been certainly unexpected.
“What?” he asked, incredulous. “How do I remind you of Loki of all people?” A horrible thought occurred to him. “You’re not mistaking me for him, are you?” That was the last thing Tony needed – for Thor to have some sort of alcohol induced mental breakdown in which he hallucinates that Tony is his dead brother.

Thor gave him an amused look. “No, of course not. I am not that drunk.”

“Good.” Tony still didn’t feel reassured. “What did you mean, then?”

“That you and him share some similarities.”

“Like what? We both have dark hair, talk too much and love making things explode?”

“Among other things.” Thor’s smile turned fond. “But no, the similarities go deeper than that.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. Thor took another sip before continuing.

“You both like showing off your accomplishments. You enjoy being celebrated for your wit. You are charming and know how to influence the minds of people, even if they do not particularly wish to listen.”

All right, Tony was starting to feel a little creeped out by how a guy who had spent less than three days total with him could read him like a book.

“How the hell do you know all this?”

“Some things I learned through observation, others from Loki. I visited him in his prison during his sentence on several occasions. Most of the time he refused to talk to anyone, but occasionally there were days when the loneliness became too much for him to bear and he was willing to converse with me.”

“And you talked about me?” Tony couldn’t help but feel skeptical. “I mean, I know I’m awesome, but I doubt that I left that much of an impression on him.”

“Oh, but you did,” Thor said. “He may not have shown it, but he was very intrigued by your creations. You are but a fragile mortal, and yet you have managed to create a device that allowed you to face me as an equal on the battlefield. Few men have ever managed to fight me like you did. It left quite an impression on him.”

“Well, he certainly didn’t show it.”

“No,” Thor smiled. “He rarely says what he means, much like you. I have noticed that about you. You talk so much, but you seldom say what is truly on your mind. Loki was much the same. He talked almost constantly, always eager to show off his wit, but he rarely shared anything of importance with me. He preferred to keep his secrets to himself, even as a child.”

The sighed and emptied the rest of the bottle in two long gulps, putting the bottle down with an unsteady hand. He reached for the other bottle but didn’t open it - instead he just stared at it with a sad expression on his face.

“Indeed, he rarely shared important things with me. He tried to, when we were younger, but I was too preoccupied with my own dreams and problems to hear him out. As time passed, he came to me less and less. I did not notice because I did not wish to notice.” If possible, Thor’s expression turned even sadder. “I wasn’t a good brother to him. Things might have been different if I had listened to him more.”
Tony felt totally out of his depth. He tried to imagine what Pepper or Steve would say to something like that.

“I’m sure you did your best.”

“No. I did not,” Thor said bluntly. “I always pushed my own opinions without taking his into consideration. I lead and he followed in my shadow, offering quiet support even to my most foolhardy ideas. And when he did voice his protests against something, my friends always took my side in the argument and his voice got silenced. Eventually, he grew to resent me.” He shook his head sadly. “I do not blame him for it. I can see now that I haven’t treated him well.”

Well, shit, Tony thought. Hindsight was always 20/20. He tried to think of something that would alleviate the crushing guilt that he could hear in Thor’s every word, because it looked like the guy indirectly blamed himself for Loki’s death. From what Tony had seen, he didn’t have much to blame himself for. Thor might not have been brother of the year, but he didn’t drive Loki insane. The god of mischief had managed that all by himself.

“I don’t think you should blame yourself for everything, buddy,” Tony told him. “From what I have heard, Loki was a dick to you, too. He sent a gigantic death-machine after you, for fuck’s sake.”

Mentioning that made him remember the attack on New York all over again and with the alcohol swimming hot in his blood, his temper flared at the reminder. “And don’t forget that that he later came here with his crazy alien army and tried to burn New York to the ground.” He threw out an arm in the general direction of the skyscrapers outside. “That didn’t happen because he wasn’t hugged enough as a child! He did it because he was fucking insane!”

He didn’t even realize he was standing until he found himself two feet from the couch, the glass still in hand. Thor stood up too, towering over him, but Tony was too drunk to realize the danger of the situation he had just managed to put himself in.

“Have care how you speak,” Thor growled. “There are matters you know nothing about.”

“Well, I don’t give a shit!” Tony snapped, the combination of alcohol and anger removing all of his normal restraint. “The guy almost killed me, for fuck’s sake! He threw me out of a goddamn window! If I didn’t have my suit, I would be dead! I think that gives me enough right to call him a raging madman.”

“He is my brother!” Thor shot back. Tony didn’t know what point he was trying to make with that.

“He was fucking crazy!” Tony yelled.

Thor crossed the three feet of space in one stride and grabbed Tony’s shoulders, shaking him like a ragdoll.

“I will not tolerate this kind of insults!” Thor shouted, swaying on his feet. “Loki may be mad, but he is still my brother!”

“He’s dead!” Tony reminded him. “He doesn’t give a shit what I think of him, because he’s dead, remember?"”

Thor stillled for a second, realization hitting him like a bag of bricks. Tony could see the way his expression cracked, grief coming back full force as he remembered why they were drinking in the first place. He practically crumpled in Tony’s arms and Tony hurriedly pushed him towards the couch, where the god buried his face in his hands and started sobbing uncontrollably.

Tony felt like the king of assholes for reminding the guy of Loki’s death. Now he had a crying Norse
god on his couch and no idea how to deal with him. The last time Tony himself had cried had been more than twenty years ago, when he heard that his parents were dead. That night he had drunk two bottles of whiskey and ended up bawling his eyes out in the corner of his workshop. The only company back then had been Dummy, who had spent the night watching him with a puzzled tilt of his claw and offering him dirty rags.

Dummy might have been a poor role model for grief management, but it was better than nothing. Copying his example, Tony reached over to the side of the couch to the box of tissues standing on one of the coffee tables and offered one to Thor.

“If you wanna talk about it, I’m here.”

He spent the next half an hour sitting awkwardly on the couch and watching Thor go through half his supply of Kleenexes (or whatever fancy brand Pepper had bought, Tony didn’t bother to check).

“He was my brother,” Thor said finally, his voice scratchy from all the crying. He had a crumpled tissue in one hand and a new bottle of Absinthe in the other. He opened it and took several long swigs before continuing. “We spent over a thousand years together.” He tore his gaze from the bottle to look at Tony. “Can you even imagine it? A thousand years of history. And now it’s all gone. He’s gone. Mother, too.” His face scrunched up, two more tears falling from his eyes. “The world feels so empty without them.”

Tony wordlessly offered him another Kleenex. Thor took it, wiping his face.

“I don’t know what to do without them. I miss them both terribly.” He gave Tony a helpless look, his eyes gazing beseechingly at Tony like he held all the answers in the universe.

“What do I do, Tony Stark?”

Tony didn’t have an answer for him.

***

The next morning Tony woke up sprawled on one end of the couch, the bottle still in hand. There was a blanket thrown over him, which made him suspect that Steve had come to check up on them after all. Thor was still snoring face down on the other end of the couch, dead to the world. Tony let him sleep. God knew that the guy needed it.

He spent the next two hours checking his e-mail and fending off calls from various Stark Industries department heads, who had somehow managed to find out that Tony was in New York and urgently needed to talk to him. Tony had no idea how they knew he was here, but he suspected it might be Pepper’s work. He wouldn’t put it past her.

Thor woke up after lunch. He was still subdued when he came down to join the others, but seemed to be in a better mood than he’d been when he had first arrived. He thanked Tony profusely for his hospitality and promised to tell all his friends about the wonders of Midgardian liquor. Tony decided to buy himself an Absinthe factory. If the Asgardian was planning to stay on Earth for a while, he would need a lot of the stuff. Might as well make a new investment.

In the end Tony spent three more days in New York. The company demanded his attention, the managers taking advantage of the fact that he was in town to consult business strategies with him. When he finally managed to tear himself away, he was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to hide away in his workshop in Malibu and tell everyone to fuck off. The moment his last meeting ended, he put on the suit and flew. He had already left a message for the Avengers, so there was no
need to go see them personally.

He arrived to the Malibu mansion in the middle of the night, exhausted but happy to be home. He let the assembly line in the workshop pull his armor from him and went to greet his bots.

“Daddy’s home!” he called, turning on the lights.

“Welcome home, sir,” JARVIS chimed.

The bots all raised their heads, their robotic claws clicking in welcome. Tony leaned on one of the workbenches and took a minute just to enjoy the peace and quiet of the empty house. Yeah, it was good to be home.

Despite his tiredness, he reached for the nearest sketch board. There were a dozen new ideas floating around in his head and he wanted to get them down before he went to sleep. It wouldn’t take long.

He was so immersed in his drawing that he almost missed the green-golden glow that appeared a few feet away. Tony raised his head just in time to see Loki step out of the portal, smirk firmly in place.

“Hello, Stark.”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Guys, this fic is so much fun to write. I’ve already got 70 000 words down, with the first ten chapters finished and no prospect of stopping anytime soon. This is shaping up to be the longest story I’ve ever written (current estimate of final length = 120-150K words), but it barely registers, because I love every minute of the process. The characters have good chemistry and the plot is already laid out, so this practically writes itself.

Of course, your support helps. Thank you so much to everyone who left kudos and comments on the first chapter! I was blown away by the amount of responses I got. I’m glad you like the story so far and hope you will stick with me until the end.

The next chapter will be posted next Thursday, on December 4th, because I’m going on a trip to Germany for the weekend and won’t have access to the internet for a few days.
Deal with the Devil

Chapter Summary

“So, this leaves me with two possibilities,” Tony said. “Either Loki’s dead and you’re some other guy who’s wearing his face for shits and giggles, or you’re the real deal and you just played an extremely tasteless prank on your brother.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hello, Stark.”

It took Tony’s exhausted mind longer than he would prefer to process what he was seeing, but the moment he did, he snapped from designing a jet engine to battle mode in less than a second. Before he even realized what he was doing, he had already taken two quick steps back and reached for the nearest weapon-like object, which in this case happened to be a half-finished repulsor prototype. He pointed it at Loki’s chest and felt a twinge of annoyance when Loki’s only reaction was an amused smirk.

“Give me one reason, one good reason, why I shouldn’t summon the Avengers right now,” Tony said, not in the mood for Loki’s mind games.

“You owe me a debt,” Loki said like it solved everything. “You would break your word if you betrayed me.”

Since it looked like Loki didn’t come to murder him (at least not right away) and the repulsor wouldn’t do much against him anyway, Tony slowly lowered the prototype back to the bench and picked up a random screwdriver instead, twirling it idly between his fingers in a fake display of nonchalance. Loki looked fairly calm for the moment, but Tony still made sure to keep himself within reach of his weapons, just in case.

“It’s the strangest thing, you know,” he told the god. “I could have sworn that just a few days ago I had your brother break down crying on my couch because you were dead.” He shot Loki a look. “It took some persuasion and a lot of booze to get the full story out of him, but he was pretty convinced that you had died in a fight with some dark elf beast-thing on Svartalfheim.”

Even now Tony could still remember it vividly - Thor’s grief-stricken face when he had finally realized that his brother was really gone for good, the way his voice had hitched whenever he had pronounced Loki’s name, the new wave of tears that started flowing from Thor’s eyes when he recalled some of his fondest memories of his brother. Thor had been drunk out of his mind at the time, so there was no way he could have been lying. The guy was 100% convinced that Loki was dead.

And now Loki was here, right in the middle of Tony’s workshop, looking very much alive and acting like nothing had happened.

“So, this leaves me with two possibilities,” Tony said. “Either Loki’s dead and you’re some other guy who’s wearing his face for shits and giggles, or you’re the real deal and you just played an
extremely tasteless prank on your brother.” He pointed the screwdriver in Loki’s direction. “Shitty move, by the way. The guy’s in pieces over it. You have a lot to make up for.”

Annoyance flickered over Loki’s face. “I answer to no one. And I don’t owe that oaf anything.”

Tony shrugged. “That’s your call. I’m not stupid enough to involve myself in your family affairs. Be warned though: when the guy finds out - and he will, you can count on that – it won’t be pretty. In fact,” he said, picking up his cellphone from the desk, “I bet he would love to hear about your miraculous resurrection. Why don’t I call him and tell him right now?”

He barely saw Loki move. One second he was lounging against a workbench a few feet away and the next he had Tony’s hand in an iron grip.

“I don’t think so,” he told Tony almost pleasantly, towering above him. “You will not inform anyone about my whereabouts.”

Tony couldn’t help it, he smirked at him. Pepper was right when she said he had no self-preservation.

“And I should do that why? Because you said so?”

Loki gritted his teeth. “You insolent-” he cut off and took a deep breath, visibly trying to compose himself a bit. “I did not come here to pointlessly quarrel with you,” he said finally, loosening his grip on Tony’s hand a little.

Tony cocked his head. “Oh really? Because you’re doing a very good impression of quarrelling right now.” When a muscle in Loki’s jaw twitched, he decided to back off a little. It wouldn’t do to piss off the god in earnest. “Why are you here, then, if not for the scintillating conversation?”

“I have come to collect the favour you owe me.”

Tony pulled his hand out of Loki’s grasp to cross his arms across his chest.

“And what if I refuse?”

“Then the consequences won’t be pleasant for you,” Loki informed him.

“Let’s make one thing straight,” Tony raised his chin, feeling a bit resentful that he had to look up to speak with Loki face to face. “I don’t respond well to threats and I don’t appreciate you showing up in my workshop at ass-o’clock in the morning to boss me around.”

“What would you appreciate, then?” Loki asked, cocking his head a bit. “If I came to you like a beggar, groveling?”

Tony massaged his temple, trying to will away the growing headache.

“Right now I would really appreciate it if you just fucked off and left me alone, but since that’s obviously not going to happen, you might as well spill. What do you want from me? If you’re here for weapons, you’re shit out of luck. I don’t make those anymore.”

And he turned his back on Loki’s smarmy face and went to pour himself another mug of coffee. Not the smartest of moves, perhaps, but since it looked like Loki planned to stay for a while, it meant Tony needed to be on the top of his game. And that required coffee.

“Oh, but you do make weapons,” Loki muttered, eyeing the Iron Man suits on display. “You have
simply stopped sharing them with others.”

“I’m not building a nuke for you,” Tony told him resolutely, keeping one eye on his unwanted visitor as he poured himself coffee. “There is nothing you can offer me that could persuade me to make one.” He took a sip, feeling his body perk up a little from the new influx of caffeine.

“I must say, you do not seem very surprised by my presence here,” Loki said.

Oh, Tony was plenty surprised, he just had a very good poker face.

“To be honest, I would be more surprised to find that you were dead. Considering who you are, a stunt like this isn’t all that unexpected. And as for you being here, well, I suppose there was magic involved in some way.”

“I have my means of finding people,” Loki told him with a smirk and all right, that was super creepy.

“You know,” Tony said, just to keep his mind away from thoughts of ‘oh god, Loki can appear in my house at any time and there’s nothing I can do to keep him out’, “I’m still half-convinced that you hired those assassins, just to have me in your debt.”

Loki’s eyes glittered with amusement.

“Your fanciful notions of your own importance are amusing, but no, I did not hire those men. Believe me - if I wanted you dead, you would be dead.”

“Well, that’s reassuring,” Tony muttered, sipping at his coffee.

Loki took a step closer, idly inspecting the half-finished projects on the workbench.

“What if I told you that I will reward you generously for your cooperation?”

“I don’t need your money,” Tony told him at once.

“I am aware of your wealth.” Loki said. “But gold is not what I’m offering. What if I offered to share some of my knowledge with you? What would you say to that?”

Tony took a second to consider it.

“I’d say you’re probably lying, trying to get me to cooperate with empty promises so that you can disappear with the final product without actually giving me anything.” He gave Loki a look. “I’ve read some of the legends, you know. They don’t call you the God of Lies for nothing.”

For the first time since he’d appeared in Tony’s workshop, Loki’s expression clouded.

“Your so called legends are wildly inaccurate and exaggerated.”

“I don’t know,” Tony leisurely finished his coffee, putting the empty mug on the counter, “I think they capture your general dickishness pretty well.”

“So that’s your answer, then,” Loki said, all traces of good mood gone from his face. “I should have known I couldn’t depend on a mortal to hold his end of the bargain.” He spun around to walk away, but not fast enough to hide the flicker of hurt that flashed across his face.

Almost against his will, Tony found himself taking a step forward.

“Wait!” He called after the retreating figure. Loki stopped but didn’t turn around. “What did you
want from me? I can’t tell you if I’m willing to work for you if you don’t even tell me what I’m supposed to do."

He had no idea what had made him stop Loki from leaving. By all rights, Tony should be happy to get rid of him, but he couldn’t help himself. Underneath the usual aura of power and confidence that Loki was trying to project, there was something in his posture that screamed tiredness and resignation, as if he had come to Tony’s workshop already half-expecting to be thrown out. Loki looked like a shadow of his former self, a far cry from the egoistical madman who had laid siege to Tony’s tower more than two years ago and Tony couldn’t help but wonder, how much had changed for the god since he’d last seen him.

Loki slowly turned back, keeping his expression carefully guarded.

“I do not require any weapons from you. I was simply going to request that you make me armour, similar to the one I am currently wearing. It would have to be resistant to magic, so that no enemy spell may touch me.”

Tony blew out a breath. “Wow. I never thought I would say this, but I’m not sure if I am able to do that. Magic is a bit out of my general area of expertise. Can’t you just go to Asgard and have it made there?”

“That is no longer an option,” Loki said in a clipped tone. Tony decided not to ask about that.

“Well, I can certainly try, but I can’t promise you anything.” Even as he spoke, he was already walking to one of the benches, a thousand different ideas popping up in his brain. “I’ve never made anything like it.” He had JARVIS run a quick scan of Loki’s armor and projected it into the space above the table. The hologram gleamed a bright, ethereal blue, dancing under Tony’s hands as he pulled it this way and that, exploring.

“The plating shouldn’t be that much of a problem, even if the materials are a bit…exotic. I can have the general shape done in a few days. The anti-magic part, however, will be a tough nut to crack.” He studied the design, trying to come up with ideas. “I assume you want the armor to be able to block magic coming at you from outside, but at the same time you want to be able to use your own magic without the armor blocking you?” He shot the god a questioning look.

Loki was wearing a strange expression, but carefully slipped back into a neutral mask when he found Tony looking at him.

“Yes, that would be preferable.” His eyes flitted from the 3-D design to its creator. “I’m not sure I understand. You were trying to evict me from your workroom just a moment ago, but suddenly you have decided to cooperate. What made you change your mind so quickly?”

Tony didn’t think Loki would appreciate being told that Tony felt sorry for him, so he opted for a cocky grin instead.

“I could never resist a good challenge. The technology on this armor of yours is far beyond anything I have ever made, so it should be interesting, to say at least. Maybe I’ll even learn something new.” A thought suddenly occurred to him and he paused with his hand above the hologram. “Why did you come to me, anyway? I don’t know jack shit about magic. I bet there are some elves or dwarves or whatever guys who can do these things a lot better than me.”

“I was told that you are the finest armourer in Midgard,” Loki said, giving Tony a glance.

The flattery was cheap and utterly transparent, but Tony still huffed a laugh. “Yeah, I guess you can
say that. I do have the best suits around here, after all, and there aren’t many people who could do what I do. Well, certainly not as well as me.”

“I see that you’re the very soul of modesty.”

“Yeah, it’s one of my best traits,” Tony replied without missing a beat. “I’m also a genius, incredibly handsome and great in bed, but never mind that. You said we’d have a deal. Am I allowed to make some of my own conditions?”

Loki made a “go ahead” gesture, still busy exploring the hologram.

“All right,” Tony said, trying to formulate the words as precisely as he could to avoid creating any inconvenient loopholes. “One: you are not allowed to threaten, harm or kill anyone close to me, or kill any humans in general, unless they’re directly threatening your life. I don’t care if you’re used to killing people when you’re bored or whatever, you won’t do that shit here. If I hear you killed anyone while you’re on Earth, the deal is off.”

“Very well,” Loki nodded magnanimously, “I will grant you that wish. Anything else?”

“Two: I get to keep whatever technology I develop during the making of the armor. The final product is yours, but I get the know-how.” He waited for Loki’s affirmative nod before continuing. “And three: no mindfucks. You’re no allowed to use any mind-control spells or anything of that sort on me. If I am to work for you, it will be on my own terms, not as some slack-jawed puppet. If I find out that you messed with my mind in any way, you won’t like the consequences.” Tony raised an eyebrow when Loki nodded for the third time. This had gone a lot smoother than Tony would expect. “So, do we have a deal?”

Loki pulled his hands away from the hologram and nodded.

“Yes, I suppose that’s acceptable. In return, I will require your absolute silence. You are not to tell anyone that I am alive or that I am here. I have managed to avoid detection so far and would be very disappointed if my plans failed because of one mouthy human.” He shot Tony a warning look before he extended a hand. “Do you accept?”

Tony hesitated for a moment as he went over Loki’s words, trying to find any hidden loopholes.

“What happens if I accidentally break my side of the deal? You know, someone like the Widow comes for a visit and figures out that you’re here? What happens to me, then?”

Loki’s smirk turned very smug. “In that case it will be my pleasure to choose a suitable punishment for you. However, I do not have to worry unduly about your indiscretion – a magical contract does not allow itself to be broken once it’s closed. Just like I will not be able to harm you or any of your pathetic humans, you will not be able to disclose my existence to anyone. Such is the nature of our deal. Now, do you accept?”

_Fucking magic_, Tony thought as he slowly reached out to shake Loki’s hand. _I’m so going to regret this._

“You’ve got a deal.”

He felt a jolt run through him when their palms touched and had to suppress a shudder when he saw the tiny tendrils of bright red light swirling around their clasped hands. They shimmered in the air for a few seconds before disappearing. Tony tried really hard not to be creeped out by it. He dropped Loki’s hand as soon as the god loosened his grasp and took a few steps back, trying to put some distance between them.
The good thing was that he didn’t feel any different, but then – if Loki had put some sort of a spell on him, he wouldn’t be any wiser, would he? Better stop thinking about it, or he was going to drive himself crazy with paranoia.

“So, that’s it?” he asked, just to be sure.

Loki’s answering smirk was far too knowing for Tony’s taste.

“Yes, our deal has been made. Now it’s your turn to fulfill your end of the bargain.”

Tony still felt like there was a catch somewhere in there that he had missed. It made him feel on edge.

“So I make you your armor and you then what? Disappear?” Somehow he had trouble believing that.

Loki inclined his head. “Your debt to me will be erased once you have given me what I came for.”

Tony leaned his hip against the workbench and gave the god a skeptical look.

“You know, I’m still not entirely convinced that there is a debt in the first place, but whatever. If it gets you off my back, I’ll do it.”

“Eager to get rid of me so soon?” Loki cocked an eyebrow.

“You have no idea,” Tony muttered, turning back to the bench to tinker with the newest StarkPhone prototype. “You know what? Come back in a few days and we can start working on a preliminary design for the armor. Right now I haven’t slept for two days and there’s like a million things I need to do before I can even think about going to bed, so I really don’t have time for this.”

He didn’t even look back to check if the god had heeded his advice, his mind already sorting through the long mental checklist of things he had promised Pepper he would do.

He had no idea when Loki finally left, but when he looked up from his workbench a few hours later, the guy was gone.

Tony really wasn’t looking forward to his next visit.

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To Tony’s annoyance, the Loki-less state of his workshop didn’t last long. When the god next popped up in the middle of the afternoon a few days later, it was all Tony could do to stop himself from throwing a wrench at him.

He had barely managed to finish an engine prototype that Pepper had been grilling him about for the past two months and he still needed to recalibrate the targeting system in his armor and there were about a hundred more things he had planned today that he hadn’t managed to get to yet, so the god’s visit was really inconvenient. Really, really inconvenient. Tony thought the guy must have a special talent for appearing where he was the least wanted.

Tony didn’t even bother to look up at his unwanted visitor.

“What do you want?”

“What? No greeting?” Loki said in fake disappointment. “You Midgardians have terrible manners.”
“Nope, that’s just me,” Tony said and continued tweaking the computer program. From the corner of his eye he saw Loki take a few steps closer before something caught his attention on one of the workbenches. He lifted the cube with Tony’s first arc reactor from the table, studying it intently for a few minutes before he put it back.

“I do not know if I should find your lack of alarm at my presence in your home insulting or amusing,” he finally drawled.

“The novelty has kind of worn off since the last time you were here,” Tony told him.

That got him an amused smirk.

“Yes, I suppose it has.”

When he didn’t say anything else, Tony finally pushed back from the computer and swiveled around to face the guy.

“Is there a point to this visit?” he couldn’t help but ask. Loki didn’t seem in any particular hurry to leave and his presence was starting to get on Tony’s nerves.

“I thought I might come and check your progress on my commission.”

“Hate to disappoint you, but there hasn’t been much progress apart from what you’ve already seen. Despite what you might think, you’re not the only person who wants something from me. I’ll take a look at your armor when I’m finished with my other stuff. That might take a while, thought, because I’m a pretty busy guy.”

Loki’s smirk disappeared to be replaced by a displeased frown. “I thought you would make my order your top priority.”

“Well then, think again.” Tony was way past the point where he would be impressed by the god looming over him. Loki tried it now, towering over Tony’s chair, but the engineer only gave him an unimpressed look.

“Look, buddy, you’re not that special. The world doesn’t revolve around you. I will make your armor – eventually – but right now I simply don’t have the time for it.”

“Then I suggest you make the time,” Loki said in a low, dangerous voice. Tony rolled his eyes. Now that he was certain that Loki wasn’t going to kill him, the guy’s threats had lost all of their weight.

“What did I tell you about the threats?” Tony said. “Don’t work on me. Now let me finish this first and if I have time after that, I might take a look at your armor.”

Loki still looked annoyed, but finally backed off a few steps and sat down on a nearby bench with a theatrical sigh.

“Very well, I will wait for a while. I would suggest you hurry with your work, however – I am not known for my patience.”

“Yeah? That makes two of us,” Tony muttered under his breath as he turned back to the screen full of code. Maybe if he worked on it for too long, Loki would get bored and go annoy someone else. He didn’t seem like the type of guy who enjoyed sitting still for long periods of time.

Soon Tony got immersed in reprogramming the targeting system and lost track of time. When he finally saved the final version of the code and stood up from the computer, the bench where Loki had
been sitting before was empty. Before he could celebrate his successful tactic for getting rid of intruders, however, a sound from the other side of the workshop drew his attention. He spun around to find Loki standing in front of his display case with the Mark I armor, examining it with fascination.

“You’re still here?”

Loki spread his arms in a “here I am” gesture. “As you can see.”

“You’re not going to leave, are you?” Tony asked in resignation.

“No.” Loki’s shark-like grin made it clear just how much he was enjoying being a pain in the ass.

A few beats passed before Tony gave up.

“All right, come here. The sooner we get this done, the sooner I can get back to my real work.” He waited for the god to cross the workshop and come stand in the open space a few feet away. “Now don’t move,” he told Loki as he set up the scanners.

“What are you going to do to me?” Loki asked, suspicious.

“Just a scan of the armor.” And of Loki himself, but Tony decided to keep that little detail to himself. “What I did the last time was just a surface scan of the general shape, but this will give me more information to work with.”

He ran several scans before he was satisfied with the results. As the information started piling up, he pulled up a few more screens into the air to have it neatly organized. When the composition scan came up, he actually blinked. “Huh.”

“What?” Loki asked impatiently.

“Oh, nothing,” Tony said. “It’s just – your armor is made of steel.”

“Yes, Asgardian steel,” Loki said, crossing his arms. “I could have told you that myself if you had bothered to ask about it.”

“No, but it’s just- Steel.” Tony shook his head. “I thought it would be something fancy like adamantium or some weird alien metal, but it’s only steel. True – it’s made a little differently than I’m used to, but it’s still just simple steel.”

“It’s enchanted,” Loki pointed out. Tony couldn’t help but notice that he sounded a little affronted. Good.

“Yes, but it’s just- Steel.” Tony shook his head. “I thought it would be something fancy like adamantium or some weird alien metal, but it’s only steel. True – it’s made a little differently than I’m used to, but it’s still just simple steel.”

“It’s enchanted,” Loki pointed out. Tony couldn’t help but notice that he sounded a little affronted. Good.

“Yeah, it may be enchanted, but the material is still quite basic. Hell – even my suits use something more interesting than this. Your smiths don’t have much of an imagination, do they?”

He was rewarded with a scowl that made him grin. Hell yeah, irritating Loki was fun when he knew he would get away with it.

“Anyway,” Tony continued. “I suppose we’ll spend some time on the design – that’s entirely your choice, by the way. Whether you want to emulate the Lord of the Rings, or want some weirdo thing full of gigantic spikes, I don’t really care. It’s your call.” He crossed over to a different screen, making it run simulations of various viable materials. “For now, we can discuss the materials. What do you want? I’ve got a few different kinds of steel, iron, titanium, various carbon infusions and even gold, if you feel like showing off. I can also make all sorts of alloys, but if you want anything
more...exotic, you will have to provide it for me, because there are only so many things I can get here on Earth."

"I can provide you with the materials, if it proves necessary," Loki said.

"Awesome. Just don’t tell me where you got them from. There are some things I’m better off not knowing."

"I will endeavor to spare your delicate sensibilities," Loki drawled.

Tony pointed a stylus at him. "Yeah, you do that. So, once you’ve chosen a design and material, the armor itself should be done in a few days. I’ll have JARVIS make the mold based on your sca-"

"No," Loki interrupted him. "No mold, no machines. I want you to create the armor entirely by hand."

"You have to be kidding me." Tony gave him an incredulous look. "Do you have any idea how much work that is? It will take ages!"

Loki only smirked. "I have all the time in the world."

"Well, I don’t." Yep, Tony was definitely annoyed now.

"That is your problem, not mine." Loki took a step closer, holding Tony’s gaze. "I want every inch of the armor crafted by your hands. I will not be satisfied with anything less."

Tony fought down the urge to punch his smug face. As a distraction, he tried to think of some alternatives.

"I suppose I can build a gas-powered forge and-"

"No," Loki said immediately, "an artifact like this requires fire for its creation."

Tony’s jaw actually dropped a little.

"You want me to build a brick forge?"

"Yes, that would be ideal," Loki said with a perfectly straight face.

"You have to be fucking kidding me."

Tony could no longer tell if Loki was serious or if he was just making up random bullshit to mess with him. Either way, he was slowly arriving at the end of his patience. Even though it was barely three in the afternoon, he went to his desk and pulled out a bottle of whisky he kept stashed there. Fuck sobriety, this needed alcohol. Otherwise he might end up putting on a suit and punching a hole through Loki’s face if the guy kept this up.

He took a few swigs from it, relishing the burn down his throat. Tony didn’t even bother hiding the bottle back in the table – instead he put in on the desk to have it on hand. He strongly suspected it would be needed after Loki left (if he ever did. The guy looked far too comfy in the workshop for his taste). Only when he felt a little calmer did he turn back to Loki.

"You know, this kind of setup has last been used sometime in the Middle Ages. I don’t know where you get your ideas about the state of our civilization, but we have graduated from making stuff this way a long time ago. Besides that, I’m the guy with technology. I make computers and planes and space-suits. If you wanted your armor done by an actual blacksmith, you should have gone to some
elf or dwarf or whoever normally makes these things for you.”

“I already told you that I cannot,” Loki said crossly.

“But why?” Tony demanded. “Did you piss off the elves or something? Were you banished for being a dick?”

“No!” Loki snapped. “I cannot go to them because I do not wish for anyone to know that I am alive!”

Tony blinked. “Seriously?” That had been unexpected. “Does that mean I’m the only person who knows you’re alive?”

“Yes,” Loki bit out. “I have my reasons for hiding that I will not share with you, but essentially, right now you are the only living soul who is aware that I’m not dead.”

“Wow.” Tony took a minute to absorb that. If Loki was speaking the truth (which wasn’t likely, but was still possible), this whole situation had just gotten twenty times weirder.

Why was Loki pretending to be dead? And why was Tony the only one to know about him?

He had so many questions but strongly suspected that Loki wasn’t going to answer any of them. He already looked annoyed enough that Tony had managed to get as much from him as he had. A further line of questioning would probably end with half the workshop destroyed and Tony smeared on the wall somewhere. For the first time ever, Tony regretted not having Natasha around anymore, spying on his every move. She would have been able to get it out of him.

Loki didn’t pay any attention to Tony’s confused state of mind, rambling on.

“So no,” he continued, “I cannot order armor from a blacksmith on Alfheim, because I do not wish to be seen there.” He pinned Tony with a glare. “Now give me a straight answer! Are you or are you not capable of making it to my specifications? If you are not, this has been nothing but a waste of time.”

Tony looked up at the furious man who was now standing less than three feet away. No, not furious, he concluded on a second look. He looked more frustrated than angry. Why did he want the armor so badly? And from Tony of all people? It bugged him. Still, there was a small part of his ego that couldn’t help but feel smug that Loki had chosen him for this. Of all the people he could have gone to, he had decided to trust a former enemy. Why?

So far, he had no idea - but, he thought, he might be able to get the reason out of Loki sooner or later, if the stupid forging took as long as he estimated. The guy loved to talk and Tony was pretty sure that with a bit of encouragement, he would spill his motives eventually. People like him always did.

“Yes,” he answered finally when Loki started to look like he was going to strangle him if he had to wait any longer. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure I can make this. It’s been a few years since I’ve forged anything like this by hand,” and boy, did he wish to forget all about those particular three months, “but I can do it.”

Loki gave him a long searching look before nodding. “Very well. I hate being disappointed.” And that didn’t sound ominous at all. Not one bit.

Tony was starting to hate this whole stupid project.
“So,” he asked with forced cheerfulness, “what sort of material do you have in mind?”

This was going to be a long day.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you all for your continuing support! I’m so happy you like this story. So far I have managed to finish 12 chapters with two more almost done and I’m having such a great time with this story.

The next chapter will be posted on next Friday, December 12.
“You know,” Tony said a few hours later, after yet another round of unreasonable demands and arguments over Tony’s methods, “I won’t be able to make the final version anyway until I figure out how to make the damn thing magic-proof, so I’m just going to use the computer-made molds for trial versions until then, because if I had to forge everything by hand, my hands would fall off. I’ll have to try out dozens of different combinations of metals and their reactions to heat and pressure before I find the ideal alloy that works best.”

He gave Loki a glare when the god opened his mouth to argue and continued: “Once I discover how to do the whole anti-magic thing, I’ll forge the actual armor in the damn fire. How does that sound?”

Loki looked annoyed, but eventually nodded. “I suppose that’s acceptable.”

“Hallelujah!” Tony exclaimed. “That’s settled then. And if you say the word “forge” one more time today, I swear I will set you on fire.”

The threat seemed to amuse Loki. His mind really worked in weird ways.

Tony tore his gaze from the demigod to survey his workshop. They had spent most of the afternoon bickering, so he hadn’t managed to do much actual work aside from tinkering with a StarkPhone prototype. The only positive thing about all this was that at least this situation hadn’t involved any sort of abductions or imprisonment so far. Compared with some of his previous encounters with mad villains, arguing with the God of Chaos over metal alloys was pretty benign, really. Even if it was exhausting.

As he was waiting for the coffee machine to finish a new batch so he could refill his mug, Tony suddenly realized that he was hungry. When had he last eaten? Today? Yesterday? His memory was kind of foggy on that front. Oh, right, there had been donuts involved at some point, so probably breakfast. Still, that had been good twelve hours ago and he was starving.

“Hey, I’m gonna order a pizza. Do you like pizza?” No response. Tony tried a different question. “Have you ever had pizza?”

Loki looked up from the blueprint he was studying. “No, I cannot say that I have. I suppose it’s one of your Midgardian dishes.”

“Yep, you got that right. Pizza is awesome, by the way, so it’s a crime you’ve never had one. Nobody should go their whole life without the knowledge of pizza.” Something occurred to him, as he remembered one of Pepper’s many lectures about sensitivity and accommodating different customs. “Do you eat meat?” he asked, almost as an afterthought. Personally he didn’t give a crap
about Loki’s preferences, but it was always better to avoid accidentally pissing off the guy.

Loki gave him a “what do you think?” look.


He waited for a moment, but all he got in response was a glare for mentioning Thor’s name. So much for cooperation. In the end he decided to order five pizzas with various toppings. If Loki didn’t eat it all, at least Tony would have some leftovers for tomorrow.

Loki watched him order food with a puzzled frown. “You do not cook your own food?”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Do I look like a guy who cooks?”

“Why not employ a cook, then?” Loki asked. “You are more than wealthy enough to afford it. Or do you not have servants on Midgard?”

“We have. I just I don’t like having people around,” Tony admitted with some reluctance. “And yes, that includes my workshop.” He gave Loki a pointed glare which the god ignored.

“Is that why you didn’t move into your Tower with the others? You told me yourself that the others live there now. The tower belongs to you and yet you do not reside there.” Loki gave him a curious look. “Why is that?”

And thank fuck, JARVIS chose that precise moment inform Tony that the pizza guy’s car was approaching the house, saving him from having to answer the question. They were always incredibly fast when Tony ordered anything, probably because about half their total revenue came from the generous tips he left them on each order. Tony turned to leave the workshop, only to find Loki blocking his way.

“What?” he asked.

“You have not answered my question.” Loki had that stupid knowing look on his face again.

“No, I have not, because it’s none of your business,” Tony told him as he stepped around him to leave. “I’m here to make you a fancy piece of metal, not to fill out a questionnaire about my habits. You didn’t want to tell me why you’re pretending to be dead, either, so it’s only fair that I keep stuff to myself, too.”

He didn’t wait for an answer and went upstairs to fetch the pizza.

“JARVIS,” he said after the door shut behind the pizza boy, “call Loki upstairs for me, will you? I’m gonna take this to the kitchen.”

Loki climbed the stairs half a minute later, looking around himself curiously.

“So, this is your dwelling.”

“Yeah,” Tony called from the kitchen. “Come here, I’ve got the pizza. It tastes best when it’s still hot.”

The god came over to inspect the pizza boxes. “You mortals have the strangest foods.”

“If you think pizza is weird, I’d like to see what you would think about haggis or fried grasshoppers.”
Tony didn’t bother with plates or cutlery - he simply took a slice straight from the pizza box and started eating it with relish. He certainly wasn’t going to stand on ceremony for Loki of all people.

Loki hesitated over the boxes for a moment, probably judging the merits of various toppings, before he finally reached for a slice of ham pizza and took a tentative bite. He must have liked what he tasted, because he wolfed down the rest of the slice in several bites and immediately reached for another.

“I usually eat in the workshop while I work,” Tony explained, “but I didn’t want to offend your delicate sensibilities by making you eat among my tools and dirty rags.”

“You would have to try harder than that to shock me,” Loki said. “I have dined in the wilderness many times while hunting. Your workshop is hardly the worst place I have ever eaten in.”

“Still,” Tony said, “most people refuse to eat there. I thought I might warn you, since it looks like you’re going to be visiting sometimes.” And boy, that was a horrible thought.

Loki ate the rest of the ham pizza before he spoke again: “This is quite tasty.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe you guys don’t have pizza on Asgard. You’re seriously missing out. There are like a hundred different toppings you can put on this, so there’s bound to be a pizza for pretty much anyone.” Tony gestured to the rest of the boxes. “Try the others and tell me what you think.”

The god didn’t need to be asked twice. He ate in a slightly more refined manner than Thor, but he still managed to polish off three whole pizzas in one sitting. Tony couldn’t help but wonder if this was his normal appetite, or if he had been unusually hungry. Where did he eat, anyway, when he wasn’t hanging around Tony? And where was he staying? Did he magic his way into some hotel, or was he homeless? Tony had never bothered to think about it before, but now it nagged him a bit. He wasn’t going to ask, though, because Loki wouldn’t answer him anyway. If there was one thing Loki had in abundance, it was pride. Even if he were homeless, he would probably never admit it. That meant Tony would just have to find out about it on his own.

He was brought out of his thoughts by JARVIS’s voice.

“Sir? May I remind you that you have a gala event that starts in an hour?”

“Which one is it?” Tony had stopped paying attention to his schedule years ago.

“It’s the event organized by the charities that fund education in Africa,” JARVIS reminded him helpfully.

“Right,” Tony said. “Starving children. Important stuff. I should probably be there.”

“That would be for the best, sir.”

“Yeah.” He turned to Loki, stuffing one last bite into his mouth. “Sorry, I’ve gotta cut this short. I’ve got a thing to get to. You can come some other time and we’ll discuss the designs.” He gestured at the half-empty boxes. “You can eat the rest of the pizza too, if you want – if not, put it in the fridge. JARVIS can tell you what it is. I’ve gotta run.”

“I see,” Loki said. “I will come back tomorrow to continue today’s discussion.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Tony uttered as he strode from the room, not even bothering with a goodbye. His mind was already elsewhere, sorting through the stuff he had neglected today.
He came to the living room twenty minutes later, sharply dressed and blessedly oil-free, to find Loki still lurking around the kitchen doorway.

“Oh,” Tony said. “You’re still here.” He hadn’t counted on the guy to stick around.

“I suppose I should thank you for the food you have provided,” Loki said, looking formal and uncomfortable.

“Yeah, don’t mention it.” Tony said. “It’s just pizza. Anyway, see you tomorrow.”

When he returned at three in the morning with a giggling Playboy model on his arm, Loki was gone.

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Almost a week passed before Loki appeared again. Tony had spent the first day feeling tense and expecting the guy to pop up anytime, but when he didn’t, Tony just shrugged and cranked the music even louder. Hey, it was none of his business if the demigod got delayed or if he was feeling too lazy to come. If this were Tony’s choice, there wouldn’t be any deal in the first place.

Honestly, it was a small miracle that the Avengers hadn’t found out about Loki yet. It made Tony wonder whether Loki had some sort of cloaking spell on, or if the Avengers already knew and were simply waiting for the right time to strike. For a few minutes he entertained himself by imagining the Avengers barging into his workshop to fight the Asgardian - Hawkeye swinging head-down from the workshop ceiling, the Captain smashing his shield through the reinforced glass by the stairs, but then he had JARVIS estimate the cost of damages his fellow heroes would wreck on the workshop and quickly reconsidered. If the Avengers wanted to have it out with Loki, he certainly wouldn’t stand in their way, but nobody was going to fight in his workshop. It was enough that he had to repair all the smashed equipment his own experiments frequently caused. He refused to clean up after others as well.

When Loki finally appeared again, it was Saturday and Tony was standing in the middle of his workshop surrounded by his three bots. Loki stepped out of his portal on the other side of the room and looked around, frowning when he didn’t see Tony in his customary place. His gaze slid over the display cases with the older armor models and the workbenches overflowing with half-finished prototypes, until it finally landed on Tony and his robots. He had never paid much attention to them beside the occasional brief look but now he came closer, looking puzzled.

“What are you doing with those machines?” he asked the engineer.

“We’re having a family meeting,” Tony told him. “Don’t interfere.”

He turned back to the bots.

“I’m going to only ask this once and if you don’t answer me, I will donate each and every one of you to the tech branch of the local university,” he said, making sure to use his sternest voice. “So guys, ‘fess up – which one of you spilled motor oil all over my chair while I was upstairs?”

There was a long beat of silence where nothing moved as the bots contemplated their options. Then, moving as one, Butterfingers and You pointed at Dummy while Dummy swung his claw towards Butterfingers. Tony crossed his arms.

“Dummy?” The robotic claw lifted towards him. “Is there anything you wish to tell me?”

Dummy rotated his claw-head forty degrees, doing his best “who, me?” expression.
“That innocent act doesn’t work on me, buddy,” Tony informed him. “I know that it was you – your wheels are still trailing grease all over the floor.” Dummy looked down to check if it was true, then promptly dropped his claw even lower, assuming his best pitiful pose. Tony smothered a grin.

“And no,” he said with a perfectly serious face, “that doesn’t work on me, either. You should know that by now.”

Dummy’s claw dropped even lower, until it was almost trailing the floor.

“What should I do with you, Dummy?” Tony gave him his best “I am disappointed in you” face. He had learned that one from Howard, who had worn it almost constantly around him. “Not only do you destroy my stuff, but you tried to lie to me as well. Why would I keep a useless bot like that around?”

Instead of looking contrite, like Tony had hoped, Dummy suddenly raised his metallic head and rolled over to Loki, claw clicking as he viewed the man.

“No, Loki won’t save you, either.”

For the first time since Tony had told him to shut up, Loki moved. He took a step towards Dummy, eyeing the bot with open curiosity.

“Is this another one of your creations?” he asked Tony, still studying the robot.

“Yeah,” Tony said, a hint of pride creeping into his voice. “He’s my eldest. Older than JARVIS, even.”

“He seems fairly intelligent,” Loki remarked.

“‘Seems’ being the key word here,” Tony pointed out. “He’s a helper bot. I made him to help me with stuff around the workshop. He’s got a learning program that allows him to pick up new information over the years.”

“He is a machine with a mind of its own?” Loki suddenly looked a lot more interested in the bots than ever before. Tony shrugged.

“Yeah, I guess you can say that. He was created to be self-sufficient. I tweak his code a few times a year, but he learns most of the stuff on his own.”

“So you didn’t teach him to lie?” Loki gave Tony a look.

Tony shook his head. “No. God knows where he picked that up.”

“I believe he learned that from observing you, sir,” JARVIS’s voice chimed from the ceiling.

“Are you saying that I’m a liar, JARVIS?” Tony’s voice took on a slightly dangerous tone.

“No, sir. It was a simple observation. You are quite skilled at deceiving the people around you. That is a fact. It appears that Dummy has decided to try and emulate some of your behavioral patterns.”

“Listen, buddy,” Tony told JARVIS. “You and I are going to have a long conversation about the disclosure of my behavioral patterns later. But we are discussing Dummy right now, not me.” He fixed his gaze back on the bot in question. “So, Dummy, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Dummy stood in place for a few seconds before rolling away and picking up a rag from a pile somewhere. He wheeled back a few seconds later and started tentatively scrubbing at the oil slick on the concrete floor.
"That’s a good boy," Tony praised him. “Now clean up the oil you spilled. And if you ever try to lie to me again, I will turn you into a moving target and give you to Barton.” Dummy looked up in alarm. “Don’t think that I won’t,” Tony warned him. “Now chop chop, I want this floor clean.”

He turned away, only to find himself face to face with Loki’s amused smirk.

“What?”

“You have an interesting manner of interacting with your servants.”

Tony shot him a warning look. “If you are planning to tell me it makes me look insane, don’t bother. I’ve heard it all before.”

“On the contrary,” Loki said. “I think it is fascinating. You have managed to create artificial beings that are capable of independent thought. I have seen mages conjure up spirits and familiars, but I have never known anyone who could do the same with metal. The closest anyone came to that was the Destroyer guarding the Asgardian Vault, and even he was a mindless metal beast that was fully tied to the will of its master.”

Tony shrugged, unsure what to think of Loki praising anything about him.

“Yeah, I don’t think anyone here has anything like it, either.” When Loki continued eyeing the bots with interest, Tony made a decision. He beckoned closer the other two bots that were still standing by the bench. “Come here, guys. I think some introductions are in order.”

The bots rolled over obediently, coming to stand in front of the two men.

“This is Butterfingers,” he pointed at one bot, “and this is You. Guys, this is Loki, he will be coming around to the workshop sometimes, so don’t bother him. If you piss him off, you may end up getting smashed to smithereens. Understood?” Both bots nodded. “Awesome. Now get back to your work.”

“They do not speak?” Loki asked as he watched the bots return to their previous stations.

“No,” Tony confirmed. “I didn’t give them a voice program and I don’t plan to. I would never have any peace down here if I did that. JARVIS is more than enough.”

“Those two seem a bit more obedient than the first one,” Loki noted.

“They are,” Tony confirmed. “I made Dummy when I was seventeen and didn’t have a clue what I was doing, and it shows. Butterfingers and You were made at the same time, several years after Dummy, so there aren’t as many glitches in their code. They are all supposed to be helper bots, but sometimes they are more of a hindrance than help.”

“Why do you not improve them, then, or replace them, if they do not do what you want from them?”

Tony’s eyes wandered to the lone bot who was still rubbing inefficiently at the oily stain on the floor. Both Rhodey and Pepper had asked him that question countless times over the years and he had never been able to explain it in a way that would make them understand.

“They may be useless, but they’re mine,” he said finally, observing the bots with a fond smile. “They all have their own personalities. If I wiped them, I would lose all that. Dummy in particular has been with me longer than anyone else. He even saved my life once.” He suppressed a shudder at the memory.

“What did he do?” Loki’s question snapped Tony out of his reverie.
"And that’s one thing I’m definitely not telling you about."

The last thing Loki needed to know was just how easy it was to kill Tony. He avoided Loki’s gaze and strode back to his desk.

“All right, break is over. I suppose we should get back to the designs.” He clapped his hands and the monitors sprang to life, showing several different concepts. “Take your pick. I tried to incorporate the elements you wanted, but since I’ve never made any of this medieval-type stuff before, I have no idea what works best.”

He took a step to the side to allow Loki to study the designs.

“You can either pick one of these as a start, or you can draw one of your own, if you prefer. These are pretty much just preliminary concepts that I came up with. I will also need your help with the materials.”

He gestured for the god to follow him to a different workbench, which had several different plates of metal lying on it.

“I’ve made several different alloys that I need you to test. I had always thought my own gold-titanium alloy was pretty tough, until Thor crumpled it like paper, almost breaking my arms in the process.” And yeah, that wasn’t a pleasant memory either. To banish it, he focused on the metal plates on the bench in front of him. “So, I’ve tried to make something sturdier, but I haven’t tested these yet. The first test is obviously strength. If they pass, you could try casting some magic on them. Are you on board?”

Loki reached for the first metal plate, weighting it in his hand. “What do you wish me to do with it?”

“Try to bend it,” Tony said. “Or crumple it. Smashing is also good, as long as it doesn’t smash a hole in my floor in the process. I need to see how much brute force these alloys can withstand.”

Loki gave a disdainful snort. “I’m not an oaf, unlike my brother.”

“Yeah, the guy certainly loves his hammer,” Tony uttered, which made Loki snort again, this time in amusement. “But I know you’re pretty strong, too, so I’m sure you can do this. You may not be Hulk incarnate, I’m sure you can still do a fair bit of damage.” And all right, he wasn’t above using a little underhanded flattery because the more work the god was willing to put into this, the better for Tony. “We need to see how much force these alloys can stand and there’s only so much I can test with machines. Come on, give it a try.”

Loki took hold of the metal on opposite sides and proceeded to bend it into a pretzel without even breaking a sweat.

“Okay,” Tony said when the metal landed back on the bench, doing his best to sound normal and not at all weirded out. “Try the others.”

Loki spent the next ten minutes bending and breaking various pieces of metal while Tony monitored the reactions of the materials and tried not to show how impressed he was by the display of strength. It was one thing to know that Loki was from a race of freakishly strong aliens and another to see it with his own eyes. When Loki snapped a titanium rod in two like it was a twig, Tony felt a newfound appreciation for his own continued existence. If the god had wanted, he could have killed Tony effortlessly during the Chitauri attack on New York. That he was still alive today was really a small miracle.

“Well, that was impressive,” he admitted grudgingly when Loki put down the last metal plate. The
demigod managed to bend or break almost all the alloys, except for two.

“What are these?” Loki gestured to the two plates, which were only slightly bent.

“Steel alloys,” Tony answered. “One is infused with nickel, the other with titanium. I would have tried adamantium too if I could, but I haven’t been able to get my hands on any, despite having tried for years.”

“So, steel seems to be the most resilient after all.” Loki said haughtily. Tony rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, steel is the best. Sorry for laughing at your armor before. I stand corrected.”

“Why do you not use this alloy for your own armor, if you are capable of manufacturing it?” Loki seemed genuinely curious.

“Because it would weight a fucking ton and I need dexterity when I’m flying.” To demonstrate, he lifted the strongest steel plate from the bench, his arm muscles working to keep it balanced in the air. “Just this little piece of metal weights a good twenty-five pounds. My armor already weights over two hundred pounds. If I used steel, I wouldn’t be able to even lift off the ground, much less perform evasive maneuvers. I had to sacrifice some protection for functionality and I have to say, it’s been working pretty well for me so far, if I don’t count the fight against your brother.”

He returned the steel plate back to the bench.

“But, since you don’t seem to be concerned with the weight of the material and prefer resilience, I can go for the heavy stuff.”

“You certainly can,” Loki said. “But the materials you have here are still nowhere near as strong as the Asgardian Steel that my current armor is made of.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Even if it pissed him off a little, because the fact that a bunch of guys who didn’t even have cable TV could make better stuff than him was just insulting. “I’ll use these as a basis for future variations. I suspect it will take several rounds of testing before we land on anything viable.” Something suddenly occurred to him. “Wait, what is Thor’s hammer made of? I’ve scanned it when he wasn’t looking and that’s certainly not steel.”

He pulled up a screen in the air and dug up those results, frowning at the numbers.

“It’s a metal called Uru.” For some reason, Loki looked resentful when he said it. “It is a rare metal made by the dwarves on Nidavellir.”

Tony perked up. “Is there any way I can get in touch with those dwarves? Because that stuff would be perfect.”

“They don’t deal with anyone, much less a mortal,” Loki said. “And I wouldn’t be able to enter their world anyway, because I was banished from there long ago.”

“What? Did you steal their gold or something?” For some reason, Tony’s mind conjured up an image of Loki turning into a dragon and plundering a cave full of tiny people.

“Or something, yes.”

From his closed-off expression, Tony concluded that this was another one of those things they didn’t talk about. They were quite a few of them already on both sides. Tony wondered if he should start keeping a list.
“Okay, so no Uru. That’s a bummer, but I’m sure I can work around that. Figuring out the right metal will be a trifle, anyway. The real problem that I haven’t managed to solve yet is how to magic-proof the damn thing. To be honest, I don’t have the faintest clue how to go about that.” He gave Loki a look. “Do you have any tips on that front?”

“I have a few ideas that might be viable,” Loki rounded the table to come stand in front of Tony. “But first,” he said, blue flames erupting around his hand, “why don’t you start with the metal embedded in your chest?” Before Tony could react, he raised his hand and tapped his pointer finger twice against the center of the arc reactor in Tony’s chest. The flames died at once. He lifted his gaze from the arc reactor back to Tony’s eyes, lifting an eyebrow. “It seems to stop magic quite effectively.”

“Jesus Christ.” Tony took a step back, and then another one until his back hit another bench a few feet behind him. He slapped his right hand over the light in his chest and tried to slow down his heart, which was running a mile a minute. He took a few deep breaths, trying to fight down the instinctive fear that always rose up whenever someone tried to touch his arc reactor. “Don’t ever, ever, do that again,” he told Loki, his voice dropping into its most dangerous register.

Loki gave him a look of false innocence. “Don’t do what?”

“Touch me without me permission.”

“And with your permission?” Was that Tony’s imagination, or was Loki’s tone almost…playful?

Tony had fully intended to tell him to piss of, but the unexpected turn of conversation took him by surprise, so instead he found himself muttering: “We’ll see about that.”

He promptly turned his back on Loki and went to his desk. God, he needed a drink.

“Also, I would appreciate a warning the next time if you plan on using magic like that on me again. It’s nice to know that the metal seems to work as a magic block, but I seriously hate surprises like this.”

Loki followed a few steps after him, wearing a puzzled frown. “You did not seem this affected when I tried to use the scepter on you before.”

Tony took a few swigs before answering. “Oh no, I was plenty affected, I just didn’t let you see it.”

“You bluffed.” Loki actually seemed impressed. “I thought that the Widow was the accomplished liar among your little band of heroes, but it seems she’s not the only one.”

Tony shrugged. “I needed to get a new armor because the previous one was busted. The drink was just a distraction to keep you talking.”

“Hm, I do not know which is more interesting – that you tried to lie to the God of Lies, or that you succeeded.”

“What can I say?” Tony shrugged. “I’m just awesome like that.”

Loki didn’t say anything to that, just stood a few feet away with a strange expression of intrigue on his face. And all right, Tony had been hit on by guys before, but this was weirding him out a bit. What kind of person got turned on by the revelation that someone had lied to them?

Loki, apparently.
Before he figured out how to deal with the bizarre situation, JARVIS spoke up: “You have an incoming call, sir.”

Tony looked up. “Who is it?”

“The Avengers are calling for assembly.” That made Tony put the bottle back on the desk and stand up a little straighter.

“Patch it through,” Tony told him, already walking over to the case with the Mark XI armor.

“Iron Man?” that was Steve’s soldier voice. “Suit up.”

“What’s going on?” Tony raised his arms to help the assembly robots put it on him.

“We’ve got a situation near Central Park. Someone opened a portal on the 5th Avenue and unleashed an army of robots on the city.”

“Damn it,” Tony sighed. “Why is it always portals?”

“You tell me,” Steve said. “Anyway, get here as fast as you can. Those robots can fly, so we desperately need aerial support.”

“I’ll be there in half an hour. Think you can hold them for that long?”

“We don’t have a choice,” Steve answered. “Thor is back in London, so he will probably arrive even later than you.”

Armor in place, Tony slapped his faceplate down, gave Loki a lazy wave and kicked off, speeding through the tunnel that led outside.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“You know, this would be a lot easier if you lived here with us,” Bruce’s voice came over the intercom. Tony suppressed the urge to sigh.

“And who would protect the West Coast from random attacks, huh? Remember that freaky medusa-octopus thing that crawled out of the sewer in L.A. two months ago?”

“Yes, we do,” Natasha answered. “As I recall, the Mayor wasn’t very pleased when you detonated it all over the Hollywood Boulevard.”

“I paid for the cleanup,” Tony pointed out. “In fact, I pay for most of the damages that our fights cause. They really should appreciate us more.”

“Try telling that to the guy who got a Leviathan thrown over his apartment building,” Hawkeye quipped.

“Anyway,” Tony said, “do we know who today’s bad guy is?”

“SHIELD intel says it’s probably Doctor Doom,” Natasha said. “They ran an analysis of the appearance and abilities of the robots and they seem to be similar to what we fought the last time.”

Fuck, Tony hated Doom. He had a stupid pompous manner and those flying bots of his were just creepy. Worse, Tony hadn’t managed to capture any part of them before they fled the scene the last time, so he still had no idea how they even worked. He would definitely have to take one home to study today. Their magic-based abilities freaked him out a bit and he desperately wanted to find a
way to counter them.

Something occurred to him as he thought about that.

“Hey, is Doom using any magic today?”

There was a beat of silence before Bruce answered: “Well, the big purple portal in time-space continuum that’s hovering in the middle of the street seems plenty magical to me.”

“All right,” Tony said. “Try to keep them occupied. I should be there in twenty minutes.”

“Roger that,” Steve said before the line went dead.

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In the end it took Tony about twenty five minutes to reach New York. He’d gone supersonic as soon as he could, blasting his way across the continent. The ground turned into a blur beneath him, the states all blending into one endless stretch of green and brown and grey. He barely paid any attention to where he was going, trusting JARVIS to pilot the suit for him and instead listened to the comms from the battle. The Avengers were still fighting and as far as he could tell, they hadn’t had much success containing the Doombots yet. The suckers had spread over several blocks, destroying everything in their path and with the lack of aerial support, the Avengers had a serious problem tracking them all down.

Cursing the distance for the first time in a while, Tony sped up even more, counting the minutes until his arrival. The others had been fighting the bots for over half an hour now and still hadn’t been able to take out all of them. He’d have to show them how it’s done.

The New York skyline finally came into view a few minutes later and Tony zeroed in on Steve’s signal, using it to navigate the endless blocks of Manhattan. In the end he didn’t even need the GPS, because the Hulk’s deafening roar was the only answer he needed to know that he had arrived to the right place. He briefly paused to hover over the middle of the street, taking in the scene.

The Doombots were all over the place, zooming up and down the street and attacking everything in sight. Tony sent out a barrage of small targeted missiles, shooting down the nearest half dozen robots before he set off to hunt down the rest. The bots were fairly small, definitely smaller than a human and aside from shooting lighting at random cars and frightened passersby, they didn’t really seem to do much. Lower down the street Tony could see the Cap and the Hulk battling several human-looking robots, but the guys seemed to have the situation more or less under control so Tony decided to shoot down the rest of the flying bastards instead.

He briefly passed Hawkeye, who was sitting on top of one of the nearby buildings, looking annoyed. Probably because he had run out of arrows. Sucked to be him. Tony gave him a cheerful wave, shooting down a few more of the barrel-sized bots in the process.

Five minutes later, most of the surrounding streets were blessedly bot-free.

“Hey guys,” he said into the intercom. “I think I got all the bastards. Where’s our main star of the evening?”

“If you’re talking about Doctor Doom,” Steve answered, “I last saw him near the portal two blocks down the street.”

“Hawk?” Tony asked just to be sure.
“Yeah, he’s still there,” Hawkeye confirmed. “He’s hovering around, looking creepy. Be careful when you approach him, he’s got the whole magic lighting thing going on.”

“Right,” Tony said. “I’m on it.”

And really, after having gone toe-to-toe with Thor, Doom was small fries. Also, Tony had just spent two days in the company of a half-mad Asgardian deity, and somehow managed to survive. A third-rate mage from Europe really didn’t seem all that intimidating in comparison.

It didn’t take him long before he saw the guy himself, hovering ominously a few feet from the large pink-purple portal, just as Hawk had said. Tony made a beeline for him, wanting to get this over with.

“Who DARES approach me?” the figure rumbled when Tony flew closer. “Who dares challenge the might of DOOM?”

“Um, that would be me,” Tony said, landing several dozen feet away. “Hi. Welcome to New York. Now kindly take the rest of your bots and fuck off before I blast you into space.” All right, he would be the first to admit that he wasn’t very good at this whole diplomacy shtick.

“WHO are you to think you can SPEAK to me such?”

“The guy with the better suit?” Tony tried, absent-mindedly shooting down a few bots that tried to sneak up on him from behind. “Between the two of us, there’s only one guy using jetpacks here. What are you, the Rocketeer? Seriously, dude, you should work on your tech a bit, because this whole getup looks like it was made before the Renaissance.” He shot down another bot with his repulsor.

“SILENCE, WHHELP! You will GROVEL at my feet!” Doom thundered. “NOBODY defeats DOOM, for I am SUPREME.”

“And they say I have an ego,” Tony quipped, dodging a bolt of lighting from Doom’s hand. In return, he aimed both his repulsors at the guy’s chest and grinned a bit when the warlock flew back several dozen feet, crashing into a building. Tony flew after him, landing only a few feet away and hitting him with another blast before he could get up from the pile of rubble.

“See? Technology,” Tony told him. “You should try it sometime.”

“You’re a FOOL if you think you can defeat ME,” Doom said, rising up from the sidewalk. Tony contemplated shooting him again, but then he remembered what Loki had said about his arc reactor. What better way to test that theory than on a guy in a magic-powered suit?

Doom tried to shoot him with a lightning bolt but Tony powered through it, his suit absorbing the energy, just like it had done with Thor’s electricity. He took a few steps closer and grabbed Doom by the neck with both hands, lifting him off his feet a little.

“Hey, how about a hug?” Tony asked, pulling the man close to his arc reactor. If this didn’t work, he could always shoot him later. Doom grabbed hold of his arms, trying to dislodge Tony’s grip, but the Iron Man armor held fast. “You’ve already done enough damage here today. I think it’s time for a nap.”

“Iron Man?” Steve asked in confusion. “What are you doing?”

“An experiment,” Tony answered, most of his attention focused on his struggle with the wizard. “Give me a minute.”
Inch by inch, Tony pulled him closer, ignoring the current of lightning that was now enveloping them both. Half a foot away and still no interruption in the flow of magic. Well, it looked like he would have to get up close and personal for this.

Tony dislodged one hand from Doom’s neck and grabbed Doom’s left wrist instead, pulling it close with a sharp jerk to press the hand against the arc reactor in his suit in a twisted parody of a romantic gesture. He kept his grip on Doom’s neck with the other hand, doing his best to ignore the metal glove that was slowly crushing his left forearm even as he made sure to keep the other hand connected to the arc reactor. It took less than five seconds before the magic in the figure pressed to him shut off, causing the man to pitch forward.

Tony caught him as he was falling, tilting him back to stand against the wall instead. Judging by the lack of sentient response from within the suit, this was probably a decoy, instead of the real Doctor Doom. Pity.

“Hey guys?” Tony said into the comm. “I think I caught us a Doombot. Turns out it was just another decoy, instead of the real guy. I managed to turn him off. What should I do with him?”

“Wait there,” Steve ordered. “We still need to close the portal.”

“Right,” Tony said, feeling very pleased with himself. He poked the motionless figure with his glove, opening the chest plate to peek inside. “Hello there, gorgeous,” he purred in a tone he usually used for his romantic conquest. It was well deserved in this case, because the wiring of the suit in front of him was just exquisite. “It’s your lucky day. You’re coming home with me tonight. You and I are going to have so much fun in my lab, you have no idea.”

“God, Stark, do you have any idea how creepy that is?” Hawkeye chimed in, interrupting Tony’s moment of triumph. “I really didn’t wish to know what you do with all the freaky stuff in your workroom.”

“Gentlemen, please,” Widow spoke up. “You can discuss your fetishes later. We still need to close that portal.”

“I’ll take a look at it,” Tony said, turning his head to let JARVIS run an analysis for him. He was so caught up in trying to come up with a way to close the bizarre magic wheel levitating in mid-air over the street that he almost missed the moment when the Doombot’s eyes lit up again. The figure shot out a hand, holding Tony in place even as the unrelenting grip dented the Iron Man suit even further.

“That was the only warning Tony got before the figure pulled him close and the world exploded into a thousand pieces. The blast shook the whole street, throwing Tony several dozen feet, until he landed hard on the opposite side of the road, the dampeners inside the suit doing their best to cushion the fall. He remained lying in the ruins of a broken wall, feeling utterly disoriented. His ears had been blasted by the explosion and the HUD display had gone dark, so the only feeling left was the dizzying rush of blood in his veins.

‘Good thing I didn’t pull up my faceplate’ was Tony’s last thought before the darkness swallowed him.
I have to confess that I have never actually read any of the Marvel comics. They were virtually impossible to get in my country when I was a kid and now that I’m an adult with access to the internet, I frankly have no idea where to start, because there are so many of them. Most of my knowledge about these characters comes from the movies, Marvel Wiki and various fanfics I have read over the years.

Therefore, I will be taking huge liberties both with the plot and with some of the character abilities (mainly Doom), so don’t expect this story to be terribly accurate cannon-wise. I’ll try my best with the characters, but the rules of the world around them will probably get bend a lot (mostly to serve the plot). You can feel free to point out any inaccuracies you spot, but unless it’s something really crucial, I probably won’t change the story just to accommodate every detail.

Thank you for understanding and I hope you will enjoy the story anyway :) The next chapter will be up on Friday, December 19.
An Unpleasant Awakening

Chapter Summary

In which Tony has a concussion and Loki refuses to leave.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The ceiling was a painfully bright shade of white. Huh. Tony didn’t have any white ceilings at home which probably meant that he was in a hospital. Again.

He blinked a few times and managed to sit up with some difficulty, only to promptly start feeling dizzy. His dignity didn’t allow him to lie back down, so he put his head in his hands and closed his eyes, waiting for the vertigo to pass. Only, one of his hands didn’t quite fit the right way over his face – wait, was that a cast? That must have been one hell of a party yesterday, if he felt like this. Or, more likely, one hell of a fight.

Bit by bit, the details of the fight started coming back to him. Huge purple portal. Creepy robotic Doom lookalike and his army of minions. Tony’s own struggle with the robot. And then just pain. The bastard must have broken his arm before he blew up, but Tony hadn’t even noticed, too surprised by the sudden reactivation of the bot to react in time. He sighed. This is what he got for trying to save everyone’s asses.

Before he could start putting together a revenge plan, the door to the room opened and Steve strode in, looking amazingly put-together in his typical khaki slacks and button-down shirt. The only hint that he had been fighting a power-hungry villain was a faint bruise on his left cheek – if he didn’t have that, one would have no idea he had even fought anyone in the first place.

The forearm under his cast twanged painfully in protest as Tony raised in in welcome and he suddenly felt deeply envious of Steve’s superhuman healing abilities. Healing broken bones would be a bitch.

“Hey there, Cap.”

“Hello, Tony.” Steve gave him a small smile. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I just went five rounds with the Hulk and lost. What happened?”

Steve pulled up a chair to the bed and sat down.

“After you drove the Doombot to self-destruct, the rest of the robots on scene scattered. Some of them managed to escape back through the portal before it collapsed and the rest of them flew around until Thor and the Hulk smashed them.”

“So we won,” Tony concluded. “Thank fuck.”


“I just survived having a crazy suicidal robot blow up in my face. That earns me some slack.
Where’s my armor, by the way? If Fury got his hands on it, I’m gonna kick his ass, cast or not.”

“Your suit is back at the Avenger Tower.”

“Good.” Tony reached over to the bedside table for a glass of water and drained half of it in a few gulps. “So, when can I leave this joint?”

“You have only been here for a few hours,” Steve informed him. “You were unconscious when you were brought in, but woke up soon after that. Do you remember any of that?”

“No,” Tony answered. “I only recall the explosion and then I woke up here.” Now that he thought about it, he did have a vague recollection of someone shining a light in his eyes and wanting him to answer questions about the president.

“The doctors said you might have some trouble remembering things after the explosion, because you suffered a concussion. Luckily for you, the concussion isn’t very serious. They did a few brain scans and concluded that you will be fine once you have some rest. They want you to stay here overnight for observations and if everything looks good, you should get the all-clear tomorrow.”

“Awesome.” Tony swung his legs over the edge of the bed. “I’m going now.”

“Tony!” Steve jumped to his feet. “You cannot leave yet. You’re supposed to be resting.”

Tony gave him an unimpressed look when the soldier moved to push him back into bed. “I can do that in the tower. Now help me to the door so I can sign the papers. I’m not spending a minute longer in here than I have to.”

He was feeling anxious to get back to his suit and check that it hadn’t been tampered with. He hated getting knocked out, because it always increased the chance that someone from SHIELD could steal his suit under the guise of “safekeeping”. He knew Fury had been itching to get his hands on it for years – only Tony’s stubborn refusal to give it to anyone else had prevented SHIELD from stealing all his schematics.

With Steve’s help he eventually managed to get himself dressed in a nice suit (there was no way in hell he would ever get himself snapped by paparazzi wearing one of those backless hospital monstrosities), checked out of the hospital and seated in a car in less than half an hour. He settled back into the seat with a sigh, watching the streets of New York pass by in a blur. Steve was still wearing that disapproving expression, so Tony chose to ignore him. He might disapprove, but he had helped Tony escape the hospital nonetheless. Clearly his convictions could be flexible, when he wanted them to be, which suited Tony just fine.

As Avenger Tower came into view, Tony couldn’t help but wonder what Loki had done after Tony’s unexpected departure. Left, probably, or at least Tony hoped he did. He dreaded to think about what a guy like him could do to his workshop if left unsupervised. He’d have to check with JARVIS as soon as he was alone. Which was going to be soon, hopefully.

The Avengers were waiting for him on the common floor when he and Steve arrived and he gave them a tired wave as a greeting, focusing most of his energy on walking straight. Despite what he had told Steve, he wasn’t feeling too great and couldn’t wait to go lay down. Luckily for him, nobody tried to stop him when he announced he was going to bed. It was clear that the Avengers wanted a debrief on his fight with Doom, but he must have looked awful enough that they let him go without a single question. Which was great, because he was just about to crash.

Still, he needed to check on the armor before he went to sleep, so he left the good Captain back at the
shared floor and rode up to the penthouse alone. The suit stood tall and proud in the middle of the living room and Tony was so happy to see it he could have cried. As it was, he settled for patting the metal fondly, noting with annoyance the scratches and burns that the fight with the Doombot had caused.

“Don’t worry, baby, I’m gonna patch you right up,” he muttered, giving the armor one last pat before stumbling over to the bar to pour himself half a glass of something good. Yes it was fucking idiotic of him to drink booze on a concussion, but since Steve wasn’t here to chew him out about it, Tony didn’t care. God knew he’d done stupider things over the years. One drink wasn’t going to kill him.

“Welcome back, sir,” JARVIS chimed as he sat down.

“Did anybody mess with my suit while I was knocked out?” he asked, sipping at his brandy.

“No, sir. I am not aware of any attempts at tampering. I engaged the lockdown protocols as soon as you were out of the armor. The armor then flew back here and stayed here until you returned.”

“Good job,” Tony said. He fished out the painkillers that he got at the hospital and swallowed them dry before knocking back the rest of his glass. It was a good thing his bedroom was just around the corner, because he seriously didn’t feel good.

“How’s the situation back home?” he asked as he walked to the bedroom. “Is he gone?” He didn’t mention a name, just in case one of Fury’s minions had managed to plant a bug in his bar. He wouldn’t put it past them.

“Not exactly, sir,” JARVIS answered and was that Tony’s imagination, or did he sound strangely reluctant?

“What do you mean, ‘not exactly’?” And yes, finally, he had managed to reach the bedroom door. He clicked it shut behind him, feeling privacy envelop him like a favorite blanket. “What the hell is going on?”

“Your visitor is still present in the house. He has decided to wait for your return.”

“He’s still there?” Tony asked in disbelief. “But it’s been hours! Does he have nothing better to do than snoop around my workshop?”

“Apparently not, sir. He hasn’t broken anything yet, if it’s any consolation.”

“Have you tried throwing him out?”

“I have, sir,” JARVIS confirmed. “He refuses to leave.”

Muttering a curse, Tony ran a tired hand over his face.

“Can you patch him through for me?”

Instead of answering, JARVIS initiated the call straight away.

“Stark?” Loki sounded confused. Had he never talked to anyone on a phone before?

“Hey,” Tony greeted. He pulled off his five thousand dollar jacket and let it fall to the floor, not giving a damn where it landed. “JARVIS tells me you’ve been staying over.”

“Yes,” Loki said. “Your servant claimed that you were occupied, so I decided to wait for your return. Is that a problem?”
Tony yawned. “Not really. I’ve got space enough. I just thought you might have better things to do than hang around my house.”

“I use my time as I see fit,” Loki informed him archly. Tony suppressed another yawn.

“Yea, you do that. Free will and all.” He did a half-hearted fist bump. Deciding that an undershirt and boxers were undressed enough for him, he crawled into bed. “Look, if you’re waiting for me, you’re wasting your time. It will probably be a few days before I get back and when I do, I won’t be able to work much anyway. If you have something else you can do for a few weeks, I highly recommend you go do it. There won’t be any forging going on for at least a month.”

“What happened?”

Tony shot his cast a glance. “I had a bit of a disagreement with some bad guys. Turns out those arm plates on my suit really aren’t as resilient as I thought. I should really do something about them.” He fought back another yawn. “So, are you going to leave now?”

“There is nothing pressing I have to do at the moment,” Loki said. Wow, being dead must have been super dull, if ‘hang around Tony’s house with nothing to do’ was Loki’s most entertaining option.

“So that’s a no, then.” Tony could almost imagine his smug grin on the other side of the line. Loki could decide to move into Tony’s house and there would be nothing Tony could do about it from his current position. And the bastard knew it.

“Your servant has granted me the use of your “sofa”, as he calls it, for the night.”

“Of course he did.” Tony shot the ceiling a betrayed look. “He’s polite like that, even to people who are holding my house hostage.” It only took him a second to decide. “So hey, since you’re going to stay the night anyway, you might as well ignore the sofa and borrow a bed instead. I’ve got a few spare bedrooms, choose whichever you want.” The pain in his arm had receded and now he was feeling a bit loopy. “Wow these meds are good.”

“Stark?” Loki sounded a little alarmed. “You sound odd.”

“That’s because I’m drugged to the gills,” Tony told him, a happy drunken smile on his face. “They gave me the good meds. This is awesome.” He drifted for a while before Loki’s voice brought him back out of his reverie.

“Stark?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m still here,” Tony assured him. “Just really sleepy. You know what? Spend the night in the house and then go do whatever. I’ll be back in a few days.” His voice trailed off as he started falling asleep. “G’night.”

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“I did what?” was Tony’s first reaction when JARVIS helpfully relayed the conversation to him the next morning. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

“You have full right to invite guests to your house as you see fit.”

“But it’s Loki,” Tony protested. “With my luck the guy will take it as an invitation to stay permanently and I will never get rid of him.”

“You are very resourceful, sir,” JARVIS said comfortably. “I’m sure you will find a way to get him
out of your house, if you ever wish so.”

“God, I hope. How long before I can get out of here?”

Between all the debriefings, health checks and meetings with the R&D department heads, it was almost another three days before Tony finally managed to tear himself away and escape from the tower. Of course, it didn’t happen without an argument with the Avengers, who all insisted that he stay in the tower for longer, but Tony’s resolve was firm. Loki’s continued presence in his Malibu home made him nervous because he could easily imagine a thousand different ways the guy could sabotage his work while he was away. He needed to leave New York as soon as possible.

Eventually he managed to escape the Avengers’ clutches, but the memory of Steve’s disapproving face followed him all the way to the airport. He knew the guys weren’t happy with his continued refusal to live in the tower, but it just felt wrong to stay there without Pepper by his side. The Tower had been mostly her idea, her baby, and it felt weird to live in the penthouse when she wasn’t there.

To distract himself from thoughts of Pepper, he pulled out his laptop and checked the state of his projects, but even that didn’t last him long. He ended up staring out of the window at the passing clouds. His arm was hurting with a dull, throbbing pain and he tried not to think about just how long it would take for it to fully heal.

“JARVIS,” he called, looking for a distraction, any distraction. “Is Loki still hanging around?”

“Yes, sir, he is still present in the house.”

“Has he burned down the house yet?”

“No, sir,” JARVIS replied, “he has been mostly well-behaved so far. He did explore a few rooms that I explicitly forbid him from entering, but he hasn’t damaged anything.”

“I suppose we should be glad for that.” Tony ran a hand over his face. “Still, he must be bored out of his mind.”

“Oh the contrary, sir, he appears quite content at the moment.” He hesitated for a second before continuing. “I took the liberty to order some groceries for him.”

That made Tony sit up a little straighter. “You did what? What the hell did you get him?”

“Basic foodstuffs,” JARVIS answered calmly. “Mostly meat and assorted vegetables. He seems to be an adequate cook.”

“And he didn’t blow up the kitchen?” Tony asked in disbelief. “Don’t forget that he’s the brother of the guy who managed to set my microwave on fire twice in the span of three days.”

“No sir, he seemed to do quite well once I provided him with instructions on how your appliances worked.”

“Huh.” Who would have thought. “What else did he do?” Tony’s curiosity was growing rapidly.

“He met the delivery person who brought your groceries.”

“Is he an idiot? What if anyone saw his face and recognized him?”

“He seemed to solve that problem in a rather…unique fashion,” JARVIS said delicately. “Please allow me to show you.”
Tony pulled the notebook back into his lap and watched in fascination the security camera footage JARVIS played for him. It showed Loki walking into the entrance hall, but when he reached the door, his body suddenly shrunk by a foot and in his place was standing a kindly-looking old lady, who greeted the delivery boy pleasantly and took the grocery bags from him. Once the door closed, the figure turned back to Loki, who strode back to the kitchen with an air of absolute casualness. Tony tried not to gape, but wasn’t very successful.

“Well, that was interesting,” he said finally. “Does SHIELD know about this little trick of his?”

“I do not believe so, sir. Their information on Loki seems to be rather limited.”

“So he can shapeshift,” Tony said in the vague hope that if he says it out loud enough times, he might even start believing what he had just seen.

“Apparently, sir.”

“That’s good to know,” Tony said weakly, his mind reeling with possibilities. He had a shapeshifter in the house, which meant that either it was Loki himself who could shapeshift, or it was someone else who had just assumed Loki’s face to spy on Tony. If that were true, they could be anyone. Either way, this discovery wasn’t good, because it was awakening Tony’s latent paranoid tendencies and god knew he had plenty of those already. No need to stir up more.

“What is he doing now?”

“He is reading, sir. I navigated him to the library and he has been spending most of his time there.”

“That’s…good.” If Loki was reading, it meant that he wasn’t running around causing destruction. Tony idly wondered if he should order more books for the library. Maybe if he kept Loki busy, the guy would stop hanging around his workshop, too. It was definitely worth a try.

“We will be landing shortly, sir,” JARVIS informed him half an hour later. “Should I alert your visitor that you’re coming?”

“No,” Tony decided. “Let’s see how he’ll react to a surprise visit.

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Loki was sprawled on the couch in the living room when Tony entered, reading a thick tome that Tony recognized as his first edition of Greek myths. He barely moved a muscle as Tony approached, but Tony could see that the god was fully aware of his presence – he was just ignoring Tony for the moment.

Loki’s focus on the book gave Tony a good opportunity to take a look at him. He had realized straight away that something was different, but now he could finally pinpoint what it was - Loki wasn’t wearing his armor. For the first time since his return from the dead, he wasn’t in full battle regalia. He must have shed that ridiculous leather coat as well, because he was wearing only a soft-looking dark green tunic and a pair of black leather pants.

So, this was what Loki looked like when he wasn’t trying to murder people. Grudgingly, Tony had to admit that it wasn’t a bad look. In fact, if they had met under different circumstances and Loki weren’t a crazy conqueror-wannabe, Tony might have hit on him at one point or other. As it was, he was going to be happy enough if he survived this whole armor deal in one piece.

Tony was ten feet away from the sofa when Loki finally decided to raise his head from the book.
“Ah,” he drawled, “the triumphant hero returns.”

He put a bookmark in the book and sat up, giving Tony a thorough onceover, his eyes lingering on the cast and the few visible bruises.

“Or maybe not so triumphant.”

Tony ignored the jibe, feeling too tired for an argument.

“I see you’ve discovered my library.”

“Yes,” Loki said. “I had to entertain myself somehow in your absence.”

“You could have just left, you know,” Tony pointed out. “I told you I wouldn’t be able to work for you for a while.” He gave Loki an annoyed look. “You’re wasting your time here.”

“I am merely protecting my investments.” And that definitely sounded like a lie, but Tony didn’t care enough to try and dig up the truth.

“Yeah, whatever.” He turned his back on Loki and started walking towards the stairs. “I’m just gonna go say hi to my bots.”

Tony punched in the code to the workshop door and walked in, automatically raising his hands to clap. The sling pulled at his arm, keeping it in place on his chest and he heaved an annoyed sigh. This was going to be a long month.

“Lights!” he called instead and watched his workshop come to life.

“Daddy’s home!” he announced to his bots and had to smile when they all perked up, robotic claws rising and chirping in greeting. “Hi, guys.”

He walked to his desk and sat down, feeling a bit lost. He had planned to work on so many things once he got home, but the broken arm had thrown a wrench in his projects. Sure, he could still draw and design, but the physical work would have to wait. No matter what he claimed to the various tech magazines that liked to interview him about his advancements of technology, privately he liked the physical work of invention more than the designing.

Sure, coming up with new designs and innovations was exhilarating – the thrill of discovery, the sheer possibilities - but there was something immensely satisfying about putting it all together and making it work. There were few moments in his life that could compare to first time he had booted up Dummy and watched him communicate with the world, clumsy but very much alive. No amount of lines on the paper could equal making his ideas come to life.

So yes, he could still design stuff while his arm was broken, but it would all be theoretical. His gaze swept over the workshop and its piles of half-finished stuff and he had to consciously stop himself from reaching for a blowtorch. The Mark XI stood in the empty space next to his cars, waiting to be repaired - a painful reminder that with the cast on his hand, he wouldn’t be able to fly in the suit, either.

God, he hated this.

To distract himself, he pulled out a large tablet and started working on the schematics for the newest StarkPhone. His guys in the R&D departments had encountered a few glitches in the programming and had asked him to take a look at it, so it seemed like the perfect thing to work on right now. It didn’t take him long to get lost in the long lines of code and before he knew it, midnight was long
He was brought out of his concentration by Loki’s amused voice.

“Do you ever stop working?”

“Sometimes,” Tony answered. “I sleep?” And alright, he hadn’t meant for that to come out as a question. “Does that count?”

“You really do love your work, don’t you?” Loki had that tilt of his head that Tony had learned to recognize as interest and it set off a hundred warning bells in his mind. “Most people work because they must, but you, you work because you enjoy it. You are wealthy enough to never have to labour a single day in your life and yet you spend more time working than anyone I know.”

“You don’t know that many people, then.” What the hell was he still doing here?

“Oh, I know plenty of people,” Loki opposed. “Only, most of them aren’t very interesting.” He gave Tony a look. “You, on the other hand…” He trailed off, letting the words hang in the air between them like an invitation.

Oh, god, this was bad.

Tony could deal with Loki being interested in the armor and the development process, but this new personal interest was just... no. That way lay only danger and heartbreak and potential for widespread destruction and this was a horrible, horrible idea. Now if only he could explain this to his libido, which was definitely taking interest in the situation.

He desperately searched for a way to change the topic.

“You were right, by the way,” he said, latching onto the first thing that came to his mind. “The Arc Reactor does repel magic.”

Loki blinked, probably surprised by the sudden turn of conversation, but his confusion didn’t last long. A second later his smirk widened, making it clear that he was fully aware of Tony’s attempts at derailment.

“I am always right,” he said smugly.

“Well, from what I’ve heard you fucked up the whole coronation thing pretty spectacularly.” That wiped the self-satisfied grin off Loki’s face in an instant. “But hey, in this particular case you were right.”

Tony stood up and walked up to the suit to transfer the data about the fight onto the screen. He ignored the glare Loki was now sending at his back.

“I had to get pretty up close and personal with the guy to be able to test that theory, but it seems to work. I was able to change the electromagnetic pulse from the arc reactor to turn it into a small anti-magic field, which effectively short-circuited his suit.” He saved the data on the screens and pulled up another one with a simulation of the reaction. “That didn’t stop him from slamming me into a building, or breaking my arm, but it did seem to block his magic quite effectively.”

Loki came closer, eyeing the burnt surface of the armor.

“What happened?”
Tony closed the screens with a wave of his hand.

“He got pissed and decided to self-destruct. Blew up right in my face.”

Loki’s expression turned incredulous. “The man committed suicide?”

“No,” Tony corrected. “That was just one of his robotic minions. He loves to make copies of himself and set them loose on the populace. He controls them by magic from the distance somehow.” His gaze fell on the burnt Mark XI armor, mind working at full speed. “I hope SHIELD managed to recover some of his stuff, because I really need it. I have to find a way to cut him off.”

His voice trailed off as he got lost in thought and walked over to the nearest workbench to doodle equations on a spare piece of paper.

“I need to find a way to make the anti-magic field larger. Or maybe turn it into a ray of some sort?” He raised his hand to run it through his hair, but found the cast blocking his way. “Shit,” he murmured, annoyed all over again. A movement from the corner of his eye made him look up, only to find Loki still present. Right. Loki.

“Oh hey,” Tony said, a new idea taking life in his mind, “you could help me with that. I need to figure out the whole anti-magic thing for your armor anyway. This would just be making it bigger.” He fought the urge to roll his eyes at Loki’s sudden look of hesitation. “Look, if you’re going to be hanging around, you might as well contribute. You know a lot more about this magic stuff than I do. If you can help me find a way to get rid of this guy, I can use it for your armor later.”

Loki shook his head slightly.

“I am not sure if I want to help you facilitate a device that could be used against me later.”

This time Tony did roll his eyes.

“Okay, whatever, suit yourself. I’ll probably figure it out on my own sooner or later anyway.”

“Yes, you probably will,” Loki muttered. He gave Tony a resigned look. “Very well, I will assist you with this endeavour. Be aware though that I am only doing it to speed up the fabrication process. It would be most inconvenient if you perished before the armour could be completed.”

“Yeah, inconvenient,” Tony muttered, trying not to snort. “That’s one way to put it.”

An awkward silence settled over the workshop. Tony tried to get back to work, but Loki’s presence disrupted his concentration.

“You’re not wearing your armor,” he said finally, just to fill the silence somehow.

Loki raised an eyebrow.

“You did not think I wear armor all the time, did you?”

Tony shrugged.

“I don’t know, from what I’ve seen, Thor practically sleeps in his when he’s at the tower. At least,” he added, “that’s what it looks like. I didn’t really bother to check.”

“I am not Thor,” Loki pointed out.

“No, you’re not,” Tony agreed.
Loki took a few steps closer and propped his hands on the opposite side of the table from Tony to lean towards him in a little.

“I have been to your house several times now and you never tried to attack or capture me. I suppose that earns you a measure of trust on my part.” He gave Tony a sharp look. “Do not disappoint me. If I learn that you took advantage of this in some way, I will take revenge.”

Tony fought the urge to roll his eyes again. Really, drama queens had nothing on Loki.

“Yeah, sure,” he said in a low voice. His forearm twanged, reminding him that his current meds were wearing off. He’d have to take another dose soon. “Anyway, you have nothing to worry about from me for the foreseeable future.” He gestured to his broken arm. “An angry kitten is more dangerous than me right now.” And yeah, that knowledge stung.

Loki was undeterred, however. He leaned even closer over the table, holding Tony’s gaze.

“Oh, I think you could be very dangerous, if you wanted,” his voice had dropped into a lower register that conjured up all sorts of filthy things in Tony’s mind. Tony swallowed, trying to come up with a comeback. Luckily, his arm started to seriously hurt at that moment, so he used that as an excuse to turn his back on Loki and go search for his meds.

“Dummy, could you get me a glass of water?”

The bot rolled away obediently and Tony fished out the bottle of pills from his pocket, trying to open it. Child-proof caps were a bitch to open with one hand. As he wrestled with the lid, the bottle slid from his grasp and fell on the table, spilling the pills everywhere. Out of instinct, Tony reached out to catch them before they could roll onto the floor and he managed to bang his left hand on the edge of the table. He hissed out loud when pain spread like flames down his forearm, turning his world blinding white for a few seconds. Tony stopped his string of swear words when Dummy came up with the glass of water and swallowed three pills, washing them down with water. It would take a while for the pills to take effect, but at least he would be pain-free for another few hours.

As he struggled to put the spilled meds back to the bottle and screw the lid back on with only one hand, he caught Loki’s thoughtful gaze on him. Seriously, why was the guy still here? Did it make him feel good to see someone in pain? If Tony had the power to throw him out of here, he would have been long gone.

“What?” he finally barked when he couldn’t bear the weight of that gaze any longer. “If you’re going to laugh at me, you can do it outside. I’m really not in mood to deal with you right now.” And was that a headache starting at his temples? Great, just what he needed.

He started walking out of the workshop, fully intending to go to bed, but Loki caught him by the arm as he was passing. The god’s grip was gentle, careful, but Tony still couldn’t suppress and instinctive flinch.

“What?” he asked again, feeling tired to the bone.

“I could heal that for you, if you let me,” Loki said quietly and all right, Tony hadn’t been expecting that.

“You can do what?” he asked, just to clarify.

“I could heal that broken bone for you,” Loki said, pulling back a little to be able to see his face. “If you want.”
“Why the hell would you do that?” Tony asked incredulously. “What do a few weeks matter to you? You live forever. You can go away for a year and barely tell a difference.”

“In this case the time matters,” Loki said, obviously reluctant. “I will not go into details, but suffice to say, I would like to have that armour ready as soon as possible. Besides,” he continued, “this would provide you with the perfect opportunity to work on my request. As far as the outside world is concerned, your arm is broken. That means you will not be bothered by inane requests from others and will be able to focus all your attention on my armour.” On me, were the implied words that he didn’t say, but Tony heard them nonetheless.

He pulled his right arm out of Loki’s grasp, taking a step back. He gave Loki a wary look, weighing his options.

“If you did this now,” he asked slowly, “how long would it take for the bone to fully heal?”

“With magic?” Loki said. “A day or two at the most. If I start right away, you should be able to wield your tools in two days’ time.”

As he said that, he reached for Tony’s injured arm, probably to assess the damage. Tony managed to avoid him before they could touch, pulling his broken arm protectively against his chest.

“Whoa there, cowboy! I haven’t agreed to anything yet.” He took a few more steps back, putting some distance between them. “I’m not sure this whole magic thing is a good idea.”

Loki stopped, frowning in annoyance.

“And what other choice do you have? You can keep this splint on and sit on your couch for the next six weeks, or you can let me help you and gain back your health in few short days.” He gave Tony a knowing look. “I have seen how this whole situation frustrates you, to be surrounded by your tools but unable to wield them.”

Tony hesitated, feeling torn between his mistrust for Loki and his magic and the logic of his words. Yes, he was pissed off that he couldn’t work the way he wanted to. And yes, he would love to be able to use both hands BUT he wasn’t sure it was a good idea to accept the offer when it came from Loki. The god obviously saw his hesitance, because the corners of his mouth pulled down even further.

“Stark,” he said again, still in that low voice, “I have sworn an oath not to cause you harm, remember? Just like you cannot tell anyone about me, I cannot harm you. Now, will you let me heal you?”

He must want the armor really badly, if he’s this desperate, Tony thought as he watched the different expressions cross Loki’s face. He let him stew for a moment longer before he spoke again.

“You know what? Let me think about it first.”

Loki looked unhappy, but nodded.

“Very well. Take your time. The invitation still stands.”

Tony gave him a nod. “Yeah, I know. You’ll get your answer in the morning.”

Tony had been exhausted when he had finally hauled himself to bed, but once he lay down, his brain
switched to 120% capacity, refusing to turn off. Also, the knowledge that Loki was somewhere in the house didn’t help his peace of mind in the slightest. Who knew what his endgame was. Maybe he was just waiting for Tony to fall asleep so that he could murder him. Tony wouldn’t put it past him.

He spend a good two hours tossing and turning before he finally managed to doze off, only to be woken at half past five by throbbing pain in his forearm, because his meds had worn off and he had managed to accidentally roll onto his injured arm. Again. Tony lay in the darkness and tried to suppress the urge to scream in frustration. How did people do this for six weeks? He had barely had the cast for a week and already he was sick of it.

When the first rays of the morning sun appeared over the horizon, he finally gave up on trying to fall asleep and got up, pulling on a day-old shirt and some jeans. He had hoped for a few hours of peace with his mug of coffee, but when he walked into the kitchen, Loki was already sitting at the kitchen table, a half-empty plate of sausages in front of him. So much for Tony’s hope that this whole thing had been just a bad dream.

Tony gave him a perfunctory nod and shuffled over to the coffee machine. If he had to deal with this madness, at least he wanted to be coherent for it. He sensed more than heard the presence behind him when he was pouring himself his second mug of coffee.

Loki stopped a few feet away, leaning on the counter with an expectant expression.

“Well?” he asked Tony. “What is your decision?”

Tony leisurely drank his coffee, seeing no point in hurrying this. He had already decided yesterday in the workshop, but he wasn’t going to give Loki that satisfaction of knowing that. He put the empty mug on the kitchen counter and turned to face Loki fully.

“Let’s do this.”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys so much for all the support you’re giving me for this story! I’m blown away by the amount of kudos and comments this fic got so far and I’m really happy to hear that you enjoy it.

This story also managed to pass the 100 000 word mark yesterday and after a minor reevaluation, it looks like the fic will be even longer than I expected. So far it looks that there will be at least 25 chapters to this, so I hope you’ll stick with me all the way through.

The next chapter will be posted on next Friday, December 26.
“Let’s do this.”

Loki looked at him for a moment before nodding.

“Very well. Come with me.” He gestured with his head and set off to the living room. Tony followed him at a slower pace, still convinced that this was a terrible idea. He stopped in the middle of the living room, hesitating.

“There’s one thing I want to know before we begin,” he said. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why am I doing what?” Loki cocked his head.

“This,” Tony gestured at the room around him, trying to encompass the bizarreness of the whole situation. “This whole “staying around, helping me” shtick. This isn’t really your thing.”

Loki crossed his arms. “Then, pray tell me - what is my “thing”?”

“I don’t know, murdering people? Causing mayhem and destruction?”

“Did you honestly never wonder why it took me over a thousand years to get banished from Asgard?”

Tony shrugged. “No offense, but from what I’ve seen so far, your fellow Asgardians don’t seem like a particularly clever bunch. If Thor of all people is supposed to be the pinnacle of your civilization, I wouldn’t be surprised to find that nobody found out about your schemes for a while.” Loki raised an amused eyebrow, so Tony continued. “Don’t forget that your people wanted him as their king. I honestly don’t know what that says about your world.”

That made Loki snort. “Indeed.” He turned his back on Tony, walking over to the window to gaze at the ocean.

“It might surprise you to hear, but I wasn’t always like this,” he said quietly. “You met me during a very dark time in my life.”
“Right, poor you,” Tony said derisively. “All those people in New York totally murdered themselves. You can try telling their families that.”

“I do not deny my involvement in their deaths.” Loki spun back, pinning Tony with a gaze. “And I am fully responsible for my actions. I am merely saying that you should not base your judgment of my character solely on my actions in battle.”

“So you’re saying what? That you’re normally all sunshine and kittens?”

Loki gave an amused snort. “Hardly. However, I am not the monster you portray me to be, either. Not when my mind is my own.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Tony had a feeling that Loki was dropping him clues to a puzzle of some sort. The problem was that Tony had no idea what the puzzle was.

“It means that I am very good at playing the role that was assigned to me,” Loki said. Tony was getting tired of all this cryptic bullshit. “And no, I am not telling you anything more. Barton said you were a smart man. Prove it.”

“Can we just get back to the healing?” Tony asked in resignation. It was far too early in the morning for any of this.

“You were the one who questioned my motives for helping you,” Loki shot back. He walked over to the large living room sofa and sat down, waiting for Tony to do the same.

“I still don’t trust you, you know,” Tony felt necessary to point out. “I’m still half convinced that this is all part of some elaborate ploy to screw me over, and - with your track record - it probably is, but I don’t care. I want this thing gone.” He gave Loki a hard look. “So I’ve decided to trust you, just this once. If you tamper with my mind in any way, I’ll sic the Hulk on you. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” Loki seemed more amused than impressed by Tony’s little speech, which annoyed Tony even more. But hey, if a guy with a broken hand tried to threaten him, he probably wouldn’t be terribly afraid, either. Fuck, he needed the cast gone ASAP.

“So, what do I do?” Tony asked.

“Sit down and give me your hand,” Loki said. “It has been some time since I last healed anyone, so I need a few moments to concentrate.”

“What? Nobody trusted you with their limbs?” Tony couldn’t help but ask. He sat down nonetheless, keeping a good foot of space between them.

Loki shot him a look.

“No, they trusted me just fine, but they usually sought out someone more proficient.” He reached out for Tony’s hand, feeling out the shape of the bones beneath the cast with a thin tendril of magic. “Besides that, healing magic had never held much interest for me. My strength lies in destruction and illusions. Healing is quite the opposite of that.”

“So are you saying you’re lousy at it?” Tony said, trying not to feel alarmed. “No offense, but if you’re crap at this, maybe this is not a good idea. I don’t want to end up with three arms.” He started to pull his hand back and stand up, but Loki tightened his hold, refusing to let him go.

“I would not have offered if I wasn’t certain that I could accomplish this,” he said. “I may not be able to repair torn innards or severed limbs, but a simple broken bone should be easy enough to mend.”
He held Tony’s gaze until the engineer sat back down, feeling even more dubious than before.

“This is such a bad idea. I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“Your friends probably wouldn’t approve.”

Tony laughed a little.

“Yeah, they would have me locked up in a madhouse if they saw me now.” He ran his free hand through his hair, blowing out a breath. “Jesus, this is insane, but I’m gonna do it anyway.” He met Loki’s eyes head on. “Go on, then, do your worst.”

Rather than watch, he closed his eyes, trying to relax. He felt Loki’s fingers circle the edges of his cast, probably searching for the best place to start. Warm golden light coming in through his eyelids made him open his eyes again and watch the proceedings with morbid fascination. Loki had a look of deep concentration on his face, holding Tony’s broken arm between his palms, which were surrounded by a glowing ball of golden light. He stayed like that for a minute or so, concentrating hard, but as time passed, his frown deepened. Finally he looked up at Tony with a mix of annoyance and disbelief.

“It is not working,” he announced. Tony blinked.

“Well, maybe you’re just shit at this.”

Loki’s lips twisted in annoyance.

“No, the fault is not on my side. My magic is working as it should, but your body is not receiving it.”

Tony’s eyebrows flew up.

“I’m magic-proof?”

“So it would seem.” Loki looked pretty irritated by it.

“So, what happens now? We give this up and you come back in a month?”

“No.” Loki appeared deep in thought. “I believe the source of your magic resistance comes from the metal in your chest. If we removed it, I should be able to heal your arm.” He started reaching for Tony’s arc reactor. Tony was on his feet in a flash, slapping his hand with enough force to knock it away.

“No,” he said resolutely. “No removing, no anything.” He ignored Loki’s incredulous stare and started pacing, trying to come up with a solution. This particular arc reactor might have magic-repelling properties, but he was almost certain that the one with palladium core didn’t. He had never tested it, but it might be worth a try. His old core was still lying in a drawer somewhere in the workshop. I would be just a matter of finding it.

“I may have a way to make this work,” he said slowly, meeting Loki’s eyes. “Let me try something.”

“What do you plan to do?” Loki asked at the same time as JARVIS spoke up.

“This is not a good idea, sir.”

“It’s worth a try,” Tony said. “Besides, it would only be for a few minutes, JARVIS, it will be fine.”

“What are you doing?” Loki started to rise from the sofa, intent on following him down to the
workshop.

“Don’t move,” Tony told him. “Wait here, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He didn’t wait for an answer, setting off to the workshop instead. It took him less than a minute to find his old arc reactor and a spare palladium plate for it. Taking out the new arc reactor and putting in the old one with only one hand took him a few tries, but he managed in the end. When the old core was in, he leaned on the desk for a moment and just breathed, getting used to the familiar tang of metal on his tongue.

It would be fine, he told himself. This was just for a few minutes, half an hour, tops. The last time it had taken him months to start showing signs of poisoning. It was going to be fine.

He came back to the living room ten minutes later to find Loki still on the sofa, waiting.

“The light in your chest is blue,” he remarked when Tony climbed the stairs.

“Yeah,” Tony nodded. “Different core. This one shouldn’t be magic-proof.”

“We’ll see.”

He sat down next to Loki again, feeling horribly naked without the newer arc reactor. There was something incredibly comforting about finding out that he was essentially magic-proof. Now that assurance was missing. Tony offered his arm again, trying to tamp down his apprehension.

Loki took his hand, sending out a small pulse of magic through his fingertip and giving a small nod of approval.

“Much better,” he said. “Now hold still, this should only take a few minutes.”

The light between his palms lit again, travelling from his skin into Tony’s. Tony couldn’t help but feel a little fascinated. If he could reproduce this process with a machine, he could advance medical technology by decades. He would have to look into this once he had use of both hands again.

Tony was tense at first, waiting for pain or dizziness or some sign that Loki was using this to put some kind of mind-spell on him, but when nothing happened besides a pleasant warm feeling in his arm, he slowly started to relax, thinking that maybe this wasn’t such a bad idea after all. Five minutes later, he started to feel weird. There was a strange itching feeling in his skin and an unpleasant taste in his mouth that felt horribly familiar. Almost soon as he realized that, Loki opened his eyes at the same time and pulled his hands back, shooting Tony a look that was bordering on alarm.

“Something is wrong. The magic feels different than it should.”

“Let me guess,” Tony said in a carefully even tone. “I have a weird blue rash on my neck?”

“Yes.” Loki frowned. “Now that you mention it, you do. It is on your other arm, too.” He gave Tony a look. “What is it?”

Tony sighed. “We’ll have to cut this session short. How long will it take before the bone heals?”

“I was almost finished healing it,” Loki replied. “I do not know how fast you mortals heal, but I estimate another three, four days at the most.”

“Awesome,” Tony said, getting up. “Thanks for this, by the way.” He set off towards his workshop, but had to stop after a few steps and close his eyes when his head started to spin. This was bad. This
was really, really bad.

“Stark, what is going on?” Loki’s voice was right beside him. The god didn’t touch him, but remained within reach.

“Allergic reaction,” Tony said, just to get rid of him. “Nothing to be concerned about. Go read a book or something.”

“No,” Loki said resolutely. “I am not some simpering servant you can get rid of when it suits you. Something is obviously wrong with you. I am coming with you.”

“No,” Tony said, drawing himself to his full height. “You don’t always get to have what you want. Right now I need a moment alone and that means you’re going to keep out of my workshop.” There was no way he was going to take out his arc reactor in front of Loki.

He closed his eyes against another wave of dizziness and counted to ten, fighting the urge to throw up.

“Stark-” Loki started again.

“I am not going to die, all right?” Tony snapped, running out of his patience. “So would you just fuck off and leave me alone for once?”

Loki’s gaze sharpened. “I never mentioned anything about dying.”

“Look, I’ll make sure your precious armor gets done, alright? Now get out of my way.”

He spun around and marched off, trying not to stumble on the stairs when another wave of poison-induced nausea hit. Jesus, this was bad.

“JARVIS?” he asked once the workshop door clicked shut behind him. “Do I still have any of the antidote from SHIELD?”

“Three vials of it should be in the second drawer from the top in your father’s box.”

“Oh, thank fuck.” He stumbled over to the box and pulled out a drawer, almost weeping with joy when he found the lithium compound, waiting and ready to be used. He thumbed off the safety cap and jammed the needle into his throat, sighing in relief when he felt it start working immediately.

With the worst symptoms gone, he crossed back to the desk where he had left his new arc reactor and thumbed the latch of the palladium one open, ripping it out as soon as he could. The new one slid into place with an elegant click, the familiar taste of coconut spreading on his tongue like a balm.

Fuck, that had been close. Closer than he was comfortable with.

He pulled open a drawer in his desk and dropped the palladium reactor into it, eager to get it out of his sight. Never again. Even if he had to wear the cast for half a year after the next fight, he would happily do it if this was the alternative.

Tony dug his bottle of whisky out of its hiding place in the desk, walked over to his favorite vintage car and climbed in, slumping onto the back seat. This needed a drink. Or three.

That was where Loki found him an hour later – sprawled over the backseat of a car, staring into space with a half-empty bottle in one hand. The god leaned against the side of the car, watching Tony with shrewd eyes.
“I tried calling from the doorway, but you didn’t answer. Since you appear to still be alive, I’ll take
that as a positive sign.”

“What part of “leave me alone” do you not understand?” Tony asked tiredly. “Do you take some
class in Asgard on how to be a pain in the ass?”

“Do you solve all your problems by drinking yourself into a stupor?” Loki countered.

“It usually works,” Tony told him. “And when it doesn’t, at least I have a good time.”

“It is not even noon.”

“Does it matter?”

“I suppose not.” Loki gave him another look, eyes lingering on his throat and the exposed right arm.
“The blue lines are gone.”

“As they should be.”

“I have never seen an ailment like this before.” Loki said. “What is wrong with you?”

Tony’s answering laugh was tinged with desperation.

“A better question would be: What isn’t wrong with me. But if you mean right now, I’ve got a mild
case of blood poisoning. It will take a few hours before it goes away.”

He sat up and screwed the cap back onto the bottle. It looked like his moment of peace was over.

“I would not exactly call that mild,” Loki said.

Tony gave him a wry smile. “It won’t kill me, if that’s what you’re asking. You would have to try
harder than that to get rid of me.”

“That isn’t very reassuring,” Loki muttered. Louder, he said: “Your body should not react to my
magic like that. What happened?”

“You magic works by speeding the body’s natural healing process, right?” Tony asked, climbing out
of the car. “Let’s just say that it triggered something that it shouldn’t have and leave it at that.”

“Can it happen again?”

“No,” Tony said. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen.”

“You’re not going to tell me more, are you?” Loki gave him a look.

“Nope.” On mostly-steady legs, Tony walked over to his desk and deposited the bottle back in the
drawer. He silently counted to three before turning back and giving Loki his patented publicity grin.
“Hey, how about a lunch? There’s a great Vietnamese place downtown that has takeout. We could
order something. You haven’t had Vietnamese food yet, have you?”

“You are attempting to derail me,” Loki pointed out, but there was a hint of a smile playing around
his mouth.

“Yep,” Tony admitted. “Is it working?”

Loki pretended to think about it.
“Order us some of those pizzas and it just might.”

“You’ve got a deal. Now, the important question – ham or cheese?”

***

What do you do with a visitor that refuses to leave?

That was the million dollar question Tony didn’t have an answer to. No matter what he tried – logical arguments, bribes, threats of bodily harm – Loki kept hanging around. After Tony’s latest threat to shoot him almost ended up with Tony smeared across the hood of his favorite Maserati, he finally gave up on trying to make him leave. Loki was apparently here to stay and there was nothing Tony could do about it, short of nuking the whole house from orbit.

The god came and went as he pleased, disappearing at random times over the next few days, only to pop up somewhere in the house a few hours later. No matter where he went, or how long he was gone, he always came back to the Malibu mansion in the end. Tony didn’t ask where he was going, but the whole thing made him suspect that his theory about Loki having nowhere to stay was probably spot on.

That still didn’t mean he had to happy with the whole situation. If he didn’t count his relationship with Pepper, Tony had spent the majority of the past twenty five years living alone. Having another living being in his house was…jarring to say at least, especially since it was someone Tony had never wanted to live with in the first place. They guy was mostly quiet and kept to himself, but Tony still couldn’t help the feeling of resentment that rose up every time he walked into a room and found Loki hanging around. The god’s teleportation ability meant that he could basically appear anywhere at any time and Tony hated the loss of privacy that Loki’s presence brought him.

His house had always been his sanctuary, the one place he didn’t have to pretend to be someone else and now he didn’t have even that. The god’s presence made Tony feel on edge, constantly on alert, because the guy could be anywhere and he detested that fact that he had to police his behavior in case the guy was watching him. Tony couldn’t count how many times he had forgotten about Loki’s presence, only to get a minor heart attack when he stumbled out of the workshop in the middle of the night and found Loki’s eyes watching him from the living room couch.

God, having a roommate sucked.

Well, he told himself one morning over his third mug of coffee, *if the guy is so hell-bent on hanging around, he might as well make himself useful.*

And that was how Loki ended up standing in the middle of Tony’s workshop, scanners beeping furiously around him as he conjured up fireball after fireball in his hand.

“Why do I have to do this again?” he asked Tony wearily.

“Because you promised to help me out with this,” Tony answered absent-mindedly, not even bothering to look up from the scanner he was calibrating. “Also, you’re eating all my food, so it’s only fair that you do something to pay me back a bit. Can you shoot fire at that metal plate? I need to check its resistance to heat.”

Loki grimaced but did as he was told, aiming a steady stream of bright orange fire at a thick steel plate. It blackened a little, but remained solid even under the barrage of ridiculously high heat.

“This looks pretty good,” Tony said when he finally gestured him to stop. “We’ll have to try ice next, but if it holds, we might have our first step towards the final thing.” He threw Loki a bottle of
water, which the god accepted gratefully, and went to check the screens with the results from the scanners, adjusting the settings for the next test. “I might even be able to get something from these readings. Of course, I’ll have to wait for the Doombot parts to arrive before I can start testing anything, but I’m pretty sure I can make this work.”

Two hours later, they were interrupted by JARVIS.

“Sir? There is a SHIELD-registered car approaching the house. My face-recognition scanners indicate that it’s Agent Barton. You have approximately two minutes before he arrives here.”

“All right, you need to go,” Tony told Loki, scanning the workshop to make sure there wasn’t anything suspicious lying about. “There is no way in hell you can be around when he gets here.”

“Do not tell me that he still holds a grudge against me.” Loki’s flippant tone rubbed Tony the wrong way.

“Yeah, he does. Maybe because you turned his brain into fucking mashed potatoes? Remember?” He threw Loki a disgusted look. “Just get out of here before he arrives and puts an arrow through your eye socket.”

“Oh, very well.” Loki looked like it caused him a personal grievance. “I suppose a strategic retreat is the best option in this case.”

“Yeah, it really is.” Tony waited until Loki disappeared, then went back to his desk to close all the armor files. As the last design schematic disappeared, he suddenly felt really grateful that he hadn’t taken off his cast yet. He had contemplated removing it, because Loki was convinced that the bone was healed already, but in the end decided to wait one more day. God knew what kind of bullshit he would have to come up with if Barton stopped by the house and the cast was gone, less than two weeks after the hand got broken.

That would be a lot of awkward questions Tony really didn’t want to answer.

Barton’s steps echoed on the stairs just as Tony pulled up another schematic on one of his tablets, starting a random song in the middle as a diversion tactic to draw attention away from the still-unnaturally-hot metal plate on the floor.

It worked like a charm.

Barton rapped at the glass door to his workshop three times, slipping in with a bulky box in his hands as soon as JARVIS unlocked the door for him. Once he was inside he opened his mouth to say something but promptly closed it again, making an incredulous face when he recognized the music.

“Lady Gaga?” Barton asked with a grimace. “Seriously?”

“Mute.” Tony turned the music off and swiveled around in his chair to face him. “What’s wrong with Lady Gaga?” he asked with a perfectly straight face.

“Nothing. It’s just that I had you pegged for more of a Metallica, AC/DC-type of guy.”

“No, you got that right,” Tony told him. “But today’s Tuesday, which means that Dummy gets to choose the music.”

“Dummy as in your demented helper bot?” Barton shot the bot in question a look.

“Yeah,” Tony confirmed, “thought he would probably object to you calling him “demented”. That’s
not a very PC word, Agent Barton. You should have more sensitivity towards your fellow robotic citizens. It’s not Dummy’s fault that he’s a little mentally challenged.”

And now Barton was looking at Tony like he was the one with a few screws loose. The look was very familiar, but he hadn’t seen it on Barton’s face before. This was getting funnier by the minute.

“No but really,” Barton said, “you let your bots choose the music?” He looked like the idea personally offended him. Tony had to use all his willpower to keep a straight face.

“Look, pal, when someone lives with you for twenty-five years, they get some privileges. Now, he may not have the best taste, but I’m willing to put up with it for a few hours every week.” He made a dramatic pause. “Be grateful you weren’t here ten years ago when he went through his Britney Spears phase.”

Barton’s expression turned from weirded out into outright horror.

“Please don’t make that face,” Tony told him. “You’re hurting Dummy’s feelings.”

Dummy put the perfect finish to the joke by hanging his head despondently and rolling away into the corner.

Barton opened and closed his mouth like a fish a few times, looking alternately at Tony and the bots.

“Are you fucking with me?” he asked finally.

Tony’s poker face cracked just a bit, but he still managed to turn it into his best grin. God, messing with the guy was hilarious. Even better than pranking Captain America, and that was saying something.

“Maybe.” He waited for a few seconds before pretending to take mercy on him. “Actually, Butterfingers is the one who likes Gaga. Dummy is a more old-fashioned guy. I still haven’t been able to cure him of his ABBA obsession. You should see him when Dancing Queen comes on. It’s madness.”

Barton stared at him for a few more seconds before shaking his head in defeat.

“All right, I give up. You’re obviously insane and we should be lucky that you haven’t blown up New York yet.”

“Yeah, I’ll get to that after I finish conquering the moon and patenting my new rocket powered roller-skates,” Tony said without missing a beat. “Now stop dissing my bot’s taste in music and tell me what you have for me.”

“Right.” Hawkeye looked down at the box in his arms, as if he had just realized why he had come here in the first place. “We managed to rescue a few Doombot parts for you. I know you said you wanted to have a look at them, but you left New York before SHIELD approved all the requisition forms. Anyway, here you go.”

He put the box on a desk for Tony to explore. And explore he did.

Most of the stuff in the box was a jumbled mess of metal plates and wires, but buried underneath all that was a piece that almost made the whole affair with the broken bone worth it.

Tony pulled the Doombot hand out of the box, lifting it closer to the light to get a better look at the intricate network of wires.
“Oh, you’re beautiful,” he murmured in appreciation, turning the metal appendage this way and that to examine it from all angles. From the corner of his eye, he caught Hawkeye’s stare.

“What?”

“Only you, Stark, can look this happy holding something that almost killed you a week ago.”

Tony shot him a grin. “What can I say? I like to live dangerously.”

“As we are frequently reminded.” Something in his tone made Tony straighten up.

“Did they send you here to check up on me?”

“No,” Barton said, a bit too quickly. “Maybe?”

“Alright, which one of them put you up to this? Pepper? Fury?” No, Fury wouldn’t bother unless Tony was actively dying. Which left only one option. “It was Steve, wasn’t it?”

“He just wanted to make sure you were alright,” Hawkeye said. “We all did.”

“I’m fine,” Tony said. “I’ll be even better after I finally get rid of this thing.” He gestured to the cast.

Barton drew himself up to sit on one of the workbenches, where he could have a better view of Tony’s face.

“Why didn’t you stay in New York with us? You didn’t have to come back here.”

Tony shrugged.

“All of my projects are here, my bots, everything. I left in a hurry when you called for us to assemble, so I had to come back and make sure everything’s all right.”

“I’m sure it could wait a few weeks until you healed. And it’s not like you can do much with one hand in a sling, anyway.”

“You’d be surprised.” Tony gave him a smirk.

Barton made a face. “And now I don’t want to know.”

Tony’s smirk widened. “Trust me, you really don’t.”

Absentmindedly, Barton picked up a few spare nuts and screws from the nearby workbench and started to juggle them. Tony bent over the robotic hand, using it as a pretext to avoid meeting Barton’s gaze, because he knew full well where the conversation was headed. Barton’s next question proved him right.

“No, but seriously. Why don’t you live in New York? I mean, you spent months building the huge-ass tower, convinced us all to move in and then just stayed on the West Coast in the end. If I don’t count Thor’s visit, we haven’t seen you in months.”

“I doubt any of you miss my scintillating presence,” Tony muttered, most of his attention focused on the numbers JARVIS was running for him.

“No, but really,” Barton was persistent. “It’s kinda weird to stay in your house when you’re not there. Why did you build yourself a fancy skyscraper when you don’t even use it?” He seemed frustrated by the concept.
Tony shrugged. “I have lots of things that I don’t use. Kinda comes with the whole billionaire shtick. Besides, just because I don’t live in the tower personally doesn’t mean that I don’t use it – it’s the Stark Industries headquarters.”

“That’s not the point,” Barton said.

“Then what is the point?” Tony finally turned to face him. “You know, if you guys wanted to interrogate me, you really should have sent the Widow. You’re crap at this, Barton.”

“And you’re a dick,” Barton shot back, not the slightest bit fazed by Tony’s attempt to rile him. “But I already knew that.”

“Right,” Tony said. “Look, let it go. I’ve never liked New York and that hasn’t changed just because I suddenly have a tower there.”

“How can you not like New York?” Barton asked, incredulous. “You grew up there.”

“Yea,” was all Tony said, turning back to the robotic hand. He had no desire to talk about his childhood in the huge empty mansion on 5th Avenue. Something in his face probably gave him away, because Barton’s expression changed from curious to understanding.

“Right,” he said, cutting into the awkward silence. “Anyway, you got the creepy hand of doom, so my part here is done.” He slid down from the bench. “I’ll be hanging around L.A. for a few days before I return back, so if you need anything, I can stop by anytime.”

Tony got a sudden idea. Loki had mentioned that the spell would make sure that he couldn’t betray him or mention his presence in any way. This was the perfect opportunity to find out just how the spell worked. He didn’t plan to out Loki, not when he needed him for the anti-magic project, but he could still mess with him a little.

“There’s this one thing,” Tony said, before Barton could turn to leave. He chose his next words carefully. “I’ve noticed this stray dog hanging around the house lately.” And here it was - a feeling like a stopgap had been put in his mind on everything Loki-related. The spell didn’t allow him to speak Loki’s name out loud or even to think about speaking it, but he could still talk about completely unrelated things. If he wanted, he could probably let Barton know about Loki even with the spell in effect. It was tempting, but he resisted.

“A stray dog?” Barton was wearing a small frown. “Why don’t you shoo it away?”

“It’s very persistent.” Tony smothered a grin. Oh yes, this was fun, especially since Loki was probably in the room, spying on him. “It’s been running around for a few days, digging in my trash cans.”

“Do you want me to shoot it?” Barton offered.

“Nah,” Tony said. “Better not. The PETA guys could find out about it and my house would get picketed by half-naked animal activists.” He paused. “Actually, the half-naked part wouldn’t be so bad. But still, it’s too much hassle.”

“I didn’t see any dogs around when I arrived here.”

“It was probably hiding. Anyway, don’t worry about it. The dog will probably get bored and leave on its own soon enough.”

“Alright.” Barton still looked a little dubious. “You know where to find me if you need anything.”
“Yeah.” Tony gave him a smile. “Thanks for delivering this.” He picked up the robotic hand and waved it, which made Barton grin.

“I hope you and Mr Robohand will be very happy together.”

“We will,” Tony assured him.

“Yea, I bet,” Barton muttered.

Tony used the opportunity to turn on the music again, enjoying Barton’s grimace when Gaga started enthusiastically belting out something about a bad romance. The agent just shook his head in disbelief and walked out, taking the stairs two at the time. Tony waited until JARVIS informed him that the agent was truly gone, then switched the music off.

Well, that hadn’t been so bad. Despite his frequent claims of the opposite, Tony liked Barton. The man had a straightforward, no bullshit manner, a wicked sense of humor and a general aura of unflappability which made him pleasant to be around. But most of all, Tony liked that Barton knew when to shut up. Unlike the Captain, who had an unfortunate tendency to pursue unpleasant topics with the tenacity of a bloodhound, Barton knew when to drop an uncomfortable subject. He didn’t push or wheedle, simply stepped back and accepted defeat if he didn’t get the answer he wanted.

For a second, Tony even found himself contemplating Barton’s words about moving to New York, before he discarded the idea. Yeah, he could probably live with the Avengers, but he wasn’t sure that the Avengers would be able to live with him. Plus the whole thing with Pepper made it all kinda awkward. There was probably something to be said about the fact that he was the one on the team, yet Pepper was the one who actually talked to them on a regular basis. Besides, Steve might be worried about him now, but he would probably change his tune pretty fast if he had to actually share his living space with Tony. Tony had no desire to spend the rest of his days by being silently compared to Howard and found wanting. He’d had enough of that already.

He started running a few tests on the doom hand, but before he could delve deeper into the data, the air behind him shimmered and Loki reappeared. Tony kept his back to him, watching him approach in the reflection thrown by one of the darkened monitors. Hoo boy, he looked pissed.

“You were here the whole time, weren’t you?” Tony asked, not feeling the slightest bit surprised by that. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough.” Loki’s voice could have cut glass. The god slowly prowled closer, moving behind Tony to hiss in his ear: “You were thinking of betraying me, weren’t you?” His voice made the hairs on the back of Tony’s neck stand, but if wasn’t out of fear. He should probably get his head examined, because he found the whole situation rather thrilling.

Rather than play along with the threats, Tony smirked.

“Well, I won’t deny that the thought crossed my mind, but no, I was mostly curious about what the spell would do.” He turned around to face Loki, enjoying the annoyed look on the god’s face. “It’s one thing to have you tell me about how the spell works and another to try it out for myself. I always love figuring out how things work. Besides, you’re kinda known for being a good liar. I was not about to take your word on it, no offence.”

“You’re playing with fire here, Stark,” Loki warned him.

“You say to the guy who loves making things explode,” Tony gave him a crooked grin. “Seriously, the fire metaphor is not working too well in this case. You should probably come up with some new
threats.”

“I probably should,” Loki said, moving a little closer. “You are getting far too insolent.”

“Or maybe I’m just getting really good at pushing your buttons,” Tony shot back, meeting Loki’s burning gaze head on.

Their eyes locked and held and Tony suddenly realized that the room was getting kind of hot. He should probably stop this madness, because flirting with a pissed off god of chaos was only inviting trouble, but he hadn’t felt this thrilled exchanging banter with someone for years. His arguments with Pepper had been more exhausting than exciting, but riling up Loki was like touching a live wire – dangerous, thrilling and so much fun.

Tony held his gaze for a few more seconds, enjoying the promise of danger lurking in Loki’s eyes, before he took a step back and reached for the now abandoned doom hand lying on the workbench. He waved it between them, effectively breaking the mood.

“How do you like my new friend, Mr Creepyhand?”

“I hope it proves useful, considering all the fuss you made about obtaining it.”

“Fuss?” Tony repeated. “That wasn’t fuss. Fuss would be if I called Pepper at two in the morning and demanded that she buy me the company that makes Swedish meatballs. Which I have,” he had to admit. “Several times when I was drunk. But never mind, this is necessary. This hand is crucial to obtaining an understanding of how the thing works.”

He circled the workbench and put the hand down, staring the scanners again.

“If I figure out how the robots are made and how he controls them, I can come up with a way to turn it against him. I can sabotage them or destroy them.” He got a glorious idea that made him pause for a second. “Or maybe, if I’m very, very lucky, I can even turn them against him. Take control. Make him eat his words.” Oh, this was getting better and better. If he could pull that off, the result would be hilarious.

“You can do that?” Loki asked with interest.

“I’m Tony Stark, there is very little I can’t do.”

“So I am beginning to see,” Loki murmured. Tony didn’t pay him much attention, bending over the hand.

“Besides, nobody messes with my stuff,” he continued. “The guy fucked up my armor plates. It will take me a week to repair all the damage he did to my suit. Turnabout’s only fair.”

“I thought you heroes were all about truth, justice and honour,” Loki said with a smirk.

“Ah no,” Tony corrected, “that would be the Cap. He’s the honorable boy scout here. I’m not above petty revenge.” He raised the hand higher to the light to study the wiring. “If I see this guy again, I’m going to kick his ass.”

“That should make for an entertaining spectacle. It’s a pity I will not see it.”

“No, you totally can,” Tony said. “It will probably be all over the news. Hey, I haven’t shown you how the TV works yet, have I?”
Loki shook his head. “No, I do not believe so. Is that another one of your devices?”

Tony shot him a grin. If introducing Loki to the wonders of cable TV went half as well as it had with Thor, who had worn a puzzled face for days after being introduced to the phenomenon that was reality TV, Tony was in for weeks of hilarity. It might even make up for having to put up with the guy.

“You have no idea.”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

I almost forgot to update today, because Dragon Age: Inquisition has eaten my brain. I have zero regrets, though, because the game is fantastic. Once I managed to tear myself out of its grasp, I will go back to writing, I promise :)

I'll be taking some liberties with the Marvel cannon, especially where magic is concerned (the magic-proof arc reactor), so I hope nobody minds too much. If it's any consolation, it all serves the plot. I'm not just making up stuff on a whim, (for example - the arc reactor and its properties will become important later on).

I’m really glad to hear that you guys are enjoying my story! Thank you for all the comments and kudos you have left on the previous chapters, it’s nice to hear that my work is appreciated :)

The next chapter will be up on next Friday, January 2nd.
Another week passed and Tony was still no closer to cracking the mystery of Doom’s magic robot hand than he’d been when Barton had first brought it. Since he couldn’t work on any of Stark Industries patents or SHIELD commissions (at least not officially), he was able to devote more time to Loki’s request. They spent many hours discussing designs and testing various metals with the help of Loki’s magic.

The armor design was slowly starting to take shape, looking like a cross between Loki’s own Asgardian armor and something inspired by Earthly fantasy movies. Tony didn’t ask where Loki got the ideas – he had a sneaking suspicion that Loki had learned to use the internet right along with the TV and was probably using it to either troll people or binge-watch the Game of Thrones. Or both. Tony had never managed to catch him at it, but he had noticed that Loki was a lot more familiar with tech than an alien space Viking had any right to be.

Unlike most visitors to Tony’s workshop, who usually looked uncomfortable when they entered, refused to touch anything, and tried to get out as soon as possible, Loki had managed to make himself right at home between the glass cases with Iron Man suits and ubiquitous piles of prototypes. At first it had annoyed Tony like hell– the brazen way he would pop out of thin air and lean against a workbench like he owned the place, the way he would pick up random stuff Tony was working on to take a closer look without asking permission – but eventually the engineer learned to tolerate it.

One learned to tolerate a lot of things when it came to Loki – property damage caused by stray spells, probing questions about things he didn’t wish to talk about, and frequent interruptions when he was trying to work. Oh boy, so many interruptions.

The god possessed an incredible amount of natural curiosity that drove him to explore the world around him. Unfortunately for Tony, that world now also included his workshop. Loki never broke anything, handling Tony’s tools and machines with care, but Tony still instinctively tensed up any time the god went near his bots. The bots, naïve creatures that they were, seemed to adore the guy for some reason. Tony had no idea what Loki had told them or done to them, but they obediently fulfilled each of the god’s request.

“How have you put a spell on my bots or something?” he finally asked one day. Loki looked up from his book with a frown. He was perched comfortably on a spare office chair, reading through a thick book of some sort.

“Of course not. Why would I bespell your machines?”

“I don’t know,” Tony said. You tell me why they suddenly obey you. It’s a little creepy, to be honest, to see them roll about, fulfilling your every whim.”
“They are servants, are they not?” Loki made an elegant move with his hand, taking the glass of orange juice You was holding out for him. “You created them to serve you. I am merely using them for their intended purpose.”

Tony didn’t bother to explain that the bots had been created less for helping out and more for keeping him company. That was far too private. Outwardly he didn’t move a muscle.

“Well, I suppose that as long as I don’t need them, you can boss them around, but if I catch you encouraging them to riot against me, I’ll test my new repulsors on your face.” He pointed a screwdriver at Loki. “Capiche?”

The only answer he got was an amused smile. He should really work on his threats.

Dummy chose that moment to roll up to the engineer, holding a plate with a sloppy-looking sandwich. The bot held out his claw, offering his concoction proudly, which put Tony instantly on alert, because Dummy’s attempts at making him food never ended well. The bot could wield a fire-extinguisher reasonably well, but he usually lacked the necessary coordination for more precise work. Count to that the fact that Dummy had a very loose definition of “food” and he had a disaster in waiting. Tony took the plate from him warily, lifting the top layer of the bread.

“Is this… grease, Dummy?” he asked the bot. “Did you just bring me a grease sandwich? Really? You made me a sandwich with grease. Wonderful. How many times do I have to explain about the difference between Nutella and grease before you get it?”

Butterfingers came to him next, carrying a smoothie. “And what’s that?” Tony pointed at the glass in Butterfingers’ claw.

“It appears to be a vegetable smoothie, sir. No foreign substances detected,” JARVIS informed him.

“See?” Tony told Dummy. “He can make food that’s actually edible. Why can’t you do that? You’re ten years older than him.”

Dummy’s claw lowered, looking sad.

“Oh, come on. Don’t try that on me. You know very well that you botched this up.” Dummy continued looking sad. Tony sighed. “All right, you did a pretty good job, if I don’t count the whole “not being edible thing”. Dummy perked up. Tony tried to pretend he wasn’t smiling. “Great job, Butterfingers.” The bots chirped at him and rolled away. Tony held up the snacks in his hands in bemusement.

“Can you explain why my bots are suddenly trying to feed me?” Tony asked Loki. The god shrugged in false nonchalance.

“I have noticed that you forget to eat when you work for too long.”

Tony didn’t buy his bullshit for a second.

“I don’t like interruptions when I work. Besides, my eating habits are none of your business.”

“I merely reminded your servants that they should pay more attention to your nutrition, since you clearly seem to be incapable of feeding yourself.”

“I eat!” Tony protested. “Sometimes. When I remember. It’s worked out for me pretty well so far.”

Loki just gave him an unimpressed look that irritated Tony to no end. To appease Butterfingers, who
was still trying (and failing) to watch him subtly, Tony took a few sips of the smoothie before he put in on his desk and picked up Hawk’s new bow instead. The weapon was almost finished, only needed to be tested. Tony cleared out a path across the workshop, hanging a metal target on the furthest wall opposite the suit displays. Loki watched the proceedings with interest.

“What are you doing?”

“Testing Hawkeye’s new bow,” Tony answered, keeping his eyes on the target. He raised the bow to the right height, drew the bowstring as far as he could and let the arrow fly. The sensors in the arrowhead engaged at once, hitting the target with unerring accuracy. Tony pulled up a screen and opened the file on the bow, noting down the reactions of the material.

“I had no idea you had an interest in archery,” Loki said, standing up from his chair.

“I don’t.” Tony was trying to notch the next arrow on the bowstring. He succeeded on the third try. “I just wanted to test the bow for Barton before I give it to him. Since he’s not around and I have a very similar build, I’m an ideal candidate for that.”

“Do you even know how to use that bow?” Loki asked and was that a hint of mockery in his voice? Tony wouldn’t be the slightest bit surprised.

“Of course I know how to use it. I made it. Besides, I don’t have to be an archer to test the flexibility of the material,” Tony countered. Loki walked over to him and held out his hand.

“Give me the bow.”

Tony stepped back.

“No way. You’ll just break it with your freakish strength. This shit isn’t built for someone of your capacity. That’s why I need to be the one testing it.”

“In that case you should at least learn how to handle it properly.” Loki took a few steps closer until he was standing behind Tony, who tensed immediately. Having a former enemy standing behind your back was never a good feeling. “No, don’t tense up,” Loki said, putting his hands on Tony’s shoulders. “You will harm your aim.”

“Well, considering that I don’t have much of an aim in the first place, that wouldn’t be such a tragedy,” Tony muttered. “Can you stop standing behind me? It’s creepy.”

“Does my presence make you uncomfortable?” The smirk was clear in Loki’s voice. “Here, let me help you.” And he let go of Tony’s shoulders, only to reach down and take hold of Tony’s elbows. “You need to keep your left arm in this position while you draw the bowstring back with your other. Your eyes should be on the target.” A gust of cold breath washed over the back of Tony’s neck, making him shiver as Loki released his hands. “Now count to three and then release the arrow.”

Easier said than done. Loki was standing less than a foot behind him, breathing down his neck. Tony was sure he didn’t need to stand this close to observe the shot. To get this over with, he blew out a breath and released the arrow. Before it could hit, he pushed the button in the bow and the arrow exploded, penetrating the target in several places.

“Again,” Loki ordered and Tony suppressed a sigh. It seemed that Barton’s bow had become the main attraction of the afternoon. He notched another arrow, but before he could draw the bow, he was startled by the hands that gripped his hips.

“What are you doing?” he asked warily, feeling goosebumps burst out all over his arms.
“Improving your posture,” Loki murmured, moving Tony’s feet until he was standing correctly. And was that Tony’s imagination, or did those hands linger on his waist a bit longer than necessary? “Your stance is abominable.”

Tony wanted to hate the situation, he really did, but instead of the touch feeling alien and unwelcome, it was turning him on just a little bit. He knew Loki was only doing it to provoke him, pushing his buttons to see how he would react, but he couldn’t deny there was something thrilling about being in such close proximity to the demigod.

He released another arrow and made a note in the file on its speed and trajectory.

“How come you know so much about archery?” he asked, just to fill the silence.

“I was brought up to be a warrior,” Loki said. “The bow may not be my preferred weapon of choice, but I was expected to be proficient in it nonetheless.”

“Right. You know, I really don’t need to know how to shoot this,” he said after Loki continued hovering around even after the fifth arrow. “That’s why I have the suit and the auto-targeting system. It calculates all the targets for me. I don’t need to do a thing. This is so old school.”

Loki didn’t say anything to that, simply leaned on the wall a few feet away and observed the tests.

It took another twenty minutes before Tony was finally satisfied with the readings from the bow. He folded it with a snap and put it in a protective case for Hawkeye, glad to finally get away from Loki’s smothering orbit.

This weird sexual tension had been hanging between them ever since he had come back from fighting Doctor Doom in New York. Loki rarely hit on him outright, but it was always there, always present in the undertone of their conversations. Looks that lingered a little longer than they should, green eyes watching Tony over the edge of a book when he worked on his designs. While before those had been only subtle hints that Tony could pretend to ignore, now it had moved from subtext into the open.

And well…Tony would be lying if he said that he didn’t enjoy the attention just a bit. It felt a little weird to be made into an object of interest by a former (?) enemy, but hey, he was Tony Stark. He lived for weird shit like this. And he would lie even more if he said that he wasn’t interested right back.

Sure, it had all started as a fun experiment to see how far he could push Loki’s buttons before the god snapped and turned him into a fireworks display, but the more time they spent together, the more Tony found that he genuinely enjoyed it. There was something exciting about being able to talk to someone who could hold their own in a conversation, who could both keep up with Tony’s quicksilver mind and didn’t fall for the money or the whole Iron Man celebrity persona. The fact that the god was quite easy on the eyes certainly didn’t hurt, either.

However, for now Tony was still determined to keep his distance. According to Tony’s calculations, the armor would take at least another three months to make, and that was if he managed to find the anti-magic trick soon. If he didn’t, who knew how long was Loki going to hang around. It was one thing to flirt a bit and another to get tangled with a half-mad demigod. Having a one night stand with the guy was absolutely out of the question in this situation and Tony’s latent commitment-phobia didn’t let him to even think about words like “relationship”.

Considering just who it was Tony was working for, he was going to be happy if he got out of this whole deal alive. Tempting or not, there was no reason to complicate it any further…
...at least that was what he had been telling himself. The reality was that he was slowly running out of arguments against this while Loki moved closer, tightening the metaphorical noose around him.

All right, who was he kidding? It was only a matter of time before they ended up in bed. There was simply too much energy, too much chemistry between them for them to keep their arrangement strictly professional. The only question was: What was going to happen once they slept together? Right now, Tony really didn’t wish to know.

“Why are you doing all this?” Tony couldn’t help but ask as he went through the results from the bow tests. “Surely there must be better things for you to do than hang around my workshop and laugh at my nonexistent archery skills.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, there are not,” Loki said. “Being dead is more limiting than I expected. I cannot use large amounts of magic, because it might draw unwanted attention. Travel between realms is out of question for me right now, so I am effectively bound to this miserable rock for the duration of our contract.”

“Hey, you were the one who wanted the whole contract thing in the first place,” Tony reminded him. “It’s not my problem that you’re suddenly bored. When I signed up to make you the armor, ‘babysitting a bored demigod’ wasn’t part of my contract terms.”

“What am I supposed to do, then, to entertain myself?” Loki asked petulantly. Tony thought he sounded about five years old. “You forbid me from causing destruction.”

“Yeah, poor you.” Tony rolled his eyes. “Not being able to slaughter people must be such a bummer.” Loki threw him a dirty look that Tony ignored. “What did you do for fun on Asgard? I’m sure it can’t be that different from what we do here.”

“Hunting and feasting, mostly,” Loki answered. “I also spent a lot of my time practicing with weapons, learning new spells and reading.”

“Did you like it?”

“Most of it.” He didn’t elaborate further. A shadow seemed to fall over his face at the memory of his home world, so Tony let it slide. Instead he tried to come up with some ideas.

“Look, there are plenty of ways to entertain yourself here on Earth. You can teleport, for fuck’s sake. You can go anywhere you wish. Why don’t you explore a bit? Try something new? If you want to hunt, you can go to Canada or Russia. They’ve got tons of bears and moose and shit. If you want to eat, L.A. is full of restaurants with food from all around the world. Hell, you can travel all over the world. There’s more to Earth than New York and L.A., you know.” He gave the god a side eye. “And, if you’re still bored after all that, you can always go visit Thor in London. I’m sure he would be thrilled to see you.”

That got him the predictable reaction.

“No,” Loki said resolutely. “I refuse to ever see him again.”

“All right,” Tony relented. “But think about what I said. You don’t have to stick around here all the time. There’s so much to do outside. So many places to see, people to meet. You could have fun.”

Loki raised a sarcastic eyebrow. “You mean like you have fun? So far I have only seen you work for days on end and drink yourself into oblivion. That doesn’t sound like entertainment to me.”
“I’ll have you know, I love my work,” Tony informed him. “Besides, you haven’t stayed here for very long. I have plenty of fun when you’re not around.” He gave an exaggerated leer. “Just ask those models at the party two weeks ago.”

“Yes, I have heard of your reputation,” Loki said, sounding unimpressed. “You had the gall to lecture me about my plans for domination, yet you yourself walk among your fellow mortals like a king, using them to fulfill your every whim.”

“Whoa!” Tony whirled around, pinning the guy with a glare. “You make me sound like some kind of a rapist or despot, which is really not cool. I don’t force anyone to do anything. The people I sleep with always come to me first. I’ve never had to use money or force to get someone in my bed. That would be just gross.” He tried to shake off the brief surge of anger, opting for a smirk instead. “If they seek me out, it’s only because I’m just that good.”

“Are you, really?” Loki’s derisive expression got replaced by one of amused interest. Tony decided to steer the conversation back into safer waters before things got out of hand.

“Look, the people here don’t wish to be ruled,” he explained. “We’ve had enough of that shit over the past few thousand years. You can’t just come somewhere and declare sovereignty over a random piece of land, be it a country or the whole world. People hate that sort of thing.” He paused for a moment, trying to get back to his original point. “What I’m saying is, they don’t wish to be ruled, but I suppose they can be…impressed. Some of them really easily. You should try it. Go out, have fun, charm someone into spending time with you. You’d never have to see them again if you didn’t want to.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Is that what you do? Charm them one day and run away the other? Leave them before they can start asking questions?”

Tony laughed. “Yeah, pretty much. It’s easier that way.”

“No harm in trying” Loki’s gaze was piercing.

Tony sighed. That question was getting uncomfortably close for comfort. He hesitated briefly before answering: “Having them run away from me. They always do, eventually.” His lips twisted into a self-deprecating grin. “To be honest, I don’t blame them, much. I’m not an easy guy to get along with.”

“No you are not,” Loki said bluntly. And alright, even coming from the mouth of a guy who had once tried to kill him, that still stung a bit. “You have a talent for driving people away.”

“It doesn’t seem to work on you,” Tony shot back, feeling a little hurt by the assessment.

“You haven’t been trying very hard,” Loki said. “But that is beside the point. You are a man of extraordinary talents. It is only reasonable that you should be allowed some leeway.”

It shouldn’t have worked, but it did. Tony could feel his irritation evaporate.

“If you’re only saying that to get me to work faster, it’s not going to work,” he warned Loki, only half-seriously.

“No harm in trying,” Loki shot him a grin that made his heart beat just a little faster. What were they talking about again? Oh, right, getting Loki out of the house.

“Look,” he said, “you really don’t have to be here all the time. In fact, you probably shouldn’t. Just because SHIELD still doesn’t know you’re here doesn’t mean that they won’t find out eventually.
What if one of the Avengers came for a visit unannounced and we didn’t notice him until it was too late? Or if someone gets suspicious and starts watching my house? We would both be in deep shit.”

“I have my ways of staying undetected,” Loki informed him, looking very satisfied with himself.

“Yeah, I bet you do,” Tony muttered.

“So, your fellow heroes and spies still have no idea that I am alive?”

“As far as I’m aware, no.”

“And how would you know that? You rarely speak with them.” Loki’s gaze was shrewd.

Tony took a few seconds to contemplate whether he was going to reveal this particular detail. In the end the need to show off his cleverness won.

“I may have been monitoring SHIELD’s secret network ever since the whole deal with you.”

Loki’s eyebrows flew up.

“Have you. How scandalous.” He seemed genuinely impressed. Tony told himself not to feel pleased by that. “What would your righteous friends think if they knew you were spying on them? Oh, this is delicious.” Loki’s grin was back full force, jubilant and full of teeth. “You fight by their side and yet you do not trust them.”

“Of course I don’t trust them,” Tony said. “SHIELD is a secret intelligence agency. I would be crazy to take anything they say at face value after the whole clusterfuck with the Tesseract-powered weapons. This way I know what they are doing. I don’t have complete access because I wanted to stay undetected this time, but what little I have is more than enough to keep me informed about anything important.” That reminded him. “Hey, did you know that Phil, the guy you killed on the Helicarrier, isn’t dead?”

“He is not?” Loki asked. “You seemed rather upset by his death.”

“Yeah, I was, but mostly because Fury used his death to manipulate us Avengers into working together. No, the fun fact is that he’s alive, but nobody knows about it. Not Steve, not Barton, nobody. I wasn’t supposed to know either, but oh well.” He paused in adjusting the metal compositions on the screen. “Hm, I wonder if I should mention that little tidbit in front of Steve the next time Fury pisses me off. That should be fun.”

“Maybe you should,” Loki said, reminding Tony of the whispering snake from the Bible parable about the paradise. “The director’s reaction to your little stunt will probably make it all worthwhile.”

“You really like to watch the world burn, don’t you,” Tony said, but there wasn’t anything biting about it. There was something admirable about the guy’s unashamed passion for causing chaos.

He got a shark-like grin in answer.

“I love it.”

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The next day brought an unexpected complication. Tony should have anticipated it, really, but he had gotten really good at denial about all things Pepper-related since she had broken up with him. God, had it really been almost a year now? Anyway, he should have seen it coming from a mile
away, but it was still an unpleasant surprise when the phone rang while he and Loki were testing the durability of the newest batch of steel alloys.

“Sir,” JARVIS informed him, “Miss Potts is on the line.”

“Tell her I’m busy,” Tony said, not looking up from the readings from the scanners.

“I have already tried that, sir,” JARVIS said, sounding almost apologetic. “She is using her override.”

“Shit.” He turned to Loki. “Alright, we’re having a break. Can you zap yourself to the library or something? This is kinda personal.”

“No, I don’t think I will,” Loki gave him the “I-love-being-a-pain-in-the-ass” grin. “This should be entertaining.”

“I’ll come up with some way to make you pay for this later,” Tony said. “If you’re so determined to stay, then stay, but for the love of all that is holy, shut up.”

Loki just shot him an annoying smirk and settled himself on workbench to watch the show. Tony gestured for JARVIS to connect the call.

“Hi, Pep,” he said cheerfully. He could almost feel the ice coming from the other side of the line.

“Can you tell me what’s keeping you so busy that you can’t even pick up a phone?” Pepper said. “I know for a fact that your arm is still broken, so I’d like to know what it is you’re working on that’s so important.”

Tony looked around on all the armor designs and magic scanners littering his workshop.

“Oh, you know, I’m making a… hoverboard,” he blurted the first thing that came to his mind.

“A hoverboard.” Pepper’s disbelief was almost palpable. “Are you serious?”

“Yup,” Tony said. “It’s like a skateboard, but much cooler. It can hover and everything.”

“A hoverboard,” Pepper repeated flatly. “And we need this why?”

“Because it’s awesome?” He heard a smothered chuckle from the other side of the workshop and shot the demigod a glare. “Because we were meant to have them like five years ago, if the pop culture is to be believed, and their continued lack of existence is really an affront to the American people?”

There was a telling silence from the other side of the line.

“I can’t even tell when you’re just making up bullshit anymore,” Pepper said finally. She sounded tired. “And no, the world doesn’t need a hoverboard, but you’re going to invent it anyway, so there’s no point in arguing about it. But this is not why I am calling.”

“Why are you calling, then?” Tony asked, feeling a horrible sense of foreboding.

“Steve wants to know what you’re doing on Christmas. The Avengers will all be celebrating at the Tower. They want you to come.”

And here it was. Tony should have known he wouldn’t be able to escape it. He threw Loki a pleading look.
“Get out,” he mouthed. When the god didn’t move, Tony added a reluctant please.

That seemed to do the trick. Loki hesitated for a few more seconds before finally disappearing in a shower of sparks. Tony sagged against the workbench, running a hand over his face.

“I can’t,” he told Pepper, taking care to keep his voice casual. “I have plans.”

“Plans,” Pepper repeated. “On Christmas Eve. What is so important that you can’t even come see your friends?”

“I’m throwing a party,” Tony made up on the spot. Yup, party was a great idea, now that he thought about it. It would give him the perfect excuse, because it was something that he had totally done before. Several times in fact. “Rhodey’s coming,” he added. Even if the man didn’t know about it yet.

“Rhodey already promised Steve he would come have dinner with us,” Pepper informed him.

Shit. That complicated things a bit.

“He can do both,” Tony said breezily. “With the suit it’s what? Forty-minute flight across the states? If he’s jetlagged, he can crash here afterwards.”

There was a sigh on the other side of the line.

“Why are you doing this, Tony?”

Tony didn’t have to ask her to clarify. They might have parted of fairly good terms (excellent terms in fact, compared to the majority of Tony’s past breakups), but the approaching winter holidays had brought it all back.

Christmas had been one of the last times he and Pepper had spent together as a couple. Everything had fallen apart a few weeks after that, but Christmas was a good memory. Tony could still remember it all - Clint, hanging from the ceiling over the big Christmas tree in the Avenger common room, trying to put the star on the top and laughing at something Bruce had said. Steve and Natasha, sitting together on the couch, the spy explaining something that made Steve simultaneously blush and chuckle. And Pepper, beautiful as always, wearing the red dress Tony had bought for her and smiling the smile that never failed to make Tony’s heart skip a beat.

There was no way in hell he could go to New York and spend the evening with them all this year. Next year, maybe. Maybe.

Instead of answering her question, he deflected with a question of his own.

“Is Steve stealing my friends now?” To his credit, it came out only half serious.

“They’re your friends, too,” Pepper said.

“Yeah.” Something in his tone must have alerted her, though, because her voice sharpened.

“You know, it’s not their fault that you refuse to spend time with them.”

“I spend time with them,” Tony protested. “We fight space monsters and steampunk wizards together.”

“Tony.” Pepper’s voice had that familiar “you’re-acting-like-an-idiot” tone.
“Hey, I’ve been to New York twice within a month in the past few weeks,” Tony protested. “That has to count for something.”

“Steve told me that after you broke your hand, you couldn’t wait to get out of there. He thinks he must have done something to offend you.”

“He didn’t- Jesus, he didn’t offend me,” Tony said. “He didn’t do anything. I just had unfinished stuff to get to. I left in a hurry when they called me and I didn’t want the house to blow up while I was away.” And that was the truth. Sort of.

Pepper sighed.

“You know what? I refuse to be the middleman in this. You’re both adults, solve it yourself. God knows I have enough to do even without cleaning up your messes.” There was a sound of voices speaking on the other side of the line. “I need to go,” Pepper said. “The invitation stands. If you decide to come to New York, everyone will be happy to see you. Thor is coming, too, by the way.”

“Right.”

“Goodbye, Tony.”

“Bye, Pep.”

After the call disconnected, Tony sat down in his favorite office chair. God, this was a mess. Still, his determination didn’t waver for a second. There was no way in hell he was going to New York for Christmas. Having dinner with Pepper and the Avengers would feel like a total farce. He refused to spend the evening smiling at Pepper’s new guy, who was kind and polite and probably rescued kittens in his free time. Steve got on with him wonderfully, which made Tony feel like a dick for hating him. Really, the guy wasn’t so bad – an actor turned human rights activist, he was everything Tony was not, reminding Tony with his mere existence of all the reasons he and Pepper had broken up.

Nope, there was no way he was going to spend an evening with this guy. And, even if Pepper wasn’t with anyone, there was still the whole problem with the broken hand. Even if he wore a fake cast the whole time, Natasha would see through his lie in less than a minute. Tony had no desire to explain how he had miraculously managed to heal a broken bone in less than three weeks.

Which meant that he need to put the party together ASAP, because otherwise his excuse would be discovered for the lie it was.

Yeah, this should be fun.

He stayed in the workshop for another five minutes, enjoying the temporary peace and quiet, before he made his way upstairs. Loki was sitting on the living room sofa, reading what looked like the Lord of the Rings. He looked up immediately when Tony entered, bookmarking the page.

“Are you finished with your mysterious phone call?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Looks like I have a solution to your little boredom problem.”

“Oh?” Loki raised an eyebrow. “This should be good.”

Tony gave him a grin. “We’re having a Christmas party.”

“…What is ‘Christmas’?”
I’ll be going on a short writing hiatus for this story soon, because I’m having my Master’s State Exams in less than three weeks and need enough time to study. You don’t have to worry about regular posts though, because I have 15 chapter fully finished and am planning to pick this right up once the exams are done. I’ll still make sure that everything gets posted on a regular schedule even when I’m not actively writing, so there won’t be any disruptions in the posts for you readers. Once I finish the story, I might speed up the posting a little, but for now I’m making sure I have enough backlog to give myself some breathing room.

Thank you all so much for your continuing support! All the feedback you give me is simply amazing and I cherish every comment and kudos I get.

The next chapter will be posted on next Friday, January 9.
The Christmas Party

Chapter Summary

In which Tony discovers that Loki in leather is bad for his self-control.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to my amazing beta InsanitysxCreation for all the support she's been giving me! Thank you!

Disclaimer: Opinions expressed by the characters in this story do not reflect the author's own views (in other words, Tony is a bit of a classist dick in this one.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next few days passed by in a flurry of plans. There were guest lists to put together, catering to order and decorators to hire. Tony might have handed over most of these responsibilities to his PA, but he still had the final say about all the final decisions. Working on Loki’s commission had also become a lot harder, because he now had to wear the cast around the house, in case someone stopped by. To add to that, he had apparently managed to forget about some important conference that he had signed up for a few months ago. He only found out about that when JARVIS reminded him the day before. Seriously, why was he paying a PA when they never told him anything important?

“Sir?” JARVIS’s voice tore Tony out of his concentration. “May I remind you that your flight to the Tokyo conference leaves in an hour?” Tony swore under his breath and shut off the welding torch.

“Which one is it?”

“The one about nanotechnology, sir.”

“Oh, right.” Tony remembered. “An hour?” He looked down at himself, noting the dirty t-shirt and hands smeared with oil. “I’ll need to make myself presentable, don’t I?”

“That would be highly recommended, sir.”

“Why do I need to go again?” he asked, already on his way out of the lab.

“You are scheduled to give one of the main lectures,” JARVIS informed him. “It would be recommended that you eat something before you leave, sir. You haven’t eaten anything since dinner yesterday.”

Tony ran a hand through his hair, trying to remember what it had been. He came up blank. “Have someone bring me a cheeseburger. I’ll eat it on the way.”

“Sir, it is not recommended-” JARVIS began
“I don’t care what is recommended. I said I wanted a cheeseburger.”

“Very well, sir,” JARVIS finally backed off, though he didn’t sound terribly happy about it.

“From what I have observed, most Midgardians require food more often than this,” Loki spoke up from where he was lounging on the couch, making Tony jump a foot in the air. He had almost forgotten about the demigod’s presence.

“I’m not most people,” Tony uttered, passing through the living room to go to the shower.

“No, you are indeed not,” Loki muttered thoughtfully, but Tony didn’t hear him, already halfway across the house by then.

The shower and a shave took him almost half an hour. When he finally emerged from the bathroom, with drying hair that was now blessedly oil-free, he felt like a new man. He chose a random suit from the walk-in closet, shrugging it on with the ease of practice. There were still a few minutes left when he walked back to the living room, knotting his tie as he went.

Luckily for him, Loki was still on the couch, so he didn’t have to waste any time looking for him. The demigod did a very satisfying double take when Tony entered, eyes trailing over the engineer’s sharply-shaved beard and well-fitting suit. Yes, Tony cleaned up pretty well and he knew it. The effect was usually even more pronounced when one was used to seeing him covered in oil and grease, as Loki lately did. He stopped a few feet from the couch.

“So hey,” he began, “looks like I’ll be gone for the next three days. The party crew should come here to clean and decorate the place tomorrow and after that the house will be full of people. I’ve also locked down the workshop. The way I see it, you’ve got two options: either you can spend a few days somewhere else and come back after the holidays, or you can come to the party. I have to tell you though, it’s gonna be one hell of a party. It would be a shame to miss it.”

“Really,” Loki drawled. “And what do these parties of yours entail?”


Tony picked up a tablet from a nearby table and put on his trademark sunglasses.

“JARVIS, give him Level One Access. If he tries anything, feel free to shoot him.”

“As you wish, sir.”

Heading to the door, he threw Loki a glance over his shoulder.

“Don’t burn down the house.”

To be honest, he still felt a little nervous about leaving Loki alone in his house with all his projects, but figured that JARVIS would keep an eye on him. Plus, if the god decided to stay for a bit, Tony would be able to find out what he was doing during the times when he wasn’t in Tony’s workshop.

Maybe it would even help him figure out why Loki needed the armor so badly in the first place.

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The flight was long and boring. God, Tony had almost forgotten how dull flying to Japan was. Ten hours on a plane with nothing to entertain him but his tablet and the sexy stewardesses. He spent a
few hours tinkering with the new Stark Industries designs and going over his lecture notes for the conference, but even that got dull after a while. He stared out of the window for a moment, trying to figure out what to do. Then he got an idea.

He walked back to his private cabin in the back of the plane and took out his phone.

“JARVIS? Can you call Loki for me?”

“Of course, sir.” A few seconds later he was greeted by a disgruntled voice.

“Stark, are you aware that I like to sleep sometimes?”

“No, I assumed you were an evil robot from a parallel dimension,” Tony said. “Did I wake you up?”

“No, but I was looking forward to resting. What is so important that you must disturb me in the middle of the night?”

“Is it so late?” Tony asked. “I had no idea. I was in the middle of some calculations and then got bored, so I figured I could call you. If it’s a bad time, I’ll hang up.”

There was a beat of silence before Loki answered.

“I suppose I can survive being awake for another hour or so.”

“Awesome.”

Now that he was actually on the line with Loki, Tony felt a bit at loss. It was one thing to trade banter with the god when they were in the workshop, arguing over best techniques for processing metal alloys, and another to talk to him when it wasn’t strictly necessary. Having Loki speaking straight in his ear right now felt strangely…intimate. To distract himself from that thought, he decided to get back to the reason why he had called in the first place.

“So, did you think about the party?”

“It sounds…less dull than other things I could do at the time.”

“Does that mean you’re going?”

“I’m considering it,” Loki drawled.

“So you’re going,” Tony translated.

“I might as well,” he said with false resignation. “However, there is one slight problem with your plan – someone might recognize me. I would hate to be discovered only because you got careless with your safety precautions.”

“Yeah, that could be a problem,” Tony admitted. “Can’t you just disguise yourself somehow?” With magic, perhaps? A little shapeshifting, maybe?

“I could, but it might draw even more attention than my normal state of dress. I would not exactly call my full battle regalia inconspicuous.”

It looked like Loki was going to pretend that the whole shapeshifter thing didn’t exist. Well, Tony thought, two could play that game.

“So, magical disguises are out,” Tony said casually. “We’ll have to go old-school, then. Any ideas?”
“A few, nothing very good.” Oh, the guy was lying through his teeth, but Tony kept a perfectly straight face. This was actually quite fun. Loki continued: “I do not suppose the response would be very favourable if I showed up at your door wearing a dress.”

“You might be surprised,” Tony said with a grin, trying to imagine Loki as a drag queen. He was convinced the demigod could totally pull that off. “But hey, I wouldn’t be too worried about being discovered. Everyone from SHIELD will be at the Avenger shindig in New York.” At least, that was what he hoped. “If you disguise yourself just a bit and keep a low profile, nobody will have a clue about who you are. The people who go to these things are usually young wannabe actors and musicians hoping to get noticed by someone rich and important.” Suddenly he got an inspiration. “Hey, that gives me an idea – your hair’s pretty long. Do you ever wear it not slicked back?”

There was a cautious pause on the other side of the line. “I have been known to do that occasionally. Why do you ask?”

“If you wear it loose, you can claim to be some obscure rock star from Europe,” Tony told him.

“What is a ‘rock star’?” Loki asked. Tony could vividly imagine the small frown on his face as he tried to puzzle out the unfamiliar term. “I assume it’s not a type of celestial object.”

“It’s a type of musician,” Tony explained. “You guys have bards on Asgard, right? Think of it as a really popular type of bard, who dresses in black leather and sings for thousands of people.”

“That sounds…potentially interesting,” Loki said cautiously. “Why a bard, though?”

Tony shrugged, even though Loki couldn’t see it.

“The most popular rock stars are super famous and make millions of dollars with their music. Music is really popular on Earth, so tons of people try to get famous that way. When you manage to achieve rock star status, you become something like a minor god. You have scores of fans who adore you, everyone wants to get a picture with you, that type of thing. However, because so many people try to become musicians, there’s tons of desperate wannabes who never make it to the top. There are so many of them that nobody can possibly know them all.”

Tony reached for a glass of brandy and took a sip before continuing.

“When you’re at the party, you can drop the name of any made-up band and the people here will gobble it up because they’re so desperate to pretend that they’re hip. Just invent a fake name, put on a pose and nobody will think twice about questioning it because hey, you’re at Tony Stark’s party. I don’t invite every random nobody I meet.”

“You seem very familiar with this particular scheme. Is this something you’ve done before?” Loki asked curiously. Tony had no idea how he had figured that out.

“Actually, yeah,” Tony admitted, grinning at the memory. “When I was in my twenties, before I grew the goatee and became so recognizable, I made a hobby out of crashing random celebrity parties and pretending to be some obscure artist. I would put on a wig and some weird clothes and spend the evening talking about modern art or funk music with some wide-eyed C-list actress. It was hilarious.”

“They never recognized you?”

“Oh they did, once or twice.” Tony’s grin grew wider. “But they usually chalked it up to me being an eccentric billionaire. That’s code word for a rich lunatic, by the way. And even when they caught me, nobody ever said a word. I guess nobody wanted to piss off the guy selling guns and guided
missiles.”

“So,” Loki said, sounding way more interested than before, “if I wanted to perform a charade like that here on Midgard, how should I go about it?”

“Well, first you need the right clothes,” Tony began. “You’ve already got the leather pants, so the only thing missing is a mesh shirt or a vest of some sort to go with it. JARVIS can help you look up how the guys from rock bands dress. Slap on some eyeliner, let your hair down and you’re good to go. The only thing you need is a fake name and a chosen position in some random European metal band nobody here ever heard about. I’m sure you can make up some bullshit about your career on your own. If you say anything weird and somebody catches on that, just claim you’re not familiar with American customs. With the accent you have, you can totally pull that off.”

He could just imagine it – Loki dressed up in black leathers, his jet black hair falling freely around his face. It wasn’t a bad picture. If nothing else, it was certainly doing some very interesting things to Tony’s libido.

“Sir?” JARVIS spoke up. “The plane will be landing shortly.”

“Right,” Tony said. “Look, I need to go. I’m sure you can put it together on your own. I won’t be back till the day of the party, so I guess I’ll see you then?”

“We’ll see,” Loki said.

The call ended abruptly, leaving Tony to stare at the screen of his phone.

“Did he just hang up on me?” Tony asked JARVIS.

“Yes, sir. Mr Loki ended the call.”

A second later Tony realized something else.

“Hey, did I just convince Loki to dress up for me?”

“It would seem so, sir,” JARVIS confirmed, sounding a little disturbed.

“What the hell am I doing?” Tony muttered, staring out of the darkened plane window.

What the hell had happened to his stay-the-hell-away plan? A part of his brain was still doing its “Danger, Will Robinson!” routine, but the rest was actually looking forward to the party. And now he had managed to convince Loki to dress up in leather and crash his party.

He was so screwed.

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The Japanese conference turned out to be better than he had expected. Apart from giving him ideas for a several new patents, it also provided him with some time away from Loki – something he discovered was desperately needed. The guy had a way of taking up space, worming himself into Tony’s life without Tony even noticing. Now, with an ocean between them, Tony finally had the opportunity to take a step back from their whole weird arrangement and look at it more objectively.

The whole thing was utter insanity – from the reason why Tony was working for him at all to the execution, it was all pure craziness. The guy practically lived in Tony’s house, for fuck’s sake. He had just moved in one day and started hanging around the workshop and eating Tony’s pizza and the
worst part was that Tony didn’t mind anywhere as much as he pretended to. Sure, it had been annoying at first to have his space invaded by the guy who had tried to kill him a few years back, but as weeks passed, he actually started to find the company tolerable.

…well, more than tolerable, if his latest dream was anything to go by. Still, attraction was one thing, survival another. As much as he wouldn’t mind a few tumbles in bed with a sexy space wizard, he wasn’t sure how the god would react if he tried his usual “thanks, babe, JARVIS will show you the door” routine on him. As much as he had calmed down since the New York attack, there was still something vaguely unstable about Loki and Tony had dealt with enough screaming women in the past to know that sticking his dick in crazy was never a good idea. What was worse, this particular brand of crazy came with actual god-like super powers. He would have to tread very carefully with this one.

Three days passed by in a haze of booze and scientific talk and before he knew it, Tony was on the plane back to the US. It was afternoon already when he arrived back at the Malibu mansion, which gave him just enough time to check if everything was ready for the party. With the time difference between New York and Malibu, the Avengers had been already celebrating for hours before he got even started.

Well, he thought as he stepped into the living room of the mansion, no time like the present. The house was already decorated with swirls of green and red, random branches of mistletoe hanging around the room. The general lack of snow spoiled the winter atmosphere a bit but hey, it was Malibu. Snow was about as common a sighting here as the Bigfoot.

“Welcome home, Mr Stark,” a busty brunette greeted him, offering him a whisky from the tray she was carrying. A few more hostesses milled about, wearing skimpy Santa outfits. It looked like his PA had booked the Ironettes for this gig. Maybe this party wouldn’t be so bad after all.

There was no sign of Loki anywhere in the house, which meant that the god had probably taken Tony’s advice and gotten hell out of dodge. The only question now was when he was coming back.

The first guests started arriving around eight. Tony had been right in his assessment – most of them were aspiring actors and models from L.A., enthusiastic young souls who hadn’t yet been chewed up by the show business industry. Most of them looked like the types who proudly wore their Gucci bags on the street, but in private probably lived on Ramen noodles and despair. After all - who else would come to some random guy’s party on fucking Christmas Eve when they could be celebrating at home with their families? Either they were desperate for fame and wanted to capitalize a bit on the prestige of attending Iron Man’s party, or they were too poor to afford the plane ticket to visit mom and dad back in Arkansas or Wisconsin or whatever sad shithole they had lived in before coming to L.A.

It didn’t take long before the first person spotted him.

“Oh my gosh!” squealed a petite blonde. “You’re Tony Stark! You’re Iron Man!”

Tony took a deep breath and put on his best party face. “Yep, that’s me. How do you like my party?”

Her exclamation drew the attention of several others and before he knew it, Tony was surrounded by people, all vying for the attention. So he entertained them. He had plenty of practice at that – he cracked jokes, told them things they expected to hear and inwardly hated it all with the passion of thousand burning suns. But what was the alternative? Go to New York and spend the evening drinking himself into oblivion under Steve’s disappointed gaze? No way.
Eventually he managed to escape to the bar, where he ordered a double whisky. If he had to be at this thing, he could at least spend it in a nicer mood. The DJ played a selection of latest pop songs mingled with Christmas classics and people danced, mingling together all around the room. One would never guess how many semi-famous single people could be found in the L.A. area at Christmas.

All in all, the party looked like a success.

A washed-up movie star ambled up to him at the bar, a Playboy model hanging on each arm. Tony valiantly tried to remember the guy’s name. Some sort of 80s action hero, perhaps? Luckily for him, the guy was high as a kite, rambling about his newest movie that nobody had seen, so all Tony needed to do was to nod in the right places and he was set. He was just listening to yet another tale about asshole producers and admiring a random woman’s cleavage at the same time when the front door opened and Tony’s brain promptly short-circuited.

Loki had certainly taken Tony’s advice to heart. He was dressed from head to toe in black, his own black pants and high Asgardian boots paired with a studded black leather vest that made him look like a reject from an 80s hair metal band. His face looked a little different than usual – probably the result of a magic glamour of some sort – the alteration subtle, but just different enough to help him avoid detection by both face recognition software and the one or two SHIELD agents who were no doubt lurking somewhere around the room (Tony wouldn’t put it past Fury to send spies to his Christmas party).

The most striking difference, however, was the hair. Instead of being slicked back into the villain hairdo Loki normally wore, it was hanging freely down to his shoulders, framing Loki’s face in a waterfall of dark curls. Who would have thought that Loki had wavy hair? Tony thought absently before he shook himself from his reverie. He couldn’t be caught staring at the guy. Someone might get suspicious.

“Who is that?” the actress on Tony’s right asked, eyeing Loki with interest in her eyes.

“Some musician,” Tony said with faked disinterest. “I think he’s from Europe.”

“Is he?” Yep, that was definitely interest. “I should probably go say hi.” She gave Tony a playful smile and set off, swaying her hips to the music as she walked. Tony watched her go, not blaming her in the slightest for her sudden change of interest.

The coked-up actor wandered away with his entourage in tow, only to be replaced by some overzealous director, who was trying to convince Tony to sell him the rights to his life story. Tony ordered another whisky and deliberately focused on arguing with the guy, who prattled on about inspiration and artistic vision. He could almost feel the moment when Loki finally noticed him, the god’s gaze pinning him in place like a butterfly under a glass. Tony pretended not to notice, chatting with the director about his ideas for his next movie.

It took another fifteen minutes before Loki managed to tear himself away from his newfound admirers and crossed the room to Tony. The engineer gave him a casual nod, going for the whole “nice to meet you, random stranger” act.

“Mr Stark?” Loki said politely, wearing an uncharacteristically friendly smile.

“Hi,” Tony replied “Have we met?”

“I do not believe so, but you may have heard of me,” Loki said. “I’m Leif Fríggasson. I play drums in the Ragnarok.”
“Oh right,” Tony pretended recognition. “That’s the metal band, right? Where are you from? Finland?”

“Norway,” Loki corrected with a mischievous grin, playing along. “It’s a beautiful country.”

“So I’ve heard, but I’m afraid I never had the opportunity to visit,” Tony said. “What brings you to California?”

“Work. I’m seeking some inspiration for our new songs.”

“Well, you should find plenty of that here,” Tony gave him a polite smile. Before he could say anything else, a tall, pretty blonde came up to him and latched onto his arm.

“Mr Stark, would you care for a dance?” She was eyeing him the way starving people look at a steak. It made his skin crawl just a bit but outwardly he grinned, his reputation not allowing him to turn her down.

“Of course,” he said with a winning grin. “It’s always a pleasure to dance with a beautiful woman.” He shot Loki an apologetic look and let the lady drag him to the dance floor.

Once the present women discovered that he was both willing to dance and still single, he didn’t have a second of downtime. They came to him one by one, all eager to share a dance with the famous Iron Man. Sometime during all the dancing, one of the ladies managed to maneuver him under a sprig of mistletoe and promptly used the opportunity to give him a long, drunken smooch. Several others took a cue from her and tried to kiss him as well. The only positive thing about the experience was the fact that most of them were fairly good looking, but still, moments like this made Tony briefly regret having built the armor in the first place.

The evening stretched on and everyone got progressively drunker and louder. Tony felt horribly sober in comparison, his last drink having evaporated hours ago. Still, if nothing else, at least the people looked like they were having a good time.

By the time he finally managed to escape from the dance-floor, it was already after midnight. He made a beeline to the bar and ordered another whisky, happy to have a moment of peace. As he kicked back the well-deserved alcohol, he suddenly realized that he was hungry. Luckily for him, the table with refreshments was situated in a nearby corner, so if he managed to cross the room unscathed, he might even discover something to eat.

Random people stopped him twice on the way, but he eventually managed to arrive at his chosen destination. Despite the late hour, the buffet table still had a fairly good selection of various canapés and other assorted finger food. He carefully balanced his plate on the stupid cast, loaded it full of chicken satay sticks and little brioches with foie gras and went to stand by the window. With his back to the party, he could watch the people in the darkened glass without them knowing he was watching them.

The people milled around behind his back, drinking and laughing, but Tony felt strangely removed from the whole affair. Was this what the rest of his life was going to look like? An endless parade of nameless people and pointless parties that he didn’t even enjoy anymore? He used to live for this stuff, for fuck’s sake! What had changed that had suddenly made him hate it all? Why did he want to throw them all out and go spend the evening with his bots instead? Had he always been like this and just hadn’t noticed, or was he just getting old?

He didn’t know what it was about Christmas that made him so annoyingly contemplative. Maybe it was the whole spirit of the thing, or the approaching end of the year, which only served to remind
him just how much could change in a year. Last year he had stood here with Pepper, enjoying a nice holiday with the woman he loved. Today he had invited a bunch of strangers to spend the evening with him, just to avoid seeing her again. Also, it looked like Rhody had decided to ditch him after all. That stung.

All right, he needed another drink. This introspective crap was getting seriously depressing. He gave his empty plate to the nearest passing waiter and walked back to the bar to order a glass of brandy. Before he could drink it, however, a silky voice murmured in his ear:

“Looking at you, one would almost believe that you are enjoying this gathering.”

Tony turned his head to see Loki leaning on the bar next to him, looking like the very picture of nonchalance.

“How wouldn’t I enjoy it?” Tony said lightly. “It’s my party. I’ll have you know that I throw the best parties around here. My guests certainly seem to be enjoying themselves.” His gaze slid over the merry drunks and several couples making out in the corners.

“Then why do you look like you want to set them all on fire?” Loki asked. Tony avoided his far-too-knowing gaze.

“It’s not that bad,” he muttered. “The alcohol certainly helps.”

“I might know something else that could help.” Loki gave him a grin. “Would you care for a dance?”

Tony shook his head. “I’m not drunk enough for this.”

“I don’t want you drunk,” Loki said, turning strangely serious. Tony suddenly found it hard to look away from those green eyes.

“All right,” he finally relented, feeling like he was taking a step towards something much bigger than a number on the dance floor. “Just one dance.”

He took Loki’s hand and led the god to an empty spot on the floor near the bar. Loki snaked an arm around his waist, taking Tony’s right hand in his, which forced Tony to put the left hand that was still in the cast on Loki’s shoulder, awkwardly trying to find purchase between all the metal studs.

“It’s a good thing everyone here’s so drunk,” Tony quipped as they started dancing. “If there were any reporters here, the internet would be full of news about my newly discovered gayness tomorrow.”

Loki gave the people around them a scornful look. “You Midgardians are so narrow minded in some regards. Nobody would find anything strange about our dance on Asgard.”

“Says the guy from a world that doesn’t even allow women to fight,” Tony shot back. Before Loki could retort, Tony continued: “And Lady Sif doesn’t count because she sounds like a badass.”

“How did you hear about her?”

“Thor spent a few days in New York when he came back. I managed to drag a few interesting tidbits out of him.”

“Such as?”

“The fact that your parents were apparently trying to persuade him to marry Sif, but he rebelled and
went for a mortal instead. Is that true?"

“From what I have observed, it seemed that way,” Loki said. “Mother certainly spoke a few times about trying to get Thor to finally marry. She was far too interested in seeing both of her sons settle down.”

“Wait a moment – both?” Tony asked incredulously. “You’re married?”

“Was married,” Loki corrected. “A long time ago, for political reasons. It didn’t last long.”

“How come they married you and not Thor?”

“Because the older son is always more valuable,” Loki explained, not without some bitterness. “Father needed to secure himself an alliance, but didn’t wish to sacrifice Thor to do it.”

“That sounds like a dick move to me,” Tony said, making Loki smile crookedly.

“Yes, Father’s methods have always been rather...questionable.”

“So how come your dad isn’t pushing Thor to get married now?”

“I was not personally present for it, but apparently he arrived back in Asgard after his reinstatement and professed his undying love for the Lady Jane.”

“Didn’t they only spend like three days together?” Tony asked. “I’ve read the SHIELD files – he was only on Earth for a few days before he managed to get back home.”

Loki chuckled. “Yes, my brother has always been rather impulsive in these matters.”

“And then he ditched her and didn’t come back for a year and when he finally did, it was only for the battle in New York.” Tony shook his head. “God, if I were her, I would have dumped him ages ago.”

“You do seem like the type,” Loki remarked.

“No but seriously, what is she doing with him? I’ve met her a few times. Apart from being quite the looker, she also has one of the most brilliant scientific minds in her field. No offense to your brother, but he isn’t exactly the sharpest tool in the box. She’s way out of his league.”

“Do not forget that my brother is a god. That puts him leagues above her,” Loki argued back, but there was a gleam in his eye which suggested that he was enjoying the back-and-forth as much as Tony was. Tony gave him an unimpressed look.

“He’s also the guy who thought popcorn must be a form of magic.” Tony grinned at the memory. “I mean - what do those two even talk about? Asgardian governance? The composition of his morning cereal? He may have charmed her with his talks about rainbow bridges and magic kingdom in the stars, but once that runs out, they will be horribly bored with each other. Trust me, I have dated my fair share of dumb models over the years. I know how this goes.”

“So what do you think will happen?”

Tony shrugged.

“As far as I know, he’s living with her in London. It might last a few months, or even years, but I think it’s pretty inevitable that they’ll break up eventually. Once the infatuation phase passes, she’ll discover that she hates that he never cleans up after himself and he’ll be annoyed that she doesn’t
admire his macho hammer waving as much as she used to.” He knew that because pretty much the same had happened to him and Pepper. Even though she had known what she was getting into when she started dating him, she still got fed up with him in the end.

“And what if that does not happen?” Loki cocked his head. “What if their love was fated after all?” There was a slight undertone of cynical mockery in his voice that told Tony he didn’t believe it, either. Tony replied without missing a beat:

“Well, there’s still the whole thing with the throne,” Tony said. “That may be on a hiatus for now, but he’s still going to be king one day. I doubt someone like her, who lives for science and thrives on discovering new stuff, will be content with sitting around on a throne all day and looking pretty. From what I’ve seen of her, she doesn’t seem like the type who would jump at the chance to be a queen.”

“What about you?” Loki persisted. “Even though it’s improbable, it is possible that The Allfather would allow it out of respect for her memory. What then?” He seemed to have a lot of fun playing devil’s advocate.

“What about you?” Loki gave him a curious look. “Would you accept such an offer?”

Tony’s eyebrows flew up. “From Thor? No offense, your brother is a good-looking guy, but he’s really not my type.”

“And if he were?” Loki’s gaze seemed to grow in intensity. “What then?”

“Still a no,” Tony didn’t hesitate for a second. “I already have my own formerly-evil empire to run. I don’t need another one.”

The look on Loki’s face could best be described as a combination of smug and pleased. He chose that moment to look up and his mischievous smile widened.

“Would you look at that,” he murmured. “You appear to be under a mistletoe, Mr Stark.”

“Am I?” Tony looked up as well. “I guess that’s what I get for not paying attention to my surroundings.”

“And why were you not paying attention?” Loki asked slyly, moving closer.

“Your choice of clothes is a bit distracting,” Tony told him. Which was true. Did he mention that Loki wasn’t wearing anything under the vest? It was just black leather on skin, miles of beautiful, pale skin and the final effect made him look like some glorious, half-mad rock deity.

“So they?” Loki grinned. “I am glad you approve of my attire.”

Tony had half-planned on banging some hot young model after the party was over, but now he could feel all his plans flying straight out of the window. Especially when the alternative looked so good. His restraint gone, Tony made an abrupt decision.
“I like the hair,” he said, eyeing the soft black waves. “It’s a good look.”

“Is it,” Loki murmured.

“Yup,” Tony said. “Mostly because it allows me to do this.” And he reached up with both hands, buried them in Loki’s hair and dragged him down for a long, hungry kiss.

There was a triumphant edge to Loki’s grin as the demigod leant forward to meet him halfway, but rather than being calculating, the look in his eyes was simply pleased. Then their lips finally met and Tony stopped caring about evil plots and hidden motives because Loki was kissing him, devouring his mouth like he had been starving for years and Tony was a feast at a five-star restaurant.

Tony had half-expected that he would have to coax him into it, seduce him into opening up, but instead of being surprised by Tony’s sudden change of mind, or coy, like some people would be, Loki dove right in, taking the offered chance to explore Tony’s mouth to the fullest.

When they pulled apart a few minutes later, Loki’s eyes were burning.

“I take it that you have made your decision at last,” he said, sounding a little breathless.

“This is a horrible, horrible idea,” Tony said, eyeing Loki’s lips. “Probably the worst I’ve ever had.”

“Did that ever stop you from getting what you want?” Loki asked with a quirk of his eyebrow. Tony gave him a grin.

“No. For me that’s more of an encouragement than a deterrent. I just wanted to have this on record when it all blows up in my face.”

“Then you’d better make the most of it.” Loki’s voice dropped an octave, putting Tony in serious danger of embarrassing himself in public. To shut Loki up, he kissed him again because holy shit, the guy could kiss.

Tony had kissed hundreds of people in his lifetime, some of whom had been incredibly good, but they all still paled a little before this. Loki could set his blood in fire with just a few flicks of his tongue. A little pressure here, a scrape of teeth there, and Tony was hard as a rock, right in the middle of his living room, which was still frustratingly filled with people. For a brief second, Tony had a vision of tossing them all out of the window into the ocean below, airplane-disaster-movie-style.

The look Loki gave him when they surfaced for air some time later was far too amused.

“You look…uncomfortable,” he said with a wolfish grin. “Perhaps you would feel better if I helped you remove all those clothes.” He ended his sentence with another toe-curling kiss and a subtle movement of his thigh that put just the right amount pressure where Tony needed it most. Tony’s mind promptly short-circuited, leaving him scrambling to remember what he had wanted to say. It took him a few seconds to get his brain back online.

“All right, we need to get out of here before I get slapped with a court order for public indecency. There’s like a hundred things I want to do to you and none of them are fit for the public eye.” He made a strategic pause. “Unless that’s what you’re into.” He gave Loki a look.

The god looked torn between being amused and turned on.

“We can explore that particular option some other time. For now I do not think your guests will miss you if you disappear.”
He took Tony’s hand and they began their strategic retreat to the master bedroom on the other side of the house. They passed a few stumbling drunks in the corridor and an amorous pair in one of the bathrooms, who had apparently forgotten to close the door in their hurry. Tony ignored all that, pushing Loki into his bedroom as soon as the door came in sight.

The door locked, leaving them in darkness.

“Alone at last.”

*To be continued…*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Loki’s look for the party was largely influenced by the jail scene in Thor 2. Ever since I saw him sitting in that cell with all that long hair, my only thought was “I need that. I must write that, now.” Blame my love for metal bands and guys with long hair for that. (Also, the movie Only Lovers Left Alive might be to blame just a bit. Because Hiddles.)

As for Loki’s fake identity – it’s not meant to be anyone in particular. There is a real Norwegian band called Ragnarok, but Loki is in no way, shape or form affiliated with them. He just chose the name because he found it amusing in an ironic sort of way.

These two may be together now (well, sort of), but the fun is only starting. (Yes, that’s what the next chapter is about *wink wink*). What sort of shenanigans will they get into when they join forces? Read on and find out :)  

The next chapter will be posted on next Friday, January 16.
A Different Kind of Magic

Chapter Summary

“Well, that didn’t take long,” Tony quipped when Loki finally recovered enough to open his eyes. Yeah, he was sometimes a dick even in bed. There was a reason why so few people slept with him more than once.

Chapter Notes

The first part of this chapter contains a sex scene. If that’s not your thing, scroll down to the first set of stars.

Also many thanks to my amazing beta InsanitysxCreation for all the feedback she gave me on this chapter! She’s the best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“All alone at last,” Loki murmured.

It was the only warning Tony got before he was pressed against the door and kissed again. Once he got over the initial surprise, he pulled the demigod closer and gave as good as he got. He wasn’t used to sleeping with people who took the initiative. Sure, some of the women he’d slept with had been bold, but he was almost always the one who pushed things further.

Not so much here.

Loki devoured him with a single minded intensity that made it a little hard to breathe. He was like a miniature supernova condensed into a pair of lips and hands and Tony couldn’t get enough. He tore at the leather vest, sliding it down Loki’s shoulders to get to the skin beneath.

So much skin. It had teased him all evening – the promise of flesh barely covered by a piece of black fabric, offering tantalizing glimpses of the lean muscles underneath. In all the weeks Loki had spent in his house, that skin had always been carefully covered by clothes – until now. It was pale and smooth and cool to the touch and Tony needed to get his mouth on it ASAP.

The demigod made a choked gasp when Tony sucked on one of his nipples, his hands tightening on Tony’s shoulders. Oh yes, Tony thought with satisfaction, there was no way in hell he was going to let Loki have all the fun. He had barely managed to pay any attention to the other nipple before he was dragged into another kiss.

Quick, agile hands divested Tony of his jacket and Loki made an impatient noise when he encountered buttons on the shirt. Instead of trying to painstakingly unbutton them one by one, Loki just tugged at the fabric with both hands, ripping the shirt in half. It shouldn’t have been so hot because hey, this was Armani Tony was wearing, but it still made his blood run a little faster.

As soon as the shirt was gone, Loki slid his hands over the muscles on his back and to the front,
reaching for the hem of Tony’s undershirt. Tony stopped him before he could pull it off.

“No, leave it,” he told him in a low voice. He had a major trust issue about letting people see his arc reactor. Even when he fucked his one night stands, he always took the care to keep a shirt over it. The only one who had ever seen it had been Pepper but well… she was Pepper.

Not wanting to think about her right now, Tony pulled Loki into another kiss, reaching for the fastenings on his pants. Loki only hesitated for a second before he let go of Tony’s undershirt and applied himself to undressing the rest of Tony instead. The weird hooks on Loki’s pants finally gave way and Tony tugged them down, desperate to get the man naked as soon as possible.

“Lights to ten percent,” he told JARVIS. The room lightened a little, just enough to let him see Loki’s face and the contours of his body. God, that body. It was going to drive him insane.

The pants finally gave way, slithering down Loki’s legs to pool at his feet.

Huh. Apparently Asgardians didn’t believe in underwear. Or maybe Loki had just planned ahead. He didn’t know which thought turned him on more.

Loki gave him a knowing smirk and wrapped his arms around Tony’s waist, pulling him to the bed. When they hit the edge of the mattress, Tony gave him a little push and had to grin when Loki indulged him, falling back on the bed. He sprawled comfortably against the pillows, utterly comfortable with his nudity, and watched Tony approach with hungry, hooded eyes. Tony tore off his fake cast, eager to be rid of it, then promptly shucked his pants and boxers and crawled after him. He kneeled on the bed by Loki’s feet, taking a moment to enjoy the view.

God, the Asgardian looked good enough to eat. He was all long, lean muscle and pale skin and Tony couldn’t decide where to touch him first. Loki’s green eyes seemed to burn into Tony’s, promising a thousand filthy things.

“For a man of your reputation, you are surprisingly hard to seduce,” Loki muttered in that low voice of his.

Tony put his hands on Loki’s ankles and slowly slid them up his calves, over his knees and thighs, pushing them apart as he moved between them. He kept his hands on Loki’s thighs, massaging them lightly as he gave the demigod a challenging look.

“Do I look like I’m playing hard to get now?”

Loki smirked. “No, you just look hard.” He gave Tony’s erection an appreciative look. “That cannot be comfortable. Here, let me help you.” He sat up, reached for Tony’s cock and gave it a few experimental strokes.

“Better?” he asked cheekily, eyes dancing with mirth.

“Did anyone ever tell you you’re a horrible tease?” Tony said, trying to remember how to put together sentences.

Loki’s answer was to lean in and give him a slow, filthy kiss full of tongue and unspoken promises.

“It’s only teasing if I didn’t intend to carry this out.” He grazed his teeth over Tony’s jaw, then bent to nip at his neck, puffing a gust of breath over his ear as he continued stroking his erection. “However, you can rest assured that I have every intention of having you tonight.”

“Really?” Tony pulled back to give him a skeptical look. “And what if I want to fuck you? What
then?"

Loki’s smile widened.

“Then the night is long. I’m sure there will be time enough for both.”

“We’ll see,” Tony shot back, putting his hand on Loki’s chest to push him back into the pillows. Loki lay down, watching Tony with challenge in his eyes.

“I hope your reputation is well deserved. I would be horribly disappointed to find that all the effort I made to seduce you was not worth my time.”

Tony knew Loki was only saying it to provoke him, so he did the only logical thing to shut him up – he kissed him again. When he pulled back some time later, the demigod looked a lot less coherent. Serves him right, Tony thought with satisfaction. He tore himself away from Loki’s lips and went to explore the rest of him.

He trailed kisses over the demigod’s chest, alternating licking and sucking with the occasional scrape of teeth that made Loki’s breath catch. He took his sweet time heading downwards, enjoying the exploration.

The erection waited for him, straining proudly against Loki’s stomach. Tony gave it an assessing look.

“Hm, no performance issues here, I see,” he said, enjoying the glare that Loki shot him.

“Of course not,” Loki scoffed, but there was a hint of a grin on his lips.

“Well, I wasn’t sure,” Tony continued. “After the whole deal with the scepter… It could have been a symbol of other problems.” Even as he spoke, he took the demigod’s cock in hand, giving it a few experimental strokes. “I should probably make sure everything’s in working order.”

“And you accuse me of being a tease,” Loki said before giving a moan when Tony ran a thumb over the head. “Damn you, Stark, would you get on with it?”

Tony shot him a grin.

“Demanding, aren’t we?” He bent down and gave an experimental lick. “Let’s see if I still remember how to do this.”

It turned out that he did. He had last given a blowjob some time in his twenties, but found that he could still remember how to do it pretty well. Maybe it was a bit like riding a bike – once you learn how to give good head, you never forget.

And it was a pretty good blowjob, judging by Loki’s reactions. It took only a few minutes before Loki started writhing. Since he showed no inclination of stopping Tony, the man continued, using all the tricks in his book to drive the demigod crazy. He only pulled off at the last moment and finished him off with his hand. He had never been big on swallowing and besides, Loki was a being from an alien world. What if Tony had an allergic reaction to his come? He would rather not spend the rest of the night in hospital, when the offer of mind-blowing sex with the god of chaos was on the table.

Loki came a minute later, his whole body tensing in pleasurable agony. He fell back into the cushions, panting heavily. With his swollen lips and hair in disarray, he looked nothing like the crazy conqueror who had tried to kill Tony a few years ago. Instead he just looked like a man who’d just had a very satisfying orgasm.
“Well, that didn’t take long,” Tony quipped when Loki finally recovered enough to open his eyes. Yeah, he was sometimes a dick even in bed. There was a reason why so few people slept with him more than once.

Loki gave him a weak glare.

“You try my patience, mortal.” He reclined his head back into the pillow, staring at the ceiling as his breathing slowed down. “It has been some decades since I had anyone in my bed,” he said after a while.

Tony gave a low whistle. “Decades? Seriously?” The idea that someone who looked like Loki hadn’t gotten laid in half a century was…inconceivable.

“When you live as long as I do, you get bored easily. It gets increasingly more difficult to find anything interesting. Carnal pleasures become…an occasional indulgence, rather than the norm.”

“No wonder you were so eager to get in my pants.” Tony smirked. “You must have an epic case of blue balls.”

“I do not understand that expression.” Loki frowned.

“I’ll explain it later,” Tony said. “Right now, I’m feeling rather…frustrated here.” His cock was still hard, hanging full and heavy between his legs. He hadn’t paid it much attention while he was blowing Loki, but now it was starting to demand his attention in a most unpleasant way.

Loki pulled him closer with one hand, propping himself on his elbow.

“I am sure I can think of something to make you feel better,” he told Tony with a grin and oh, god, that bedroom voice was doing nothing to improve Tony’s condition.

“You just came,” Tony pointed out, but lay down willingly, scooting closer until they were lying side by side with just a few inches between them.

“Have I mentioned that Asgardian stamina is vastly superior?” Loki said smugly, running a hand over the muscles of Tony’s abdomen.

“Is it?” Tony asked, interested. “I guess that answers my question of why Jane hasn’t broken up with Thor yet.”

The next second found him flat on his back with Loki looming over him.

“Do not mention my brother’s name while we are in bed together,” he growled, giving Tony’s neck a light, warning bite. The demigod moved a bit, pinning Tony to the bed with his weight. Tony had to admit that this strength thing was kind of…hot.

“Or you will do what?” Tony asked challengingly, moving his leg in a teasing motion against Loki’s rapidly growing erection. He tried not to feel envious about that because holy crap, that was one hell of a refractory period.

“I will make sure there’s not a single coherent thought in your mind,” Loki whispered in his ear. His hand slid down to take hold of Tony’s cock. “I will drive you insane with pleasure.”

“You’ll have to try a bit harder than that,” Tony told him, just to rile him up a little more. “I’m not feeling very satisfied here.”
He was rewarded with a hard, punishing kiss that did a very good job of scrambling his mind for a bit. When he gathered his thoughts again, Loki was lying between his thighs, looking at Tony with fire in his eyes.

“Do not fret,” he said, “I will make sure you are fully satisfied.” He gave Tony’s cock a long, languid lick that had had him seeing stars.

“Oh, god, I’ve unleashed a monster.”

Loki gave him a predatory grin.

“You have no idea.”

***

Tony woke up at half past six the next morning, feeling strangely disoriented. The sky was still dark outside, so at first he had no idea why he had woken up so suddenly. Then he felt a gust of breath against the back of his neck and memories of the night before came rushing back in a flood.

Right. Loki.

He rolled over to look at the god, who was sleeping peacefully on his stomach, head half buried in the pillow. Shit. There was no way Tony could go back to sleep with Loki in his bed. It was bad enough that he had fallen asleep in the first place, but Loki had done his best to tire him out, keeping him awake for most of the night. The alarm clock told him he had only been asleep for a little over three hours, but he felt fully awake now. His brain was back online, running at full capacity, so there was no choice but to get dressed and go back down to see if everyone had left yet.

Tony carefully slithered from underneath the blankets and bent over to pick up his discarded boxers, putting them on as quietly as he could. The shirt he had worn to the party was in tatters, so he left it lying when it had fallen and snatched one of his band shirts from a nearby chair instead. A minute later he was fully dressed in what turned out to be a Metallica T-shirt and a pair of worn black jeans, ready to face the day. Loki was still dead to the world, so Tony let him sleep and slipped out of the room to do a little recon.

To his immense relief, the house appeared to be empty. He did a sweep of all the rooms, but didn’t find a single loitering partygoer. It looked like the bouncers had done their job and really made sure that everyone left like they were supposed to. The living room was still a disaster, with empty bottles and dirty plates lying everywhere, but Tony was confident that the cleaning crew would roll in soon and tidy it up. If he hadn’t count the Asgardian sleeping in his bed on the other side of the house, Tony was completely alone. Thank god for small mercies.

The catering table still had a few sorry remains of yesterday’s feast when Tony made his way to it, so the engineer snatched a few canapés from a nearby plate, chewing them as he walked down to his workshop. The bots perked up as always when he walked in, chirping their welcomes and Tony leaned on his desk, taking a moment to finish his breakfast and sort out his mind a bit.

Most of his thoughts were still occupied by memories of the night before. No matter how much he tried to just push them back and focus on something more productive, his mind kept replaying random flashes for him like the world’s most annoying pop up ad for porn. Usually he tended to be at least half-drunk during his one night stands, so he rarely remembered more than a few flashes of skin and the occasional hair color the day after, but this time he had been almost entirely sober and, hoo boy, did it show. Since the memories weren’t covered by a haze of alcohol, they were fresh and crisp and filthy enough to make even a seasoned porn star blush. Captain America would probably
suffer a stroke if he saw even a fraction of it.

The fleeting thought of Steve brought Tony back to reality. Right, Avengers. If they ever found out about Tony’s little tryst, he would be so f*cked. Still, Tony couldn’t bring himself to regret his decision. The sex with Loki had been great – some of the best he’d ever had, even. It may not have been a wise decision, but hey, since when was Tony known for those?

Besides – it wasn’t like it had meant anything, Tony told himself. Loki would be gone once the armor was finished. If Tony decided to have a little fun in the meantime, it was nobody’s business.

With his mind sorted out, Tony could finally focus on his work and it didn’t take long before he was fully immersed in his designs and prototypes. The Nanotechnology conference in Japan had given him plenty of new ideas, and there was one in particular he wanted to try out because it could give him the solution for the anti-magic part of Loki’s armor. If he could only make the right type of particle accelerator for mixing different elements…

He had no idea how much time had passed, but when he next surfaced from his special brand of creative trance, Loki was standing in the door of his workshop, watching him. He was dressed once more in his usual Asgardian clothes but the hair was still loose, falling down onto his shoulders in a wild tangle of curls. Tony only gave him a brief glance before he focused back on welding the delicate wires of the machine in front of him.

“Hi.”

“You didn’t come back to the bed,” was the first thing Loki said.

Oh, awkward mornings after. How he loved them.

“Um, no,” Tony said. “I got an idea for a new concept and wanted to try it out.” Which was mostly the truth. There was no need to mention that he had left because the thought of sleeping next to Loki creeped him out. Some things were better left unsaid.

Loki seemed to sense some of it, though, because he cocked his head a little.

“Why do I have a feeling that you are not telling me the whole truth?” He crossed the workshop slowly, stopping only a few feet from Tony, who was still doing his best to appear casual.

“Even if there was more to it, which I’m not saying there is,” Tony said, “what makes you think I’m going to tell you? As far as I’m concerned, my sleeping habits are none of your business.”

“They become my business when you share your bed with me,” Loki said. “It is not heartening to find that your bedmate couldn’t wait to run away from you at the first opportunity.” He gave Tony an assessing look. “You could not have slept more than a few hours.”

Tony avoided his eyes. “I’ve slept enough,” he said curtly. “I’ve never been able to sleep much, anyway. Insomnia is a bitch.” Inwardly he pleaded for Loki to drop the subject. The demigod, however, was relentless.

“Did you leave because you regret what happened?”

Tony ran a hand over his face, trying to come up with an answer. He hated these talks.

“No,” he said, finally meeting Loki’s eyes. “I don’t regret it. The sex was great. I just have a thing about sleeping while other people are in the room. Call it a trust issue, if you will. It’s nothing personal, alright?”
He hadn’t slept through the night next to anyone since Afghanistan. Sure, Pepper had been an exception - but then, she was always the exception to everything. After his experience with Obadiah, there was no way he would ever leave anyone alone with his arc reactor when he wasn’t awake.

“Stark,” Loki gave him a strange look, “did you forget that I have been staying in your house for several weeks now? If I wanted to harm you in any way, the opportunities were countless.”

And all right, he had a point, even if it wasn’t reassuring in the slightest. Tony had totally forgotten about that. Maybe it was because since his arrival Loki had somehow managed to become part of the general scenery in the Malibu house. For at least two weeks now, Tony had been going to sleep without giving his presence a second thought. In fact, due to his irregular sleeping schedule, he had slept in the house countless times when Loki had been awake and yet the demigod had never tried to tamper with his arc reactor. It was one of those things you don’t even realize you were doing until someone points it out to you.

Tony’s expression must have been interesting, because it made Loki smile faintly.

“You did not even think about that, did you? The people around you are just an annoying background noise to you, akin to flies. You only start to notice them if they get too close.” He stepped closer, crowding Tony against the workbench. “Tell me, Stark, is this close enough for you?”

“I didn’t say it was rational,” Tony shot back, but he made no move to push Loki away. The demigod propped his hands on the table on either side of Tony’s hips, bracketing him with his body.

“If you have trouble sleeping, I am sure I could find something that could tire you out.” He gave Tony a smirk, his voice turning playful.

Tony found himself seriously tempted for a moment, before he found the resolve to gently push Loki back.

“Maybe later,” he said. “I’m in the middle of a new idea right now and I want to finish it first. It’s for your armor, by the way, so don’t you dare say that I’m not giving it enough attention.” He gave Loki a pointed look. “And as for you, I distinctly remember giving you more than enough attention last night.” His mind helpfully supplied him with a memory of himself begging sometime around round three. “By your own admission, you have managed to survive decades without sex. I’m sure a few hours won’t kill you.”

He had never thought he would turn down an offer of free sex with an attractive guy, but he really needed some downtime after the night he’d had. Loki was… impressive in more ways than one. It would be a few hours before Tony would be able to sit down again without squirming.

Loki could probably guess where Tony’s mind had gone, because his smirk widened, turning smug. He let Tony go, however, stepping back.

“Very well. I assume your fragile mortal form needs some time to recuperate after all the excitement. I will leave you alone then to work on your inventions. If you ever feel the need to…sleep,” he rolled the innuendo on his tongue with relish, “you know where to find me.”

“Yeah,” Tony gave him a smile, “I do.”

Loki turned to leave, looking very pleased with himself. Tony only hesitated for a second before he made a decision.

“Wait!” he called after him. He hated the talk that was coming, he really did, because it was
awkward as hell and no matter how many times he did it, it never got any less awkward, but he felt like he should make one thing clear before Loki got any ideas.

Loki turned with an expectant expression on his face.

“‘Yes?’

“You know this is just sex, right?’ Tony asked carefully. ‘No strings attached?’

“I am aware,” Loki told him. “You need not worry about my delicate sensibilities. I am not some blushing maiden you have to flatter and coax with flowers and gentle words. I do not expect anything from you that you are not willing to give.”

“Good,” Tony said, relieved. “Glad we cleared that up, then.”

“If that is all, I think I will go upstairs and sample some more of those little delicacies. The ones with the pink fish were especially delicious.” Loki turned around and walked to the glass wall. Before he could walk out, however, he turned his head and pinned Tony with a gaze.

“A fair warning,” he drawled, “I expect to be thoroughly entertained tonight. I would be very disappointed if you felt too feeble to satisfy me.”

“Don’t worry,” Tony shot him a lewd grin of his own. “I never fail to rise up to a challenge.”

“I sincerely hope so.” Loki walked out, leaving Tony alone with his experiments.

It was a while before Tony could concentrate on his work again.

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“All right,” Tony said a few days later. “I’ve made a few experiments and managed to come up with a way to incorporate the anti-magic element into the armor alloy. The only thing remaining is for you to test it.”

He gestured to the two feet tall rectangular piece of metal that was standing carefully propped near one of the concrete walls. Loki shot the metal plate a curious glance.

“You made a metal compound resistant to magic?”

“Well, we don’t know yet if it’s resistant to magic,” Tony corrected. “It needs to be tested first. Can you help out with that? The Doombot hand is useless for this.”

Loki inclined his head. “Very well. What do you want me to do?”

“Can you shoot flames at it? It doesn’t have to be anything too fancy – just enough to see if the magic can touch it or not.”

Loki stepped closer to the metal plate, aiming his right hand carefully. A few seconds later he sent out a small fireball towards it. The fire travelled through the air rapidly, but before it could touch the metal, it simply stopped mid-air, dispersing into nothingness. Tony fought hard to contain his excitement.

“Well, that appears to the working,” he said in a carefully level tone. It was too early for celebrations. There were still more tests to perform. “Let’s do the next test.” He walked over to the wall and picked up the metal, which was completely cold. Tony raised it in front of his chest like a shield.

“Alright, now something less destructive, if you can. Can you conjure up water, perhaps?” Loki
gave him a nod. “Awesome. Aim a stream of water at me. I need to see how big the radius of this thing is.”

Loki looked a little doubtful but complied nonetheless, raising his hand again. The stream of water from his palm shot towards Tony, but before it could touch the metal, it simply stopped and disappeared again. It was fascinating to watch from up close. Tony admired the neat trick for a moment before remembering that he was supposed to be testing the range.

“Can you aim the water higher? Like, at my head?” When Loki hesitated, Tony gave him a challenging look. “Come on. I bet you’ve been itching to slap me with a spell for years.”

Loki’s only answer was an amused smirk. He lifted his hand a little higher…and Tony was drenched in an instant. The demigod grinned when Tony let out a stream of curses and doused him for a bit longer before he finally took mercy on the engineer, who was now dripping wet. Tony dropped the metal plate, giving Loki a weak glare that was spoiled by the fact that he was grinning too.

“Well, that was interesting,” he said as he walked to the little bathroom adjacent to his workshop to get a clean towel. He scrubbed at his hair as he viewed the calculations on the screen, trying to find where he had made a mistake. His clothes were wet, too, but he could deal with that later. “So, we know that the metal repels magic, but only in the immediate vicinity. If I made your armor from this, you would have to be covered from head to toe in the metal, otherwise anyone with a good enough aim could find a soft spot.” He shot Loki a look. “I doubt you want to look like a walking metal can.”

“No, I do not,” Loki said, leaning on a workbench nearby. “I am far too good looking for that.”

That made Tony snort. “Yeah, god forbid someone doesn’t get a chance to appreciate your prettiness in the middle of a fight. You know, having your face covered isn’t that bad. It allows you to laugh at people without them having any idea. Very handy for meetings with Fury.”

“I have no doubt about that,” Loki said. His eyes swept over Tony’s drenched form. “Your clothes are still wet.” A playful tone entered his voice as he slowly stalked closer. Tony knew that tone all too well by now and it never failed to make his pulse pick up just a little. “You should probably take them off before you get cold.” He stepped behind Tony, sliding his hands below his shirt as he gave his ear a playful nip. “It would be horribly inconvenient if you got too ill to work on my commission.”

Tony opened his mouth to suggest that they take a shower together for the sake of expediency, but then remembered that a shower would require him to get completely naked. He still hadn’t showed Loki his arc reactor and he didn’t plan on doing that anytime soon. There were few positions more vulnerable than being naked in a small glass container with a super-powered alien who may or may not have ulterior motives. He froze a bit, which made Loki pause behind him. Sensing his discomfort, Loki pulled his hands back, his mouth setting into a displeased frown.

“You still do not trust me,” he said.

Tony gave a helpless half-shrug. “No, I don’t. Sorry.” God, this was awkward. “You know what? I’ll just…” he made a vague gesture to the house above them, “go and get some dry clothes, ok? I’ll be back in a few minutes and we can continue discussing the design.”

He made a beeline to the stairs, walking just casually enough to make it look like he wasn’t fleeing the scene.

Which he was. He totally was.
This was why he didn’t do the whole “relationship” shtick. Relationships required trust and reciprocity and a ton of other things that Tony simply wasn’t capable of anymore. He wished that Loki would remember about their “no strings attached” deal and let this little incident slide. The sex they had was great, really (in fact, Tony hadn’t had this much sex since his twenties), but he fervently hoped that they wouldn’t cross the invisible line from fuckbuddies into something…more. If they ever did, the ensuing clusterfuck would be of cosmic proportions. Literally.

Tony spent a good fifteen minutes upstairs not hiding, which consisted mostly of changing his clothes and drinking a glass of whisky to calm down his nerves before he finally ventured downstairs again. He found Loki still present in the workshop, examining the magic-proof metal plate closely. Tony strolled back in in what he hoped was a casual manner.

“So,” he said into the silence, “that particular combination of metals may not be the ideal, but it’s still a step in the right direction. It does seem to repel magic pretty well.” He ended up standing on the opposite side of the workbench from Loki and if he happened to pull a few screens into the air between them, well, it was just for the sake of efficiency.

“How did you accomplish this?” Loki asked in a carefully neutral tone, lifting the metal into the air. Tony swallowed down a sigh of relief. Good, they were back on track, no awkwardness. Thank fuck.

Tony tapped his arc reactor.

“I took the element I use to power my suits and mixed it into the steel alloy I had created previously. It took a bit of experimenting, but I managed to do it eventually.”

“What is that metal?” Loki eyed the arc reactor curiously. “The energy it gives out is surprisingly similar to that of the Tesseract, but I have never seen it before. How did you come by it?” He seemed genuinely curious.

“I made it,” Tony said, not without a hint of pride. “It’s a new element that I invented - or, more precisely, my dad was the one who invented it, but he never managed to actually manufacture it. I was the first to synthesize it and right now, I’m the only one in the world who has it.”

Loki looked impressed despite himself. “That is…quite remarkable. I was not aware that this metal was so rare.”

Tony shrugged. “It’s not, really. Once you know how to make it, you can have as much of it as you want.” Which he did. He had a box full of that stuff here in the workshop and another one in one of his secure warehouses. It was enough to power his suits for a thousand lifetimes, so it was hardly a hardship to sacrifice a few of the small triangles for the alloy experiment. After all - if he ever ran out of them, he could always make more. “But if you mean rare as in unique than, yeah, it’s pretty rare.”

He frowned at the screens, studying the readings.

“We will have to find a way to increase the coverage. It would be ideal if the armor produced some sort of a field around it, so you wouldn’t have to be covered by it from head to toe.” His gaze fell in the circular piece of metal lying on the bench. “Oh, right, there is one more experiment I need to run.” Tony picked it up and crossed around the table to stand next to the demigod. “Put this on your forearm and tell me what it does.”

Loki gave him a dubious look but took the metal strip, which looked like a thick bracelet. He cuffed it on his hand and promptly his expression turned strange.
“This is…unpleasantly familiar.”

“Try to conjure up a flame or something in the hand,” Tony told him. “You can take it off right after.”

Loki turned his hand palm up, concentrating, but nothing happened.

“It cut off your magic?” Tony asked in fascination, stepping closer to study it. “What does it feel like?”

Loki grimaced. “Like the handcuffs they put on me in Asgard when I stood trial before the Allfather. My magic is still there, right under my skin, but I cannot use it.” He looked a little creeped out by it. Tony decided to take mercy on him.

“Alright, take it off. Magic-suppressing handcuffs are cool and all, but that wasn’t what I was going for with this. You should still be able to use your magic, even when you’re wearing the armor, otherwise it defeats the entire purpose of this.” He took the cuff from Loki, who was now rubbing at his wrist, still looking uncomfortable. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Loki said after a small pause. “It just brought back some…unpleasant memories.”

“Sorry about that,” Tony said. He turned his back on Loki, giving him a moment to recover. In his mind the wheels were turning furiously, trying to compartmentalize all the possibilities this discovery had just brought him. If nothing else, at least he now had the recipe for anti-magic handcuffs. That was…strangely reassuring, actually. His mood a little improved, he called up a few more screens, trying to find the solution to this new problem.

“So, we can’t use this alloy, because it blocks your magic,” he said, thinking out loud for Loki’s benefit. “It blocks magic coming from outside, but has the unfortunate side effect of blocking your own magic as well. Therefore I have to either come up with something else, or find a way to somehow isolate it, so it doesn’t affect your magic.” He rubbed a hand over his beard, thinking.

Loki came closer, giving Tony a look. “The ideal state would be if the armor augmented my own magic, as well as blocked anything coming from the outside.

Tony’s mind boggled at the implication.

“But that would be a paradox,” he turned to face Loki fully, wearing an incredulous expression. “Something like that should be impossible to make, if my calculations are right. And they are always right.” His eyes narrowed as an idea occurred to him. “Did you make this up just to fuck with me? You did, didn’t you?” He crossed his arms. “You gave me a commission for something impossible, so you can hang around and laugh at me as my feeble Midgardian mind tries to make you something that shouldn’t exist.”

“No,” Loki shook his head with an amused smirk. “I did not come here for the sake of amusement. I fully expect you to create what I asked of you.” When Tony continued looking unconvinced, Loki’s expression lost some of its smugness, turning more serious. “I am aware of the challenge that creating something like this presents. As far as I know, nobody has ever been able to make anything like this.”

“What makes you so sure that I can do it?” Tony asked.

“Because you create, in the purest sense of the word.” Loki gestured towards the bots, which were milling about in the background. “You give life to your creations. You take metal and wires and give them something akin to a soul. Some would say that is impossible, and yet you have managed it.” He
gave Tony a look of so much genuine wonder that Tony found it a little hard to breathe for a moment. “You are but a mortal man and yet you have been able to create inventions that could rival those of the gods.”

For once in his life, Tony found himself speechless. Loki smiled a little at his expression.

“I do not give this praise lightly,” he said. “I am fully confident that you can do what I asked of you.” He came a little closer, pinning Tony with his gaze. “Just imagine the possibilities. If you manage to create me this armor, if you do the impossible, nothing will be out of reach after that.”

It took Tony a good minute to find his voice again. He had almost forgotten how intense Loki’s presence could be.

“Well,” Tony said finally, “I’ve never liked the word ‘impossible’. It’s so limiting.” He gave Loki a cocky smile. “If someone calls something impossible, it only tells me that nobody else has been good enough to do it before. And you know that I’ve always liked a good challenge.”

“So you are not giving up on this?” Loki asked.

Tony shook his head. “Hell no. It might take me a while to figure out, but I’m pretty sure I can do it. I’m awesome like that.”

“Don’t let this go to your head,” Loki said, but he looked pretty happy with his skills of persuasion. Loki’s speech had actually been one of the nicest things anyone had ever said to Tony, but there was no way he was going to admit that out loud. He tried to search for some other words that would convey his appreciation without giving away anything too personal, but found himself coming up blank. Talking about feelings had never been Tony’s strong suit. Still, he felt that he should thank Loki somehow, for making Tony feel less like a fuckup.

In the end, the decision was easy. Since Loki was standing less than three feet away, it was a simple matter of taking hold of his tunic and pulling him closer. Loki went willingly, meeting him halfway when Tony tipped his head back. The resulting kiss was…different. That was really the best way to describe it.

Usually they only kissed during sex, or as a precursor to sex - hot hungry kisses full of teeth and tongue to fuel their passion - but this kiss was none of that. It was slow and deliberate - a thoughtful exploration that made Tony feel like all the blood in his body was turning into liquid gold. He closed his eyes and let Loki pull him even closer, taking a few moments to bask in the simple act of intimacy. He could go back to being a wisecracking badass in five more minutes or so, but for now he allowed himself to enjoy it.

The work wasn’t going anywhere.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

I'm having such a great time with this fic. Unlike my previous long stories, which were all a slow build towards the big romantic gettogether in the end, this one is of the "sex first, feelings later" variety. I'm trying to challenge the classic fanfic trope of "it gets
boring once they get together, because there is no conflict anymore." Sex is not a magical cure for problems. These two aren't even remotely in love - they just have a lot of sexual tension. It's fascinating to write a romance where the two sleep together fairly early on, but still have a ton of issues to work through. Yes, they will fall in love eventually, but first they have to work their way through a mountain of lies and mutual trust issues.

Also, I finally found a pairing where I'm comfortable writing an explicit sex scene (it would feel incredibly wrong to write something like this for the Hobbit), so I may have gone a little overboard in my enthusiasm. I hope nobody minds :D There will be a few more scenes throughout the fic and I'm half-done writing another, shorter story that’s pretty much just FrostIron smut, so you can look forward to that.

I’ll be done with my exam (and University in general) next Wednesday, so I’ll be returning to my regular writing schedule soon. Thanks a lot for all the support you continue to give to this story, I really appreciate it :)

The next chapter will be posted on next Friday, January 23.
Chapter Summary

In which both Tony and Loki try to play a con on each other, with different results than either one expects.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to my amazing beta InsanitiesxCreation for all the great advice she gave me for this chapter. It was absolutely indispensable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

New Year’s Eve came and went and before Tony knew it, it was time to finally get rid of the cast. He couldn’t have been happier when JARVIS told him that he could go to the doctor to have it taken off without it looking suspicious. True, he hadn’t been wearing it for a month now, but he’d still had to put it on for public appearances and it had made everyday tasks a bitch to do.

But no more. He was free at last.

“So I hear you’re back to active duty,” Steve said when Tony picked up his call on the way home from the clinic. He had his brand new StarkTech earpiece on, which allowed him to keep his hands free to man the steering wheel. It seemed to be working pretty well so far. He should really get it patented soon, before some leach steals the blueprints from him. Wouldn’t be the first time that happened.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Tony answered, flexing the wrist on his newly-freed hand. Fake or not, it was good to be rid of the stupid thing at last. “I can’t wait to put on my suit again.”

Which was the truth. He hadn’t been able to wear his suit for five weeks. It was the only thing he hadn’t been able to do, because the suit was just too conspicuous and he’d needed to keep his cover. He hadn’t gone this long without flying for years - not since he had first made the Mark II. Now he was just itching to put it on and go for a flight.

“It’s good to have you back.” Steve sounded like he genuinely meant it. “Though it’s a shame it took you so long to heal. We could have used your help during that X-Men accident.”

Tony grinned, remembering the SHIELD file on it.

“No, you couldn’t,” he told Steve. “You know that my suit is practically useless against Magneto. I would have just spent the whole fight stuck to some random piece of metal while you tried to take him down.”

“Still, you could have provided some support. At least as a distraction.” And was that a joke Steve had just made at his expense? Will wonders never cease.
“Hey, it’s not my fault Magneto hates Christmas,” Tony protested, but he was chuckling anyway, because the image of a grumpy old man in a cape crashing the Avenger party was just hilarious. “Anyway, my suit is almost repaired, so if there’s an emergency, feel free to call.”


“Yeah,” Tony said. “Thanks.”

He hung up the call and pulled into his garage, leaving the car by the entrance. Right now he only had eyes for his suit, which was standing proudly by the display cases, fully restored to its former glory. Loki was nowhere to be found, so Tony just walked up to it and let the armor snap into place around him, enveloping him with the familiar smell of metal and electricity.

Tony didn’t even wait for JARVIS to run all the diagnostics - as far as he was concerned, the computer could do that just as well during the flight. The moment his faceplate snapped into place, Tony activated the thrusters and sped out of the driveway, happy to finally be in the air again. He hadn’t even realized how much he had missed this until he was flying high above Malibu, the cars below nothing but colorful specks on the ground.

He spent a good half an hour in the air, just zooming around the coast and enjoying the freedom before he relented and decided to go back. Loki was in the workshop when he came back, leaning over a desk to examine the Doombot hand. He looked up when Tony flew in, his eyebrows climbing when he noticed the armor.

“Did I miss anything interesting?” he asked as he watched the assembly line take the armor off.

“No.” Tony grinned at him, pumped full of joy and adrenaline from the flight. “No world-threatening emergencies. I just went for a joyride because I finally got the green light to fly in the suit.”

“Oh. You look…pleased about that.”

“Damn right I’m happy,” Tony said. “I haven’t been able to fly for a month.”

Loki frowned a little. “You didn’t seem terribly bothered by your temporary limitation.”

Tony shrugged. “I found other ways to entertain myself.” He shot Loki a lewd grin. “But still, it’s about the principle of the thing. Why stay on the ground when you can fly?”

“Why indeed,” Loki mused.

Tony waited for the last piece of equipment to be pulled away by the robotic line before he stalked over to the demigod, stopping less than a foot away. He was feeling full of energy, like he usually did after a particularly thrilling flight. Most of the time he channeled that energy into creating new inventions, but Loki’s presence in the room gave him a different idea.

“Were you doing anything important with that hand?” he asked, completely failing at nonchalance as he propped his arm on the desk next to Loki’s hip, moving into his personal space. He could almost see the moment when Loki’s mind clicked onto his wavelength.

“No, nothing particularly interesting,” he said slowly. “Why?” He leaned back against the table, cocking an eyebrow.

Tony licked his lips, mentally going over a hundred different pick-up lines. In the end he decided with the most straightforward approach. Judging by the interest in Loki’s eyes, there wouldn’t be much need for persuasion, anyway.
“Do you have any idea how many times I have wanted to bend you over this table?” Tony asked, stepping even closer. He was close enough to see Loki’s eyes widen and his breath hitch a little. Yep, the blunt approach seemed to be working just fine for him.

Loki’s throat worked a few times as he deliberated his answer.

“No?” he tried finally, his eyes lingering on Tony’s lips. “I would not mind hearing about it, though.”

Tony stepped forward until they were touching from shoulder to knee, pressing the demigod against the desk. He only had to tilt his head a bit to be able to whisper in his ear.

“Talking would take too long.” Slowly, deliberately, he raised a hand and ran it over Loki’s chest and down to his belt.

“Why don’t I show you instead?”

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A few hours later, he was lying on his bed, basking in that pleasant half-awake state that one has after really good sex. Loki had teleported them into the bedroom sometime after the first round, which Tony had had absolutely no complaints about at the time, but now the comfortable mattress was making it hard for him to get up and go back to work. Instead of working on the new tablet design like he had been planning to, he could only lie and stare at the ceiling, his muscles suffused with pleasurable lethargy.

He was almost on the verge of dozing off when he got woken up by JARVIS’s voice.

“Sir? You have an event to attend in an hour.”

Tony threw the ceiling a half-hearted glare.

“Which one?”

“The Golden Globes Awards Ceremony, sir.”

“But I’m not an actor. Or a producer,” Tony argued.

“No, but you are a public figure. It has been almost two weeks since you were last seen in public, sir. It would be advisable for you to make an appearance, because some of the media are starting to speculate that you had a mental breakdown.”

Tony ran an exasperated hand over his face.

“Let me guess – Perez Hilton?”

“Among others.”

He sighed, sitting up a bit. “Why is it always a mental breakdown? What if I had ran off to the Bahamas with an entire team from the Lingerie Football League? Or joined Magneto in his quest for mutant world domination?”

Next to him, Loki stirred. “Where are you going?” he asked, lifting his head a bit from the pillow.

Tony made a face. “To a film awards ceremony, apparently, because otherwise the people of America might start to think I was killed and got replaced with a lifelike animatronic model by
bodysnatching aliens.” He lowered his legs over the edge of the bed and walked over to the bathroom to freshen up a bit.

It took him less than ten minutes to make himself somewhat presentable. He came back to the bedroom wearing only a towel, but stopped midway to the walk-in closet when he noticed the look Loki was giving him.

“What?” he asked, feeling a little weirded out by the stare.

“You’re not wearing a shirt,” Loki pointed out, his gaze flitting between Tony’s face and chest.

“Oh.” Tony looked down to see that yes, he had forgotten to put on an undershirt, which meant that Loki now had a front row view of the arc reactor. Loki was still wearing a strange expression that did nothing to raise Tony’s confidence. The billionaire grimaced. “Yeah, this is what it looks like.”

He promptly turned his back on the bed and disappeared into the closet, not emerging until most of the shirt buttons were done. Loki was still lounging naked on the bed, but the previous sleepiness was completely gone from his eyes. Instead he looked alert and - what was worse - interested.

“May I see it again?” he asked, rising from the bed to walk over to Tony. He lifted a hand slowly, reaching out to touch the arc reactor, but pulled back when Tony instinctively flinched from the touch.

“Maybe some other time,” Tony told him, taking a step back to put on his jacket. “Now I have to go and entertain the masses.” He paused for a moment, getting an idea. “It’s too bad you can’t come with me,” he said casually. “I’m sure a minor scandal of some sort would be a huge improvement to the evening I’m going to have.”

“I could wear the same disguise I used for your party,” Loki suggested.

“Nah,” Tony said. “There’s gonna be a ton of reporters where I’m going. If you showed up looking like that, you would draw way too much attention. Besides, the rockstar excuse wouldn’t hold for very long if you kept showing up with me in public. Sooner or later someone would run a face-recognition scan and you’d be fucked. Better not risk it.” He made a deliberate pause. “Well, I guess you’ll just have to entertain yourself on your own. I’ll probably be gone for most of the night.”

He gave Loki an apologetic smile and walked out, heading for the limousine that was waiting for him upstairs. The bait was laid, now he only needed to wait and see whether Loki would take it. The demigod must be bored out of his mind already. Tony’s place was pretty nice, but there were only so many things one could do before they went stir crazy. Nothing like a little shapeshifting to spice things up a bit.

At least, that’s what Tony was hoping for. There was still a possibility that Loki would just go hunting or watch TV instead. One never knew with him.

Tony managed to arrive to the ceremony on time for once and waved his way along the red carpet and into the auditorium. The ceremony was long and boring and even though the two lady hosts were doing their best to keep the audience entertained, Tony still wanted to claw his eyes out by the two-hour mark. Thank god it ended soon after that, because he was getting close to making something explode. Instead he suffered through countless handshakes and chit chat, before he could finally move on to the afterparty, which luckily contained booze.

He was drinking his second drink and discussing one of the winning movies with its director when he finally saw her.
She was standing near one of the walls, watching the crowd of actors with a faint, disinterested smirk. Black hair pulled into an elaborate braid served to provide a nice contrast to an attractive face. Her tall, slim figure was dressed in a shimmering silver dress that fit right in with all the glamorous movie stars.

Tony carefully turned away, hiding his grin in a glass of scotch. He wondered what Thor would say if he knew his friend Lady Sif apparently had a second gig as a Hollywood actress.

It had taken him a moment to put a name to the face, because he had only ever seen it in the SHIELD files dealing with Thor’s first visit to Earth, but he’d managed in the end, because he wasn’t a genius for nothing. Since it was highly improbable that Sif had come all the way to Earth just to crash some random celebrity party, it meant that Loki had finally gotten tired of lying about and decided to come out and play.

Well, two could play that game.

Tony let her be for the moment, focusing back on the conversation. It wouldn’t do to show his hand too soon. Over the next hour, he slowly made his way over to her spot. She didn’t move around much, preferring to stay back and observe instead, which suited Tony just fine. Thanks to a strategic piece of planning, he managed to accidentally bump into her just as she was passing by, causing her drink to spill just a little.

“I’m sorry.” He gave her his most charming grin. “I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going.”

She paused, raising her eyebrow. “Does that happen often with you?” And oh look, he hadn’t even bothered to change the accent.

“More often than it should,” Tony said. He offered his hand. “I’m Tony Stark, by the way.”

“I know who you are,” she told him, showing a hint of teeth as she shook his hand in a firm grip. “There are few people on Earth who haven’t heard about you, Mr. Stark.”

“Good to hear that I’m so popular,” Tony quipped.

“I’m not sure if popular is the right word for it,” she said, and yeah, that was Loki’s trademark snark all right. If Tony had been even the slightest bit doubtful before, now he was certain. Instead of giving anything away, he just shrugged.

“Might as well be one and the same as far as I’m concerned.” He gave her a look, pretending to think. “Have we met? I think I might have seen you somewhere before. One of the parties in New York, perhaps?” Hell yeah, this was fun.

She shook her head. “No, you must have me mistaken for someone else. I only moved here recently.”

“Oh. Where are you from? You sound kinda British.”

Fake Lady Sif barely blinked at the inquiry, staying fully in character as she sipped champagne from her glass.

“I’m originally from Ireland, but my parents travelled a lot when I was little.”

“So you’ve seen the world,” Tony said, giving her a slow once over. “Why don’t you tell me about your travels over a drink?”
There was a brief flicker of triumph in her eyes, but it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. A second later she smiled, leaning into him a little.

“Lead the way, Mr. Stark.”

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An hour and a half later, they were riding a limousine back to Tony’s place. For once Tony wasn’t using the privacy of the car as an opportunity to make out with his lady du jour. In fact, they had barely kissed once over the entire evening, which was fine with Tony. There was a conversation they needed to have before anything else of interest could happen.

The evening so far had been…quite pleasant actually. Tony had given the “lady” his full attention, smiling and flirting, and trying to see just how long Loki’s made-up identity would hold before he gave himself away. Tony had done his best to remain subtle, wheedling information out of him under the guise of romantic interest and trying to trip him up over random tidbits of information, but the guy was frightfully good for someone who had barely spent two months on Earth.

In fact, all this only made Tony grateful that Loki had been half-mad when he had attacked New York. If he’d been fully in charge of his mental faculties, there was no way they could have stopped him. Really, the guy was almost frightfully clever when he wanted to be. Few people were able to lie like this and not get caught.

Tony suddenly felt glad for the contract he had made with the demigod. It had felt limiting at first, and borderline dangerous, but the longer he thought about it, the more useful it seemed - as far as he knew, Loki hadn’t killed a single person during his stay in California. There had also been a suspicious lack of explosions, so the magic in the contract really seemed to be working.

He’d been wary of the magic before, but now he was slowly changing his mind - if this was what it took to keep Loki not-homicidal, Tony was fully on board.

The car stopped in front of his house, the driver jumping out to open the door for Tony, who slid out, holding out a hand for the lady.

“Here we are, at Casa de Stark. Shall we?” he said with a smile. She took his hand and stepped out of a car, doing a great show of looking around and pretending surprise.

“This is where you live?”

“Yup.” Tony gestured for the driver to go and led the woman into the house. They barely made it inside when she pressed herself against him, giving him a slow, teasing smile.

“So it’s really true,” she murmured. “You would truly take home anyone.” Was it Tony’s imagination or did she sound a little…disappointed?

“Not just anyone,” Tony gave her a winning smile, wrapping his arms around her waist. “I like people who have a little something special. You know, like an interesting personality, or a great rack…or magic.” He gave Loki a look. “So. Are you going to change back now or do you want to have sex like this?”

To Loki’s credit, he only blinked a little.

“What are you talking about?” he said, still keeping in character.

“Oh, you’re good,” Tony said with admiration. “But you can change back now, really. I know it’s
you, Loki.”

A second later the air around the figure shimmered and the woman turned into Loki, who took a step back, frowning at him. Tony released him, curious to see what his reaction would be.

“How did you know it was me?”

“JARVIS told me about your little shapeshifting trick,” Tony admitted. “As for me knowing it was you, well, you’re not as subtle as you think you are. I knew it was you almost right away, but you looked like you were having fun, so I decided to play along.”

“Why stop now?” Loki asked, curious. “You could have had me as a woman and reveal it afterwards.”

“Because having sex with you while pretending that you’re someone else would be a serious dick move,” Tony told him. “I may be an asshole, but I’m not that much of an asshole. No matter what people might say about me.”

“But you still spent the evening toying with me.” Luckily for Tony, Loki seemed more amused than annoyed by it. “You knew who I was and yet you let me believe that you were ignorant. Why?” He cocked his head, waiting for Tony’s answer.

“Because it was fun,” Tony said simply. “You were trying to pull a con on me, seduce me and then make a big reveal at the end – or so I assume. I decided to make a game out of it - to see just how far you were willing to go. Turns out that it’s a bit further than I’m comfortable with.”

“Interesting,” Loki drawled, giving Tony an assessing glance. “It has been a very long time since anyone was able to see through my tricks.”

“Well, if your normal standard for intellectual company is Thor, it’s no wonder,” Tony said, making Loki smirk. “No offense to your brother but he does seem rather…gullible.”

“Yes, he is.” Loki’s lips pulled into a grin. “Unlike you, he never failed to fall for my tricks.”

Since it seemed that Loki was planning to spend the rest of his evening by basking in his own cleverness, Tony decided to get a drink. He poured himself two fingers of whiskey and leaned on the bar, savoring the drink.

“So, shapeshifting,” he said. “How does it work, exactly? Is it just an illusion you put over your normal body, or do you completely change your shape?” He gave the guy a slow once-over. “What little I have seen so far seemed to support the second theory. Those boobs pressing against my chest a few minutes ago have felt pretty real, at least.”

“They were,” Loki confirmed, wearing a devilish grin. “As much as anything conjured by magic can be real.” He followed Tony to the bar, pouring a glass for himself. He had become increasingly familiar with Tony’s selection of drinks over the past few weeks. “Your second guess is closer to the truth. I can put an illusion of someone else’s face over my own, but the more convincing illusions are achieved by changing the shape of my body.”

“How do you achieve that?” Tony wanted to know, his curiosity taking over. "Do you simply rearrange the atoms? Or do you borrow some extra ones from somewhere else?" The sheer implications of the magic-induced physical processes made even his mind boggle.

Loki smiled, sipping his drink. “Your approach is far too narrow-minded. Magic works on different principles than your so-called physics – it originates from the mind, not the world around you. It
works on more levels than just the one perceivable by your meagre senses. It changes your perception along with the world around you. ”

“What is magic, exactly?” Normally, Tony would hate all this metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, but since he was trying to construct a weapon against a crazy European magic-wielder, he needed all the help he could get.

Loki took a moment to think.

“Hm, I suppose it would be best described as a type of energy. It is part of the universe, woven into the very fabric of reality. When you wield it, you have the power to bend the reality to your will. There are very few things magic itself cannot accomplish – the only limitations lie in the mind of its wielder.”

“So Thor was right when he said magic was simply a more evolved version of our science?”

“Thor has always oversimplified everything, but in this case he is essentially right. Your understanding of magic will be limited by the tools at your disposal and your own prejudice, but if you put in enough effort, you should be able achieve at least partial understanding of what you are facing.”

“I should be able to make an anti-magic device, then?” Tony asked. “Something that will work against Doom, even though I don’t have any magic myself.”

“I believe so, yes,” Loki confirmed. “You are a man of remarkable talents. I’m convinced one mediocre magician will not pose much of a problem for you.”

“Speaking of remarkable talents,” Tony said, “what sorts of shapes can you change into? I’ve only seen a woman so far, so I assume you can change both into men and women. What else?” He was genuinely curious.

Loki hesitated briefly before answering. “I can impersonate any person of any race or sex, at least superficially. There are probably some subtleties I would not be able to portray correctly without previous study, but my arsenal is still vast. The better I know someone, the easier it is to imitate them.”

“So you could walk out of here tomorrow wearing my face and announce that I have decided to live out the rest of my life in a monastery on the moon and nobody would bat an eyelash.” Tony didn’t know whether to be horrified or impressed.

“Essentially, yes.” Loki grinned.

Tony shook his head. “My mind still can’t decide whether this is brilliant or creepy as fuck.” He shot Loki a look. “Remind me never to piss you off.”

Loki’s grin widened. “It is good to see that you’re finally learning some respect.”

“Not respect, self-preservation,” Tony corrected. He walked over to the window, thinking about everything he had just learned.

“You know this shapeshifting thing has unlimited possibilities of use, right?” he said after a moment. “You could impersonate anyone. You could commit a crime and pin it on someone else. You could pretend to be the president and make an outrageous speech that would incite a war between nations. You could-”
“How do you think I’ve been amusing myself all these centuries?” Loki interrupted him. “Asgard can get unbearably dull after a thousand years or so. Igniting scandals is the most fun one can have without getting arrested.”

“Right, God of Mischief,” Tony remembered. “I guess that particular moniker is well deserved in your case.”

“Yes, very,” Loki said proudly. “Though my pranks have done little to endear me to the Asgardian populace.”

“No, I guess not,” Tony said. “You should have tried hitting things with a hammer instead. That seems to impress them.”

Loki chuckled. “Yes, it does.” He gave Tony an appreciative look. “I must admit, I like the way your mind works. You discover my secret ability and instead of being awed or horrified, or trying to convince me to stop using it, your mind immediately jumps to all its potential uses for corruption. You are far less bound by the Midgardian morals than most humans that I have met.”

Tony shrugged, kicking back the rest of his drink.

“I never claimed to be a paragon of virtue. Creative? Yes. Genius? Yes. Borderline crazy? Possibly. Heroic role model? Hell no.” He poured himself another drink. “I’ve been trying to get you to do the bodyswitching trick ever since I found out about it. You’re really hard to manipulate, you know that?”

“And how long have you known?”

“Since I broke my hand,” Tony admitted. “JARVIS showed me the recording.”

“You knew all this time?” Loki asked incredulously. “Did it never occur to you that I might be someone else who is pretending to be me?”

“It did,” Tony said. “That was one of my first thoughts. But I watched you for a while and eventually ruled it out.”

Loki shook his head, stepping closer. “You’re mad,” he told Tony, with a mix of disbelief and admiration. “You are completely insane, but I love it.”

That was the first time anyone ever expressed fondness for Tony’s particular brand of crazy. Tony couldn’t help but stare a little.

“You know,” he said when he found his voice. “Most people would tell you that you shouldn’t encourage me. Things tend to explode when I get creative.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Since when do you listen to what other people think?”

Tony gave him a grin. “Exactly.”

When Loki stepped in to kiss the grin off his face, Tony didn’t do a single thing to stop him. It was actually pretty nice, this casual intimacy they had. They could argue about magic and pizza toppings as much as they wanted, but at the end of the day none of it mattered, really. Tony didn’t have to worry about impressing him, or charming him, because Loki was going to hightail out of here once the armor was finished. This way Tony could enjoy their few months to the fullest, because they both knew that their little indulgence didn’t mean anything.
And boy, having a steady source of great sex was seriously awesome. Much better than random fumbling one night stands. Tony was going to miss it when this was over.

For now, though, Loki was still here and willing to indulge Tony’s whims, just like Tony frequently indulged his. It was no wonder then that Loki looked receptive when Tony pulled back from the kiss and gave him a playful smile.

“Will you show me what you can do?”

Loki’s eyes narrowed in mock-suspicion. “If I find that you are doing this to gather information on me…”

Tony couldn’t help it: he rolled his eyes. “Please, you’ve been hanging around my workshop for weeks now. You’ve seen every single thing I’m working on. If anyone has the information here, it’s you. This only makes us even.”

Loki still pretended to consider. “My magic is not some circus act to be performed for your entertainment,” he said, but it was half-hearted at best.

Tony walked over to the couch and sat down, leaning back comfortably.

“Indulge me. Just this once.” He gave Loki his best puppy dog eyes. “You watch me work all the time. It’s only fair that I get to look, too.”

That seemed to be the breaking point. Loki gave a long suffering sigh as he walked across the floor to Tony, but it was apparent that he couldn’t wait to show off. Tony draped his arms over the back of the couch, settling in to watch the show.

And it was quite a show. Loki’s transformations were mesmerizing to watch. He took on several different shapes for Tony’s amusement, including a few of the Avengers. His rendition of Captain America had Tony in stitches for good five minutes. When he finally recovered, Loki was already back to himself, watching Tony with an amused expression from his comfortable perch on the barstool.

“Oh god,” Tony said once he could speak again without laughing. “I can’t believe I used to have a crush on that guy when I was a kid.”

That made Loki frown and straighten up a bit. “You liked him?”

“My dad used to talk about him all the time. On those rare occasions when he remembered to acknowledge my existence, he usually told me tales about Captain America. I had a bit of a hero worship going on as a kid and I suppose the crush developed from that,” Tony shrugged, not embarrassed by his youthful obsession. He stood up to go refill his glass at the bar. “I had a crush on him for years. Then I finally got to meet him in person and any remains of attraction I might have harbored promptly died a swift and shameful death.”

“Why?” Loki asked in puzzlement. He seemed weirdly tense, from up close. “He could be considered reasonably attractive by your people’s standards, could he not?”

“Yeah, I suppose he’s fairly good looking,” Tony said, leaning on the bar next to him. “But it’s hard to be attracted to someone whose manners remind me of my maiden aunt Beatrice. It makes you afraid to make a single inappropriate joke, or his head might explode from all the innuendo.” Tony sighed, shaking his head. “All right, now I’m being harsh on him. The guy is doing pretty well, considering the time period he came from. It’s just that he’s so repressed, he could give nuns a run for their money. No way I’m ever touching that.”
“What if you could?” Loki asked suddenly, wearing a strange expression. Tony would almost believe that Loki was into the idea, if it wasn’t for the tight set of his shoulders and way the demigod refused to meet his eyes as he said it. “What if there was a way-”

“Fuck no,” Tony didn’t even let him finish that thought because holy shit, that was hundred kinds of fucked up. “There’s no way you’re roleplaying Captain America for me. I’m open to a lot of things, but this is just…hell no.”

“Very well,” Loki said, his face relaxing. “What would you like, then?”

“I was thinking more about the practical uses for this,” Tony said, his mind already spinning in other directions. Loki’s bizarre offer had singlehandedly managed to kill all his thoughts of sex for the moment (or the nearest future because Jesus Christ, he would never be able to look Steve in the eye after something like that).

“Such as?” Loki cocked an eyebrow.

“Well,” Tony began, "as a widely beloved public figure, I’m expected to attend tons of events. Parties, fundraisers, balls – as long as there are rich and/or important people in attendance, I’m usually there. You’ve seen how dull these things can get.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Loki asked, but for all his pretended disinterest, he was already leaning forward a little to hear Tony’s idea. “It is none of my concern that you have to attend these events.”

“That’s where you’re mistaken,” Tony told him, pointing with a cocktail umbrella he had snatched from the nearby stack. “When I’m bored, my work morale tends to hit rock bottom.” He gave Loki a look.

“And you expect me to do what? Entertain you? I am not a court jester,” Loki pointed out, but it was clear that the idea had caught his interest.

“I can’t be seen multiple times with the same person, because the media would go crazy trying to figure out who you are.” Tony unglued himself from the bar, taking the floor with a glass in his hand. “Nobody gives a shit about my one night stands, however. Those have stopped being tabloid fodder years ago. If I’m seen with a different person each time, no one will bat an eyelash.”

Loki continued to look unconvinced. “What would I get out of it?”

“Imagine the fun you could have,” Tony told him, using the same smooth voice that he did for his sales pitches to the board of directors. “You could discover people’s secrets, whisper them into the right ear, then step back and watch the show. You could flirt with someone’s wife and make the guy fly into a fit of jealous rage, you could push someone into making a drunken scene…” Tony could just imagine it. And, judging by Loki’s growing grin, so could the demigod. “The potential for chaos is high.”

“I’m listening,” Loki said, tilting his head a little.

Tony continued. “We could even turn the shapeshifting into a game – you could change into a random person without telling me first and I would have to figure out who you were.”

“What if you guess wrong?” Loki said, crossing his arms. Still, despite the outward show of reluctance, he seemed intrigued. “What if you don’t recognize me and try to take home someone else?”
“Well,” Tony said, giving him a grin as he came closer. “I guess in that case you will have to punish me for losing the game.”

“Hm.” Loki licked his lips. “This game of yours sounds intriguing. I am willing to participate, under the condition that I get to choose the punishment for you.”

Tony felt his heart speed up a little, adrenaline rising in anticipation at the look he saw in Loki’s eyes.

“Looks like I’ll just have to do my best to win, then.” He crossed the last few feet of space between them, offering Loki a hand. “You’ve got a deal.”

Loki took the offered hand, running his thumb over Tony’s knuckles. “I am looking forward to this game of yours.”

“JARVIS?” Tony asked. “When is the next party I can go to?”

“The day after tomorrow, sir,” JARVIS answered, helpful as ever. “Please try not to cause too much of a disturbance.”

“Don’t count on it, JARVIS,” Tony said, flashing Loki a grin. “So, what do you say we go and have some fun?”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

I know it may feel like every other scene ends with them having sex right now, but don’t worry, I will move away from that pretty soon. I wanted to establish the base for their relationship before the plot makes a comeback.

In real life news – I passed my exam! It was the last one left, so now I only need to hand in my thesis and I’ll be finished with Law School. The best part of all this is that I can go back to writing now, since I no longer have to spend 12 hours a day with my nose buried in textbooks. Once I get over my post-exam exhaustion, I should be back at work on this story (and all the other stories waiting for me on my hard drive).

Chapter 11 will be posted on next Friday, January 30.
Loki’s shapeshifting became a new source of entertainment for them both. Even after half a dozen times, it was still exciting to try and guess who Loki was going to be posing as for the evening. Tony had to admit that it made a great improvement to his usual social schedule.

The game they played was simple: Tony would go to a party alone and Loki would appear sometime during the evening, slipping into the room in disguise. He never told Tony which face he’d be wearing, or even which gender he was going to be posing as, so it was up to the engineer to try and figure it out. Usually Tony managed to spot him right away and they spent the rest of the evening flirting and plotting ways to spice up the event they were on. Other times it took him a little longer to pinpoint the right face, but he always managed in the end.

Once or twice Tony managed to recognize him fairly early on, but pretended not to, just for kicks, and spent the evening flirting with random people instead. The sex when they got home after that tended to be…explosive. Loki had never outright forbidden him from sleeping with someone else, but he always got that narrow-eyed look when Tony flirted with other people. Tony had never been a big fan of possessiveness or jealousy, but he had to admit it was a bit thrilling to have this much power over someone who was essentially a magic-wielding space deity.

They didn’t have any sort or official arrangement and in fact hadn’t spoken about the thing between them since the first “no strings attached” conversation back in December, but the fact was that Tony hadn’t slept with anyone else since the Christmas party. Keeping up with Loki’s demands for sex was challenging enough, and the sex was great, so there was no need to fuck anyone else. Besides, Tony was half-convinced they were going to get tired of each other soon enough, so he was resolved to enjoy the ride as much as he could.

Their new shapeshifting game had another unexpected benefit – it made Loki perk up a bit. Tony hadn’t really noticed before, too preoccupied with his work, but now that he could see the difference in Loki’s moods, it was clear that the demigod had been a bit subdued ever since his arrival. Thinking back on the weeks before his return finally gave Tony the answer he was looking for - Thor hadn’t been the only one to lose his mom in the attack on Asgard.

Loki never talked about her and hid his grief well, but sometimes, when he thought Tony wasn’t looking, he got a distant, sad look on his face. Tony let him be. If he wanted to share, he would.
They rarely talked about anything personal and a dead parent was a super-personal thing in Tony’s book, so he figured it was none of his business. Just because Thor had cried his heart out on Tony’s couch didn’t mean that Loki was going to do the same. God knew Tony had never been eager to talk about Howard and Maria’s deaths, either.

All in all, life was pretty good. The only thing that bugged Tony was his lack of progress with the anti-magic field. He had tried everything to block the magic – projecting different wavelengths, creating all kinds of fields – but nothing worked. It was starting to piss him off, because he had never gone this long without figuring out a solution to his problems. He was almost ready to give up when it finally hit him.

How ironic that a shareholders meeting should provide the source of inspiration for this.

Tony was just sitting at a meeting with the company higher-ups, bored out of his mind. He had already reprogrammed Dummy’s new code and finished designing a new circuit board on his tablet and the meeting was still going on.

The head of marketing was droning about sales figures and strategy and it was starting to make Tony’s head hurt. The guy was like a living black hole of boredom, sucking all the energy from the room, and Tony wanted nothing more than to get out of here and-

Holy shit, that was it!

The solution for his magic problem.

He stood up at once, ignoring the annoyed looks from the suits in the room.

“Sorry,” he told them, “it’s an emergency. Gotta run.” And he strode out of the room, almost running down the several flights of stairs to his car.

He must have broken more than a few speed limits on the way home, but he couldn’t be bothered to care. The traffic cops could just send the speeding tickets to his secretary, like always. The house stood waiting for him at the end of the road and Tony sped towards it, only slowing down when he hit the driveway leading to the garage. He stopped the car inside and jumped out as soon as he could, running to the bench with the anti-magic device.

This was it! He had finally figured out the solution to the anti-magic blocker! Now he only needed to recalibrate the device he’d been working on for the past several weeks and hope like hell that it would work.

Tony was so immersed in his calculations that he didn’t even notice when Loki came into the room. He was alerted to his presence when the demigod leaned on the bench next to him. Loki gave him a strange look when he noticed that Tony looked even more manic than usual. To be honest, Tony didn’t blame him - he must make quite the picture in his oil-stained designer suit and with hair sticking in all directions from where he’d been running his hand through it for the past twenty minutes as he worked out the problem.

“JARVIS told me you were back,” Loki told him as he moved closer to find out what had caught Tony’s attention.

“Yeah,” Tony answered distractedly, most of his focus still on the angular black box on the bench in front of him.

“Is something wrong? What are you doing?”

“I think I’ve got it,” Tony announced as he picked the device up, barely containing his excitement. His grin was wide enough to split his face in two, but he didn’t care - after all these weeks, he finally
had the solution. He felt full of energy and eager anticipation, and only his dignity prevented him from running over to the magic scanners to test the blocker right away. Instead he held himself still with the sheer force of will and ran the last few tests. “I had the idea when I was at the meeting and I had to get home as soon as possible. If I’m right - and I hope like hell that I am - then this should work. It should finally work.”

“Is that your anti-magic device?” Loki asked, eyeing the box in Tony’s hands.

“Yes.” Tony finally managed to tear his gaze from the machine. “Look, I’m going to turn it on in about a minute, see what this bad boy can do. If it makes you uncomfortable, just leave for an hour. I’ll manage.”

Loki folded his arms. “How would you know it works without my presence?”

“I could test it on the robohand.” Tony shrugged, his mind already going over a hundred alternatives. “And if that fails, I can always bully SHIELD into giving me another Doombot. I know that they have a pile of them stashed in some secret warehouse somewhere. I’ll probably do that anyway, just to piss Fury off - god, have you ever seen him in his pissy mood? The one where he has to be polite to you, but inwardly he’s imagining gouging out your eyeballs and feeding them to SHIELD’s ninja dogs? It’s hilarious.” He paused for a second, trying to remember what he’d been talking about.

“Right, magic blocker. You know, I would probably manage one way or another without you, but hey, if you wanna stay and give me a hand with this, I’m certainly not gonna stop you.” He crossed over to his screens and turned on the magic scanners, barely keeping himself from bouncing in place like an overexcited squirrel. “If you wanna help with this, then go over there and conjure up some magic for me. Nothing fancy, a fistful of flames or lightning should be enough to see if it works.”

“I am not going to enjoy this experiment, am I?” Loki asked with a hint of humor in his voice, even as he walked to the empty spot on the concrete floor.

“No, probably not,” Tony muttered, his attention back on the device. He finished the last few adjustments and put it back together, ready for use. “This might sting a bit,” he warned before aiming the device at Loki and pushing the button.

Nothing happened for a second and then all of a sudden the flames in Loki’s palms disappeared. The demigod looked at his empty hands in alarm and then straight at Tony, glaring at the box in Tony’s hands like it was the embodiment of evil.

“Turn it off!”

Tony would have left it on for longer, but the guy sounded like he was two steps away from full-blown panic. Not wanting to risk causing irreparable damage, he pushed the button again, turning off the anti-magic field. Loki stumbled and slumped back against the nearest workbench, looking like he’d just seen a ghost. He took a shaky breath and raised both hands in front of his face, sighing in relief when a green glow enveloped them. He stared at his hands for a long moment watching the magic dancing around his fingers. It was only when Tony came closer that he noticed that Loki’s hands were actually trembling a bit.

“It shouldn’t cause any permanent damage,” Tony tried to reassure him. “The magic-killing effect should only work when the machine is switched on. Once I switch it off, everything should go back to normal.”

“How did you accomplish this?” Loki asked, still sounding uneasy. He slowly lowered his hands, giving Tony an incredulous stare. “Never in my life have I felt this powerless.”
“What did it do?” Tony couldn’t help but ask. He had intended for the device to simply nullify any magic in the room, to negate it, but Loki’s reaction suggested it might be something else.

Loki gazed back down at his hands. “I felt my magic being stripped from me, bit by bit, like water running down a drain. It simply…disappeared and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Not even the prison cells in Asgard have anything like this.” He walked over to Tony and bracketed his shoulders with his hands, giving him an imploring look. “How did you accomplish this?”

Tony felt a little weirded out that his short demonstration had had such a profound impact, but then he remembered that Loki had had his magic all his life. He was a creature of magic, used to being enveloped by it, to having it serve his every whim. To have such an intrinsic part of oneself taken away must have been pretty disconcerting.

“I finally figured out what I was doing wrong,” he explained. “I was thinking of magic as a physical force – a wavelength or a magnetic field of some sort that you emanate when you want to cast a spell. But I was wrong. I was trying to block it, or to create some sort of barrier against it, but it didn’t work.” He pulled away from Loki’s grasp to pull up a holograph of his calculations.

“You said magic was a part of the universe, that it is a sort of an energy that exists independently on anyone, as a creative and destructive force. So that got me thinking - maybe it’s not about building a barrier against it, but about negating it. If the energy exists, it can be cancelled out, neutralized. After that it was simply a matter of finding the right way to make a field that kills magic completely. So,” he gave Loki an impatient look, “does it work?”

“Yes, it works,” Loki confirmed, still looking a little shaken.

“Yes!” Tony did a fist pump. “Fuck yeah, I’m good.”

He froze mid-movement, blinking a little as the full impact of what he had just accomplished hit him like a brick, a new world of possibilities opening before him. He had just managed to block Loki. Loki, the Asgardian mage extraordinaire.

“Oh, Doom is going to get his ass kicked so hard.” Tony gave Loki a wild grin, feeling exhilarated that all those weeks of work had finally paid off. “Can you imagine his face when I use this on him? It’s going to be amazing.”

“Less so for him, I imagine,” Loki said dryly, but he was starting to smile, too.

“His suits are powered by magic,” Tony continued. “He won’t be able to do a thing. If this little box can hold in check someone of your caliber, he doesn’t stand a chance. I’ll need to increase the radius more if I want to use this in the field, but I’m so looking forward to seeing those stupid bots fall from the sky.”

“I am sure it will be a sight to behold.”

“But still,” Tony said, already pursuing a new idea. “If I could find a way to turn his bots against him, it would be even better.” He made a distracted motion towards the black box with his hand. “This, this is just physics, nothing mysterious about it once I figured out the right combination of fields, but if I could find a way to turn his magic against him…” He took a minute to ponder the possibilities. “Imagine what I could do with that.”

“No wonder your enemies fear you.” And was that actual respect in Loki’s voice? “They would be fools not to.”

“Was that a compliment?” Tony turned back to him, raising an eyebrow. “Did you seriously just say
something nice about me? The world must be coming to an end.”

“It probably will, if you are allowed free reign over it for much longer,” Loki said, coming closer. He took the device out of Tony’s hands and put it on a nearby bench, then wrapped his arms around Tony’s waist and claimed his mouth a kiss that made the engineer’s head spin.

Tony had imagined Loki reacting to the anti-magic device in all kinds of ways - anger, fear, mistrust, horror… “Arousal” hadn’t even made the top twenty, but hey, if the experiment had managed to put Loki in the mood for some fun, Tony wasn’t about to turn him down. The demigod’s reaction to the experiment had been a bit unexpected, but certainly not unwelcome. Tony himself was still running high on the thrill of new discovery, so he was more than happy to kiss back, pulling Loki closer by the fabric of his tunic. Still - who would have thought that Loki got off on the idea of Tony being able to restrain him?

_Huh._ There was an idea. Maybe he should save some of the steel alloy from the armor and make a pair of handcuffs instead. That could be interesting.

“Congratulations,” Loki murmured against Tony’s lips a few minutes later. “You have successfully managed to create a device that can suppress one of the most powerful beings in all nine realms. If you ever use it against me, I will probably have to kill you.” His eyes were glittering though, so the final effect made his threat lose some credibility.

“I’ll make sure to remember that,” Tony told him. “Also, thanks for helping me with this. The hand would have been a lousy substitute.”

“Most hands are poor substitutes for my skills.” Loki gave him a wicked grin, his hands sliding down to cup Tony’s ass.

“And what sort of skills would those be?” Tony asked cheekily, his hands already busy at work with Loki’s tunic.

“Should I give you a practical demonstration?” Loki asked as he pushed Tony onto his back on the workbench. Tony just chuckled and pulled him into another kiss.

He didn’t get anything else done that day.

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“I hope you’re happy,” was the first thing Pepper said when Tony picked up the phone a few days later. “You’ve made the front page of every tabloid in the country.”

“Really?” Tony honestly had no idea. “To what do I owe the honor?”

“To the guy you made out with at the Grammy after party.” And, hoo boy, did she sound pissed.

“Oh.” He and Loki had had a lot of fun at that one. Apparently they hadn’t been as inconspicuous as Tony had thought. “What are they saying?”

“See for yourself.”

JARVIS helpfully loaded the pertinent covers for him on his tablet. *Tony Stark’s Secret Gay Affair!* read one of them. The pictures underneath were a bit blurry, the faces out of focus due to distance and bad lighting but Tony’s signature goatee was still recognizable, just as it was clear enough that the person kissing Tony wasn’t a woman.
“Wow, I look pretty good in these,” Tony said, just to be a dick.

“That’s not the point,” Pepper ground out. “I’m facing a PR nightmare here. The stocks have gone down by three points. Couldn’t you keep it in your pants for once?”

“Only three points?” Tony asked. “They had dropped a lot more after that incident with me and the Spanish princess.”

“That’s because she was married,” Pepper reminded him.

“I know.” That had been one hell of a clusterfuck. “Look, Pep, you always knew I played for both teams. I just didn’t make it public knowledge.”

“Why now?” she demanded. “Why couldn’t you keep it private?”

“Why not?” Tony shot back. “Gay marriage has been legalized in several states of the country. I have nothing to be ashamed of.”

There was an exasperated sigh on the other side of the line. Tony knew that sigh well – Pepper always made it when she was hanging onto the last of her patience. She fell quiet for a moment, probably counting to ten in her head, but it seemed to have worked because when she spoke next, she sounded a bit calmer.

“So, who is he?”

“Who?” Tony pretended confusion. He could almost hear her clenching her teeth.

“The man you’re kissing in those pictures.”

“Honestly? I have no idea,” Tony said flippantly. It was partially true – Loki never told him who the people he was changing into were. “He was hot and we talked for a while and when he kissed me, I just went for it. I have no idea what his name was.”

“Great.” If Pepper could kill people over the phone, Tony would be dead by now. “What should I tell the press? They’ve been pestering me even since TMZ posted the pictures last night.”

“Tell them whatever you want.” Tony shrugged. “I don’t care.”

“You should,” Pepper told him. “It’s your public image on the line here.”

Tony sighed. “It’s funny how that works. Nobody gave a shit when my company sold guided missiles to terrorists, but god forbid I kiss a guy once. The people here have seriously warped priorities.”

“Nonetheless, you’ll still have to do something about this.”

“Can’t I just issue a press statement? ‘Yes, Tony Stark likes to fuck dudes sometimes. Ladies are also welcome. If you’re interested, call this number’?”

“This is not a joke, Tony,” Pepper said.

“I know,” Tony replied. “But I seriously don’t know what the big deal is. People are idiots. Also, this is boring. I’m going to hang up now.” His eyes fell on the Doombot hand and he got an idea.

“Actually no, wait. I need a favor.”

“Tony-” Pepper’s voice could have frozen the Sahara desert.
“No, but really,” Tony spoke over her. “This is important. I need a Doombot. A functioning one. I only have a hand, but it’s not enough. There was a good dozen of them the last time we fought Doom, so SHIELD must have at least one squirreled away somewhere. I need it. Can you get it for me?”

There was a long sigh from the other side of the line.

“One day, Tony, I’m going to stop putting up with this.”

“You already did,” Tony reminded her quietly, growing a bit more serious. “But this is purely a friendly favor I’m asking for. I need to figure out a way to shoot Doom out of the sky. The last time I fought his bots, I ended up with a hand in a cast for five weeks.” Yes, he wasn’t above a little emotional manipulation.

Pepper sighed again. There was a sound of ruffling papers and a few muffled voices before she got back on the phone.

“I’ll see what I can do. In return, you are going to make your own press release, because I’m not here to clean up your messes. I expect you to have it ready by the evening today.”

“Yes, mom,” Tony joked, but inwardly he was glad that Pepper was willing to get the Doombot for him. If anyone could browbeat the SHIELD bureaucracy into submission, it was Pepper. “Anyway, thanks for doing this.”

“Try not to cause any more scandals in the foreseeable future, would you? I only have one set of nerves and running the company is hard enough.”

“I knew I could count on you,” Tony said.

“I seriously don’t know why still put up with you,” Pepper said, but it was clear she wasn’t angry anymore. “I’m going to hang up now. Make that statement or I will sic Natasha on you.”

And she hung up, leaving Tony standing in the middle of his workshop with a fond smile on his face.

“JARVIS? Make a press statement for me, will you? Something Pepper will like. We wouldn’t want to disappoint her.”

“Very well, sir,” JARVIS said. “You will have it ready in ten minutes.

Awesome.”

With that taken care off, Tony could go back to work. Before he knew it, he was elbows deep in a new jet engine prototype, taking it apart. He didn’t look up until Loki wandered into the workshop, setting a stack of pizza boxes on one of the benches.

“I took the liberty of ordering us some lunch.”

“Oh, you got pizza.” Tony brightened up. “Awesome.”

“You’ve been working since the middle of the night,” Loki said, sitting down on the bench next to the boxes and opening the one on top, which seemed to have ham pizza in it. “I thought you might appreciate some sustenance.”

Now that he mentioned it, Tony actually was kinda hungry.
“Yeah, I do,” Tony told him. “Let me just wash my hands and we can eat.”

He walked over to the kitchenette, where he made a genuine effort to wash at least some of the motor oil off his fingers.

“We made the news, by the way,” he mentioned casually as he dried his hands on a towel.

“Did we.” Loki cocked an eyebrow, looking only mildly interested.

“Yep.” Tony handed him the tablet with the magazine covers and went to get some pizza. “It’s all over the internet.”

“I hope Thor doesn’t see this,” Loki muttered, flipping through the pictures.

“Why?” Tony asked through his mouthful of pizza.

“Because he would recognize me. I borrowed the face of one of our- his friends.”

“Oh.” This was getting better and better. “Which one?”

“An annoying womanizer,” Loki said with a hint of disdain. “I thought it would be perfect for the occasion. Let’s hope Fandral never hears about this, because it would only serve to make him even more annoyingly smug than he is now.”

“Are you telling me that I publicly made out with one of your Asgardian friends?” Tony gave him a look.

“…Essentially yes,” Loki admitted.

Tony’s eyebrows shot up.

“And what about all the other people you have impersonated? Were they also from Asgard?”

Loki didn’t quite meet his eyes, using the pretence of choosing the next pizza slice to avoid looking at Tony. “Most of them were, yes. It is easier to imitate someone you know than to make up entirely new faces.”

Tony crossed his arms. “So you’re telling me I’ve basically made out with half of Asgard.” He waited for Loki’s reluctant nod. “Well, it could be worse,” Tony said. “At least you chose people who were hot.”

That earned him an amused chuckle and Loki relaxed a bit, reaching for another slice.

“Does nothing truly faze you?” the demigod asked incredulously. “Anyone else would be horrified or uncomfortable.”

“Hey, I was the one who came up with this game,” Tony reminded him. “If I didn’t think I could handle it, I wouldn’t have suggested it. Besides, you’ve got pretty good taste, if your selection is anything to go by. Trust me, kissing a few good-looking strangers is hardly a hardship for me.”

“Very well,” Loki said, a small smile pulling at his lips as he met Tony’s gaze. “We should probably aim to be a little more discreet the next time. It wouldn’t do to alert my brother to my presence.”

Tony shot him a smirk. “I guess we’ll just have to try a little harder.” His eyes lit up a second later as a mad, brilliant idea flickered to life in his mind.
“Hey,” he said with forced casualness that fooled no one. “Can you do an invisibility spell?”

Loki’s answering grin could have powered his arc reactor for a year.

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“I got you the Doombot you wanted,” Pepper announced over the phone a week later. “It took about a million phone calls and the promise of a new Quinjet for the Avengers, but I managed to convince Fury to give you one of the robots to study.”

“Yes!” Tony did a little victory dance, ignoring the concerned glances his bots sent his way. They should be used to his random bursts of madness by now. “You’re the best! Remind me to give you a raise.”

“I already gave myself a raise,” she said dryly.

Tony grinned. “That’s the spirit. So, when is it going to arrive here?”

There was a small pause on the other side of the line.

“The Doombot is in New York. Fury refuses to ship it over the states for you, so you will have to come to New York, if you want to study it.”

“I could ship it here myself,” Tony offered, but he was already suspecting that wasn’t an option.

“He doesn’t want it out of SHIELD’s sight,” Pepper said. “He refuses to budge on this. Believe me, I already tried.”

“Damn.” This news put a bit of a damper on Tony’s mood. “Looks like I’ll just have to go to New York, then. Can’t say I’m looking forward to it.”

“Tony-”

“I know, I know, I should talk to a shrink about it. You already told me that like a million times,” Tony cut her off before she could say anything. They’d had that particular argument enough times already. “I’ll talk to Bruce, ok?”

“He’s not a psychologist,” Pepper pointed out.

“He might as well be,” Tony said. “He’s some sort of Buddha Zen master or something. If anyone has their shit figured out, it’s him.” He muttered a few curses under his breath, trying to juggle a coffee cup, a blowtorch, and a box of spare parts all at once.

Pepper must have sensed something, because her tone changed from long-suffering to mildly worried.

“Tony? How long have you been awake?”

Tony paused, trying to remember. “What day is it?”

“Exactly,” Pepper said. “You will run yourself into the ground if you don’t take care of yourself. I don’t have the time to call you every five hours to remind you to eat.”

“You don’t have to,” Tony said. That’s what Loki was for - sneakily leaving pizza boxes and containers of Chinese around the workshop for Tony to find and wolf down. “Really, I’m fine.”
“If you say so.” She didn’t sound terribly convinced. “Anyway, I have a meeting in five minutes, so I have to go. Get some sleep. I don’t want you accidentally setting yourself on fire again.”

“Hey! That only happened once!” Tony protested, but he was smiling.

“Once is still too many,” she shot back. “Good luck with the Doombot.”

“Thanks, Pep,” he told her before she could hang up. “You’re the best.”

“Yes, I am. Bye, Tony.”

He hung up, only to find Loki watching him from his chair in the corner. Tony hadn’t even noticed him come in.

“Good news?” he asked.

“Yeah. “Tony nodded. “Pepper managed to get that Doombot for me. If I’m lucky, I should be able to finally figure out how they work. The only problem is that I have to go to New York again.”

“You don’t look very happy about that,” Loki said, perceptive as always.

Tony shrugged, trying not to show how much he hated the thought of having to go back to New York. “It’s not a big deal, really. I should be gone for a week, two tops. You can use the time to go travelling or something.” He turned his back on Loki and started tinkering with a random engine part to avoid looking at him.

“Or I could go with you,” Loki spoke up behind him, taking Tony aback a little with the offer.

“That’s…not a very good idea. If any of the Avengers wandered in and saw you lurking around the Tower, we would both be in deep shit.”

“I have my means of staying undetected,” Loki informed him, not the slightest bit concerned. “A few simple illusions should take care of that, should the need arise.”

“I’m not gonna talk you out of that, am I?” Tony said, already sensing defeat. Loki could be stubborn at the worst of times. His coming to New York would be dangerous and probably inconvenient as hell for them both, but if he was dead set on coming, there wasn’t much Tony could do about it.

“No,” Loki announced smugly.

Tony sighed. “All right, help me pack this up. You can’t fly on the plane with me, but I trust you know where the penthouse is, right?”

“I do.”

“Awesome,” Tony said in resignation. “See you in New York.”

***

New York was the same as ever – loud, smelly, full of cars and people, but most of all it was cold as hell. February had just begun and a new wave of snow had fallen the day before, coating the city in a three-inch thick layer of dirty brown sludge. Tony tried not to shiver as he walked from his private jet to the car. The temperature difference between Malibu and New York was massive and his body was having trouble adjusting to the sudden cold. At least the car waiting for him was nice and toasty, providing a welcome refuge from the biting air outside.
He arrived to the Avengers Tower, only to find the living quarters mostly deserted; apparently, Barton was on a mission somewhere exotic and Steve and Natasha had temporarily relocated to D.C. to be closer to the SHIELD headquarters. Thor was back in London, which only left Bruce, who seemed quite happy to see Tony. They spent Tony’s first evening in New York by geeking out in the lab while Bruce shared his ideas on how to reanimate the Doombot that SHIELD had lent them.

The thing was, SHIELD did provide a Doombot for them to study – but it was broken. It had a big dent in the upper part, probably caused by a hit from Thor’s hammer. Also, unlike the hand in Tony’s Malibu workshop, this was a completely different class of robot – smaller, more compact, and with less complex programming – it looked like one of the little bastards who had swarmed Hulk before Tony had arrived on the scene. When Tony had ordered a Doombot, he had wanted one of those Doom replicas, dammit, not a knock off R2-D2. But hey, a shitty bot was better than nothing and since it worked on the same electricity-magic combination as the others, it was as good a starting point as any.

Tony’s first step was to take it apart to study the inner mechanics. He needed to know how these things worked before he could do anything else like reanimating it or trying to reprogram it to listen to him. There was a reason why SHIELD stored only non-functional bots – those bastards were fucking vicious. If this little bastard were on, it could tear apart his workshop in a matter of seconds. Tony had to be sure he could contain it before he could even think about turning it on.

As promised, Loki arrived to the Tower two days later, materializing in the penthouse in the middle of an evening. Tony briefly looked away from the Doombot schematics he was studying on the large screen that JARVIS was projecting into the air for him.

“Hey,” he greeted the guy, pushing a few wires around on the design. “Malibu got too dull for you?”

Loki gave him a small smile, coming closer.

“Hard at work as always, I see,” he said, studying the design. “Is this what you asked them for?”

“Not quite, but it will do,” Tony said. “You’re lucky, by the way. Bruce is the only one home right now. And no, you can’t provoke him,” he continued before Loki could get any ideas. “I like my floor as it is. No renovations necessary.”

Loki smirked. “I was not planning on that. One encounter with the beast was more than enough for me.” He cocked his head. “I assume he is helping you develop the weapon against the metallic creatures.”

“Yeah, he is,” Tony told him. “He had some great ideas I can use for it. It will be another day or two before I can try putting it together and turning it on, but I think we’re on the right track.”

“And what happens if you animate it and find out you were wrong?”

“Then I’ll hope like hell that I can get to my suit before it kills me.” Tony shrugged, unconcerned. “I’ve fought these things before. Their strength is in numbers. One should be easy enough to handle.”

Loki gave him a doubtful look but didn’t say anything else. Instead he picked up an apple from the fruit bowl on the coffee table and bit into it.

“How long do you estimate this is going to take you?”

“A week?” Tony guessed. “Maybe two? Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten about your armor. This is just a side project, but I want to get it done in case that guy shows up again. It’s been over two
months since our last fight. He’s kept a low profile lately, which is never good. I’m expecting him to show up soon.”

“Why? Is he so predictable?” Loki asked.

“I’m releasing a new StarkPhone next week. I made sure to point out how great and advanced it is, totally better than anything Europe can produce. He’ll be pissed as hell. If I’m right, he will show up in a few days to kick my ass and brag about how much better he is than me.”

“You’re baiting him,” Loki actually looked amused by the notion.

“A little, yeah.” Tony grinned. “It’s not my problem that his ego can’t handle a little competition.”

“He almost killed you last time, and yet you still decide to provoke him.” Loki shook his head a little. “You really like to play with fire, don’t you?”

“How did you think I ended up sleeping with you?” Tony said, shutting down the screen. “You’re a guy who can shoot fire from his hands. You can’t get much more literal than that.”

“I haven’t heard you protesting yet.” Loki vanished the rest of the apple, then crossed the last few feet between them and straddled Tony’s lap, propping his hands on the back of the couch on either side of Tony’s head. He leaned his head down and gave him a long, slow kiss before bending to whisper in Tony’s ear “Or are you?”

“Nope,” Tony said, lifting his hands to grip Loki’s waist. “Totally no protests here.”

“Good,” Loki kissed him again, a little harder this time. “I would be very disappointed to hear that.”

“I bet,” Tony said, sliding his hands under Loki’s tunic. “Actually, the magic can be pretty handy. Especially for things like teleporting us right into the bedroom.” He gave Loki a hopeful look.

The next second he found himself on his back in the middle of his bed, with Loki leaning over him. The demigod was wearing a very self-satisfied smile.

“Like this?” he asked smugly, moving back a little to pull down Tony’s pants.

“Yeah, just like that,” Tony said before he dragged him into another kiss.

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It took another five days of studying the designs before Tony finally figured out how the Doombots worked. Putting it back together was a piece of cake, the only tricky part was to create the device that would help him turn the Doombots against their creator.

The plan was simple – cut of their power supply first and shut them down, then switch to a new source that would tune them to Tony’s signal. He felt fairly confident that he would be able to make them do what he wanted. He just needed to block Doom’s signal for long enough to give them the time to switch sides.

He based the new anti-Doom device on his magic blocker, modifying it a little to have it perform two functions instead of one. When he finally put it together, he was hungry and filthy and hadn’t slept for three days, but at last he felt like he had made some progress.

Tony decided to activate the Doombot in one of his more isolated labs – if the device didn’t work and the Doombot tried to wreak havoc, at least it wouldn’t destroy any of his equipment. He had
managed to convince Bruce to wait for the results somewhere else, because he didn’t want to risk having him Hulk out and tear down half the skyscraper if the test didn’t work out. Bruce had been a great help with the experiment, but this particular phase was better done alone.

Or, almost alone. Loki had insisted on being present for the test, wanting to see how Tony would fare. To be honest, Tony didn’t really mind. The Doombot made him a little nervous, so having some reinforcements in the workshop with him wasn’t so bad.

Tony checked the finished Doombot one last time, making sure to put it in the middle of a large, empty space. He picked up his modified magic convertor from the nearby table and went to stand next to Loki, clearing his throat.

“Well, let’s see how this goes.”

He nodded at the demigod, who sent out a jolt of lightning from his palm, kickstarting the Doombot. Tony could have done that himself with a modified Tesla coil, but he wanted the bot to have its magic from a different source before Tony cut him off.

It worked.

The bot came alive, lifting up to hover a foot off the ground. Before it could orient itself and attack them, Tony hurriedly pushed the first button on his box, sending out a brief magic-killing impulse. Loki gritted his teeth next to him but didn’t say anything. The bot fell down with a thud.

A second later Tony pushed the other button, which was supposed to supply the bot with a facsimile of the signal Doom himself used to control them. The bot beeped back to life, lifting up again. It turned towards Tony, hovering in place.

“Awaiting your orders, Master.”

It took all of Tony’s restraint not to whoop in victory. He merely grinned, making sure to sound authoritative when he spoke.

“All right, Doombot, your first order is to fly a lap around this room.” Better to start off with something easy.

The Doombot lifted obediently and started to circle the room. It had only flown a few feet, however, when it stopped in midair, jerking a little.


“Shit!” Tony froze, frantically looking around. The damn thing was going to explode in less than three seconds and the nearest metal table he could use as a cover was a good fifteen feet away. There was no way he could make it on time.

“Stark!” Loki shouted. Before Tony could think of other alternative, Loki yanked him to the ground, covering him with his body. He managed to activate some sort of protective magic barrier just as the Doombot exploded, making the whole building shake.

Tony lay on the floor in the aftermath of the explosion, breathing heavily. If Loki hadn’t protected him, he would be dead. The demigod was propped on all fours above him, his eyes wide as he looked down on Tony.

“You’re an idiot,” he told Tony, his voice a little shaky.
“Yeah,” Tony agreed for once. “That was…not good.”

He would have lain there for a bit longer, just to get over the shock, but he was interrupted by a distant, very familiar roar. He and Loki exchanged a glance, the demigod going a little pale.

“I think we have a problem,” Tony said.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the kudos and comments you guys keep sending my way! I’m so happy for your continuing support. The lighter chapters are over and from the next chapter on we’ll be going back towards the plot again. I hope you like the story so far and will keep on reading. (There are still at least 20 chapters to go!)

Chapter 12 will be posted on next Friday, February 6.
Nightmares

Chapter Summary

In which Tony has to deal with an unexpected crisis. Twice.

Chapter Notes

As always, a huge thank you belongs to my amazing beta InsanitssxCreation, who gave me wonderful feedback on this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I think we have a problem,” Tony said. It was probably the understatement of the century, but right now he really couldn’t care about semantics. Mostly he needed to find the Hulk ASAP, before he smashed his way out of the tower and started destroying half of New York. He pushed at Loki’s chest, trying to make him sit up.

“Come on, let me up,” Tony said urgently, jumping to his feet as soon as Loki moved back.

“What are you going to do?” Loki wanted to know, following him out of the room.

Tony’s legs were a little shaky from all the adrenaline and the shock of almost dying again, but he started running anyway, heading in the direction where he’d last heard Hulk roar. If he was right in his guess, the green guy should still be in Bruce’s lab, two floors below them. With some luck they might still find him there.

Loki kept pace with him effortlessly, wearing a disturbed expression. Tony was just about to climb down the last flight of stairs (he didn’t trust the elevator to be safe right now) when Loki caught him by the arm, pulling him back to face him.

“What are you planning to do?” Loki asked again.

“I’m going after him,” Tony said. “I need to catch him before he destroys my tower.”

“You cannot face him on your own. The beast will kill you!”

Tony pulled his arm out of Loki’s grip. “I don’t have a choice. The faster I get to him, the better chance I have of calming him down and convincing him to stay here.”

He started down the stairs, taking two at a time.

“It’s madness!” Loki hissed, still following. “He will crush you like a worm.”

“Well, there’s nobody else around to do it, so I have to try anyway,” Tony told him. “Wait here. I don’t want to piss him off even more than he is already.”

Before Loki could protest, Tony slipped around him and went down the corridor, walking a little
more cautiously. He could hear the Hulk grunting and smashing things right around the corner, which meant he hadn’t left the Tower yet. Good.

On the other hand, it also meant that Tony was about to go face a pissed off Hulk armorless and empty handed. Metaphors about little rabbits facing wild lions and bears suddenly popped into his head.

Tony stopped right outside the door to one of the labs and took a deep breath before he called out, “Hulk? Buddy? Are you in there?”

He got another angry roar in answer.

“It’s me, Tony,” he continued. “Remember me, big guy? You saved me when I was falling from that portal.” He took a few cautious steps towards the entrance. “I’m going to come in, alright? Please don’t kill me.”

*Please don’t kill me* turned into a mantra in his mind as he carefully peaked around the corner before moving inside the doorway so that Hulk could see him. The guy was standing in the middle of the lab, surrounded by overturned tables and smashed equipment. He paused his rampage when Tony appeared in the doorway, watching the newcomer mistrustfully.

“Hi,” Tony said, slowly raising his arms to show him that he wasn’t carrying anything. “Sorry for the explosion earlier. I know it scared you. It surprised me, too. I was doing an experiment that went badly.”

Hulk watched him for a moment before snorting. “Hulk hate explosions.” His fist crushed the microscope that he was holding, bending it beyond recognition, but otherwise he remained still, waiting to see what Tony would do.

“I know, buddy,” Tony said, grateful that the green guy didn’t look particularly murderous. Bruce had done a great job trying to calm him down over the years. “I’m really sorry about that. Look, can we please get out of this lab? This is Bruce’s lab and he won’t be happy when he gets back and discovers that you destroyed all of his experiments.”

That got him a roar that made Tony’s heart skip several beats.

“Please don’t do that again. You know - the roaring bit. I’ve already had a heart attack once and it wasn’t pleasant, I really don’t need another one.”

“Hulk hate experiment!” the green guy announced, glaring at the lab equipment. He punctuated his words by grabbing a nearby stool and slamming it against one of the tables.

“I know,” Tony said again. It took all of his willpower to keep his voice even. “But Bruce likes them, remember? He will be sad. So please, try not to smash anything more, you’ll make him sad.”

All things considered, this was going pretty well. Tony had half expected to get smeared into a wall in the first five seconds. That the Hulk was willing to hold a conversation was pretty good, actually.

Nevertheless, Tony still felt really close to pissing his pants. He had no idea how Natasha did this on the regular. His respect for her grew enormously.

The Hulk was still watching him, so Tony continued speaking, still keeping his hands in the air above his shoulders.

“Hey, how about we walk out of here and go watch some cartoons, all right? I can play you a few
reruns of Tom and Jerry, how about that?”

This time the large green face actually brightened a bit.

“Hulk watch cartoons?”

“Yeah, you can watch cartoons, big guy. I’ve got them right here, you just need to follow me. Can you do that?” Hulk nodded. “And no smashing, please,” Tony added, backing out carefully to avoid turning his back on the guy. “I really like this tower, I would hate to see it smashed to bits again.”

Slowly, carefully, Tony managed to coax him out of the lab and into the corridor beyond. Luckily for him one of the Avenger common rooms was just a few dozen feet away, so unless the Hulk had already smashed the TV in there, there was a good chance that Tony would be able to get him to sit down and watch the cartoons. Hulk loved cartoons, which the Avengers had managed to discover by chance during one of Bruce’s unexpected Hulkouts a few years back. The hardest thing was always to convince him to stop smashing and sit down.

Tony crabwalked his way down the hallway, moving slowly to make sure that the Hulk didn’t see him as a threat. He kept his back to the wall and hands in the air, trying to make himself look as small and harmless as possible. From the corner of his eye he glimpsed Loki watching them from behind the corner, but couldn’t acknowledge him, because all his focus was on the big green mass of heaving muscles in front of him. Tony tried to make sure that there were always at least ten feet of space between them, but he knew all too well just how fast that guy could be. If he got even a whiff of suspicion about Tony’s motives, Tony would be toast.

“That’s it,” Tony praised him as he backed down the corridor. “We’re almost there. If you want, I can even get you some ice cream from the kitchen. You like strawberry, right?” It was times like these that Tony really loved his memory for being able to store all the random crap people said around him.

The Hulk nodded enthusiastically. “Hulk love ice cream.”

“That’s great,” Tony gave him a smile, hoping that it didn’t look half as terrified as he felt. “That’s it,” he said again, getting a glimpse of the living room. The room looked undamaged, the TV intact. Thank fuck.

“Come on,” he encouraged him, stopping by the large black sofa. He laid his hand on the backrest, using it as an anchor to keep his legs from giving out. “Do you want me to sit down with you, or should I get the ice cream first?”

“Ice cream!” Hulk ordered, smashing his fist down on the coffee table, which promptly broke into several pieces.

The unexpected movement made Tony jump two feet back and raise his hands again. “What did I tell you about the smashing? All right, let’s get you some of those cartoons. JARVIS?” he asked, hoping like hell that the explosion hadn’t fucked with his AI system.

“Yes, sir?” JARVIS answered, to Tony’s enormous relief.

“Could you play some cartoons for our green friend here?”

“Hulk watch cartoons!” The Hulk followed Tony’s order with his own.

“Certainly, sir,” JARVIS said, turning the TV on. Five seconds later the theme song for Tom and Jerry started playing and Tony sighed in relief when the green guy sat down on the couch to watch.
The sofa sagged a little under his weight, but held, the steel rods inside doing their job of holding the furniture together. Tony had specifically designed it with the Hulk in mind and was pleased to see that it worked. Too bad he was too freaked out right now to be able to admire his feat of engineering properly.

“I’ll go get you that ice cream, ok?” he asked carefully, still making sure he was within the Hulk’s field of vision. When the guy nodded, Tony turned around and slowly walked to the adjacent kitchen, where he leaned on the nearest counter as soon as he was out of sight, his legs almost giving out from under him.

Jesus Christ, that had been terrifying. Facing the Hulk without the protection of his armor, without the possibility of getting out in a second, was utterly nerve-racking. Tony closed his eyes and took several deep breaths to calm his furiously beating heart, silently counting to twenty. Then he took one last, bracing breath, pushed himself upright and went to fish out the huge steel spoon they kept around for the Hulk in one of the drawers. As he was pulling out three containers of ice cream from the freezer, he suddenly felt intensely grateful that JARVIS kept stock of the groceries. Tony didn’t want to imagine the meltdown that would ensue if it turned out that they were out of strawberry ice cream.

He walked slowly back to the common room, making sure to put the ice cream buckets on display.

“Hey, buddy!” he said cheerfully. “Look what I found! Ice cream! What do you want me to do with it?”

“Sit!” The Hulk ordered, leaving Tony no choice but to join the guy on the sofa. He put the buckets and Hulk’s spoon on the couch between them and the Hulk immediately picked up one of the strawberry flavored ones, tearing off the lid. “Ice-cream!” he exclaimed happily, making Tony glad that he had basically the mentality of a preschooler. He shuddered to think what would happen if the Hulk ever developed higher forms of intelligence.

Since it seemed that the guy was determined to have Tony watch cartoons with him, Tony just reached for the one bucket of chocolate ice cream he had brought and settled down on the sofa. It usually took about an hour for the Hulk to change back once he had calmed down. Tony hoped like hell it would be soon. The guy might look content now, but it was still super stressful to sit within reach of that huge green hand.

It took almost half an hour before the guy finally started to shrink down. The moment the change started, Tony put away his ice cream and fished out a blanket from underneath the cushions, handing it to Bruce as soon as he changed. After all the years, they were all used to seeing the guy naked, but it was still easier to give him the opportunity to cover up a bit.

Bruce took the offered blanket, wrapping it around himself as he looked around to survey the damage. His eyes slid over the broken coffee table and the empty buckets of ice-cream before finally landing on Tony.

“Some party, huh?” he said with a self-deprecating smile.

“Yeah, you could say that,” Tony said, grateful that his friend was back to normal.

“What happened?”

Tony grimaced. “I had an accident and then you had one.”

“Oh.” Bruce frowned, sorting out his memories. “I think I remember an explosion...?” He gave Tony...
“Yeah, you remember right. The Doombot experiment didn’t work out. Turns out he has them rigged against tampering. If someone else tries to control them, they blow up.”

“Oh. That’s not good.” Bruce looked disappointed. “Are you all right?” he asked, giving Tony a quick once-over to make sure he wasn’t injured.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “I managed to hightail out of there before it blew up, so I’m fine. You had it worse than me.”

“I got caught off guard,” Bruce said. “I’m sorry you had to deal with him.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony told him, “I managed. Your lab is smashed to bits, though.”

“Better the lab than your head. It’s a good thing the Other Guy likes you.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Thank god for that.”

“You did really well,” Bruce said, giving him a smile. “He’s not an easy guy to handle.”

“Takes one to know one.” Tony shot him a grin, even if it felt a little forced. “Hey, I think I’m gonna go check out the lab to make sure the damn bot doesn’t reassemble itself and kill us in our sleep. You gonna be all right here?”

“Yes. I think I’m going to make myself some tea and meditate for a bit. It always takes me a while to calm down after a change.”

“Right. I’ll leave you to it, then,” Tony said. “If you need anything, JARVIS can let me know.”

“I know,” Bruce told him. “Thank you for doing this.”

“No problem.” Tony got up from the sofa and walked out, keeping his legs steady by sheer force of will. Once he was certain he was out of Bruce’s sight (and earshot), he leaned on the wall by the staircase and slid down to sit on the floor, letting his head fall back against the plaster.

Jesus Christ. That had been terrifying. Probably the scariest thing Tony had ever done, and that was counting the first time he went for a flight in his Mark II suit and almost smashed himself after the armor froze.

Loki was right. He was insane.

Speaking of Loki - the guy suddenly appeared out of thin air and grabbed Tony’s arm, teleporting them upstairs into the penthouse. They ended up rematerializing near the bar, so Tony used the opportunity to go and pour himself a strong drink because, hell, he really needed one right now. He kicked the first one back then poured a second one. Loki was watching him from a few feet away, looking pissed. Tony sighed.

“All right. You look like you want to yell at me. Go ahead.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Loki snarled. “The beast could have killed you the moment you stepped inside the room.”

“I know,” Tony said with a calm he didn’t feel, “but he didn’t.”

“Is that supposed to be reassuring?” the demigod shot back, giving Tony a sudden flashback to his
arguments with Pepper.

“Look.” Tony turned to face him fully. “Steve or Natasha would normally be the ones to try and calm him down, but since they are on a mission somewhere, the task fell to me. I couldn’t let him wander around New York. He would cause more damage than half of your army combined.”

“That still doesn’t mean you had to face him unarmed—” Loki argued.

“The big guy hates guns,” Tony cut him off. “And threats. Plus, he knows me. If I sent in some random SHIELD personnel, he would have smashed them to bits.”

Loki sighed, some of the anger draining out of him.

“Why do you always have to play the hero?” he asked, but it sounded more like a rhetorical question than an accusation.

“Because there’s nobody else around to do it,” Tony said simply. He drained his glass, setting it on the bar. “Sometimes being the good guy means doing things nobody else is willing to do.”

“That does not mean I have to like it,” Loki said, coming closer.

“No,” Tony told him. “You don’t have to like it. You just have to accept it. This is who I am, what I do. I’m not going to change because someone says I should. Believe me, people have already tried that. Nobody succeeded.”

“I have no doubt about that. You can be awfully stubborn at the worst times.”

Tony gave him a grin. “It’s part of my charm.”

“Yes, it is,” Loki told him. Before Tony could come up with an answer to that, the demigod stepped close to him, pulling him into a tight hug. “Nevertheless,” he murmured against Tony’s hair, “try not to go near that beast again. I do not wish to see you die by his hand.”

“I’ll try?” Tony said tentatively, a little weirded out by the sudden affection. Still, the hug was nice, so he lifted his arms and wrapped them around Loki’s back in return. “I can’t guarantee anything, though.”

Only now, when the physical closeness forced him to pay more attention to what his body was doing, he realized that he was shaking a little. Probably a delayed reaction to the explosion and dealing with the Hulk. And, all right, the hug was very nice. Plus, he’d probably needed one, after the hour he’d just had. It suddenly occurred to him that he might not be the only one in need of a hug – after all, Loki had been just as surprised by the explosion as he was.

Surely, nobody was going to mind if they hugged for a few minutes longer.

Loki sighed softly, running his hands over Tony’s back.

“He has no idea how much he frightens you, does he?” he asked quietly a moment later. He didn’t have to specify who he was talking about.

“I think he does,” Tony said. “It’s probably the reason why he’s so nice to me all the time. He doesn’t want me kicking him out of the tower.” Which reminded him. “Hey, why are you being so nice to me?” he asked, pulling back. Now that he thought about it, the whole deal with a hug was a bit weird.
“Do I need a reason?” Loki frowned. Tony made a step back, breaking the contact.

“No, I guess not,” he said, sounding hesitant. “It just makes me feel like you have some ulterior motive, or you’re plotting something and want to distract me from noticing.”

Affection had always been a conditional thing in Tony’s experience – be clever enough, hard-working enough and maybe Father will notice you enough to talk to you about robots for a while. His mother had been distant, too busy with parties and luncheons to pay attention to him, so the occasional absent-minded pat on the head he got from her felt like Christmas. Later, much later Tony had learned that if he smiled long enough at someone, there was a high chance they would sleep with him.

The vast majority of people in his life only spoke to him when they wanted something, which always made him suspicious of the few who claimed to have no ulterior motive. They existed, of course – Pepper, Rhodey, even Steve – but they never bothered to stick around for longer periods of time. To be honest, Tony didn’t blame them.

So, all this served to immediately put him on alert when Loki claimed to have no hidden motives for his sudden affection. He was the God of Lies, for fuck’s sake, there had to be one, somewhere.

Loki’s face fell a little, but he covered it up a second later. “Has anybody told you you’re awfully paranoid?”

“Yeah,” Tony said with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “It’s one of my best traits. Anyway, I need to go check the workshop before the Doombot reassembles itself and kills us all. Thanks for the hug.”

And he turned on his heel and left Loki standing there, feeling a bit like a dick for brushing him aside. But what other choice did he have? He couldn’t let him get too close.

Nothing good ever happened when people got close to Tony.

***

The darkness was pressing on him from all sides, making it impossible to see. He was stumbling down a narrow corridor, trying to find his way out of the cave. Every step was a struggle, the heavy Mark I suit weighing him down. There was a faint light at the end of the corridor, but he couldn’t reach it. Instead there was gunfire everywhere and the sound of footsteps coming closer and closer.

He tried to run, but the suit was too heavy on him, so he could only plod along, trying to escape from his invisible pursuers. The more he tried to run, the closer the steps got, but they never came close enough for him to see. His heart was pounding in his chest, the arc reactor going into overdrive to try and compensate for the armor’s failing mechanisms.

Finally, the end of the tunnel was within reach. Tony could see the sunlight pouring through, welcoming him into safety. He felt a surge of new energy pour into his limbs at the sight and ran the last few steps, eager to get out of the oppressing underground caves. The sun washed over his face, reaching out to him. He made the last step, walking out into the sunlight, but the moment he stepped over the threshold, the sunlight disappeared, along with the Mark I suit and the cave. Instead he found himself floating in the same alien space he had seen when he’d flown through the portal made by the Tesseract.

It was cold and quiet, so quiet, and he couldn’t breathe. There was no air and with every breath he tried to take, he was suffocating even further. His lungs burned, his hands were freezing and he
could almost feel his heart slowing down beat by beat. Just when he thought things couldn’t possibly get any worse, Obadiah Stane suddenly appeared, floating in the air before him. He watched Tony struggle for air, laughing. Then, when Tony felt like he was going to pass out any second, he reached out and before Tony could do anything, he pulled the reactor out of his chest. Again. He weighed it in his hand, the blue light washing over his face as he shot Tony a disdainful look.

“Who are you trying to fool, Tony?” he asked derisively. “You will never be good enough.”

Tony woke up with a ragged gasp, panting for air. It took him almost a minute to notice that he was clawing at his arc reactor with both hands, tearing his shirt to shreds. Slowly, deliberately, he forced his hands to cease their frantic movements, laying a palm over the arc reactor to convince his mind that it was really there. A second later he realized that JARVIS was talking to him, his voice penetrating the cloud of panic surrounding Tony’s brain.

“It’s 3:26 a.m. on February 11 and you are currently in New York in your penthouse in Stark Tower. Are you with me yet, sir, or should I continue?”

Tony took a deep breath, trying to calm down a bit.

“Thanks, JARVIS. I’m awake now,” he told the AI, trying to ignore the note of hysteria he could hear in his voice.

He slid his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, putting his head in his hands. “So much for sleep.” Less than three hours, too. Fuck.

The nightmare had taken him by surprise, but it shouldn’t have, really – he hadn’t had one for weeks, but New York always brought them back eventually. It had been only a matter of time before he got another one and the incident with the Hulk had been the last straw needed to set it off.

He used to get nightmares regularly after Afghanistan and later the attack on New York, but they had slowed down over the last couple of years. Now he only got them a few times a year and when he did, it was always a variation on the same theme – the cave, the portal, helplessness…

Still, no matter how many times he had them, he never got used to them. They always shook him to the core, preying on his darkest fears. And, with all the shit he’d seen over the past few years, there were more than enough of those.

Tony ran a shaking hand through his hair, trying to pat the bedhead down a little bit. “How are the calculations for the helicarrier project going along, JARVIS? Think it could use some input from me?”

“There is still 8% remaining before the final assembly is complete, sir. No input is necessary at present. There is however the Stark patent that you promised Miss Potts you will have ready by next Wednesday.”

“Oh yeah,” Tony tried to remember. “The…jet engine, was it? I’ll have a look at it.”

“Sir,” JARVIS’s voice came a little softer. “It would be advisable if you talked to someone about-”

“No,” Tony cut him off. “I’m not doing this.”

“Captain Rogers is currently in the gym. I am sure he would be understanding.”

“Steve is back?” He must have arrived just a few hours ago. “Anyway, that’s not the point. I’m not talking to Captain America about this. He would tell Fury, who would use it as a handy excuse to
"boot me off the team."

"Or," a velvety voice drawled behind him, making him jump a foot in surprise, "you could simply try talking to the man who is already in your bed."

"Jesus fuck," Tony spun around to look at the half-naked demigod lounging on his bed. "You’re here?"

"Where else should I be?" Loki raised an eyebrow.

Tony had gone to sleep late, crawling half-drunk into an empty bed, because Loki had disappeared right after their discussion in the penthouse and hadn’t shown up for the rest of the day. As it turned out, he hadn’t gone far.

"You weren’t watching me sleep, I hope," Tony quipped, trying to insert a little levity into the situation and also to divert attention from the fact that his hands were still shaking.

Loki gave him an incredulous look. "Of course not. I was asleep. Until you woke me up with your thrashing."

"Sorry for that," Tony muttered, turning away. Before he could start to walk away, however, the demigod caught him by the wrist.

"Where do you think you’re going?" Loki said, his eyes looking way too alert for such an early morning hour.

"To the workshop, probably," Tony answered, but he didn’t try to pull his hand out of Loki’s grasp.

"And what are you planning to do there? Stare into space? Try to blow yourself up again?" There was a hint of snideness in his voice that made Tony think that he still wasn’t over that Doombot accident.

"I don’t know." Tony shrugged, finally shaking off Loki’s hold. "Something productive."

He walked over to the wardrobe to get a new shirt, because the one he was wearing had long tears in it that made him look like he had been attacked by a rogue werewolf. When he took the shirt off, he found that he had managed to scratch his skin in several places as well. The scratches weren’t deep, but his nails had still managed to draw blood. All right, this needed to be washed off.

With the new shirt in hand, Tony walked over to the en-suite bathroom, splashing some cold water on his face to wake himself up a bit. He dipped a towel on the water and cleaned his chest next, grimacing a little when the swipe of the fabric made the scratches sting unpleasantly. He patted them dry and pulled on the new shirt, intent on finding a pair of pants in the bedroom and spending the rest of the night (and possibly the next two, three days as well) in the workshop.

Tony came back to the bedroom and started looking for a pair of spare pants. Before he could pull them on, however, Loki’s voice froze him in his tracks.

"There was darkness when I fell from the Bifrost," he said quietly, drawing Tony’s attention. A quick glance revealed that he was still on the bed, reclining against the headboard. "I drifted through space for what felt like eternity. Asgard vanished from my sight, becoming no more than a distant memory. At first there were colours, a thousand stars swirling in their eternal dance, but the longer I fell, the greater the darkness became."

By this time, Tony had forgotten all about his plans for getting dressed. He turned to watch Loki as
he told the story, but the demigod wasn’t looking at him – instead he was staring at the ceiling, his eyes a million miles away. His voice held a vaguely dream-like quality, like he was telling a story that had happened to someone else a long time ago.

“It was dark, and cold,” Loki continued. “Colder than anything you can imagine. I am a creature born on a forsaken world of eternal darkness and even my heart froze in my chest from the chill. I was lost, suspended over an endlessness that threatened to swallow me whole. I looked into the abyss and the abyss looked back with a thousand lidless eyes that burned themselves into my brain. I had fallen deep between the branches of Yggdrasil and discovered horrors that were never meant to be seen.”

“How did you get out of there?” Tony couldn’t help but ask. A shadow crossed Loki’s face, his eyes focusing back on the present.

“I was found,” he said in a tight voice. “The events of the following months did much to make me wish that I had not been.”

And, wow, that was pretty fascinating. It also confirmed some of what Tony had already suspected about Loki’s motives both for the attack on New York and his sudden desire to have an armor that would make him invincible. Outwardly, he didn’t show anything, dropping the pants onto the floor.

Instead of leaving the room as he had planned, Tony walked over to the large window. Loki had just told him a hugely personal thing, so it was only fair that he reciprocate. Still, he didn’t have to look at him while he did it.

Tony gazed out at the pulsing city below, grounding himself in the familiar sight of life. He clasped his hands together behind his back, trying to assume a comfortable pose. The darkness in the room almost helped him believe that he was alone when he started speaking.

“I don’t get the nightmares much. Well, not anymore, anyway, and when I do, they tend to be pretty predictable, really.” Maybe Loki would get bored and let it drop.

“Tell me about them,” Loki said. Or maybe not.

Tony took a deep breath, trying to keep his voice even and unaffected, but his left hand was gripping his right wrist with enough force to bruise it a bit.

“Sometimes I’m back in Afghanistan, being drowned in a barrel of water. The more I struggle, the more water I swallow, until the live wires in my chest touch the surface of the water and electrocute me. Sometimes they cut out my tongue and I choke to death on the blood. Other times, someone tears out the wires from my chest and I slowly bleed out before going into cardiac arrest, locked away in a corner of some filthy cave dozens of feet underground.

“Sometimes it’s not Afghanistan, but New York – I don’t get to the bomb in time and it explodes and wipes out the city, or I fall out of the tower and smash against the sidewalk.” He lifted a hand, tangling it in the fabric of his shirt over the arc reactor. “Today I escaped from the cave, only to fly through the portal and into the space, where I slowly suffocated.” There was no need to mention Obadiah, because that was a can of worms he really didn’t wish to open right now.

Tony turned his head, only to find Loki watching him intently. “Have you ever seen the space on the other side of the portal?” Tony asked him. “It’s so cold there.”

“I have seen it, yes,” Loki said slowly. He looked up, meeting Tony’s eyes. He didn’t have to say anything more – all the horror of that place was written deep in his gaze. Tony suddenly didn’t want
to know how long Loki had spent there. He himself had almost gone mad just from his brief visit through the portal. He couldn’t imagine staying there for hours, days, weeks. It was a small miracle that Loki was still capable of forming coherent sentences after all that.

“Come back to bed,” Loki said after a minute or so, offering a hand to Tony, who took it without hesitation. He let Loki pull him on the mattress, lying down on his side so that the demigod could press himself against his back, wrapping an arm around his waist. They had never touched much outside of sex, but after the day and night they’d just had, he suspected he wasn’t the only one who could use a little human contact. Even if this contact wasn’t strictly speaking human.

Loki flicked his fingers and the covers rose from where they’d ended up tangled in the foot of the bed, covering them both neatly.

“I’m not sure I will be able to fall asleep again,” Tony confessed into the darkness. Loki moved even closer, burying his nose in Tony’s hair.

“You have been awake for more than three days in a row,” Loki said. “You need to rest. As do I,” he added quietly.

“All right,” Tony conceded, settling a little more comfortably into the pillow. Hell – if he didn’t manage to fall asleep in the next hour, he could always sneak out and go back to work. But even as he thought that, he could already feel his muscles getting heavy, his mind slowing down.

The last thing he heard before his brain finally shut down was a soft whisper in his ear.

“Sleep. You’re safe here.”

And, for the first time in months, Tony slept through the night.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

I hoped you liked this chapter, guys, because it’s one of my personal favourites. It was one of the most fulfilling to work on and I enjoyed writing every line.

My work on this has slowed down a bit, because I’m battling a minor burn-out, but chapter 18 is almost finished. Hopefully I’ll be able to pick up my writing pace before I run out of finished stuff to post, because I would hate to leave you guys hanging. Your feedback helps a lot. I always get a huge grin whenever there’s a new comment on this, so thank you for supporting me! I really appreciate it :)

Chapter 13 will be posted on next Friday, February 13.
Boombots

Chapter Summary

In which Magneto hates kittens and Tony is ATTACKED by random CAPSLOCK of DOOM.

Chapter Notes

As always, a huge thank you belongs to my beta InsanitysxCreation! Special shoutout also goes to the wonderful Ariana Deralte, who was kind enough to send me some comics with Doctor Doom. Thank you, Ariana! They were very helpful :)

And now, just in time for Valentine's Day, Chapter 13:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony had no idea when it had happened, but sometime over the past few weeks he and Loki had managed to become friends, or at least something suspiciously close to that.

The thought hit him when they were eating breakfast together in the penthouse kitchen the day after the explosion. Loki was sitting at the table next to him, telling him a funny story about one of the pranks he’d played on Thor as a child, and Tony suddenly realized how completely at ease he felt with the whole situation.

Sure, they had been living in the same house for weeks now, but it was one thing to grudgingly tolerate someone’s presence because they were a superpowered overlord who could zap you out of existence with the snap of their fingers, and another to spend time with someone because you actually liked them.

Somehow, in the span of a few months, Loki had gone from a former adversary and sort-of business partner to a friend/fuck-buddy. The demigod had managed to worm himself into Tony’s life and Tony hadn’t even noticed. He had never liked people intruding on his space and hanging around when he was trying to work, but in Loki’s case, he found that he didn’t really mind. The guy knew when to leave Tony alone, but most importantly – unlike Tony’s other friends – he actually seemed to enjoy spending time with Tony.

That was the thing that threw Tony the most, because nobody enjoyed spending time with Tony, if they had a choice. Sure, he was popular at parties and people sucked up to him because he was rich and famous – but once they weren’t actually paid to tolerate him, most people ran away as soon as they could. There were a few exceptions, of course, like Rhodey and Pepper, but even they didn’t spend much time with Tony. Pepper was busy running the company and Rhodey was currently somewhere in the Middle East, trying to diffuse the tensions between locals and the American troops stationed there.

Tony thought it probably said something about him, when his best friend only visited him a few times a year.
Loki, however, seemed to be sticking around for the time being. It may have all started because of the armor, but Tony had a feeling that this thing between them had stopped being about that a while ago. Sure, Tony still worked on it in his spare time, but the urgency to finish it as soon as possible had sort of...disappeared. Loki didn’t seem to be in any hurry to leave and Tony didn’t feel compelled to throw him out anymore.

So Loki kept hanging around, eating Tony’s food and entertaining him with tales about his childhood in Asgard. It was...oddly nice, actually, to have someone stay with him like this. Tony tried not to analyze it too much, this weird relationship they had, because he liked the easy, comfortable routine of work and sex they had fallen into over the past six weeks.

This was one of the reasons why he got thrown for a loop a few days later when he wandered into the Avenger common room, only to find Bruce and Steve sitting at the table together, watching him expectantly.

“So, Tony,” Steve said, “what are your plans for today?”

Tony halted in the doorway, wary of the sudden interest. “Work on the magic blocker, draw up a new design for the Mark XII repulsors, eat a lot of pizza,” persuade Loki for a quickie on one of the workbenches... But that probably wasn’t what they wanted to hear, judging by their faces. “Why do you ask? Am I supposed to have any plans? What day is it?”

Bruce and Steve exchanged a look.

“It’s Valentine’s Day!” Steve informed him cheerfully.

Tony’s face fell. “Oh.” He hated Valentine’s Day, because it only served to remind him of his own inability to maintain a functional romantic relationship. “The plans still stand. Only now I’m going to make sure something explodes before I have that pizza.”

He turned to leave, but got a sudden idea. Turning back around, he fished his wallet out of his pocket and pulled out a random credit card, putting it on the table before Bruce.

“Go and have a nice lunch with Betty. Don’t think I don’t know that she’s in New York. Take her out for a date. You too, Cap, go out, have fun. I’m buying.”

“What about you, Tony?” Bruce asked before Tony could disappear into the elevator. Tony shot them a grin.

“I’m gonna go send a Valentine’s card to Magneto. I bet he just loves this holiday.” That made them both chuckle and gave him the opportunity to disappear from their well-meaning grasp. The guys were nice, really, and meant well, but Tony really wasn’t in the mood to discuss his own relationship situation with them.

Especially when he himself had no idea what he was doing with that.

Actually, sending a card to Magneto wasn’t such a bad plan. It would entertain him for a while, if nothing else. He picked up one of his tablets and sank down into his favorite armchair in the penthouse living room, bracing himself for the avalanche of hearts and tacky colors that exploded over his screen when he loaded the internet.

“What are you doing?” Loki asked when he wandered into the room ten minutes later.

“Trolling supervillains,” Tony answered, hitting send on cards for both Magneto and Doctor Doom. It might finally piss Doom off enough to come out and play. Or so Tony hoped. Sappy holidays
were always better with explosions. “Do you think Magneto likes kittens?”

Loki’s eyebrows flew up. “I never had the pleasure to meet the man personally, but from what I have heard, he does not seem like the type.”

“Too bad,” Tony told him. “I already sent them. Extra fluffy kittens with sky blue eyes and the tackiest pink bows I could find.” He showed Loki the screen, which had the picture of the aforementioned kittens accompanied by a sea of tacky hearts and a message written in a curly golden script:

_Happy Valentine’s Day, you grumpy old fart!_
_So sorry I missed your latest rendezvous with the Avengers. Hope you’ll make it up to me soon._
_Love_
_Iron Man xoxo_

“I sent one to Doom as well,” Tony said, shutting down the tablet.

“I don’t get one?” Loki asked, propping himself on the armrest of Tony’s armchair.

“No,” Tony said resolutely. “They are for active supervillains only. You’re dead, remember? You’re not even supposed to be here. Besides, you haven’t been very evil lately, so I’m afraid you don’t qualify.”

“I could always kill someone,” Loki suggested helpfully.

“Nope,” Tony said. “No killing, remember? We have a deal.”

Loki made a long face. “You never let me have any fun.”

“Not the murderous kind of fun, no.” Tony gave Loki a sidelong glance. “You do know that I only forbid you to cause mayhem on _Earth_, right? Technically you could go to any of those other realms and do whatever you want there and it would be none of my business.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Those are some impressive loopholes. If you’re not careful, someone might find a way to exploit them.”

Tony just shrugged. “Exploit away. It’s none of my concern if you go and turn half of Alfheim into unicorns and flying pigs. I’m just looking after my own interests here.”

“Careful,” Loki warned with a grin. “You might give me ideas.”

“And we wouldn’t want that, would we?” Tony asked, rising from the armchair to walk over to the window. “I think we can expect a visit from our favorite pompous Tin Man-knockoff soon. He would never miss a good party. Plus, the sale numbers of the newest StarkPhone are through the roof. He must be so pissed at me right now.”

“You’re baiting him on purpose,” Loki said. “Why? I thought your device against him was not ready yet.”

Tony shrugged. “I don’t know if it will ever be. I’ve been tinkering with it, but so far I haven’t been able to find a way to make the bots switch sides permanently. I can control them for a minute, two, tops, but they will always explode, no matter what I do.” The moment the bots detected a sign of tampering with their orders, they initiated a self-destruct sequence. It was such an intrinsic part of their programming that he hadn’t been able to change it yet. And when he couldn’t do it in a lab, the chance of him doing it mid-fight was astronomically low.
“So what are you planning to do?”

“Who says I actually have to keep them?” Tony told him with a grin.

“Oh,” Loki said, his eyes lighting up a bit as he picked up on Tony’s plan. “That could be potentially entertaining, provided that he appears at all. Are you sure he will rise up to your taunts?”

“Sure? No,” Tony said. “But he’s just arrogant enough to come here and try to beat me. It’s always better to have the fight on my own terms, on my home turf, than to get surprised in the middle of the night by a sneak attack. Let’s wait and see what happens.”

They didn’t even have to wait long. Barely four hours had passed when Tony received a call from Steve in his workshop.

“Tony? Suit up. We’ve got a situation in Lower Manhattan. A portal just opened in a middle of a park on Canal Street. It looks like one of Doom’s.”

Tony had to fight not to grin when he answered, keeping his voice perfectly professional, even as he did a quiet fist bump.

“Right. I’m on it. ETA five minutes. Where are you, by the way?”

“Just coming back to the Tower.”

“You know what?” Tony said, already heading for the suit. “Don’t sweat it. I’m pretty sure I can handle this one myself.”

“Are you sure?” Steve sounded doubtful. “The last time didn’t end well for you.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “But now I’ve got a little surprise for him. I don’t think he’ll like it very much.”

“If you say so. Bruce is on his way to the portal right now. I’ll come back you up as soon as I can.”

“Roger that,” Tony said, muting the connection on his side as the last armor pieces snapped into place around him. He left the faceplate up and turned to Loki, who was looking at him expectantly.

“Well?”

“What did I tell you?” Tony said smugly. “He’s like clockwork. So predictable. So pissy, too.”

His earpiece chirped again.

“Latest reports say he’s got two dozen Doombots with him,” Steve warned him. “Be careful.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Tony told him before he ended the call. He gave Loki a grin full of giddy anticipation. “Oh boy, he must really hate me.”

“You’re looking forward to this,” Loki said with a smirk of his own.

“Damn right I am,” Tony said. “I’ve been working on this thing for weeks. I’m gonna blast the bastard out of the sky.” He would have rubbed his hands in anticipation, if he weren’t wearing the repulsor gloves. Instead he picked up the new magic blocker, giving it one last quick check.

The final version of the device was smaller than he had first expected - about the size of the Tesseract, with a sleek, metallic black surface. The design was deceptively primitive: a cube with two buttons on top, so simple that a toddler could use it. It was kind of amazing, really, how much
power could be contained in something so small - and all that was needed to control it was a single touch of a finger. The only thing left now was to turn it on and watch the magic happen.

“Aren’t you heroes supposed to be above petty vengeance?” Loki asked. “You look terribly gleeful for someone who is only going into battle to protect the innocents.” He was enjoying this way too much.

“Hey, just because I fight for the good guys, doesn’t mean that I can’t have fun!” Tony protested. With the black box checked out and securely attached to the armor, he was ready to go. He walked out of the workshop, heading for the nearest window. “You know,” he said over his shoulder, “I would actually feel sorry for the guy, if he hadn’t broken my arm the last time.”

Armor at the ready, he had JARVIS open one of the tall glass windows for him. Tony slapped down the faceplate, waiting for the HUD display to come to life. He gave Loki a quick salute before lifting into the air.

“Showtime.”

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It took him less than a minute to get to the scene. He stopped to hover above one of the nearby condo buildings, taking a few seconds to survey the scene. The bots were swarming around the park, shooting at the passing cars, which were frantically trying to get away. Civilians had mostly run away, so the only people around were a few curious morons who were recording the scene on their phones. Tony hated those types with passion, because they were always the first ones who needed to be saved from getting hit by a stray flying car or a random piece of building.

Luckily for him, the Doombots were still mostly clustered around the portal, apparently waiting for the Avengers to arrive, which was great, because this way he might be actually able to get them all with a single pulse from the anti-magic box. Doom was hovering in the middle of it all, his cape billowing dramatically in the wind. Probably another one of Doom’s robotic clones, Tony thought, kicking up the repulsors to get to the scene.

He sped the last hundred meters, opening his comms for the others.

“This right here is why I hate New York, guys,” he said when he got within Doom’s earshot. “Someone is always trying to destroy it.”

“IRON MAN!” Doom rumbled. “We meet again!”

“Did you like my card?” Tony asked, landing a few dozen feet away. “I took special care when I was choosing it for you.”

“You Americans and your ridiculous traditions,” he said scornfully. He gave the city around him a disdainful look – well, as disdainful as an expressionless metal mask could manage. “I HATE how you always try to spread your influence, flooding my country with your FILTH!”

“Hey dude, you don’t have to celebrate Valentine’s Day if you don’t want to,” Tony said. “Nobody’s forcing you. Besides, it’s not my fault if you’re cranky because you’re not getting laid.”

“SILENCE, whelp! CEASE your blabber! I came here to CONQUER your pathetic city, not to banter with the likes of you. You are BENEATH me. I have already DEFEATED you once, Iron Man, and I will do so AGAIN. You may stall all you want, but you will never PREVAIL over DOOM!”
“You’re not doing a very good job with the conquering if you ask me,” Tony said, just to be a pain in the ass. He lazily dodged a lightning bolt from Doom’s hand. “Besides, there’s only one cheap Iron Man knock off here today, and it’s not me. “

“I AM DOOM! I will NOT be treated with disrespect!”

“Yeah, yeah, we already heard that,” Tony dismissed him. He was getting bored with the banter. Bad guy speeches were all so alike. So dramatic and predictable. And so boring. “Hey, wanna see my new magic trick?” He asked, pulling out the black box. “It’s pretty great.”

Before Doom could do anything else (like crush Tony to bits), Tony raised his hand and pushed the first button on the magic controller. He had deliberately made the button big and red, just to fuck with the guy.

It worked like a charm. The moment he activated the magic-killing field, all the swarm-bots fell out of the sky, landing with metallic thuds on the ground all around them. Doom whipped around, watching the carnage with something akin to horror.

“What have you DONE to my creations?” he asked, sounding mighty pissed.

“Wow. You’re actually the real deal,” Tony marveled. When they had fought “Doctor Doom” before, he always turned out to be just a copy of its creator. Tony had counted on this guy going down with the rest, but apparently he was the real Doom for once. “Well, that makes this even better. Let’s see what happens if I do this,” Tony continued, pushing the button again.

The lightning that had started to gather in Doom’s hands died a swift and shameful death.

“Oops, wrong button. Sorry,” Tony said, fighting back the urge to cackle with glee at the sight of Doom looking utterly baffled. “It’s actually this one.” He pushed the other button and as one the Doombots flickered back to life, lifting up to hover creepily a few feet above ground.

“Well, that’s more like it,” Tony said with satisfaction.

“I will CRUSH you like a BUG!” Doom roared, looking a bit pathetic as he flailed around, trying to get the Doombots back under his control.

“Promises, promises.” The adrenaline was surging through Tony’s veins, making his blood dance with anticipation.

The Doombots turned to Tony, following the signal emitted by the device in his hand. He ignored Doom frothing in the background and concentrated on them instead.

“What are the orders, Master?” The robots asked Tony in spooky unison. Tony switched over to his Doom Voice Generator, which was one of the tweaks he had added to his suit after the whole fiasco with the exploding bot.

“HE IS AN IMPOSTOR,” he told them in his best dramatic voice, pointing at Doctor Doom. “KILL HIM!”

The bots turned as one, zeroing in on Doctor Doom.

“That’s more like it,” Tony said smugly, switching back to his normal voice.

“WHAT are you DOING?” Doom yelled, sounding a bit panicked now as his own creations swarmed him from all sides. “You are supposed to be attacking Iron Man, NOT me!” But even as he
said that, the bots started shooting lighting at him. He tried first to get them back under his control, then to block the attacks, but they only grew in intensity. When one of the bots hit him hard enough to dent his chest plate, Doom finally turned around and hurriedly flew back to the portal, escaping through and abandoning most of his Doombot army on the other side. The portal closed before Tony could do anything about it, leaving him alone with two dozen hypnotized Doombots.

“Well,” Tony drawled, “that was quick.”

“Is he gone?” Steve asked over the comm.

“Yup,” Tony confirmed. “Both of you guys can go back to your dates or whatever it was you were doing before.”

“Stark.” That was Fury. “What on Earth did you do?”

“Uh, I defeated the guy? I may have also stolen his bots in the process,” Tony said, feeling a little giddy about how well this had gone.

“Sir,” JARVIS chimed. “The impulse from your device will only last another forty-five seconds. It is suggested that you relocate the robots to avoid causing further property damage.”

“Right,” Tony said, remembering the self-destructive subroutine. “All right, guys,” he told the bots. “Gather round.”

“What are you doing, Iron Man?” Fury asked over the comm.

“Well, apparently now I have a Doombot army of my own. I’m trying to decide what to do with them.”

He muted the comm from his side, turning to the bots. “Okay, Doombots. We’re going on a little trip. Follow me.”

Tony lifted up from the ground and started speeding towards the bay. The mouth of the Hudson River wasn’t far from here and he was pretty sure he could get the bots over the water before they exploded.

“Iron Man, stand down and hand the Doombots over to SHIELD,” Fury said.

“Sorry, no can do, Nick,” Tony told him, the countdown on his HUD showing him that he had less than 15 seconds to get the bots away from the city. “I’ve got a better idea.”

“I gave you an order,” Fury said, starting to sound pissed.

“And I’ve decided to ignore it. Sorry. I’ve got a bit of a situation over here. Talk to you later.” He killed the comms, focusing all his attention of finding the best spot for the detonation. He was already over the harbor, the Doombots still flying behind him like baby ducks following their mother. Thank god.

They passed the Statue of Liberty, rising high into the air. Tony figured that if he detonated them about half a mile above the center of the Upper Bay, he should be in the clear. He had almost managed to arrive at the right spot when the self-destruct sequence initiated, the bots zeroing in on him with creepy accuracy.

He led them in flight high over the harbor, waiting until the last possible second before he suddenly killed all propulsors and fell like a rock through the throng of bots just before they exploded. Tony let
himself fall two hundred feet before he halted mid-air, propulsors kicking back to life and stabilizing
him in place. He took a minute to pause and just admire the fireworks. Oh yes, the explosion was
glorious.

The Doombots detonated all at once, washing over him with a deafening roar of sound and color. Tony cut off all audio from outside to mute the ruckus the exploding robots were causing, keeping
video only. On a whim, he spread out his arms, grinning like a madman as he watched the burning
parts of Doom’s creations rain out of the sky all around him.

His blood was singing, his heart beating like a drum from the excitement of his unexpected victory,
and just for a moment, he felt like a mad, destructive god, utterly invincible. Yeah, he could see why
Loki loved creating chaos so much. The feeling of power was intoxicating.

It had been a long time since he had felt like this, since he had last enjoyed pure destruction this
much. Stopping the production of weapons by Stark Industries had definitely been the best decision
Tony had ever made, but just because it had been the morally right thing to do didn’t mean that he
didn’t miss the weapon demonstrations sometimes. He might never make mass-produced weapons
again, but he’d be damned if he couldn’t have a bit of fun playing with other people’s toys.

Tony waited until all of the Doombot pieces had fallen into the water of the Hudson River, making
sure that none of them were going to fall on land and accidentally set something on fire. Once it was
clear the bots were well and truly destroyed, he fired up his propulsors and started on the short flight
back to the Tower. He had no doubt that SHIELD would fish all the Doombot pieces out of the river
as soon as they could, but those were no longer his problem. If one of the bots managed to
reassemble in the SHIELD labs and went on a rampage there, it was none of his concern. He had
already done his part by defeating them.

He landed on the landing pad of his penthouse balcony and did his customary walk down the
disassembly line, the robotic claws stripping the suit from him bit by bit until he was holding only the
anti-magic device. Loki was waiting for him on the terrace below, watching him intently. Tony
suddenly had a bizarre flashback to their meeting during the Chitauri attack on New York. Just like
back then, they each walked inside through a different door, their eyes meeting over the room.
Only this time it was different – instead of fright, Tony only felt exhilaration and excitement, still
riding the adrenaline high from the fight. This time he wasn’t trying to avoid Loki, or to stall him.
Instead of taking the detour around the bar, he put the anti-magic box on the nearest flat surface and
crossed the marble floor in the shortest line, walking over to where Loki was already waiting for him
by the large glass window overlooking the city.

Before the demigod could even open his mouth to say anything witty, Tony caught him by the lapels
of his ridiculous leather coat and dragged him down into a kiss. He poured all his excitement and
giddiness into it, letting Loki get at least a little taste of his triumph. Loki’s arms locked around his
back, pulling him close as he returned the kiss with enthusiasm, diving into Tony’s mouth. When
they surfaced for air a few minutes later, Loki’s lips were ridiculously red and there was a hint of
color in his cheeks.

“You smell like fire and victory,” he said, nosing at Tony’s temple. “I take it you were in the centre
of that explosion I just heard?”

“Oh yeah,” Tony gave him a million-dollar grin. “Where else would I be?”

“Why am I not surprised?” Loki said, but he was grinning, too. “So the device worked?”

“Yep, it worked like a charm. The guy couldn’t even conjure up a fistful of lightning once I turned it
on. When his own bots attacked him, he turned his tail and ran, leaving me there with a small army of Doombots. So I went and blasted the little bastards out of the sky.”

“It is a pity I did not get to see that,” Loki said. “It must have been a sight to behold.”

“It was,” Tony said. “But hey, you can still totally see it. I bet there was someone recording it with a smartphone from somewhere. JARVIS?” Tony asked the AI. “Has it made the news yet?”

“Yes, sir. All major news channels are broadcasting the footage from the fight.”

He shot Loki a look. “What did I tell you?”

They both turned to the opposite wall, where JARVIS turned on a screen for them. A grainy footage that looked like it had been taken by a low-grade smartphone played on CNN, capturing the moment of Tony’s detonation of the Doombots. Tony couldn’t help but grin when he saw the explosion of fire and colors that burst out on the screen.

“Hm, it looks even better from afar than it did from the middle,” he said with satisfaction, leaning back against the bar to watch the screen. Loki was watching the scene on TV with rapt attention, something like hunger in his expression.

“Fury will probably be calling me any minute now,” Tony said, pouring himself a celebratory glass of whisky as the picture switched to another low-quality recording of the fight with Doom. “I bet he’s pissed.”

“Why would he be angry with you?” Loki asked in puzzlement. “You just managed to overcome a worthy adversary.”

“I may have also stolen a few dozen Doombots from him while I was at it,” Tony said. “He tried to claim them for SHIELD, but I told him to fuck off. I don’t think he’s happy about that.”

He barely finished the sentence when JARVIS spoke up:

“Sir? Director Fury is on the line. Should I accept his call for you?”

“What did I tell you?” Tony cocked an eyebrow at Loki. To JARVIS, he said: “Might as well get this over with. Patch him through. Audio only.”

“Stark,” Fury ground out.

“Nick!” Tony greeted him with fake enthusiasm. “What a pleasure to hear your voice again.”

“What the hell was that?”

“Boombots,” Tony told him gleefully, his grin wide enough to make him look slightly deranged. “Did you like them?”

“Cut the bullshit, Stark. Do you have any idea what you have done?” Fury sounded pissed as hell.

Tony grinned. “Uh, gave the city a nice fireworks display?”

“You went against my express orders, stole a squadron of Doombots, and detonated them over the Statue of Liberty.” The words came out like a barrage of bullets. “Do you have any idea how that looked?”

“Um, awesome?” Tony asked. He met Loki’s amused gaze over the bar, shooting him a grin. “I’ve
I’ll tell you what it looked like,” Fury said, going on a roll. “It looked like you lost your fucking mind and went on a goddamn rampage. I’ve got multiple security agencies calling me to ask what the hell you were thinking.”

Tony sighed, his previous good mood rapidly slipping away under the barrage of negativity. He reached for his glass and poured himself another drink, leaning on the bar.

“I’ll tell you what I was thinking. I was thinking that I have to get the bots away from the city before they explode. They are programmed with a self-destruct sequence that initiates when they are tampered with. I haven’t yet found a way to make them switch sides permanently. If I hadn’t taken them away, they would have torn apart half of Manhattan.”

“That may as well be true, but did you have to detonate them over the Statue of Liberty of all places? Not even the real supervillains have ever done anything like that.”

“They haven’t?” Tony asked, feeling very disappointed with the lack of imagination of his adversaries. “Too bad for them. They’re certainly missing out, because it was awesome.”

Tony could almost picture Fury grinding his teeth. There was a brief moment of silence before Fury spoke again.

“Stark, do you know that I could have you classified as a terrorist?”

Tony blinked. That had certainly been unexpected.

“What the- Why on Earth would you do that?”

“Because the stunt you just pulled looked hell of a lot like a terrorist attack,” Fury snapped. “You took a squadron of Doombots on a fucking joyride, only to blow them up over an iconic landmark in an explosion that made half the tourists on the island piss their pants in fright. It’s been barely half an hour since the explosion and already we are getting flooded with lawsuits for emotional damages. The media are starting to call your sanity into question. Again.”

“So what?” Tony shrugged. “We won. The day is saved, New York lives to see another day. Who gives a shit how I did it?”

“The people care,” Fury growled. “We already spend a fortune to keep a good PR image, because the constant fights with bad guys are doing little to endear your team to the general populace. I don’t need you acting like a loose cannon on top of that. So I’m suspending you from the team,” Fury said, taking Tony by surprise. “Two weeks, starting immediately.”

“You’re laying me off?” Tony couldn’t believe it.

“Only temporarily. We need time to clean up the mess you’ve made.”

“I win you a fight over your current number one enemy and you pay me back by kicking me off the team?” Tony asked, tossing back the rest of his glass because damn, this was some Twilight Zone-level shit. “That’s a real dick move on your part.”

“Stark, don’t be a drama queen,” Fury said.

“No, this is not me being a drama queen,” Tony told him, starting to get pissed off. “You’ve never seen me in full drama queen mode and believe me, you don’t want to see that.” He poured himself
another glass of whisky, ignoring Loki’s warning look. Before Fury could say anything else, he
continued. “Let’s go over the facts here, shall we?” He picked up the glass, coming closer to the
screen with Fury’s photo. “The way I see it, I’ve just managed to single-handedly defeat Doctor
Doom, a dangerous supervillain who has been a pain in our collective asses for years now. I
managed to do so without a single casualty and with minimal destruction of property. It was the
quickest, most effective fight we’ve ever had with anyone and instead of patting me on the back, you
suspend me? Bullshit. So tell me: what is this really about?”

There was no way he was getting suspended from the team for blowing up a few Doombots. There
had to be something else at play here that he couldn’t see yet.

Fury sighed, loud enough to be heard over the speaker.

“The brass has a problem with the way the fight went down. To be precise, there really wasn’t a
fight. You just came over and wiped the floor with him. He’s one of our most formidable enemies
and you made him fold like a house of cards in less than five minutes.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Tony asked, still not sure what the problem was. “A show of strength to
serve as a deterrent against future attacks? It will show the bad guys not to fuck with us.”

“It becomes a problem when the outcome makes you look like a schoolyard bully,” Fury argued.
“We’re supposed to be the good guys here. The only thing missing from your little light show was
maniacal laughter.”

Tony took a moment to think over everything that had just been said. The conclusion made him
laugh out loud, in that incredulous way that one does when the situation is just too ridiculous to be
real.

“Are you telling me that you’re suspending me because I defeated him too easily? What else was I
supposed to do? Let him kill some people first before defeating him? Let him thrash half of New
York, just to make it more realistic? What the fuck do you guys want from me?”

“You didn’t have to make such a spectacle of it.”

Tony laughed again, because this was just too much.

“Let me get this straight. You’re asking me to make less of a spectacle. Me, the guy who held an
expo that had his name plastered on everything. Oh, this is just too good.”

“Sir,” JARVIS interrupted them. “Captain Rogers and Doctor Banner are now present in the Tower
and headed in your direction. They will be here soon.”

Tony had been so focused on his phone call that he hadn’t even noticed them arrive to the Tower.
The elevator was already moving, the two men coming their way. Loki shot the elevator door a look
and promptly vanished without a trace. Just a few seconds after he disappeared, the elevator stopped
and Bruce and Steve stepped out of it. Their eyes flicked between the screen with Fury’s static
picture and Tony’s face. Tony didn’t miss the way they both straightened up when they picked up on
Tony’s bad mood.

“What’s going on here?” Steve asked, walking over to Tony’s side. Tony gave him his best fake
smile.

“Apparently I’m getting kicked off the team because I’m a horrible bully who made Doctor Doom
cry like a little girl. Also, because the people now think I’m a terrorist, or something. Looks like
some of them didn’t appreciate my little fireworks display.”
“You mean the explosion?” Bruce asked. “I was only a few blocks away from the harbor when it went off. It was one hell of a boom.”

“You kicked him off the team?” Steve asked at the same time, rounding on Fury, despite the Director not being able to see him.

“Nobody is getting kicked off the team,” Fury said, trying to diffuse the situation before Steve got angry. Steve rarely got angry, but when he did (usually on behalf of perceived injustice), it was always one hell of a show. Fury knew that better than anyone, hence the sudden backpedalling. “This is only a temporary suspension. We just need him to lay low while we sort out the PR mess on our hands.”

“Explosion or not, Tony just defeated Doctor Doom,” Steve insisted. “Why on Earth would you suspend him for that?”

Tony spoke up before Fury could. “He’s suspending me because I defeated Doom too easily. Apparently I should have let a few dozen people die first to make the fight more realistic.”

“I never said that,” Fury pointed out.

“You might as well have,” Tony told him. “Also, you’re pissed off because I stole the bots from SHIELD and you can’t stash them away somewhere. Bad idea, by the way. If you take them in, they will turn your headquarters to dust. Don’t think I don’t know that you have agents fishing Doombot parts out of the water as we speak.”

“We wouldn’t have a problem in the first place, if you shared the technology you just used against Doom with us.”

“Nope, no way,” Tony said. “That box is my baby. I spent weeks working on it. There’s no fucking way I’m handing it over to SHIELD. Also, it only works for a few minutes. You wouldn’t be able to keep the suckers in check with it permanently.”

“The Avengers fall under the SHIELD supervision.” Fury didn’t back off an inch. “Since you developed the technology to be used by the Avengers, we could always claim it as SHIELD property.”

“You can try,” Tony said, a steely undertone entering his voice. “But I’m telling you now – you ever come anywhere near my stuff and you might find that most of your funding has mysteriously disappeared. All those accounts my dear old dad set up when he founded SHIELD?” Tony ignored the surprised looks from Steve and Bruce. “They’re technically my money now. Let’s see how well those pretty helicarriers of yours get off the ground with 60% of your funding gone.”

“Is that a threat, Mr. Stark?” Fury said, sounding completely unimpressed.

“No, just a simple observation,” Tony said pleasantly. “If you ever kick me out of the Avengers, you can go back to begging the government for funds. Let’s see how many plasma weapons they are willing to pay for.”

“We have other resources.” Fury didn’t sound the slightest bit fazed.

“Right.” Tony didn’t even try to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. “Like Justin Hammer. Because his stuff is such great quality.”

There was another sigh from Fury’s side of the line. Tony could vividly imagine him pinching the bridge of his nose.
“I’m ending this conversation now, before you say something you will regret,” Fury said resolutely. “The two-week suspension holds. It won’t be made public knowledge, so as far as everyone is concerned, you’re still an active member of the team. Once your time is up, you can come back. Try to lay low and avoid blowing up anything for a while. The people are nervous enough as it is. And Stark?”

“Yeah?”

Fury actually hesitated a little before speaking again.

“If it makes you feel any better, the suspension was not my call. The order came from higher up. I’m just the one to carry it out.” The unspoken “even though I think it’s bullshit” was loud and clear in the subtext.

“Thanks for nothing, asshole,” Tony said once Fury hung up. He turned to his two friends who were watching him with a mix of pity and apprehension.

“So, it looks like I’m taking a holiday,” he told them, taking care to keep his anger out of his voice. He could get pissed off later, in private, but these guys didn’t deserve to be on the receiving end of his meltdown. “I hope you guys can manage without me.”

“We’ll do our best,” Steve said, not looking very happy with the situation. He walked over to the window, practically thrumming with nervous energy. He watched the street below for a moment, silently clenching his fists, but a few seconds later he whirled back to face them again, unable to stand still. “How can they suspend you for defeating Doctor Doom?” he asked in dismay. “Shouldn’t they be happy that you finally found a way to take him down?”

“No but you see, that is the problem,” Tony said, becoming animated as he walked over to the anti-magic cube. He took it in his hand, playing with it as he spoke. “I found a way to neutralize magic. One push of a button and Doom’s powerless. His armor runs on magic, as do his bots. Once you take that away, he’s just a guy in a crappy metal suit, flailing around like an idiot.”

He tossed the cube into the air, catching it carelessly.

“They didn’t suspend me to punish me. They did it because they don’t know what to do with me. After all, I’ve just proved that I can take down a fucking mage. What will be next? The mutants? Someone from Asgard?” He made it a point not to look at the corner where Loki had last stood. “He met Bruce’s eyes. “They’re fucking terrified of what I could do if I had enough time on my hands.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, I think you may be right,” Bruce said slowly, taking off his glasses to clean them with the tail of his shirt. “This whole suspension deal smells awfully fishy. They have never suspended any of us over a fight, not even me after I accidentally tore apart that town in Kansas. It makes even less sense to kick you off the team after a victory like this.” He exchanged a look with Steve. “There must be something else at play here.”

“There is,” Tony said. “I don’t know what it is yet, but I know that the SHIELD brass has been annoyed with me for years for keeping all my technology to myself, especially my suits. The higher ups don’t like that I’m basically sitting on a gold mine of potential weapons and refuse to share them. This was probably the final straw that broke the camel’s back. I wonder what they will do now to try and get me to cooperate.”

His mind immediately slid to all the underhanded tactics they could use – blackmail, bribery, theft,
maybe even torture. He certainly wouldn’t put it past them.

Steve seemed to follow his train of thought, because he gave Tony a disapproving frown.

“They wouldn’t go that far, Tony. SHIELD is not a terrorist agency. They have to follow the laws just like everyone else. Nobody can steal anything from you.”

Tony didn’t have the heart to dissuade him. After the whole clusterfuck with the nuke and the Phase II weapon plans, Tony didn’t believe a single word that came out of Fury’s mouth.

“We’ll see,” was all he said, not in the mood for another argument.

Instead of trying to convince Steve, he turned back to the TV, where the recording of the explosion was playing again, now with some talking head running a commentary. Tony watched it for the second time, still enjoying the spectacle, but this time he focused more on the overall impression. Yes, from the distance it looked a bit like he had detonated a bomb over the Statue of Liberty, but it was hardly his fault that the destructive sequence had activated so soon. He had planned to fly a little further, but the bots had had other plans.

A quick look told him that the two Avengers were watching the footage with him.

“So, what do you think?” he asked them when the news ended. “Was it really so bad?”

“The only thing missing was maniacal laughter,” Bruce commented wryly. “You should have heard yourself over the comm. You sounded about two steps away from breaking out the evil cackle when Doom went down. No wonder Fury thought you had gone on a bender.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “God forbid that I actually enjoy fighting the bad guys. You would be gleeful too if you spent weeks on end working on something, only to find that it works even better than you had expected.” He gave Steve a look. “Seriously, don’t tell me that you don’t enjoy the fights just a bit. All the adrenaline, the excitement. You wouldn’t have stayed on the team if you didn’t.”

That got him a reluctant nod from the soldier.

“There you go,” Tony told him. “This is a bit like that, only a little more cerebral. You can imagine it as a little brain orgasm, if you want.” And yeah, he never got tired of the way Steve’s cheeks tinged pink at the slightest mention of sex. “There’s a special kind of satisfaction in seeing your inventions work just as they are supposed to.”

“Still, did you have to threaten Fury over it?” Steve asked, recovering from his small bout of embarrassment far too quickly for Tony’s taste.

“No,” Tony said. “I just wanted to see what his game was. How far he was willing to go to get his hands on the box. Turns out it’s pretty damn far.” He glanced down on the black box still in his hands, making a split second decision. “That’s why I’m leaving it here with you guys,” he told them, getting two identical looks of surprise back.

“I thought you want it out of SHIELD’s hands,” Steve said, clearly confused.

“I do. And I trust you to keep it safe from them,” Tony told him. “I can’t do shit for two weeks, so in the extremely unlikely case that Doom shows up, you need all the leverage you can get. If you cut off his magic, you should be able to punch him to oblivion before the bots restart again.”

“So, how does it work?” Bruce asked. “I never got to see the final version of this.”
“Button one kills all magic in a hundred-foot radius,” Tony explained, pointing at the big red button on the top of the box. “Button two makes the Doombots switch sides, but only temporarily. You only get about a minute or two before the bots explode, so use it as best as you can. And don’t, I repeat, don’t ever hand this over to SHIELD. With their track record, they would probably turn it into some sort of a Death Ray that would vaporize entire countries out of existence. I don’t want to have that on my conscience.”

“By kill magic you mean…?” Steve gave him a questioning look, his eyes flicking between the black box and Tony’s face.

“All magic,” Tony confirmed, hoping that Loki wasn’t somewhere in the room, in case Steve decided to try it out. “I honestly have no idea if it works on Mjölnir, too, so you should probably test it with Thor before you take it out to the field for a real fight.”

“That’s a good idea,” Steve said earnestly. “I don’t think Thor would appreciate it if his hammer stopped working all of a sudden.”

“Yeah, nobody appreciates it when their hammer stops working,” Tony quipped, making Bruce snort. “Not that I would know anything about that, of course. And yes, that was a dick joke, Cap, in case you’re wondering whether you should blush,” he added and gleefully watched as Steve’s ears turned bright red. “Aw, you’re adorable,” Tony told him, earning a weak glare from the blushing soldier.

Bruce just shook his head in amusement, watching their antics. He sobered up a little when Tony handed him the black box.

“There you go. Use it well, young Padawan.”

Bruce took the box from him with some reluctance, holding it gingerly in both hands, as if it was a bomb.

“How long will this last?”

Tony shrugged. “My calculations give it at least five uses before I have to charge it again. But don’t waste the energy needlessly,” he added, before any of them could get any ideas. “You can give it another shot when Thor comes back.” And Loki isn’t in the Tower.

“All right,” Bruce agreed. “I’ll tell him to come as soon as he can, at least for a few days. It’s always better to have someone else here. I assume you’re going back to Malibu?”

He didn’t even have to ask – the answer was clearly written on Tony’s face.

“Yeah,” Tony confirmed. “I’ll leave tonight. There’s no point in me sticking around when I can’t do anything interesting here.”

“I think I’ll go back to D.C. for a bit,” Steve spoke up, surprising them both. “I’ll see if I can do anything about your situation. Maybe they will cancel the suspension if I speak to the Directors on your behalf.”

Tony wasn’t convinced that was going to work, but Steve looked so hopeful that Tony just let him. The Captain hated feeling helpless and if a hearing with the brass would make him feel better, who was he to stop him? So he just nodded, letting the Cap do his thing. Dealing with bureaucracy had never been Tony’s strong suit.

“Even if you don’t convince them, it’s not a big deal,” Tony said. “It’s just two weeks. I can use
them to work on my other projects. A little holiday isn’t going to kill me.”

“Let’s hope so. You have a special talent for getting yourself into trouble, Tony,” Steve said fondly.

“No I don’t,” Tony argued automatically, the familiarity of the good-natured argument helping to improve his mood again.

“Yes, you do,” Bruce joined in. Tony threw up his hands in surrender.

“All right, whatever. I’m clearly outnumbered here, so I’ll just shut up. Try to hold the fort while I’m gone.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Steve promised, both of them turning to leave. Just before they entered the elevator, Tony called after them.

“Oh and little a heads-up,” he waited for them to turn before continuing. “Magneto will probably stop by soon. I might have sent him a little something to spread the holiday cheer. You know how much he loves holidays.”

Bruce looked torn between exasperation and amusement. “You didn’t.”

“Oh I did,” Tony told them with a grin. “Extra fluffy kittens with lots of pink hearts.”

Bruce and Steve exchanged a helpless look.

“God help us all,” Steve said.

Tony’s laughter followed them all the way into the elevator.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is super-long compared to the rest (8400 words!), so I hope nobody minded much. I am hard at work on the rest of the story, and have almost 20 chapters finished so far.

Thank you guys so much for all the support you keep giving me! I was floored by the number of comments that I got after the last chapter. So much love for this story! It makes me incredibly happy to hear that you enjoy reading this. I'll take the time over the weekend to respond to them all, but for now I'm thanking you via the author's note.

The next chapter will be posted as always on a Friday, February 20.
Return to Malibu

Chapter Summary

“I have spent my entire life not living up to people’s expectations. I’m not about to start now.”

Chapter Notes

A huge thank you belongs as always to my beta InsanitysxCreation, for all the work she’s doing on this.

Warning: The first part of this chapter contains a (fairly explicit) sex scene. If that’s not your jam, just read until you get the beginning (it’s a build-up, you won’t miss it) and then skip to the first set of stars. The rest of you, enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Looks like we’re going back to California,” Tony said once Loki rematerialized in the penthouse.

“So it would seem,” the demigod said. He took a few steps closer, watching Tony’s face. “I must say, I’m a little surprised to see that your so called allies do not hold you in very high regard.”

“Depends on how you define regard.” Tony shrugged. “The Avengers like me well enough, as long as I don’t spend too much time with them. As for SHIELD - well, I suppose they grudgingly tolerate me. They don’t have much of a choice about that. Whether they like it or not, I’m armed and dangerous, and I’m not going anywhere anytime soon, so they might as well keep on good terms with me.”

“They are afraid of you,” Loki said, looking like he just had a revelation. He let out a small laugh. “Well, isn’t this interesting. You are widely lauded as a hero, and yet your own allies don’t trust you because they’re afraid of you. Why?” he asked wonderingly. “What are they so afraid of? You’re just one man.”

“I’m the guy with the most advanced computer A.I. on the planet,” Tony explained. “JARVIS is much more than a simple servant, you know. You’ve only seen him order pizza and take my calls for me, but that barely scratches the surface of what he can do. He’s a fully formed intelligence capable of breaking into any network on the planet. If I ever decided to weaponize him, I could cause worldwide chaos in less than ten minutes.” He took a minute to imagine it. “Do you know how many things work on electricity these days? Airports. Traffic control. News stations. Stock Exchange. Power plants. The Internet. If I messed with any of that, I would throw the world into a state of utter mayhem - and all that with just a push of a few buttons.”

“So why don’t you?” Loki cocked his head. “Why don’t you rule the world? Take it for your own, when you have such means at your disposal?” He seemed genuinely curious about it.

“Because it would be boring,” Tony said simply. “Boring and far too predictable, because it’s what
everyone is expecting.” He looked at the glass in his hand, the decades-long legacy of alcoholism and emotional baggage perfectly condensed into a few ounces of amber liquid. “I have spent my entire life not living up to people’s expectations. I’m not about to start now.”

“What do you mean?” Loki inquired.

Tony snorted, his lips pulling into a wry smile. There was no way he was going to talk about Howard, but the public opinion about him was a fairly safe topic.

“People have been waiting for me to snap ever since I came back from Afghanistan. Everyone thought I had gone crazy when I first announced that I wanted to stop making weapons. I had spent twenty years creating weapons of mass destruction, so the sudden turnabout came as a huge surprise for everyone. Most people have accepted the change since then, but there are still plenty of those who think I’ve been secretly evil all this time and I’m just waiting for the right moment to reveal my true colors.”

“And are they right?” Loki asked playfully.

“No.” Tony shook his head, leaning back against the bar. “I have no interest in becoming some sort of crazy galactic overlord. Besides, ruling the world would be far too much work. I’d rather just stick to inventing new versions of completely useless bots.”

“Are you saying that the only thing standing between you and potential world domination is your own conscience?” Loki raised an incredulous eyebrow.

“Yeah. That and the Avengers.” Tony chuckled. “I guess when you put it like that, it does sound pretty ridiculous.”

“On the contrary,” Loki argued. “I think they would be fools not to fear you.” He paused, looking contemplative. “How can you stand it to have so much power at your fingertips and not want to use it?”

Tony sighed. “I’ve seen what power can do, the way it corrupts people. Everything can be misused if you put it in the wrong hands. I used to think I was above it all, that I was righteous, just because I was selling deadly weapons to the good guys. I had no problem making weapons capable of killing thousands of people, because I naively believed that they were in safe hands.” He grimaced. “Turns out that very few people remain good guys once you give them power.”

“Your words are…surprisingly wise for someone who has only lived so shortly,” Loki said.

Tony gave a self-depreciating snort.

“Yeah no, I just have a bad tendency to ramble when I get a bit tipsy. But because my mouth tends to run 24/7 even when I’m sober, most people don’t even notice.”

He drained the rest of glass and poured himself another, silently swearing that it was going to be the last one for the day. He caught Loki’s eye over the heavy glass flask and reached for another glass, pouring one for the guy as well. He pushed it across the counter wordlessly before reaching for his own. With the glass in hand, Tony walked over to the window to enjoy the view of the city for one last time before he left.

“It’s kind of funny, when you think about it,” he said, watching the busy streets below. “Did you know that I wasn’t even supposed to be on the team in the first place?” He chuckled at Loki’s look of surprise. “Yeah, they didn’t want me in the Avengers. All things considered, it’s something of a miracle that I managed to last as long as I did.”
Loki strolled over to him, joining him to stand side by side in front of the window.

“From what I have seen, you are by far one of the most formidable warriors Midgard has to offer and your mind is unparalleled. Why wouldn’t they want you on their side?”

“Well, according to Natasha’s report, I’m a volatile, selfish alcoholic with poor impulse control who doesn’t play well with others,” Tony quoted from memory. “You know, the works. Not exactly a poster boy for the all-American hero.”

“If you lived on Asgard, the exact same qualities you just named would make you exceedingly popular there,” Loki said with a smirk. “If you were Thor, that is.” Oh, that was a burn, if Tony ever saw one. Tony shot him a grin in return.

“I don’t think my hammer-wielding skills are quite up to par for that.” He remembered his earlier conversation with the Avengers and his grin took on a playful edge. “Hey, maybe all I need is a bit of practice. You don’t happen to know about a hammer I could use for that?” He gave Loki a sidelong glance, curious to see just how much of his conversation Loki had spied on.

Loki gave him a knowing look. “I might know of another instrument you could use to hone your skills.”

“Oh really?” Tony raised an eyebrow, his eyes giving the demigod a slow once-over. “And would that particular instrument happen to reside in your pants?” God, flirting with Loki never got old. The banter that usually preceded their more interesting encounters often tended to be almost as much fun as the sex itself.

Loki’s smirk widened. “Telling you would spoil the surprise. You’ll just have to find out for yourself.” He waved his hand and both their whisky glasses disappeared, leaving Tony’s hands conveniently empty so he could reach out and hook his fingers in the waistband of Loki’s pants, pulling him closer.

“Hm, tempting,” Tony said, leaning close enough to let his breath whisper over the bare skin above Loki’s collar bone. “I think I might just take you up on that offer, especially since it comes in such a pretty package.” He ran a hand over Loki’s chest as he said that, enjoying the slow seduction. Loki’s hands lifted up to grip Tony’s hips in return, pulling the man closer. His nose grazed the edge of Tony’s jaw as he bent down to press a kiss against the side of Tony’s neck, using the faintest hint of teeth to slowly set Tony’s blood on fire..

A thought occurred to Tony a second later and he laughed out loud, causing Loki to frown and pull back a little at the sudden change of mood.

“What?” he asked, a hint of annoyance entering his voice. He got a grin in response.

“Can you imagine Steve and Bruce’s faces if they walked in and saw us right now?” Tony told him. “Steve’s head would probably explode.”

He could picture the whole scene in his head – the Avengers walking in and catching Tony in flagrante delicto with one of SHIELD’s most dangerous former enemies. That thought made Tony’s blood run just a little faster. Yeah, he had always had a bit of an exhibitionist streak. His face probably gave something away, because Loki sighed.

“I know that look,” he said. “You always make that face when you get one of your groundbreaking ideas. What is it?” He started to pull away, probably expecting Tony to storm off into the workshop to start working on some mad new design. It had happened a few times before, so it wouldn’t be all
that strange.

Tony caught Loki’s hands before he could retreat completely, wrapping them back around his waist.

“I have an idea,” he said slowly, giving Loki a look that made it clear just what kind of idea it was. Loki licked his lips, his arms unconsciously tightening around Tony.

“I’m listening.”

Tony shot a look at the window behind them, calculating distances and angles in his head.

“You know,” he began slowly. “We’re pretty high up here. I don’t think anyone can see what’s going on near that window, unless they’re flying by in a plane.”

It took Loki less than three seconds to catch on, his eyes lighting up.

“Oh. You have a very dirty mind, Mr Stark.” His voice held a healthy dose of appreciation for Tony’s creativity. As he said it, he started subtly pushing Tony backwards, steering him to the large glass window that was only a few feet away. Tony’s back hit the bullet-proof glass and Loki pressed against him, his teeth scraping Tony’s throat. Tony didn’t even have time to worry about any accidental flashbacks, because a second later Loki raised his head and caught Tony’s lips in a kiss that managed to wipe his mind clean of everything that wasn’t burning desire.

He pulled back a minute later, looking very pleased with the effect he was having on Tony.

“If your companions knew about my presence here, they would probably be very, very scandalised.”

Tony gave him a lewd grin in return. “Oh, plenty of your things have rubbed off on me, but I don’t think this is one of them.” His hands were doing a very efficient job divesting Loki of his pants. “I’ve always loved making things go boom. Why do you think I made weapons?”

“For the thrill?” Loki guessed, trailing kisses over Tony’s chest. “For the challenge of proving you’re better at it than everyone else?”

Tony’s boxers joined the rest of his clothes on the floor. Loki sank down on his knees in front of him, running his hands over Tony’s thighs in appreciation before he bent down to pay some attention to where Tony needed it most. Tony buried his hands in Loki’s mane of hair, enjoying the feel of the freshly-washed strands between his fingers and the sight of an attractive man on his knees. Loki chose that moment to look up and Tony could see that the green of his irises had been almost driven out by the desire-blown pupils, his reddened lips making him look unbelievably erotic.

Meeting Tony’s eyes, Loki gave his cock another slow, deliberate lick, grinning like a cat when Tony groaned out loud. He repeated the motion a few more times before he swallowed Tony down once more, using all the tricks in his extensive arsenal to drive him wild.

Tony was so caught up in the sensations that he barely even noticed the hand that had crept up his thigh and was now playing with his ass, fingers spreading magic lube around his entrance and circling around inside, slicking him up. He slammed his head back against the glass when two wicked fingertips brushed against his prostate, applying just the right amount of pressure to make his breath catch in his throat.
It took Tony almost half a minute to notice that Loki had pulled back from lavishing attention on Tony’s cock and was now watching the engineer with an expectant expression on his face. Right. Loki was probably waiting for an answer. To something. Too bad Tony had no idea what they’d been talking about.

“Yeah,” Tony said breathlessly, just to fill the silence while he waited for his brain to come back online. *Oh, right. Chaos. And wicked fantasies about semi-public sex.* “No matter what my friends may think, you definitely haven’t corrupted me with your evil schemes. You’d have to try a lot harder than that.”

“I could take that as a challenge,” Loki purred as he stood up. Sliding his hands under Tony’s ass, he hoisted him up and propped him against the glass. Tony wrapped his legs around Loki’s waist, burying his hands into Loki’s hair again, because *damn*, that hair was just glorious. This position never failed to turn Tony on, because even after so many weeks, he still hadn’t quite gotten used to being with someone who could hold him up like that. Having so much strength at his disposal was very, very hot. Especially when he could use it for less than honorable purposes.

“You should,” Tony told him, catching Loki’s lower lip between his teeth. “You can start by fucking me against this glass.” Pepper had never wanted to have sex in the open area of the penthouse, finding it uncomfortable and the chance of accidental exposure too risky, so Tony had actually never done anything like this here. It was high time he rectified that.

Instead of answering, Loki just entered him in one smooth stroke, sliding in as far as he could. Tony’s hands slid down to grip Loki’s shoulders, holding on for the ride.

“Oh yeah, that’s it,” Tony said, once Loki found the perfect angle. He leaned close, blowing a gust of breath over Loki’s ear. “Imagine if we were on one of the lower levels. Anybody could walk in and see us like this.” Loki’s breath caught a bit at the description, his hands tightening their grip on Tony’s ass. *Oh yes,* he loved this just as much as Tony did. Tony continued: “Or maybe some bored office workers across the street could decide to take a break and go look out of the window. And they would see us. Like this. Some of them would turn away, or call the cops, but a few might stay and watch. Enjoy the show.”

Loki sped up a bit, his lips dropping down to feast on Tony’s neck.

“What else?” he asked roughly, his voice sliding into that low register that always set Tony’s blood on fire. People usually tried to get Tony to shut up during sex, but Loki seemed to be getting off on Tony’s voice and the fantasy Tony was describing for them. “What else would happen?”

Tony tried to unscramble his brain cells for long enough to form a coherent sentence, which was getting pretty hard at this point.

“Someone might record it,” Tony muttered. “Just like the explosion today. It would probably be a crappy quality, but it would still make the internet explode. Imagine the scandal – Tony Stark caught fucking a guy on camera. It would make rounds, everybody would watch it, even if they claimed that they hadn’t. They would watch us fuck and privately envy us both because* Jesus, this is good.*” His voice broke into a moan as Loki bit down on his shoulder, thrusting even faster.

His ability to form coherent sentences left him right after that and he could only hold on for the rest of the ride, which didn’t take long. They were both wound up from the fantasy, the entire situation adding a spike of thrill and urgency to the sex. A few minutes later Loki slammed him against the glass, pressing himself close as he finished with a low groan. Tony followed him a moment later, his nails digging into Loki’s back as the orgasm washed over him, hitting him like a torrential wave. The climax was so strong that his eyesight actually short-circuited for a few seconds, leaving him utterly
breathless.

They clung to each other, feeling tired but incredibly satisfied. Loki was still holding Tony up, the mortal’s weight completely negligible when compared to his strength. Tony leaned his forehead on Loki’s shoulder and just breathed, recovering from the experience. And really, “experience” was probably the best word for it, because Loki had just managed to fulfill about three of his kinks at the same time. Not even the blonde twins from Sweden he had bedded that one time had been this good.

“I should probably blow up Doombots more often, if this is the result,” Tony muttered some time later, still sounding a little out of breath. Loki chuckled, burying his face in Tony’s hair.

“Yes, you probably should,” Loki said. “If only for the entertainment value.”

“Don’t encourage me,” Tony warned with a grin. “You might live to regret it.”

“I very much doubt that.” Loki gave him a smile. With his heartbeat almost back to normal, Tony finally released the death grip he had on Loki’s neck and put his legs back on the floor, grimacing a bit when he felt the tell-tale twinge in his lower back.

“I don’t think this is what Fury meant when he told me to take a holiday,” Tony quipped. He imagined all the different things he could do, now that he wasn’t officially under SHIELD supervision and his grin grew even wider. “Hey, do you know what else this means?”

“What?”

Tony’s grin widened.

“It means I can do whatever the hell I want.” He could just imagine the possibilities. “Oh, Fury is so going to regret this.”

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Despite his outward aura of calm and indifference (and the fantastic sex he’d just had), Tony still felt pretty pissed about Fury’s decision to suspend him from the team. He decided to take the suit for the flight back to Malibu, because he wanted to use the time in the air to sort out his thoughts about the whole clusterfuck of a day.

He had done the best he could, he was convinced of that. There was no way he could have handled the situation with Doom any better (well, he could have tried not provoking him in the first place, but the fight itself had gone as smoothly as it could have). His conduct wasn’t the problem here – it was the potential that his new invention had. Someone at SHIELD had shat their pants at the thought of Tony having this much power and wanted him gone from the scene - that much was pretty clear. The only question was – who was it? And what was going to happen next?

Tony wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

The events of the day were still on his mind several hours later when he stood in his workshop in the middle of the night, unable to focus on anything. He had planned to work, to start designing something new, but his brain refused to cooperate, fixating on useless speculations instead. Loki was upstairs, probably asleep, but Tony wasn’t in the mood to see him - in fact, he hadn’t even bothered to check up on him when he’d come back home from New York. Right now he just wanted to have a moment for himself, to sort through all the thoughts on his mind. There was no point in leaving the workshop because he knew that even if he went to bed, he wouldn’t be able to sleep anyway. He was far too keyed up for that.
In the end he decided to get a coffee, because there was no point in being awake in the middle of the night if he couldn’t have coffee. As he was waiting for the water to boil, his eyes fell on the preliminary design for the Quinjet that Pepper had promised SHIELD in exchange for the Doombot and his brain lit up, the engineer taking over. It didn’t matter that he was angry at them right now and had no intention of actually giving them anything. Designing the Quinjet would at least serve as an interesting mental exercise and would keep him busy until the swirling mass of resentment in his chest calmed down a bit.

Freshly-filled coffee mug in hand, he walked over to his desk, instructing JARVIS to project the design on a screen for him. A few minutes later he pulled up a second screen and then another, and soon he completely lost himself in running calculations and drawing models of different wing shapes. He had no idea how long he had spent working, but when he next surfaced from his creative trance, Loki was leaning on the wall next to the doorway, watching him with a pensive expression on his face.

“You didn’t come upstairs last night,” he said, once he noticed that Tony was fully aware of his surroundings again. It made Tony wonder just how long he’d been standing there.

“No, I was…busy.” Tony made an aborted motion with his hand towards the screens around him, getting distracted by trying to figure out what the hell he’d been doing. He had moved from the Quinjet onto a new project sometime around dawn and the half bottle of scotch he had consumed during the night might have been great for inspiration, but not particularly helpful when he was trying to put the pieces together now. He clapped his hands and the different designs slotted together, forming a preliminary design for a new Iron Man suit.

“Huh. So that’s what it is,” he muttered, his focus now fully on the hologram.

Tony rotated it with a gesture of his hand, noting the sleek lines and the narrow visor.

“Do you often invent things without knowing what they are?” Loki asked curiously, coming closer.

“Sometimes, yeah,” Tony admitted. “I get lost in my own head a lot. The results tend to vary. Sometimes I end up inventing total bullshit, but most of the time it’s great. A lot of my best ideas have originated this way. And this is definitely good.” He noticed something in the composition and blew up the detail on the screen. “JARVIS? Is that an anti-magic layer? Made with nanoparticles?”

“It would appear so, sir,” JARVIS answered.

“I’m a genius,” Tony said smugly. “Have I mentioned that lately?”

“Only approximately thirty-two times in the last two months,” JARVIS said in his classic dry way.

“See?” Tony said. “Genius, and so modest, too. Really, they should hold me as an example.”

“I would not recommend that, sir. I would not exactly call you a paragon of virtue”

Tony crossed his arms over his chest. “Did you just sass me, JARVIS? Was that judgment I heard in your voice?”

“You must have imagined it, sir,” JARVIS deadpanned.

“No, I didn’t,” Tony shot back. “Why do I still keep you around?”

There was a small pause.
“I think the better question would be: Why do I still put up with you? Sir,” JARVIS quipped, his typical dry humor coming through. That surprised a short laugh out of Tony.

“JARVIS?” he asked carefully. “Are you turning evil? Because if you are, I would appreciate a warning – after all, it would take me some time to dye all my suits black.” He shot Loki a look. “Or green, since that seems to be the preferred color for supervillains these days. Seriously,” he turned to the demigod, “what is it with you bad guys and green? Were you all sorted into Slytherin, or what?”

Loki sighed. “I wish I could claim that I do not know what you’re talking about.”

That gave Tony a pause.

“You’ve read Harry Potter?”

Loki shrugged.

“I have read many things during my stay here. You have quite an extensive library and I am a fast reader. Watching you work gets tedious very fast. I had to amuse myself somehow.”

“All right…?” Tony said, unsure what to think of that. He turned back to his A.I.’s interface, because dealing with the computer was easier than trying to unravel Loki’s moods. “But I mean it, JARVIS. If you’re ever planning to join the Dark Side, give me a heads-up, will you? I’d hate to be the last one to find out that my A.I. has gone on a murderous rampage and didn’t think to include me.”

Loki gave him a look. “I thought you said that you did not wish to become one of the villains, as you had put it.”

“I don’t,” Tony confirmed. “But if JARVIS ever goes rogue, I won’t have much of a choice. Everyone’s fingers will be pointing at me regardless, since ‘creating an omnipotent, evil computer program’ seems to be something straight out of the supervillain handbook. So if that happens, I might as well strap in for the ride and go out in a blaze of glory.”

“That…does sound like something you would do,” Loki said with a wry smile. “You are—” he began, but before he could say anything else, JARVIS interrupted him, this time sounding more like his usual serious self:

“Sir? Miss Potts is approaching the house.”

Tony blinked, taken aback.

“Pepper’s coming here?”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS confirmed. “She will be here in less than five minutes.”

Tony froze, trying to deal with this unexpected complication. Pepper hadn’t set foot in Tony’s Malibu house since their breakup more than a year ago. Sure, they had kept in touch via phone calls and had even seen each other a few times over the past year, but she had never come back here.

Why was she here now? And why hadn’t she told Tony that she was planning a visit?

“Do you know why she’s coming here?” Tony asked JARVIS, carefully avoiding Loki’s eyes.

“No, sir,” JARVIS answered, “but she seems to be in a bad mood.”

“Oh boy.” Tony grimaced, mentally bracing himself for the meeting. He shot Loki a pleading look. “Can you leave the house for a few hours? Go somewhere else?”
“Why?” Loki raised his chin challengingly, crossing his arms. “You never minded me being present
in the room during your conversations with your friends before.”

“This is different,” Tony said, feeling a bit awkward. He had never really discussed Pepper with
Loki before, because he had seen no reason to bring her up. She was an ex and one of his best
friends and her relationship with Tony was none of Loki’s business. Only, apparently now Loki had
decided to make it his business. Tony sighed, running a hand through his hair as he searched for the
right words.

“Pepper is…an ex-girlfriend. We used to date for a few years, but it didn’t work out. I haven’t seen
her for months, because she doesn’t come here much. Now it looks like she’s pissed off enough to
actually come for a visit, which is never a good sign.” Tony made a face, turning his back on Loki to
put away a few more incriminating things from his workbenches. “Anyway,” he said, “I don’t think
you should be here. This will be awkward enough already without you spying on us.”

Loki’s face clouded with irritation. “Why is she coming here?”

“I don’t know.” Tony threw up his hands, starting to feel annoyed with Loki’s barrage of questions.
“Probably to yell at me about the whole thing with the Doombots.” He paced around the workshop,
trying to hide all the Loki-related stuff. “God knows I haven’t had enough of that already.”

“What if it is something else?” Loki asked, a strange undertone entering his voice. Tony didn’t have
the time or the patience to try and find out what the hell he was talking about.

“Why do you care, anyway?” Tony whirled around to face him. “It’s none of your damn business
what I talk to her about.”

“I see,” Loki said icily, his face closing off.

“Sir?” JARVIS spoke up, interrupting their silent staring contest. “Miss Potts has arrived.”

Tony shot the ceiling a quick look before turning back to Loki.

“Alright, you need to go now. I don’t care where you go or what you do, just go away for a few
hours. Please?” he tacked on to the end, mostly as an afterthought.

Loki opened his mouth to say something, but the distant sound of clicking heels made him change
his mind. Instead of talking, he gave Tony one last angry look and teleported away, leaving Tony
standing alone in the middle of his workshop. Tony made one last visual sweep of the workshop to
make sure there wasn’t anything incriminating in sight before he returned back to his screens,
blowing up the new Mark XV design. On a whim, he programmed the speakers to play Bon Jovi’s
“It’s My Life”. Hey, he had never claimed to be subtle.

Half a minute later Pepper’s gorgeous legs came into view on the staircase, followed by the torso and
finally head as she walked down the stairs in one of her well-tailored skirt suits. She looked as
beautiful and immaculately put together as ever and Tony felt a brief pang at the sight of her. If
things had worked out, they might have been still together. Instead she had some new guy and he…
well, he was sleeping with Loki. He had no idea what sort of label to put on that.

She opened the glass door and walked in, looking around. Tony pretended to be engrossed in the
hologram to give her some time to adjust. From the corner of his eye he saw her open her mouth and
then close it with a frown when she recognized the song.

“Did you set this to play on purpose?” was the first thing she ended up asking.
Tony muted the music and swiveled around on his chair to finally face her.

“Maybe?” he said. “It’s fitting, don’t you think?”

Yeah, he was being kind of a dick, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. After the day he’d had yesterday, he thought he had the right to be cut some slack. He had a brief moment of hope that maybe she hadn’t come to yell at him after all, but then he saw the newspaper with the giant headline in her hand and felt his mood sink even lower.

Pepper looked like she was on a warpath - everything from her almost painfully-straight posture to the tight press of her lips made it clear that she wasn’t going to let him get away from the conversation with a few half-assed excuses. That was too bad, because after the scene with Fury, Tony really wasn’t looking forward to yet another interrogation about his methods for Doombot disposal.

It was probably too much to hope that she would let it drop.

He let out a small sigh as she marched up to his workbench and slapped a copy of a newspaper on the table in front of him. It was that day’s edition of the New York Times. The front page had a big blown up image of Iron Man hovering in midair over the Statue of Liberty, surrounded by falling debris from the exploding Doombots. The headline over it read **Tony Stark: Terrorist?**

“Care to explain this?” she asked sharply.

Tony briefly skimmed the article, finding nothing but the usual bullshit: Tony Stark…successful entrepreneur…ex-weapons manufacturer…Iron Man…potential threat?

He raised his head from the newspaper, putting on his best poker face.

“I fought a bad guy and won. They’re blowing it out of proportion,” he said, giving nothing away.

Pepper didn’t look convinced.

“I’ve been fending off calls ever since yesterday afternoon. People have been asking me about the fight, about your methods for defeating Doom, about whether you present a danger to America—”

“Have they called me a megalomaniac yet?” Tony asked glibly, cutting her off. “I always love that one.”

“This isn’t funny, Tony.” Pepper didn’t look happy with him.

“No, it kind of is,” Tony argued. “Public opinion is such a fickle thing. One day I’m a superhero, the good guy they are trusting to protect them and the next they would happily hang me from the nearest tree for not fulfilling their expectations about how I should conduct myself.”

“Well, you’re certainly not helping in this case,” Pepper said sharply, crossing her arms.

“Then tell me - what else was I supposed to do?” Tony pushed himself away from the workbench, spinning around to face her as his mask of indifference finally cracked. He’d been trying to hold his temper in check for her sake, but she wasn’t making it easy for him. “The bots are all rigged – they were going to blow up, regardless of what I did. Should I have just left them in the middle of a populated area, let them explode and level several blocks? You’ve seen what happened the last time I fought Doom. That was only one Doombot and they still had to close the street for weeks to repair the damage. Now imagine that, but multiplied by a dozen.”
He realized that his voice had raised into a shout, so he took a deep breath and turned away, going to get another coffee instead. God knew that he needed it, after the all-nighter he had just pulled.

“I didn’t know that,” Pepper said quietly behind him. There was a small beat of silence before she continued. “In fact, I have no idea what you’re doing with any of this. The media have been calling me for hours and if I don’t count the generic phrases I have repeated dozens of times in the past, I have nothing for them.”

“That’s not my problem, is it?” Tony bit out, still keeping his distance. “You should employ better PR people, if the current ones are useless.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” she said.

“Then what are you talking about?” he demanded, shooting an annoyed look in her direction before he turned back to the coffee maker.

He heard her come closer, stopping only a few feet away from him. He didn’t look at her, pretending to focus on pouring his coffee.

“I feel like I don’t know anything about you anymore, Tony,” she said, sounding a little sad. “You hardly talk to me these days and when you do, you are always distracted by a million other things. You have pulled away from me and I have no idea what to do.”

And all right, that annoyed him a little, because she had been the one to end things between them, but now she was complaining that he wasn’t sharing enough with her? Bullshit.

“You broke up with me, remember?” he said, not without a trace of bitterness. “I didn’t think you would particularly mind if I stayed away for a while.”

“Well, you are wrong about that,” she told his back. “I miss you.”

Tony closed his eyes, his hand tightening around the coffee mug.

“That’s not fair,” he told her. He tried to keep the resentment out of his voice, but didn’t entirely succeed. “You can’t just come here after a year of avoiding me and tell me that.”

“Tony-” she said helplessly, at a loss for once. He heard her come closer and then there was a short touch at his back – a tentative press of fingertips against his shoulder blade before the hand was retracted again.

“We were friends before,” she reminded him softly. “I was hoping we could be again. Is that too much to ask?”

Yes, Tony wanted to tell her. You broke my heart when you walked out on me and now you want to talk about friendship?

But he’d had enough time to think about it and he’d had to admit that with the way things were now, he would need all the friends he could get. Pepper had stood by his side for almost eighteen years. It would be the height of idiocy to drive her away now, just because he still felt resentful over the breakup.

What he needed right now was a friend and Pepper was the best one he had ever had.

Outwardly he just sighed, his shoulders dropping a little as he schooled his features into something more neutral.
“All right,” he said slowly. “I can try.” He turned around with the coffee mug in hand, meeting her eyes.

“Thank you,” she gave him a small smile. “I appreciate it.”

And he hated every minute of this, every second of this forced politeness, the careful way she was watching him, expecting him to snap or blow something up. Had she always watched him like that and he hadn’t noticed, or did yesterday’s events just put her on edge? He wasn’t sure if he wanted to know.

Instead of lingering in the moment, he moved back to his desk with the holograms.

“Why are you here?” he asked her, “really? You haven’t set foot in here since last January. Why did you fly across the states just to see me? You could have just called.”

“I wanted to see how you were,” she told him calmly, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear with an absent-minded brush of her hand. “How you really were, after everything that went down yesterday. You’re too good a liar, Tony.” She made a few steps closer, watching his face. “If I had called, you would have just lied to me. I can’t count how many times you had assured me that you were fine and then came back home with your suit wrecked.” He could still vividly remember her shocked tone of her voice when she had asked him: “Are those bullet holes?” all those years ago.

“So you’re checking up on me?”

“Someone has to,” she said.

“That’s what JARVIS is for,” he replied, turning his attention to the Quinjet schematics.

“Well, obviously he’s not doing a very good job at it,” she said bitingly, her voice rising a little.

“Why do you care?” Tony whirled around, no longer able to keep up the pretense of working.

“Pepper, you haven’t given a damn about what I do for months. Why the hell do you suddenly care now?”

“Because no one else will!” she shot back, her veneer of calm politeness finally cracking a little.

“Tony, you’ve made it your life’s mission to drive away everyone who might show the slightest bit of affection for you. You never let anyone help you! You have to do everything alone, even if it kills you.”

“Has it occurred to you that maybe I don’t want any help?” Tony asked, just in case.

“Yes, because you’re Iron Man, the noble lonesome hero who deals with everything on his own.” He had rarely heard sarcasm from her, but now she was just killing it. “Would it kill you to let anyone close, just this once?”

“I already did,” Tony reminded her. “It didn’t work out.”

“No, you didn’t,” Pepper said firmly. “You never let me in. Not really. God knows I tried, but in all the years we’ve known each other, you never let me in, Tony, you never let me close enough to help you.”

“Is that why you broke up with me?” he couldn’t help but ask.

He hadn’t really asked her before, why she had left him. He’d been so overwhelmed with the thought of Pepper leaving that day that he hadn’t even bothered to ask her why. In the end, he had
figured that it didn’t really matter – everyone left him in the end.

Her parting words - “Tony, I love you. But I can’t do this. I can’t watch you slowly destroy yourself.” – had been replaying themselves in his mind for months, even as he’d drunk himself into stupor after stupor.

But now she was here and he wanted to know. Wanted to find out why she had walked out on him after nearly three years of relationship.

“Yes,” she admitted finally. “That was part of the reason. I can’t spend my life with someone who refuses to talk to me. I thought you might open up to me over time, but you never did. Not about things that really matter.” Before he could open his mouth, she continued. “But it’s not just that. It was everything – the way you never take anything seriously, the way you keep everything to yourself, the way you would rush off at the first sign of danger…” Her eyes lingered on the nearly-empty bottle standing on his desk, the censure in her gaze loud and clear.

“And there was no point in talking to you about any of it, because you would just brush away my concerns like they were nothing.” She pursed her lips, visibly hesitating over her next words. “Do you have any idea what it’s like? To watch you go out there, time after time, without knowing if you’ll come back? To dread every time the phone rings, because they could be calling to tell me that you’re dead? To find that you had been dying for months, but never cared to tell me?” There was pain in her eyes, a shadow of old hurt and worry that she had never showed him before.

Or maybe she had, and he just hadn’t cared enough to notice it.

“I’m sorry,” he offered, feeling a little lost.

“So am I, Tony,” she said sadly. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out between us, but I couldn’t live like that. I just couldn’t. I loved you, but you refused to change anything. So I had to draw a line somewhere, had to get away while I still could.”

The unspoken before we got married hung in the air between them like a particularly ugly breed of elephant.

Yes, the thought had crossed his mind once or twice over the years, but he had never thought about it seriously – not until she had already left him. Pepper had been the only person willing to stand his presence for prolonged periods of time, the longest successful relationship he had ever had. If he couldn’t make it work with her, he couldn’t make it work with anyone. She had been his final chance, his last shot at a long-term romantic relationship and he had fucked it up anyway. There was no chance he could ever meet anyone else who would ever understand him like she did.

...at least, so he had thought. He still preferred not to examine the thing he had with Loki too closely.

Pepper was still standing a few feet away, watching him with an anxious expression. Tony tried to think of something to say.

“Well,” he said finally, putting a little levity into his voice. “I guess I should be grateful that I at least got to keep the kids.” He gestured to his bots, who were watching the whole exchange curiously. “I don’t think Dummy would enjoy moving to the New York Headquarters.”

Pepper laughed a little at that, a short, nervous laugh that sounded a little forced, but was still better than the pinched expression she had been wearing before.

“Yes,” she said, “Dummy has always liked you more.”
“It’s the Stockholm Syndrome,” Tony joked. “He has been locked away down here for too long.”

“It must be,” Pepper nodded, relaxing a little, “or he would have smashed your CD collection a long time ago.”

“Hey!” Tony protested. “That’s quality music, I’ll have you know. Not like that commercial crap produced today.”

They exchanged a pair of tentative smiles, a new truce growing slowly between them. It would take weeks, maybe even months to rebuild the friendship they’d had before, but it was a start.

As she stood next to him, grilling him about his response to the latest PR disaster, he suddenly realized just how much he had missed her over the year they had spent apart. She had been the one constant in his life over the years and her absence had been jarring. Having her back here now felt… right. They would never be lovers again, because that had been a horrible mistake (god what had he been thinking), but with a bit of work, they could (maybe) go back to being friends. Tony hoped so.

With the shitstorm that was coming his way, he was going to need all the support he could get.

He only hoped that when the time came, it would be enough.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

I’m really enjoying writing a story where the main protagonist isn’t a cookie-cutter good guy. It’s fascinating to write about someone who is a hero in public, but in private is a selfish, arrogant asshole who may mean well in general, but doesn’t always make the best choices. Don’t get me wrong, I love Tony’s character, especially because he’s so flawed. He’s one of the most interesting, compelling characters I’ve ever had the pleasure to write about and I’m glad that this story gives me the opportunity to explore him properly.

Chapter 15 will be up on next Friday, February 27.
“Whoa!” Tony said, his mind latching on the least important part of the whole speech. “Lover? Who said anything about lovers?”

Many thanks to my beta InsanitysxCreation for the great feedback she gave me back on this.

If you asked other people what Tony’s strongest trait was, they would probably tell you it was his brilliant mind - the genius-level intellect that powered his greatest creations. If you asked Tony, he would say the same, but privately he thought that his secret superpower must be the ability to successfully sabotage every single one of his relationships. No matter what he did, how much he tried, everyone left him in the end.

Even Loki.

He and Pepper ended up going to L.A. for lunch. It gave them an opportunity to discuss SHIELD’s latest fit of idiocy in detail, plus the public appearance was good for Tony’s PR image. It had been months since he had last appeared in public with Pepper and now, with the possibility of SHIELD putting him back on top of their threat list, the two of them needed to present a united front.

So he had gone to L.A. with her and they ended up spending three pleasant hours chatting over steak and wine. Once they got over the initial awkwardness from the workshop, they fell back into their usual banter and Tony found that he was actually enjoying himself for once. Pepper even managed to convince him to attend a board of directors meeting with her afterwards, to smooth things over with the company heads, but he only agreed to that because she promised to meet with Fury in return. He needed to know what SHIELD was planning and this was as good an opportunity as any.

They parted on fairly good terms, so Tony was in a pleasant mood when he finally arrived home. He found the house dark and empty, but didn’t think much of it, because Loki had a habit of disappearing sometimes - vanishing for hours, sometimes even a whole day, only to appear out of thin air with some random thing that he had picked up somewhere. So far he had brought fresh sushi from Japan, a woven mat from Peru, and a tiger tooth from China, among other things. Tony had no idea what he did with those things – hoarded them in his room, probably.

Since he was spending most of the nights in Tony’s bed (often alone because Tony pulled a lot of all-nighters), the room he had claimed when he had first arrived here mostly served as storage for his things. He didn’t seem to have many possessions – a golden comb, few changes of clothes, and a couple of weird magical trinkets that Tony preferred not to touch – but it was still a lot more than one would expect from an escaped prisoner. It made Tony suspect that the demigod had stopped by Asgard before going to Tony.
Hell, for all Tony knew, he might be sneaking into Asgard even now, to spy on them or steal from them or something. As far as Tony was concerned, it was none of his business. He preferred to know as little as possible about Loki’s activities outside this house because when the guy finally left and decided to use the new armor to destroy the world or something, Tony didn’t want to be an accessory to it. It was bad enough that he was making a fucking magic armor. He had no idea what he would do if he found out that he’d been accidentally helping Loki destroy Asgard as well. No way was he going to have that on his conscience.

When Loki didn’t come back for dinner, Tony was a little concerned, but soon forgot all about it because he got engrossed in a new design for the tablet that Pepper had asked him to make at lunch. He went to sleep way after midnight, crashing into the empty bed just like he always did after he had gone several days without sleep.

He woke up in the middle of the morning to find that he was still alone. All right. So it looked like the guy was sulking. Loki had gotten annoyed with him a few times before, but they had always made up pretty quickly. This was the longest period of absence so far; Tony told himself not to read too much into it. The guy had a penchant for dramatics, so it was entirely possible that he was lurking somewhere in the house, waiting for Tony to drop his guard, only to pop out of thin air and scare him to death. Wouldn’t be the first time that happened, either.

By the end of the day Tony had mostly forgotten about Loki’s absence because he had several new designs to play with and wanted to test them for faults as soon as possible. And if he happened to drink a bit more than he normally would, well, it wasn’t like there was anyone around to comment on it.

A second morning came with no sight of Loki. Tony would have called him, but the demigod had left his StarkPhone in his room, making it clear that he didn't wish to be found. Well, Tony thought as he stood in the middle of his empty living room, there was no need for panic. Loki was going to turn up eventually. He always did.

Three days passed before finally Loki came back. Tony walked out of the kitchen one evening and froze in his steps when he found the demigod standing by the window in the living room, watching the half-full moon over the Pacific Ocean.

“Oh hey,” Tony said lamely, “you’re back.”

Loki didn’t look at him, keeping his back to Tony.

“Yes, I suppose I am,” he said quietly.

“Awesome.” Tony kept his voice light, trying to ignore the tense line of Loki’s shoulders. The demigod was clearly annoyed with him, but he had no idea why. Better not provoke him too much. “I got an idea for a new version of the anti-magic layer on your armor,” he continued. “You can help me test it tomorrow, if you like.”

Loki finally turned around, wearing a pensive look on his face that Tony didn’t like one bit.

“Are you going to bed soon?” Loki asked, eyeing Tony’s sweatpants and tank top.

Yes, as a matter of fact, Tony had been planning to sleep tonight, but now he wasn’t sure that was such a great idea. So instead of following Loki into the bedroom and trying to work out whatever beef Loki had with him, he shook his head.

“Not yet,” Tony told him. “I’ve got a few things that I want to finish before I crash tonight.”
Loki’s jaw set, but he didn’t say anything to that. Nor did he explain where he’d been for three days. Tony decided not to ask. Instead of lingering around under Loki’s disapproving stare, he set off towards the workshop. “There’s some Chicken Lo Mein in the fridge if you’re hungry,” he added over his shoulder and disappeared down the stairs.

Tony had no idea what Loki did after his departure. He felt like an asshole for running away, but he had never been good at talking about feelings. If Loki wanted to talk, they would talk, but there was no way Tony was going to initiate this. The conversation with Pepper a few days ago had been bad enough. He really wasn’t in the mood for another one like that.

He had already been awake for almost two days and felt pretty tired (he hadn’t been able to sleep well while Loki was gone), but he sat down at his desk anyway, opening the first random program he came across. If there ever was a world contest in emotional avoidance, he was pretty sure he would win at least the third place.

A few hours, four coffees, and one new invention later, Tony had finally managed to stop thinking about the look Loki had worn as he had stood in the shadows by the tall glass window. He was just contemplating packing everything up and joining Loki when the door to his workshop opened and Loki walked in, giving the workshop a brief once-over before his eyes settled on Tony.

“You’re tired,” he said. “Come to bed.”

“Just a moment,” Tony told him, not looking up from the screen. “I need to back this up and send a copy to Pepper, but I’ll be with you in ten minutes.” He turned his attention back to the lines of code, giving it one last check to make sure he hadn’t overlooked anything.

He was so focused on the work that he almost missed the movement behind him. Tony looked up just in time to see Loki approach, but it still wasn’t fast enough to avoid tensing up a bit when two sets of fingertips touched his shoulders, hands sliding forward and lingering in place for a few seconds before they abruptly pulled back.

Tony frowned when the demigod stepped away from him. He hadn’t expected the guy to sneak up on him like that, but that didn’t mean Loki had to pull away completely. Tony wouldn’t have said no to a nice shoulder massage.

“You always do this,” Loki said in a low voice, sounding a little resentful.

“Do what?” Tony honestly had no idea what he was talking about. “Drink booze in my workshop?” A half-empty bottle was standing on the desk next to his elbow, with two more empty ones under the table, so he understood why Loki might have arrived to the conclusion that he was drunk again.

“Shy away from my touch,” Loki clarified. When Tony swiveled the chair around to give him an incredulous look, Loki’s lips twisted. “You are not even aware that you are doing it, are you? Even now you are tense, watching me like I’m a coiled snake you’re expecting to strike out at any moment and hurt you.”

“I’m not-” Tony started, wondering what brought on this discussion.

“But you are,” Loki spoke over him, taking a step closer to tower over Tony’s chair. “You may not say it, but your body speaks for you. You are never at ease in my presence, never relax – not even in your sleep. You are always wary, always waiting for me to turn around and betray you. Do not deny it,” he added when Tony opened his mouth to argue. “Even after all this time that we have spent together, you still do not trust me.”
And all right, Tony had already had one shitty relationship talk this week. He didn’t need another reiteration of all the ways he was fucking up. Feeling his mood plummet, he stood up to face Loki, crossing his arms. If Loki wanted to talk about this so much, he might as well get a dose of the truth, too.

“No, I guess I don’t,” he admitted, leaning back against the desk. “Honestly, I’m not sure if I even want to trust you, after all the shit you’ve pulled in the last few years. Or have you forgotten that you tried to kill me? You almost succeeded, too – if I didn’t have a backup plan that day, I would be dead.” Loki paled a little but Tony ignored him, continuing. “To this day, I still have nightmares about falling from the skyscraper sometimes. Sorry for pooping on your parade, but it’s a bit hard to relax when you wake up from a nightmare and the guy who threw you out of a window is lying right next to you.”

A shadow ran over Loki’s face, his mouth setting in a line.

“Why do you lie with me, then, if you dislike my company?”

“Because the sex is great,” Tony said bluntly, seeing no point in trying to lie. “And apparently I’m just crazy enough to sleep with a guy who tried to kill me before.” Unable to bear Loki’s accusing stare any longer, he went to get himself a drink. God knew he needed it, with the direction this conversation was heading. “You don’t have to like someone to sleep with them, you know,” he continued as he poured the scotch into a glass he had taken from one of the kitchenette cupboards.

“And you would know all about that, wouldn’t you?” Loki said sardonically, giving Tony a piercing look.

Tony shrugged. “Actually, yeah.” He narrowed his eyes. “Why is this suddenly an issue? You never gave a shit before. Why bring this up now? This thing between us has been working out pretty well so far.”

“For you, maybe,” Loki told him, his voice hardening with every syllable. There was a tight set to his shoulders that spoke of barely restrained anger and a shadow of hurt in his eyes, but Tony was too busy being utterly flabbergasted by the sudden flood of resentment to pay much attention to that.

“What is that supposed to mean?” What the hell was going on? Just a few days ago they’d had mind-blowingly good sex in the Tower and suddenly there was a problem? Tony was confused.

“It means,” Loki hissed, stalking closer, “that I’ve had enough. Enough of being ignored, of being pushed aside.” His arms rose, too, making sharp, angry gestures as Loki became more and more animated. “You only notice me when it suits you, when you’re in the mood for conversation or sex. The rest of the time I might as well be a piece of furniture or one of your robotic servants, for how little attention you pay to me. I help you with your projects, keep you company at night, and receive next to nothing in return.”

Tony hadn’t even realized that he was instinctively backing away until his back hit one of the kitchen cupboards.

“What the hell do you want from me?” he asked, a little taken aback by Loki’s outburst. “Look,” he began, before Loki could say something else, “if you want sex, I can do that. Sex is great. I love sex. We can have a lot of sex.” He knew he was rambling like a madman, but he didn’t care. “But that’s all. Don’t think this is more than it is. Don’t expect anything…more.” Loki’s stare was burning into him like a laser, so he took another sip of his scotch to boost his courage for the next part of this argument. “I don’t really do relationships or anything of that sort.”
“Really?” Loki raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Then what was your Miss Potts?”

Of course he would bring her up.

Tony sighed. “She was… an exception.” *A mistake.* “One I probably won’t make again.”

“You already did,” Loki growled, his face darkening like a thundercloud. And hell, this was bad. This was really, really bad. This was what Tony got for starting this whole stupid thing in the first place.

“Please don’t make this into more than it is,” he tried, but only succeeded in pissing Loki off even more. The god closed the last few feet between them, leaning into Tony’s space. Tony was promptly reminded of the fact that he was arguing with a superpowered magic-wielding space Viking.

“And what *is* this, exactly?” Loki asked, towering over him. It took a lot of Tony’s courage to meet his eyes.

“A fling? A diversion? Blowing off steam?” he offered, seeing no point in lying. “I don’t know what kind of name you use for this on Asgard. Look,” he continued, “what is this all about? You’re planning to leave anyway once the armor is completed, so there is no need for us to complicate this. We can have fun and then go our separate ways like two mature adults.”

“And what if I didn’t leave?” Loki gave him a strange, weirdly significant look that Tony couldn’t quite decipher.

Tony floundered for a response. Loki leaving had always been a given for him, a rock-solid part of the deal they had – Tony would make the armor, Loki would leave. Their affair had always had an end-date in Tony’s mind, so he had never bothered to even think about an alternative. Why would he?

His thoughts must have reflected on his face because Loki took a step away from him, his face twisting into a bitter grimace.

“You did not even think about that, did you? It did not even occur to you that I might have plans of my own.” He gave Tony a scornful look. “Did you ever think to ask me what I want from this?”

Tony opened his mouth to respond, even though he had absolutely no idea what to say, but Loki cut him off, still on a roll.

“No, of course you didn’t, because you’re *Tony Stark,*” he pronounced the name in perfect mockery of the way Tony always used it when he bragged about his awesomeness. “Everything is always about you – what you want, what you need.” There was venom in his voice now, weeks of quietly building resentment condensed into a few sentences. “You are the main star of everything you do and just like Thor, you always decide everything on your own, even when it concerns other people. You set all the rules by yourself and expect others to blindly fall in line with what you want. You have no interest to hear what they might think, or want.”

“That’s not–” Tony began, but Loki cut him off, still on a roll.

“You take people for granted,” he continued, mercilessly dissecting Tony’s flaws one by one. “To you they are all temporary, disposable, only there to serve a purpose – to admire you, have sex with you, fight you. Everyone around you is merely a backdrop against which you can showcase your cleverness, because that’s all that matters to you,” he said with a slow, disdainful shake of his head. “You don’t want a partner, but a toy – an object you can use when it suits you and discard the rest of the time.”
“Hold on a second,” Tony raised his hands in front of him, interrupting Loki’s tirade. “What the hell are you talking about?” He had been silent through most of Loki’s rant, too surprised by the barrage of words to react to them in time, but he detested the picture Loki was painting of him.

“You have no idea, do you?” Loki gave a short snort. “You have so little self-awareness that you do not even see what you are doing to me.”

Tony frowned. “I’m not doing anything to you.”

The corners of Loki’s lips turned up into a small, ironic smile. “Precisely.”

The full weight of Loki’s words finally caught up with Tony’s tired brain.

“Are you breaking up with me?”

Loki only hesitated for a second.

“Yes, I suppose I am. I have tried to give you what you want, but you give me nothing in return. I refuse share a bed with someone who doesn’t trust me.”

“I trust you not to kill me in my sleep, how’s that for a start?” Tony tried, but deep down he knew that it was useless.

“That’s not good enough,” Loki said firmly. “I need more than that. I am not willing to put up with someone who doesn’t even trust me enough to undress in front of me. Someone who would rather drive himself to the brink of exhaustion than sleep in the same room as me. I am not blind,” he added when he saw the silent admission in Tony’s eyes. “You may be a good liar, but even you cannot lie all the time, and especially not to me. I notice it when you avoid me on purpose.”

“Why didn’t you say anything before?” Tony couldn’t help but ask.

“Because I had hope,” Loki said, sounding bitter. “I hoped you might change your mind over time and start seeing me as more than an adversary, or a convenient bedmate, but I see now that I was mistaken. I cannot expect anything from you, because you have nothing to give. You are like a piece of rock, encased in a shell of ice – cold, smooth and completely untouchable.” He briefly turned his eyes downwards, a wry smile appearing on his lips. “You tolerate my presence, I suppose, but that’s not good enough for me. I have had enough of that on Asgard. I need more from a lover than merely being tolerated.”

“Whoa!” Tony said, his mind latching on the least important part of the whole speech. “Lover? Who said anything about lovers?”

And that was apparently the wrong thing to say, because Loki’s entire face locked down like a high-security treasure vault, his mouth pulling into a thin line. When he spoke next, it was with freezing politeness that made Tony take an instinctive step back, because this man was the same one who had confronted Tony in the penthouse of his tower all those years ago.

“I see,” he said icily, his muscles tightening up into a posture so rigid, it looked almost painful. “I was a fool to think that my regard for you may be reciprocated. These months of enforced closeness must have clouded my judgment in this matter. Therefore, I think it will be beneficial for us both if we spend some time apart. I will be back for my armour,” he added, in case Tony wanted to get any ideas.

He didn’t wait for Tony’s reply – instead he turned and walked to the glass door by the stairs, leaving Tony standing in the middle of his workshop, feeling utterly speechless for once in his life.
By the time he got his brain back online, almost a minute had passed. He rushed out of the workshop door, taking the stairs two at a time. Tony managed to reach the living room just as Loki was descending down the stairs from the upper floor, small leather duffel in hand.

“Wait!” Tony called, having no idea what to say next.

Loki stopped in his tracks, meeting Tony’s eyes over the expanse of the large living room floor. He only paused for a second before he started walking again, ignoring Tony completely. Tony stared after the retreating figure, trying to search for something that would stop Loki from leaving.

Before he could come up with anything sufficiently persuasive, Loki had reached his front door. He halted there for a moment, bowing his head a little, his right hand gripping the handle with enough force to crumple it. Then he straightened up with a sigh, turning back slightly to pin Tony with a look that had so much raw emotion in it that Tony forgot to breathe for a second.

“Your people may call me a monster,” he said slowly, “but at least I have a heart.”

He turned away after that, opened the door with a sharp tug and walked out without a second glance at Tony. Before Tony could find his voice, try to call him back and explain, Loki conjured up a portal outside and stepped into it, disappearing from sight. A few seconds later the portal closed and Loki was gone, vanishing like he had never been there in the first place.

Tony stared at the air where Loki had disappeared, feeling only confusion and a vague sense of loss.

What the hell did just happen?

***

Loki was gone.

Loki was gone and there was nothing Tony could do about it. The breakup had come out of nowhere for him, completely blindsiding him. Tony walked over to his main bar and pulled out an unopened bottle of whisky, not even bothering with a glass. He took it to the couch and sat down, staring blankly at the front door. Loki had walked out of that door less than ten minutes ago, slamming it shut behind him. The whole experience had been so fast and so surreal that Tony still couldn’t quite believe that it had really happened.

The silence of the empty house was pressing on him like a heavy smothering blanket, so he opened the bottle and took a few gulps, just to have something to do with his hands. Few gulps turned into a dozen and before he knew it, half a bottle was gone. Tony set it down on the floor and leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees.

So, Loki was gone. Just like everyone else who had ever tried getting close to Tony.

Really, Tony told himself, he should have known better by now than to think that a relationship could ever work out for him. He should have learned that from his breakup with Pepper – there was nobody willing to put up with him. Not Pepper, not the Avengers and apparently not even the God of Chaos.

To combat the growing feeling of dejection that had been growing in his chest from the moment Loki had turned his back on him in the workshop, Tony tried to take the situation apart, look at it from a logical point of view. If there was a problem, it could be fixed. It may not bring Loki back, but it would help Tony understand just what it was that he had done wrong this time.

With Pepper it had been easier to understand – she didn’t like his drinking, his devil-may-care
attitude and Iron Man. Especially Iron Man. The suits had been a thorn in her side ever since he had created the Mark II. She had never said it outright, but it was clear that she didn’t like them. To her they represented the danger that Tony kept putting himself into, the possibility that one day he may not come back from a fight with the bad guys.

Loki, on the other hand, didn’t seem to mind any of this. He understood the thrill that Tony got from fighting, helped him with some of his more insane experiments and seemed to get off on the thought of Tony blowing up things, more than anything. In some ways, he had been the complete opposite of sensible, careful Pepper. Rather than try and persuade Tony out of his madness, he supported it. He accepted it, accepted Tony for what he was - a half-mad genius with way too much access to explosives. He never tried to change Tony, to mold him into some better version that he would like more.

And that was actually pretty remarkable, wasn’t it? Everyone always tried to change Tony – make him stop drinking, stop sleeping around, start behaving like a responsible adult. Everyone except Loki. As insane as the thought was, he had actually seemed to like the person Tony was, not the person he could be after a major character makeover. For the first time in his life Tony had managed to meet someone who accepted him as he was – and Tony had managed to drive him away, because he was an idiot.

God, he had really fucked this up, hadn’t he?

Unable to stay still any longer, Tony rose from the sofa and grabbed the half-empty bottle, intending to go down into the workshop to work for another few hours, only his legs apparently had a mind of their own, because he ended up standing in the doorway of Loki’s room instead, hesitating on the threshold.

Tony hadn’t been inside the room for weeks – not since a few days after Loki had first moved in, when he had used the guy’s absence as an opportunity to snoop around a bit to see if he could find out what the demigod was planning. After the knowing look Loki had thrown him the next morning at breakfast, Tony had never gone inside the room again. Now he walked in to look around a little, hoping that he might find some clues that would tell him where Loki had gone.

No such luck. Loki hadn’t left a single thing behind – not even the damned tiger tooth. The room looked the same as it had for years – empty, quiet and completely impersonal, with two empty night stands and a perfectly made bed. It looked like a fucking hotel room, completely devoid of any signs that anyone had been staying there for the past ten weeks and Tony hated it with the passion of thousand burning suns.

So much for hoping that Loki might come back.

With one last lingering look at the room, Tony slammed the door shut behind him and set off to the workshop. Screw this moping around, he was going to do something productive with his time. And if he got drunk in the meantime, well, nobody could blame him. Anyone would drink after the day he’d had. He sat down at his desk and opened a random targeting program, hoping that the monotonous lines of code would help him take his mind off the look Loki had worn when he had opened the door outside.

No such luck.

Instead of working, he ended up staring at the wall of text, unable to concentrate. His mind kept replaying Loki’s speech for him in painful detail, focusing on all the perceived slights Loki had accused him of that Tony had never noticed before.
Did he really act like that? Ignore people until he wanted something from them?

He didn’t even have to try very hard before his brain helpfully conjured up several dozen instances of him acting like a dick. So yeah, he did. Good to know, even if that knowledge was mostly useless to him now.

With the first bottle gone, he pulled another one from one of the wall cabinets and opened it, letting the burn of the alcohol wash away his thoughts. But no matter how much he tried to forget, no matter how many shots he drank, Loki’s disappointed face kept floating before his mind’s eye, reminding him of all the ways he had fucked this up. When he thought about it, Loki hadn’t been that far off the mark with his complaints. Tony had been ignoring him sometimes. Often intentionally, because he wanted to avoid getting too close. The avoidance had been his tool to avoid getting hurt once Loki left with the armor at the end of the contract. Except that it hadn’t worked, because Loki was gone even sooner than he had expected and Tony was feeling like shit anyway.

Oh, god, this was Pepper all over again, Tony suddenly realized. Except - it shouldn’t be. His relationship with Loki wasn’t anything like that – they were fuckbuddies, nothing more. Just two guys who live together and have sex sometimes. And work together. And share meals. And laugh at stupid TV…Christ, they really had been dating, hadn’t they? And Tony hadn’t even noticed.

Or, maybe he had and just didn’t want to admit it to himself, because admitting it out loud would have somehow made it real, while ignoring it would make it not exist. Yeah, Tony was really good at denial when it concerned things that made him uncomfortable. Like dying from a blood poisoning. Or love.

Yeah, Tony concluded, reaching for the bottle again, he had really fucked this up.

***

Tony woke up the next day in the middle of the afternoon with a headache from hell and three blueprints for new weapons schematics. Apparently, he had blacked out and designed a plutonium nuke. Again.

He should really stop engineering while drunk.

***

More than once, he thought about calling Pepper and getting some advice from her. She had always been much better at this stuff than him – they were fuckbuddies, nothing more. Just two guys who live together and have sex sometimes. And work together. And share meals. And laugh at stupid TV…Christ, they really had been dating, hadn’t they? And Tony hadn’t even noticed.

“Oh hi there, Pep. I was wondering if you could help me. You see, I’ve been kind of dating this crazy Asgardian wizard for a while. Remember the guy who tried to destroy New York a few years ago? Yeah, that’s him. And he just broke up with me. Wait- what do you mean by “bad idea”? No, I’m not being mind-controlled. Listen Pepper- oh shit, I need to go. A bunch of people just broke into my house and started pointing guns at me.”

Yeah, that would go over really well. If Pepper didn’t have him locked up for insanity, SHIELD certainly would. He couldn’t tell anyone about this, which meant that he was back at square one. But hey, he could deal with this. He had always handled everything on his own and this was no exception.

He could do this.

***
No, he didn’t need Pepper, he assured himself after yet another half bottle of vodka. In fact, he didn’t need anyone. And especially not Loki. Seriously, fuck that guy.

Yeah, he was going to be fine.

If he repeated it enough times, he might even start believing it.

***

Seven days and twelve bottles later, he was feeling just fine.

So Loki was gone. Big fucking deal. Tony had dealt with way worse in his lifetime. What was another breakup to him, anyway?

In fact – he should be glad for this. He had been trying to get rid of Loki for weeks before they had started sleeping together. He had hated having him in his house at first. Now he finally had the house to himself again. Really, he should be celebrating.

Instead he just sat on his couch and felt like shit.

***

The house felt…empty without Loki. Too quiet. Several times Tony caught himself climbing the stairs to the living room with an amusing anecdote on the tip of his tongue, only to be greeted with an empty couch and a reminder that right, Loki was gone.

At times like these he usually buried himself in his work, designing and welding for days on end, until he was too tired to remember why he was doing all this in the first place. But even the workshop didn’t provide much solace against memories. He and Loki had spent weeks there together - bickering and flirting over armor designs and Tony’s mad ideas for new inventions, eating takeout in the kitchenette, having sex on various flat surfaces. Tony couldn’t even look at his cars anymore, because it reminded him of the time Loki had fucked him on the hood of his Ferrari, his long hair falling forward over Tony’s chest as he bent down to promise Tony a thousand filthy things he was going to do to him, that wolfish grin of his bright enough to light up-  

Oh, god, this needed to stop. It had been almost two weeks already, for fuck’s sake. He needed to get a grip.

***

“Sir?” JARVIS interrupted his work one afternoon. “Miss Potts is on the line.”

Tony lifted his head from the circuit board he was working on, trying to remember why she might be calling him.

“What day is it?”

“It’s Friday, February 28. It has been two weeks since your suspension from the Avengers.”

“Right.” How could he have forgotten? “Patch her through.”

“Hello, Tony.” There was a wary tone in Pepper’s voice that couldn’t mean anything good.

“Hi, Pep,” he greeted her casually, feeling glad that she couldn’t see him right now. He looked like hell, with a four-day-old scruff and under-eye circles so dark, they looked like someone had painted them on with clown make-up. “What’s up?”
“I have bad news,” she said, sounding apologetic. “I went to D.C. to speak to Fury on your behalf, but it was no use. Not only did the higher-ups refuse to drop your suspension, they prolonged it.” She made a frustrated noise. Tony was feeling too tired to really care about the news.

“How long?” he asked calmly.

“A month. You have another two weeks to go before you’re allowed to fly the suit again.”

“Bullshit,” Tony shot back, the sheer nonsense of what she had just told him finally connecting with his emotions. He straightened up a little, glaring at the circuit board in his hands. “They can’t tell me when I can or can’t use my suit. They can forbid me from fighting with the Avengers, but they can’t do a damn about my suit. That’s just bullshit.”

“It was heavily implied,” Pepper said.

“Well, screw them,” Tony told her. “It’s my suit. I will do whatever I want with it.”

There was a moment of silence on the other side of the line before Pepper asked slowly, carefully: “Tony? Have you been drinking?”


Another pause.

“Are you all right? You sound a bit strange.”

“No, I’m fine,” Tony assured her. “Just a bit tired.”

“How long has it been since you last slept?”

Tony’s forehead furrowed as he tried to remember.

“I don’t know, a day? Maybe two? Sleep is overrated, anyway.”

Tony’s response came at the same time as JARVIS’s: “It has been 64 hours since you have woken up, sir.”

“Do I smell treason in the air?” Tony pointed his welding torch at the ceiling. “Are you conspiring against me, JARVIS?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, sir.”

“You totally are.”

“You need to sleep, Tony,” Pepper interrupted their argument. “I know you can stay awake for days when you’re working, but this isn’t healthy.”

“All right,” Tony conceded. “I’ll just finish this circuit board and-”

“I need you sane, Tony,” Pepper spoke over him. He could almost imagine her face when she said it – the unhappy set to her mouth, the small dip between her eyebrows that always appeared when she was stressed or worried about him.

Tony’s eyes strayed to the corner, where Loki’s chair still stood empty in the corner, a silent reminder of the man’s continuing absence.
“Might be a bit late for that.”

“Please try,” she implored him. “Trying to convince the world that you’re a responsible adult who should be allowed possession of a dangerous weapon is hard enough for me already. With all that’s been going on lately, you really can’t afford to have a breakdown right now.”

Tell that to Loki, Tony thought bitterly, but didn’t say anything to that. On the other end of the line Pepper sighed.

“I’ll talk to Fury again and try to get the suspension dropped, but I don’t think it will do much. I already tried.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony reassured her. “They have to let me back sooner or later anyway. It will be fine.”

Right?

***

The bed was empty and cold and Tony couldn’t sleep. He lay on his back in the middle of the night, feeling utterly exhausted, yet his brain refused to shut down and let him sleep. He had never been able to sleep much, but Loki’s departure had made his insomnia even worse.

He had never thought he would miss having another body in his bed, but he did. They had only been together for two months, but somehow it had been long enough to make Tony used to Loki’s presence. While his denial usually stood firm during the day, now, in the darkness in the middle of the night, he finally admitted to himself that yes, he missed Loki. He missed his wit and his dark sense of humor and the way his eyes always lit up when Tony came with some new mad, dangerous scheme. And yes, of course he missed the sex. The sex had been mind-blowingly good, so its absence was rather disappointing.

But even more than sex, Tony found that he missed Loki’s company. He missed having someone to talk to, someone who could keep up with him both in his bed and out of it. Out of all the people around Tony, Loki had been the one who actually seemed to understand him. Everyone else just floated around the engineer, wearing confused expressions and waiting for him to go away, but Loki understood. He knew the joy that came out of creating new things and the thrill caused by blowing something up. He shared Tony’s wonder of discovering new ways to manipulate the world around him.

Remembering Loki’s parting speech for the thousandth time, Tony had to admit that the demigod had been mostly right. Loki had offered him help, affection, compassion…and Tony had thrown it right in his face. He had never been good at dealing with other people’s emotions, but it was one thing to have trust issues and another to treat someone like a service dog, sending them away whenever they became inconvenient. It was no wonder Loki had walked out on him. Anyone with half a brain would.

God, he’d been an idiot. He had managed to fuck up every single thing Thor had warned him about all those months ago (even if the guy hadn’t meant it like that). For fuck’s sake, he’d practically gotten a goddamn manual on handling Loki from the guy’s own brother and he had managed to screw up anyway. If that wasn’t idiocy, he didn’t know what was.

Loki was gone and even if he wanted to apologize, Tony didn’t have any way to contact him. He could only sit around and wait until Loki decided to come back.
If he ever did.

***

Three weeks passed and still no sign of Loki. Unable to stand the oppressive silence any longer, Tony climbed into the driver’s seat of his favorite silver Lamborghini and decided to go out for a ride. A ride along the coast always did wonders for clearing his head and Pepper had wanted him to come into the L.A. Stark Industries office today anyway, to hand over one of his new prototypes to the R&D guys. Any excuse that could get him out of the house was welcome, really.

He drove into L.A. in the middle of the afternoon, paying only half a mind to the road as he went over a mental checklist of things he wanted to do once he came home. His distraction was the reason why he didn’t notice the suspicious black car that pulled up in the line next to him at the red lights.

What he did notice were the guys in black who jumped out a second later and started heading for his car with guns in their hands. Tony slammed down the gas pedal, hightailing out of the intersection just as another car pulled up on the other side of the road. He sped around them, and was just congratulating himself on the way he had managed to shake them off when he noticed a third car waiting for him two blocks down the road.

And then the first bullet hit his windshield and everything went to hell.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

*dodges objects thrown at her head*

Please don’t kill me! XD Before anyone gets mad at me, remember that there are still at least 15 more chapters to go and that Loki has a penchant for drama. Also, Tony is a dick. That’s all.

The next chapter will be posted on Friday, March 6.
The bullet that smacked against his windshield made Tony jerk in surprise and swerve the car sharply to the right, but the sudden maneuver still didn’t help him avoid the barrage of bullets that came flying his way when the guy with the gun fired again. There were several armed men standing on the road in front of him, blocking the traffic, and Tony frantically tried to find a way to drive around them without running them over. The cars on the road around him were all driving wildly, trying to escape from the danger.

Tony sped up, hoping that it would help him shake off the black car that had been following him since the first intersection, but so far he wasn’t having much luck with that. It was the middle of the afternoon, which meant that the traffic had been pretty dense. Now the people were all driving their cars at breakneck speed, trying to take the nearest turn to escape from the shooting.

Several more bullets hit his rear window, cracking it slightly but not penetrating the glass just yet. Tony suddenly felt fiercely glad that he had taken Natasha’s recommendation and had all his cars bulletproofed a few years back. Sure, it wouldn’t stop the storm of bullets forever, because his fancy cars weren’t built for military warfare, but it should at least buy him the few minutes that he needed to get his suit. The suitcase with Mark VIII was lying on the back seat behind Tony, ready to be used.

“JARVIS?” Tony asked. “Can you take the wheel for a bit?”

“Of course, sir,” the computer answered. “Shields are currently holding at 63%. You have approximately two minutes before the bullets penetrate the glass.”

“Better get to it, then,” Tony said, already diving into the back seat. The steering wheel locked behind him, maintaining the course that JARVIS had calculated. A brief glance out of the back window told Tony that yes, those guys were still in pursuit and still shooting at him. Wonderful.

Despite the limited space, he managed to open the suitcase and shimmy into the suit. It was a tight fit and he almost broke the door twice, but after a few minutes of wiggling around, he managed to get himself suited up. Just in time, too, because almost as soon as the faceplate slammed down, the first
bullet whizzed over his head, burying itself deep in the glove compartment. About a million warning systems lit up at once, their shrill beeping informing him of the breach.

“Yeah, I kinda noticed,” Tony huffed, scrambling around as he tried to sit up. One thing was clear – he couldn’t stay in the car. Since the bad guys seemed determined to turn his sports car into a block of Swiss cheese and the shields were already mostly dead, there was no point in staying inside any longer. Might as well take the fight to them.

Tony braced his hands against a door and kicked his legs out, making the door on the opposite side fly off its hinges and land in the middle of the street with a thud.

“Stop the car!” he shouted at JARVIS, who complied at once, making the vehicle skid to a stop a little further down the road. Tony climbed out of the car, turning to face his attackers.

The first car came to a halt with a swerve and a loud screech a few dozen feet away, revealing several masked men in black SWAT-type suits, who jumped out of the back and promptly took cover behind the open doors. They opened fire at once, their bullets ricocheting harmlessly off Tony’s suit. Tony let them have fun for a few seconds before he took off, heading for their car with the intention of knocking them out.

Sure, he could have just shot them all under five seconds, but he was supposed to be the good guy here. It was one thing to execute terrorists in the middle of nowhere in Afghanistan and another to do the same in the middle of an L.A. boulevard, in full sight of witnesses, several of whom had already pulled out their smartphones to record the fight because they were idiots with no sense of self-preservation.

Tony swooped down in an elegant arc and landed right in the middle of the group, picking up two guys before throwing them back inside the van. The fall was enough to knock them out, but not enough to kill them. He punched the third and slammed the fourth against the side of the car, letting him slide unconscious to the ground. There was something uncivilized about throwing around punches like a common brawler, but he couldn’t deny that it was kind of fun. Next he walked over to the driver’s door and pulled the guy out through the window just as he started trying to drive away. This guy got a punch in the face before Tony threw him back inside, slamming the door behind him.

So, that was one car. The last time he checked, there had been three. He took to the air again, scanning the road beneath for the rest of the attackers.

“JARVIS? Where’s the rest of the G. I. Joes?”

“Approaching fast, sir,” JARVIS informed him. “Do you require assistance? Should I alert the Avengers about your situation?”

“Nah, I think I’ve got this. Couple of bad guys with guns isn’t anything I haven’t fought before. There’s no need to call them. I can deal with this on my own.”

“As you wish, sir,” JARVIS said. “There is a car headed in your direction from the south that is approaching at approximately eighty miles per hour. It is highly suggested that you perform evasive maneuvers to avoid collision.”

“Nope, I’ve got something better,” Tony told him gleefully when he spotted the black van that was driving fast towards him. Instead of flying even higher, he landed back in the middle of the street and waited. Being the idiots that they clearly were, the guys inside took it as an invitation to try and run him over, just as he had expected. What a bunch of morons.
Remembering his fight with Obadiah and the Iron Monger, Tony waited on the road until the car was almost within reach, then braced himself for the impact and just before the car slammed into him, he activated the hydraulic systems of the suit and lifted the van over his head, using the inertia created by the vehicle’s own velocity to send it flying dozens of feet through the air. The car landed on its roof with a sickening crunch of metal and skidded for a few more seconds before coming to a stop. Nothing moved inside and nobody got out, which meant that the men inside were either knocked out or dead. Tony couldn’t bring himself to feel particularly sorry for them – they had shot at him, after all.

The third car stopped behind him with a loud screech of brakes, the guys jumping out to take strategic positions behind the abandoned cars in the middle of the street. Tony turned away from the overturned black van that was slowly starting to smoke and turned his attention to the new arrivals. They opened fire at once, denting his armor in several dozen places.

Tony took to the air, contemplating the best way to deal with them. Before he could decide on anything, however, one of the guys pulled out a fucking bazooka and took a shot at him with an anti-tank missile. The sensors in the suit activated at once, avoiding the collision smoothly, but the shot still left Tony a little shaken. These guys wanted him dead badly enough to fire a goddamn missile in the middle of an inhabited zone in L.A. He must have really pissed someone off this time.

Instead of waiting around for them to load another missile, Tony took off, doing a round above the street to survey the scene. It seemed that apart from these guys, there was nobody else left to try and kill him. If he took them out, the fight would be over.

He circled the street again before swooping low and shooting two of them with a repulsor, slamming them against the van. He was just planning to do another swoop when one of the guys threw something at him. The little circular disc latched onto his armor, short-circuiting the computer system and making Tony fall to the ground with a painful crash. He was lucky that he had only been hovering a few feet above the ground but hitting the ground face-first in an unresponsive suit still hurt like a bitch.

Tony shook his head a little to clear out the flickering black spots in front of his eyes and propped himself on his hands to survey the street. The HUD was down, so he could only see what the narrow visor allowed him to see. The guys were still hiding behind the car, taking potshots at his prone form. He managed to lift himself to his feet with some effort, which wasn’t made any easier by the barrage of bullets that was still coming his way.

Lifting his hand to his chest, Tony peeled off the little jammer, crushing it in his fist.

“JARVIS?” he asked, but the armor stayed unresponsive. Tony sighed in annoyance, opening a keypad in his wrist to initiate a reboot sequence. A grenade landed at his feet, making him stumble when it went off.

All right, now he was really pissed off.

He managed to reboot the system a second later, the HUD lighting back up just as another shower of bullets came his way. His armor was still holding up, but it was only a question of time before one of the bullets found a soft spot in the joints and damaged something important. He needed to take them down as soon as possible.

Not in mood for games, he took off the ground again to be able to see all the men better, and used the auto-targeting system to pick out the attackers. A second later the latch in his shoulder opened and a half-dozen bullets flew out, finding their targets with unerring precision. Just like back in Gomira, the guys fell over, the guns falling out of their hands. Tony stayed in place for a moment longer to
survey the scene and make sure there was no one else who could try and attack him. Finding the street empty, he landed back on the road and turned his back on the dead guys around the van.

He was just planning to ask JARVIS about the state of his car when he suddenly felt a small impact on his left shoulder. Puzzled, he looked down, only to see a clean hole in the armor.

“JARVIS?” he asked with a hint of alarm

“That was a hit, sir,” JARVIS announced with eerie calm. “The bullet has managed to penetrate the outer layers of the armor and is currently lodged in the flesh of your upper arm. I do not have enough information to make an accurate prediction about the severity of your injury.”

“The bullet got through?” Tony demanded. “How the hell did it do that?”

“According my calculations this was a bullet fired by a sniper from a building approximately half a mile away from here. He was most likely aiming at your heart, but missed. The possibility that he will fire again is almost 92%. I suggest you relocate yourself somewhere else, sir.”

“A sniper?” Just how many guys did those people send after him? “Can you find him for me?”

“I can try, sir. Though it’s highly probable that he will relocate once you try to pursue him.”

“Try anyway,” Tony ordered him. “I want this bastard dead.”

He flew a little higher in the air, taking care to keep his trajectory as convoluted and unpredictable as possible. JARVIS had managed to narrow the point of the bullet’s origin down to several high-rise buildings near the city center and Tony made his way towards them, intent on catching the guy who shot him.

Unfortunately for him, the hunt turned out to be a waste of time. All the roofs in the suggested radius were completely empty, no sight of a possible sniper anywhere. Tony also suddenly realized that his shoulder was starting to hurt. He hadn’t felt anything before, too pumped up on adrenaline to feel pain, but now that the fight was over, his body had started to do its best to remind him that yes, he did have a fucking bullet buried in his shoulder.

Annoyed with the failure of his search attempt, he turned around and set off to fly back home.

“Sir?” JARVIS chimed just as they were passing the site of the fight, where two cop cars had just pulled up to investigate the smoking remains of the overturned van, “it would be highly advisable to seek out medical attention as soon as possible.”

“There’s no need,” Tony told him, even though pain in his shoulder was growing with each passing second. “I can take it out myself.”

“That course of action is not recommended. If the bullet had hit any major artery, you could bleed out.”

“If it had hit any major artery, I would be dead already,” Tony corrected him. “It’s been over five minutes since I got shot. If the bullet had severed anything important, I would have drowned in my own blood by now.”

“Your lack of concern for your own well-being is rather alarming, if I may say so, sir.” A clear note of disapproval entered JARVIS’s usual placid voice.

“Hey, when have you ever known me to be careful, of all things? Besides, I’ve already done the
whole “take out a bullet in the field” thing for Hawkeye once before. I’ll be fine.”

“That situation had been an emergency. You have more than enough opportunity to go to a hospital right now, sir,” JARVIS argued. “There is no need for you to-”

“Just shut up and take me home,” Tony interrupted his mother-hen routine. “The sooner I do this, the better.”

***

The journey home passed by in a blur. Tony let JARVIS navigate the suit for him, wanting nothing more than to finally be back in the safety of his own house, with the bullet taken out and enough to time to try and figure out what the fuck had just happened. He could have wept with joy when the familiar silhouette of his mansion finally appeared in the distance before him, welcoming him home like he had never left.

He headed straight for the garage, landing hard on the concrete floor inside the door and stumbling a little when the damaged mechanisms in his right leg gave out. Cursing the bad guys and their grenades, he managed to straighten up enough to let the robots take off his wrecked armor. The suit was a bust – there were about a million bullet indentations, several of which had come perilously close to penetrating the outer layer, the plates on his right leg were mangled from the grenade and the armor’s left arm was mostly unresponsive due to the stupid jammer.

The busted armor pieces made it difficult to take the suit off, causing the assembly robots to yank at the plates, which jarred his injured shoulder. Tony waited until most of the pieces were gone before he crossed the workshop and collapsed onto the first available bench, poking idly at the burnt metal on his arm. The assembly robot chose that moment to try and pry off the damaged arm plate and it was all Tony could do not to cry out when the jagged edges of the metal scraped against the torn skin. He batted the robot off and reached for the armor piece himself, hissing in pain when he peeled it back and discovered the bullet wound beneath.

“Dummy?” he called, making a face when he touched the fabric of his ruined business suit and his hand came away red. “Bring me a medkit, will you?”

The wound wasn’t very deep – a little over half an inch – but it was still bleeding and now that the adrenaline had finally worn off, the pain was rapidly growing in intensity. It hadn’t hurt all that much before, so Tony hadn’t paid it much attention, focused as he’d been on the fight and finding the mysterious sniper, but now his injuries were flaring up and it wasn’t pleasant.

“Sir?” JARVIS chimed. “May I suggest calling an ambulance?”

“Nah, I’ve got it,” Tony told him. “Just run a medical scan on me to make sure I don’t overlook something.”

Despite being a shapeless, faceless AI, JARVIS somehow managed to convey his disapproval without saying a single word.

“Very well, sir,” he said after a short pause. “But if you lose consciousness, I am calling the emergency medical services.”

Tony didn’t dignify that with a response. Instead he reached for the medkit that Dummy had brought him and started pulling out everything he would need for a bullet extraction. With only one hand functional he was slower than he would have liked and the throbbing in his left arm was growing stronger with every passing second.
“Fuck!” he swore when the pair of tweezers fell out of his hand, his fingers shaking too badly to hold it. Instead of picking them up he reached for the medkit again, digging out a bottle of painkillers. “Butterfingers, get me a glass of water.” He shook out four of the pills and swallowed them dry, washing them down when the bot handed him a glass half a minute later.

With that taken care off, he unbuttoned his jacket and started to ease it down his shoulders, trying to avoid jostling the wound even more than he already had. The sleeve of the shirt beneath was soaked with blood, the once-white fabric painted a vivid, crimson red. To distract himself from the task at hand, he started designing a new armor in his head. The old suitcase armor was totally busted, so much that fixing it up would take more time than making a new one. Might as well make some improvements it if he was going to make a new model.

He had just come up with the perfect upgrade for his hand propulsors when JARVIS interrupted his thoughts.

“Sir? You have a call from Captain Rogers.”

“I’m not taking it.” Tony responded at once, ripping off the sleeve from his shirt to get to the skin underneath. Luckily for him the blood hadn’t dried yet, so the act of peeling the sodden fabric away from his skin was only gross instead of painful. “Tell him I’m busy.”

“Sir, he is most adamant that he needs to speak with you.”

With an annoyed sigh, Tony tore his gaze away from the bleeding arm to address the computer.

“Why is he calling me now?”

“The Avengers heard that you had been attacked and are concerned for your health. Rightly so, may I add, sir.”

Tony made a face.

“I won’t even ask how they know about it. Fucking SHIELD.” For a second he contemplated blowing them off, but in the end decided not to. If Steve thought he was hurt, he would keep calling until Tony answered. Better get this out of the way with a phone call, or he risked getting a surprise visit from the Star Spangled Man himself. Tony wouldn’t put it past Steve to fly over here and come to check up on Tony in person if he thought it was necessary. “Okay, whatever, patch him through. I might as well get him off my back. Audio only.”

“Tony?” Steve’s voice filled the room.

“Hi there, Cap,” Tony answered, taking care to keep the tone light. He ran an alcohol-soaked piece of gauze over the wound, wiping off some of the blood to be able to see the bullet better. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“We heard about the fight,” Steve said, sounding way too concerned. “Are you alright?”

“Just peachy,” Tony assured him, gritting his teeth as he carefully inserted the tweezers into the wound. “Believe me, the other guys came off much worse than me.” His first attempt to grip the bullet was unsuccessful and he had to bite back a cry when the sharp end slipped and painfully poked the flesh in the open wound.

“Do you know who they were?” and that was Natasha now, which meant that he was probably on a speaker. Wonderful.
“No idea,” Tony admitted. “They had the whole black leather thing going on, some sort of SWAT-type uniforms. Kinda generic. Could have been anyone. I’ll send you a debrief when I have time. I’m kinda busy right now.” The tweezers finally managed to hold onto the bullet and he carefully pulled it out, grimacing when the trickle of blood from the wound intensified.

“Is everything alright?” Steve asked again and Tony had to suppress the urge to snap at him.

“Yeah, everything’s fine, really,” Tony reassured him, trying to stem the flow of blood. “My armor is busted, though, so I’ll have to spend a few weeks repairing it before I can use it again. You’ll have to manage without me for a while.”

“All right,” Steve said, but he didn’t sound very convinced. “Natasha and I are leaving on a mission today, but we should be back in a day or two. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask and we can stop by.”

“Sure thing, Cap,” Tony said cheerfully, doing his best to stop the bleeding with a piece of gauze. “Just try not to destroy my tower while I’m gone. I would hate to come for a visit and find it in ruins because Thor blew up another microwave.” There was a telling silence on the other side of the line. “You know what? Don’t tell me. I don’t wanna know. Just hold down the fort, I’ll let you know if I find out anything about the guys. Good luck with your mission.”

He cut the call before they could answer and slumped against the table, pressing his hand against the wound.

“JARVIS, how long do I have before I pass out?”

“Judging by the current speed of blood loss and your state of fatigue, you have approximately twelve minutes of consciousness left,” JARVIS announced.

“Awesome.” Tony grimaced. “Will I be able to patch this up before I pass out?”

“It is technically possible,” JARVIS told him, but didn’t sound very convincing. “Sir, it is inadvisable that you should attempt to sew up a bullet wound all by yourself-”

“JARVIS,” Tony interrupted him before he could continue. “Have a little faith, will you? I know what I’m doing. Instead of bitching at me, you can scan the bullet and tell me what it’s made of.” He doused the bullet hole with a liberal amount of alcohol before patting it dry as best as he could, then reached for a needle and thread and started sewing up the wound. Threading the needle through the tender skin on the edges of the wound hurt like a motherfucker, but he couldn’t afford to wait for the pain meds to kick in.

“Preliminary scans indicate that the bullet is made of Adamantium, sir,” JARVIS announced two minutes later.

Tony let out a string of curses. “No wonder it punched through my armor. Fucking adamantium. Where the hell did those guys get their hands on adamantium, anyway? Shit,” he hissed as the thread pulled the wound close, the skin throbbing unpleasantly. “JARVIS, make a new file, designation Mark XVIII. We need to make an adamantium-bullet-proof suit. What do you think will be better for the alloy? Reinforced titanium of Vibranium?”

“Sir, may I remind you that the world reserves of Vibranium-”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, the Panther is hoarding them,” Tony waved his concerns away with a careless hand. “I’ll come up with something to give him in exchange for it. It will be a bitch to get my hands on the metal, but hopefully it should keep me from getting turned into a block of Swiss cheese the
next time I come across another bunch of guys with fucking adamantium bullets.” Having tied up the knot on the thread, he reached for gauze and started to wrap up the arm, holding the shorter end in his teeth.

He had just manage to wrap it up (not very neatly but hey, at least it held. sort of.) when an idea suddenly came to him that made him push the medkit to the side and reach for a tablet instead. Tony took the care to wipe the fingers on his right hand clean to avoid smearing blood all over the surface but other than that didn’t bother to clean up, his mind already miles away.

“Or maybe it’s not about the material,” he muttered, running calculations. “Maybe we could do something else. JARVIS, what kind of metal does Doom use for his armor? It looks like steel to me.”

“According to my scans, Victor Von Doom uses titanium infused steel alloy.”

“I knew it!” Tony gloated. “So it’s not about the material. He uses some sort of magic to make himself impervious, a force field of some kind. If I could replicate that, I wouldn’t have to bother with adamantium, or Vibranium, for that matter. Do we have enough readings to replicate the energy output?”

“We do, but I am unsure whether we have the means to produce the desired outcome,” JARVIS replied.

“You mean that it’s fucking magic and I don’t have the faintest clue about how I should go about it,” Tony concluded. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, pal, you really know how to make a guy feel special.”

“Sir, if I may-” JARVIS started but Tony cut him off.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry, I’ll figure it out eventually.” A faint nudge at his side made him turn his attention to Dummy, who stood by the workbench with a rag in his claw, trying to wipe off the blood on the floor.

“Oh, right,” Tony said, scooting a bit to give the robot more space to clean. “You’d better clean this blood up while it’s fresh. It’s a bitch to get out of the concrete when it’s dried.” He lifted a tired hand and patted the robot’s head. “There’s a good boy. Make sure you get all of it, or Pepper will have a fit the next time she comes here. Sorry for the mess, by the way.”

“Sir,” JARVIS spoke up again, this time more urgently. “You have a visitor.”

“Send them away,” Tony told him without bothering to look up. “I’m not dealing with anyone else today.”

“That might not be possible, sir. They are already here.”

“What the-” Tony raised his head and sure enough, Loki was standing in corner of his workshop, his face like a thundercloud. Tony fought down a sigh. Just what he needed right now – an angry chaos god to add to his rapidly growing shitpile of things going wrong today. Of all the times Loki could have come back, he chose the worst one possible because of course he did.

“If you’ve come for sex, I’m afraid I’ll have to disappoint you,” Tony said, just to fill the silence. When Loki didn’t answer, Tony ran a tired hand over his face, unaware that he managed to smear a bloody streak over his cheekbone in the process. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough,” Loki bit out, and oh boy, did he look pissed. Everything from the tense set of his shoulders to his tightly clenched fists spoke of deep, barely restrained anger, but even if he had come
here to kill him, Tony couldn’t bring himself to care much. His entire body hurt as bruises caused by the fall started to bloom on his skin and he was feeling far too drained to deal with another confrontation today.

“Why are you here?” Tony asked tiredly.

“The magical contract does not allow itself to be broken,” Loki said, stalking closer. “It alerts me when your life is in danger. As it is now.”

“No, it isn’t,” Tony argued automatically. “I already patched it up. Good as new.”

“Then why is it still bleeding?” Loki asked, giving the wound a pointed look. Tony followed his gaze down to discover that yep, he was right. The wound was still bleeding, if the slowly spreading red blot on his gauze was any indication.

“Goddamnit,” Tony said, not having the energy to even feel annoyed about it anymore. He reached for the medkit and started rummaging through it blindly, looking for something, anything-

A hand shot out, catching his wrist and pulling his hand away from the box. Loki was standing next to the workbench, looking frustrated.

“You’re an idiot,” he told Tony, not letting go of his hand.

“Uh yeah?” Tony said, frowning. “Can you let go of my hand? I’m kinda bleeding out here. If you want to yell at me, you can do it after I patch myself up.”

“Why didn’t you seek out help?” Loki demanded as he finally let go of Tony’s wrist. He pulled back his hand with a quick, sharp movement, but didn’t step back - instead he continued hovering over Tony’s shoulder as he watched the engineer’s half-baked attempts at first aid.

Tony gave a one-shoulder shrug, most of his attention focused on the medkit as he tried to look for something else that could help.

“Someone just tried to kill me in broad daylight. I can’t risk someone coming into a hospital and finishing the job while I’m unconscious.”

“Are your pride and mistrust really so strong that you would rather bleed out than seek out assistance?” Loki asked in disbelief.

“And who was I supposed to call for help?” Tony’s lips twisted into a wry grimace. “Rhodey, who is halfway across the world right now? Pepper, who almost had a fit the last time I came home with bullet holes in my armor? Nick Fury? Captain America? What help would they be, when they’re all thousands of miles away from here?”

Loki looked at him silently for a few seconds, something like a new understanding dawning in his eyes.

“You really do not have anyone, do you?”

“I don’t need your pity,” Tony snapped, turning away to try and stem the flow of blood. He stood up to reach for a new batch of gauze, but the blood-loss made his head spin and he propped his arms against the table to stop himself from pitching forward, trying to breathe through the vertigo. There were black spots dancing around his vision, which was never a good sign.

Two strong hands caught him before his legs could give out, helping him to sit back down on the
“Just go away,” Tony muttered, weakly trying to bat at the hands that were keeping him upright.

“No,” Loki said firmly. Despite Tony’s protests, he reached for the gauze Tony had haphazardly slapped on the wound, unwinding it with quick, precise movements. “I need to heal this, otherwise you risk bleeding out or dying from an infection.”

“Why are you doing this?” Tony gave him a bleary-eyed look. “Is the contract making you do this? Don’t tell me you need the armor this badly.”

Loki’s lips pulled into a thin line at that remark, but he continued working, unwinding the piece of fabric until he unearthed the wound underneath, which was swollen red and still leaking blood. The demigod cradled Tony’s injured arm in one hand and reached for a disinfectant with the other. The wound kept bleeding sluggishly, blood slowly seeping out through the haphazard mess of threads Tony had patched it up with.

“You didn’t do a very good job with this,” Loki said as he cleared away the blood.

Tony grit his teeth as the wound flared up from the touch, running possible scenarios and probabilities in his mind. Numbers upon numbers, dozens of possible outcomes and none of them looked good. If he wanted to live, he was gonna have to take a risk with this.

Making a split-second decision, he met Loki’s eyes.

“All right, old school’s not going to cut this. You said you wanted trust from me? I’ll give you trust.” He gestured to the wound. “You can heal this for me.”

Loki’s eyes shot down to the arc reactor.

“My magic will not work on you.”

“I know that,” Tony said, “which is why I’m gonna need some help here. Help me get this off.” He started to unbutton his shirt with one hand, but his fingers were clumsy and the buttons kept slipping from his grasp. Loki took one look at his fumbling and tore the blood-stained shirt apart with one sharp tug. Tony wished he were in a better state of mind to appreciate it. “The undershirt too,” he added quietly, averting his eyes.

Loki only hesitated for a second before he ripped off the undershirt as well. The arc reactor shone clear and bright, finally unhindered by the careful layers of fabric that Tony always put over it. The engineer raised his hand, laying it over the reactor.

“I’m going to take it out,” he explained, still reeling with disbelief at the idea that he was really going to do this. “Once I do, you will have about five minutes to heal this for me. Will that be enough?”

Loki nodded, eyeing the mechanism.

“Awesome,” Tony said with an enthusiasm he didn’t feel. “Let’s hope I don’t pass out before you’re done.”

“What would happen if you did not replace your machine in time?” Loki asked.

“My heart stops,” Tony informed him bluntly, seeing no point in lying. “But since I’m going to bleed out anyway if we don’t do this, I might as well trust you.”
Loki pressed his lips together, looking unhappy with the new revelation.

“We are going to talk about this later.”

“Can we not?” Tony muttered, but he was already fingering the latch of his arc reactor. “Okay, I’m gonna pull this out on the count of three. One. Two.” He pulled it out, trying to ignore the sickening feeling of emptiness that always accompanied the extraction. “Hurry up,” he added, when Loki remained frozen, staring at the hole in Tony’s chest in morbid fascination.

To his credit, the demigod shook himself out of his surprise a second later and went to work. The familiar golden light enveloped his palms as he pressed them on the wound, willing it to heal.

Tony kept holding the reactor core in his shaking fist, waiting for Loki to finish so he could slap it back in. Those five minutes he had given Loki had been a generous estimate – with the amount of core changes he had done in his Palladium days, he had managed to shorten the time he could stay core-less by a lot. He wasn’t going to tell Loki that, however. The demigod looked pissed-off enough as it was.

Loki pulled back a minute later, leaving behind only smooth skin.

“I’m finished,” he announced.

“Oh, thank fuck,” Tony let out the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding and pushed the reactor core back into place. It took him two tries to get the latch to click properly, but he managed in the end. A quick check told him that everything was in place, which was a relief. The black spots in his vision were slowly overtaking everything, so he closed his eyes, focusing most of his energy on forming coherent sentences. “Thanks. I think I’m going to pass out now.”

Before he could pitch forward and faceplant into the tabletop, hands gripped his shoulders, keeping him upright.

“Stay with me, Stark,” Loki’s voice came from somewhere far away, sounding rather alarmed.

“Not an option,” Tony muttered.

He didn’t find out what Loki said next because he passed out a second later.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

This story just reached the 150 000 word mark! I’ve got 22 chapters done and the end is still nowhere in sight. This fic has eaten my life, but I don’t mind, because I’m really enjoying writing this. The only downside is that I have tons of ideas for other stuff that I wanted to write, but this story is taking up so much of my time that I don’t have any creative energy to work on anything else. Hopefully I should be done with this in a month or two then I can finally finish a few of the short stories that I started over the winter holidays.

Thank you so much for all the feedback you guys keep giving me! I know the last chapter was a downer, but I know what I’m doing with this, I promise. I hope you will keep on reading, because there is still much to come for these two before the story is
over.

The next chapter will be up on next Friday, March 13.
“You wanted to talk to me,” Loki said, meeting Tony’s gaze head-on. “So, talk. I am, as you mortals say, ‘all ears.’”

Tony opened his eyes with a ragged gasp, the tattered edges of a nightmare still clinging to his mind. He couldn’t recall what he’d been dreaming about, but it had involved him fleeing from some unseen pursuer. There had also been explosions involved at some point. He couldn’t remember who he’d been fighting against, or why, but he was glad that he had woken up. He hated dreams like this.

He yawned and reached up to rub his eyelids with his thumb and index finger, trying to recall why he was in bed in the first place. His thoughts were unusually muddy, which was weird – on most days his mind snapped from sleep into full alertness in the matter of seconds, but now it was taking unusually long to boot up. Just how much had he drunk last night?

Except that it wasn’t morning, but late afternoon, as the clock on the bedside table helpfully informed him. He had also apparently slept shirtless, which was another thing that didn’t happen very often. At least he still had his arc reactor, which was something. Thank god for small mercies.

Wait – why the hell was he shirtless in his bed in the middle of the day? As far as he knew, he hadn’t pulled an all-nigh– Oh.

Memories of everything that had happened before he’d passed out came to him in a rush, making him sit up and scramble to look at his arm, but instead of an oozing bullet wound he only found perfectly smooth skin, not a trace of an injury in sight. Which meant that either he had hallucinated the whole thing in L.A., or Loki had really come and healed him. Tony wasn’t entirely sure which version he preferred.

And – speaking of Loki – the demigod was nowhere in sight. Tony’s bedroom was empty, completely devoid of any signs he had ever set foot in there, and the house was as quiet as ever, the only audible sound coming from the ocean waves outside.

“Looks like it’s just you and me, JARVIS,” Tony told the ceiling, trying not to feel disappointed by the fact that Loki had apparently taken off again.

He still felt a little weak but otherwise fine, and his head didn’t start spinning when he sat up fully, which was good. Seeing no point in staying in bed any longer, he lowered his legs over the edge of the bed, intent on standing up. Before he could try to stand, however, a voice from the doorway
stopped him.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Loki was standing in the doorway, holding a small vial with something dark purple and wearing a frown that was 100% aimed at Tony. “You are not supposed to get up yet.”

“There are a lot of things I’m not supposed to do, but I do them anyway.” Tony told him, but stayed sitting because his vision had started to blur a little and he didn’t want to end up face-down on the floor. Instead he propped his elbows on his knees and stared at the carpet because he had no idea what to talk about, now that Loki was here.

“So, you’re still here,” he said finally. Ladies and gentleman, Tony Stark – legendary playboy and sweet-talker extraordinaire. It would be funny if this wasn’t so pathetic.

Loki’s expression clouded even further. “You thought I would abandon you when you are injured?”

Tony made a half-hearted shrug. “I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

Loki’s lips thinned a little, but he didn’t say anything to that. After a short moment of deliberation, he walked into the room where he stopped a few feet away from Tony’s bed. He was holding himself almost painfully straight, as if he expected Tony to lash at him in some way, which made Tony feel like the king of assholes all over again. They stared at each other in silence for a minute, neither quite knowing how to act.

“Lie back down,” Loki ordered, not moving from his spot. “You need rest.”

“What’s that?” Tony asked, gesturing towards the flask in Loki’s hand as he pulled his legs back under the covers and slowly leaned back against the headboard.

“A healing potion,” Loki said. “You lost a lot of blood. This should help you replenish it.”

“Oh, what the hell,” Tony thought. He had already started this whole “trust” thing with the damn arc reactor. Since there was no going back from that, he might as well drink the stupid potion, too.

“All right, give it here,” he told Loki, who looked up in surprise. “And don’t look at me like that. You wouldn’t offer it to me if it wasn’t safe to drink.”

Loki hesitated for a moment longer before he stepped up to the bed, handing the potion over to Tony. Tony noticed that the man took care not to touch him, which stung a little. Apparently he was willing to help Tony remain not dead, but nothing else. Well, it wasn’t like Tony hadn’t expected it, really. After everything that had happened, he should probably be grateful that the demigod had been willing to help him at all. Tony would be dead by now without him.

Tony uncorked the little bottle and sniffed at the contents. The potion was thick, roughly the consistency of cough syrup, and smelled like some mixture of herbs that Tony didn’t recognize.

“It is not poisoned,” Loki assured him. He was still standing by the foot of the bed and looked uncomfortable, like he would prefer to be anywhere else but here. It made Tony wonder just how strong that contract’s magic was, if it was forcing him to stay here against his will. Tony cradled the
“All right, here goes nothing. Cheers, I guess.” He made an ironic toast in Loki’s direction and kicked back the whole flask. The potion had a surprisingly nice taste that vaguely resembled raspberries and it only took Tony three gulps to drink it all. Almost as soon as he swallowed the last drop, he could feel the potion start to work, warming up his body as it traveled through his veins. It wasn’t unpleasant – just a little strange. He put the bottle on his nightstand and turned to look at Loki, who was watching him expectantly.

“Well?” Loki demanded. “Is it working?”

“It seems to be doing something,” Tony confirmed. He wasn’t entirely sure what to think about this whole potion thing just yet. “So far I just feel kinda warm – like that time I went drinking with the Canadian hockey team and woke up half naked in the middle of a Californian vineyard two days later.” He pointed a warning finger at Loki. “If I end up with a set of tentacles or a second head after this, I’m gonna to sue you.”

“As if you could.” Loki looked like he barely refrained from rolling his eyes, one corner of his mouth twitching up briefly before he schooled his expression again. He opened his mouth to say something else, but JARVIS interrupted them.

“Sir? Miss Potts is on the line. I have been able to block her while you slept, but she is using her override now. She is very worried about you.”

“How long have I been out?” Tony asked.

“Over four hours, sir.”

Tony’s mind boggled a little at the information.

“Jesus. It’s no wonder she’s going crazy. The fight must be all over the news by now.”

While Tony had been speaking with JARVIS, Loki picked up the empty potion vial from the nightstand and started walking towards the bedroom door. Tony caught the sour expression on his face before the man had turned away and suddenly he knew with absolute certainty that if he let Loki walk out of the room now, he would leave the house as well and most likely never come back again. There was no way Tony was going to let him leave again – not when he finally had a chance to talk to him.

“Loki, wait!” Tony called after him.

The demigod stopped in the doorway, keeping his expression carefully neutral as he looked back over his shoulder. “Yes?”

“There are some things I want to talk to you about,” Tony said, giving Loki his best puppy dog eyes. “Just...give me a minute to assure Pepper that I’m not dead, ok? You can walk out afterwards if you want, but...can you just stay for a bit and let me explain? Please?”

Loki sighed in defeat and hung his head for a second before he turned around and walked back into the room. With a few long strides, he crossed the bedroom and stopped by the large sunlit window, clasping his hands behind his back. Though he was trying hard to pretend nonchalance, the tense line of his shoulders gave away his discomfort with the situation.

“Very well,” he said quietly. “I will stay for a while. But make it quick.” He kept his back to Tony,
focusing his attention on watching the ocean waves below.

Tony tore his eyes from him and looked up at the ceiling again, bracing himself for the inevitable call.

“Patch it through, JARVIS,” he told the computer.

“And if you don’t pick up the phone, Tony, I swear I will come over there and kill you myself,” Pepper was just saying, bitching at the phone in Tony’s absence.

“Hello to you too, Pep,” Tony greeted her with a grin, feeling amused by the rant.

“Oh, thank god, you’re alive,” she breathed out, the relief in her voice unmistakable. “JARVIS told me you were too busy to pick up the phone, which I know you weren’t. Are you all right? I saw the TV footage, it looked horrible.”

“I’m fine,” Tony assured her, noticing that Loki was covertly watching him from the window. “The suit took most of the damage, I’m only a little bruised.”

He paused for a second, deliberating whether to say the next bit, but in the end he decided to go for it. If something ever happened to Pepper because he had kept things from her, he would never forgive himself.

“The thing is – someone just tried to kill me, Pep. A bunch of guys with guns attacked my car in the middle of a busy road in broad daylight. I have no idea who they were or why they went after me, but if they were after money, it’s possible that someone could come after you, too, seeing as you’re my CEO.”

“Oh my god.”

“No, it was an assassination, plain and simple.” He saw no point in painting the thing as something else. “It became an Iron Man fight after I put on the suitcase armor. Before that it was just a bunch of commando guys shooting at a civilian.”

“Oh my god.”

“Hey, it’s fine,” Tony said with fake confidence. “Lots of people have shot at me before. These guys were just better equipped than most.”

“Are you sure you’re alright?” she insisted. “The last time you said you were fine, you came home with a dislocated shoulder.”

“Nope, I’m 100% fine,” he reassured her and pointedly avoided Loki’s knowing gaze. It was kinda scary, how well she knew him, sometimes. “The armor is a wreck, but I’m all right. I think I’ll lay low for a few days, just to see what happens next. You should disappear for a while, too, just in case this was meant as an attack on Stark Industries.”

“I…have about thousand meetings I should be attending these next few days, but this sounds serious,” she said hesitantly.

“They shot a fucking missile at me so I would say that yeah, this is pretty serious. Pepper,” he added in a softer voice when she hesitated, “screw the company. I couldn’t care less if the business went under, but I would hate it if something happened to you because of it. You’re the boss, so just take a few days off. You’ve earned them. Take your guy – what’s his name, Brandon?”
“Bradley.”

“Bradley, and go to the Bahamas or something. You’ve got the money, treat him to a vacation. You can save kittens together or feed orphans or whatever it is he does, and wait for this whole mess to blow over. Just get out of here for a while, ok?”

“All right,” she finally relented. “I’ll take your word on this. What are you planning to do?”

“No idea so far,” Tony told her, but in his mind he had already come up with at least twenty ways to find the men who had attacked him and make them pay. “I’ll probably try to figure out what the hell happened first.”

“Be careful,” she said.

“I’ll try,” because that was the best he could offer her at the moment. “Enjoy your vacation.”

“Don’t get killed,” was her parting shot before she hung up on him.

Tony sighed, turning his head towards the window where Loki was standing, watching him silently. When he noticed that Tony was looking at him, he leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest, making it clear the he wouldn’t make this easy for Tony.

“You wanted to talk to me,” he said, meeting Tony’s gaze head-on. “So, talk. I am, as you mortals say, ‘all ears’.”

Now that he finally had Loki’s attention, Tony had no idea where to begin. After three weeks of imagining what he would say to the man if he ever came back, he still didn’t have a clue how he should go about apologizing. However, since Loki seemed to be growing more and more impatient with every passing second of silence, he had to say something, or he risked having the guy walk out on him again. Once had been more than enough.

“The first thing you should know,” Tony began, “is that I don’t talk about things. Well – at least not about things that are important. I don’t talk about them, because...I just never really learned how. I don’t…share.” He made a face.

“Yes, I already gathered as much,” Loki said bitingly.

Tony shot him a glare. “Look, this is not easy for me. I’m not used to explaining myself…or apologizing, for that matter. People around me usually don’t give a shit about why I do the things I do. They either roll with it, or leave, which is more common. But I figured that I at least owe you an apology for being a dick.”

Loki’s expression didn’t change, but at least he wasn’t leaving, which was something.

“For a man who likes hearing himself talk as much as you do, you are not doing a very good job of it now,” Loki pointed out when Tony didn’t say anything else.

“Yeah,” Tony muttered, his eyes flickering between Loki’s face and the blanket on his lap. “I suppose I’m not.” He was still trying to figure out how he should go about the whole apology deal. Luckily for him, a quick flash of a memory of their conversation in the workshop gave him an idea.

“Hey,” he said suddenly, sitting up a bit straighter. “You said that you wanted to know about the arc reactor, right?”

Loki’s eyes flickered down to Tony’s chest, which was still fully on display.
“I do,” he admitted. “But since we already established that you do not wish for me to know anything about it – or you in general, for that matter – I thought it would be pointless to ask.”

“It’s…complicated,” Tony said. “But I’m willing to explain. I owe you that much, for saving my life. Again.”

He sat up on the bed and reached for the bottom part of his nightstand to pull out the bottle of whisky that he kept stashed there for emergency purposes. A shadow of distaste flickered over Loki’s face.

“Do you really have to drink right now?”

“Yeah, I do,” Tony told him matter-of-factly, but his hand on the bottle still hesitated for a second before he pulled it out. “Look, I’ve never spoken about this before and I hope like hell that I’ll never have to again. Even Pepper doesn’t know everything that happened, and she was present for most of it. This is…” he paused, his eyes flickering down to the bottle in his hands, “there’s no way I can have this conversation sober.”

“Well, if you must,” Loki said, but he didn’t look very pleased with the idea. “Beware though, that drinking alcohol after ingesting the potion might bring on some unintended consequences.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Tony waved his concerns away. “The doctors in the ER always tell me the same when I come in with some Avengers-related injury. Never stopped me before.”

“Do not say I did not warn you,” Loki told him. “Now, I believe you were going to tell me about that device in your chest?” He gave Tony a meaningful look.

“Right.” Tony nodded, but he didn’t begin just yet. Instead he opened the bottle and brought it to his lips, focusing on the way the liquid burned in his throat as he drank. When he finally started speaking, he kept his eyes on the bottle in his hand, using it as an excuse to avoid looking at Loki directly. This way he could pretend that the guy wasn’t in the room and that he wasn’t spilling one of his deepest, darkest secrets to his former enemy.

“The arc reactor is basically a life-support system for me. It keeps me alive. There are pieces of shrapnel from a missile scattered through my chest, trying to crawl their way into my heart. This stops it.” He raised a hand and tapped the glass with his finger before letting it fall back down into his lap. “When you take it out, two things can happen – one: I get a heart attack, my heart stops beating and I collapse.” He smiled a little at the startled look Loki threw him. “Yeah. That’s the better option, by the way. The second possibility is that the absence of the magnetic pull will allow the bits of metal to reach my heart and shred it to bits while I’m fully conscious.” He shuddered a little just imagining it. “I don’t suppose it would be a great experience.”

“How many people know about this?” Loki asked quietly.

“Only a few. I didn’t make it public knowledge, because that would be downright idiotic. ‘Oh hey, bad guys, listen up! Iron Man has an off button. Just follow this one simple rule for a quick, effortless death.’” He was so focused on his words that he missed the brief flicker of horror on Loki’s face. “Pepper knows everything, because she was the only one I trusted to help me switch the first model for the new one. The Avengers know the basics – if you take it out, I die – and Fury knows what it does because he’s a nosy bastard. Oh, and Rhodey. Apart from that, nobody has a clue about what it is. Natasha would probably skin me alive for telling you this much, but I figured that you deserve to know.”

Since Loki didn’t say anything, Tony decided to continue.
“And as for the rest, well, short answer is: trust issues. The long answer is...long. You probably have better things to do than to listen to my sob story.”

He shot Loki a hopeful look, but the demigod shook his head.

“No, you promised me an explanation. I have more than enough time to hear it.”

“All right,” Tony said, with a decisiveness he didn’t feel. “I’ll...try.”

Slowly, carefully, he stood up from the bed and went to stand in front of the window near the nightstand, leaving a good eight feet of space between himself and Loki. He leaned his back against the wall by the window and took another swig from the bottle to steel himself for the story. Loki was watching him patiently, waiting for him to begin. Tony took a deep breath before he finally met Loki’s eyes.

“I could go all Freud on you and tell you about how my childhood sucked and my dad didn’t love me, but I don’t think you want to hear any of that. So I won’t talk about that. Instead, I’ll tell you about Obadiah Stane.” He felt his voice grow harder as he pronounced the name, the all too familiar face flashing through his mind.

“Imagine you have a mentor.” He gestured with the hand that wasn’t holding the bottle. “A friend whom you’ve known your entire life. This guy has been with you every step on the way, motivating you, supporting you, helping you – and then you find out that while you were grateful for his guidance, he’d been plotting your murder behind your back the whole time.”

Loki’s eyes widened a little but he didn’t interrupt, letting Tony speak.

“Stane was my father’s best friend,” Tony continued. “They met sometime in the sixties and hit it off. It didn’t take long before he became my dad’s trusted business partner and advisor. He helped him run Stark Industries and took care of the company’s public image, which at that time probably consisted of making sure that Howard was sober for his public appearances. I’ve known him since he was a kid. While my own father largely ignored me, Obie paid attention to me – he always asked about my inventions and praised my creativity.”

Tony let out a hollow laugh.

“In retrospect, I have to wonder, just how much of it was genuine affection and how much was him grooming me, making me trust him so I wouldn’t question all the shit he later pulled behind my back. Hell, maybe he even liked me at the start and only got greedy later, but I wouldn’t be the slightest bit surprised if the whole thing had been one long con he played on me.” He made a half-hearted shrug. “I suppose I’ll never know.”

A quick glance at Loki told him that he had the demigod’s full attention. The weight of Loki’s gaze on him was starting to make him uncomfortable, so he turned to face the glass instead, focusing on the rhythmic motion of the waves below.

“Obie was like a father to me. Hell, he was a better father figure than my own father had ever been. He always stood by my side, guiding me, helping me. When my parents died, he comforted me at their funeral and then showed me how to lead my own company. He worked for me for decades and I never suspected a thing. I had no idea that he had been planning to kill me for years. I trusted him absolutely.” Tony’s lips twisted in a self-deprecating smile. “God, I was an idiot.”

“No, you weren’t,” Loki said quietly, taking a few steps closer. “He had spent years building up your trust. You had no reason not to trust him.”
Tony didn’t look at him, gazing at the ocean instead. The story wasn’t done yet and if he looked at Loki now, he might never finish it.

“He had me invent weapons and I was happy to do it, happy to prove that I was the best player in the field of mass destruction. My inventions killed thousands of people every year and I didn’t give a shit, because they were no more than a random number for me, a boring statistic. All I cared about was being the guy making the best guns, best missiles – and he knew it. He knew how to best flatter me, how to make me look the other way when he started selling my inventions to people I would never let touch my stuff. He used me for as long as it was convenient for him and when I became a liability, he ordered to have me killed by my own weapons.”

Tony would have loved to be able to pace around the room, to try and get rid of some of that nervous energy humming under his skin, but his legs were barely holding him up. As it was, he just leaned on the wall and played with the bottle in his hands, glad to have something to do with them. He had only drunk a few gulps of the whisky so far but he was already starting to get a slight buzz from it, which was nice. It made this whole situation seem less real, made it easier to talk about things he had never told another living being before.

“I suppose there’s a strangely poetic irony to it, being killed by one’s own instruments of death. Unfortunately for Stane, the terrorists that found me half dead were much more interested in what I could bring to the table than in killing me, so they dragged me to a cave somewhere, patched me up as best as they could, and tried to persuade me to make them some weapons. They didn’t succeed, though not for lack of trying.”

Memories flashed unbidden through his mind – of darkness, barrels of water and a horrible pressure at the back of his neck as he tried to breathe but drowned instead, half-convinced he would never come up for air again. With some effort, he forcibly pulled himself out of the memory, taking a long, shuddering breath as he did so. He closed his eyes and tried to focus back on his tale, tried to remember what he’d been talking about.

“Long story short, I built my first suit in that cave and then I burned the whole place to the ground.” He followed the words with another swig from the bottle, trying to chase away the tightness in his throat.

Loki was still watching him, only now there was a shadow of concern in his eyes that he tried to hide under a mask of indifference. He was also standing closer than before – less than four feet away. When the hell did that happen? Tony wondered. Just how long had he been out of it? Didn’t matter. He still hadn’t finished his story.

“When I came home, Stane latched onto me, feeding me bullshit about how happy he was to see me alive, while inside he was probably going ballistic that he hadn’t been able to get rid of me yet. Being the idiot that I was, I happily showed him the arc reactor and explained how it was keeping me alive. Kinda like I’m doing now with you.” He shot Loki a wry grin that the demigod didn’t return.

“I assume that he used the knowledge against you in some way,” Loki said.

“Of course he did,” Tony confirmed. “He was livid that I had managed to escape from the cave in Afghanistan. Outwardly he hid it well, but he was getting impatient to have me gone, especially since I came home and announced that I was shutting down the entire weapons division of Stark Industries. When his attempt to have me proclaimed mentally unstable didn’t work, he came here, paralyzed me with a military tech I had invented, and yanked the arc reactor straight out of my chest.” He shuddered at the memory. “He just took it and I was completely powerless to stop him. I could only lie there and watch him do it.”
Tony fell silent for a moment, fighting against the wave of humiliation and helplessness that the memory always brought him.

“And you know what the best part was?” He shot Loki a quick look. “He didn’t just take it and leave. No, he sat down next to me, so he could savor his victory. He gave me a whole monologue about how he couldn’t wait for me to die and what a piece of shit I was for spoiling his plans so many times. God, I will never forget the look on his face as he stood over me and watched me gasp for breath – the triumph and smug satisfaction at the knowledge that he had finally managed to get rid of me.”

Loki visibly paled but Tony didn’t notice, caught up in memories of pain and anger.

“He had probably hoped to see me die, but he got too impatient because he wanted to see what the arc reactor could do. He got bored of waiting and decided that I was going to be dead soon anyway, so he gloated at me some more and then waltzed out of here like nothing happened. I managed to crawl to the workshop and Dummy saved my life by bringing me my old arc reactor.” Tony drew in a deep breath, pulling himself back to the present only to realize that he had his left hand clutched protectively over the light in his chest, his nails digging into the scar tissue around the reactor. He made a conscious effort to let go before continuing. “Then I put on my suit, went after him, and the rest is history.”

“Did you kill him?” Loki asked in a carefully even voice. Tony knew that tone well enough to know that the demigod was probably imagining a thousand creative ways to kill the guy right now.

“Yeah.” Tony nodded, seeing no point in lying. “He went after Pepper next, so I hunted him down and confronted him. Technically speaking, it was his own stupidity and overconfidence that killed him, rather than any direct effort from me, but yeah, he’s dead.”

“Good.” Loki’s eyes had taken on a bloodthirsty gleam.

“So yeah, I have trust issues,” Tony concluded. “Big surprise there. Sorry if I wasn’t super eager to trust a guy who had already tried to kill me once.” He shot Loki a sidelong glance, watching his reaction. The guy looked...kinda lost. And maybe even a little ashamed.

“I…did not know any of this,” Loki said slowly, hesitantly. “I only knew that the man tried to kill you. I did not know why.”

Tony shrugged, pulling his shoulders a little tighter to his chest.

“I didn’t want you to know. If it were my choice, nobody would ever hear about this.” He heard Loki move closer but didn’t look at him, keeping his eyes glued to the ocean.

“Then why are you telling me now?” Loki wanted to know.

“I…” Tony paused, realizing that he himself had no idea, either. In the end he decided that honesty would be his best bet. “I liked what we had. I tried not to get too involved, because I figured you would hightail out of here once the armor was done, but I liked the…” he made a vague motion with his hand, “whatever it was. It worked. We were pretty good together. And if I was a dick to you, it was mostly because of issues on my side. I know the breakup saying ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ is a cliché, but in this case it mostly applies. Sure, I had some issues with you, but most of them were on my side.”

He dropped his gaze down to the bottle in his hands, feeling uncomfortable with talking about emotions so openly.
“Why am I telling you all this now? Because I was an idiot. I thought that if I kept the reactor safe, if I didn’t tell you what it does, it would, I don’t know…protect me? Maybe? It doesn’t matter. It’s stupid, because you already have about a hundred other ways you could kill me if you wanted, so you knowing about the reactor doesn’t change much.” He raised the bottle to his lips and took another gulp of the whisky, just to have something to do, but it didn’t ease his discomfort with the situation in the slightest. “Anyway, you’re probably going to walk out of here any minute now, so I figured that you at least deserve an explanation. Also, sorry if I was an asshole to you. It’s kind of my default setting.”

“You’re…” Loki shook his head, looking speechless for once. “Are you doing this on purpose?” he said, making Tony frown.

“Am I doing what? Drinking?” Tony had no idea what he was talking about.

“This,” Loki gestured to him, a sweep of his hand that encompassed the entirety of Tony’s person.

“What am I supposed to- Oh.” Tony looked down at himself, only to finally realize that he was wearing only his boxers. The whole time he’d been standing there monologuing, he’d been doing it almost naked and hadn’t even noticed. It seemed that his mental capacities still hadn’t fully recovered from the blood loss. “I can put something on, if you want,” he offered half-heartedly, though he didn’t see much point in it.

“No, it’s…fine,” Loki said, looking amused by his lack of attentiveness. “Do you often parade around the house half-naked?”

“Sometimes,” Tony admitted. “It usually involves either wild orgies or robot dance parties. Hard to say which one is better, really.”

“You’re drunk,” Loki pointed out, but at least he was wearing something close to a smile, which was…good, right? Loki smiling was always good.

Tony looked at the half-empty bottle in his hand, a wry grin stretching his lips.

“Yeah, I suppose I am. I’m never this eager to share when I’m sober.”

“You should go back to sleep,” the demigod told him. “The potion needs several hours to work properly.”

“Where did you get it?” Tony inquired as he shuffled back towards the bed, depositing the bottle on the nightstand next to the bed.

“I made it. It is not very hard, when you have the right ingredients.” Loki was still holding back, watching Tony from a safe distance, but at least he no longer looked like he desperately wanted to be anywhere else but here. Tony supposed that was progress. He lay back down on the bed, feeling the exhaustion creeping up on him like a fog.

“Will you be here in the morning, or are you leaving again?”

“I will stay, for now,” Loki promised. “The rest depends on you.”

And yeah, that was…something. Tony could work with that – once he’d slept for about a million hours. He vaguely heard Loki move around the room and close the door, but before he could come up with a strategy for the morning, he was out like a light.

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The morning sun woke him up at half past seven and he rolled over on his back, stretching in contentment. He actually felt rested, which hadn’t happened to him for…he couldn’t even remember the last time he had slept this well. Whatever stuff Loki had put into that little potion of his seemed to have done its magic, because Tony felt as good as new. Hard to believe that just twelve hours ago he had been bleeding out all over his workshop floor.

Tony sat back against the headboard and reached for a tablet on the end table, drawing it into his lap to do a quick check in with JARVIS. Before he could delve into the news, however, he remembered something he had forgotten about yesterday. He’d been so loopy from the blood loss and booze that he hadn’t even questioned how he’d ended up half naked in his bed when the last thing he remembered was passing out fully clothed on the desk in his workshop. He may not have been interested yesterday, but now he wanted to know. He suspected Loki must have had something to do with Tony’s sudden talent for teleportation.

“JARVIS?” Tony called.

“Good morning, sir. How are you feeling today?”

“Pretty good, actually. Is Loki still here?”

“Yes, sir. He is currently in the kitchen, eating breakfast.”

“Great.” So he was still here. That was…Tony didn’t quite know how he should feel about that, but it was something. Something good, probably, judging by the way his heart rate picked up a bit just by mentioning Loki’s presence. Yeah, “good” was…safe, for a start.

“How did I get back here yesterday?” Tony asked JARVIS.

“I could explain, but in this case it will be easier to show you, sir,” the computer said and a second later the screen of Tony’s tablet changed to the picture of his workshop. “This is the recording from yesterday.”

JARVIS started by playing the last minute of their argument before Tony had passed out and Tony had to admit that he looked like death warmed over in the video. No wonder Loki had felt sorry for him.

The Tony in the video passed out and Loki caught him before he could faceplant into the desktop, holding him upright as he kept up a string of swear words about reckless idiots and fragile humans. He picked Tony up from the bench and lifted him into his arms, shooing off a worried Dummy, who had come to investigate the new development. He then held a brief conversation with JARVIS before he turned on his heel and started to walk upstairs.

The fact that he didn’t teleport them straight into the bedroom surprised Tony a little, especially since he knew how convenient transportation by magic could be, but what surprised him way more than that was just how gently Loki was handling Tony’s unconscious body. He could have just thrown Tony over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes if he’d wanted to, but instead he was cradling him in his arms almost protectively. Like he was something fragile (Tony’s mind shied away from the word precious) that needed to be handled with care.

He carried Tony all the way to the master bedroom and deposited him on the bed, after which he promptly started divesting Tony of the remains of his bloodied clothing. Everything from the waist up had been ruined by blood, so Loki took off the dirty clothes and threw them onto the floor before running a quick visual check to see if there weren’t any more injuries. He hesitated briefly when he reached for Tony’s belt, but in the end he pulled the pants and shoes off as well, making Tony more
comfortable. Tony could be almost fooled into thinking that Loki was doing it with a clinical detachment, if he didn’t notice the way Loki’s eyes repeatedly lingered on his face with something suspiciously close to longing.

When Tony was finally undressed all the way to his boxers and Loki was satisfied that he wasn’t going to bleed out from some other, hidden wound, he covered Tony with a blanket and stood up, probably intending to go downstairs. Instead of marching out, however, he ended up hovering by the bed for a few more minutes, watching the slow rise and fall of Tony’s chest. In the end he tore himself away and went back down to the workshop, where Dummy was working himself into a frenzy over the drying blood on the floor.

“Your master will be fine,” Loki told the bot, making it look up hopefully. “He just needs some rest.”

Dummy rolled over to him and gave him a small, grateful nudge with his claw-head that almost made him look like some sort of a weird mechanical dog. Loki gave him a small smile and patted the metal frame briefly before he turned to look at the desk where Tony had last been sitting. There was a small pool of drying blood on the seat and several streaks of it over the floor and desk. The medkit stood half empty on the tabletop, its contents strewn across the desk. Parts of the suitcase armor lay all over the workshop floor, the numerous bullet-holes serving as quiet witnesses to the violence Tony had been caught up in.

And everywhere around him, empty bottles from various alcoholic beverages Tony had consumed during his numerous attempts to induce romance-related amnesia on himself after their break-up. Loki’s gaze swept over the workshop, taking in the dozens of empty bottles Tony that hadn’t bothered to clean up because why would he? Nobody ever came into his workshop.

Loki’s lips pulled into a thin, displeased line at the sight and he turned an accusing look at the ceiling.

“You are supposed to protect him,” he said, clearly addressing JARVIS.

“I do protect him. I do everything in my power to keep him safe,” JARVIS answered, not fazed in the slightest by the burning glare directed at his cameras. “However, there is only so much I can do. I am limited by the parameters Sir provides me with.”

“So you would just let him bleed out?”

“I can only provide suggestions and raise my objections to his more questionable actions. I cannot disobey his direct commands,” JARVIS said apologetically. “In this particular case I would have waited for him to lose consciousness before proceeding with the emergency protocol.” He made a delicate pause before continuing. “While your frustration is somewhat understandable, Mr. Loki, is it misplaced. I am not responsible for Mr. Stark’s actions. Sir can be…stubborn at the best of times.”

“Yes, he’s…” Loki tangled a hand in his hair, staring at the bloodstain on the floor. It looked like he was torn about what he should do next.

“Nobody is forcing you to stay here, Mr. Loki,” JARVIS spoke again. “I am sure Sir would understand it if you left now.”

“Yes, he would, wouldn’t he,” Loki said flatly. “Tell me, machine – what will he do if I leave again? You are familiar enough with him to make such a prediction, are you not?”

“I am, yes. However, I am not certain if I should disclose such information to you,” JARVIS said, being his wonderful bitchy self.

“To this day, I have saved his life three times,” Loki pointed out. “If I wanted him dead, I would not
have bothered. So tell me, what will he do?”

JARVIS only hesitated for a moment before replying:

“There is 92% chance that he will drink at least two bottles of alcohol shortly after your departure, 85% chance that he will try to uncover the identities of his attackers, and 78% chance that he will succeed in his search. Once he does, he will most likely take one of the suits and pursue them. Depending on the level of weaponization of their base, there is a 21-34% chance that he will be mortally wounded in the process.” Loki drew a short breath at that. “The odds are not very favourable in this case,” JARVIS concluded.

Tony squinted at the screen, a little taken aback by the amount of information JARVIS was willing to divulge about him. Then he saw the hesitation on Loki’s face and his eyebrows flew up. Was JARVIS trying to manipulate Loki into staying? If he was, it seemed to be working, because Loki let out a resigned sigh and sat down on one of the nearby benches.

“That does seem like something he would do.” He picked up a nearby empty bottle and turned it over in his hands as he contemplated his next move. Finally he seemed to have arrived at a decision; with a small resigned sigh, he raised his head to address Dummy, who was still hovering nearby. “Very well, I will stay. For now.”

“Thank you,” JARVIS said. “Despite your past history, your presence here has been a largely positive influence on Sir. In fact, so far you have proved to be the only one even remotely capable of keeping him in line, so to speak.”

Yep, that was definitely manipulation on JARVIS’s side. Loki responded with a wry grin.

“Nobody can keep Stark in line. He is like liquid fire, burning, unpredictable.”

“Nonetheless, you are the one who has managed to come the closest,” JARVIS insisted. “And we recognize that. It is understandable if you are hesitant to stay after recent events,” leave it to JARVIS to find the blandest word possible to describe the gigantic clusterfuck that had been their breakup, “but it would be most appreciated if you remained here for at least a day or two. At least until I manage to determine who the attackers were and how much of a threat they pose.”

“You will find them?” Loki asked.

“Of course,” JARVIS said, like it was insulting to even suggest otherwise. “I will use the satellite network to trace their movements. I should have the relevant information available in a matter of hours.”

“Good.” Loki stood up. “I need to leave for a few hours but I’ll be back. Please try to keep Stark from accidentally killing himself again.”

“I will try,” JARVIS offered. “But you should come back soon. Sir never stays in bed as long as people expect him to.”

“Don’t I know that,” Loki muttered, but it sounded more exasperated than anything. “I will be back soon,” he promised before disappearing in a shower of gold-green light.

The video ended right after, a frozen image of the empty workshop filling the screen. Tony looked up from the tablet with small grin.

“JARVIS?” Tony addressed the ceiling. “Have I ever told you that you’re evil?”
“Only four times so far this year, Sir,” JARVIS answered. “But I do try to use my powers for the common good.”

Tony’s eyes fell back to the screen, remembering the expression Loki had worn as he’d stood vigil by Tony’s bed. Yep, that wasn’t the face of someone who was completely over him. It gave Tony hope that maybe this wasn’t a totally lost cause just yet.

Maybe there was still some hope for them.

*To be continued…*

Chapter End Notes

So. Loki’s back. Kind of. Also, Tony is terrible at this whole “talking honestly about feelings” thing.

The plot will pick up speed in the next few chapters as Tony starts to uncover the identity of his mysterious attackers and he and Loki enjoy some fun at the bad guys’ expense. So stay tuned, there is still much to come!

Also, thank you so much for all the comments and kudos you keep leaving on this story! You guys make me so happy, you have no idea.

Chapter 18 will be posted on next Friday, March 20.
Chapter Summary

In which Tony discovers that he’s the bad guy after all.

Chapter Notes

A big thank you goes to my beta InsanitysxCreation, for her continuing support and the amazing help she gives me with this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After his illuminating twenty minutes with the security camera footage, Tony felt more than ready to face the world. He pulled out the first random t-shirt and jeans that he came across in the closet and went to have a shower. The skin on his arm and chest was still caked with dried blood from the bullet wound, making it itch unpleasantly and he wanted it gone as soon as possible. JARVIS set the perfect temperature and turned on the shower for him, so all Tony needed to do was stand under the spray of hot water, scrub, and watch the pink stream escape down the drain.

It was just what he needed after the shitty day he’d had yesterday. Even now he could hardly believe half of what had happened: an assassination, Loki coming back, Tony almost bleeding out, and then that fucking stupid confession he’d made…god, what had he been thinking? He’d never told anyone the truth about what had happened with Obadiah. Not even Pepper, and she knew almost everything there was to know about him. And yet he had gone and blabbed about it to the guy who had once been his most dangerous enemy. Why the hell had he done that? Was he so desperate not to be left alone? Did Loki put something into the potion to make Tony blurt out his deepest, darkest secrets?

No. As much as Tony hated to admit it, the sudden urge to share had been all his. The combination of Loki’s three week absence and the sudden threat on his life had been the last blow needed to break through Tony’s already wavering determination to keep Loki at arm’s length, their relationship casual and uncomplicated. Who was he kidding? This thing between them had been anything but casual. If it were, Tony wouldn’t have spent the last three weeks drowning in alcohol.

So, that tactic hadn’t worked. Loki had left him anyway and Tony had only ended up feeling fucking miserable. But even after his dramatic departure, and despite the mess that Tony had made of things, Loki had still been willing to come back and save Tony’s sorry ass from bleeding out. It gave Tony a glimmer of hope that maybe this thing between them could still be salvageable. The hope wasn’t too big, because Loki was a stubborn drama queen, capable of holding petty grudges for decades at a time, but it was better than nothing.

The question facing Tony right now was: what was he going to do about this? Was he going to let Loki walk away again? (Even though that might still well happen. Tony wouldn’t put it past the guy to hightail out of here as soon as he could.) Or was he going to try and see if things between them could be patched up?

He knew what he wanted, at least – Loki back in his life, in his bed, laughing and plotting and
watching him with those clever green eyes of his that always made Tony feel like the Asgardian was staring right into his soul. And as much as he would like to deny it, he had missed Loki. He’d missed his presence, his acerbic wit, his jokes about Tony’s fellow Avengers that were sometimes horribly dark but made him laugh anyway, everything. The guy had left a demigod-shaped hole in Tony’s life and no amount of alcohol had been able to dull the hollow ache that had echoed in his chest whenever he’d looked at his empty bed or the extra chair in his workshop.

So yeah, he’d missed Loki and now the guy was here and Tony didn’t have the first clue about how to go about getting him back. All he knew was that he wanted to, that the possibility of reconciliation made his heart light up with something fierce and hopeful and there was no way he could lose it again. It would be awkward as hell and Loki might end up hating him anyway, but he was still going to try. He owed them both that much, at least.

As far as Tony was concerned, it was definitely worth a try. He had nothing left to lose on this front – if he managed to sweet-talk Loki into giving him a second chance, it would be a win for them both. And if the demigod decided to leave in the end, the current status quo wouldn’t change from what it was right now. But that wasn’t quite true, was it? They had both shifted the balance already yesterday – Loki by coming back and Tony by telling him things he’d never shared with another soul before. They couldn’t go back to what they’d had before, but maybe, just maybe, they could have something else – something better.

One could only hope.

JARVIS turned off the water from him and Tony stepped out of the shower, towelling himself absent-mindedly. His mind was still mostly focused on how to best approach Loki, so he wasn’t paying much attention to what he was doing. Out of habit, he picked out a random baggy T-shirt from the closet, but stopped before he could pull it on. Normally he wouldn’t give a damn about what he wore at home, but with Loki here, he might as well try to look good. With that thought, he stuffed the garment back inside the closet and pulled out a tank top instead, letting it show off his shoulders and the muscles on his arms.

Yeah, he might be trying to get Loki back, but nobody said he had to play fair.

Fully dressed and finally ready to rock, Tony made his way downstairs to see what sort of bullshit the news stations had managed to cook up while he’d been sleeping. If the media reactions after the Doombot incident were any indication, it probably wouldn’t be anything pleasant. But first, he needed coffee. There was no way he was going to face the world without coffee.

Loki was sitting at the dinner table when Tony walked into the kitchen, eating an enormous plate of scrambled eggs with sausages. He looked up as Tony approached, meeting Tony’s eyes with a carefully neutral expression that could have been hiding a hundred different things. Awkward silence fell over the kitchen as Tony filled his mug with hot beverage.

“You’re still here,” was the first thing out of Tony’s mouth, cementing Tony’s lifelong belief that he shouldn’t be allowed to communicate with people without ingesting some coffee first. Caffeine deprivation had an unfortunate side-effect of removing most of the filters between his brain and mouth. “I mean, not that you shouldn’t be. It’s good to have you around, eating my sausages.” He slammed his mouth shut at the knowing look Loki shot him. “Oh god, I’m going to shut up now.” He shuffled over to the coffee maker, trying to ignore the demigod’s amused smirk.

“Yes, I am still here,” Loki confirmed. “As you can see. You shouldn’t be so surprised.”

“I guess I’m just not used to people sticking around,” Tony muttered as he reached into one of the cupboards for a coffee mug. Awkward silence fell over the kitchen as Tony filled his mug with hot beverage.
“You did not have any food here,” Loki remarked behind his back, making Tony look up.

“I didn’t? No, I guess not. I’ve been…” *half-drunk most of the time* “busy lately. I guess it just slipped my mind.” He tried not to feel completely pathetic about that. “I assume JARVIS ordered those eggs for you.”

“Yes, among other things.”

Rather than stay in the kitchen under the weight of Loki’s piercing eyes, Tony relocated to the living room and told JARVIS to turn on the recording of the news coverage that the computer had collected for him overnight. Might as well get this over with.

What greeted him on the screen was…insanity. Sure, he had expected the attack to get some media coverage – after all, he was Iron Man, he couldn’t even sneeze without some eager reporter writing about it - but this was just…unbelievable. He dismissed the first headline that read *Tony Stark: Hero no more?* without as much as a blink, because that particular station was well known for their sensationalist style, but when the second and third news reports both tried to portray him as a power-hungry lunatic going on a killing rampage, he had to accept that this was something that was really happening.

Loki wandered into the room just as Tony was skipping between the channels, trying to get something that would have at least a hint of truth about what had really happened, but apart from one or two more left-leaning stations, the general narrative stayed the same.

“*Tony Stark, a man who had proclaimed himself the protector of American people, caused deaths of:***”

“-the so called Iron Man engaged in a dangerous shootout in populated L.A. area-”

“-has been known for his alcoholism and poor impulse control-”

“-is clearly unstable-”

“-executed fifteen men in broad daylight in the middle of an L.A. street. He could do anything next-”

“Can he still be trusted?” Senator Stern’s smarmy face filled half the screen as he posed for the reporters on the stairs in front of the building of Congress in D.C. “Certainly not. He should hand over his weaponry to the American Government before he can cause any more dama-”

“Mute,” Tony said, feeling a little shaken. He ran a hand over his face and closed his eyes for a few seconds in the hope that maybe it would make all this magically go away, but no such luck. The picture on the screen stayed the same, showing a burning building in the background while the headline read *Iron Man: National Threat?* When the fourth channel in a row showed the same clip of Iron Man flipping over a van and shooting eight men, Tony deliberately turned his back on the TV and gave Loki a bewildered look.

“What the hell is going on? Someone just tried to kill me by sending twenty guys and a fucking sniper after me and yet the majority of the media stations are portraying me as a trigger-happy madman that engaged in a shootout just for the hell of it.” He ran an agitated hand through his hair and started pacing, his body too full of nervous energy to stay still. “Have you seen what those guys did to my car?” He whirled to face Loki. “If I didn’t have my suit, I would have ended up looking like Swiss cheese.”

“I know,” Loki said placidly, watching him pace.
“I mean, what the fuck?” Tony continued. “Someone tries to kill me and I’m a bad guy for defending myself? The media coverage after the Doombot thing was a bit bizarre, but this is some next-level bullshit. How the hell did they come up with all this?”

“Someone is controlling the narrative,” Loki said, giving the TV screen a narrow-eyed look. “They are working hard to undermine your image, to portray you as a dangerous, unstable maniac that cannot be trusted.”

“And they’re doing a damn good job at it, too.” Tony couldn’t even look at the TV anymore. “JARVIS, turn it off.” He blew a relieved breath when the screen went dark. “You know, nobody knows better than me just how fast the public opinion can change, how quickly the people can turn on you, but this is insane. Who the hell is doing this? And why? If they wanted me gone, they could have just killed me. Why make a spectacle out of it?”

“Because they do not wish to merely kill you,” Loki explained and he took a seat on the couch. “They want to publicly discredit you. They want you to die alone and in shame and then tarnish even the very memory of you.” He looked disgusted by the idea.

“So someone out there really hates me,” Tony concluded. “Too bad that I have no idea who it could be. I mean, I have no shortage of people that I have managed to piss off over the years, but this is new. This is personal. The only one who ever tried to pull something like this against me has been Obadiah, and he’s dead.”

“Maybe he was not working alone.” Loki gave him a look. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe his greediness had been partially encouraged by an outside influence?”

“Um, no? Not really,” Tony replied. “To be honest, I try to think of him as little as possible. But I suppose it could be possible. Still, even if they had confidential information on me, turning the public opinion shouldn’t be this easy.”

“Not necessarily,” Loki countered. “From what I have seen, you have a long-standing reputation of impulsiveness and arrogance, which certainly does not help the matters in this case. You may have tried to turn yourself into someone better, but don’t forget that you still have decades of less-than stellar reputation in your past. It is not that hard to use that in a manner that could discredit you.”

“So you’re saying that every stupid thing I’ve ever done is now coming to bite me in the ass?” Tony threw up his hands. “Wonderful.”

Their talk got interrupted by JARVIS’s discreet chime: “Sir? Colonel Rhodes is on the line.”

“Rhodey’s calling?” Tony looked up in surprise. “Put him on.”

“Tony?” Rhodey’s voice came through the ceiling speaker.

“Yeah, hi. What’s up?”

“I just got off a conference call with three generals who kept asking me if you pose a threat to national security. What on Earth are you doing, Tony?”

“Me? Nothing really. Drinking my morning coffee, hanging out with JARVIS, trying to figure out what the fuck is going on with the news all painting me as a mass-murdering psychopath…”

“Tony,” Rhodey interrupted his monologue, bringing him back to his original question. Tony sighed in irritation, draining the rest of his coffee.
“Honestly? I’m not doing anything. If you want to know what the hell happened, you should probably ask those guys who tried to kill me yesterday, because I have no idea.”

“So you were attacked?” Rhodey asked for confirmation.

“Yes, someone tried to assassinate me in broad daylight while I was going to a business meeting. Why do you ask? Shouldn’t you have all the info already?”

“The reports on this are…mixed. Some claim that you got beset by a commando of attackers, other that you engaged in a shootout in the middle of a highway. What happened, Tony?”

“I’ll tell you what happened,” Tony said, heading to the kitchen to refill his coffee mug, knowing that JARVIS would move the sound of the phone call with him as he went. “I got surrounded by three cars that opened fire on me while I was heading to L.A. As a civilian. I wasn’t wearing the suit. They started shooting at my car, so I put on the suit and went a few rounds with them.” He poured his mug full and breathed in the heavenly scent of freshly-ground Brazilian coffee before continuing. “When the whole thing was over, I came back home, because my suit was wrecked and I didn’t know if there weren’t more guys waiting to ambush me somewhere else.”

“Yes, that seems consistent with the reports I got,” Rhodey said, sounding a little distracted. He was probably going through the reports as he spoke.

“So you believe me?” Tony wanted to know.

“Of course I do,” Rhodey answered at once. “You’re my best friend. I know you wouldn’t lie to me about this.” He sighed. “But just because I believe you doesn’t mean everyone will. The media coverage of the incident has been…controversial at best.”

“Tell me about it,” Tony said, remembering the sensationalist TV headlines. “I just found out about all this less than an hour ago and I’m still not sure if this isn’t some elaborate prank that someone is playing on me. You know, like Justin Hammer, or Barton being a dick and reprogramming my TV because I told Natasha about that time I caught him and Coulson making out in Fury’s office.”

His attempt to lighten the mood a little didn’t really succeed, because Rhodey made a heavy, worried sound on the other side of the line – the same one he always made when Tony was doing something particularly stupid and/or dangerous.

“I wish it were, Tony, but this doesn’t seem like a prank. Unfortunately for you, both the news reels and the tens of thousands of dollars of destroyed property in downtown L.A. are 100% real.”

“Still, those commando guys should be the ones getting sued for damages, not me,” Tony told him.

“So you weren’t the one who flipped over a van and made it explode?” Rhodey asked with a healthy dose of skepticism.

“Yeah, I might have done that,” Tony admitted. “But I’ll have you know that it was a bad guy van,” he felt it necessary to point out. “Full of guys with guns who had spent the previous five minutes trying to turn my car into a block of Swiss cheese. No loss there.” He walked back to the living room and tried to do his best to ignore the way Loki was watching him from his comfortable perch on the couch. Meanwhile, Rhodey continued speaking:

“Maybe not for you, but I can guarantee you that there will be some people who will find your actions objectionable.”

“You know what the fun thing is?” Tony stalked over to the bar, growing tired of having every
single one of his actions examined and found lacking. It was way too early to start drinking, but with
the way this day was shaping up, he was going to need a drink before all this was over. “I actually
tried to use non-lethal methods this time. You know, instead of shooting all of those guys straight
away.”

“Well, I hate to tell you this, but those non-lethal methods of yours resulted in twenty civilian
casualties when the anti-tank missile they shot at you landed on a city block four streets away.”

“Jesus.” Tony braced his hands on the bar and closed his eyes, trying to fight back the wave of guilt
that rose up in him. He took a few breaths before continuing, doing his best to keep his voice even.
“You know, I can never win. Whenever I try to go the good guy route, something always goes
wrong. Fucking always. It’s like a rule or something.” He pushed the half-finished coffee aside and
reached for the first bottle he saw, slamming an empty glass on the counter with slightly more force
than necessary.

“When I saved New York from an alien invasion AND a damn nuke, people bitched about the
damages being too high. When I fought Doom last month, SHIELD didn’t like my methods and half
the papers labeled me a terrorist for not letting a Doombot army wipe out several city blocks.” He
chugged half the glass in one shot, closing his eyes when it burned down his throat, making him hate
himself just a little for being so reliant on the drink to keep him from falling apart. “And I bet that if I
had shot all those guys yesterday straight away, the headlines would be: “Iron Man executes twenty
people in cold blood.” He placed the empty glass on the counter and pushed the bottle away,
turning his back on it to concentrate on the conversation. “I mean, what else was I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know, Tony,” Rhodey said unhappily. “This is bad.”

“Tell me about it,” Tony said. “It looks like someone out there really, really wants me dead, and
they’re apparently powerful enough to control the media narrative. You know, I could kinda
understand how the fight with Doom might have looked a little shady to an outside eye but this? This
is as clear-cut as it can get. Bad guys attack good guy. Good guy tries to protect himself from getting
killed. The attack on me had been an assassination attempt, pure and simple, and yet when you look
at the news, they somehow managed to turn me from a victim of violent assault into a deranged
terrorist. I wouldn’t be the slightest bit surprised to discover that I’m back on the government threat
list.”

There was a telling silence on the other end of the line.

“Don’t tell me,” Tony said. “I’m already there.”

“You are,” Rhodey confirmed. “They put you on it forty minutes ago.”

“Wow, they move fast.” Tony couldn’t help but admire the efficiency a little. “But I’ll let you in on a
little secret: I was never really off the threat list. They just bumped me down, because they thought
the Avengers would keep me in check. And since I’m still off the team for the time being, I’m
basically fair game for anyone who wants to try and take a shot at me.”

“But that’s…”

“Evil? Brilliant, in a depressing kind of way?” Tony offered. “You have to admire their methods, if
nothing else. If someone wanted to destroy my reputation, they couldn’t have done a better job. I was
already in the grey zone after the fight with the Doombots - they only needed to give a little push and
now the media will do the rest of the work for them. They’ll gleefully dig up every incident where I
acted the slightest bit shadily in the past and reveal that I have been a bad guy all along. A few video
clips, some creative editing, and before you know it, I’m worse than Satan and Magneto combined.”
One of his screens pinged, alerting him that he was on SHIELD’s watch list now, too.

“Oh, look,” Tony said with false cheerfulness. “SHIELD just bumped me up on their threat list, too. Second place, right behind Magneto. I should probably feel honored to be in such elite company.”

“Are you spying on SHIELD?” Rhodey asked incredulously.

“They spied on me first,” Tony insisted. “Besides, I need to know what’s going on.”

“I’ll tell you what’s going on,” Rhodey said. “There’s going to be a congressional hearing about your recent actions the day after tomorrow. Your presence is not optional.”

Tony sighed. “This is Afghanistan all over again, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid so.” When Rhodey spoke next, he sounded apologetic. “I can’t do anything about this, Tony. I already tried, but the brass refuses to budge. You’ll have to attend the hearing or they’ll arrest you for obstruction of justice.”

“Goddammit,” Tony muttered. He shot a helpless look at Loki and found the demigod already watching him. “All right, I’ll be there.”

“Good,” Rhodey said. “Please try not to antagonize them too much. This is way too serious for you to jeopardize it with your particular brand of poorly-timed sarcasm.”

“I’ll try,” Tony promised. He only hesitated for a second before continuing. “But I really don’t need you to tell me that this is serious. I kinda got the memo when someone sent a fucking sniper with adamantium bullets after me.”

There was a distinct pause on the other end of the line.

“A sniper?” Rhodey asked slowly.

“Yeah,” Tony confirmed.

“With adamantium bullets?”

“Yeah.”

“I won’t even ask how you know they’re made of adamantium.”

“Don’t,” Tony told him.

“Damn.” Rhodey sounded like he knew exactly how much Tony wasn’t telling him and was having a hard time pretending ignorance for his own peace of mind.

“I know. I’ll try to find out who they were.”

“Be careful,” Rhodey said. “And if you need someone to watch your back, just give me a call and I’ll take War Machine for a spin.”

“Sure,” Tony replied, having no intention of dragging Rhodey into anything. “Try to get the higher-ups off my back, all right? If I’m to find who is behind this all, I can’t have half the army surveillance breathing down my neck.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but I’m not promising anything.”
“Thanks for the heads up about the hearing.”

“Yeah, you’ll need it. Good luck, Tony.”

“Bye, Rhodey.”

The call ended and Tony met Loki’s eyes over the room.

“What the hell is going on with all this?” Tony swept out his arm, trying to encompass the general madness of the past few days in a single gesture. “It feels like I woke up today and the whole world went crazy. Am I dead? Or in some parallel dimension? Because this is just…insane.”

“As far as I can tell, you’re not dead.” Loki stood up from the couch and took a few steps closer, watching Tony’s expression carefully. “Nor is this some magical construct that somebody conjured up to torture you with. And before you ask - no, I am not the mastermind behind all this.”

“I wasn’t.” Tony began.

“I know,” Loki said. “But it must have crossed your mind as a possibility.”

Tony didn’t even try to deny it, because the answer was written all over his face.

“Well, if it’s not you, then who the hell is doing this? And what do they even hope to gain from all this?”

“I do not know yet, but I intend to find out,” Loki promised him. “What are you planning to do?”

“I’m certainly not going to sit on my ass all day.” Tony started pacing again, trying to sort out the confused jumble of thoughts in his mind. “I need to find out who’s behind all this, and I need to do it fast. Maybe this was a one-off kind of a deal, but if someone has been ordered to kill me, they will probably come after me again. Only this time I need to be the faster one and strike against them first, while they still believe that they managed to incapacitate me. The ruse won’t hold up for long, so I need to act quickly.”

He ran a hand through his hair, going over all the facts in his head.

“They probably have a base somewhere nearby, or at least some sort of safe house where they gather. I have no idea who they are, but they’re certainly dangerous – you can’t get adamantium just anywhere. For fuck’s sake, I was an official weapon’s contractor for the US government and even I never got anywhere near that stuff. Which means that they probably have some friends in high places. That sucks, but doesn’t surprise me in the slightest.”

Getting tired of pacing, Tony pulled up a screen from the air and started running probabilities on it.

“The adamantium is problematic, but I’m sure I can work around it somehow. The worse thing is that they don’t seem to give a shit about collateral damage – if this was just a hit on me, they could have simply hired a sniper to quietly take me out while I was going to a business meeting or something.” And boy, was that a cheery thought. “But no, they had to turn it into a public spectacle, because they wanted to see me humiliated, and they didn’t seem to care how many other people got hurt while they were trying to get to me. That is the shitty part. People usually don’t shoot anti-tank missiles when they want to take down a single guy. That was a bit of an overkill.”

And all the resulting deaths fell on Tony’s head as a result. Tony pushed the lingering quilt away, trying to focus back on the problem. He could mope about it later, when he’d made sure that the bad guys who had killed all those people had been taken care of.
“So yeah,” he concluded, “these guys suck. They don’t play by the rules, which means that I’m not going to play by them, either. Steve would probably raise hell if he had any idea what I’m about to do, but since he’s not here, I can do things my way.” He shot Loki a look. “You are welcome to join in if you want.”

Loki made a low, thoughtful sound, considering the options.

“That would depend on the plan. If it is entertaining enough, I might even be persuaded to take some interest in it.” He cocked his head a little. “So what is the plan?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Tony promised. “But first, I need to go back to L.A. and take control of the company before someone tries to undermine me.” He paused as a new thought occurred to him. “Yesterday’s meeting wasn’t public knowledge, which means that the attackers must have had internal info. So there’s a high possibility that there’s a mole inside my company. I need to find out who it is and cut them off as soon as possible. And since Pepper is out of the picture for the foreseeable future and Natasha is doing god knows what, I’ll have to do this myself. Hopefully JARVIS will be finished with his search by the time I come back.”

“And then?” Loki asked. “What do you intend to do once you know who attacked you?”

Tony met his gaze full on, letting the man see the ice-cold fury that had been slowly growing inside him since yesterday’s ambush.

“Then I make them pay.”

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It took Tony less than half an hour to convince his PA to call a board of directors meeting for him. She sounded a little fearful over the phone, something Tony wasn’t pleased about, but he had better things to do right now than reassure a random secretary that he wasn’t a mass-murdering lunatic - things like convincing the Stark Industries Board of Directors that he wasn’t a mass-murdering lunatic.

He dressed in his sharpest suit and decided to take his flashiest cherry red Ferrari as a huge fuck you to anyone who might think that they had managed to bring him down. As long as he could fight back, there wasn’t a chance of him crawling away into a hole somewhere and giving up peacefully. The mysterious attackers might have damaged his reputation, but if there was one thing Tony was good at, it was charming the pants off people who didn’t wish to be charmed. As far as Tony was concerned, they hadn’t seen anything yet.

“I’m coming with you,” Loki announced, appearing behind Tony’s back just as the engineer was loading another version of the suitcase armor into the backseat of his car in the workshop.

“No, you’re not,” Tony informed him. Before Loki could open his mouth to bitch about it, Tony turned around and silenced him with a look. “This is something I need to do on my own. Don’t worry, I won’t be long. It’s just a business meeting and maybe a press conference. I should be back in three, four hours tops.”

Loki, however, wasn’t impressed. He folded his arms, staring Tony down. “And what if your attackers return?”

“They won’t,” Tony said with a certainty he didn’t feel. “They’re expecting me to hole myself up somewhere and send other people to do stuff for me. Besides, if it wasn’t for you, I’d be half dead right now. Not exactly a good condition for public speaking. Nobody’s expecting me to leave the
house today, much less go in public.”

“Still, that doesn’t mean someone isn’t lying in wait to ambush you as you leave the house. So I am coming with you this time.” He strode over to the opposite side of the car and settled down into the passenger seat, sprawling out his legs like he owned the vehicle. Tony stared at him in resignation.

“I’m not gonna convince you to stay here, am I?”

“No,” Loki said resolutely.

Tony was about to open his mouth and argue with him anyway, when he got a small flashback of the criticism Loki had thrown his was in his break-up speech: “I’ve had enough of being pushed aside,” he had said, among a million other things. Apparently, if Tony wanted to patch things up between them, kicking Loki out of the car wasn’t the best way to go about it. So instead of trying to persuade Loki to stay in the house, Tony just climbed behind the wheel and started the car. The demigod shot him a surprised glance, but didn’t comment on Tony’s change of heart, a fact for which the engineer felt immensely grateful. He could try this – this whole “listening to other people, cooperation thing” – as long as Loki didn’t make a big deal out of it.

The car sped along the coast, glinting in the sharp morning sun. Tony kept his eyes on the road, using it as an excuse to avoid meeting Loki’s eyes. He knew the demigod was watching him, sharp green eyes taking in every detail, but Tony wasn’t quite ready to look back just yet. The stereo played some local station, but even the music wasn’t enough to disperse the awkward atmosphere in the car. To break the silence, Tony cleared his throat.

“You know, you really didn’t have to come to L.A. with me.”

“So you do not want my help?” Loki asked, looking like he was contemplating which teleportation spell would help him escape from the car the fastest. Tony cursed inwardly, making a split-second decision.

“Not with this,” he said slowly, making the demigod’s head snap up. “But there might be something else you can help me with. If you want to, that is,” he added, just to make it clear to Loki that he wasn’t ordering him around.

Loki leaned back into the backrest, drumming his fingers idly on his knee in a bad attempt at indifference.

“What exactly are you expecting me to help you with?”

Tony shot him a grin full of teeth. “Well, it all depends on what JARVIS discovers. If you’re bored, you can help him scout out the possible hideouts while I’m at the meeting in L.A. We can sort out the rest when I get back.”

“I assume you have a plan?” Loki cocked his head a little.

“Of course,” Tony told him. “I always have a plan. Right now I have about a dozen that could work. Not sure which one I’ll use just yet, but I think you’ll like it.”

They approached the place where Tony had been ambushed yesterday and Tony tensed up, changing lanes to avoid the large burn mark in the middle of the highway.

“Is this where you were attacked?” Loki asked quietly, picking up Tony’s mood.

“Yeah,” Tony muttered. He couldn’t keep his eyes from darting around nervously, but no one tried
to ambush them this time. The dark tinted windows ensured that nobody would be able to see inside the car, so at least he didn’t have to worry about a traffic camera accidentally snapping a picture of Loki sitting in the car with him. Getting discovered for harboring a known criminal was the last thing he needed right now.

The rest of the journey passed pretty uneventfully, but he still breathed a small sigh of relief when the roof of the underground garage at Stark Industries closed over them, hiding them from the open sky on the street.

“This is our stop,” Tony informed Loki as he brought the car to a halt. “There are cameras in the garage, so it’s probably better if you disappear from here. You can help JARVIS search for the secret base. But try to restrict your activity to scouting only. No killing bad guys without me. It wouldn’t do to alert them too soon.”

“So you are planning to kill them?” Loki asked for clarification. Tony only hesitated for a second.

“Yeah, probably.” He hadn’t really thought about it much before, about the moral implications of his actions, but the need for vengeance burned like bile in his throat, the fear of getting attacked again weighing like lead in his stomach. Yeah, it wouldn’t be a very moral thing to do, but those men had attacked him first. If he didn’t get rid of them now, they would come back to finish the job. At this point it was pretty much a matter self-preservation, really.

He met Loki’s eyes this time, letting the man see his resolve.

“Good,” Loki said, sounding like he meant it.

Tony unbuckled his safety belt and pulled the car keys out of the ignition.

“I suppose I’ll see you back at home?” He hated the way his voice rose at the end of the sentence, a hint of uncertainty slipping through his self-assured manner. Loki gave him a nod.

“You will. However, I still think it is a folly for you to go out there alone.”

“We are currently inside my own company. They would have to have balls of steel to try and take me down here,” Tony said. “Besides, what would life be without a little danger to spice it up?” He shot Loki a cocky grin and climbed out, blocking the view inside the car with his body. “Find those bad guys for me, will you? If everything goes well, you can help me make them pay.”

He shut the door and walked away before Loki could protest, using the relative solitude of the garage to snap back into his public persona.

Despite the bad guys’ best efforts, he wasn’t dead yet and if it was up to him, he wasn’t going down anytime soon.

Now was the time to prove it.

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Tony’s phone rang just as he was leaving the meeting with the directors, which had been a horrible drag, but at least he had managed to convince them that, no, he was not a terrorist and he wasn’t planning to take over the world. It had taken him over two hours of pointless back and forth to accomplish it, but at least it was something. He supposed that with the current state of affairs, he should be glad for every ounce of support he could get.

“Yeah?” he said, picking up the call with a lazy swipe of his thumb. Instead of leaving just yet, he set
off towards Pepper’s office to do some snooping through the employee files. It was probably too much to hope that someone will have a swastika or the Ten Rings symbol tattooed on their forehead in their employee profile, but he could always try.

“Stark,” Loki greeted him on the other side of the line. “JARVIS has managed to track down your attackers.”

Tony closed the office door behind him, locking it carefully. Then he made a beeline for Pepper’s desk and booted up the computer.

“Has he? That’s good.”

“I’m looking at the base as we speak,” Loki continued.

“You’re-” Tony paused, taking it all in. “You’re invisible, right? Please tell me you’re not standing on a hill somewhere in full battle regalia.”

He was rewarded by an amused snort.

“Of course not. I have hidden myself with a spell. The men have no idea I am here.”

It only took Tony a minute to slip through the security measures on the high-ranking personnel files. Of course, he could have just used his override to do it, but he didn’t want to leave behind any trace of his search.

“So, what does the base look like?” he asked as he started running through the files.

“From what I can tell, it appears to be quite small. There are about a dozen guards, some weaponry, but nothing impressive. What are you planning to do?”

“I’ll tell you when you get home,” Tony promised.

“Are you there already?” Loki asked.

“No, I’m still in L.A., but I’ll be coming soon. Get a lunch or something after you’re done at the base, you’re gonna need it for the day we’re about to have.”

“What makes you so sure that I am going to cooperate with you?” Loki shot back. Tony could almost imagine the sly, playful grin on his face.

“Oh, you will. You wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

“We’ll see,” the demigod said, hanging up.

God, Tony had missed this – the banter, the way they worked so well together. It almost felt like Loki had never left. Except that he had. They would have to discuss it some other time, but for now, Tony intended to enjoy what he had. If everything went according to his plan, the evening was about to be a blast.

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Loki was already back home when Tony pulled into the garage, waiting for him in the workshop kitchenette with several boxes of Chinese.

“Oh hey, you got food,” Tony said instead of a greeting, heading for the boxes.
“Yes, I did,” Loki confirmed. “I doubt you had anything to eat while you were away.”

“Nope,” Tony told him through a mouthful of noodles. “I was busy trying to convince my head management that I wasn’t a crazy terrorist. Turns out that it’s harder to do than one might expect.” He walked over to the table that he used for his holo-projections, eating as he went. “JARVIS? Give me a model of the base. Blueprints, too, if you have them.”

A second later the projection flickered to life, showing both the compound from a bird’s view and the blueprints of the underground tunnels.

“It’s an old military training base, sir,” JARVIS reported. “It was used by the US Army until 1973, after which it was abandoned. No additional information is available at present.”

“That’s…” Loki said, staring at the 3-D projection with badly-disguised wonder.

“Not bad, huh?” Tony said, preening a little. “I told you JARVIS doesn’t just order pizza for me. He can be very resourceful when I ask him to.”

“I wonder if your enemies would be so eager to make you angry if they knew about this,” Loki muttered.

“There’s a lot I don’t share with the world,” Tony told him. “The less I make public knowledge, the bigger advantage I have when someone inevitably comes after me.”

“You said you have a plan.” Loki finally managed to tear his gaze away from the glowing blue projection, turning to Tony instead.

“I do,” Tony confirmed. “The base is smaller than I expected, so I’m pretty sure I can pull this off. The only question is: are you willing to help me?” He met Loki’s eyes, waiting for an answer.

Loki gave him a smirk. “It depends. What would this ‘help’ entail, precisely?”

Tony pretended to think.

“Hmm, let’s see: teleportation, camouflage, killing a bunch of bad guys… You interested?”

“Maybe?” Loki pretended nonchalance, but from the gleam in his eye it was clear that he was at least a little bit intrigued. “Present me with the plan first and I’ll tell you if I’m willing to do it.”

“All right.” Tony clapped his hands, making the computer screens light up. “First, we go to this high profile party that some senator is throwing at his house tonight. I was invited to it months ago, so I bet that he forgot I’m even on the invite list. After the nonstop reel of bullshit on TV these past few weeks, my appearance should make quite a stir.”

“Why are we going to a party?” Loki inquired. “I thought we were going to attack a base.” Tony couldn’t help but notice that the demigod had already included himself into the plan. Smothering a grin, he continued:

“We’re going to a party, because I need a cover. If we are to blow up a secret military base, there can’t be anything that could tie me to it. As far as anyone is concerned, I was at a party tonight. That a bad guy base burned down at the same time is merely a coincidence.”

“So that is why you need me,” Loki guessed. “To get in and out without being noticed.”

“Yep,” Tony nodded. “To compensate you for using you as a glorified magical taxi, I’m gonna let
“you have some fun, too.”

Loki opened his mouth to speak, but a second later he frowned, remembering something.

“As much as I would love to wreak havoc on those men, you’re forgetting one thing – I cannot kill anyone while I’m under the influence of the magical contract.”

“Oh but you can,” Tony corrected him. “The rule I made was ‘you can’t kill anyone, unless they’re threatening your life’.” He raised an eyebrow. “I’m sure you can find some ways to provoke those guys to shoot at you.”

Loki shot him a calculating look.

“If I did not know any better, I would have to suspect that you orchestrated this entire chain of events.”

Tony shook his head with a grin.

“No. As much as I would love to take credit for being an amazing evil mastermind on top of my general awesomeness, sadly this wasn’t planned. But just because I didn’t plan on it doesn’t mean that I can’t use it.”

“True,” Loki said. “Is there any limit to what you do not wish me to do? Any particular moral commandments you do not wish me to cross?”

Tony thought about it for a moment. “Not really? I don’t think so.”

Loki gave him an incredulous look.

“Do you have any idea about the things I could do with permission like that? The mayhem I could cause?”

“Yeah, I think I have a pretty good idea.” Tony shrugged, unconcerned. “And to be honest, I don’t give a shit in this case. Those guys tried to turn me into a human piñata. As far as I’m concerned, they have it coming. Besides, it’s not like I will have a leg to stand on after I burn the whole place to the ground.”

Loki actually blinked at that before his lips pulled into a devilish grin.

“That is not very nice of you. Shouldn’t you to be the noble hero here? All mighty and just in his moral superiority?”

“Well, technically I’m not an Avenger right now, am I?” Tony said. “Which means that I can do this my way for a change. As long as there’s nothing to tie me to this, no one can prove that I had anything to do with it.”

“Oh, I like this.” Loki was looking positively gleeful by now. “It’s so…vengeful.”

“I thought you would.” Tony shot him a smile that the demigod readily returned. “Now we just need to perfect the plan, come up with an attack strategy and we’re all set. But first things first - is there any other gorgeous Asgardian lady I haven’t taken out yet?”

Loki’s smile turned mysterious.

“I think I know exactly who you need.”
Chapter End Notes

As you can guess, the next chapter will have them going to a lavish party and wreaking havoc on a bad guy base. It’s going to be fun (for them, at least. Less so for the bad guys.)

I hope you liked this chapter and will keep on reading in the future. As always, thank you so much for all the comments and kudos you keep leaving on this story! It makes me incredibly happy to read them all.

Chapter 19 will be posted on next Friday, March 27.
Six hours later they were on their way to Senator Whitby’s mansion in L.A. Loki was sitting next to Tony in the back of the limo, this time disguised as a black-haired woman in a sparkly forest green dress. Tony had asked for someone who would make the heads turn and Loki had certainly delivered – the woman he was pretending to be was simply stunning, with her tall, voluptuous figure, moonlight-pale skin and an air of confident grace that few people could ever hope to imitate. The only part of himself that Loki had kept unchanged were the eyes, which were currently watching the coastline beyond the window.

Tony gazed at him for a long moment, admiring the flawless way Loki’s magic could turn him into a complete stranger.

“You know,” Tony broke the silence, “this is pretty spectacular, but I still think I prefer your original form.”

The demigod remained quiet, long enough to make Tony think that maybe Loki hadn’t heard him.

“That is not my true form,” Loki said quietly, not taking his eyes off the sea outside.

“What do you mean? You are a guy, right?” Tony asked to clarify, just to be sure. Honestly, he didn’t really care what gender Loki was, but it would be pretty weird to date a guy for months, only to find that it wasn’t a guy after all.

“Yes, I am a man, but that is…not what I meant.” Loki sounded really hesitant, like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to speak about this at all.

Tony felt briefly confused before he remembered. “Does this have anything to do with the adoption thing?”

“You know about that?” Loki finally turned his head towards him, pinning Tony with a suspicious look.

“Yeah, Thor mentioned something on the helicarrier,” Tony said. “He didn’t go into any details.”

They stared at each other for a moment – Loki uncertain, Tony waiting patiently.
“I am…not from Asgard,” Loki admitted slowly.

“Yea, I kinda gathered that.”

Loki shot him a glare. “This is not easy for me to talk about.”

Tony put his hands up in a placating gesture. “Alright, sorry, I’ll shut up now.”

“That would be for the best,” Loki said, but there wasn’t any bite in the words. He spent a moment gazing out the window before he started speaking again. “I was kidnapped by Odin as a baby, taken from the frozen wastes of Jötunheim to be brought up in Asgard as his son. My true identity was kept secret from everyone, my real form disguised by magic. I grew up ignorant of who I was, what I was. I only found out a few years ago that I had been lied to all my life.”

His lips twisted into a grimace at the memory. Tony decided to ask about that particular bit of information some other time. Right now, it was safer to return to the original topic of their conversation.

“So what do you look like, really?” He realized suddenly that he was pretty curious about it.

“I…” Loki hesitated, “I am not sure I wish to show you.”

“Why?” Tony demanded. “It can’t be that bad. I mean, unless you’re actually a twenty foot tall purple lizard or something. You’re not secretly a Godzilla in disguise, are you?”

“No.” The corners of Loki’s mouth lifted a little. “No, as far as I know, I am not a lizard.”

“Good,” Tony said. “Because that would be weird. But really, it’s not a big deal if you have horns or pointy ears or something. I grew up watching Star Trek, you know. Even my fourteen year old self found those green Orion women hot as hell. I’m pretty sure I can handle anything you throw at me.”

“I…” Loki opened his mouth to say something, but the car stopped at that moment, signalizing that they had arrived.

“You can show me some other time, then,” Tony told him, putting on his most charming smile. “When you’re ready. For now I’ll just take this gorgeous lady for a few spins around the dance floor, show her around a bit. After all, we need to be noticed tonight.”

They both climbed out of the car, Loki took his offered hand and together they walked out into the light spilling from the building’s entrance. And boy, were they noticed.

The moment they stepped inside the mansion, whispers started spreading around them like wildfire. Tony pretended not to notice, wearing his best party smile, and greeted people with enthusiasm, stopping to chat whenever he spotted someone he could recognize. Loki hovered at his side, doing his best impersonation of a dumb arm-candy and Tony had to bite his lip to keep himself from laughing out loud whenever the guy’s signature sharp tongue came out to play. Loki batted his lashes and tittered, luring his victims into a false sense of security before he finally struck, leaving behind a string of flabbergasted men. The people didn’t even know what hit them – one moment they were smiling patronizingly at Tony’s pretty date and the next thing they knew, they had been humiliated in front of half their acquaintances, because Loki thought it would be hilarious to casually mention their secret furry fetish with a look of wide-eyed innocence.

Tony had to drag him away to the bar after the fourth time Loki did it, because there was a danger that they might accidentally incite a brawl or get arrested for slander. They needed to be noticed, yes, but not that much. Once Tony was certain that everyone in the five-mile radius knew that Tony Stark
was at the party, he snaked an arm around Loki’s waist and slowly initiated a strategic retreat into one of the side wings. The house was huge – a sprawling hacienda built next to a vineyard, so there was plenty of space for them to sneak away without it looking suspicious. Tony knew that nobody would find it weird - after all, it wouldn’t be the first time he had sneaked off from a party with some gorgeous woman, only to come back half an hour later, looking rumpled and satisfied. It had been years since he’d last done anything like that, but people had long memory where scandals were concerned.

He and Loki had discussed the strategy at length that afternoon, so when Tony’s hand slid to Loki’s ass in full sight of half the room and gave it a suggestive squeeze, Loki only gave him a coy grin and pressed himself closer, playing his role perfectly. A part of Tony felt a small pang of wistfulness at that – one could only imagine how much better this whole evening could be if they were doing this for real, instead of merely putting on a show for the sake of those nosy few who bothered to watch. He chased away any sentimental thoughts a minute later, because they were almost at their destination. JARVIS had supplied them with the floorplans of the mansion, so they knew exactly which room they would be the least likely to get disturbed in.

As soon as the door of the second-floor library clicked shut behind them, Tony dropped his hand from around Loki’s waist, taking a deliberate step back.

“So,” he said, “that went pretty well, don’t you think?”

“Speak for yourself,” Loki told him, already reaching for his arm to teleport them. “At least three different men tried to proposition me while you were standing right next to me.”

There was a familiar flash of gold-green light and a second later they were standing in the middle of Tony’s workshop. Tony shrugged, unbuttoning his jacket and loosening his tie as he went.

“Yeah, corrupt, lecherous politicians and free booze are always a bad combination. The next time someone tries to grope you, just punch them. That should take care of it.” The suit stood ready for him in the middle of the room, so Tony spread out his arms and let the automatic system fit it around him.

“Maybe I will,” Loki said in his regular voice, once more looking like himself. “I have thought about the attack plan we have discussed and I think I have the perfect disguise for myself,” he announced, making Tony look up from where he was checking his supply of ammunition.

“Oh? So, who are you planning to be?” He had decided to let Loki choose his own method of camouflage. After all, the one who knew the demigod’s combat abilities best was the guy himself.

Loki folded his arms, the air around him shimmered and a second later there was Steve in his full Captain America regalia standing in Loki’s place.

Tony unsuccessfully tried to smother a grin.

“I should probably say no,” he said, just to have a token protest on the record. “Poor Steve, if he knew that you’re using him to wreak havoc on some unsuspecting bad guys.”

Loki just gave him Steve’s honest, sunny smile.

“Nobody will question his presence by your side.”

“No, they won’t,” Tony had to admit. “But we’ll have to make sure that we wipe that base clean, otherwise someone might start to wonder how Captain America managed to be in two places at once.”
“Do not worry,” Loki said, with a predatory smirk that looked distinctly out of place on Steve’s earnest face, “I will make sure of it.”

And yeah, Tony probably should have been creeped out by that, but instead he felt strangely grateful for the support. So the only thing he said in reply was: “Good.” and went back to checking their equipment.

“You’re very bloodthirsty tonight,” Loki remarked, coming closer. Tony grimaced.

“I just don’t like being threatened. Besides, if I don’t go after those guys now, they’re gonna come back later and try to take me out again. I prefer to live my life without a constant threat of being blown up. Call it a whim, if you want.” Straightening up, he remembered something. “Oh, any by the way, since you have decided to impersonate Captain America for the night, I have something for you.” He walked over to one of the cabinets by the wall and pulled out his version of Captain America’s shield.

“What is that?” Loki asked, accepting the piece of metal after a second’s hesitation.

“A prototype,” Tony explained. “I have been trying to recreate my dad’s work with the shield, but unfortunately I don’t have access to the same metal he had. This thing is not as good as the real deal that Steve has, but it should be able to handle anything they throw at you tonight. It’s a little heavier than the original, but I don’t think you’ll have any problem with that.” When Loki continued gazing at the shield with a strange expression on his face, Tony sighed. “Look, you want to look the part, don’t you? This should help you with that. You don’t even have to use it much – just wave it around enough to make the guys at the base shoot at you and you can then take them out in whatever way you like.”

Loki stared at the shield for another moment before he finally nodded, straightening a little.

“That’s more like it,” Tony praised. “Oh, and one more thing,” he added, digging a comm unit out of a drawer. “Put this in your ear. We need to stay in contact.” He made one last sweep of the workshop, trying to remember if he’d forgotten anything. “All right,” he concluded. “This is it. We can’t be gone from the party for more than forty-five minutes, hour, tops, or someone might get suspicious. So we’ll have to make this quick.” He nodded towards the shield: “I hope you know how to use that thing.”

Loki shot him a grin. “I’ll improvise. Now, shall we?”

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They materialized on the hill above the base, using the darkness to hide them from prying eyes. Tony let go of Loki’s arm to take off into the air, but Loki caught his wrist, pulling him back.

“Not so fast,” he said, his hands lighting up with golden-white light. “Stand still for a moment. This will not take long.” He made a slow, sweeping motion downwards in front of Tony’s body, and Tony could see the light slowly spreading from his outstretched fingers, enveloping the Iron Man suit.

“What’s that?” Tony inquired, feeling a little weirded out by the magic.

“A protective shield,” Loki explained. “It should be enough to stop any bullets shot at you. If they have more of those bullets that penetrated your armour before, you stand no chance against them. I would prefer not to see you bleed out again.” Before Tony could reply, Loki took an abrupt step back, his spell done. “I will teleport to the base and dispose of the guards. I trust you can make your
“Yeah, that shouldn’t be a problem,” Tony told him as the HUD display lit up, giving him layout of the whole place. “See you inside. And good luck,” he added, right before Loki disappeared. With the demigod gone, Tony waited for another 20 seconds, then kicked off, making a quick lap over the base to see what was going on there. JARVIS helpfully magnified the picture for him and wow, it was really something.

Watching Loki now, Tony had to conclude that he had never really seen him fight before. Sure, the demigod had dicked around a bit in New York, but he had never really joined the fight in any serious capacity. Now, however, he was a sight to behold.

Moving almost quicker than the eye could see, Loki cut a bloody path through the base, leaving behind a trail of corpses. He might have been wearing Cap’s uniform, but the elegance and agility of his movement were purely his. Nobody who knew Steve would believe this was him. Loki was faster, for one, and much, much deadlier. Where Steve was cautious, carefully surveying the terrain and the layout of his enemies before barging out into the open, Loki simply breezed through, striking like a snake and leaving in a flash before anyone could even register what was happening.

Tony watched him for nearly a minute, mesmerized by the deathly dance of shield and dagger, before he finally pulled himself back to reality. If wouldn’t do for Loki to have all the fun. The Iron Man landed in the middle of the base, blasting off the three men who tried to shoot at him with a repulsor. Confident that Loki would be able to handle the rest of the guys outside, he kicked in the heavy steel door leading to the main bunker, making it fly off its hinges.

A group of soldiers rushed at him the moment he stepped inside and he shot them as well, making them fly into the wall. He would feel sorry for them, if they hadn’t been trying to kill him. Slowly, methodically, he started making his way through the base, checking the rooms he passed for useful tech and materials. So far he had found several computers, a handful of unfamiliar weapons and one or two prototypes that he couldn’t wait to get his hands on. However, before he could go and play with his new toys, there was still the small matter of taking care of his attackers.

Luckily for him, he didn’t have to look for them for very long. They appeared to have holed themselves up in the room adjacent to the main control room of the base, barricading the door. Tony just shook his head at this. Did they think a locked door could stop him? He had purposely taken his bulkiest, most heavily-armed suit for this, because he had wanted to be able to bulldoze his way through both enemy fire and concrete. Now it came in handy.

The heavy metal door held against his kick, so instead of ramming against it like a moron to try and take it down, he turned on his new and improved anti-Leviathan laser and burned a hole through the wall next to it. It didn’t matter that it was made of ferroconcrete – the laser created a nice, rectangular block of concrete that he only needed to push a little to make it fall inside the room. He stepped in right behind it, taking particular glee at the stunned faces of the guys inside the room. Unfortunately for him, the surprise only lasted for a few seconds before they started shooting at him. Tony just stood there and let them go at it, trusting Loki’s spell to protect him from the more vicious slugs.

While they were busy trying (and failing) to turn him into a pincushion, Tony used the opportunity to look around the room. It was a fairly large hall filled with old desks and filing cupboards that had probably once served as the administrative headquarters of the base. Now the desks were strewn with weapons and ammunition and the cupboards held soldier uniforms.

But more than anything, Tony’s gaze was drawn to the huge HYDRA insignia painted on the wall behind them. It looked fairly new, too, not faded like the ones that had survived from the WWII era, which meant that this was probably a HYDRA base. A functional HYDRA base. His guess was
confirmed when he took a closer look at the uniforms these guys were wearing, with the evil octopus in full display on their shoulders.

Wonderful. Just what he had needed. An evil Nazi organization with a bounty on his head.

Outwardly he just sighed, assuming a bored pose.

“Are you done with the shooting, or should I wait for you to run out of ammo?” he asked the guys conversationally, like they were out on a brunch and not engaged in a deadly shootout in a secret underground military base.

His question startled them enough that they actually stopped firing at him. Well, most of them stopped. There was still that one sorry bastard who continued with his attempts to kill Tony. Tony just turned his visor at him, putting on his best long-suffering voice.

“Oh, please, stop embarrassing yourself. It only makes you look like an idiot. Well, more like an idiot than you already look.” Tony ignored the indignant sound the man made behind him and turned away to examine the plasma weapon lying on the nearest desk.

“Nice evil lair you have here,” he remarked, strolling around the room like he owned the place. He ignored the dozen or so weapons trained on him from all sides. “It’s a little lacking in décor, but you definitely make up for it with the furnishings. That plasma generator I saw in the other room is particularly gorgeous.”

“Tony Stark,” the bald guy who appeared to be their leader finally spoke up, sounding weirdly pleased for someone whose men had just utterly failed to kill their target. He had been the only one who hadn’t shot at Tony before. If Tony didn’t have Loki’s spell on the suit, that fact would have probably made him nervous. “The man himself, in the flesh. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Tony made an exaggerated shrug. “Oh you know, it’s a courtesy visit, really. You guys left me a little present in L.A., so I thought it would be only polite it I returned it.”

The leader smirked. “Ah, yes, the adamantium bullet. I hope it made an impression.”

“Hm, I guess you can say that,” Tony answered, still pretending disinterest. “It scratched my suit a little. I would be pissed about the ruined paintjob, if the rest of my armor already wasn’t a fucking disaster. I should probably make you pay for the damages, but I think I’m just gonna kill you all and steal your tech instead.”

He finally turned to face them fully, and felt a little thrill of satisfaction when they visibly tensed.

“Kill us?” the leader said scornfully. “You can try. But from this close up, you will be dead before you can even raise your hand against me.” He accompanied his words by raising the gun he held and pointing it at Tony’s heart, and if Tony’s guess was right, that was a muzzle made of adamantium.

Wow. He would be all over the design, eagerly taking it apart to see how it worked, if it wasn’t for the small detail that it was currently being used to kill him.

As he looked down the gun’s muzzle, Tony suddenly realized that right now the only thing standing between him and death was Loki’s spell. The realization should have freaked him out, should have sent him running for the hills, but instead he found that was weirdly okay with it. It was all about trust – trusting Loki not to betray him, trusting him to be strong enough to hold up the barrier for long enough, and for once, Tony found that he didn’t mind. After all, it wasn’t all that different from having Hawkeye covering his blind spots, or the Cap watching his six. It was teamwork, only in a little more intense form.
The HYDRA leader went on a monologue about the glory Tony’s death was going to bring him and Tony was just contemplating whether he should let the moron speak some more, or just shoot him straight away when the comm in his helmet pinged, alerting him that Loki was nearby. Since Tony couldn’t see him anywhere, he had probably turned himself invisible. Which meant that Loki had stuck to the plan after all. Good. Tony felt some tension seep out of his body as he turned his attention back to the leader-guy, who was still babbling about HYDRA’s impending victory.

“Is that a gun with adamantium bullets?” Tony interrupted him, speaking up to draw attention away from the feather-light footsteps behind him.

“It is,” the leader confirmed smugly. “And now I’m going to kill you with it.”

“Those are some pretty big words from such a little guy,” Tony made a jab, relishing the way that the man bristled a bit. “And that’s a nice piece of tech you have there. Well, not as nice as the things I could make if I got my hands on some adamantium, but still, not bad for a bunch of amateurs.”

“We are HYDRA!” the man hissed menacingly, taking a few steps closer.

“HYDRA who?” Tony pretended confusion, just to piss him off. “Never heard of them.”

“Fool!” the man spat. “We are the force that moves the world!”

“Wait, which ones are you again?” Tony cocked his head a little. “Are you the Illuminati, or the Lizard People? Because I have never heard of-”

“You have now!” the leader roared, pulling the trigger.

There was a split second where Tony was absolutely certain that he was going to die, spell or not, because this was a fucking adamantium bullet shot from a point blank range, but then the bullet hit the protective magic shield around his armor and harmlessly ricocheted off, dropping down onto the floor. Tony watched it roll on the concrete for a few seconds, then bent down and picked it up with a grin, raising it in front of his eyes to study the design.

“I think you dropped something, buddy,” he told the HYDRA leader pleasantly, enjoying the flabbergasted expression on the man’s face. “Hey, are you buying weapons from Justin Hammer by any chance? You are, aren’t you? Wow, you must be really desperate to stoop so low, because let me tell you, Hammer is a complete fraud. Most of his stuff doesn’t even work.” He tossed the bullet into the air, catching it with ease. “Like this. Are you sure that’s a real gun? It doesn’t seem to be working very well.” He took a step closer and his grin grew when they all took a collective step back. “But really,” Tony continued, “you guys are a bunch of morons for buying weapons from someone who couldn’t engineer his way out of a paper bag.”

The man aimed his gun again and fired another shot, with the same result as before. Tony clucked his tongue at him.

“You seem to have some performance issues there, pal. Well, I guess it’s not that surprising at your age but still-”

Another shot. Tony sighed.

“And now you’re just pissing me off. Really, you shouldn’t have started this in the first place, this was a colossally moronic idea, even by HYDRA standards.” Another shot. “Look, would you just cut it out already? You’re-” Shot. “God, you’re annoying. Here, let me show you something that actually works.”
And he raised his hand and shot the guy in the face with a repulsor, relishing the way he flew across the room and smashed into a wall.

“That’s more like it,” Tony said with satisfaction, turning to face the rest of the HYDRA goons. Before he could shoot them too, however, they all froze in place, completely ceasing their movements. Tony blinked a few times, but they stayed in the same position, silent and unmoving as statues. The mystery got solved a few seconds later when Loki climbed in through the hole in the wall in his Captain America getup, making a show of looking around.

“Oh hey there, Cap,” Tony greeted him, strolling over. “Welcome to the party!” He spread his arms to encompass the room. “I’m sure my friends the HYDRA henchmen would love to greet you as well, but I’m afraid they’re a little tied up at the moment.” He had no idea what sort of spell Loki had used on them, but it was pretty impressive. And creepy.

Loki himself was just doing his best impression of confused Steve. “What is going on here?” he asked, frowning at the frozen HYDRA goons. Not for the first time, Tony felt intensely glad for his faceplate, because there was no way he could have kept a straight face right now.

“Paralyzing gas,” he made up on the spot, turning back to the bad guys. “It’s actually one of SHIELD’s formulas, I just borrowed it. The original version was supposed to paralyze the target and stop its heart by slowly freezing all muscles in the body, but I’ve managed to dilute it enough to make it suitable for field use. If my calculations are correct, now it should only paralyze the target without killing it. Of course, it hasn’t been tested on humans yet, so there’s still the possibility that they will die anyway but hey, they’re HYDRA, so it’s not like it would be any great loss for the world.”

Tony made a dismissive wave towards the HYDRA men, his eyes lingering on the leader, whose face was frozen in a look of silent horror.

“You see, while you were busy prattling about your plans for world domination, I took the liberty of gifting you with a little something. Don’t worry, the paralysis should wear off in a few minutes – ‘should’ being the key word here - I haven’t actually tested it on people yet, so I have no idea. Thank you for volunteering, by the way, I really appreciate it.

“Anyway,” he whirled around, grabbing a few of the more interesting weapons diagrams from the nearby table, “it has sure been nice to catch up with your evil plans and all, but I’m afraid I really have to run. You know how it is, places to be, your secret tech to steal, base to blow up, that sort of thing. I would really love to stay and make sure you guys don’t experience any of the horrible side effects, but I have a party to return to and no time to spare.” He strode towards the main control room, pausing on the threshold. “I did mention that there could be side effects, right? Things like blindness, impotence, nerve damage, heart attacks…” He took a moment to enjoy the panic in their eyes before he turned back. “Anyway, it’s been really nice here with you guys, but I really need to run. Ta!”

He waited for the door to fall shut behind Loki, making sure that they wouldn’t be overheard, then started to laugh, leaning against a wall for a brief moment.

“Oh god,” he said, pulling up his faceplate, “I’m going to burn in hell for this.” Despite his glib attitude, he was more than aware that he could have died in there, and the mixture of relief and excitement from the fight was making his heart run a mile a minute. Loki met his eyes, shaking his head a little at Tony’s manic grin.

“Are you sure you do not wish to join the ‘Dark Side’?” Loki asked him with a smirk that looked horribly out of place on Steve’s face. He took a few steps closer, leaning on the wall next to Tony.
“Because I am fairly certain that you would make an excellent villain.”

“I would, wouldn’t I?” Tony said, pushing away from the wall to go explore the control panels. “That’s a scary thought. What did you do to those guys, anyway?”

“A paralyzing spell.” Loki shrugged, trailing after him as Tony walked around, methodically destroying every system he could get his hands on. “Your fable wasn’t too far from the truth.”

“How long can you hold it?” Tony asked, booting up their main security program once he made sure that he had disabled their communications. “Can you manage ten minutes?”

“Of course,” Loki said, like it was insulting to even suggest otherwise. “I managed to hold that shield around you, didn’t I?”

“Thanks for that, by the way,” Tony muttered, most of his attention glued to the screen in front of him. “We’ll only need about five minutes, anyway, so you should be fine. Oh look!” he exclaimed half a minute later. “They have a self-destruct sequence in place because of course they do, they’re fucking HYDRA, they have the whole Nazi-death-by-cyanide down to an art form. Still, what the fuck are they doing here? They’re supposed to be gone for like, fifty years or so. Fuck.”

He finally managed to activate the self-destructive protocol, the alarms coming to life to blare loudly everywhere around them. Loki’s head shot up at the sound.

“What did you do?”

“Ordered us some fireworks. We have less than five minutes to get out of here before the whole place blows up. I need to make a few stops first, but we should still have plenty of time to find our way out.” Tony punched in the last line of code, then straightened up and slapped down his faceplate. “Alright, let’s go. You can let those poor bastards loose once we’re out of the room. Let’s give them a fighting chance at least. It would be a pretty shitty move to let them die paralyzed.”

“If you say so,” Loki sounded dubious, but fell into step with him anyway. They crossed the room with the frozen guys quickly, paying them little attention. The sirens were still wailing and the countdown on Tony’s HUD display told him that he had less than four minutes to get away. Instead of poking around some more, he continued straight to the labs where the real treasure lay waiting for him.

“Oh yes,” he muttered when he spotted the lump of adamantium. “Come to daddy.” He turned the nearest computer screen towards him and found the file with the inventory, running double check with JARVIS to make sure this was the real deal.

There was a sound of running footsteps and panicked shouting outside the room, but Tony ignored those, too. He had what he had come for – both adamantium and revenge. The terrorist cell that had planned the attack on him would blow up in a few minutes, wiping out all of HYDRA’s resources inside. Of course, since this was fucking HYDRA, there were probably plenty more of these secret bases around, but he could always go and destroy those later (and he’d bet that the real Cap would love to come with him for the next round). For now, he was satisfied.

“Oh, this is beautiful,” he said as he pulled up the schematics to one of HYDRA’s plasma generators. “I’m so not giving this to Fury.” Instead of downloading the files, which would have taken too long, he simply grabbed the hard discs with the relevant information. He didn’t have the time to go through all that stuff right now, but he was sure there would be some information on them that he could use. And, if he was feeling particularly generous and forgiving, he might even share some of it with SHIELD.
Once he had gathered everything he wanted, he turned back to Loki, who had been amusing himself by poking through the HYDRA weapons arsenal.

“I’m done here,” he announced. Before he could say anything else, the door to the room flew open and the leader of the HYDRA cell burst in with four guys in tow.

“Wonderful,” Loki said dryly. “Just what we needed – more interruptions.” He managed to raise his shield just in time to deflect the bullets that the men had started shooting at him. “Why did you tell me to let them go again?” He followed the sentence by burying the blade of his dagger in the chest of the closest attacker.

“Because it was the right thing to do?” Tony chanced, shooting another one. The leader tried to shoot him with his adamantium gun again, but Tony was quicker, catching the man by the front of his uniform. “I already told you this doesn’t work,” he informed the guy, before throwing him on the floor. Meanwhile, Loki had managed to dispose of the rest of the men. Tony did his best not to notice the slowly-growing bloodstains on the floor.

“You cannot beat us,” the HYDRA leader rasped from the floor. “HYDRA is eternal. Cut off one head, two more shall-”

“Thanks, I’ve already heard this spiel before,” Tony interrupted his villain gig. “No need for a repeat performance.” He turned to Loki. “Come on, we need to go,” he told the demigod, who was watching the HYDRA leader crawl on the floor with a look of disdain.

“How much time do we have left?”

“Um, about twenty-five seconds?” Tony said sheepishly. “I might have gotten a bit carried away with the tech. Can you get us out of here? We can watch the fireworks from the hilltop.”

He barely managed to finish the sentence and Loki was already reaching for him, teleporting them in a flash. They landed in the same spot where they had stood before, the HYDRA base now dark and quiet in the valley below.

“Ten seconds left,” Tony informed him. He adjusted his hold around the armful of the stolen things, pressing them closer to his torso. Loki stood by his side, quietly gazing down as they waited for the charges to go off. A few seconds later, there was an explosion strong enough to shake the ground under their feet, a huge cloud of dust rising from the base as the concrete labyrinth folded like a house of cards.

“You know,” Tony said, his heart running a million miles per minute from the adrenaline, “I wasn’t entirely sure how I was going to blow up the base in half an hour, but luckily these suicidal maniacs have me covered. Wow, I never thought I would be grateful for the craziness of Nazis.”

“What is a “Nazi?” Loki asked curiously.

“I’ll explain later,” Tony promised. “Right now we need to get back, before someone notices that we’re not at the party. Can you drop us off in my workshop?”

After one last, satisfied look at the destroyed base, Loki reached for him again and a second later they were standing in the brightly-lit space of Tony’s workshop. Once he had reoriented himself, Tony just stood frozen in place for a moment, taking in the reality of what they had done.

“Holy shit, we actually did it,” he breathed out, his mind still reeling from the victory. “We wiped out a fucking HYDRA base. That’s just….wow.”
Not that he hadn’t believed they could do it, but hoping and knowing were two very different things. With a short laugh he shook himself out of his stupor and walked over to the nearest half-empty workbench, dropping his loot on it. Just the sight of the computer discs with those endless Terabytes of classified HYDRA data made his fingers itch to find out what was on them, but he couldn’t allow his mind to wander right now. They still had to return to the party.

Through sheer force of will, Tony tore himself away from his prize and called in the assembly station instead, letting it strip the armor from him. As much as he loved his suits, this one was heavy as fuck and he couldn’t wait to be out of it. He’d only spent about half an hour in it and already he could feel his muscles screaming in protest against the abuse he was putting them through. Tomorrow would be a bitch. But hell, it had been worth it, if only to see HYDRA eat its words.

While the robots were taking off his armor, Tony’s eyes inevitably strayed to Loki, only to find the demigod already watching him. Loki had turned back into himself as soon as they had appeared in the workshop, shedding his Captain America disguise. The shield was still in his hands, however, long elegant fingers rotating it almost absent-mindedly. It made Tony wonder whether the demigod even knew he was holding it. He hadn’t said a single word since they had appeared back in the workshop, staring at Tony with a thoughtful look that weirded the engineer out a bit.

Tony was just contemplating the best way to break the silence, when the demigod spoke up.

“I take it you are satisfied with the results of our little…excursion.”

Tony nodded with a grin, moving his arm out of the way to give the robots easier access to his chest plates. “Hell yeah. It was pretty amazing. I haven’t done anything like this for years.”

Loki cocked his head a little. “You have done this before?”

Tony shrugged, not really embarrassed to admit it.

“Yeah, this was not my first time blowing up a secret terrorist base. Or the second time, for that matter. After I got home from Afghanistan, I went back there in the new suit and settled the score with the guys who had kidnapped me. Most of it never made it into the news.” He shot Loki a look. “If we’re lucky, nobody will hear about today, either.”

Loki was still watching him, his eyes judging, assessing. Tony had no idea what he was thinking about. To distract himself from the piercing stare, he changed the topic.

“Great job with the HYDRA goons, by the way. The paralyzing spell was pretty handy. As was the shield on me.” He didn’t bother to add “thank you for not letting me get killed”. Loki could read that on his face easily enough. Thankfully for him, Loki didn’t dwell on it.

“Who were those men we fought?” he asked instead, finally putting down Cap’s shield. “You seemed to be familiar with them.”

“Only in passing,” Tony said. “Steve was the one who used to fight them, back in his heyday. HYDRA goes back decades. Everyone thought that they had been destroyed sometime in the sixties, but apparently they are still around, alive and kicking. I have no idea how they have managed to survive for this long without anyone knowing about them.”

“But we destroyed them today,” Loki argued. Tony made a face.

“That was just one cell. If this HYDRA is anything like the old one, they probably have a network of some sort. God knows how many bases there are in total. I’ll have a look at their files tomorrow, see if I can dig up something useful.”
The robotic arm pulled away the last piece of armor from his chest and Tony could finally roll his shoulders, getting rid of some of the tension in his muscles. He stretched his arms over his head, popping his back a little. Loki leaned on a nearby workbench, waiting for Tony to put on his jacket.

“What does today’s victory mean for you? Are you safe, now that we got rid of your attackers?”

“I think I’m safe for now,” Tony told him, knotting his tie with the ease of practice. “No idea how long it will last, though. These bastards are persistent. Someone will probably come after me again, eventually.” He grimaced. “And this time they’ll be pissed that I destroyed their base on top of everything. Should be fun.”

With his party clothes back on, he walked over to the small adjacent bathroom to splash some water on his face. The day had been long and full of excitement and he needed to stay sharp for another few hours. Since Loki couldn’t see him from his spot, Tony reached into one of the cabinets and pulled out the bright red lipstick that Pepper had forgotten there some time ago. A few discrete dabs on his lower lip and a light smudge on the side of his neck were all he needed. Combine that with some strategically ruffled hair, and he had that ‘I just spent half an hour making out in a closet’ look down to an art form. It was subtle, but those who cared to look would recognize the signs immediately. Nobody was going to question their absence from the party with him looking like that.

Loki’s eyebrows shot up when Tony emerged from the bathroom again, but didn’t say anything. Tony made a beeline for him, seeing no point in lingering around any longer.

“Okay, I’m ready to go,” he announced. “We have pretty great time, too – we’ve only been gone for thirty-five minutes. I doubt anyone has noticed us missing.”

The demigod took his arm and teleported them again, making them materialize in the same spot in the private library from which they had left before. Once they landed, he took a deliberate step back, changing into the woman from before in a blink of an eye.

“Wow,” Tony said. “No matter how many times you do that, it never stops being cool. You’ll have to show me how you do it someday.” They started to walk back to the ballroom, Tony snaking an arm around his waist once they were in view of the nearest guests. “You know,” he said, leaning in a little to avoid being overheard, “I still haven’t figured out how you do the whole shape-shifting thing.”

“Good,” Loki gave him a small smirk. “It would not do to have you uncover all my secrets.” He chuckled a moment later as he realized what Tony had said. “Wait, did you just admit that you do not know something? That must be a first for you. Did it hurt, wounding your pride like that?”

“Shut up,” Tony muttered, but he was smiling, too. “I’m a genius. I’m pretty sure I will figure it out sooner or later.” They slipped into the main hall from the side, lingering by the door. While they’d been gone, the live band had started to play dancing tunes. Tony surveyed the crowd with a smile, seeking out their next target. “How about we get a drink, make another round of mingling and then dance for a bit? There are plenty of people we haven’t spoken to yet. I’m sure they would love to hear what you think about their bedroom habits.”

“Oh, I do not doubt that.” Loki shot me a devilish smile. “Do you want to see how many grown men I can make cry before the end of the night?”

Tony returned the smile with one of his own.

“I knew I took you with me for a reason.”
Sorry for the slight delay, guys, I got home late last night and didn’t have the energy left to post the chapter. I hope nobody minds too much.

The HYDRA base scene was one of the very first I wrote for this fic and it was a lot of fun to write. Tony and Loki joining forces to cause mayhem never gets old. I’m trying to keep Tony in the grey in this fic (which he is, in my opinion). He might fight on the side of the good guys and try to redeem, but he can also be vengeful and ruthless with those who had hurt him.

And no, before anyone asks, this is not a story about Tony going evil – rather it’s a story about him toeing the line, trying to find a way to balance his hero persona with the darker aspects of his personality. It’s a fascinating journey for me to go so deep inside a character and I hope I will be able to do him justice. I’ve got 25 chapters finished for this and there’s still no end in sight, so you guys are in for a long ride. I hope you’ll stick with me to the end of this :)

Chapter 20 will be posted on next Friday, April 3.
Chapter Summary

“So you’re saying what?” Tony asked slowly, trying to make sure that he wouldn’t fuck this up again. “That I was a dick to you, but you were kind of a dick to me, too, so we’re even?”

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, guys! The editing on this took longer than I expected.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

An hour after their return to the party, Tony and Loki relocated to the dance floor to avoid having to talk to any more people. Their mission had been accomplished already – there wasn’t a soul at the party who didn’t know about their presence, so there was no need for them to draw any more attention to themselves. It was probably for the best, really, after all the scandals Loki had managed to incite today.

“How do you do that, anyway?” Tony asked as he led Loki in a slow waltz, using the dance as a way for them to talk without being overheard.

“How do I do what?” The lady Loki was pretending to be raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow. The face might have been foreign, but the expression was purely his.

“How do I do what?” Tony clarified. “Not that I don’t enjoy watching them squirm, it’s just a bit bizarre how easily you can play them. That last guy’s head almost exploded when he said the thing with the diapers out loud.”

Loki shrugged with an air of deliberate casualness.

“It is merely a simple low-grade truth spell. Nothing damaging or life-threatening.”

“Mind control?” Tony guessed.

“In its mildest, most harmless form. You can view it as a party trick of sorts.”

That made Tony smirk. “You must have been a real hit at parties back home.”

Loki chuckled. “I have been banned from most of them, in fact.”

“Have you,” Tony deadpanned. “You must have been devastated.”

“Not really,” Loki countered. “I used to detest them for the most part. They were nothing but an endless parade of self-important people and annoying table talk, and Thor managed to get drunk with his friends at every single one of them, so it always fell to me to drag him back to his rooms at the end of the night. It was very tedious.”
Tony expertly executed a turn, making them spin in an elegant circle. Loki followed his lead flawlessly, matching his steps in perfect harmony.

“What about now?” Tony asked with a grin as he twirled them again, just for the hell of it. “Is this any better?”

One corner of Loki’s mouth pulled up. “Do you even have to ask? There has been murder, mayhem, explosions and several minor political scandals, all in the span of a mere few hours. You have managed to provide me with more entertainment in a single day than Asgard has in half a century.” His eyes glittered. “So yes, this is a definite improvement.”

“That’s good to hear,” Tony said, feeling a little relieved. Loki hadn’t seemed to mind being dragged along into his plan, but it was always good to hear it out loud. “So you had fun today? With the fight and all?”

Loki’s smirk widened. “Surprisingly, yes. It has been some time since I last engaged in combat of this scale. It was…refreshing.”

“You weren’t kidding about the warrior part, were you?” Tony said. “I know you mentioned that you’ve been training combat for ages, but it’s one thing to hear about it and another to actually see it.”

“Why? Did you not believe me?” Loki inquired.

“No, I did, it’s just…” Tony searched for the right words, “you seem more like the intellectual type. You know, ‘put a plan in motion from afar and watch the world burn’ kind of guy. I would have guessed your fighting would be more about magic and less about brawn.”

“It is, usually,” Loki confirmed. “However, that doesn’t make me any less skilled in close combat.” Oh yeah, it looked like Tony had hit a sore point there. Loki was probably thinking that Tony was comparing him to Thor in his mind. Which wasn’t too far from the truth.

“Still, it was pretty impressive,” Tony said quickly, to avoid a potential crisis before it could develop. There was no need to drag Loki’s brother into this conversation.

“Was it?” Loki shot him a pleased look, his mood changing from annoyed to amused in a heartbeat.

“Yeah.” Tony gave him a slow, charming smile, laying it on a bit thick. “Especially the part where you froze a whole room full of guys with guns. That was great.” He didn’t miss the way Loki’s eyes flickered to his lips for a second.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” Loki tipped his head to the side a little, watching Tony’s face carefully. He tried to maintain a veneer of aloofness and suspicion, but the interest in his voice gave his bluff away.

“I don’t know,” Tony drawled. “Is it working?”

“That remains to be seen,” Loki told him, playing hard to get. “However, I may be amenable to another dance.”

“That can be arranged.”

Tony pulled him closer, swaying them in tune with the slow song that started to play. They stayed in one place for the number, enjoying the simplicity of the slow rocking motion and the closeness that it allowed them.
“You know,” Tony said a minute later. “I don’t think we ever danced quite like this.” Feeling bold, he ran a teasing hand up and down Loki’s back, lingering over the skin exposed by the low-cut back of the dress.

“Like what?” Loki asked in a low voice, but he wasn’t pulling away.

“Like we’re actually enjoying it,” Tony explained. “All this time, whenever we danced at a party, it was either part of a prank, or a way to gossip about the other guests without them overhearing. This is actually just…dancing. It’s nice.”

“It is, isn’t it,” Loki muttered. “But from what I recall, our first dance together was also very enjoyable.”

His eyes met Tony’s, and there was desire in them, desire and something else, something Tony had only seen in the last few days before Loki’s departure. His heartbeat quickened a little, but outwardly he made sure to remain calm.

“Yes, it was,” Tony agreed. “It’s too bad you don’t want to dance with me anymore.” He held Loki’s gaze in challenge, waiting for his answer.

Loki’s eyes briefly dropped to the floor as he deliberated his next words, but even when he raised his head to speak again, he still didn’t quite meet Tony’s eyes.

“I might have been somewhat…hasty in my decision to leave,” he said slowly, looking uncomfortable with the admission.

Tony’s brows pulled together in a frown. “Is that an apology?”

Loki shrugged, still not looking at him. “It could be. If you wish for one.”

Tony took a minute to think about it. On the one hand, Loki wanted him back. That was good. Excellent, in fact. On the other hand, he couldn’t have been more half-assed about it if he’d tried. Tony guessed that this was probably a case of Loki’s royal snootiness coming through.

“Oh?” Now was Tony’s turn to pretend disinterest. “Well, I don’t know. I guess I’ll have to think it over. It would not be good for me to give into my old vices.”

That seemed to do the trick. Loki’s awkward expression disappeared, only to be replaced by a predatory grin as he pulled their bodies flush together, leaning over to whisper into Tony’s ear. “I suppose in that case I will simply have to persuade you.” He let his breath ghost over the lobe of Tony’s ear, his smile growing wider when Tony shivered a little.

“I suppose I could be persuaded.” Tony licked his lips, his heart now running a mile a minute. Loki probably felt it too, from where his hand laid on Tony’s shoulder, his thumb caressing Tony’s neck above the collar in a slow, teasing motion. Loki moved his head a little and his nose brushed the edge of Tony’s jaw, his mouth almost close enough to kiss. Before they could cross the last few inches, however, someone behind them cleared their throat loudly, making them pull apart.

Right, Tony realized. They were still at a public party, with a good hundred people watching them. This was not a good place for a private reunion. Tony cleared his throat and moved back to leave an inch or so between their bodies, trying to think of a safe topic that would allow them to maintain the illusion of propriety for the rest of the song.

“So, um, thanks for coming with me today,” he blurted out the first thing that came into his mind. You really helped me out there.”
“I know.” Loki smiled smugly, adjusting to the sudden change of mood without missing a beat. “You would have been lost without me.”

“I wouldn’t go as far as “lost”, personally, that just implies general incompetence and I kinda detest that, but I suppose you can say that I would be “inconvenienced” without you. That sounds much better, don’t you think?”

“Hm, I suppose that is acceptable,” Loki said magnanimously. Something occurred to Tony and he chuckled a little at the thought.

“You know, here on Earth we have a saying: ‘A way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.’ From what I’ve seen of you and Thor, I’m beginning to suspect that the Asgardian equivalent must be something like: ‘A way to a man’s heart is through a nice, bloody murder spree.’”

Loki actually laughed out loud at that, a rich, velvety sound that drew more than a few curious gazes their way.

“No, I would not use “murder spree”, personally. That sounds so crude and sordid. I think “a glorious battle” may be better. But you are not entirely off the mark with your guess.”

“So my devious plan to lure you back with the promise of violence and destruction worked?” Tony could hardly believe it.

Loki’s smile turned mischievous. “Yes, it did. However, I must inform you that it was less the violence itself and more the general execution of your idea that intrigued me. You have a fascinating mind.”

“Is this your way of saying that you only like me for my brain?” Tony asked teasingly. Loki chuckled.

“You are fully aware that I find you very attractive. Your brilliant mind is merely one of your many compelling assets.”

“Really.” Tony raised an eyebrow. “And what exactly would those ‘assets’ be, hm?”

Loki leaned forward, pressing himself close again to whisper in his ear. “I believe that is a conversation better left for a more private venue. You would not want to shock the present guests even more than we already have.”

Tony pretended to be put out by that, but inwardly he was doing a thousand little victory dances.

“Well, In that case, I think we should get back. I don’t think anyone here will miss us much.” No, they certainly wouldn’t, judging by the mix of glances thrown at them, which ranged from wary to downright poisonous. “I’ve sent my driver away for the night. Do you think you could pop us back home?” Tony gave Loki a hopeful look. He got a smile in answer.

“I suppose I do have enough magic left for that. Let us get out of here.”

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Instead of teleporting them to the workshop like he had before, Loki made them appear in the middle of Tony’s living room. While Tony took the requisite few seconds to reorient himself again after the rapid change of location, Loki took a few steps back, his expression sobering up a little as he changed back into his normal form.
In his mind’s fantasy theatre, Tony had imagined a hundred different versions of their reunion (most of which ended in wild make-up sex on the nearest horizontal surface). In them, Loki had been alternatively cocky, angry, sad, overjoyed, pleading with Tony to take him back – all kinds of emotions that one could imagine. There had been no scenario, however, in which he had looked as hesitant as he did now. Gone was the open flirtation from the dance floor – now Loki looked like he didn’t know what he was doing in Tony’s house in the first place.

“I…suppose we should talk,” Loki began slowly.

“We’ve been talking all evening,” Tony replied, trying to ignore the slowly growing feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach. What was wrong? Was Loki leaving again? He’d thought they had been getting on well enough at the party, but maybe it had all been just an act for the people around them. What if he had misread the entire situation? What if Loki hadn’t meant it after all?

While Tony was quietly freaking out, Loki walked over to the window, taking a moment to gaze out on the dark ocean below. He stood there for a few minutes, probably trying to find the right words, or maybe trying to come up with a way to get out of here as fast as possible. Tony had no idea. It was highly unnerving.

Finally Loki turned back from his view to face Tony again, wearing an uncharacteristically sincere expression.

“I believe I owe you an apology,” he said quietly, taking Tony aback. His gaze briefly swept over the spacious living room before it settled back on Tony. “Both for my sudden departure and for the words I said to you before I left. They were…not kind.”

Yeah, that’s an understatement, Tony thought, remembering some of the things the demigod had hurled at him before he’d walked out.

Loki seemed to have caught onto the train of his thoughts, because one corner of his mouth lifted up in a crooked smile. “In fact, I had deliberately taken care to be as cruel to you as possible, because I was feeling angry and resentful and wanted you to experience at least a fraction of my misery.”

“Yeah, I gathered as much,” Tony admitted. “Still, that was a dick move on your part.”

“Yes, my outburst and the subsequent decision to leave might have been a tad…excessive,” Loki conceded. “Nonetheless, I still believe my anger at you was justified. My reaction may not have been the best one, but the reasons were legitimate – you really had been treating me poorly. I understand now why you might have been inclined to try and keep some distance between us, but your methods for it left a lot to be desired.”

“Yeah, I was a dick to you,” Tony said when Loki made a pause to help drive his point home. “I know. Believe me, I’ve had more than enough time to think about it over the past three weeks. I’m more than aware of all the ways I’ve fucked up.”

The corners of Loki’s mouth twitched upward.

“Good. That means you will not repeat your mistakes again. However, that is not all,” he continued as he started walking closer, coming to a stop less than four feet away from Tony. To a casual observer he might have looked cool and confident, but Tony could tell that he was nervous by the tense set of his shoulders and the way his eyes kept flickering around the room, never resting on Tony for very long. “What I wanted to say was that you may have not treated me well, but I, too, bear at least part of the blame for our fight.”
Tony opened his mouth to retort, even though he had absolutely no idea what to say to that, but he promptly closed it again after the look Loki shot him.

“Let me finish my speech, will you?” the demigod said with a hint of humor. “My mistake in this case had been miscalculation. You had been straightforward with me right from the start, had warned me upfront about your reservations and your expectations for our relationship, but I paid no heed to your warnings. I foolishly assumed that I would be able to win you over with my charm and blatantly ignored your wishes on this matter. I had been too blinded by anger and jealousy on the day of my departure to assess the situation objectively, but now I can see that you were not the only one at fault.”

Tony’s jaw fell a little because this was…not what he’d been expecting. He’d expected something along the lines of “You’re an asshole, but I’m willing to give you another chance, if you work for it”, but to hear Loki apologize, really apologize like he meant it and admit to his own mistakes was…surprisingly humbling.

He wet his lips, trying to tamp down the wild surge of hope that rose in his chest at Loki’s words, even as he tried to formulate a response in return.

“So you’re saying what?” he asked slowly, trying to make sure that he wouldn’t fuck this up again. “That I was a dick to you, but you were kind of a dick to me, too, so we’re even?”

This time Loki smiled for real, his eyes lighting up with genuine joy.

“Yes, that is exactly what I’m saying.” He extended his right hand to Tony, holding it palm up. “I am willing to come back and try again, if you are.”

Tony didn’t hesitate for a second. He crossed the distance between them with two quick steps and reached out with his left hand, taking Loki’s offered hand in his.

“Yeah,” he said with a smile that felt wide enough to split his face in two. “Yeah, I think I’d like that.”

Loki ran his thumb over Tony’s knuckles in a gentle caress, but his gaze stayed firm.

“I am glad to hear that. However, I would like to make a few things clear. If we are to give this relationship another chance, I refuse to be treated like that again. I wish for us to be partners. Equals. I refuse to end up at your beck and call again, being treated like a servant, or an inconvenient house pet.”

Tony swallowed, feeling so full of relief and happiness that he felt like he was going to burst out of his skin.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice a little rough with emotion. “I’m pretty sure I can do that. And if you feel like I’m ignoring you again, feel free to yell at me. Sometimes I need a little rough handling to make me pull my head out of my ass.” He took another step closer, until there were only a few inches of space left between them. “Any other requests?”

“One,” Loki informed him, lifting his free hand slowly. “That you do not flinch away from me when I do this.” He laid it on the side of Tony’s neck, his thumb caressing the sensitive spot under Tony’s ear. “Or this.” He gently brushed his knuckles over Tony’s cheekbone. Tony didn’t even try to pretend that he wasn’t leaning into it. “Or this.” He slid his hand forward, burying it in the hair at the back of Tony’s head.

Tony was already leaning forward when Loki moved, meeting him in the middle for a kiss. By their
normal standards, it was deceptively soft and sweet – little more than a simple brush of lips, but to Tony it felt like coming home. After all the weeks of anger and guilt and resentment, Loki was finally back. Back here, in Tony’s home, in his arms. Back where he belonged.

Loki’s arm wrapped around his waist, pulling him close and Tony felt like his heart was going to burst, a flood of warmth exploding in his chest. They kept the kiss light and gentle, relearning each other slowly after the weeks they had spent apart. There was no rush, no hurry to be anywhere else – the base had been destroyed, the bad guys were dead and now Tony could finally savor his victory to the fullest.

The kiss didn’t stay chaste for long, however. It only took a few flicks of Tony’s tongue between Loki’s parted lips to coax the demigod’s mouth to open up and just like that, the mood between them changed from slow and careful into hot and hungry in a matter of seconds. Loki welcomed him inside at once, letting them get re-acquainted, and it was just as good as Tony remembered. God, he had missed this, Tony thought as he scrambled at Loki’s clothes, trying to get to the skin underneath.

Growling low in his throat, Loki backed him up against the nearest wall, breaking the kiss only for long enough to let Tony pull his tunic over his head before he captured Tony’s mouth again, kissing him with enough fervor to make it look like he’d been dying to do this for weeks. Which was quite possible, when Tony thought about it. God, how long had it been since they had last been this close? A month? The urgent, almost desperate way Loki was pressing against him made Tony fervently glad that they had decided to skip the rest of the party after all. This was much, much better.

Tony slid his hands up over Loki’s chest and buried them in his hair, pulling at it lightly as he slotted a thigh between Loki’s legs to press it against the demigod’s rapidly growing erection. He started moving his hips in a slow, undulating rhythm, drawing a throaty moan from Loki when he pressed himself close enough for their cocks to brush against each other through the two layers of fabric that separated them. He briefly thought about moving this to the bedroom, getting some lube, anything, but quickly realized that neither of them was going to last long enough for that. They were both too keyed up from the fight and the emotions running through the room to engage in something more complicated than this.

Loki bit Tony’s lower lip, tipping his head back to deepen the kiss even more as his other hand reached for Tony’s zipper, making quick work of it. Not wanting to be left behind, Tony stopped groping Loki’s excellent ass and started to untangle the fastenings on Loki’s pants instead. After all the practice he’d had during their time together, it took him less than half a minute to untangle the set of hooks and buckles that were keeping him away from his prize.

He was almost done with them when Loki’s hand slid into his boxers, bold and confident as ever and wrapped those skillful fingers around Tony’s erection. Tony groaned, his mind going blank for several seconds before he recovered, redoubling his efforts to free Loki from the confines of his leather pants. The last two hooks gave way and he pushed the pants down impatiently, closing his fist around the demigod’s cock. Loki made a throaty moan against Tony’s temple, his hand faltering for a moment before he picked up his previous pace again, doing his best to drive Tony completely mad.

It was the kind of madness that Tony welcomed wholeheartedly – two people in quiet semi-darkness, with nothing between them but heavy breath and skin and slowly rising pleasure. He wrapped his spare hand around Loki’s hips, drawing him closer until their cocks touched, sliding against each other in a motion that made Tony go a little cross-eyed. Loki opened his hand, wrapping his fingers around them both and hell yes, this was even better, shared heat and friction created by two tightly entwined hands.
As he dove into yet another kiss, Tony couldn’t help but relish the rightness of it all – the long, muscular shape of the body pressed against him, the confident way those elegant hands played him like a well-tuned harp, the familiar smell of Loki’s skin. Loki kept murmuring against Tony’s mouth between kisses, a low stream of appreciation in a language that Tony couldn’t quite understand, but enjoyed nonetheless. Their movements were starting to get a little uncoordinated as they got close to the finish, the sensations growing with every slide of their hands – the tight heat at the pit of his stomach, the sweet ache in his legs, the furious beating of his heart; all of them building up together in a delicious symphony until Tony felt like his entire body was going explode if this went on any longer.

Loki’s thumb brushed over the head of Tony’s cock, drawing a teasing circle and that was it – the final push Tony had needed to get over the edge. He came with Loki’s name on his lips like a prayer, meeting the demigod’s eyes as he spilled over their joined hands. Loki was watching him with rapt attention, his pupils widening a bit as he drank in Tony’s face during his orgasm. It only took Tony a few more tugs to make Loki follow him and the demigod buried his face in Tony’s throat, holding the man close as he shook apart against him.

They stayed like that for a while, their legs barely holding them up, until Tony finally sighed, running his hands over Loki’s back.

“We should go to bed,” he murmured against Loki’s neck. The demigod had his nose buried in Tony’s hair, his arms still holding him tightly.

“That would be probably for the best,” Loki said quietly. “It has been a very long day for the both of us.” He clung to Tony for another moment before he finally pulled back, straightening up a little. “Should I take us there?”

Tony gave him a fond grin, shaking his head. “No, let’s just walk. I’m not that lazy yet.” A new thought occurred to him, a previously-unexplored idea and he rolled it around his mind a little before he finally decided to give it voice. “Hey, how about you take a shower with me?” he asked, taking care to keep the question light and like it totally wasn’t a big deal for him. “My shower is big enough for five people, let alone two.”

“Is it.” Loki lifted an eyebrow. “It is too bad we never had the opportunity to find out before.” The jab was subtle, but it was still there. Tony supposed that was only fair, since Tony’s refusal to get fully naked in front of him had been one of Loki’s biggest sore points before. They might be back together now, but it would still take a while for things between them to go back to normal.

Instead of getting defensive, Tony deliberately relaxed his shoulders.

“We have an opportunity now. If you want it.” He pulled away from the demigod and started to walk away in the direction of the bedroom, throwing a look over his shoulder when he reached the stairs. “Of course, if you don’t wanna, I can always shower on my own. It won’t be as much fun but…” He didn’t even have to finish the sentence before Loki was at his side, matching his stride with ease.

“And miss out on seeing you wet and naked? Never.”

They made their way into the bathroom, leaving a trail of clothes along the way. Tony tore his shirt and pants off without a second thought, but hesitated a little when he reached for the hem of his undershirt. Finally, he pulled it off, too, trying (and failing) to keep the motion casual. He ended up standing in the middle of the bathroom with the shirt in hand, feeling horribly naked without the layer of fabric over his chest.
Loki walked in behind him but paused in the doorway when he noticed the stiffness in Tony’s posture. In the large wall-length mirror, Tony saw his eyes flicker from Tony’s face to the piece of fabric, something like understanding dawning in his eyes. Without a word, Loki walked up to Tony, reached down and took the shirt from Tony’s tightly bunched fist, dropping it to the floor.

“I am glad you told me about this,” he said, gazing at the arc reactor for a few seconds before he met Tony’s eyes again. “It explains a lot of things about you.”

It was Tony’s turn to drop his gaze to the floor. “Let’s just get into the shower, ok?” There was still a small frisson of nervousness in his chest that was trying to claw its way into his throat but he pushed it down resolutely and stepped inside the spacious glass shower stall. JARVIS turned on the water for him, setting it to the perfect temperature and Tony closed his eyes, letting the stream of water wash away the last of his doubts.

Loki came in a few seconds after him and hissed in discomfort when the hot water touched his skin.

“What is it?” Tony asked, turning around to face him. Loki was doing a good job of trying to look unbothered, but it was clear that the near-scalding water wasn’t pleasant for him.

Loki sighed. “This is…a little hotter than I would prefer.”

Oh, right, Tony remembered. *Frost Giant.* They probably bathed under ice or something.

“JARVIS?” he asked the A.I. “Can you lower the temperature a few degrees?”

The temperature of the water dropped at once, changing from hot to still pleasantly warm and Loki audibly sighed in relief, stepping more fully under the spray.

“Thank you. This is much better.” Without further ado, he reached for the nearest soap dispenser and started soaping up Tony’s shoulders. Tony didn’t comment on the water thing, just like Loki didn’t say anything else about the arc reactor. It was actually pretty good.

They soaped each other up slowly, taking their time to get reacquainted with each other’s body after the long separation and Tony thought that reality couldn’t get much better than this. Loki seemed to have a fascination with Tony’s chest, running his hands repeatedly over the pectorals on both sides of the arc reactor and Tony let him, knowing that it was probably Loki’s way of compensating for all the times Tony had refused to take off his shirt in front of him.

Now it was just the two of them, a stream of water and slowly exploring hands. They were both still spent from the recent orgasm, so the shower was more relaxing than sexy, but the touching still felt pretty nice. Actually, it felt almost more intimate than any sex they’d had to this day, but Tony wasn’t about to voice that thought out loud. Instead he let his body speak for him, closing his eyes and allowing Loki to wash him in a gesture of trust he had only allowed one other person to this day. Which reminded him:

“Hey, when we talked before, you mentioned that you were jealous. Why the hell would you be jealous?” He looked up to meet Loki’s eyes, but found Loki’s gaze firmly fixed on the washcloth in his hand.

“You and Miss Potts seem to have a close relationship,” he said reluctantly. “I might have… misinterpreted some of your interactions.”

“You were jealous of Pepper?” Tony asked incredulously. “We broke up a year ago. There’s nothing going on—”
“I know,” Loki interrupted him. “I know that now, but I had my doubts before. You were so adamant about my leaving the house that I decided to stay and watch you instead. It was a violation of your privacy, but I could not bring myself to particularly care at that moment.” He hung his head, a bitter smile stretching his lips. “She came in and I saw your conversation with her, saw how at ease you were in her presence, how much affection you held for each other. And then you left together and didn’t come back for hours and my mind jumped to the worst conclusions. I’m sorry.”

_Huh_, Tony thought. So that’s why Loki had been so pissed off when he’d come back. Loki had feared that Tony would get back together with Pepper and leave him. Normally Tony would find this kind of jealousy annoying, but in this case it was actually strangely…reassuring. It was good to know that Loki wasn’t perfect, that Tony wasn’t the only one in this relationship who sometimes screwed up.

“Hey,” Tony said softly, but Loki kept his eyes down, probably feeling embarrassed about his admission. “Hey,” he said again and this time he took Loki’s chin in his fingers and tipped it up to make the guy meet his eyes. He took care to keep his expression neutral, to avoid making Loki think that he was making fun of him. “Listen carefully to what I’m about to tell you, because I want to make something clear to avoid something like this again.”

He took a breath, trying to choose the best words for this.

“Pepper is the best friend I have,” he began. “She’s been by my side forever and is almost singlehandedly responsible for keeping me sane these past twenty years. She’s an important part of my life and if I have some say in this, she’s never going away. That being said,” he added when Loki opened his mouth to interrupt him. “There’s zero chance of me getting back with her. We’ve tried it and it just doesn’t work. We just don’t…fit. Besides, even if I wanted to get back together with her – which I don’t,” he emphasized that, just to make sure, “- she still wouldn’t take me back. She’s got some new guy now that she’s been dating for months and she seems to be happy with him. So in conclusion – me and Pepper make surprisingly good friends, all things considered, but dating? Hell no.”

From this up close, he saw the embarrassment that still lingered in Loki’s eyes after his previous confession.

“I-” the demigod muttered, averting his eyes again, “I understand. As I said, my reaction was not very rational. I’m sorry.” He turned his back on Tony, ostensibly in a request for Tony to wash his back.

“It’s okay,” Tony told him because really – what else was one supposed to say in a situation like that? “Just make sure you don’t do it again.” He soaped up the skin in front of him, marveling at the smoothness of it. Healing magic sure was a handy thing for a warrior to have. “You know,” he couldn’t help but add as he dragged the cloth down the long stretch of Loki’s back, washing away the soap, “contrary to popular belief, I actually am capable of being monogamous. I just usually don’t bother.”

With their shower done, the stream of water turned off and they both stepped out, drying themselves with the large fluffy towels that lay waiting for them on the marble counter next to the shower stall.

“I know,” Loki said as he towelled his hair, the cascade of curls framing his face and spilling down his shoulders. “I shouldn’t have doubted you.”

“Hey, don’t sweat it,” Tony told him. “We were both idiots, in our own unique ways. I’m just glad that we didn’t fuck this up completely.”

“As am I.” The smile Loki gave him this time was small and tentative and 100% genuine. It was a
really nice smile, Tony thought as he chased away the last drops of moisture from his skin with the towel. Loki should really smile like that more often.

He was just contemplating whether he should bother to hunt down some boxers or just sleep in the buff when he noticed that Loki had halted in the bathroom doorway, hovering there uncertainly.

“What is it?” Tony asked straight away, wanting to avoid any further misunderstandings.

“May I share your bed tonight?” Loki asked, sounding horribly formal. Tony suddenly realized that the demigod had never asked that before. They had fallen into bed together at the start and then never bothered to discuss whether they actually wanted to be there. It looked like things really were changing between them.

Tony didn’t even have to think about it – he only had to remember the crippling insomnia he had suffered after Loki’s departure to arrive at his answer.

“Yes, sure,” he told Loki. “You don’t have to ask again. If I didn’t want you here, I would tell you.

Loki just gave him a short nod and sat down on the bed, sliding naked under the covers. Well, that answered Tony’s underwear dilemma. He ordered JARVIS to turn down the lights and lay down as well, staring at the darkened ceiling. He could hear Loki breathing next to him, could feel the way their shared blanket pulled across his torso, but instead of freaking him out like it usually would, the knowledge that Loki was in the room with him was weirdly comforting. Yeah, it was good to have him back.

*This is new as well,* Tony thought as he listened to the distant sounds of the ocean below. Them, going to bed at the same time, to sleep. They had mostly just used the bed to as a place to fuck before, rarely sleeping in the same room due to Tony’s weird hours and Loki’s superhuman stamina. So this - actually going to bed together to sleep like normal people – was new for them, too. It made Tony wonder how many more new things they were going to discover.

After the sex they’d had before, Tony had hoped to be able to fall asleep quickly, but now it didn’t look like a full-night’s sleep was in the cards for him. The occasional rustle from the other half of the bed told him that Loki wasn’t asleep yet, either. As his mind wandered, Tony stumbled across something that had been niggling at him ever since Loki’s unexpected appearance in the workshop two days ago.

“Hey,” he said quietly, breaking the silence in the room. “There’s one more thing I want to know.”

“Yes?” Loki asked, turning on his side to face Tony. He reached up with his hand and pushed his unruly hair away from his face. “What is it?”

“Why did you come back?” Tony asked him. “You looked really pissed when you left. I thought you would sooner help bring on the apocalypse than help me again. Not that I’m not glad that you’re here,” he added, “but I still have no idea *why.*”

Loki let out a small sigh and sat up on the bed, the blanket sliding down to pool in his lap. Tony could see his profile silhouetted against the muted light coming from the window.

“I was angry, yes, and hurt and I took it out on you.” He shot Tony a look. “I may be called Silver-tongue, but you are skillful at twisting words, too. You know exactly where to strike, which words to choose to drive people away from you. And you succeeded. I could not wait to get away from you.”

And it hurt to hear that, it hurt to know that Tony had managed to drive Loki to something like this with just a few careless remarks, but he needed to hear it. He had caused this, so it was only fair that
he hear about the fallout.

“Did you do it as payback? Because it was pretty effective if you did, I have to give you that.” One only had to remember the endless rows of bottles in his workshop to know just how effective a punishment it had been.

“Partially, yes,” Loki admitted. “You had taken my presence and my help for granted, so I decided to withdraw it for a while. But it was not only reason. I did it for myself as well. You were treating our liaison as a temporary fixture, so I decided to take some precautions of my own. One of them was to find out whether I could walk away from you of my own will when things inevitably fell apart.” His lips twisted into a parody of a smile. “As it turns out, I can, though it brings me little pleasure.

“So why come back?” Tony asked again, genuinely wanting to know.

There was a small pause before Loki spoke again.

“I had not meant to, at first,” he said quietly, picking at the blanket in his lap with his fingers. “I was still angry at you and did not wish to let myself get pulled into your orbit again. However, the spell compelled me to try and save your life, and no matter how much I might not have wished to, I had to heed its call. So I went, with no small amount of reluctance, and transported myself to your side. I had intended to stay invisible and watch from the shadows as your precious companions swoop in and save you in some ridiculously heroic fashion.”

He grimaced, probably recalling the events of that day. “Only, they didn’t come. Nobody did. I kept waiting, but nothing happened. I was almost ready to reveal myself when you received the call from your Captain and I thought: This is it. This is the moment where you finally break down and admit that you need help, let someone else save your life.”

Loki snorted, throwing Tony an incredulous look.

“Instead, you brushed him off. You were dying, I could feel the life slowly bleeding out of you - and you still lied to him. You lied to him, because you did not want his pity. And that was the moment when I finally understood.”

“Understood what?” Tony said quietly, sitting up as well to be able to see Loki’s face better. Loki turned his head to meet his eyes, the intensity in them making it impossible for Tony to even think about looking away.

“That you really are that broken. Before that moment, I had thought that you were merely cruel – using your charm to reel me in, so you could toy with me and discard me when it suited you, but I was wrong. You do not do it out of cruelty – you do it because you’re afraid. You are afraid of people getting too close to you, of seeing you for who you really are.”

And Tony had had enough. He’d already known he was a fuckup in the emotional department, thank you very much, but he didn’t need to hear it from Loki, too.

He turned away and scooted over to the edge of the bed, intent on running away to the workshop or going for a ride or something – anything that would get him out of the house and away from this conversation, because he’d dealt with a lot of emotional shit already today, but this was taking the cake. Before he could stand up, however, Loki caught his shoulder, holding him in place with his superior strength.

“No,” Loki told him firmly. He pushed himself up to kneel behind Tony, keeping a careful distance between their bodies because he correctly guessed that a more intimate touch wouldn’t be welcome
right now. “You do not get to walk away from me because you’re feeling uncomfortable with the
truth.” He shifted forward a little, enough for Tony to be able to see his face, but he did not release
the grip he had on Tony’s shoulder. It wasn’t painful, but it was firm enough to keep him from bolting.

“You do not get to walk away from me because you’re feeling uncomfortable with the
thrust.” He shifted forward a little, enough for Tony to be able to see his face, but he did not release
the grip he had on Tony’s shoulder. It wasn’t painful, but if was firm enough to keep him from bolting.

“Now listen to me carefully, because I am only going to say this once,” he warned Tony. “Yes, you
are flawed, and terrible at dealing with real emotions and quite frankly you can be insufferable at
times,” wow, what a ringing endorsement of Tony’s character, “but all the people who have walked
away from you are idiots,” he added, taking Tony aback. “They are idiots, because they did not
appreciate the man you are, the man you can be when you make the effort.”

“Are you going anywhere with this?” Tony bit out, sitting stiffly on the edge of the bed. His back felt
hard as a rock under Loki’s hand and his legs were tense, ready to get him out of the room the first
chance he got. Loki sighed next to him, hanging his head with a crooked smile.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. The point I am trying to make is – I do not mind. I have seen who you
are and I like it. Not all of it, of course, there are a few minor issues that you could work on,” he
added, because he was an asshole, “but as a whole, you are a fascinating man and I have grown
reasonably fond of you.” Loki wet his lips, the thumb of his hand making slow circles over Tony’s
collarbone as he leaned forward to meet his eyes. “And I am willing to stay, for as long as you will
have me. The only question is – will you have me?”

Something in Tony’s throat closed down and he had to swallow several times to get rid of the
tightness in his chest. When it finally passed, he reached up and tentatively laid one hand over the
one Loki still had on his shoulder. He took a deep breath, feeling some of the tenseness abate when
Loki squeezed his hand back.

“Yeah,” Tony said in a rough voice. “I think I’d like that.”

Loki let out a small sigh, so light it was almost imperceptible, but Tony heard it anyway. So Loki had
been nervous about this. Who would have thought. The hand on his shoulder squeezed Tony’s again
before Loki retracted it, trailing his fingers over the muscles on Tony’s back in a light caress as he
pulled away completely. He laid back down, waiting patiently for Tony to get over his freak-out and
join him.

It wasn’t exactly a marriage proposal, but it was something. It was a start.

Yeah, Tony thought as he began to fall asleep, we can make this work.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Several people have asked me whether I’m going to be posting any quicker than this. To
that I say: Probably not. I would love to, but I’m only human and I can only write so
fast. I’m not a very fast writer – I tend to write about 8000 - 10 000 words per week, on
average (far less than I would like). Most chapters of this story are around 7000 words
long (14 Word pages), so I write about a chapter and a half per week (+ lots and lots of
editing, which also takes ages). All in all, I spend between 20-30 hours on every chapter
to make it presentable (this is not a complaint, by the way, just an observation. I love
writing, so that time is more of a reward than work for me).
I have tried the accelerated posting schedule thing before, with my Hobbit stories, where I posted 2-3 chapters per week. I managed to finish the stories on time, but the insane writing pace resulted in a burnout where I had to take nine-month long break from writing before I was able to even think of creating anything else. I don’t wish to end up like that again, because I love this story, and want to finish it, so I’m taking my time with it. So far I’ve managed to more or less keep to my writing schedule, and hopefully I should be finished with this fic by the end of May (June at the latest). If everything goes according to plan, I might speed up the posting of the last few chapters, but for now, I have no such intention. You’ll just have to content yourself with reading new stuff once a week :)

Chapter 21 will be posted on next Friday, April 10.
Tony woke up feeling warm and happy, cocooned in a nest of blankets in a pleasant semi-darkness. His muscles were heavy with that vague, languid ache that they always had after a particularly good round of sex and he stretched lazily with his eyes still closed, enjoying the slow process of waking up.

There was a low chuckle on his left that sounded awfully familiar, but what would Loki be doing in his bed? He had– *Oh*. The memories from the night before rushed into Tony’s mind in a flood of images and sounds and he couldn’t have stopped the content, slightly dopey smile from appearing on his face even if he wished to. When he finally opened his eyes, Tony was met with the sight of Loki’s face half-mashed into the pillow, his hair a wild tangle of curls that spilled everywhere. Despite the outward impression of laziness, Loki’s eyes were alert, sharp and fully awake and were watching Tony with a mixture of fondness and amusement.

“G’morning,” Tony mumbled, rubbing his eyelids.

“It is.” Loki smiled at him, propping himself up on his elbow.

“What time is it?” Tony asked the ceiling.

“It is 8:42 a.m., Sir,” JARVIS responded dutifully. “Shall I open the blinds for you, Sir?”

“Yeah, you might as well,” Tony told him. He ran his hand through his hair and sat up, stretching a bit. The morning sun spilled in through the window, filling the room with light. *Jesus, almost nine in the morning*. He hadn’t slept this long for…well, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept this long (without being knocked out or black-out drunk). “You’re still here,” he said softly, his eyes turning to the naked man sprawled under the covers next to him.

“I am,” Loki confirmed. He tried to make it sound cocky, but Tony didn’t miss the brief flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

“That’s good,” Tony muttered, already leaning down. “Very, very good. Excellent, in fact, because if you’re here, I can do things like this,” he pressed a kiss against Loki’s lips, “and this,” another one beneath his jaw, “and this,” he trailed a series of kisses down Loki’s throat, scraping his teeth gently against his collarbone.
Moving closer, Tony propped his arm next to Loki’s shoulder and leant down to pepper his neck and shoulder with kisses. Loki rolled fully on his back, pulling Tony down with him. The demigod waited for Tony to lift his head, then caught his mouth, doing his best to remind Tony why this morning was so good in the first place. While they were kissing, one of Loki’s hands sneaked down Tony’s back to grab his ass, using the leverage to pull him even closer, the sensuous slide of their naked bodies making Tony’s skin heat up everywhere they touched.

*Oh yeah, Tony thought as he bent down to kiss Loki again, this is going to be a great day.*

***

Of course, he should have known better than to expect things to go well today – after all, he had just managed to patch up his personal life. It was only a matter of time before something else in his life went tits up. Unfortunately for him, the peace lasted nowhere near as long as he had hoped.

It took them over an hour before they were finally ready to get out of the bed and face the day. (Well, hour and a half, to be exact, because they got delayed in the shower when Loki got a little too enthusiastic about soaping up Tony’s back and they ended up going for another round against the shower stall wall). As a result, it was already well past ten when they made their way downstairs for breakfast, their bodies still riding the wave of blissful contentment from their last orgasm. While Tony sat down at the kitchen table and started flipping through the news on his tablet, Loki made a beeline for the fridge, pulling out an enormous carton of eggs and several packets of bacon.

“You’re going to eat all that?” Tony couldn’t help but ask, as he watched Loki break egg after egg into a bowl.

“Of course not.” Loki shot him a look. “Some of that is for you, too. Despite what you would like to believe, you cannot subsist on coffee alone. And since I’m already cooking for myself, I might as well throw in a little extra for you.”

“That’s…thanks,” Tony said, feeling weirdly moved by such a small gesture. Sure, Loki had cooked for him before, but those occasions had been few and far between. And after the clusterfuck they had just gone through, it was nice to see Loki acting so at home here again. Still, drawing attention to it would only remind them both of the past few weeks, so all Tony said was: “Yeah, eggs will be great, thanks,” and he turned his attention back to the tablet.

The gossip sites were full of paparazzi pictures from last night, running wild speculations about the identity of Tony’s mysterious date. Which reminded him that he had no idea who she had been, either.

“Oh hey.” Tony remarked casually, “your choice of disguise yesterday drew quite a bit of attention. Nobody has any idea who that smoking hot lady on my arm had been.” He shot the demigod a side glance and found him steadfastly focused on the pan full of scrambled eggs. “Who was that, anyway?”

There was a brief moment of silence as Loki deliberated whether he wanted Tony to know.

“That was…my former wife,” he said finally, hesitation clear in every word. Tony’s eyebrows shot to his hairline.

“Your- *That* was your ex? Holy shit.” Loki had been married to someone who looked like *that*? And still left her?

Loki seemed to follow the unspoken train of Tony’s thoughts, because his lips pulled into a wry half-
“Yes, she was beautiful, but she was also cold and vain and possessed no sense of humour. Our marriage had been one of convenience, not love, and we had never understood each other well. The decision to end our marriage had been entirely mutual, as neither of us had any desire to remain in it longer than absolutely necessary.” He tried to keep his tone very matter-of-fact, but there was a thread of underlying bitterness in it. It made Tony remember their conversation on Christmas, about Odin marrying his son to gain political influence.

“Did anyone even ask you if you wanted any of it?” The thought had only occurred to Tony now, but it would fit in with the things Loki had told him so far.

Loki snorted. “No. I was presented with the decision after it had been made. Father did not particularly care about my opinions on that matter. Thor had tried to plead with him on my behalf, but Odin ignored us both. Just like he always has.” The note of anger in his voice grew more pronounced and the stainless steel salt shaker bent a little in his fingers when he reached for it to salt the eggs, but Loki didn’t seem to notice, lost in memories. “I had felt hurt by Father’s decision back then, had wondered why he would disregard my thoughts on the matter, but now I am no longer surprised – after all, I have never been more than a bargaining chip for him. Why would he care about what I want, when gaining political leverage had been the reason for which he had kidnapped me from Jötunheim in the first place?”

There was something vaguely sad about the set of his shoulders, a memory of old hurt and disappointment that seemed to lay on him like a shadow. Tony had little experience in how to comfort people, but as he watched Loki poke the eggs with short, sharp movements, face clouded with memories of resentment and betrayal, he thought he might give it a try anyway.

He stood up from the kitchen table and crossed the few feet to the stove, stopping only a few inches behind Loki. After a second of hesitation, Tony raised a hand and laid it between Loki’s shoulder blades, rubbing light circles over Loki’s spine with his thumb.

“Your dad sounds like a real piece of work,” Tony said, taking care to keep both his voice and the motion casual. “I mean, I thought mine was a dick, but yours really takes the cake.” He kept up the rubbing motion as he leaned forward around Loki’s shoulder to take a whiff of the lovely bacon smell from the pan. “This smells amazing. Want me to help you with the plates?”

“Yes, that would be...appreciated,” Loki said and Tony could feel him relax a little under his hand, his mind finally focusing back on the present. Once he was sure that Loki wouldn’t accidentally destroy any more of his kitchen utensils, Tony pulled his hand back and went to get the plates and silverware. Despite what some of his critics might think, he did know where his knives and forks were. He just usually didn’t bother using them when he ordered takeout.

Loki loaded the plates full of eggs and bacon (his portion was considerably larger than Tony’s) and laid them down on the table while Tony distributed the knives and forks. As Loki passed him to put the plates on the table, he briefly laid a hand on Tony’s shoulder, the quick squeeze of his fingers conveying his thanks without making a big deal out of it.

They had never touched much outside of sex before this, Tony realized. Sure, there had been the occasional brush of shoulders as they had leaned over an armor schematic together or an arm sneaking around Tony’s waist when Loki had been in a playful mood, but as a whole, they had never been particularly affectionate together. They’d had tons of great sex, but as a whole, they had an invisible barrier always seemed to spring up between them, keeping them apart. If he was honest with himself, Tony would have to admit that the unspoken no-touch rule had mostly been his invention. In his mind, non-sexual touches of this kind were reserved for couples and needy
people and back then he had considered the two of them to be neither.

Now he was slowly beginning to change his mind. Sure, he was never going to be Mr. Touchy-Feely, but this kind of simple comfort really wasn’t such a bad thing once in a while – after all, it wasn’t as if there was anyone watching them, policing their behavior from afar. They could do whatever the hell they wanted. Including the occasional hug.

They ate their breakfast in comfortable silence, both of them lost in thought. Tony was still idly scrolling through the news on his tablet, trying to figure out what the hell was going on with the whole HYDRA thing, while Loki’s eyes were a million miles away. Still, despite the lack of conversation, the mood was…surprisingly not awkward. Actually, this whole slow morning thing was pretty nice. Tony thought he could get used to this.

Once they were done with breakfast, Tony led the way to the workshop, where he opened one of the bigger storage lockers while Loki stood in the doorway, looking around.

“I’ll clean up the mess later,” Tony called out, doing his best to ignore the dried blood on the floor. There were still a few dark brown streaks leftover from Dummy’s attempt at cleaning, but Tony couldn’t blame him for the half-assed job – mopping up blood of someone you liked was always really fucking depressing. He’d deal with that later, because right now he had something for Loki.

“Come here,” he told the demigod, drawing a haphazardly-wrapped bundle from the locker. He laid it down on the nearest table and gestured for Loki to take a look at it. “While you were gone, I took the liberty and made the first version of your armor. Well, actually, I used it as a way to try out the new anti-magic layer for my own suit, but it’s still pretty good.”

Loki stepped up to the table, unwrapping the heavy cloth from the armor with a look of curiosity. The armor wasn’t anything special – just a rough model of the final product, no frills - but it was made of a steel alloy and the anti-magic layer seemed to be holding up pretty well so far. Loki lifted it in his hands, trying out the weight and material.

“It’s an experiment,” Tony explained as Loki examined it. “I made a computer model based on the scans of your armor and body and then had JARVIS create this for me. It’s not handmade, so it doesn’t possess that magic voodoo or whatever you wanted, but it’s close enough to the final thing that it can give us some idea about the fit and durability.”

Still without a word, Loki took the breastplate and pulled it down over his head, the intricate set of hooks and locks clicking into place when he pushed the front and the back pieces together. The seams on his sides slid together, creating a sleek carapace that fit him (almost) like a second skin. Loki watched the whole process without a word, still wearing that carefully neutral expression that he’d had since Tony had first mentioned the new armor. The blankness weirded Tony out a little, but he decided not to let it throw him off balance. Instead of trying to puzzle out Loki’s thoughts, he turned his attention back to the armor.

“It’s still not as flexible as the armor you have and we’ll probably have to make at least half a dozen versions before we come up with the perfect deal, but for a first try, I don’t think it’s too bad.” Tony made a circle around him, checking the fit. “Yep, the size is good. Try to conjure up a fireball or something. I tried to be careful with the anti-magic layer, but I had no way to test it. Hopefully, this shouldn’t cut off your magic when you try to cast something.”

Extending his right hand in front of him, Loki filled his palm with a ball of bright orange flames.

“It takes slightly more effort to perform the spell, but it does not block my magic significantly,” Loki finally spoke, focusing on the magic for a moment longer before he killed the flames and turned to
face Tony again. “You made this after I left?”

Tony made an awkward, one-shoulder shrug and turned away to tinker with a few spare engine parts
to give his hands something to do.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “I was spending a lot of time here and one project sort of started to blend into
another and before I knew it, I was halfway done with this and it seemed like a waste not to finish
it.” The whole sentence came out of him in a rush and he cleared his throat, feeling uncomfortable
with the admission. “So, how is it?”

“It is…better than I expected,” Loki said cautiously, running one hand over the smooth metal of the
breastplate. “The anti-magic layer is still too deeply etched into the armor so it interferes with my
own magic and the field it generates is too small to cover me entirely, but it is a very good start.” He
looked up and gave Tony a small smile, his expression softening from its previous stiffness. “It seems
that I have chosen my craftsman well after all.”

Before Tony could respond, he leaned over and gave Tony a short kiss, his hand lingering on Tony’s
shoulder before he stepped back again. “Thank you. I am confident that with some more practice you
will be able to create exactly what I asked you for.”

“And if I can’t?” Tony couldn’t help but ask.

Loki’s smile turned into a smirk. “Then we’ll find some other way for you to accomplish this. There
are many resources in the Nine Realms that you have never even heard of. There are bound to be
plenty of materials you can use if the limited selection that Midgard offers does not prove sufficient.”

“So then you’ll what?” Tony raised an eyebrow. “Bring me some alien metal? Or take me travelling
to some half-forgotten corner of the galaxy that has right material for this?” He had only been half
serious when he’d said it, meaning it as a joke, but Loki didn’t even blink.

“Why not both?” Loki suggested, surprising Tony a little. “You have never left this world, have
you?”

“Well, no? Not for lack of trying, I’ll give you that.”

“Would you come travelling with me, if you could?” Loki asked, stepping closer until he was only a
few inches away. He didn’t touch Tony, not yet, but it was clear that the question wasn’t meant just
as a throwaway line. Tony took a minute to think about it, about all the implications of packing his
bags and just disappearing off to an alien world for a few weeks or months. To his surprise, he found
that he was strangely okay with that.

“Yeah,” he replied a moment later. “Yeah, I think I would. I’ve always thought this world was far
too small to hold all of my awesomeness. I wouldn’t mind an occasional trip or two.”

“I am glad to hear that,” Loki murmured, leaning even closer until his nose bumped Tony’s.
“Because there is so much I wish to show you. Just you wait.”

He ended his words with another kiss, one in which Tony happily participated. They kissed for a
while, sharing languid, unhurried kisses that felt weirdly like sealing of a deal of some sort. But hell,
if that deal involved more kissing and a possible opportunity to get his hands on some rare alien tech,
Tony was all for it. They were finally forced to break apart when something hard poked Tony’s ribs,
causing him to pull back and glare down at Dummy, who was looking between the two of them, his
claw-head tilted in silent question.

“Yes, we’re back together. No, he’s not going to leave again,” Tony told him, shooting an amused
glance at Loki before he looked back down at the bot. “Now, I believe you were supposed to be cleaning up the workshop, weren’t you, Dummy? Stop poking me and go pick up some trash, that’s a good boy.”

Dummy shot him another curious look before he turned, apparently satisfied with the answer, and rolled away to gather the empty fast food wrappers from the workshop kitchenette. Tony stepped out of Loki’s arms, giving him another smile.

“I’d better get back to work, too, before Dummy sets something on fire again. He swore it was an accident the last time, but one never knows with him.” He cleared his throat a little, picking up the nearest half-finished prototype out of habit. “Anyway, it’s good to hear that the armor fits. We can work on another version after I finish decrypting the files I brought home from the HYDRA base. Which reminds me,” he spied the shiny lump of adamantium on a nearby workbench, “we might have something else I could use for the armor. I wonder just how much adamantium HYDRA has. I bet that if we raided a few more secret bunkers, I would have enough of the stuff to make a dozen suits.” He could just imagine it, too, an impenetrable layer of protection around his body. No more stray bullets, no more danger of getting skewered by some weird alien beast. It would be like a dream come true.

While Loki was taking off the new armor, Tony wandered off to play with the lump of adamantium, running tests on it to measure the weight and volume so he could figure out just how much stuff he could make out of it. He was in the middle of toying with a few new ideas for armor upgrades when JARVIS spoke up, drawing his attention.

“Sir?” he asked, and there was unusual hesitation in his voice, which put Tony instantly on alert. Sure, he had programmed JARVIS with a personality, but these kinds of subtle inflections never bode anything good. His next sentence confirmed Tony’s suspicions. “I have some bad news, Sir.”

“What is it?” Tony asked, putting the lump of adamantium back on the table.

“Nicholas Fury is dead.”

The words hit Tony like a bucket of ice-cold water and he straightened up, throwing the ceiling a startled look. “What the- Run that by me again?” Because he was sure he must have misheard. There was no way Nick Fury was dead.

“Nicholas Fury, the Director of SHIELD, is dead, Sir,” JARVIS dutifully repeated. Even Loki looked up at that, his mind finally connecting the name and title to a corresponding face. Tony wasn’t looking at him, however, his attention fully focused on JARVIS.

“I’m sorry, I must have heard wrong, because it sure as hell sounded like you just said that Nick Fury is dead. That’s bullshit. That guy can’t be dead, he’s indestructible. He’s like Rambo, or those weird starfish that grow back when you cut them in half. I bet if you cut him open, you would discover some kind of a Terminator skeleton under his skin. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised to find that he’s at least part cyborg.”

He was fully aware that he was rambling, but his brain refused to compute the reality of Fury being dead. The guy was a badass – he had like fifty different secret identities and probably a spare brain in a jar somewhere. There was no way someone like that was dead. No fucking way.

“Nonetheless,” JARVIS continued, “according to the official SHIELD report that I have managed to acquire this morning, the Director died at 2:13 a.m. Eastern Time.”

It took Tony less than two seconds to convert that information.
“Are you telling me that he’s been dead for almost twelve hours and I had no idea?” He pushed away from the table and started to pace, too full of energy to stay still. There was a thin tendril of panic trying to crawl its way down his throat and it was freaking him out.

“The report only appeared on official SHIELD channels an hour ago, Sir,” JARVIS said. “I needed time to verify that it was genuine.”

“And?” Tony paused in his pacing. “Is it?”

“It appears so, Sir.”

“Shit.” Fuck, this was bad. This was very, very bad. However, he couldn’t let himself just descend into panic. He needed reason, logic, information… “How the hell did that happen, anyway?”

“According to the report, he was assassinated shortly after he left the SHIELD Headquarters in Washington D.C. The report does not go into detail, but from what information I have managed to aggregate, the attack on Director Fury had been carried out in a manner similar to the assassination attempt on you two days ago.”

“So it was HYDRA, then?” Tony said, pacing again as he tried to puzzle all the pieces of the clue together. “When they didn’t manage to kill me, they went after Fury? Why? Are they trying to bring down SHIELD? Nobody heard of them for decades and suddenly they’re making highly publicized hits all over the country. Why now?” He combed a hand through his hair, bunching his fingers into a tight fist at the back of his head. “How did they get Fury, anyway? That guy has like a thousand safeguards in place. His car is like a tank. You can’t just shoot it to pieces.”

“From the available information, it appears that he got surrounded by several cars that opened fire on him,” JARVIS explained. “When they failed to reach him, the attackers blocked his retreat and smashed his windows with a battering ram. Director Fury managed to escape them and find refuge in the home of Steven Rogers, but was hunted down by an assassin of unknown identity who shot him with a sniper rifle.”

“Fuck,” Tony breathed out, the similarities between his and Fury’s cases almost eerie. “Did they use adamantium bullets, too?”

“The report does not say what kind of ammunition was used against the Director.”

“Anything else I should know?”

“Captain Rogers was present during the final attack of the sniper, but was unable to apprehend the assassin responsible. He then accompanied the Director to the hospital.”

That made Tony pause.

“Steve saw the whole thing? Get him on the line for me, I need to talk to him now.”

Several seconds of silence passed before JARVIS spoke again. “I am afraid that I am unable to connect you to Captain Rogers, Sir.”

“Why? Where is he?” And why wasn’t he answering his phone? It had taken the Avengers a few days to explain the convenience of cell phones to Steve and persuade him to start carrying one on his person (he’d been genuinely baffled by the fact that you no longer needed an operator to connect you with the person on the other side of the line), but once they had, he never failed to answer a phone call, no matter what time it was. He still wasn’t a big fan of texting (preferring the good, old fashioned pen and paper or a phone call), but he answered his calls with the same diligence that he
applied to everything else in his life.

Steve Rogers not answering his phone meant that something was very, very wrong.

“The current location of Captain Rogers is unknown,” JARVIS answered.

“Unknown? Unknown how?” Tony demanded. “Unknown as in you have no idea where he is, or because he’s on some sort of a secret mission or what?”

There was a small pause. “I believe he has gone into hiding, Sir. There has been an…incident at SHIELD this morning. As of this moment, Steve Rogers is Number One on SHIELD’s list of wanted persons.”

Tony blinked, trying to comprehend what he had just heard.

“SHIELD is…hunting Steve?” He exchanged a baffled look with Loki. “What the fuck is going on? What the hell did Steve do?”

“I do not have enough information available to answer that, Sir,” JARVIS said regretfully. “The order was issued twenty minutes ago, active immediately for all SHIELD personnel.”

“Jesus.” Tony wiped a hand over his face. “Why would SHIELD put a bounty on Steve’s head? I mean, it’s Steve. He’s practically a living saint. There’s no way they’re after him because he suddenly went darkside. He’d never do that. Out of all of us, he’s the one who’d rather die a hundred times that shake hands with Hitler. If they’re after him this badly, it’s probably because he found out something he shouldn’t have, or yelled at some bigwig who had a great new idea about using alien artifacts to power nukes. Hell, with his luck, he probably stumbled across some conspiracy without any effort from his side.”

He went over the available information again, reading the reports over and over and trying to see what lay beneath.

“Or, more likely, Fury told him something.” Tony straightened up from the table and started moving again, gesticulating with his hands as he spun his theory. “You said that Fury came to Steve’s flat, right? And SHIELD started hunting Steve shortly after that. There’s no way that is a coincidence. Fury probably knew something he shouldn’t have, shared the info with Steve before he died, and now SHIELD is trying to get the information back. And Steve, loyal old Steve, is going to protect it with his life, even though he probably has no idea what’s going on with all this.”

He sighed, shaking his head. “That would be just like him, protecting other people’s secrets without even knowing what those secrets were. If I find out that Fury has been alive all this time and the manhunt for Steve was just some part of another one of his convoluted plots, I’m gonna kick his ass.”

“You’re very protective of him,” Loki remarked quietly, interrupting Tony’s frenetic ranting. He was watching Tony from a nearby workbench, keeping enough distance between them to give Tony room to pace.

“Well, yeah,” Tony said, his eyes involuntarily flying towards the Captain America shield replica in the corner. “He’s a friend. And a really decent guy. Honestly, I still have no idea how someone so wholesome ended up being friends with a guy like me, but he’s one of the few people I can depend on. If someone is after his head, I want to know why.”

“Will you go after him?” The question was carefully posed, but there was an undertone of tension in his voice which suggested that Loki wasn’t too happy with the idea.
“Yeah, probably. He would do the same for me.” Tony walked over to the holographic table and pulled up several screens, skimming through the dozens of SHIELD reports that JARVIS had gathered for him. “But I’m not gonna fly off blind when I don’t even know where the guy is. I have to find him first and figure out what the hell is going on before I can even think of going after him.”

“Your little red-headed spy could know where he’s hiding,” Loki suggested, coming closer to join Tony at the table. Actually, that was a pretty good idea.

“JARVIS, what about Natasha? The last I heard, she was with Steve in D.C., wasn’t she? Do you have anything on her?”

“The current location of Agent Romanov is unknown,” JARVIS replied. “She was last seen at Director Fury’s side in the hospital, but has not been heard from for eight hours.”

“So she’s gone into hiding, too,” Tony rubbed a hand over his beard. “With any luck, she’s with Steve. That’s good. Still, what the hell is going on?”

“I do not have enough infor-” JARVIS began.

“Then get me some, dammit!” Tony snapped. “I need to know what happened. All this can’t be a coincidence.” He turned to Loki, who was watching him with a carefully neutral expression. “It’s not just me,” Tony told him as he started to pace again. “Before, I thought someone was targeting me because I was the head of Stark Industries, but that’s not it. HYDRA is going after the Avengers, one by one. They started with me and when that didn’t work, they went after Fury. Still, that doesn’t explain why Cap is suddenly on SHIELD’s wanted list.” He threw up his hands, feeling frustrated with this whole thing. “It doesn’t make any sense - why would SHIELD try to kill one of their most prized soldiers, right after the Director has been assassinated by their enemies? Something smells fishy as hell here and I need to find out what it is. It can’t be an accident that it all happened in such a short timeframe.”

He clapped his hands and the screens with the Avengers’ profiles rose into the air around him.

“So, Cap and Widow have gone AWOL. I should probably make sure the rest of the guys are still okay. Where’s Hawkeye?” he asked JARVIS.

“Agent Barton is currently on a classified mission somewhere in the South Pacific area,” JARVIS informed him.

“Barton’s a big boy,” Tony said. “He can take care of himself. What about Bruce?”

“Doctor Banner is in his lab in Avengers Tower. Should I call him for you, sir?”

Tony suppressed a sigh of relief. At least Bruce still seemed to be ok. Thank fuck.

“Yeah, patch him through.”

Less than ten seconds later, Bruce’s voice came through the speakers.

“Hi, Tony.”

“Hi,” Tony said, doing his best to keep his voice casual before he dropped the bomb on him. “How are things in my Tower? Thor hasn’t blown it up, yet?” He ignored Loki’s automatic scowl at the mention of his brother’s name, focusing his attention on the phone call instead.

“No, he’s been on his best behavior,” Bruce assured him. There was a shuffling sound on the other
side of the line and a few clinks, suggesting that Tony had most likely interrupted some sort of scientific experiment. “He might have accidentally destroyed the common room coffee table when he dropped his hammer on it, though.” The easy-going humor in his voice made it clear that Bruce hadn’t heard anything about the SHIELD clusterfuck yet. “He offered to repair it by hand, but I told him that you’ll buy a new one.”

“Yeah, I will,” Tony said, his mind supplying him with a hazy image of an ugly rectangular thing made of chrome and glass. “The old one was hideous, anyway. I have no idea what Pepper was thinking when she bought that monstrosity. And it’s probably better that you stopped him from trying to put it back together. God knows what would happen if he discovered the existence of super glue. How is he, anyway?” Tony couldn’t help but ask, remembering the sobbing wreck on his couch a few months ago.

“Mostly well.” Bruce’s voice sobered up a bit. “He’s trying to hide it, but I think he’s still grieving for his mother and brother. The daily calls with Jane help a lot, but he still looks a bit sad. And he’s been watching the Lion King again.”

He didn’t need to say any more than that to make it clear that he still hadn’t gotten over Loki’s death.

“Oh, boy,” Tony sighed, shooting a quick look at Loki, who had no idea what any of this meant.

Thor had first seen the Lion King during his November visit at the Tower when Tony had suggested watching some Disney movies to help get Thor acquainted with Earth culture, and while the guy had loved all the songs, he’d spent half the movie sobbing into his popcorn. At the end, he had proclaimed it a “fable worthy of Asgardian legends” and had been watching it at least once a month ever since. Tony didn’t know whether it was because the story reminded him of his own life in some way, or because Scar reminded him of Loki, but the movie had quickly become Thor’s favorite. Even if he always ended up crying over Mufasa’s death.

“Yes,” Bruce confirmed awkwardly. “It’s been...emotional.” There was a wealth of unspoken words behind that sentence, things he was probably holding back out of respect for Thor’s privacy, but Tony still heard enough to draw his own conclusions.

“Did he drink all my booze again?”

“Oh, boy, I managed to stop him before he could go streaking through the streets of New York.”

That drew a chuckle from Tony. “That’s probably for the best. I don’t think the Earth is quite ready to handle his naked awesomeness, yet.”

“That might as well be true, but I still don’t think I’m a good candidate for that. Jane is much better at calming him down than I am. But luckily for me, he flew back to her yesterday, so I can have a few days of peace,” he continued, making Tony freeze. “Don’t get me wrong, I really like the guy, but he can be a handful at the best of times.”

“Thor’s not at the Tower anymore?” Tony asked, all the previous teasing slipping from his voice. Bruce probably picked up something from the change, because his next question was careful, wary.

“No, he’s not. Why? Is there a problem?” When Tony didn’t answer at once, he added: “What is
going on, Tony?”

Tony sighed. “Do you want the long or the short version?”

“Start with the short one,” Bruce suggested.

“Okay.” Tony took a bracing breath. “Basically, Fury is dead, Steve and Natasha are on the run, and HYDRA is apparently alive and trying to kill us all.” When the only reaction he got was baffled silence, he tentatively added: “You might have missed a few things these past few days.”

“Fury is– What the– HYDRA?” Bruce burst out before he cut off, probably in an attempt to get his blood pressure under control. For a few seconds, his speech descended into incomprehensible muttering and when he started talking again, it was with that forced calm that he used when he was desperately trying not to Hulk out. “You know, Tony, if this were any other time, I would probably think you’re playing some kind of prank on me with this, but I heard about the attack on you two days ago. I assume that was part of it, too.”

“Yeah, most likely.”

Another beat of silence passed before Bruce spoke again, sounding a little calmer. “So, Fury is dead?”

“As far as I know, yes,” Tony confirmed.

“And Steve and Natasha are missing?”

“Yeah. I’m trying to locate them now.”

“And you didn’t think to begin the conversation with that in the first place?”

“Well I–” Tony began, but Bruce spoke over him.

“Begin from the start. And tell me what on Earth is going on. Why didn’t I know about any of this?”

“You see, two days ago I was…”

It took almost an hour to explain everything to Bruce and even after he did, he could still hear the sheer disbelief over the situation in Bruce’s voice.

“Tony, this is bad. If what you’re saying is true - which, knowing our luck, it most likely is - then they’ll be coming after all of us. We should be doing something. We should help Steve-”

“I’m already on it,” Tony assured him. “The moment I find out anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Good.” For a moment it seemed like Bruce was going to hang up before he remembered something else. “Why were you asking so much about Thor, anyway?”

Tony pointedly didn’t look at the demigod, who was now reading in the corner where he had wandered during Tony’s conversation with Bruce.

“I was hoping he might help you get the hell out of the Tower,” Tony admitted. “This way if anything else happens, you’ll be on your own. They might come after you next.”

“I know how to disappear if it’s necessary,” Bruce told him. “It will be hard, but not impossible. But still, I would much rather stay and help you and Steve than run away again.”
“You might end up doing both,” Tony said grimly, fervently hoping that it wouldn’t come to that. “I’m gonna try and crack the files I recovered from HYDRA, to see if I can find anything useful. Can you call Thor for me and tell him what’s going on? We could use his help.”

“I’ll do that,” Bruce promised. “The last I heard, he was battling some sort of sea-monster near London, but he’ll come back if he hears about this.”

“Let’s hope so. Anyway, gotta go. I’ve got files to decrypt, government secrets to steal, you know how it goes. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Be careful, Tony.”

“Yeah, you too. Bye.”

Tony ended the call, trying not to feel too weirded out about the fact that in Steve’s absence he had de facto stepped into his shoes to try and get the team back together. If this were happening a few years ago, he might have freaked out about it, but right now he only felt a grim determination to find out who was behind all this and take them down.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Loki put away his book and stand up.

“Why did you keep asking him about Thor?” he asked, coming closer. Tony turned around to face him, drawing himself up to his full height.

“Because whether you like it or not, Thor’s still one of my friends,” Tony told him. “He was pretty devastated by your death. As it turns out, he’s apparently still not over it yet.”

Loki pursed his lips and looked away, but not quickly enough to prevent Tony from seeing the flicker of guilt in his eyes.

“You know, you should probably talk to him eventually,” Tony continued. “Whether you like it or not, he’s your brother. It’s kind of a shitty move to let him believe you’re dead.”

“He’s not my brother,” Loki muttered, turning away. Tony had expected the demigod to snap at him, to scream about wanting nothing to do with Thor, like he always had whenever Tony had brought the topic up before. Now, however, he seemed only mildly annoyed. “I do not wish to see him.”

“He has a phone, you know,” Tony pointed out. “You could at least call him.”

“I do not wish to speak with him, either,” Loki bit out, a little more forcefully than before. “And even if by some miracle I did, I cannot – not if I wish to stay unnoticed. If I told Thor that I am alive, the Allfather would hear about it as well. I need to stay hidden for longer yet.”

“Why do you still keep all this up, anyway?” Tony wanted to know. “You’ve been pretending to be dead for months. Why? Is it because you don’t want to go back in prison? Or is it something else?”

“I…do not wish to speak about that.” Loki didn’t meet his eyes, which all but confirmed to Tony that this wasn’t just about hiding from the wrath of Asgard. There was something more going on here, he knew it, but unfortunately right now he didn’t have the time to try and poke his nose into Loki’s secrets. HYDRA was the more imminent issue, its threat looming over his head like a particularly ugly breed of spider and he needed to get back to uncovering what the hell their deal was.

“All right,” he relented. “I won’t pry, because I have better things to do right now, but we are going to talk about this.” He met Loki’s eyes, making it clear that he wasn’t going to forget about the conversation. Loki scowled, but nodded anyway, acknowledging it reluctantly.
“All right,” Tony said again, straightening up. “Now we need to figure out what the hell is going on with all this. JARVIS? Can you break into SHIELD’s files? Not the super-secret ones, there’s no need to alert them just yet, but enough to give us a better idea of what their game is?”

“Of course, sir,” JARVIS answered. “I will start right away. This should only take a few hours.”

“Awesome,” Tony told him. “In the meantime, I’m gonna try and decrypt the stuff on the HYDRA discs that I stole yesterday. There must be something on them that will tell us what the hell is going on. Maybe I’ll even discover something that will help explain how the hell they have managed to hide from everyone for fifty years.” He carried the stolen discs over to his computer and started plugging them in with an elaborate set of cables.

“How long will this take?” Loki asked, coming to stand at Tony’s side. Tony shrugged.

“No idea. Depending on their level of security, it could take anything between a few hours and a day, but since I’m a genius, it shouldn’t take me very long. If you wanna go watch a movie or take a walk or something, I won’t blame you. This next stage will be pretty boring.”

“Very well, I will defer to your superior knowledge in this matter,” Loki said with a hint of humor. “Let me know when you find anything useful.”

“Will do.”

After a second’s hesitation, Loki leaned over and gave Tony a peck on the lips before walking out and disappearing up the stairs.

Tony sighed, turning his attention back to the secret data.

“Damn, and this day started out so good.”

***

It took him six hours of using every trick in the book to slip around the numerous firewalls and safeguards those guys had in place and get to the data beneath. For a decades-old evil Nazi organization, they sure had good security – in fact, some of their security was a little too good for Tony’s taste. After the third run-in with the same problem, Tony had to admit that he knew why some of those protections seemed so familiar – they were based on his tech.

Someone had stolen his tech and given it to HYDRA, who had developed their own programs based on Tony’s stuff. He was appalled and insulted, but most of all he was pissed as hell that yet another one of his creations had ended up in hands of people who should have no business handling it.

And just when he thought his discoveries couldn’t get any worse, he broke through the final firewall and discovered something that made him blink several times to make sure that he wasn’t dreaming.

There, printed black on white in a bold, stark script, lurked his newest nightmare.

“SHIELD is HYDRA??!!”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes
As you may have already guessed (and I hinted at it in my very first Author’s note for the story), this fic is CA: TWS compliant. This part of the story is my attempt to answer the “where the hell was Iron Man during all this?” question that a lot of people (including me) had while they were watching Captain America: The Winter Soldier. I always figured that Tony wasn’t able to help Steve - not because he didn’t want to, but because he was dealing with problems of his own. In my interpretation, those problems include assassination, HYDRA and his own convoluted love life. Knowing Tony, I don’t think my version of the events is too far-fetched from reality.

Thanks for all the lovely feedback you keep giving me! Your comments are lovely and I adore every single one of them. You guys are the best :)

Chapter 22 will be posted on Friday, April 17.
Tony slowly climbed the stairs from the workshop, barely paying attention to his surroundings. Loki was lying in a comfortable sprawl on the living room couch, his nose buried in yet another thick book, but he looked up when Tony appeared on the top of the stairs. His eyes flickered over Tony briefly, half his attention still on the book before he noticed the expression on Tony’s face and froze, sitting up in one quick, sharp movement.

“What happened?”

“I went too far down the rabbit hole,” Tony muttered, making a beeline for the bar, where he grabbed the nearest bottle, poured himself a glass and drained it in a single go before filling up another. He lifted that one in front of his face and stared at it moodily, feeling too drained to even enjoy booze anymore. “I shouldn’t have listened to the cat.”

“Stark, are you feeling well?” Loki asked cautiously. Tony didn’t blame him - his words probably sounded like complete gibberish right now. “You have been away for the entire afternoon. Have you managed to uncover the secrets of those discs you stole from the base?”

“Yeah, I have,” Tony confirmed. He gave a short, bitter snort and took another sip of the whiskey, watching the liquid swirl around in the glass. “Now I almost wish I hadn’t. In this particular case, ignorance really was bliss.”

His interest piqued, Loki put aside the book and stood up, giving Tony his full attention. In several quick steps, he crossed the distance to the bar and slid down onto the barstool next to Tony. His face reflected a strange mix of concern and burning curiosity as he leaned forward, pinning Tony with a look.

“Why? What did you learn?”

“I…don’t even know where to begin,” Tony admitted with a small shake of his head, feeling helpless in the face of the enormous knowledge he had just gathered and hating himself for the weakness at the same time. He turned his head to look at Loki, letting him see the anger and doubt and raw, debilitating helplessness that were threatening to overpower him.

“What would you do if you found out that almost everything you believed in, everything you’ve ever worked for, was a lie?”

Loki’s breath left him in a whoosh. He leaned back on the stool a little, his eyes not leaving Tony’s as he pondered that information.

“I…have been in a similar position once before. It is...highly disconcerting to find out that your entire
life has been a lie.” A shadow ran over his face at the memory and he averted his eyes for a second, remembering his own circumstances. “It feels like your whole world is breaking into pieces and you cannot do anything to stop it.” Pulling his attention back to the present, Loki turned his gaze back to Tony. “What happened?”

Tony took a long, fortifying breath.

“SHIELD is HYDRA,” he began, “and HYDRA is SHIELD. The same guys who were supposed to protect the world are now doing their best to destroy it and I helped make it happen.”

Loki stayed silent as Tony took another gulp of his whiskey, trying to sort his thoughts into something halfway coherent so he could explain this whole clusterfuck to Loki.

“As you probably know by now, my dad was one of the founders of SHIELD,” Tony told him. “He and two others founded the organization shortly after the war as an international intelligence agency. It was supposed to monitor threats, assess them and respond to them as needed. Well, as it turns out, shortly after SHIELD was founded, it got infiltrated by HYDRA agents, whose numbers slowly grew within SHIELD’s ranks, poisoning it from the inside.” He grimaced, remembering the endless pages of data with the evil octopus sigil on them. “For over fifty years, everyone believed that HYDRA was gone, that it had been destroyed after the war, when all this time it’s been alive and well, steadily growing in power under SHIELD’s banner. For decades now they have been lurking in the shadows, orchestrating assassination and setting up regimes to further their goals and nobody noticed.” He shot Loki a frustrated look. “Nobody fucking noticed. Can you believe it?”

“Your Director did,” Loki pointed out.

“Yeah, and they took him out before he could say a word about it to anyone,” Tony said bitterly. “They’re not fucking around anymore. They’ve grown in power and they got tired of waiting around.” He threw up his hand. “For fuck’s sake, they put out a bounty on the head of a national icon and nobody at SHIELD so much as batted an eyelash. It’s a fucking disaster.”

“But it’s not the reason why you’re so disturbed,” Loki observed, his sharp eyes watching Tony’s face. “Discovering enemies in unexpected places is nothing new for you, so the revelation itself shouldn’t have shaken you like this. What is it?”

Tony stared at his glass, contemplating whether he wanted to share this particular piece of information with Loki. In the end he decided that what the hell, why not. It wasn’t as if things could get much more fucked up than this. He ran a hand over his lips, propping his chin on his palm.

“Well, among other things, I found a file with the order for my father’s assassination. For twenty years I was led to believe that my parents died in an accident - that my father lost control of the car on an icy road and they drove off a cliff. Now I find out that it wasn’t an accident, but a calculated hit that HYDRA ordered because my old man was getting cranky and uncooperative and they wanted to put in charge someone who would be easier to manipulate.” He raised the glass to his lips, pausing to add one more sentence. “Obadiah Stane’s signature was on the kill order.”

“Oh,” Loki said, going quiet and contemplative.

“Yeah,” Tony muttered, not without a hint of derision. “Good thing I had Obie to look after me, wasn’t it?” He rubbed his fingers over his eyelids. “Christ, these people have been puppeteering my life for decades and I had no idea. Not a single clue. And I thought I was being so clever, keeping everyone at arms’ length and feeling so sure that nobody could ever deceive me like this without me noticing.” He gave a short, self-deprecating snort. “Turns out that I’m the same gullible idiot as everyone else. Worse, even, because I had made such a big deal of being the genius lone wolf who
doesn’t work with anyone.”

“You have said it yourself that nobody noticed anything.” Loki reminded him.

“No, we didn’t, but we should have!” Tony burst out, finally arriving at the main source of his anger.
“I should have noticed something was off. For fuck’s sake, I thought the whole deal with the Tesseract-powered weapons and the nuke casually thrown on New York was fishy as hell, but I got caught up in a thousand other projects and kind of let it slide. There was a city to rebuild and monsters to fight and new designs to try out and fucking post-battle PTSD and I guess I just didn’t want to deal with it. We had just saved a world – what more could they want from us? So I let it slide and figured that someone else could deal with all that shit for a change because I’d had enough.” He kicked back the rest of the glass. “Now they’re gonna destroy the world because I couldn’t be bothered to pay attention.”

He got up from the barstool in one sharp, angry move and started pacing the length of the living room, feeling furious with himself. Loki stood up too, watching Tony pace with rueful eyes.

“Stark, you are just one man. You cannot do everything.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t try.” Tony whirled around, glaring at the bottle of booze on the counter to avoid taking his anger out on Loki. “When I stopped making weapons and shut down that particular branch of Stark Industries, I had sworn that I would never let anything like that happen again – that I would never allow terrorists to get their hands on my weapons. I thought I was being so careful, but all it took were a few words from SHIELD and the promise of a miracle cure and I was at their side in a heartbeat. I really believed that I would be able to make a difference, to help the good guys for once.” He snorted bitterly. “Turns out that I just switched one bunch of terrorists for another.” He shot Loki an annoyed look. “What does that make me?”

“It makes you human,” Loki answered without hesitation. There was a strange note to his voice, an echo of centuries of experience and Tony got reminded that yes, in fact, this guy was over a thousand years old. It was easy to forget that sometimes. “You wanted to believe in your ideals. Everyone does.” He didn’t say anything else, but it was clear that he had included himself into that statement as well.

“No.” Tony shook his head. “I’m a fucking idiot. They saved my life when I couldn’t save myself and I was so pathetically grateful for it that I ate up all the bullshit lines they fed me. I ignored the warning signs because I wanted to believe that I was doing something good for once.” He sighed, staring out of the window. “But then, we all did. I suppose I can’t really blame myself for this when we all fell for the same bullshit. The whole team believed in what SHIELD was selling, even Fury. They reeled us in, one by one, and we went because they told us exactly what we wanted to hear.”

No longer able to stand Loki’s gaze, he walked over to the window where he stopped and jammed his hands into his pockets, staring at the horizon.

“Steve joined the Avengers because it was the right thing to do,” Tony began the headcount, his mind helpfully supplying him with an image of Steve’s handsome, earnest face. “He was lost in a weird alien world that looked nothing like he remembered, all his friends were dead and he had no sense of purpose, no idea what to do with himself. Fury gave him a chance to find a place where he could belong once more.” Steve’s face floated away, only to be replaced by Tony’s favorite science buddy. “Bruce wanted to stop being hunted. He was tired of always being on the run, always having to be on alert and keep a tight check on himself. With the Avengers, he has a stable place where he can play around in his lab and if he goes wild, there is always someone to reel him in and prevent him from causing widespread destruction.”
He only had to remember the Hulk incident a few weeks ago, the deeply grateful expression on
Bruce’s face when he’d changed back and discovered that Tony had managed to keep the Hulk calm
and happy.

“Thor wanted to be a hero,” Tony continued, ignoring Loki’s scowl at the mention of Thor’s name.
“He fell in love with this strange new world and wanted to use his superior powers to protect it. It’s
really as simple as that. Hawkeye…” Tony paused, thinking. “I honestly have no idea why Barton
joined. Most likely because Coulson suggested it. Or Natasha. And speaking of Natasha – she came
on board to try and make up for the decades of doing unspeakable things on the orders of a bunch of
creepy guys in the shadows. She’s a world-class assassin, the most paranoid of us all, and even she
fell for it, because she wanted to believe that there was a way to make up for her past crimes.”
Tony’s lips pulled into a wry smile. “Redemption is one hell of a drug.”

“And you would know all about that, wouldn’t you?” Loki walked up behind him, meeting Tony’s
eyes in the darkened glass of the window.

“Yeah.” Tony bowed his head, his shoulders sagging under the crushing realization that all he had
done to redeem himself had been for nothing.

“You know, we have a team full of deadly assassins and legendary warriors, and on that team I’m
probably still the one with the most innocent blood on my hands. Skill with weapons and hand-to-
hand combat doesn’t mean squat when you have the power to wipe out an entire city with a single
press of a button. God knows I made more than enough of those things.” His gaze fell on the half-
forgotten glass in his hand and he took another gulp, desperately wishing it would help him forget all
he had learned today. “The others may have a headcount of hundreds, maybe thousands. Mine goes
into millions.” He threw a sidelong glance at Loki. “I don’t think there’s anything that can wipe out
that much red.”

“There isn’t,” Loki said bluntly, his face still carefully blank. “But that doesn’t mean you cannot try.”

“We already did,” Tony told him. “And look where it got us.” He gestured with his free hand. “We
all thought we were going to save the world, but now we find out that we have all failed miserably at
it – not only did we fail to protect the world from terrorists, we helped them rise to power.” Unable
to stand still, Tony started to pace again, the anger bubbling in his chest like acid. “I should have
known this shit wasn’t kosher when the SHIELD higher-ups dropped a nuke on New York without
breaking a sweat. I should have dug deeper into it, shouldn’t have trusted Fury’s half-hearted
platitudes that they weren’t making weapons, but I was fucking exhausted of all the fighting and
wanted to have some peace for once. And while I was happily looking the other way, they took my
designs and found new, inventive ways to destroy the word.

“Fuck!” In a fit of frustration, Tony whirled around and threw the empty glass at the far wall with
enough force to smash it into a thousand pieces. He ended up standing in the middle of the room,
shaking with anger and that sort of deep, impotent rage one has when things spin completely out of
their control. Not wanting to look at Loki’s reaction, he clamped his eyes shut and buried his shaking
hands in his hair, pulling at it with enough force to hurt. He felt like he was falling apart, like his
entire world was spinning out of control and nothing he had ever done mattered and it was
completely frightening.

Tony was so focused on his own thoughts that he almost missed the hands that gently caught his
own tightly clenched fists and pulled them away from his hair. He opened his eyes to find Loki
standing in his space, looking at him with something suspiciously like sympathy. It was weird to see
the guy looking so serious.

“Stop it,” he told Tony firmly. “None of this is your fault. You couldn’t have known.”
“But I-” Tony protested.

“No,” Loki repeated. “Stop blaming yourself.”

They remained in that standoff for a moment longer, with Tony standing tense and stiff and Loki watching him patiently and then, as if someone had pulled the plug from the bathtub, Tony felt his anger drain out of him at once, leaving behind only a feeling of enormous, crushing futility and helplessness. Loki took one look at him and pulled him close, wrapping his arms around Tony’s back.

“It is not your fault,” he told Tony again. Tony stood stiffly in his embrace for a few seconds before he finally melted against him, fisting his hands in the fabric over Loki’s shoulder blades.

“They’re planning something, something big, but I have no idea what it is,” Tony muttered into Loki’s neck. “And I know I should be working to stop it, that I should go out there and sort this shit out - storm the SHIELD headquarters with guns blazing and demand answers, but…I’m tired,” he admitted quietly. “I’m just so fucking tired of all this - of the endless fighting, of getting betrayed, of always having to be the one guy who has to deal with this shit.”

Tony shook his head, burying his face in Loki’s shoulder. He knew he should be strong and decisive right now, that he should be making strategies and putting together attack plans, but inside he felt like his whole world had been turned on its head and he was falling apart at the seams.

He felt pathetic for being so weak, for clinging to Loki like this - like he was drowning and Loki was the only real, solid thing in the word, but he couldn’t help himself. This whole situation was just too much, and he didn’t have any strength left to care about it anymore. He just wanted to disappear, to shed the cloak of the billionaire, playboy superhero for a moment and just be a regular human for once. Was that too much to ask?

Loki tightened his arms around him and leaned his cheek on Tony’s head, holding Tony close as the man shook against him, desperately trying to pull himself back together, to find the strength to pick himself back up and face the newest threat.

“It just all feels so…pointless, you know?” Tony spoke up after a while, when he finally calmed down a bit and no longer felt like he was going to suffocate under the weight of all the secrets. “Like nothing I’ve ever done matters and there’s no point in even trying, because they’re gonna kill us all anyway.” He sighed. “And I wish I didn’t have to be the one who has to sort out this mess, but Fury is dead and Steve and Natasha are running for their lives and SHIELD is evil and there’s just nobody else left who can do anything about this. So I have to try, even though it’s probably useless.”

“You could always just leave,” Loki suggested. “Let someone else deal with this for a change. Why must you be the one responsible for keeping everyone safe? You are not a king, or a figurehead; the burden of rule does not rest on your shoulders. You have no obligation to anyone.”

“It was my dad’s legacy,” Tony said quietly, finally pulling back a little to look Loki in the face. “He founded it, and they eventually killed him for it. As much as I might not like it, I’m responsible for looking after the stuff he left behind. As it turns out, that includes SHIELD as well. It would be a dick move to let HYDRA take over the world just because I still feel resentful towards a guy who died twenty years ago.” And yeah, saying that out loud helped him remember why he was doing all this in the first place.

Loki shook his head a little, a bemused expression on his face.

“Forget anything I ever said about you having the potential to turn into a villain. Your sense of duty
is absolutely ridiculous. You do not owe those people anything, and yet you will still go and protect
them, out of some misguided sense of obligation.”

“It’s not misguided,” Tony argued. “My dear old dad created something that has the potential to
destroy the world, so now it falls to me to pick up his mess. Wouldn’t be the first time that happened –
remember that nuke that SHIELD dropped on New York during your Chitauri attack? That was
one of his creations too, you know.” He realized that he was still clinging onto Loki like his life
depended on it and frowned. “Okay no, I need to stop this. I can’t feel angry if you’re holding me
like this.”

He made to step back, but Loki’s arms around him tightened, not letting him go just yet. A small,
unhappy line appeared between Loki’s eyebrows.

“Why won’t you allow yourself a moment of weakness?”

“Because I already did,” Tony said. “And I really can’t afford to have a breakdown right now. Later,
when this is all over, I can curl up in a corner somewhere and feel sorry for myself, but now is really
not the time. I need to get my shit together.”

Loki watched him for a second longer, his eyes searching Tony’s face before he gave a reluctant nod
and broke the embrace. Tony stepped back and ran a hand through his hair, trying to focus. He
closed his eyes and tried to remember the burning rage and betrayal he’d felt when he had first read
all those HYDRA reports. Only now, instead of being overwhelmed by it, he took those emotions,
like a smith takes a piece of metal and shaped them into something solid, something strong that could
feed his resolve when everything else failed.

*I am Iron Man,* he realized suddenly. It was not the suit, not the AI that powered it, but him — *he* was
Iron Man. It hadn’t been the metal suit that had allowed him to survive three months of torture in a
cave in Afghanistan — no, the suit had been more of an afterthought, a means to get out. *He* had been
the one to survive it, to endure weeks upon weeks of torment, only to emerge victorious at the end.

And it hadn’t been the Mark II that saved his life when Obadiah had pulled the arc reactor from his
chest, either — no, it had been his own will of steel, his own stubborn determination not to get beaten
by that bastard that had helped him survive that.

And now he was going to call upon that same, unbreakable will of iron and hope that it would help
him survive this mess too. He let himself remember everything that HYDRA had done, let the anger
fill him up with the kind of carefully controlled, simmering rage that he had utilized after Coulson’s
death on the Helicarrier and felt the jagged pieces of his fractured sanity slide back into place, the fog
of depression clearing out to be replaced with the cold, deadly focus that he utilized during battles.

“Oh,” he said resolutely, a hard edge entering his voice. “Anger. Hate. That’s much better.”

He opened his eyes and let Loki see the quiet fury lurking in their depths. He had expected Loki to
react to his transformation, or to take a step back on instinct, but the demigod just raised an eyebrow,
a slow smirk gracing his lips.

“Feeling better?”

“Yeah, much,” Tony admitted, realizing that it was, indeed, the truth. Maybe he had needed to break
down, just a little bit, to build his walls back up again. “Thanks for the hug.”

Loki’s smirk widened. “It was my pleasure. Now, what are you planning to do?”

“Well, I’m not gonna just sit here on my ass, that’s for sure. First, I need to go through the HYDRA
files again, see if there’s anything useful in them. Then, I break into the SHIELD database and find out what the hell their endgame is.”

Loki licked his lips. “And then?”

Tony met his eyes straight on.

“Then I’m gonna take those fuckers down. The only question is – are you coming with me?”

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“Oh, you have to be fucking kidding me,” Tony breathed out three hours later when he finally managed to break through SHIELD’s security and the plans for Project Insight filled his screen. He sat back in his chair and wiped a hand over his face, staring in disbelief at the monstrosity on the screen. The surrounding text helpfully explained everything about speed and weaponization and the state-of-art targeting systems and it was making Tony feel sick to his stomach.

Loki straightened up from where he’d been pouring over the numerous HYDRA files and came closer, leaning over Tony’s shoulder to look at the holograms.

“What is that?”

“It’s- This.” Tony made a fast, expanding motion with his fingers and the helicarrier holograms flew up into the air around them, the pictures and accompanying information slowly circling around them in the air like hungry sharks. “This is SHIELD’s endgame. They have managed to create a trio of weapons capable of killing millions of precisely chosen people in the blink of an eye.”

He stood up and scooped one of the helicarriers from the air, rotating it in his hands.

“And you know what the fun part is? I worked on this project, too. I designed the engines and the rotor system and gave them pointers on the best placement of the guns. I didn’t make the guns themselves, or the DNA-based targeting system, but they probably copied that off some of my older designs.”

Loki’s eyebrows climbed by half an inch.

“You knew about this?”

Tony ran a hand through his hair, scratching the back of his neck.

“Yeah, sort of. I wasn’t privy to the details, because it was classified, but I knew SHIELD was building a new helicarrier. They even approached me for help with this, but told me it was only going to be one helicarrier, to replace the old one that your goons destroyed. I had no idea that the end result would be this…abomination.” His eyes skimmed over the rows of numbers, searching for the most important one. “And unless we stop it, these things are gonna be launched in sixteen hours.”

Loki swiped one of the holograms from the air as well, examining it curiously.

“What precisely do these machines do?”

Right, space wizard, Tony reminded himself. Despite his intelligence and surprising proficiency with everyday technology, Loki probably had no idea what any of the accompanying technobabble meant. Tony tried to search for the best way to explain this to Loki.

“They are basically huge battleships that can find anyone, anywhere and take them out with a single
bullet from miles away.”

Loki’s eyebrows climbed even higher. “That’s—”

“Pretty impressive, right?” This was the first time Loki had looked genuinely impressed by anything he had seen on Earth. He had taken the TV and even the Internet in stride, but apparently a DNA targeting system was something that even Asgard didn’t have. “Or at least, it would be, if they weren’t trying to kill us all with it.”

“Are you going to destroy them?”

“If possible, yes,” Tony said, turning his attention back to the problem at hand. “I’m gonna try and disable the targeting system from afar. If that doesn’t work, I’ll have to find a way to get on board those things and do it manually. Hopefully I’ll be able to get far enough before they turn me to toast.”

“This would all be much simpler if you had someone who could take you straight there,” Loki murmured in his ear, leaning into Tony’s side.

“Yes, it would, wouldn’t it?” Tony gave him a sidelong glance, his fingers flying over the keyboard as he tried to break through the firewall protecting the access to the helicarrier protocols. “It would be nice to have someone who could watch my back, too, make sure I don’t get killed.” He made a strategic pause. “It’s too bad that you can’t do it because preventing a genocide would hurt your villain cred.”

Loki let out a low growl, his arms snaking around Tony’s waist from behind.

“You’re trying to manipulate me.”

“Yes, I am,” Tony admitted with a smirk. “Is it working?”

Before he could get an answer, however, a dozen warnings lit up, informing him that remote access to the targeting system was denied. And also that SHIELD had now noticed his probing. He huffed in annoyance.

“Well, looks like that won’t work. We’ll have to do this old school.” He turned around in Loki’s arms to meet his eyes. “So, what do you say?” He asked playfully. “Wanna help me save the world?”

“No,” Loki replied at once. “I do not. But I am going to aid you anyway, because I will not let you go into battle alone. I have worked too hard to keep you alive to see you perish by the hand of some mortal.” His tone was light but his eyes were burning, shining bright with a wild, possessive light as he held Tony’s gaze. “Do you see now, what you have done to me?” he murmured. “Do you finally understand the spell you have put me under?”

He didn’t say the word, didn’t have to, because it was written all over his face. Tony swallowed heavily, feeling a wave of fondness rise up in him in response as he held onto the man who was willing to go against his principles, even help out the people who had once had been his enemies – and all that just because Tony asked.

It was a heady feeling, to have this much power over one person, but instead of making him feel gleeful about it, the realization frightened Tony a little. Loki had already killed on his orders - what else would he be willing to do for Tony? Conquer the world? Overthrow Asgard? Better not to try to find out. Nothing good ever came out of Tony indulging his megalomaniac side. The knowledge that he would have Loki’s support during the attack on SHIELD would have to be enough for now.
“Yeah,” Tony replied in a low voice. He raised a hand and laid it on Loki’s cheek, marveling at the smoothness of the skin beneath his palm. The demigod leaned into it at once, a small gesture of vulnerability that reminded Tony of the fact that despite being a super-powered near-immortal being, inside he was just as easily hurt as everyone else. The “L” word was still a bit too much for Tony to even think about, much less say out loud, but the idea wasn’t as outlandish as it had seemed before. In fact, given time, there was high possibility he was going to arrive there eventually, too. “Yeah, I think I finally understand.”

Loki’s eyes closed and his head tipped forward a little, but Tony was standing close enough to see the relief that flickered in his eyes before Loki hid it. It spoke volumes – even though Loki acted confident and assured, he was still terrified of getting rejected again. And after the way their break up had gone, Tony didn’t blame him in the slightest.

Instead of trying to find words he didn’t have yet, Tony stretched up and kissed him, trying to convey his feelings through the touch of their lips. I’m sorry. I won’t leave again. Thank you for helping. I promise I won’t die. Loki made a small, broken sound against his lips and leaned into the kiss with all he had, pulling Tony closer.

So yeah, they were going to save the world from evil Nazi-terrorists. There was a high chance that either one of them might be dead in less than twenty-four hours, but strangely enough, Tony didn’t feel too disturbed by the thought. Their lives were dangerous enough as it was – what was one more battle for the fate of the world?

There were plans to put together and strategy to discuss, but those could wait a few minutes longer. If they were going to go into mortal danger, the least they could have was a moment for themselves, a few minutes to forget about the world and just enjoy the closeness before they were forced to deal with reality again. Tony closed his eyes and let himself revel in the slow, drugging kisses, in the way their bodies seemed to melt together even through several layers of clothes. If this had been happening a few weeks ago, they might have gone for a quickie on the nearest desk, pawing at each other like their lives depended on it, but now Tony realized with a small jolt of surprise that this was enough. They could have sex later, when they had reduced HYDRA to dust. Right now, the kissing was as good as it could get.

They pulled apart some time later and Loki leaned his head forward, touching his forehead to Tony’s.

“You are a dangerous man, Anthony Stark,” he murmured, brushing his thumb over Tony’s lower lip. “You make me do so many things I would never even consider undergoing on my own.”

“So you’ll help me with this?” Tony asked again, just to be sure.

Loki huffed out a small laugh, finally pulling back.

“I am probably going to sorely regret this but yes, I will help you save your precious Midgard. Be aware though that I am only doing this for you. If anyone else asked…”

“That’s good enough for me.” Tony gave him a genuine smile, feeling incredibly relieved. Sure, he probably could have pulled this off on his own, but with Loki on his side, their chances of actually being successful had just raised exponentially.

It would have been nice to be able to just stand there and make out some more, but there was an evil terrorist organization to take down and not much time to do it.

“So,” Tony said, clearing his throat and tried to ignore the way Loki’s eyes followed the movement
of his lips. “Let’s get the party started.”

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Two hours later a missile landed on the house and everything went to hell.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

This story is now over 185K words long! 27 chapters finished, about 10 more to go. To be honest, I never expected this story to get this long – I had the storyline planned from the start, but I thought it would only take about twenty chapters to tell. Now my final estimate has almost twice that. I guess this is what I get when I put together two people who love to hear themselves talk as much as these two do :D

I’m greatly enjoying all the feedback you guys keep giving me – especially the speculations of what is going to happen next. It’s always nice when the readers get so invested in a story. So thank you for your continuing support, I really appreciate it :)

Chapter 23 will be posted on next Friday, April 24.
The attack came just as Tony and Loki were arguing over whether to order pizza or Chinese as a midnight snack. They were standing together in the middle of the workshop, bantering with JARVIS when the lights suddenly all died at once, plunging the workshop into pitch black darkness.

“What the-?” Tony said, his head whipping up in alarm. “JARVIS?”

The silence that followed was scarier than all the darkness in the world.

“Stark?” Loki spoke up next to him, a hint of unease in his voice. “What is-”

Before he could finish that sentence, an explosion rocked the house, throwing them both off their feet. Tony landed hard on the concrete, bumping his head on the metal edge of one of the tables. A shower of fireworks set off in his head, filling his vision with thousands of little swimming dots and Tony blinked at the ceiling, waiting for the moment of dizziness to pass.

He finally managed to sit up on the second try and shook his head, trying to get rid of the fog in his mind. There was a trickle of blood running slowly down the side of his face, making the skin on his jaw tickle unpleasantly when it reached his beard. In a slow, dream-like motion, Tony raised a hand to his temple and felt the sluggish wetness under his fingers, the steady pulse of life leaking out of a ragged gash. Unfortunately for him, he didn’t have a way to check the severity of the wound right now, because the workshop was still pitch black, not a flicker of electricity in sight.

“Loki?” Tony asked in a raspy voice, hoping like hell that the guy hadn’t been knocked unconscious.

“Stark?” A sudden blaze of fire lit up several feet away from him as Loki sat up as well, looking pissed but unharmed. His left hand was full of bright orange flames, illuminating a wide circle around him. “What happened?”

A second missile landed on the house, shaking the room around them. Tony’s jaw set.
“Someone is trying to destroy my house. My money’s on HYDRA. Fuck.”

He pulled himself up with the help of the edge of the desk and reached for the nearest available rag, pressing it to his skull in an attempt to stop the bleeding. Loki was on his side at once, keeping the fire burning in his hand as he leaned closer.

“You’re injured,” he said, eyeing the wound on Tony’s head.

“Just a bump. I’ll be fine.” Tony waved away his concern. “Right now I need to find the bastards responsible for this and get rid them before they turn my house into rubble.” The lights overhead flickered back to life a second later, the emergency protocol kicking in. Even if HYDRA had cut the house off from the main power grid, the generators he kept as a backup source of power should be able to give them enough juice to get through this.

The lights had been out for a minute, but in terms of combat, that might as well be eternity.

“JARVIS?” Tony asked again as he dropped the bloodied rag and headed over to the first suit available, which turned out to be the almost finished Mark XVII.

“Sir,” JARVIS answered and his voice was one of the sweetest sounds Tony had ever heard. Tony would have wept with joy to have his AI back if they weren’t so epically fucked. “I apologise for the lapse. Someone cut off the main power supply to the house.”

“Yeah, I gathered as much. What the fuck made the explosions?”

“My sensors are offline, but the satellite readings indicate that there is a military-grade helicopter approximately quarter mile away from here. Also, there appears to be a group of men on the ground approaching the house from north-east. The recommended course of action would be to evacuate immediately.”

“Not a chance,” Tony told him. “Just get me into the suit.” He met Loki’s eyes. “Can you deal with the guys upstairs? I’m gonna try and take down the helicopter.” He spread his arms and breathed out a sigh of relief when the armor started folding itself around him, enveloping him like a protective cocoon.

“Well, if I must,” Loki sighed in mock-affront, but he was already changing into his armor, the magic wave sweeping over his body and covering tunic and pants with layers of steel and gold. It took him less than ten seconds to switch to his full warrior mode, complete with that ridiculous horned helmet he’d worn during the attack on New York. “Try not to get killed,” he told Tony and disappeared in a shower of sparks.

“A few seconds later another missile hit the house above him, the explosion strong enough to rock the house in its foundations. Only half-dressed in his armor, Tony was thrown several feet and he landed on his Lamborghini, which started to wail loudly, its alarm tripped by the impact.

“Shit,” Tony muttered, picking himself up. He kept up a steady stream of curses as the rest of the armor snapped into place, the HUD lighting up. He didn’t bother wasting any time on diagnostics or testing the dozen new functions that he’d built into this version of the suit. He’d planned to do a test flight of the armor in a few days’ time, when he’d have ironed out the rest of the kinks in the programming, but oh well, no time like the present to see how his new prototype worked. The Mark
VII had done pretty well under pressure, as he recalled. This one should be fine, too. Hopefully.

Kicking off from the ground, Tony flew through the entrance tunnel and up into the sky to survey the situation. The first thing he saw was a motherfucking tank parked at the end of his driveway. The second was a platoon of guys in black surrounding the house. Some of them were already inside while others were crouched along the walls, preparing for an attack. Tony spared a second to hope that Loki would be able to deal with them before he turned to the most pressing problem, which was the fucking helicopter that was still hovering a few hundred yards away, prepared to take another shot at the house.

Tony activated his propulsors and sped towards it, not giving the guys inside time to register what was going on. He didn’t bother to fly all the way – just had JARVIS scan the design, find a weak spot and calculate the trajectory for the small shoulder-mounted missile that he then sent at the helicopter. The guys in the helicopter tried shooting at him with a mounted submachine gun, but he avoided the stream of projectiles easily. His missile hit the helicopter a second later and the HYDRA chopper went up in a blaze of flames. The explosion was pretty glorious, but Tony didn’t allow himself to bask in his victory just yet. There were still the rest of the soldier guys to deal with.

Oh, and a tank, apparently. Can’t forget that.

He turned around and shot back towards the house. Through the blown-out holes where the tall glass windows used to be, he saw a blur of gold and green inside, cutting down the black-clad attackers one by one with a deadly combination of weapons and magic. So Loki was still alive and fighting. That was good. Safe in the knowledge that Loki would be able to hold his ground, Tony made a wide lap around the house and went to look for the rest of the attackers.

As it turned out, he didn’t have to search for very long, because the tank was still sitting in his driveway like a particularly sinister breed of frog. Tony swooped down towards it, trying to find a weak spot that would allow him to blow the whole thing up. Before he could pinpoint it, however, the tank shot another rocket at the house. Tony sensed his chance. Without a second’s hesitation, he dropped down the last few feet and sped after the flying missile, overtaking it before it could reach the house. In a move that could have been suicidal if he’d been any slower, he gripped the rocket with both hands and scooped it up mid-flight, the joints in the suit’s arms protesting a little as he pulled, diverting the missile from its trajectory. Activating the thrusters on his back, Tony made an elegant U-turn and sent the rocket flying back where it came from. The tank blew up a few seconds later, making him grin with a vicious sort of glee.

“That’s what you get for attacking my house, you bastards,” he informed the smoking heap of twisted metal. Several bullets whizzed past him, reminding him that right, there were still a few of the guys milling about outside. JARVIS helpfully highlighted them for him on the HUD and Tony came down on them like a metallic bird of prey, repulsors blazing.

They didn’t last long. Armed with only guns and flimsy body armor, they didn’t stand a chance against Tony’s newest suit. Tony disposed of half a dozen guys in black in less than twenty seconds, then rose up into the air to do another sweep around the house. Another stream of bullets came his way and Tony set off in the shooter’s direction, grinning like a shark when he spotted another group of attackers who were trying to sneak inside his workshop through the driveway.

Time lost all meaning. There was only the adrenaline rush and the thrill of battle. All outside noises got replaced by the sound of his own breathing and the deafening roar of blood in his ears as Tony weaved and ducked, picking off the attackers one by one. He did one last sweep of the grounds around the house to make sure everyone was dead and then finally decided to go check on Loki to see if the demigod needed any help.
Tony didn’t have to search for him for long – the sound of shooting and muffled screams led him to the lower floor of the devastated living room, where Loki was facing off against the last few guys who had managed to survive this far. Using the broken terrace window to fly inside, Tony landed in the middle of the cracked floor and shot down the guy that had been aiming his gun at Loki’s back, just as Loki disposed of the last attacker.

The demigod turned to face Tony, wearing a satisfied, predatory grin that Tony would have found highly unsettling if he the one were fighting against Loki right now. As it was, Tony opened the faceplate to return Loki’s grin with one of his own and promptly choked a little when he got a face full of dust from the ruined concrete around him.

“Some party, huh?” he quipped, once he managed to stop coughing. “I wonder if it was HYDRA or SHIELD that ordered this. With my luck, it’s probably both.”

“That would be more than likely,” Loki concurred, taking a few steps closer. “You do seem to attract trouble like a magnet.”

“Well, I attracted you, didn’t I?” Tony pointed out with a grin. That got him an amused snort in return.

“So you did,” Loki told him, making a sweeping gesture at the room around them. “Aren’t you glad for that now?”

The movement drew Tony’s attention to the state of his living room, which was, quite frankly, an utter disaster. The roof had caved in and all of the windows had been smashed, covering the floor with pieces of concrete and broken glass. One of the walls had several huge cracks in it, looking like it was going to collapse any minute and if the draft was any indication, some parts of his house must have been destroyed already. Only a few lights were still on, the few surviving lightbulbs casting patchy circles of light over the open space of the room, illuminating the carnage inside. Because really, carnage was a pretty good word for it.

Now that Tony’s eyes had gotten used to the dim lighting, he could finally see the room around them in all its macabre glory.

The floor was littered with a good two dozen bodies in various states of mutilation. Most of them bore knife and sword marks of some sort, several had been burned or frozen and there were one or two that didn’t have a head. The floor was covered with blood, slowly spreading stains that hadn’t had time to dry yet and there were several long bloody streaks on the crumbling walls. Tony preferred not to think about how those had ended up there.

And in the middle of it all stood Loki, his armor spattered wet with blood and his face sprayed with slowly drying droplets of red. He was holding a bloody sword in his hand and his eyes shone with a wild, exhilarated light, making him look like some mad pagan god of old, or a barbarian warrior from legends and R-rated fantasy movies. No wonder the ancient people used to worship him, Tony thought as he tried to remember how to swallow, anyone would pray if they came face to face with that.

Not for the first time, Tony felt a brief flicker of gratitude that he wasn’t the one who had to fight him. Trying to take down Loki in his full-on Viking mode would be problematic at best and fucking impossible at worst.

But right now, the knowledge that Loki was on his side gave Tony hope that maybe they were going to survive all this after all. His house might get destroyed and his suit wrecked, but with Loki at his side, he was going to make HYDRA pay for it a hundred times over.
“Yeah,” Tony replied honestly. “Yeah, I am.” His eyes flickered over the bodies on the floor, unwittingly lingering on the nearest headless corpse. “But did you really have to cut off their heads?”

Loki shrugged, unconcerned. “It is the fastest way to kill a man. They barely felt anything.” Despite the copious amounts of blood covering his armor, he didn’t seem to be hurt. He lifted the sword to wipe the blade with the edge of his cape and Tony felt a vague niggling at the back of his mind. The weapon looked strangely familiar. In fact, he was almost sure that he had seen it somewhere before.

“Where did you get that?” Tony couldn’t help but ask because the last he’d known, Loki had only owned a single magical dagger and a couple of knives.

“It was on the wall of your library,” Loki explained, “I noticed its presence on my first visit there. It is a well-made sword.”

“Yeah, that’s…” Tony frowned, trying to remember how the hell he had come across something like that in the first place. “I think it’s supposed to be a samurai sword of some sort. 19th century Japan?” A flicker of memory flashed through his mind, giving him a brief image of Pepper lecturing him about his newest piece of art. “Pepper was pretty excited when she bought it at some auction a few years ago, but I thought it was just a decoration.”

“No, this is a very worthy weapon,” Loki said, eyeing the blade with appreciation.

“Well, since you already borrowed it, you might as well keep it, if you want,” Tony offered. Because hell no, there was no fucking way he was going to display something that had been used to cut off someone’s head.

Loki aborted his movement to give the sword back to Tony, his eyebrows climbing up. “You do not wish to have it back?”

“Nah.” Tony waved a hand. “Keep it. I wouldn’t know what to do with that, anyway. Pepper keeps buying all sorts of decorative crap, so I never paid much attention to it. If you can find a use for it, it’s all yours.”

“Very well.” Loki sheathed the sword after a short moment of hesitation, strapping it to his back. “I took the liberty of eliminating the intruders inside the house. I hope you do not find that presumptuous.” His lips quirked up at the end of the sentence, showing that he was only half-serious.

“What? Hell no. You saved me a lot of work.” Tony tried to ignore the slowly spreading pools of blood on the floor as he walked over to the nearest dead guy and turned him on his back with a nudge of his foot. “HYDRA,” he growled, eyeing the evil octopus patch on the guy’s shoulder and trying his best not to feel weirded out by the corpse’s slit throat. “Just as I thought. Fuck.”

Loki appeared at his shoulder, joining Tony in his examination of the corpse. There were little drops of blood all over his face, making him look like that guy from American Psycho.

“What do you propose we do now?” he asked Tony. “The house is in ruins, we cannot stay here.”

“I know,” Tony muttered, his gaze sliding over the half-collapsed walls of what used to be his living room just an hour ago. There might have been a few rooms that hadn’t been completely destroyed and the workshop seemed to be holding up so far, but most of the walls looked like they were standing by sheer force of will. There was no guarantee the house wouldn’t collapse on them. Still, even with that knowledge, Tony found himself highly reluctant to leave.

The thing was - this was his home. The Malibu house had been the first place where he had felt
really, truly home for the first time in his life. He had helped design it, had overseen its construction and had even chosen most of the furniture and decorations for it. Unlike his other places, which were mostly Pepper’s creations, the Malibu house was purely his. He had sunk years of his life into this place, had built it up as a reflection of his personality and the thought that he would now have to leave it because a bunch of terrorists came and destroyed it was filling him with a deep, impotent rage.

Loki must have read some of his thoughts on his face because he stepped closer, laying a comforting hand on Tony’s upper arm.

“Do you have anywhere else to go?”

That made Tony laugh – a short, bitter bark of laughter because of course he had other places - he was a billionaire after all. He was one of the richest men on the planet – there was no place that would dare close its doors on him.

The problem was that none of them were safe right now.

“Well,” Tony drawled, counting on his fingers, “there’s the Tower, where twenty floors are being used as a base for SHIELD personnel, several Stark Industries warehouses, which are used for developing new technology for SHIELD, and Pepper’s flat in D.C., which will be bugged to high hell. I also have a few houses scattered across the States, but SHIELD knows about all of them. Then there’s the summer villa in Mediterranean, a house on the Maldives and a lovely little bungalow in the Caribbean, but if I know SHIELD, they probably have some sort of surveillance mounted on all of those, too. God forbid that a guy would want to have a little privacy on his vacation.”

His lips twisted into a wry grimace. “And before you ask – no I don’t have any friends with convenient secret houses who would be willing to harbor a pair of fugitives for a few days. Rhodey is on a military base somewhere in the middle of Iraqi desert and Steve is running for his life, so...” he trailed off awkwardly, trying not to feel completely pathetic about his utter lack of meaningful human relationships.

“So where would you go, if you needed to hide?” Loki asked. Tony gave an uncomfortable little shrug.

“Honestly? I have no idea. Canada, maybe? I guess I could bunk in the woods somewhere for a few days like Banner used to do and recoup. Or, I could go straight to D.C., put on a disguise and try to find a way to take HYDRA down from the inside, but it would be pretty tough. I have one of the most recognizable faces on the planet. It’s near impossible to buy a coffee in peace, much less stage a secret coup on a military organization.” Loki was watching him with a weird expression. “Why? Do you have any better idea?”

“I might have,” the demigod admitted. “While I was travelling, I found several places that would be both suitable for our purposes and sufficiently remote to help us avoid detection. Would you be willing to follow my lead in this case?”


“Sir,” JARVIS interrupted him, in an eerily calm voice. “The satellite data indicates that there are another two military helicopters and an armored personnel carrier headed towards the house. ETA two minutes.”

“Shit,” Tony hissed. “Looks like we have more visitors on the way. We need to get a move on. We
can’t be caught here - when those guys arrive, they will turn the house into a pile of rubble.” He slapped down his faceplate, straightening up. “I need to get some stuff and lock down the workshop, but I’ll be back as soon as I can. I’ll meet you outside.”

Loki gave him a nod and disappeared at once. Tony kicked off from the ground and flew back outside through a hole in the wall. He flew high enough to be able to see the entire lot around the house and cursed when he spotted the new wave of guys in black that was spilling out from the carrier and onto the smoldering remains of his once immaculate lawn. The helicopters were almost here as well, approaching quickly along the coast from the north. Tony stopped for a second and activated the shoulder-mounted auto-targeted missiles.

The missiles hit their targets a few seconds later, lighting up the night by turning the choppers into two large balls of fire. As he watched them fall down into the cold water of the Pacific, Tony couldn’t help but wonder how many helicopters it was going to take before HYDRA got the message that he wasn’t a guy they wanted to fuck with. A movement on the edge of his HUD display caught his attention and Tony turned back towards the house, where Loki had turned into a vision of ice and fire as he teleported all over the battlefield with super-human speed, cutting through the wave of enemies like they were butter. The katana swirled through the air, powered by magic and Loki’s inhuman strength and the HYDRA goons didn’t stand a chance against him.

Tony stopped in the air for a second, admiring the sight, but the second of distraction was all it took – just as he powered up his repulsors to return to the workshop, he felt a small impact somewhere near his left shin. It didn’t hurt, but the feeling was awfully familiar. He didn’t even have to bother to look down and check, because he was almost certain that there was an adamantium bullet lodged somewhere in his calf muscle. His suspicion got confirmed a second later when several of the suit’s alarms started beeping furiously, informing him of the breach in the armor’s integrity. JARVIS managed to trace the location of the hidden sniper from the bullet’s trajectory and Tony darted after him, wanting to take the fucker down before he could fire again.

He found the guy hiding between a small outcrop of rocks at the edge of a cliff and shot him between the eyes before the sniper could as much as raise his rifle. Still, the damage had been done already – Tony could feel the blood seeping slowly through the fabric of his jeans, the armor pressing the wet fabric against his leg in a way that never ceased to feel disgusting. The bullet extraction was going to be fun, he just knew it. With the sniper down, Tony made a beeline towards the workshop. Securing it was his highest priority, and he had already been delayed enough by the stupid helicopters. He spared a quick thought for Loki, hoping the guy was all right, but most of his attention was focused on getting back inside the house.

There was a group of guys trying to sneak their way down his driveway and he swooped down and shot two of them before they could even turn around. The remaining two opened fire on him and Tony thanked his lucky stars that these particular goons hadn’t been equipped with weapons shooting adamantium bullets. If they had, he would have been toast.

“Heil HYDRA!” one of them yelled, emptying his magazine in a futile attempt to turn Tony into a cheese grater.

“Fuck HYDRA,” Tony replied and shot the guy in the face with a repulsor. “And fuck you, too,” he added as he shot the other one. He was starting to feel like one of those action heroes from the 80s, Rambo or Terminator, or possibly John McClane. The guys in black were everywhere and no matter how many of them he took down, more always seemed to pop up from somewhere. It looked like HYDRA really, really wanted him dead.

There was no way in hell he could take on another wave of these guys, especially if some of them
had those adamantium bullets. Before, he’d had the combined advantage of surprise and a suit at full power, but now he was out of missiles and his luck seemed to be running out as well. If another one of those helicopters showed up, he would be royally fucked. As much as he hated the idea, retreat really was the best option right now.

“JARVIS,” he said the moment his workshop came into view, “active Grade Three Lockdown on the workshop, effective immediately. Nobody gets in or out of this workshop unless they’re me.”

“Understood, Sir.”

The four-inch thick steel plates he had installed into the walls and ceiling a few months back slid out of their hiding places and started to cover all the exit points of the workshop, turning the entire room into one big, impenetrable metal box. The concrete around it might crumble under the force of a well-targeted missile blast, but the steel was designed to withstand the strength of several atomic bombs. Nobody would be able to get inside the shop without his permission now. Pepper had called him paranoid when he had ordered them. Showed what she knew.

Tony managed to slip inside the workshop shortly before the heavy metal gate locked down and landed near the entrance, letting out a small sigh of relief when he found his workshop still blessedly HYDRA-free. Thank fuck for small mercies.

While the defense mechanism was moving into place, Tony grabbed a random backpack and started throwing his stuff inside. He only took the essentials – a box of tools, a non-traceable StarkPhone, a few discs with data and a replacement core for his arc reactor. Once he had everything, he called up a screen to record a message for the Avengers. Before he could start the recording, however, Loki appeared in his workshop, wearing a thunderous scowl.

“Why are you still here?” he demanded. Tony didn’t blame him.

“I needed to grab my stuff and lock down the house,” Tony told him as he went through the emergency protocols with JARVIS, shutting down the systems one by one. “What are you doing here? I thought we said we would meet up outside.”

“You were taking too long. I killed all the attackers outside but there is another wave of reinforcements approaching.” He swayed on his feet a little and leaned on the edge of a nearby table for support. “They are almost here.” His voice sounded a bit pained, which was what made Tony finally look up and take a proper look at him.

“You’re hurt.” There were several bullet holes in Loki’s golden armor – one on the arm, one on the shoulder and four scattered over his chest and stomach. Despite having sustained wounds that would have killed a regular mortal, Loki was still standing, even if he looked freakishly pale.

“So are you,” Loki returned, eyeing the hole in Tony’s leg armor with displeasure.

Tony shrugged. “Yeah, we’ll have to deal with that later. I’m almost ready to go, I just need to leave a message for the Avengers to let them know what’s going on.”

“Very well, but make it quick,” Loki ground out, moving aside to avoid having his face on the recording.

Tony took off his helmet and shut down all screens except for one. The lights in the workshop had dimmed, leaving just enough light to make Tony’s face visible in the darkness. The wound on his head had stopped bleeding a while ago, so he reached for the nearest available rag and tried to wipe off the dried blood to make himself look a little more presentable. He ended up smudging it all over
his cheek and jaw, but at least he no longer looked like an escaped victim of a crazy axe murderer.

“JARVIS? Record a message for the team for me, will you? You can give it to them when one of them gets online again.”

“Recording now, Sir.”

Tony turned to face the screen and tried to conjure up a carefree smile for the camera. It came out looking like a grimace.

“Hi guys. I hope all of you are still alive. Some guys from HYDRA just paid me a visit in Malibu and it’s a total clusterfuck. I’ve taken down as many as I can, but those bastards keep on coming. If any of you guys happen to come across HYDRA, can you kick their asses for me? Because those fuckers owe me a new house.” He rubbed a hand over his beard, trying to find the right words. “Oh, and by the way, in case you don’t know yet, SHIELD has been overtaken by HYDRA. I won’t go into detail, because I don’t have time, but I’m including a file in the attachment that should give you a pretty good idea about what’s been going on.”

Another explosion rocked the house but Tony managed to remain standing this time, grimacing a little when he braced himself and the wound in his leg flared up. His eyes flickered to the ceiling briefly before he turned back to the screen.

“Looks like the party’s not over yet.” His lips pulling into a crooked smile. “Anyway, don’t bother coming here, because they’ll be long gone by the time you get this.”

“Stark!” Loki appeared at his side, but still kept himself out of the frame. He looked pale and furious and was holding the edge of the table for support. He grabbed Tony’s forearm with his right hand, leaving bloody handprints on the armor. “The house is falling apart. We need to leave! Now!” To an outside observer, he would probably look angry and largely unaffected by his injuries, but Tony didn’t miss the way his eyes burned with exhaustion or the way his fingers were shaking a little as they held onto Tony’s wrist.

“All right, we’re leaving,” Tony acquiesced. “Gimme a second.” He licked his dry lips, making lightning-quick evaluation of the situation as he tried to choose the best words to leave for this friends. Before the attack on the house, he had planned to storm the SHIELD Headquarters in D.C. and disable the helicarriers before they had a chance to launch. Now, however, with them both hurt, he wasn’t sure what they were going to do. They needed to find a quiet place where they could tend to their injuries as soon as possible and with the way Loki was swaying on his feet, Tony wasn’t sure if they were going to be up for another fight anytime soon.

As much as he hated the thought, he might not be able to get to SHIELD on time. He only had to hope that Steve would be able to unravel the mystery and stop the madness before it could kill anyone. It was a little frightening to leave this in the hands of other people, but right now he didn’t have the energy or the means to deal with it. Loki needed medical attention and Tony couldn’t just leave him to go chase around people who could kill him with a single push of a button.

His decision made, Tony shot a glance at Loki before he turned back to the screen.

“Guys, I’m going away for a while. I have no idea how long I’ll be gone. Hopefully, it will only be a day or two and when you find this recording, I’ll be at the Tower with you and you’ll be able to laugh at me for being an idiot.” The fingers around his wrist tugged a little, forcing Tony to stop rambling and focus back on the matters at hand. “Or I might be gone for a little longer, who knows. Anyway, don’t look for me, I’ll be back when I can.” He looked straight into the camera. “I’m not dead and I’m not planning to be, if I can help it, so don’t bury me just yet, ok? Good luck with taking
down HYDRA.” He turned off the recording and put on his helmet. “JARVIS? Cut off all power in
the workshop.”

“As you wish, Sir.”

The lights turned off, plunging the workshop into complete darkness. The only source of light now
came from Tony’s chest and visor.

“You’ll have to teleport us out of here,” he told Loki. “I put a lockdown on the workshop. No one
can get in, but we can’t get out either.”

Tony barely finished the sentence and they were gone. One moment he was standing in the darkness
of the basement of his ruined house and the next he was on top of a cliff, a quarter mile away from
his house. The smoke and flames rising from the remains of the house were visible even from here
and the sirens of the fire trucks wailed through the night as they raced down the cliffside road in an
attempt to try and save something that was long beyond redemption. Tony stood on the hill and
silently watched a piece of his life burn down to the ground, feeling like someone had torn out a
piece of his chest and set it on fire in front of him.

Loki’s hand slipped into his, offering silent comfort as he stood next to him, pensive and quiet,
leaning his shoulder against Tony’s. Tony clenched his teeth, trying to push back the burning in his
eyes. It was just the smoke, he told himself, even though he knew the air-ventilation system in this
suit was impeccable. A storm of impotent rage swirled in his chest, making him want to catch every
single guy responsible for this and make them pay.

The pain in his leg was slowly growing in intensity, reminding him that yes, if fact, he did get shot in
the attack and it would be good to seek some medical attention before he bleeds out. If it weren’t for
the armor keeping him upright, he would have most likely crumpled to the ground by now. Loki
didn’t look much better than him, his face white as a sheet and his breathing growing more laborious
with every passing minute.

Tony gave the wreckage of his house one last regretful look before he turned his back on it, focusing
on Loki instead.

“We should get out of here,” Tony said flatly, and despite his best effort, his voice still cracked a
little. “There’s no point in staying any longer.”

“I concur,” Loki breathed out, leaning his weight more heavily against Tony’s side. Tony wrapped
an arm around his back for support, pulling him closer. He didn’t bother to mention that the added
weight wasn’t doing his injured leg any favors. “Some medical attention would be most welcome.”

“If you have a place, lead the way,” Tony told him. “’Cause I can’t trust anyone not to rat me out
right now.”

“Do you trust me?” With some effort Loki straightened up, meeting Tony’s eyes through the visor.

“Yes,” Tony replied without hesitation, and amazingly enough, found that he really meant it. “Yeah,
I do.”

Loki gave him a weak smile. “Good. In that case, close your eyes. This might be a bit unpleasant.”

“Where are we going?” Tony asked.

“You’ll see,” Loki muttered, concentrating on gathering his magic.
“Will I need to take a towel?” Even with his entire life burning down, Tony couldn’t give up the opportunity for a good pop culture reference.

“Why a towel?” Loki’s eyebrows pulled together in a puzzled frown.

“Never mind.” Tony waved a hand. “I’ll explain some other time. Just get us out of here.”

Loki’s hands slipped down to Tony’s forearms, his fingers wrapping around them in an iron grip. A muttered spell and a sharp tug later, they were flying through space. The world around them dissolved and Earth disappeared, along with sound and gravity. Stars swirled overhead in a glorious fiery dance, colors melted into each other and Tony felt like he had that time in college when he’d mixed up LSD and coke.

“Holy shit,” he breathed. “This is amazing.”

“I told you to close your eyes,” Loki gritted out. He sounded strained.

“You’re kidding, right?” Tony said. “This is fantastic. Better than a laser show.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Loki muttered before falling silent.

After what felt like small eternity, but couldn’t have been more than a few minutes, they landed with a lurch on the border of some forest. The impact sent a sharp stab of pain through Tony’s leg and he made a pained grunt, doing his best to stay upright. A second later the vertigo hit, making him feel like his innards had all decided to migrate around.

“Woah, this is certainly less awesome.” Tony put a hand on his stomach, trying to figure out whether he was going to hurl or not. “What the hell was that?”

“Travel between realms,” Loki murmured, closing his eyes as he swayed on his feet.

“You mean like the Rainbow Bridge?” Tony inquired, looking around at the unfamiliar landscape. “What did you do? Where the hell are we?”

“Vanaheim,” Loki whispered as his knees gave out under him. Only Tony’s firm grip on his shoulders prevented him from falling right on his face. He gave a weak, rattling cough and a few drops of blood appeared on his lips as he leaned forward, resting his forehead against Tony’s neck. “We are on Vanaheim.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

So, that happened. We are now officially leaving Marvel canon behind and heading straight into the AU realm of unlimited possibilities. Also – the end of this fic is finally in sight! The final chapter count should be 35 or 36 chapters. (Hopefully. One can never know with these two.) Once I am certain of the number, I will update it into the stats above.

I hope you’re still enjoying the journey and will stay tuned for the future adventures of Tony and Loki. Thank you so much for the incredible number of comments you left me after the last chapter, I was over the moon every time I logged into my e-mail :)}
Chapter 24 will be posted next Friday, as usual :)
“Vanaheim,” Loki whispered as his knees gave out under him. Only Tony’s firm grip on his shoulders prevented him from falling right on his face. He gave a weak, rattling cough and leaned forward, resting his forehead against Tony’s neck. Several small droplets of blood appeared on his lips when he exhaled, glistening almost black in the dark orange light of the rising sun. “We are on Vanaheim.”

Tony wrapped his arms tighter around Loki’s waist, trying to keep him upright, but the guy was heavy as fuck.

“Loki?” No response. “Loki?” he asked again, more urgently. He only barely stopped himself from shaking Loki in his desperation to get an answer.

“What?” Loki muttered a few seconds later. He looked like he was on the verge of passing out.

“Why the hell are we on Vanaheim?” Tony posed the obvious question.

Loki licked his lips, his eyelids fluttering as he tried to stay awake.

“There is a healer here, an old friend. He can help us.”

His legs gave out for real this time and he started to slide down in Tony’s hold. Tony’s leg flared up again, protesting against the weight put on it and Tony had no choice but to sink down on one knee and slowly lower Loki to the ground. Kneeling hurt and he had to bite his lips to stifle the groan of pain that the sudden movement elicited, but he didn’t let go of Loki, propping him up into a half-sitting position against his right knee. He kept a hold on Loki’s shoulders to prevent him from pitching forward.

“Where do I find this healer buddy of yours?” he pressed, trying to get the information out of Loki before the demigod passed out. “I can’t get you there if I don’t know where I’m supposed to be going.” He tried to tamp down the tendril of panic that was slithering up his spine. No, he couldn’t afford to freak out now, even though Loki looked like death warmed over and was probably going to bleed out if Tony didn’t find help soon. Tony took a deep breath and tried to remind himself that
Loki was from a race of badass near-immortal warriors. He could survive this. Right?

“He is-” Loki coughed again, a trickle of blood escaping the corner of his mouth. “There is a settlement twenty miles northwest from here.” His words were coming out slowly and his eyes were unfocused, staring through Tony as he tried to desperately hold onto the last bits of wakefulness. With some effort, he zeroed his gaze on Tony’s face. “Look for…red roof…” the last words trailed into a shuddering whisper as he closed his eyes again, exhausted by the effort. It made Tony wonder just how much blood Loki had lost in the fight.

Seeing Loki this weak was scary as hell, so Tony deliberately tried to focus on something else - anything that would keep him from panicking over how pale Loki was. Practical stuff had always served him well in situations like this so he tried to concentrate on the next step. Finding the healer shouldn’t be too hard - after all, twenty miles were nothing in a suit like this. The harder part would be getting them both there before Tony passed out, too. His own head was starting to get a little foggy and the fabric of the pant leg of his jeans was soaked against his skin, its disgusting clamminess reminding him that Loki wasn’t the only one who was bleeding. They were on the clock here and he really couldn’t afford to lose any more time by dicking around.

“All right,” he announced. “Let’s get going. I’m leaving the stupid horny helmet here, by the way. If you want it, you can pick it up later, because there’s no fucking way I’m taking it with us. Now, let’s see how well this suit can fly without stabilizers.”

He tried lifting Loki, but even with the help from his suit, the guy was still heavy as fuck. Part of that weight must have been the armor, too. Fucking Asgardian steel. Tony didn’t dare take off the chest piece when Loki was hurt this badly, but the helmet seemed like a safe enough bet. Slowly, carefully, he eased the helmet off Loki’s head and laid it on the ground next to them, barely sparing it a second glance.

Loki’s hair was plastered to his head and sweat was beading on his forehead. He seemed to have slipped into a sort of half-consciousness where he was still partially aware of his surroundings but didn’t have the energy to respond to them anymore. Tony swallowed down his fear and worry and straightened up a bit, slipping one arm under Loki’s knees and another around his shoulder. With a considerable boost from the suit, he managed to stand up with Loki in his arms and bit down a cry of pain when the added weight made his left leg felt like there were a thousand knives stabbing into his calf muscle.

Instead of his usual lightning-fast speed, he was forced to slow down into a leisurely hover, focusing most of his attention on keeping them both upright. This whole thing would be much easier if Loki were conscious and could hold onto his neck, but with the guy out of it, this was the only way Tony could carry him and fly at the same time. Loki seemed to be half-awake for the first few minutes of the flight, but eventually slipped into unconsciousness with a soft sigh. Tony only spared him the occasional glance here and there, too busy with piloting the suit. While he tried to keep his calm, inside he was quietly freaking out over the chalk-white color of Loki’s face and the way his head lolled on Tony’s shoulder, his arms hanging slack along his body.
Oh, to hell with it, Tony thought and accelerated a little, taking the calculated risk to make them move a little faster. What was the point of being careful if it caused him to arrive too late? He clutched Loki a little tighter to his chest and flew, following the compass on the HUD display. The forest seemed to stretch on endlessly below them, the tops of the trees shrouded in mist. It was also eerily quiet, the fog dampening all sound, and for a moment it made Tony feel like he was the only living person in the entire world. Loki seemed to be getting heavier with every passing second (or maybe Tony was just getting tired, which was more likely) as he desperately searched for any signs of civilization.

Finally, after what felt like eternity, but couldn’t have been more than ten minutes, he glimpsed the first houses on the edge of the forest. A few seconds later the trees ended, giving way to large green fields full of grass and some sort of wheat. There was a river running through the fields below and a sizeable settlement spread out around its banks. With civilization in sight, Tony flew a little lower, and started searching for a house with red roof, fervently hoping that this was the right place. Far in the distance, he could see something like a fortress standing on top of a hill, but he didn’t pay much attention to it, his gaze skimming the ground below for the right house.

As he soon discovered, the settlement was larger than he had thought – at least two hundred houses that stood bathed in the light of the rising sun. While it had been the middle of the night when they had left California, here it was early morning and the town seemed to be just waking up. A few people milled around here and there, going about their daily routine, but the rest seemed to be still asleep. That was good. The fewer people saw them, the better.

After a few minutes of fruitless search, he finally managed to spot the only house with red roof and made a beeline towards it, hoping like hell that he would be able to land without his legs giving out on him. He didn’t think he would be able to stand up for the second time.

The house grew bigger on his HUD display and Tony had to admit that it was actually a pretty nice house. It stood on the edge of the town, a little apart from the others and while the rest of the houses had been mostly smaller, rectangular and built of a mixture of bricks and wood, this one was two stories high, U-shaped and made of solid grey stone. There was a large garden behind it and several fields surrounding it on the sides, but Tony didn’t examine them too closely, too preoccupied with his landing maneuvers.

Despite his best effort, he landed a little harder than he’d expected and his legs nearly buckled under him. He managed to keep his balance through sheer force of will and straightened up to cross the last dozen steps towards the front door. Before he could reach the threshold, however, the door flew open to reveal a tall, thin man with a carefully trimmed grey hair and beard. He froze in the doorway when he saw the pair, staring in disbelief at the bloodied form in Tony’s arms.

Tony’s legs chose that moment to finally give out under him and he sank to his knees in exhaustion, hissing a little when the movement jarred his wound.

“Hi,” Tony said, flipping his faceplate open with a flick of his eyes, “can you help us?”

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The man stared at them for a second longer before he shook himself out of his shock.

“Is that…?”

“Loki? Yep,” Tony confirmed. He would feel sorry for accosting the old man like that if they both weren’t in the danger of passing out soon. “And no, he’s not dead, but he will be soon, if you don’t help him. So, will you? Help him?”
No longer able to hold Loki up, he gently laid him down on the ground and slumped over him with a heavy sigh, feeling exhausted. A pair of thin legs in soft leather sandals and the hem of a knee-length beige tunic appeared in Tony’s vision as he lifted his head to watch the man come closer. The stranger approached them slowly, wearing a wary expression.

“Who are you?” he asked, stopping a few feet away. Tony let out an annoyed huff.

“Look, pal, it doesn’t matter who I am. Loki needs medical attention or he’s going to bleed out. There’ll be plenty of time for chit chat later.”

The man gazed at him for a moment longer, his piercing blue eyes flitting between Tony’s tired face and Loki’s bloodied armor before he finally nodded and crouched down to lay a hand on Loki’s forehead.

“He has been gravely injured,” he intoned.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Tony muttered, too tired to be polite anymore.

“We need to get him inside,” the healer decided, sliding his arms under Loki to pick him up. Before Tony could say anything, the man stood up with the demigod in his arms, carrying him like it was nothing. For such a slender guy, he was surprisingly strong. *Immortals*, Tony reminded himself. Fucking demigods and their superhuman strength. It seemed that out of all the races in the Nine Realms, humans had really gotten the short end of the stick in this aspect.

Tony managed to heave himself upright with some effort, though he didn’t quite manage to stop the pained groan from leaving his lips when he put his weight on the injured leg. The healer halted in his tracks halfway to the house and shot Tony a concerned look.

“You are injured as well.”

“Yeah, but it can wait.” Tony waved away his concerns. “Loki’s got it much worse.” He started to hobble after the healer, trying his best to keep up with the man’s steady pace. “Besides, I need to get out of the armor, anyway, and it will take a while. Just tend to him first, I’ll manage.”

Tony followed the man inside the house, closing the wooden door after them. The entrance hall that greeted him was large and full of light, decorated with colorful wall frescoes and a beautiful floor mosaic. Tony didn’t have much time to admire the architecture, however, because he was currently preoccupied with trying not to black out. Two corridors branched out of the hall on both sides and Tony followed the healer down the left one, passing through a narrow hallway and into one of the rooms, which turned out to be an infirmary of sorts. The room had two low beds - one standing by the wall on each side, a wooden examination table and several cupboards with rows of salves, potions, and boxes of all sorts.

The healer gently deposited Loki on the nearest bed and started divesting him of his armor. Tony sank down on the other bed with a sigh, glad to be finally able to rest for a while. He slid the backpack from his shoulder and pulled out the box of tools, looking for a screwdriver. Once he had it, he got down to work on taking off the armor piece by piece. He had designed the suit to be capable of disassembling itself, but unfortunately he hadn’t been able to install that particular function before his house got attacked. This way he had to do it old-school and it was going to be a pain in the ass to take it all off.

While he was working on freeing his arms and chest from the armor, the healer had managed to undress Loki all the way to his pants and was now cleaning away the blood from his chest and arms with a wet cloth. His sleeves were rolled up, exposing wiry forearms and the front of the tunic was
getting splattered with water, but he didn’t seem to notice. He was working quickly and professionally, yet there was certain gentleness in his manner that suggested a degree of affection. Tony honestly didn’t care what sort of relation those two had - right now he was just glad that there was at least one other person in the universe who seemed to care for Loki. It was nice to see that there were still some people who didn’t hate his guts.

“What happened to him?” the healer asked quietly as he cleaned the wounds. “His armor should have protected him from injuries like this.”

“He got shot with the hardest metal on Earth,” Tony explained. “Looks like Asgardian armor isn’t as good as they claim it is.”

“So it would seem,” the man muttered. He lit up his hand with a pale blue light and reached out to hold it above the first bullet wound. A second later, the bullet rose up from the flesh and flew into his palm. He put it aside and laid his fingers over the bleeding wound, muttering a spell to make the wound close. When he pulled his hand away a moment later, the skin beneath was perfectly smooth, not a trace of injury in sight. Tony would admire the effectiveness of the technique if he wasn’t focusing most of his energy on keeping his own hands from shaking as he pulled the armor parts off his body, laying them on a pile on the bed next to him.

“You are from Midgard, then?” the healer asked as he moved onto the next bullet wound.

“Yeah,” Tony confirmed, seeing no point in lying. “Tony Stark, hi.” He briefly raised a hand in greeting and went back to unscrewing the bolts. “Now that I think of it, I don’t believe I caught your name before.”

“My name is Vedius,” the healer informed him.

“And you’re…” Tony raised an eyebrow.

“An old family friend of Frigga’s. Loki’s mother,” he clarified for Tony’s benefit. “She and Loki used to come here for visits when he was younger.”

“Oh,” Tony said, having no idea what to say to that. Loki had never spoken about his mom to him before, so this kind of information was completely new.

They both worked in silence for a while, focusing on their work. The last screw under his knee finally came loose and Tony pulled away the plate on his injured leg, letting out a stream of curses when the trickle of blood from the wound intensified.

“Uh, could you toss me a piece of gauze or something?” he asked the guy.

Vedius looked up from his work, his frown deepening when he saw the soaked fabric of Tony’s pants.

“I will heal you in a moment. I am almost finished with this.”

“I’ll be fine, I just need to wrap it up,” Tony insisted. “The magic wouldn’t work on me anyway, so you needn’t bother. Just give me a potion or something and I’ll be okay. You can go back to tending to Loki.”

After one last check of Loki’s condition, Vedius stood up from his side and gathered his medical kit, only to drag over a small stool and sit down at Tony’s feet.

“Look, you really don’t have to do this,” Tony protested half-heartedly. “Just make sure Loki will be
“Alright.”

“You’re a stubborn young man, aren’t you?” Vedius told him with a hint of amusement. “Now, hold still so I can tend to your wound.”

He pulled Tony’s foot into his lap and tore the sodden pant leg in two with a sharp tug, exposing the wound. He examined the bullet-hole with his fingers, frowning when he discovered the full extent of the injury.

“The metal is embedded quite deep in your flesh. I assume that it is the same type of projectile?”

“Yeah, more or less,” Tony said. He had no idea who had shot Loki, but he sure as hell hoped that they were dead. “Still, I got off pretty easy, all things considered.”

“What happened to you two?” Vedius briefly looked up from the wound he was tending to meet Tony’s eyes.

“It’s a long story,” Tony began, but when he saw the steely edge in the man’s eyes, he decided that a little more detail wouldn’t hurt. “But basically, a bunch of my enemies attacked my house and burned it down. We took down most of them but not all, got injured in the process, and ended up running away before they could finish us off. Then Loki transported us here and told me to find you.”

Vedius’s eyebrows climbed up to his hairline.

“He transported you here from Midgard? In this condition? The travel between worlds is taxing even under normal circumstances, but to undertake it in a state like this? He could have died!” He shot a concerned look towards the prone form on the other bed.

Tony grimaced.

“Yeah, I had no idea what he was going to do. He offered to take us somewhere safe, so I went for it.”

“You trust him that much?” There was something shrewd in the man’s eyes now, assessing Tony with renewed interest.

Tony shrugged.

“Yeah, I guess I do. It’s a pretty recent development and it scares the shit out of me half the time but yeah, I trust him.”

The man looked at him for a second longer, making Tony feel like he was under an X-Ray, before he finally looked away with a satisfied nod and went back to work. He lit his hand up with the blue magic and laid it over the wound, only to pull it away a few seconds later. A puzzled frown appeared on his face.

“It is not working. I do not understand.”

“I told you your magic wouldn’t work on me,” Tony told him with a wry smile. “I guess you’ll have to get a pair of tweezers and dig it out old school.” He made a small pause. “Barbaric, isn’t it?”

“Magic is much faster,” the man said as he stood up to look for the right tool. “Less painful, too.”

“Yeah, well, sorry about that.” Tony’s eyes flickered over to Loki, who was still unconscious. “Are
"You sure it’s safe to leave him alone like that?"

"Your worry about him is commendable, but unnecessary. Loki is strong, much stronger than most people believe and I have already mended his wounds. He will be fine."

"Good," Tony said, his eyes not leaving Loki. "That’s…good, yeah." It was a huge relief to have it finally confirmed out loud. When the man turned back to him with a pair of medical tweezers, Tony remembered that he had been trying to take off his armor and went back to work on his other leg. He was almost done with it, which was good because he wasn’t sure how much longer he would be able to stay awake.

"This is going to hurt," Vedius warned as he sat back down on the stool.

"It’s okay." Tony shrugged, a quick, sharp movement of his shoulders. "Just do your thing. The last time I got shot I had to do this myself and I bet you’re much better at this than I am." He gritted his teeth and tensed a little when Vedius pushed the ends of the tweezers into the wound, but didn’t make a sound otherwise. Instead he tried to concentrate on taking his arm plates off.

"Get shot a lot, do you?" Vedius said conversationally as he tried to get a grip on the bullet.

"Sometimes, yeah," Tony admitted. "But when it happens, the armor usually stops all of it. Today’s fight was…extenuating circumstances, in more ways than one."

"So you are a warrior then?" the man’s gaze slid over Tony in a brief assessment. Tony could almost hear the unspoken "you don’t look like one" underneath.

"It’s only a part time gig," he muttered, struggling with the last stubborn screw on his right leg. "Most of the time I’m a…" he paused, trying to find the right way to explain his job to a guy who had probably never seen a car, or a plane. His mind felt sluggish, exhaustion weighing on him like a fog so it took him several seconds to find the right word. "I suppose ‘inventor’ is the best word for what I do. I come up with ideas for new stuff and then make that stuff to see if it works."

"The armor is your creation as well?" Vedius asked, nodding towards the pile of metal on the bed as he finished sewing up the wound.

"Yeah." Tony nodded. "One of several versions. I have a few more at home." Which only served to remind him that he no longer had a house. "Or at least I had, before those bastards turned it to dust." With the last armor piece off, he leaned back against the wall behind him, fighting exhaustion and a new wave of misery. He opened his eyes a few seconds later to find the old man looking at him.

"Sorry, I’m not the best company right now."

"You should sleep," Vedius told him. He was wrapping up the leg with quick, precise movements. "I will give you a healing potion for your leg and then tend to the wound on your head."

Tony closed his eyes again, trying to stay awake. He could hear the old guy moving about the room, rummaging through his cabinets.

"If you’re going to poison me, at least give me something that tastes good," he murmured when Vedius came back with a vial of something dark red.

"I am not going to poison you," the old man said with a frown. With some effort Tony opened his eyes and focused them on the healer.

"Yeah, that’s what they all say." But he took the vial anyway because what the hell, why not. It wasn’t as if this whole fucked up day couldn’t get any worse. He drank the whole thing in a few
gulps and grimaced at the bitter taste. He was almost ready to lean back against the wall and fall asleep when he remembered something else. Something important.

“Hey,” he mumbled when the healer started heading towards the table to get a new batch of gauze. “You’re not going to tell anyone that Loki’s alive, are you?”

Vedius stopped and turned, giving Tony a patient look.

“Of course not. If he is pretending to be dead, he probably has a good reason for it. I may not condone his particular choice of actions, but I am not going to tell anyone that he is here.”

“Good,” Tony breathed, his eyes slipping close again. “Because if you did, I would have to shoot you.”

He tried to stay awake for a little longer, but the fatigue flooded him like a wave and pulled him under, filling his vision with blackness until the sound cut off and he knew no more.

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The sunlight on his face was what woke him up several hours later. Tony blinked a few times, shielding his eyes with an arm when the golden light assaulting his eyes refused to stop.

“JARVIS?” he asked sleepily. “What time is it?”

Nothing. Silence was his only answer. He lowered the arm from his eyes and sat up, taking a look at the room around him. He was still in that examination room where he had passed out before, with its unfamiliar instruments and rows of potions and oh, god, he was still on Vanheim. Tony had half hoped that it had all been a bad dream - that he would wake up back home, in his bedroom, with JARVIS’s voice in his ear and Loki’s arm thrown casually over his waist. Instead he was here and Loki was nowhere to be seen.

Letting out a stream of curses, Tony sat up straighter and started frantically looking around. His suit was still there, gathered in a pile at the foot of his bed, but Loki was gone. The bed where the demigod had lain before was empty and the bloodied sheets had been changed. Tony had a brief, horrible thought that the old guy had killed Loki and hid his body before he told himself to stop being an idiot. The man wouldn’t bother patching Loki up, only to kill him later. And since Loki wasn’t here, the guy had probably moved him somewhere else.

Slowly, cautiously, Tony slid from underneath the soft woolen blanket he’d been covered with and laid both feet on the floor. His leg felt much better than it had, but he couldn’t see what the wound looked like because his left calf was wrapped in a thick layer of bandages. Standing up sent a shot of pain through his leg and walking felt like he was repeatedly getting stabbed by a horde of angry ninjas, but he didn’t sit back down. He was already standing, so what the hell. He might as well go and try to find out where Loki had disappeared.

The door to the room was unlocked when he hobbled over to it, which was good, because he didn’t think he would have reacted well to getting locked in. Since there seemed to be nothing stopping him from leaving the room, he pressed down the handle and peered out. The corridor outside was quiet but he could hear the faint sounds of someone moving around further inside the house. The way to the right led only to the entrance door so Tony turned left, limping slowly along the corridor, his shoes clicking on the large grey flagstones. He had no idea where any of the tall wooden doors led but oh well, it was worth a try, wasn’t it?

The first door opened into some sort of a pantry, so Tony closed it again and walked on. The second
door revealed a bathroom, which yeah, he could probably use soon, too, but he really wanted to find Loki first. Luckily for him, the next door he tried opened into a nice, spacious room full of sunlight and the smell of healing herbs. Bingo, Tony thought as he stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

Loki was lying on a bed in the middle of the room, enveloped in a strange, golden dome of light. He seemed to be still unconscious but at least he was dressed again, wearing a simple white tunic and pair of soft brown pants instead of his usual black-green leather getup. His hair was fanned around his head, providing a dramatic contrast to his face, which was still chalk-white but at least it no longer had that horrible grey tinge it had had when Tony had brought him here. Tony had no idea what the glowy thing was for, but his guess was that it was probably some sort of a magic field.

His leg was threatening to buckle beneath him again, so Tony grabbed a tall wooden stool from the corner, hobbled across the room to Loki’s bed and sat down, sighing in relief when the pain in his calf abated a little. The leg was still throbbing and felt uncomfortably hot to the touch, but at least it was no longer bleeding, which was good. Loki slept on, oblivious to the world. Tony hesitated, looking around to make sure they were alone, but the room was completely empty apart from the two of them and the old man seemed to be minding his own business somewhere else. Good.

Taking a deep, steeling breath, Tony raised his hand slowly and touched the golden field with his fingertips. It didn’t give him any resistance and didn’t seem to react to his presence in any way, so he pushed his hand further in, stretching up a little to lay a palm on Loki’s forehead. It was probably the height of idiocy to stick his hand in magic, but right now he really, really wanted to make sure that Loki was alive. The forehead felt cool under his touch, a lot colder than Tony was used to. Tony didn’t know if it was because Loki was hurt or if the magic on him had lowered his temperature somehow, but it was creeping him out a bit. If Loki were human and Tony didn’t have that slow, shallow movement of his chest to reassure him, he would be pretty sure that the guy was dead. As it was, he just had to hope that this was normal for Frost Giants or whatever alien species Loki belonged to.

Since they were still alone in the room and there wasn’t anyone around to judge him for it, Tony briefly ran his fingertips down the side of Loki’s face, wishing like hell that Loki would wake up soon. It was scaring him to see the demigod like this, so still and cold under his touch, especially since Loki was normally so full of life. Whether he was hanging around Tony’s workshop to offer snide remarks on Tony’s ideas, parading around a ballroom, or pushing Tony onto a bed, he always seemed to fill any room he was in with his presence. Now he looked awfully thin and sickly, almost gaunt, and it made Tony contemplate just what the hell Loki had been doing in those few weeks after their breakup. Tony had never really thought to ask before, too happy to have him back, but now he couldn’t help but wonder. Where had Loki gone? And what sort of shenanigans had he been up to? Tony fervently hoped that he would have the chance to hear it from Loki himself.

Oh, to hell with it, Tony thought and reached for Loki’s hand, wrapping his own around it. He might have felt embarrassed by a gesture like this before, when he had to hold onto his macho persona, but the guy had almost died on him and dammit, he needed this. Loki might laugh at him when he woke up, but right now Tony didn’t give a shit. His entire world had fallen apart, a bunch of assholes had burned down his house, and if it weren’t for Loki, he would have been long dead. If anyone had a right for some emotional comfort, surely it was Tony?

The golden field around their hands was creeping him out but he didn’t let go, enjoying the solid feel of skin and flesh under his hand. Loki’s hand was limp in his grip, his pulse sluggish and his fingers almost deathly pale, but at least he was real and still alive. Tony had to hold onto that thought or he was going to go crazy. He couldn’t imagine what would happen in Loki died on him and Tony ended up stranded here, in a foreign world, millions of miles away from everything he’d ever known.
Better not think about it.

He had no idea how long had passed with him sitting there, but the next time he looked up, Vedius was standing in the doorway, shaking his head at the two of them.

“You shouldn’t be walking around yet,” he admonished Tony.

Tony shrugged, not letting go of Loki’s hand. He wasn’t fifteen anymore to feel embarrassed about things like that.

“Yeah, well, I’ve never been good at staying still. And you moved Loki somewhere else, so I wanted to see how he was.”

“Of course you did,” Vedius muttered. Some of the previous wariness seemed to disappear from his gaze at those words and he walked inside the room, carrying a large tray with two ceramic bowls, a loaf of bread, a pitcher and two metal goblets. He set them on the wooden table by the wall and sat down, gesturing to the empty chair on the opposite side of the table. “You woke up just in time for dinner. I was going to save it for you but now I see that it will not be necessary. Why don’t you join me, Tony Stark? I am very curious to learn more about Loki’s new friend.”

“Er.” Tony’s first, instinctive reaction was to refuse, but then realized that he was, in fact, pretty damn hungry. God, how long had it been since he had last eaten? It seemed to be mid-to-late afternoon here. He had no idea how long the days here were, or how many hours he’d been asleep, but his guess was that he’d last eaten at least fifteen hours ago. He shot one last glance at Loki before he let go of his hand and stood up, trying to shuffle over to the table without looking completely pathetic.

“How is your leg?” the healer asked, breaking the bread into smaller chunks. He laid one half down by Tony’s bowl and reached for a spoon.

“I’ve had worse,” Tony told him, concentrating hard on crossing the last two feet to the table. His leg felt like it was on fire, but he pushed through it and let out a small, involuntary sigh of relief as he sat down.

“I made some stew.” Vedius nodded towards the bowl of soup. “Eat as much as you like. There is more in the kitchen.”

Tony reached for the metal spoon, trying to take a whiff of the soup without looking like he was checking it for poison. It smelled vaguely like beef and had pieces of vegetables floating inside it. Since his choice was between alien soup and starving to death, he ladled the first spoonful and brought it to his lips, making a pleased sound when he discovered that it really did taste a lot like a beef broth.

They ate in silence for a while, and while Tony concentrated mostly on the soup, he could feel the other guy’s eyes on him, the curiosity in them almost palpable.

“All right,” he sighed a minute later, “spill. You’re obviously dying to ask me about stuff. I don’t guarantee that I will answer everything, but the staring is getting a bit creepy, to be honest.”

Vedius chuckled under his breath.

“You’re an impatient one, aren’t you? I have planned to let you at least finish your meal in peace, but very well. It has been some time since I last visited Midgard, but it seems that many things have changed in that realm since then. Fashion, if nothing else.” He eyed Tony’s carefully-shaved goatee, his dirty black shirt and jeans. “The Loki I knew as a boy had never shown much interest in
Midgard, had even denounced it for being inferior to the other realms, and yet here he is, in the company of a Midgardian warrior, of all people. What brought you two together, then? How did you meet?"

“Well,” Tony began, “the whole thing is a really long story, but basically, we met when he was trying to conquer the world with an alien army.” He decided to go with the truth because why the hell not. This guy had obviously known Loki for ages, so he must have had a pretty good idea of the shit Loki could pull when he put his mind to it. “The first time we met, I shot him in the face with an energy blast and then arrested him for being a murderous dick.”

Vedius’s eyebrows climbed to his hairline, making the fine lines on his forehead even more pronounced.

“Oh my,” he muttered. “I had heard that he got thrown into prison on Asgard, but I did not have any details about how he had accomplished that. I assumed it was merely one of Odin’s fits of idiocy.”

“Yeah, no,” Tony said. “He really tried to do the whole evil conqueror gig on Earth, but we managed to stop him in the end.”

“We?”

“Me, Thor, and a few others.”

“You work with Thor?” Vedius asked, bemused. “And yet you are here with Loki.”

“What can I say?” Tony grinned. “I’m a popular guy.” He ladled a few more spoonfuls of soup and ate, trying to ignore the gaze on him. The old man was just teeming with curiosity, but Tony was famished and really wanted to enjoy the soup. Vedius seemed to understand because he fell silent, letting Tony finish his meal. Only once both bowls were empty and Tony no longer felt a burning urge to wolf down the nearest food-like object did Vedius speak up again.

“You still have not told me how you managed to turn up here as Loki’s companion. You were obviously his enemy before, and yet here you are, saving his life.” He tilted his head a little and fixed Tony with an inquisitive look. “I cannot help but wonder, what happened that made him entrust his life into the hands of his enemy.”

Despite his best effort, Tony’s cheeks still reddened a little.

“Er, we’re not exactly enemies right now.” He didn’t meet the old guy’s gaze, because it weirdly felt like he was admitting that he had despoiled the guy to the guy’s own grandfather. Or something like that. Anyway, it was ridiculous, because this guy was older than dirt and there probably wasn’t anything he hadn’t seen before, but still. Awkward.

“Yes, I inferred that particular detail from your earlier display by his bedside,” Vedius said patiently, no trace of judgement in his eyes. “However, that was not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant,” Tony told him, “but honestly? I have no idea, either. He came to me a few days after the whole Dark Elf clusterfuck and we talked for a bit.” The magic of the contract pressed on his mind, making a subtle effort to censor certain words so he had to choose his next words more carefully. “We made a deal of sorts. A truce. He wants something from me and I’m going to make it for him. Hopefully. Don’t ask me what it is because I can’t tell you.”

“I assume he has been staying at your house since then?”

“Yeah, basically,” Tony confirmed. “I guess nobody else knows that he’s alive?”
“As far as I am aware, no.” Vedius raised his goblet to his lips and took a sip. “Asgard still seems to believe that he is truly gone.”

Tony narrowed his eyes a little, studying the man. For a guy whose (nephew? grandson?) old friend had just come back from the dead, he seemed weirdly unperturbed.

“You don’t seem too surprised by his miraculous resurrection, though,” Tony said out loud.

Vedius’s shook his head.

“It would not be the first time Loki tried something like that. He has always been very proud of his tricks. Too proud, even. It does not surprise me in the slightest that he has managed to fool Thor with something like this. Thor has always been susceptible to trickery. It seems that time has done little to improve that particular failing of his.” There was a faint note of derision in his voice that told Tony that Vedius didn’t have a particularly high opinion of the guy. That was pretty interesting because if one went by Loki’s tales about his childhood, everyone seemed to worship the very ground Thor walked on.

“I take it you’re not a fan of his,” Tony said.

The old man’s eyebrows pulled into a small, confused frown.

“I do not know what that word means but if you mean that I have never been very fond of him, they you are mostly correct. Thor is an earnest boy and means well, but he is also foolish and headstrong and rarely listens to reason or the advice of his elders. While I still hold some measure of fondness for him, it does not compare to the adoration he receives from others. I doubt that it bothers him overmuch, however, since he has never held me in particularly high esteem.” He finished his drink and poured himself another. “I have not seen him for several centuries. What kind of a man is he these days? Still as rash as he was in his youth?”

Tony rubbed a hand over his beard, trying to find a way to describe a guy with whom he’d spend the grand entirety of five days. He tried to remember the tales Loki had told him about their adventures and overlap the Thor from them with the guy that he knew.

“He’s…honestly, I haven’t known him for very long, but I think he’s a bit better now. He’s still kinda impulsive and not exactly the brightest tool in the box, but he seems a little more willing to listen to others. We’ve got a team of great people, some of which can beat the crap out of him, so he’s learned that he’s not always the strongest or the most important guy in the room. Cause that would be me,” he followed the quip with his best grin. “No, but seriously, I think he’s calmed down a lot. Mostly thanks to Jane’s influence. That’s his girlfriend,” he added as an explanation.

“From Midgard?” One of Vedius’s eyebrows shot up. “He is courting a Midgardian woman? And Odin allows it?”

Tony reached for his own cup, trailing his fingertips around the rim.

“Hm, from what I’ve heard, he doesn’t have much of a choice. When Odin tried to forbid him from seeing her, he told the old man to stuff it and went back to Earth, where he follows her around like a puppy and sings her praises to anyone within hearing range.”

A second eyebrow rose to join the first.

“Thor rebelled against Odin? Thor?”

“Yeah, apparently.” Tony took the pitcher and poured himself some of the drink, which had a pale
golden color and smelled faintly of apples. “But from what I’ve heard, I can’t say I blame him. With the way Odin’s been treating his sons, I’m surprised they didn’t snap earlier. His parenting certainly leaves a lot to be desired.” He brought the cup to his lips and took a few sips of what turned out to be sweet cider. It tasted pretty good, but Tony still felt a brief pang of regret that it wasn’t booze. He hesitated for a second before he decided to finish his thought after all. “To be honest, I think their daddy dearest is kind of a dick.”

He waited with bated breath, hoping that he hadn’t misread the situation and hadn’t accidentally insulted this guy’s best friend or something. Vedius remained still for a second, his face carefully blank, then threw his head back and let out a long, hearty chuckle.

“Oh, dear boy,” he said, mirth dancing in his eyes, “I think the two of us are going to understand each other very well indeed.”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

The guy they’re staying with is an OC that I made up. He’s not completely random, but loosely based on an existing mythological figure (if anyone’s interested, you can dig it up on Google in less than a minute). At first I had planned to keep up with the pseudo-Nordic theme of Thor, but then I discovered this guy and thought, oh what the hell, might as well widen the scope a bit.

For this story, I’m working with the theory that all ancient gods from polytheistic religions (Greek, Roman, Celtic…) were magic wielders from other worlds of the Nine Realms - some of them from Asgard, others from Alfheim and Vanaheim… Same with Greek Titans, who were probably Fire Demons escaped from Muspelheim. Some of the “gods” are long dead (the guys from ancient Egypt and Babylon, probably) while others still live, just left Earth ages ago. They probably used to visit Earth more often but Odin eventually forbid it and closed down the Bifrost, forcing them to stay on their respective worlds.

And since there are so many of these magical worlds, I don’t need to limit myself to just one set of mythology and can dabble into others.

With this chapter, we have now officially left the modern world behind and fell straight into a fantasy setting. Poor Tony, he won’t be happy with all the magic-related stuff that awaits him :D

Chapter 25 will be posted on next Friday, May 8.
Chapter Summary

Tony couldn’t remember the last time he had to ask someone to let him use their bathroom.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the delay. This chapter is really long and I had to do all the editing on my own, so it took longer than I expected. I tried to do my best with it, but if you happen to see any mistakes, feel free to point them out and I’ll correct them as soon as I can.

The two men sat in silence, both of them lost in thought.

Since Vedius didn’t seem too interested in continuing the conversation for the time being, Tony used the opportunity to finally take a good look at the room around him, which was lit by the last rays of a setting sun. The high healing bed with Loki stood in the center of the room, drawing attention with its shining golden dome of light. A closer look, however, revealed another, regular-sized bed with simple white linens standing in the corner by the window. The wall on the left was lined with several small cabinets with medicines while on the right side of the room stood the square wooden table where Tony and Vedius were currently sitting, but apart from the few pieces of furniture, the room was pretty bare. The lack of decorations and personal effects reminded Tony of hospital rooms on Earth, only instead of beeping machines, this one apparently had magic.

Despite his best efforts, Tony’s gaze kept returning to Loki and the golden glow around his bed and he found himself fascinated by how the whole thing worked. Finally he couldn’t hold his curiosity any longer, so he stood up and shuffled back to the stool by the bed to watch the dance of golden particles from up close.

“The field around the bed,” Tony spoke up, drawing the healer’s attention, “that’s magic, right? How exactly does it work?”

“It is magic, yes,” Vedius confirmed with a small nod. “It is healing magic, similar to the one Odin himself uses when he needs to rejuvenate. This one will heal Loki over the course of a day or two. He is in a magical sleep right now, but should wake up once the healing process is complete,” he added, answering Tony’s question before he could pose it.

“So he’s going to recover?” Tony asked, just to be sure.

“Oh yes,” Vedius assured him. “He’s a strong lad and you managed to bring him here while there was still time. You can expect a full recovery.”

Tony released the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. “Good. That’s…good. It would suck for him get hurt just because a bunch of dicks have a grudge against me and he happened to be in the
house when they attacked.”

“No, I was thinking about the last time they attacked it.” Vedius asked conversationally, raising the goblet to his lips.

“You mean right now, or in general?” Tony quirked an eyebrow. “I’m a pretty famous guy where I come from, so there are always people who hate me, but lately it kinda feels like everyone is trying to kill me.” Something occurred to him suddenly and he had to ask, even though deep down he knew it was bullshit. “Hey, you’re not working for HYDRA, by any chance, are you?” Because if the Nazis had magical interplanetary connections, he might as well pack up the whole superhero gig and go home, game over.

He watched the healer’s reaction closely, but Vedius merely frowned at the name, no traces of recognition in his gaze.

“I do not know anyone bearing that name. I used to work for the king of the Vanir for many years, but I have retired from that life several decades ago.”

“Oh, good,” Tony said. At least that was something.

Having finished his dinner, Vedius stood up and collected the goblets and bowls back on the tray.

“I would give you a tour of the house, but you should not strain that leg too much just yet. Maybe when Loki wakes up tomorrow, he will show you.” His gaze slid towards the magic field before returning to Tony again. “Am I right in assuming that you would prefer to spend the night in this room?”

“I…yeah.” Tony nodded, not even bothering to pretend otherwise. “That would be great.”

“Very well,” Vedius said. “I will bring you another potion for that leg.”

“Wait!” Tony called after him before he could leave the room.

“Can I use your bathroom?”

Tony couldn’t remember the last time he had to ask someone to let him use their bathroom, because he usually waltzed everywhere like he owned the place, but the guy was making him feel a little uneasy and Tony didn’t want to get on his bad side. Vedius might look mostly harmless, but there was an aura about him that put Tony on edge – he reminded Tony of those old martial arts masters from kung fu movies who shuffled around in their affable grandpa persona and then beat the crap out of a whole platoon of guys with nothing but a broomstick handle. He might be a healer now, but if the way he carried himself was any indication, he probably knew his way around a weapon. Also, old or not, he was still about ten times stronger than Tony, so pissing him off really wasn’t the best course of action.

Politeness it was then, even if the words felt unfamiliar on his tongue.

“Of course,” Vedius said, making it sound like Tony was the weird one for asking in the first place. “The house is at your disposal for the duration of your stay here. I would advise you not to take a full bath tonight, however, because your leg still needs to heal and soaking the wound would hinder the process.”

“I wasn’t…” Tony began, in an attempt to tell him that a bath wasn’t the reason why he’d asked about it, but Vedius cut him off.
“I know. However, if you wish to clean yourself up a little, there is a bucket with water in the bathroom that you can use to wipe yourself down. If the potions work as they should, you should be able to take a full bath tomorrow.” He gave Tony another glance, his eyes lingering on the dried blood on his pants. “I will bring you some spare clothing as well.”

“Yeah, that would be great, thanks.” Tony had the nagging suspicion that he had thanked this guy more in a single day than he had anyone in the past year combined.

“You’re welcome,” the healer told him with a graceful incline of his head. “Do you need any help to get to the bathroom?”

“Nope, I’m fine,” Tony assured him hastily, raising his hands in the universal ‘back off’ motion. “I’m good, really. You go do your thing, I can handle this on my own.”

“Well, if you think so.” Vedius still looked a little skeptical but let it slide, trusting Tony to manage this on his own. He walked out of the room, leaving the door open behind him. Tony slumped on the stool, really not looking forward to the journey to the bathroom. It would hurt like hell, but it was still better that having the old man carry him like an invalid. He was Tony Stark, for fuck’s sake, genius billionaire superhero. He could walk on his own like a boss. Yeah, totally.

Now if only he could convince his leg to get on board with that idea.

Tony would have stayed sitting at Loki’s side for longer, but the need to go find a bathroom was growing with each passing second, rapidly crossing from “uncomfortable” to “oh god I need to pee now or I’m gonna explode”, so he slid down from the stool and hobbled over to the door, using the doorframe for support. He shot one last look at Loki, who was still sleeping peacefully, and limped out into the corridor, counting each painful step as he went. Luckily for him, the bathroom was only a dozen or so feet away, so he didn’t have to go too far.

He had no idea what he’d expected from the bathroom of a magic user, but it was certainly not…this. He’d thought there might be a magical waterfall in the garden or a hole behind the house where people went to do their business, or something, but this was…surprisingly modern. The room itself was pretty spacious and well-lit, with smooth stone floor and walls covered with mosaics. Closest to the door stood a large counter with a stone sink and behind it, tucked in the far corner, a square seat with a hole in it. A large mirror hung over the sink, reflecting the opposite wall, which was lined with several cupboards.

The main star of the room, however, was an enormous square bath underneath the window. It was about two feet high, large enough to comfortably hold four people and had three steps leading up to it for easier access. When Tony limped closer to take a better look, he discovered that its bottom was actually a few inches below the floor level. It was, well, pretty luxurious, even by Earth standards. But then, this guy was apparently friendly with people from multiple royal families, so it shouldn’t be so surprising that he would have a nice house after having served the king of Vanaheim for god knows how many centuries.

The need to pee was getting critical so Tony abandoned his exploration of the bath to go take care of business, but he still couldn’t help but be tempted a little by the possibilities the bathtub offered. He wondered, when Loki woke up, if he would be up to trying it out – after all, Loki would be surely weakened after his brush with death and would need someone to help him wash his back. Luckily for him, Tony was a Good Samaritan at heart and would be more than happy to volunteer for that particular task.

Especially if that task held the potential for mind-blowingly good sex.
As promised, the bucket full of lukewarm water was waiting for him on the counter next to the sink so Tony took it and sat down on the edge of the bath to take some pressure off the leg. His clothes felt disgusting when he peeled them off, reeking of smoke and sweat and blood so he threw them on the floor, glad for the chance to freshen up a little. While he was wiping himself down, a pile of clean clothes suddenly appeared on the counter nearest to him, the sudden movement startling him enough to almost make him drop the sponge. *Fucking magic*, Tony thought as he stood up and tentatively prodded at the pile with his finger, but nothing happened. The clothes just lay there, neatly folded and smelling faintly of wildflowers.

Just to make sure that it wasn’t some kind of a trick, Tony poked the clothes again before he scooped them up with a sigh and put them on the corner of the tub next to him. The magic aspect of the instant-materialization kinda freaked him out but at the same time he couldn’t help but wonder just how the whole thing was done. Maybe Loki would explain it to him once he woke up.

Still, he reasoned, magic or not, it was probably better for the old guy to magically transport clothes to Tony than to come inside the bathroom with them – at least this way Tony wouldn’t have to explain anything about his arc reactor. So yeah, he could live with magic clothes, if it meant that his arc reactor wouldn’t get ogled by a weirdo Yoda guy.

Fully dressed in a pair of dark blue pants and a soft white tunic, Tony picked up his dirty clothes and set off on the journey back to their room, which was still empty except for Loki, who looked like he hadn’t moved a single muscle in Tony’s absence. Really, this whole not-moving thing was getting kinda creepy. If Tony didn’t have the healer’s reassurance that Loki would be ok, he would be freaking out right now.

Tony dropped the dirty clothes at the foot of his new bed and limped over to Loki’s side to check up on him again. The old guy was nowhere to be seen so Tony reached up through the golden glow and laid a hand on Loki’s forehead, checking his temperature (and if he happened to run a hand over Loki’s hair as he pulled back, well, nobody had to know). Loki’s skin was just as cold as it had been before, but his face seemed to have slightly more color in it. That was great, because right now Loki was the only link home Tony had and Tony really hoped that he would wake up soon, because being alone in the house with the old guy was starting to become vaguely unnerving.

Vedius didn’t seem dangerous, or evil, but the way he looked at Tony made the engineer feel like the guy knew everything about him from a single glance. It was unsettling and Tony would much prefer to have Loki there, acting like a buffer between them before Tony slipped up and accidentally insulted the guy’s mother or something. He had tried to be on his best behavior since he’d woken up, but he wasn’t sure how long he would be able to keep it up before he said something offensive.

Less than five minutes later, Vedius came back inside the room, carrying a vial with a familiar-looking dark purple potion. A faint smile appeared on his face when he saw Tony sitting on Loki’s side but he didn’t comment on it, focusing on preparing a new batch of bandages instead.

“Well, young man, it is time for you to go to bed,” he announced resolutely as he walked over to hover at Tony’s side. “You can sit with him again tomorrow but right now, that leg of yours needs rest.”

“But I’ve only been awake for like, an hour, two, tops,” Tony protested. “It’s not even dark outside yet.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he felt ridiculous for saying them - but then, the healer had an uncanny ability to make him feel about five years old just by being in the same room.

Vedius, however, was unyielding.

“Nonetheless, you need to heal. And to heal, you need to rest. The damage to your leg was quite
extensive and you only made it worse by carrying him around. As far as I am concerned, you have
already strained your leg enough for one day. Loki is not going to wake anytime soon, so you might
as well start focusing on your own treatment.”

Tony shot one last glance at Loki’s impassive face before he sighed and stood up, giving in to the
man’s demands. From the frown on the old man’s face, there was high chance that the guy might
actually pick him up and carry him over to the bed if he didn’t comply soon, so Tony opted to
preserve his dignity while he could. Under the healer’s watchful gaze he limped over to the bed and
sat down, pulling the injured leg up to let it rest.

Vedius followed after him, probably to make sure that Tony wasn’t going to fall on his face. Once
Tony was on the bed, the healer put the dark purple potion on top of a nearby cupboard and reached
for a handful of clean bandages instead.

“Oh hey,” Tony exclaimed, once he had the opportunity to see the vial up close “I think I’ve had that
one before.”

One of the healer’s eyebrows rose a fraction. “Indeed?”

Now that he could see it better, the potion really did look an awful lot like the one Loki had given
him after the workshop incident.

“Yeah, Loki made it for me when I got shot the last time. It worked pretty well.”

“It is nice to hear that at least some of my teaching seems to have taken hold,” Vedius said as he
started unwinding the bandages from Tony’s leg. “I had high hopes for him, but the boy never had
much aptitude for the healing arts

“I don’t know, he seemed to heal me just fine.” Tony shrugged.

“And how did he manage that, I wonder,” Vedius said, more to himself than to Tony. “I have
already tried healing your leg with magic, but your body does not receive it. How did Loki
accomplish that?”

“I…” Tony trailed off, hesitating. “I don’t think I want to tell you. I barely know you.”

“Does your reluctance to let me near have anything to do with the glowing piece of metal in your
chest, by any chance?” Vedius shot him a knowing look that put Tony on instant alert. Tony’s entire
body tensed, getting ready to bolt at a moment’s notice. He’d never been able to play it cool when
someone breached the topic of the arc reactor. While Tony was quietly freaking out about what sort
of answer he should give the man, Vedius calmly continued removing the bandages, seemingly
paying no attention to the way Tony’s muscles had turned to stone under his hands. “I could not help
but notice it earlier when I was tending to your leg,” he continued. “The fabric of your shirt is quite
thin and the metal emits a very distinctive pattern that seems to disrupt the flow of magic around it. I
wonder what would happen if it was re-”

“No!” Tony interrupted him sharply. He scooted closer to the wall and away from the healer,
wrapping his arms around his knees. The wound on his leg started to bleed again from the sudden
movement, a trickle of blood seeping out between the half-healed stitches, but Tony didn’t pay it any
attention, his gaze firmly focused on Vedius. “No removing, no experiments, no anything. You can
tend to my leg if you want, but no more than that.” He tried to slow down his furiously beating heart,
which had picked up pace at the first mention of the arc reactor, but he wasn’t having much luck.

“You’re a prickly one, aren’t you?” The indulgent tone of the old man’s voice was rubbing Tony the
wrong way.

“Look, pal,” he growled, running out of patience. “I don’t care if you’re some magic hotshot who’s older than dirt. If you so much as touch that reactor, I’m turning you to dust. And I’m fully willing to deal with Loki’s freak-out afterwards, if that’s the price I have to pay.”

To Tony’s annoyance, Vedius seemed more amused than impressed by the threat.

“And how would you do that, hm?” he asked mildly. “You are injured, barely able to walk and all your weapons are in the room next door. That does not read to me as particularly threatening.”

“You’d be surprised,” Tony said darkly, letting a dangerous steely edge enter his gaze. “I can be very resourceful when I want to be.”

The healer held his gaze for a moment longer before he nodded, retreating a little.

“I do not doubt that. However, I can assure you that you have nothing to fear from me. I know that this situation might seem overwhelming to you, especially if this is the first time you have left your world behind, but I am not a threat to you.” He reached behind himself and retrieved the purple potion from the cupboard. “Now be a good boy and drink this potion, will you?”

“I’m not a boy,” Tony muttered automatically, annoyed at being patronized like that. He hesitated for another second before he gave in and took the vial from Vedius’s hand. The healer started to clean and redress the wound, so Tony used the opportunity to examine the contents of the vial to make sure it was the same potion he’d had before. “I still don’t trust you, you know.”

Vedius shrugged.

“I do not expect you to - in fact, I would think you a fool if you did. But there is no need to be so wary around me. I only wish to heal you.”

“Why?” Tony couldn’t help but ask. “You barely know me. Why would you help me?”

“You are a friend to Loki, and as such you are welcome here.” Vedius gave him a small smile. “The boy is very dear to me, so it heartens me to know that he has friends like you. There are few these days who would risk so much for him.”

It was Tony’s turn to look away.

“He got hurt like this because he was helping me. If it wasn’t for him, I’d probably be dead right now so yeah, of course I’m willing to take risks for him. It would be a major dick move not to.”

“That is good to hear.” Vedius finished redressing the wound and stood up, nodding towards the vial in Tony’s hand. “Drink that. It will help you heal faster. If everything works as it should, you should be free of the bandages by tomorrow evening.”

Tony rolled the potion between his palms, still not convinced that it was a great idea to be drugged and asleep in the same house with this guy. He hadn’t protested before because he’d been on the verge of passing out, but right now he was fully awake and mistrustful as hell.

“Do I really have to drink this?” he finally asked. The healer looked up from where he was cleaning up the medical supplies. “Can’t I just, I don’t know, let it heal on its own?”

“You could,” Vedius confirmed. “But with this type of damage, the healing process will probably take several weeks and you might still end up with some minor impairment of the muscle function.
With the potion, however, you can be fully healed in less than a day. So, which one will it be?”

Tony grimaced, but kicked the potion back anyway. As much as he hated to admit it, the guy was right. He couldn’t afford to spend several weeks hobbling around like a cripple. HYDRA was probably raising holy hell back on Earth and Loki would be up in no time and he couldn’t afford to slow him down. For all he knew, they could be returning back to Earth tomorrow. He had to get back to full strength as soon as possible.

The potion tasted almost identical to the one Loki had given him a few days ago, which reassured Tony a little, but he still couldn’t help but wish that he could just pop a Tylenol and be done with it. Vedius was puttering around the room, drawing shut the curtains and checking the field around Loki’s bed to make sure everything was in order. Instead of trying to keep up the awkward small talk, Tony dug out his phone from his pants pocket and unlocked it with a swipe of his thumb. Even though he rationally knew that he didn’t have any signal here and wouldn’t find any new messages on it, force of habit made him check them anyway. Well, that and also the desire to avoid talking to the old man.

A minute later Vedius picked up the tray from the table and set off towards the door.

“I will let you rest, Tony Stark,” the healer said, dimming the light in the room with a whispered word.

“You really don’t need to use my full name,” Tony told him. “Just Tony is fine.”

“Very well.” Vedius inclined his head. “I will come and check on you again in the morning. Good night, Tony.”

“Good night,” Tony muttered. The door closed, leaving him in quiet semi-darkness. The only sources of light came from the cell phone screen, his arc reactor and the soft golden glow around Loki’s bed. Tony fiddled with the phone for a moment longer before he finally turned it off and put it away, not wanting to use up the battery. He briefly contemplated going to check on Loki again, but he was starting to feel sleepy from the potion.

In the end Tony just kicked off his shoes, laid down and let the potion work its magic.

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The room was still dark when he woke up the next morning. He had no idea if it was due to magic or because it was still so early, but Tony knew with absolute certainty that he couldn’t bear to sleep for a single minute longer. He’d slept more in the past 24 hours than he had in the whole last week combined and his body felt sluggish, unused to resting so much.

He sat up on the bed and blinked, trying to get his eyes used to the semi-darkness in the room. For a second, he was tempted to check the time on his phone before he remembered that it was useless, because the time here most likely passed differently that the one on Earth. Instead of sitting around, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and was pleasantly surprised to find that the leg didn’t hurt when he stood up. It seemed that the potion had worked exactly as had been advertised. Well, that was something at least.

Loki was still asleep so Tony let him be and went to visit the bathroom instead. The hallway outside the door was filled with the sleepy light of a rising sun and the house was quiet, no signs of Vedius or anyone else, for that matter. Since his leg seemed to be fine and he felt like he was going to jump out of his skin if he had to stay in that same room for any longer, Tony decided to go explore the house a bit.
The hallway seemed to lead through the entire house, copying its U-shape. Since he had already explored the left side of it, which only had a bathroom and several healing rooms, Tony decided to go see what was in the other wing.

A quick look revealed two more rooms similar to the one Loki and he were sharing, a small dining room, a study with an attached library and a kitchen. He was just contemplating whether he should go take a peek at the books in the study when the front door opened somewhere behind him. Not wanting to piss the guy off first thing in the morning, Tony closed the library door again and set off towards Loki’s room. Halfway there, he remembered the suit he had left in the examination room and went to get it instead. The new Mark XVII was lighter than most of his suits, largely due to being unfinished and missing the last layer of plating, so it only took him two trips before he was able to move all the armor parts from the first room into Loki’s.

Vedius had disappeared somewhere upstairs and Loki was still dead to the world, so Tony dumped the armor parts on the empty bed and went to pull apart the curtains on the window to let in some light. The room was still a little dim even when he did that, probably due to some kind of a spell, but it was enough light to work by. Once the curtains were open, Tony flopped back on the bed and reached for the nearest piece, checking it for damage. If they were going to leave in a day or two, he needed the suit fully operational.

Well, that, and also he was bored as hell and needed something to keep him occupied before he started clawing at the walls. A house without technology in the middle of nowhere really wasn’t his favorite type of a vacation spot.

He was just checking the shoulder joints for damaged circuitry when Vedius walked inside the room with another set of bandages in his hands. He set them aside on a nearby cupboard, then clapped his hands, and the room lit up the rest of the way.

“Good morning, Tony.” The healer gave Tony a friendly nod and went to check on Loki to make sure that everything was in order.

“Yeah, morning,” Tony muttered, most of his attention focused on the damage done to his chest plate.

“How is your leg today?” Vedius continued pleasantly as he sat down on the stool next to Tony’s bed.

“Pretty good, actually,” Tony told him. “Doesn’t even hurt anymore. Hey, could I get a rag or something? I need to clean the blood out of this thing.” For the first time since the guy had come inside, Tony gave him his full attention. The healer was wearing long, dark blue robes today that reminded Tony of wizards from fantasy movies. However, instead of being flashy, the robe was fairly simple, with clear, straight lines and comfortable, soft material.

“Let me look at the leg first and then I’ll see what can be done about that rag.”

“All right.” Tony didn’t even try to protest – instead he stuck his leg forward and went back to checking the circuitry.

“That armor of yours,” Vedius remarked after a minute, “is that what the warriors of Midgard wear these days?”

“This?” Tony waved the repulsor glove at him. “No way. I’m the only guy who has it. I invented it, and me and my best friend are the only people who wear it. And even if someone wanted me to make more - which they do but I told them to go fuck themselves - there’s no fucking way I’m ever
letting anyone get their hands on my suits.” He remembered the whole HYDRA clusterfuck and had to fight not to get depressed all over again. “After the recent events, someone getting their hands on my suit would be the cherry on top of the shit cake.” He ran a hand over his face and discovered that the healer was watching him. Tony averted his eyes with a grimace. “Sorry, I’m a bit of a buzzkill right now. The last few days have really sucked for me.”

“I would ask you what happened, but I suspect you would not tell me,” the healer said.

“Yeah, you’re guessing right. No offense, but I really don’t wanna discuss it.” Tony’s eyes involuntarily flickered to Loki before he focused back on the armor again. If the demigod were awake, he might offer Tony a few clever words or a hug, but there was no way Tony was going to spill all this to a guy whom he’d known for a day (most of which he’d spent asleep).

Vedius finished changing his bandage in silence, for which Tony was deeply grateful. Once he was done, he stood up and gathered the used bandages in his hands.

“I will go see about breakfast. Do you wish to come eat in the kitchen with me, or would you prefer to stay here?”

Tony shot him a look. “Do you even have to ask?”

“Here it is, then,” Vedius decided. “I will be back shortly.” He walked out, leaving Tony alone again.

Less than two minutes later, a small basin with water and a rag appeared on the floor next to the bed. Tony reached down for them, putting the basin on the vacated stool before he grabbed the blood-spattered leg plates and started cleaning them. Normally he would use alcohol for this, but with the limited options he had, water was still better than nothing. He was so focused on his work that he almost missed the healer’s re-entry into the room.

“I brought breakfast,” Vedius announced as he laid the tray on the table and sat down. “I would advise you to come eat soon, or the food will get cold.”

With a sigh Tony put aside the bloody rag and the half-cleaned armor leg and went to have some breakfast. His guess about the nature of the food proved right when he discovered that the bowl waiting for him had something that looked suspiciously like oatmeal in it. Back on Earth he would never be caught dead eating something like that (not even Pepper had ever managed to get him to eat anything even remotely resembling a healthy breakfast), but right now he actually felt pretty hungry so he decided that a mush was better than nothing. He took a hopeful peek into the cup next to the bowl, but instead of coffee, it only held milk. Well, so much for hope.

“You wouldn’t happen to have coffee, would you?” he asked, just to make sure.

“No. I do not. I assume it is some type of Midgardian food or beverage?” Vedius asked mildly.

“Yeah,” Tony muttered, ladling a spoonful of oatmeal instead. Man, the lack of caffeine was going to be a bitch. Well, that and the alcohol withdrawal, unless this weirdo hippie guy had a few bottles of some magic hooch stashed somewhere. Tony had gone through the whole withdrawal deal once before, back in Afghanistan, and the physical symptoms had almost been worse than the torture and threats combined. He really wasn’t looking forward to another round of that.

Rather than ruminate about the shitshow that the next few days were going to be, he decided to focus on something else.

“So,” Tony changed the topic, “you live here alone? We’ve been here for almost two days and I
haven’t seen anyone else around yet.”

“Yes, I live alone, most of the time,” Vedius confirmed. “I used to have a wife, but she passed away several decades ago. My daughter currently lives at the royal palace where she serves as a healer to the king’s family, so I only see her when she comes for a visit. There is also a local lad whom I am teaching the healing arts to, who comes around sometimes, but I already sent him a missive that his help will not be needed for the next week or so. Apart from those, I only get the occasional visit from someone ill or injured, who seeks out my help – much like you did the other day. Luckily for you, there is nobody else here whom I am tending to at the moment, so your presence in my house should go completely unnoticed.”

“Oh, good.” It took Tony another heartbeat before he recalled the rest of the conversation. “I’m sorry to hear about your wife,” he added awkwardly, because really, he didn’t know what else to say to that.

Vedius gave him a small, sad smile.

“Yes, she was very dear to my heart and her passing was a great blow to everyone who knew her. Even Frigga herself travelled here from Asgard to attend her funeral. Those two used to be very good friends since childhood, nearly inseparable, until Odin came and made Frigga marry him and move to Asgard. After that we only had to content ourselves with the occasional visit.” His lips pulled into a thin, displeased line, but he didn’t say anything else. It was clear that Odin’s decision was a sore point for him, but he probably didn’t want to badmouth the guy too much, especially since Loki was in the room with them.

“You’ve known Loki for a long time, then,” Tony decided to move onto a safer topic.

The clouded expression on the healer’s face cleared a little at the mention of Loki’s name.

“Oh, yes, since he was a little boy. He used to come here with Frigga every few years. Back then I was still working at the palace, so I often had the boys underfoot when she brought them for a visit. Loki was a quiet child, who kept to himself a lot. Unlike Thor, who was always running around, causing ruckus, Loki could usually be found in the garden, reading or practicing his spells. He would often come to me to discuss things he had discovered in the books, because I was one of the few who were willing to answer his question and did not treat him like a child. Even after it became apparent that he would never have much talent for healing, he would still seek out my company because we both enjoyed our conversations.”

Vedius’s gaze turned distant, a fond smile appearing on his lips. Tony didn’t quite manage to suppress the small pang of envy at the man’s words. While it was nice to hear that Loki had had someone willing to pay attention to him when he was a boy, he still couldn’t help but envy him a little. The only mentor figure Tony had ever had turned out to be a murderous traitor. What he wouldn’t have given as a kid to have someone like this - someone willing to pay attention to him because they wanted to, not because they could get something out of it.

Oblivious to Tony’s inner turmoil, Vedius continued reminiscing.

“Yes, Loki had always been an exceedingly clever, curious child. Why, I remember one visit shortly after his two hundredth birthday when he snuck inside the palace stables and-”

“Oh, please, not the stable story,” a raspy murmur interrupted him from the bed. “You know how much I hate it when you tell that one.”

“Loki!” Breakfast forgotten, Tony jumped up from the chair, at the same time that Vedius rose to his
feet. As one, they moved towards Loki’s bed, where the demigod was in the process of trying to sit up, the golden particles slowly dispersing around him. He threw a weak glare in the healer’s direction.

“I cannot believe you put me into Odinsleep.”

“It is not Odinsleep,” Vedius corrected, running some sort of a diagnostic spell over Loki’s body. Tony kept himself out of the way, letting the guy do his job. “It is a modified version that I use for healing extensive damage to the body. You are welcome, by the way. I managed to save you at the nick of time. If the young man here had not brought you to my doorstep when he did, you would have bled out.”

At the mention of Tony, Loki’s eyes fixed on the engineer, roaming over him to make sure that he was all right. Tony had no idea what his own face looked like, but it was probably something similar, judging by the way Vedius took one look at them and opted for a strategic retreat.

“I think I will go fetch you some breakfast. Tony can help you get to the table.” And with that, he departed, closing the door behind him.

Tony took a step closer to the bed, but didn’t touch Loki just yet. Instead he just hovered over him awkwardly, unsure about how to proceed about this.

“Hi,” he said finally. “It’s good to see you awake.”

“It is good to be awake,” Loki returned with a small smile. “And still alive.” He tried to swing his legs over the edge of the bed, but wavered a little, lifting a hand to his temple and closing his eyes to fight a wave of dizziness. That one, small movement was all that was needed to break the weirdness between them. Tony stepped up to him at once, catching his shoulders and stabilizing him.

“Are you sure you should be getting out of the bed yet?” Tony asked.

“My body is healed,” Loki assured him. “This is just a temporary weakness. It will pass once my magic returns fully.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” Tony was still a bit doubtful, but figured that the guy knew what he was doing. He released Loki’s shoulders and started to pull his hands back, but Loki caught them in his own, holding them in the space between their bodies.

“Thank you for saving my life,” he told Tony earnestly. His thumbs kept brushing over the backs of Tony’s knuckles in a slow, soothing motion and Tony suddenly found it very hard to look away.

“You were hurt,” he muttered. “Of course I would help you.”

“Most people would just let me bleed out.” Loki’s lips twisted into a self-deprecating smile.

“I’m not most people,” Tony reminded him.

“No,” Loki said fondly, “you are not.” Without letting go of Tony’s hands, he pulled back a little and looked around, giving the room around them a brief once-over. “You did well in bringing me here. Vedius is one of the few beings in the Nine Realms whom I can trust right now. Unfortunately, I did not have enough magic left to transport us all the way here.”

Once the dizziness had passed, he let Tony wrap an arm around his shoulders to help him stand up and cross the few feet towards the table. Loki snaked a hand around his waist in return, leaning into him and Tony felt intensely glad for having his leg almost back to normal because damn, the guy
was heavy.

“By the way,” Tony said as they shuffled across the room, “that whole “teleport two people across millions of miles and several different dimensions while bleeding out buckets” thing you did? That was stupid. You could have died.”

Loki’s smile just widened. “I knew you would be able to get me to a healer in time. I had full trust that you would be able to follow my directions.”

“Still, stupid,” Tony persisted. “Please don’t do it again. I’ve already had a heart attack once. I don’t need to get another one the next time you decide to turn yourself into a cheese grater and bleed out on me.” He had a sudden flashback to similar conversations he’d led in the past and he out an involuntary groan when he realized where he had heard that before. “Oh, god, I sound like Pepper.” The low chuckle from the figure pressed against his side told him that he really, really did. “I think I’m getting a belated appreciation for the lectures she used to give me after every fight.”

“Is that maturity I hear?” Loki teased as he lowered himself into one of the chairs with Tony’s help. “Are you finally starting to listen to your betters?”

“Shut up,” Tony muttered, without any real heat. “I’m not the idiot here who thought it would be a good idea to face a bunch of guys with adamantium weapons armed with nothing but a sword.”

“Wasn’t it you who said to me: ‘What would life be without a little danger?’” Loki shot back with a smirk, enjoying Tony’s scowl. “I believe that in this case the Midgardian saying about a pot and kettle would be applicable.” He raised an eyebrow, waiting for Tony’s counterargument.

As much as Tony hated to admit it, Loki kinda had a point. So, instead of trying to prove the point that he would lose anyway, Tony just sat down next to him and reached for his half-eaten bowl of magic oatmeal.

“It looks like your snark has managed to recover, along with everything else,” Tony remarked instead. Months ago, he would have found the answering smirk on Loki’s face immensely punchable. Now, he was merely a little annoyed at having his own words turned against him. Loki seemed to follow his train of thought, because his grin only widened.

“It never left.” He shot a brief glance at the still-closed door, then leaned closer to murmur in Tony’s ear. “After all, my tongue is widely regarded as one of my best assets, as you are well aware by now.” He pulled back just enough to be able to meet Tony’s gaze, his eyes flickering to Tony’s lips. “Here I am, back from the brink of death, and I didn’t even get a welcome back kiss.” He affected a fake pout. “One might even start to think that you don’t like me anymore.”

“I hauled your ass all the way here, didn’t I?” Tony retorted. When Loki continued giving him a hopeful look, he sighed. “Yeah, okay. Whatever. You look like death warmed over so I thought I might lay off the PDA for a while, but I guess one small peck won’t kill you.”

Even as he said it, he was already leaning over to Loki, who was more than happy to meet him halfway. They kept the kisses soft and fairly chaste, just gentle brushes of lips rather than any kind of making out, but it was still nice, especially after the endless hours that Tony had spent worrying about Loki’s recovery. This was a tangible proof that Loki was real, and alive and that maybe, just maybe, they were both going to survive this epic clusterfuck after all.

Something cool touched the side of his face, a light brush of fingertips, and Tony suddenly realized that he had closed his eyes without even noticing. Loki was still wearing his self-satisfied smile but his eyes were soft, the fondness in them plain to see even for someone as emotionally dense as Tony.
“Thank you for saving my life,” he said in a low voice, his thumb sliding down to caress the edge of Tony’s jaw.

“You did the same for me before,” Tony retorted. “I was just returning the favor.” But he wasn’t pulling away, because the touch was actually pretty nice. They would have most likely started kissing again, if the old guy hadn’t opened the door with a discreet cough. Rather than startle at the interruption and snatch his hand away, Loki simply pulled back a little, making no effort to hide the nature of their relationship. Vedius didn’t comment on that, just put a bowl and a cup in front of Loki and sat back down at the opposite side of the table.

Tony and Loki finally pulled apart to start eating, but Tony could feel the healer’s eyes on him with every bite. Vedius gave them a minute head-start before he spoke again.

“So, Loki,” he said with obvious relish, “how did this young man manage to catch your attention?”

Loki’s smirk widened.

“Do you want to hear the tale about how he beat up Thor or the one where he offered me a drink in the middle of a battle?”

Vedius’s eyebrows rose a little, his gaze flickering between the two of them.

“How about both?”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

This fic is now over 200K words long! (208K at the moment, to be precise) and I’m slowly making my way towards the end of it. 30 chapters down, roughly 6 more to go. It’s strange, but even after such a long journey it’s still exciting to write Tony and Loki’s interactions. When I started writing this, I had feared that I might get bored halfway through and might have to force myself to finish it, but I’m still as enthusiastic about working on the final parts as I was at the beginning. There’s no burnout, no bitterness, just pure, boundless joy at being able to write this, to see these characters come to life.

Your feedback and responses are a big part of that joy – I don’t think I would have ever written so much if I didn’t have all of you guys supporting me through the process. Feedback is a hugely important part of the writing process for me and I’m so happy that so many of you take your time to leave me a comment with your thoughts and encouragement.

Thank you guys, for your continuing support! You’re the best readers one could wish for :)

Chapter 26 will be posted next Friday or Saturday.
“Several days ago, you expressed a wish to see my true form. Do you still want to see it?”

As always, a thank you belongs to my beta InsanitxsCreation for her continuing support on this.

After breakfast, during which Loki managed to consume enough food to sustain a small army, Tony left Loki in the healer’s capable hands and went back to working on the armor. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Vedius checking Loki’s wounds and reflexes to make sure everything had healed up properly, but he kept most of his attention focused on the suit and his own attempts to get the dried blood out of the circuitry. It didn’t take long for the entire bed to get filled with armor parts in varying states of disassembly.

“Hey,” Tony interrupted them, once he’d managed to clean out the blood. Both men looked up from the quiet conversation they’d been holding. “How long will it take before Loki is back to full power?”

The healer threw Loki a quick, assessing glance.

“Two days at the most. The healing magic has run its course and his body is almost recovered, so the only thing needed is to wait for his powers to replenish.”

“Okay, great, thanks,” Tony muttered and stopped paying attention to them again. He brushed his fingers over the smooth metal plates, running mental calculations about how long it would take him to get the suit up and running again. He probably wouldn’t be able to make it run at 100% capacity, not with the stuff he had on hand, but it should be good enough to get him through a fight, if it ever came to that. As it was, he would need about half a day to put a suit together and another few hours to recalibrate it, but if Loki decided that they were leaving tomorrow, he should have the suit ready by then.

Safe in his knowledge that he could do this, Tony tuned them out completely and let himself get lost in the endless miles of circuitry. He’d been pretty rough when he’d taken the armor parts off before, so a few spots needed to be repaired first before he could even think of putting the whole shebang together. He was so focused on checking the state of the repulsors that he almost missed Loki’s approach to the bed.

“Where is my helmet?” Loki asked, waving a piece of his destroyed armor in Tony’s face. Tony plucked a screwdriver out of his mouth to answer.
“I ditched it,” he informed the demigod, causing him to frown. “No offense, but that thing is bulky as hell and flying with an unconscious dude in my arms was difficult enough as it was. I didn’t need the extra weight.” At Loki’s unhappy look, he sighed. “Look, it should still be somewhere near the place where we first landed. If you miss it that much, just pop over there and bring it back.”

“I do not have enough magic for that right now,” Loki said petulantly.

“Then go tomorrow.” Honestly, Tony didn’t know what the big deal was. “We landed in the middle of nowhere. I don’t think anyone will steal it if you leave it there for another day. And anyway, you’d probably be much better off without it,” he couldn’t help but add.

“Well, it kinda makes you look like a goat.” There was a distinct snort from the other side of the room that got quickly covered by a cough, but Tony paid the old man no attention, his eyes focused on the growing thundercloud on Loki’s face. “A very handsome, powerful goat with plans for world domination, but a goat nonetheless. I’m sorry, but someone really had to tell you,” he added with a grin when Loki’s face darkened even further. “I know you probably really love that helmet, but it looks ridiculous as hell. But then, I suppose I don’t really have a right to judge, seeing as I’m the guy who runs around with a dude in a Star-Spangled outfit. Aaand I should probably shut up now,” he finished lamely when Loki’s gaze took on a slightly dangerous edge.

“Yes, you probably should,” Loki said in a carefully level tone. But despite his stony glare, he didn’t quite manage to cover the hint of humor in his voice. He was towering over the bed, trying to look intimidating, but Tony only gave him an unimpressed look. After a few seconds, he got bored of the staring contest and returned to the circuitry again.

“I guess you’ll need that new armor now, won’t you?” Tony shot a brief glance at the ruined piece of metal. “You can’t run around with holes in your chest plate.”

“No, I suppose I cannot,” Loki conceded, allowing the change of topic.

“And by the way? That Asgardian Steel of yours is shit,” Tony told him smugly, because he’d called it ages ago, even though Loki had tried to claim otherwise.

“So it would seem,” Loki muttered.

Remembering something, Tony raised his head and luckily found the healer still in the room.

“Vedius?” he asked. “Do you still have the metal bullets you dug out of us?”

Vedius frowned, but answered nonetheless. “Yes, I do. Why do you ask about them?”

“Can you save them for me? ‘Cause I’m pretty sure that I can find a use for them.” In fact, he already had – he could see the image of his future masterpiece slowly forming in his mind, the various ingredients coming together one by one to create something incredible.

“I will bring them for you, if you wish to have them,” Vedius said. Gathering the tray with the empty bowls and cups, he started heading towards the door.

“What are you planning to do with them?” Loki asked once the man was gone. Tony gave him a crooked smile.

“I built my first suit out of my own weapons, mostly because I didn’t have anything better available.
Adamantium is the best metal I can get my hands on. It would be a shame not to use it when I have it on hand, even if it’s stuff that someone used to try and kill us.”

“Oh,” Loki said quietly, pondering the possibilities. “But how are you going to craft the armor when your house burned to the ground?”

Tony’s grin slid from his face and he shrugged, making a failed attempt to keep the motion casual.

“I can still use the workshops in the Tower. Unless that got demolished, too. In that case, I have no idea.” He’d been trying to think about home and the whole HYDRA clusterfuck as little as possible since he had woken up, but now it was starting to claw at his mind again, demanding attention. He met Loki’s eyes, trying not to look too pathetic about that fact that he was now essentially homeless. “Look, let’s just…cross that bridge when we come to it, okay? You need to heal right now and I need to put this suit back together. Once that is done, we can try to figure out what we should do next, but right now, let’s just…”

“Heal?” Loki finished his thought.

“Yeah, heal.” Tony nodded. “Healing is a good start. The rest of the bullshit can come later.”

“Very well.” Loki straightened up. “I will leave you alone to work on your armor. If you need me, you can find me in the library.”

And with that he departed, leaving Tony alone with his half-finished suit and the frantic jumble of his thoughts.

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Tony worked on the suit all morning, disassembling and reassembling, and would have missed lunch if Loki hadn’t come to inform him that Vedius was threatening to confiscate the suit if he didn’t eat the meal with them. Apparently, the old man was super serious about health and proper nutrition, and was hell-bent on making them eat three regular meals a day while they were staying with him. Tony wasn’t very happy about being dragged away from his work, but he resigned himself to it, willing to put up with it for the sake of keeping peace. It was apparent that Loki regarded Vedius as a family of sorts, so being on good terms with him was probably the best course of action right now.

He managed to get through the lunch without accidentally insulting the old guy, but several times he could feel Loki’s eyes on him, watching him with a small frown. Tony had no idea what sort of offense he’d managed to commit now, but since the old dude seemed pretty chill with everything, it was most likely another one of Loki’s issues with something, rather than some general faux pas. Tony let him be, knowing that the guy would eventually tell him on his own once he’d stopped sulking.

As it turned out, he didn’t have to wait for long to find out what the problem was.

Shortly after lunch, they got kicked out of the house by Vedius to go get some fresh air. The healer had probably expected them to sit down on a bench somewhere in the inner courtyard and rest for a bit, but instead they ended up wandering through the garden behind the house. The garden was huge, with dozens of wildly growing bushes and rows of carefully-tended flowerbeds interspersed with the occasional tree. They were dozens of flowers of all shapes and colours blooming around them as they walked, but Tony didn’t recognize any of them (which wasn’t that much of a surprise, really, considering that the only flower he could name with any certainty back on Earth was the rose).
Since Loki seemed to have recovered a lot since morning, having no trouble walking unassisted and Tony’s leg was practically healed already, they decided to head towards the woods behind the house, away from prying eyes. The house might stand on the edge of town, but there was always a chance that one of the locals might see them wandering around and get curious. Better to keep out of sight as much as possible.

There was an orchard adjacent to the garden, and what looked like a vineyard further in the distance, but Tony didn’t pay much attention to them, his gaze focused on the demigod walking next to him. Loki was quiet and thoughtful, staring off into space as he deliberated over something, so Tony pretended not to notice, filling the silence with a stream of light-hearted chatter about the house and the plans he had for his suit repairs. They were almost at the edge of the forest when Loki finally spoke up.

“There is something I noticed,” he began, trying way too hard to sound nonchalant. “Vedius calls you 'Tony'.” He shot Tony a curious look. “Why is that?”

“Because I asked him to.” Tony shrugged. “Why? Did I break some intergalactic etiquette taboo or something?”

“No,” Loki replied, but there was an unhappy little frown between his eyebrows. “You did nothing wrong.”

“Then what’s the problem?” They stopped in the shade of an enormous, leafy tree. Loki licked his lips, contemplating his next words.

“I thought only your friends called you that. You have barely known him for a few days and I know very well that you are still wary of him and yet…” He trailed off, looking a little frustrated by the topic. “Why do you let him call you that?”

“Because it’s my name,” Tony said like it was obvious.

“No, it isn’t,” Loki replied at once, a hint of a smirk gracing his lips. “Your real name is Anthony Edward Stark.”

“Did you snoop in my file by any chance?” Tony smothered a grin, keeping a straight face for now. He still had no idea where Loki was going with the discussion, but he found that he was enjoying it nonetheless.

Loki’s smirk widened. “Yes, I might have seen it in passing.”

“You totally snooped in my file,” Tony accused him, pointing a finger at Loki’s chest. “Don’t deny it, I see right through you, buddy. It was probably during the whole supervillain shtick, wasn’t it? A part of planning a strategy against the petty little mortals?” Loki’s silence was all the answer he needed. “Oh, this is priceless.” His poker face finally broke out into a shark-like grin. “Tell me, oh mighty bad guy, how did you like my file?”

“It was…informative,” Loki allowed. His eyes roamed over Tony’s face and body appreciatively. “Though I must say, all those pictures hardly did you justice.”

“And now you’re trying to derail me from the previous conversation,” Tony pointed out, enjoying Loki’s scowl at having his bluff called. “You know, this tactic would be so much more effective if I didn’t use it all the time myself. Anyway, why do you care about what your healer buddy calls me?”

Loki’s gaze fell to the ground for a second before he met Tony’s eyes again.
“Does anyone call you by your name?”

“What? You mean ‘Anthony’?” Tony pronounced it like a foreign word, the syllables unfamiliar on his tongue. “Nobody calls me Anthony. The only person who did was a nanny I had when I was three. She had a really snooty, nasal way of pronouncing it and I hated it, mostly because I hated her. She wouldn’t let me play with circuit boards, so I set her newspaper on fire with a miniature catapult, she ran away screaming and I never saw her again. And that was the last time anyone called me Anthony. Why do you ask?”

It was at that moment Tony realized that Loki looked almost…bashful, which was really fucking uncharacteristic of him.

“What about if I called you Anthony?” Loki asked slowly, holding Tony’s gaze. “Would you hate that, too?” He reached down and took Tony’s hand and it was all Tony could do not to start looking around for hidden cameras, because really, shit like this only happened in romance novels and Lifetime movies. And, apparently, when one dated a crazy space Viking. Normally he would roll his eyes at a gesture like this, but Loki looked so earnest at that moment that Tony didn’t have the heart to ruin the moment with a snarky comment. So he remained still and let the demigod tangle his fingers with Tony’s like they were two teenagers on a High School date.

“Why not just call me Tony?” Tony asked, because really, it seemed like the obvious solution.

Loki snorted derisively. “Everyone calls you Tony. And it sounds…” He clamped his lips shut, cutting the sentence off in the middle, probably out of an attempt not to say something rude.

“Okay, should I be offended?” Tony checked. “Cause it just sounded like you were going to do some major bashing of my awesome nickname which, let me tell you, is not cool at all from you.”

“No, I simply meant-” Loki began again, looking a bit flustered. It was a good look on him, Tony decided.

“I thought you were calling me 'Stark','” Tony reminded him. “What happened to that? You seemed pretty ok with calling me by my surname.”

“It suits you,” Loki explained simply. “It is a very fitting name for you. However, with all the time we have been spending together, it has begun to feel rather…inadequate? Impersonal. It is a good name to use on a battlefield, but not so much…”

“In bed?” Tony finished for him. “Yeah, the whole surname thing would probably be a bit weird normally, but trust me, I’ve been called weirder things before, so it wasn’t that big of a deal. And since you’ve had enough time to figure it out, I assumed that was just one of your things and decided to roll with it. But hey, if you wanna call me something else, I don’t mind.”

“So you will not object if I call you Anthony?”

Tony had been all prepared to raise at least a token protest at being called that, but all his objections died when he heard Loki pronounce it. It slid off his tongue like velvet, carried with a hint of breathy promise and hell yeah, Tony could get on board with that. He swallowed once before he found his voice again.

“Nope, no objections from me,” he assured the demigod, whose smile had turned very smug at Tony’s reaction. “Just…don’t use it in public, okay? That might end up being awkward for everyone involved.”

“Why?” Loki moved closer, crowding Tony against the tree. “Can it possibly be because you’re
bothered by it?” He followed his words by blowing a breath across Tony’s ear and yep, there was no way Tony could return back to the house right now. Loki seemed to sense it, too, because his grin widened. “Is that for me, Anthony?” And nope, Tony definitely didn’t shudder at that. Loki rubbed his thigh against the front of Tony’s pants, his lips descending down to brush against the sensitive spot below Tony’s ear.

“You sure did recover fast from your latest brush with death,” Tony shot back, but he was already reaching down to fondle the rapidly growing hardness in Loki’s pants.

“I did tell you I have superior stamina, didn’t I?” Loki said smugly, pulling back a little to meet Tony’s eyes again. “It seems that you have taken to my new name for you quite well, Anthony.” He seemed to take relish in pronouncing it in that bedroom voice of his. Tony didn’t bother telling him that it was less about the name and more about voice itself. Loki looked smug enough as it was.

The demigod shot one look towards the house before he stepped back, leading Tony a little deeper into the forest, until they were completely out of sight. There was a small green meadow to the side and they headed towards it, stopping by random trees to make out like a pair of horny teenagers.

“I don’t think this was quite what your healer pal had in mind when he told us we should go outside to relax,” Tony quipped as he dragged Loki’s tunic over his head.

“I don’t know, I’m feeling plenty recovered, don’t you?” Loki said with a grin. He pulled Tony close and kissed him again, making quick work of the fastenings of his pants.

“Hm, we should probably do something about that, shouldn’t we?” Tony muttered between kisses. “That kind of condition can’t be good for your blood flow.” He’d planned to make another witty quip, but his leg caught on a protruding tuft of grass and he stumbled backwards, pulling Loki with him. They landed on a layer of soft green leaves and started laughing when their legs tangled together. Loki propped himself on his elbows above him, watching Tony with eyes full of mirth.

“How kind of you to offer your help with this particular problem,” he purred. “Luckily for you, I know just the right remedy.”

They spent most of the afternoon in the forest, alternatively having sex and chatting about random stuff, and even though Tony had never been a very outdoorsy type, he found that he was actually enjoying it. He’d spent his entire life as a city guy, and had never been a big fan of the whole “hiking in wilderness” thing, but he had to admit that there was something strangely relaxing about lying naked on soft green grass and watching the clouds pass overhead.

It was almost time for dinner when they finally started their trek back to the house. They were both pleasantly languid from their afternoon in the sunlight, and though Tony had originally planned to spend the afternoon working on the armor, he realized that he really, really didn’t mind. The time spent with Loki had been fun and the demigod had been affectionate, even more than usual, which Tony thought was a little weird at first but eventually figured out that it was probably Loki’s attempt to somehow make up for the month they’d spent separated.

As they walked, Tony tried to pat down his hair a bit to make himself at least half-way presentable, even though he was fairly certain it was a lost cause. With the way they both looked, they practically had “we just fucked” written all over their foreheads, so even a complete idiot would be able to guess what they’d been doing all afternoon, but Tony found that he really didn’t care. The old guy would find out anyway and since Loki seemed completely cool with that, it was probably fine.
“So,” Tony said when they emerged from the forest and the countryside opened up before them, “you must know this place pretty well.”

“Yes, I suppose I do,” Loki conceded. “Though I am more familiar with the royal palace than the countryside here.”

“Vedius mentioned that you used to come here pretty often.”

“Yes.” Loki nodded. “Vanaheim was my mother’s ancestral home. She grew up here, at the royal palace, with her brother and father. After she married Fa- Odin, she moved to Asgard, but Vanaheim still held a place in her heart, and every few years she would come here to visit her family. Most of the times, she took me and Thor with her.” Tony couldn’t help but notice that while Loki tended to violently oppose being called Thor’s brother (and Odin’s son), he seemed to have no such issue with his adoptive mom. He tucked that piece information away for later use.

“Did you like it here?”

“I did,” Loki admitted. “Vanaheim is home to many magic wielders, and magic is regarded as normal part of life here. Unlike Asgardians, who often tend to treat mages with suspicion, the Vanir hold no such prejudice. My magic was always welcome here.” He hesitated a little before he decided to finish the thought. “In fact, when I was growing up, I often dreamt of moving to Vanaheim permanently. Unfortunately, as an heir to the throne, it was out of question for me.” A shadow flickered over his face, a memory of old bitterness that he hadn’t quite managed to forgive.

“What about now?” Tony couldn’t help but ask. “You’re not in the running for the throne anymore, are you?”

That drew a small chuckle out of Loki.

“Well, Odin has not officially disinherited me yet, so in theory I still have a claim. However, since I am considered dead right now, I suppose my candidacy is no longer viable.”

Tony cocked his head a little, watching Loki curiously. “Would you even want to rule, if you turned out that you can?”

Loki was silent for so long that Tony almost started to think that he had decided to ignore the question on purpose, or that he hadn’t heard it.

“You know what? It’s none of my business,” Tony blurted out, trying to find a way to back away from the topic. “You probably don’t wanna talk about it anyway and-”

“No,” Loki interrupted his rambling. “I do. It’s just…”

“What?”

Loki bit his lip, hesitating. They came across a low wall and Loki sat down on it, staring into space. Because his leg was starting to ache after the day of exertion, Tony lowered himself next to him, waiting for Loki to speak. The garden was empty except for them, the quiet disturbed only by the buzzing of insects. There was a herd of vaguely cattle-like six legged creatures grazing over a field several hundred yards away and Tony watched them while Loki contemplated the right words to use.

“When I was growing up, I had been told that it was my destiny to be a king one day,” Loki began, gazing into the distance. “The Allfather kept telling me and Thor that, giving us lessons on how a king should rule. It never occurred to me to question the wisdom of his words, but in retrospect I
realise that I should have – you cannot have two kings when there is only one throne available. Later, I thought that he was telling me that to placate me, because it became apparent that he favoured Thor over me and I became resentful of the deceit – after all, why tell me that I am going to be king, if he had planned to hand the throne over to my br- to Thor all along?"

He leaned forward to prop his elbows on his thighs and threaded his fingers together, forming a cradle with his hands between his knees. He didn’t look at Tony as he spoke, his eyes a million miles away.

“Of course, now I know that it hadn’t been a complete lie – he did intend to make me a king, only it was not the throne of Asgard he planned to put me on, but Jötunheim, my birthplace. He had brought me up as a bargaining piece, a puppet king - a fake figurehead that he planned to plant on Jötunheim and control that realm through me.” He shot Tony a look, his words growing more clipped and agitated the longer he spoke. “That is why he kidnapped me when I was a baby – it wasn’t pity, as he had tried to claim later, but pure calculation on his part that had driven him to steal another king’s son and raise him as his own.”

And Tony really didn’t know what to say to that, so he decided to stay silent for once and let the guy talk, because he looked like he really needed it.

“As for my claim on the throne of Asgard,” Loki continued, “I am not sure if that is something that I wish for anymore. I spent my youth dreaming about the glory and power of kingship, but when the time came for me to take up the burden of rule, I discovered that it was different than I had expected. The people hated me, for one, and nobody wanted to listen to my orders. It was…” he grimaced “frustrating.”

“Well, I don’t really blame them for being pissed, after you got Thor banished and Odin almost killed,” Tony couldn’t help but say. He’d heard the whole sordid history from Thor before during one of their drinking binges – how Loki had schemed his way on the throne by removing everyone in his path.

“No, that wasn’t…quite what I had planned,” Loki protested.

“The version I heard had you quite firmly in the villain role.” Tony shot Loki a sidelong glance. He was really looking forward to how Loki would talk his way out of this one.

“Yes, I did get Thor banished,” Loki admitted after a beat of silence. “But it was not for the reasons he thought. I did it because I was convinced that he was not yet ready to take the throne and wanted to spare Asgard from the idiocy of his rule. He was a selfish, immature buffoon and I did not wish for the people to suffer from his whims. So, I orchestrated a way to spoil his coronation and get him exiled, I freely admit that. However, most of the events that transpired afterwards were out of my control. I was never supposed to sit on the throne, for one.”

“What?” Tony frowned. “What about all your speeches about glorious conquest?”

“That came much later,” Loki told him. “I was not prepared to take up the throne of Asgard after Thor’s disgrace. My plan had been to get Thor banished for a while, to make Odin see the folly of his counsel, but I did not count on the Allfather collapsing right afterwards. I thought Father would rule in Thor’s absence, and maybe later decide that I was a better candidate for the throne than Thor, if I showed him my obvious superiority. However, when Father collapsed unexpectedly, I was forced to take the spear in his stead and discovered that it was not what I had envisioned.”

He sighed, his mouth pulling into a thin line.
“The people hated me. They had always regarded my magic with suspicion, but that suspicion had now turned into outright hostility. My friends turned away from me at the first opportunity. The palace guards were on the verge of mutiny. And I…I grew resentful, because I saw that even if I ever managed to obtain the throne by my own merits, the people would never accept me - that no matter what I did, Father would never consider me Thor’s equal, would never fully trust me because of who I am, what I am.”

Loki opened his palms, staring at the pale skin of his hands.

“It is a lie – all of it. My life as Odin’s son, my claim to the throne - even this form is a lie, now that I know what lies beneath the layer of magic Odin concealed me with.” He clenched his fists, his fingers looking almost chalk white against the dark fabric of his pants. Loki was silent for a long time, deliberating something for a moment before he came to a decision. He looked up, his eyes locking with Tony’s. There was apprehension in his eyes, but determination as well. “Several days ago, you expressed a wish to see my true form. Do you still want to see it?”

“Well, yeah,” Tony admitted, “but you don’t have to-”

“No,” Loki shook his head, “I wish to show you. Will you let me?”

“Of course,” Tony said at once because magic or not, he was pretty curious to see what Loki really looked like.

“Very well, then.” Loki stood up and extended a hand towards Tony. “Come with me. I cannot do it here, because I need a way to maintain the spell that’s hiding me from prying eyes.”

Tony took the offered hand and stood up as well, letting Loki lead him back to the house. They passed through the narrow corridor in the back and into the kitchen, where Loki murmured a few words to Vedius, who nodded in understanding. Backing out of the kitchen, Loki gestured for Tony to follow him upstairs. They walked through the entrance hall, up a narrow staircase and into another hallway, passing more painted frescoes as they went.

“This bedroom used to be mine, a long time ago,” Loki explained as he opened a door to one of the rooms. “Vedius most likely uses it as a guest room nowadays, but he allowed us to have it during the duration of our stay.” He walked over to the window, stopping with his back to Tony. Since he didn’t look like he was going to speak anytime soon, Tony took the opportunity to take a look at the room.

The bedroom was nice and spacious, decorated in muted shades of light brown and dark green. There was a low double bed on the right, a desk next to the window and a large decorative chest that probably served as a wardrobe by the wall opposite the bed. Something that looked like a chess table with two chairs stood in the corner, but Tony didn’t examine it just yet, his attention focused on Loki, who looked like he was gathering the courage to walk to his own execution. Making a split-second decision, Tony closed the door and walked over to him, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey,” he said quietly, “you don’t have to do this, you know.”

“I know,” Loki muttered. “But I suppose now is as good a time as any.” He finally turned around to fully face Tony. “Besides, you deserve to know. If anyone should know what I look like, it’s you.”

“Still, that doesn’t mean-” Tony tried to protest.

“I want to,” Loki said with conviction, his eyes not leaving Tony’s.

“Okay, then,” Tony relented. “Go ahead, I’m certainly not gonna stop you.”
Loki took a deep breath, looking like he was mentally steeling himself for the big reveal.

“Very well,” he told Tony a second later, “in that case, take off your shirt.”

Tony blinked at the sudden request. “Um, what? Not that I don’t want to, normally I’m all for us taking our clothes off, but what does this have to do with-”

“I need access to the device in your chest,” Loki told him. “Do not worry, I’m not going to take it out. I only need to touch it.”

Tony only hesitated for a second before he complied, loosening the ties at his neck. Even though he’d just spent the whole afternoon naked with the guy, he still couldn’t help but feel a little nervous about uncovering his arc reactor like that. He’d spent so many years hiding it from the world, making sure it was safe from his enemies, that it always made him feel strangely vulnerable to let people see him without the protective layer covering the light in his chest. Despite his best intentions, he still paused with his hands on the hem, and it wasn’t until Loki gave him an encouraging nod that he pulled the borrowed tunic over his head.

He dropped the garment on the bed and remained standing in place, waiting for Loki to make his next move. Loki’s eyes slid over his chest in a brief, appreciative glance, lingering a bit on the arc reactor before he met Tony’s eyes again.

“What now?” Tony asked, just to fill the silence.

“Now watch,” Loki said, coming closer. “Don’t move.”

Slowly, tentatively, he lifted his right hand and laid it flat over the arc reactor, blocking out the light with his palm. He closed his eyes, his brows furrowing together at the sensation. For a few seconds, nothing happened.

Then his skin began changing color.

It began at his fingertips, slowly spreading up his arm and onto his shoulder. It looked like one of those videos of people striping paint from planes and cars – the beige tone of his skin slowly bleeding away, to be replaced by a deep, striking shade of blue. The change started out slowly, but gradually sped up, as the prolonged contact with the arc reactor seeped the magic out of Loki’s body. Loki kept his eyes closed, probably out of fear of Tony’s reaction. Tony thought it was bullshit, because Loki’s transformation was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen.

The demigod waited until the entire glamor was gone, then finally opened his eyes, the apprehension in them loud and clear. They were a startling blood-red color now, a far cry from the usual pale green, but their shape and the expression in them were the same they had always been. Tony took the time to look, to really look at all the changes the transformation had done to Loki and to his surprise he discovered that apart from the obvious change of color and the artful swirls decorating his skin, Loki still looked very much like himself.

The longer Tony looked, the more uncomfortable Loki seemed with the scrutiny, hunching his shoulders a little under Tony’s gaze. How many people have ever seen this part of him? Tony wondered. Loki had mentioned that the discovery of his heritage had been a fairly recent development. Had Thor ever seen him like this? Or his parents? Had anyone seen this at all?

“Wow,” Tony said finally, to break the silence. “This is stunning.”

Loki’s eyes snapped up to his briefly, shooting him a weak glare before they glued themselves to the floor again.
“You do not have to lie. I am aware I look monstrous-”

“No, you don’t,” Tony corrected him. “You still look like you, just blue.” He shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t see the big deal here. What does it matter if you’re an Asgardian, or a Frost Giant or whatever? You’re still you. You’re still the same guy you’ve always been, just different color.” He moved a bit closer but didn’t touch him yet, waiting to see how Loki would react first. “And if your pals in Asgard can’t see that, then they’re clearly idiots.”

Loki swallowed, meeting Tony’s eyes again.

“You…your reaction if different than I expected,” he said slowly, his eyes roaming over Tony’s face to watch his reaction. “I thought you would be repulsed, or at least startled but…you’re so calm about this. How can you just accept something like this?” He seemed genuinely puzzled, his brows pulling into a deep frown.

Tony shrugged again. “I guess I just got used to being surrounded by weirdness over the years. Don’t forget that I work with a century-old superhuman soldier, the God of Thunder, and a guy who turns big and green when you piss him off. I’ve seen magic and monsters and aliens in more forms than I can count. After a few months of that, the revelation that your boyfriend is a runaway extra from Avatar doesn’t even register on the shocking scale, really.”

Loki let out a short chuckle at that, hanging his head. “It appears that I have underestimated you once again.”

“Yeah,” Tony told him with a grin. “You really did.” He crossed the rest of the distance between them and lifted his hand to run his fingertips over the strange blue lines on Loki’s neck. Loki’s skin was cool under his touch, colder than usual and he was tense at first, but eventually he relaxed, allowing Tony to explore the swirling lines on his neck and collarbones. “But I mean it,” Tony continued. “I don’t care if you’re green or blue, or whatever. You’re still you. Still hot,” he added with a grin.

“Actually, the temperature of a Frost-” Loki began. Tony shot him an exasperated look.

“So this really doesn’t repulse you?” Loki asked again, just to make sure.

“Hell no,” Tony said. “You’d have to try way harder than that. In fact, you could probably find plenty of people on Earth who would find this incredibly sexy. There was a movie a few years back that had these fifteen feet tall blue aliens in it and everyone went crazy for them. Half the people on the internet were devastated that those guys weren’t real. And let me tell you, you look much, much better than those cartoon people. You-”

His words were cut off in the middle when Loki lunged forward, catching his mouth in a kiss. Tony tried to put up a token protest at having his awesome speech interrupted, but Loki was doing some really clever things with his tongue, so Tony decided that he didn’t mind the interruption all that much after all. The demigod finally took his hand off Tony’s reactor, only to wrap it around Tony’s waist, pulling them flush together.

Loki was kissing Tony like his life depended on it, like he had just spent an hour drowning under water and Tony was oxygen, but for once the kiss wasn’t about sex – it was Loki’s way of saying thank you, for showing his appreciation for Tony’s reaction. The demigod had never been big on gratitude, and his own emotional outburst had most likely embarrassed him, so now he was doing his best to try and make Tony forget about it by making his brain leak out of his ears from the kissing
Tony had no idea how long they’d spent entangled together like that but when Loki finally pulled away, his lips were red and puffy and his eyes were shining with something that looked a lot like happiness. He was also back to his regular pasty-white skin color. Tony tried not to be too disappointed by that.

“What?” Loki said when he noticed Tony’s look.

“Nothing,” Tony muttered. “I just thought you might stay like that for longer. Also, I was thinking that I would really like to explore all those artsy swirls with my tongue.” Loki’s reaction didn’t disappoint – a faint flush appeared on his cheeks at Tony’s words. Which gave Tony an idea. “Hey, just how far do those ornaments go?” He raised an eyebrow, waiting for Loki’s answer. To his surprise, Loki looked away.

“I wouldn’t know,” he said quietly.

“Seriously?” Tony’s mind boggled. “You don’t even know what you look like? Which means that you’ve never had sex looking like that, either, have you?” Loki’s glare was the only answer he needed. “Well, we’ll have to remedy that. Cause let me tell you – that blue thing? Totally does it for me.”

Loki still looked a little unsure but some of the tension disappeared from his shoulders at Tony’s words.

“You would really be willing to touch me when I’m…?”

“Sure,” Tony answered without hesitation. “I told you – it’s still you, just blue. I get that you’re probably not on board with the whole idea right now, but if you ever want to try it out, I’m down for it. Just say the word.”

Loki chuckled at that, shaking his head a little.

“Anthony Stark, you are the strangest man I have ever met, but I am very glad that I met you.” He leaned forward and gave Tony another slow, lingering kiss before he stepped back completely. “Go take a bath, I will see you at dinner.” He started walking towards the door.

“Wait, what about you?” Tony called after him. “You won’t join me?”

Loki shot him a look over his shoulder.

“There is something I need to do. I’ll see you at dinner. Enjoy your bath.”

And with that he left Tony in the room and disappeared off God knows where.

***

The water was wonderfully hot, the perfect temperature, really. Tony leaned back and closer his eyes, relishing the opportunity to finally get properly clean after two days of sponge baths. It was a pity Loki hadn’t joined him, but he probably wouldn’t be able to bathe in this kind of temperature anyway. And Tony really liked to have his bath hot.

As he lounged in the large bathtub, his mind wandered back to Loki’s revelation. If Tony was honest with himself, he had been a little shocked by Loki’s look. He’d hid it well, but there was always something startling about discovering that a person you know is someone completely different.
However, he hadn’t lied to the demigod about his reaction – the blue really did look pretty hot on Loki. Even better than it did on Mystique, whom Tony’d had the opportunity to meet a few times before. Tony had a brief idea about introducing her to Loki - then he imagined them bonding over their mutual blueeness and love for turning into other people and quickly discarded the idea again. He and Loki had barely gotten back together a few days ago and Tony was really enjoying what they had right now. No need to tempt fate more than necessary.

But really, he’d been truthful when he’d said that Loki’s real identity wasn’t that big a deal. After the whole clusterfuck of the past few days and the revelation that HYDRA had been manipulating his life for the past twenty years, the discovery of Loki’s heritage was small potatoes compared to that. And since Tony hadn’t grown up with the whole racist anti-Frost Giant shtick that Loki seemed to have, he held none of the prejudices that the Asgardians were so hung up on.

With his bath done, Tony toweled off and put on his clothes, pausing when he reached the shirt as a thought occurred to him. Had Loki made him take it off because he really needed skin contact with the reactor, or had he done it because he’d been feeling vulnerable and wanted to even the stakes a bit by forcing Tony into a similar state? He knew full well that Tony still had issues about walking around sans-shirt, but the reveal had been a huge deal to him, so maybe he’d done it to balance the scales out a bit. Either way, Tony found that he didn’t really mind. As long as Loki didn’t tamper with the reactor itself, he was willing to let him play with it, if it made Loki feel better.

Fully dressed, Tony made his way back to the healing room to continue his work on the armor. Dinner wouldn’t be around for another hour or so and Loki was nowhere to be seen, so Tony figured that he might as well get back to work. There were still a few spots that needed to be repaired and then the final assembly and he still hadn’t quite figured out how to reprogram the suit without a computer on hand. It would be fun to try and make it work again.

He had barely gotten started on the damaged circuitry in the leg when a soft knock sounded on the door. Vedius came in, closing the door behind him.

“Tony?” he said, taking a few steps closer to the table where Tony sat, surrounded by tools and armor parts.

Tony looked up from his work, half his mind still focused on the problem at hand. “Yeah?”

“What would you say if I told you that I can help you get rid of that device in your chest?”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

I have already mentioned this in a response to one of the comments on last chapter, but figured that I should probably make an official announcement: This fic is now an AU in relation to Age of Ultron. Its storyline was planned and (mostly) written long before the movie came out, so the two are not compatible in any way. I might write a separate short story for AoU if the fancy strikes me, but this story will have nothing to do with it. I have incorporated all of the other Marvel movies (except for Iron Man 3) into this, but not Ultron.

It’s a fascinating concept, however, and I enjoyed the movie a lot (despite a few minor issues), so it's highly likely that I might use it for inspiration in the future.
I hope you’re still enjoying this story and will stick with me for the rest of the journey. Thank you all for the amazing comments you keep leaving me, you guys are the best :)

Chapter 27 will be posted next Friday or Saturday.
The Offer

Chapter Summary

“That machine in your chest.” Vedius gestured toward the shining white circle. “It clearly bothers you. I could help you get rid of it for good.”

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: This chapter takes some liberties with the human anatomy, so please suspend your disbelief a bit. I’ll do a more in-depth explanation of my reasoning at the end of this chapter.

A thank you belongs, as always, to my beta InsanitysxCreation, for all the help and feedback she gave me on this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“What would you say if I told you that I can help you get rid of that device in your chest?” Vedius asked, in a tone that one uses for discussing golf stats at a Sunday brunch, instead of Earth-shattering revelations.

Tony froze with a screwdriver in his hand, staring at the old man in disbelief. Several seconds passed in silence as Tony wondered whether this was real, or if the old man was a hallucination caused by a delayed reaction to one of the potions.

“Um, what?” he asked finally, because there was no way that he’d heard that right.

“That machine in your chest.” Vedius gestured toward the shining white circle. “It clearly bothers you. I could help you get rid of it for good.” Since he looked pretty real, Tony concluded that this was a thing that was really happening.

A thousand thoughts flashed through Tony’s mind at that moment: the desire to believe the old man’s words warring with his mistrust and the instinctive need to hide his secrets away from the world. On the one hand, he would love nothing more than to get rid of the arc reactor. It might have become part of his identity over the years, but it was still a foreign object and a potential risk to his life. Yeah, it would be nice to be able to live without it, but on the other hand, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to trust the old mage with this. After all, he had only known the man for a few days. Giving him this much trust so soon seemed...ill-advised.

The healer’s expression softened slightly in face of Tony’s confusion and he pulled back the nearest chair, sitting down at the table opposite Tony.

“I am not going to pressure you into this,” he said gently. “This is merely an offer from a friend. If you do not wish to undergo the procedure, I will understand.” His soothing tenor washed over Tony like a balm, and, despite his wariness, Tony felt himself relax a little, some of the tension leaving his shoulders as he contemplated his options.
Tony had roughly a million questions that he wanted to ask at that moment, but one was the most prominent.

“Why are you doing this? I mean, I’m a guy you just met. You have no ties to me, no…obligation.” He tried to search for words that would best convey his meaning. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s great that you’re willing to do this, but why?” Because there had to be a reason for his offer, something that the guy could get out of this. Why would he offer to do it, otherwise? Nobody did things for free in Tony’s experience. It was always quid pro quo, favor for favor. Everything had a price tag attached somewhere - one just had to find it.

“Because you are important to Loki,” Vedius said simply, smiling a little at Tony’s surprise. “Even a blind man could see that he loves you. And before you say anything - no I am not going to try and come between you two. I am no fool - I can see that you make him happy, so I have no reason to try and interfere. And since it was his wish that I offer this to you, I am offering.”

“Loki was the one who came up with the idea?” Tony asked for clarification.

“Yes,” Vedius confirmed. “He first mentioned the idea this morning, but after your return from your walk,” he gave Tony a knowing look, “he came to me again, this time to plead with me on your behalf. I have no idea what you did to him,” and it was clear that he didn’t wish to know, either, “but he looks happier than I have ever seen him before. You are clearly a good influence on him, which is why I am willing to do this for you. And for him.”

That was…wow. Tony had no idea where to begin. There were so many issues to address. The source of Loki’s happiness seemed like the easiest part to explain, but Tony had no idea if this guy was aware of Loki’s real identity. If he wasn’t, it would be a dick move on Tony’s part to accidentally out Loki like that. Not wanting to fuck this up, Tony decided to feel out the ground first.

“I didn’t do anything to him, really,” Tony told him with a small shake of his head. “He just confided in me with something and was pleasantly surprised when I didn’t react like the racist dicks he grew up with.”

“Ah.” Vedius’s eyes lit up in understanding. “So that’s what it was. I wondered whether you knew about that. This explains a lot.”

Tony shrugged, his gaze briefly flickering to his hands as he remembered the deep blue color of Loki’s skin.

“Yeah, I guess so. I mean, I’ve known about the whole adoption thing for a while, but I never had the visual to go with it. Now I do.”

“You do not seem too shocked,” Vedius remarked.

“What’s there to be shocked about?” Tony raised both his hands, illustrating his words with animated gestures. “Yeah, it does look a bit…exotic, but it’s not like he had a personality makeover or something. He’s still the same guy, just with a different paintjob than was advertised.” He paused briefly and put down the screwdriver, getting it out of the way before he accidentally jabbed himself in the throat with it. “And anyway, it would be pretty hypocritical of me to have issues with this when one of my closest friends is a meek little scientist who can turn into an angry green giant at the drop of a hat. That’s one hell of a change. This? This is cosmetic. No big deal.”

Vedius gazed at him for a long time, until Tony started to feel uncomfortable with the scrutiny. Finally the healer gave him a small smile, and his entire face seemed to soften a little.
“You are a strange man, Tony Stark, but I think I finally see why he likes you so much.” He leaned
forward, propping his elbows on the table. “You still have not answered my original question,
though. Do you want my help?”

Tony hesitated, weighing his options.

“Let’s say, purely hypothetically, that I decided to go for this. You could really do it?” He gave the
old man a skeptical look.

The healer responded with a slow, measured nod.

“Yes, I am fairly confident that I could heal you, with Loki’s help.”

Tony couldn’t help but still feel skeptical about this whole thing.

“No offense, I’m sure you’re great and all, but...do you have any idea what exactly this would take?
How much work it would be? You know, there’s a reason why I haven’t had it removed yet, even
though I have access to the best doctors on Earth.”

“Why don’t you tell me, then?” Vedius beckoned Tony to speak. “Enlighten me.”

Tony’s first knee-jerk instinct was to clam up and say nothing, but reason prevailed in the end – after
all, how could the guy decide whether he would be able to do it if he had no idea what exactly he
would have to be doing? Besides, what harm was there in telling him? He was a healer, a doctor.
These guys knew how to keep a secret - and even if he didn’t, who the hell would he tell? From the
look of things, he hadn’t left this world in centuries. And nobody local would have any interest in the
medical history of a random dude from Earth.

Oh, what the hell, Tony thought.

“Okay, then.” He took a deep breath. “I won’t go into too much detail, but basically, a few years ago
I got caught in a blast from an explosive weapon that someone shot at me. I was wearing a
bulletproof vest at the time, but it didn’t do shit to protect me against the explosion and I got
bombarded by a ton of shrapnel. The guys who attacked me then dragged me into a cave somewhere
and forced a doctor that they were holding prisoner to perform an operation on me to try and get the
shrapnel out before I die. The shrapnel are these tiny, extremely sharp pieces of metal, really tricky to
extract without damaging the surrounding tissue. A lot of them were right next to my heart, which
made the operation risky as hell, and since the guy didn’t exactly have the best equipment on hand,
he didn’t manage to get them all. So, to prevent them from moving around, he did the next best thing
and stuck a battery-powered magnet in my chest.

“This,” he tapped the arc reactor with his fingers, “is an improved version of that magnet that I
created later. It keeps the shrapnel bits from reaching my heart and tearing it to shreds. It works pretty
well, all things considered, but I can’t say I would be sorry to see it go.” He sighed, meeting the
healer’s eyes. “Now for the hard bit. The guy who put this in explained to me in detail what he had
done to be able to install this, so I have a pretty good idea of what’s missing from my chest. And let
me tell you, it’s a lot.”

“How much?” Vedius asked quietly.

Tony grimaced, unconsciously fisting the fabric of his shirt in his hand.

“Well, from what he explained, to make enough room for the device, he had to cut out a small piece
of my lungs on each side. My breastbone is gone, too, obviously, along with parts of my ribs. The
arc reactor sits right on top of my heart, acting as a life support system of sorts. It’s…complicated.”
He realized that he was clutching at the tunic over the arc reactor and made the effort to let go, picking up a random armor part instead to keep his hands busy. “Now that I think about it, the guy who did this was a fucking miracle worker for being able to pull this off. He had to perform the operation in a cave, in the dark, with only minimal tools, and somehow he still managed to save my life.” Tony shook his head. “Honestly, to this day I still have no idea how I’m even alive after all that. But somehow he did it and here I am.”

“Where is he now?”

“Dead,” Tony said, seeing no point in sugarcoating it. “He sacrificed himself to give me a chance to escape.” And even six years later, that memory still stung. Tony’s gaze turned distant as he revisited his memories of Ho Yinsen - of evenings spent chatting over the blueprints; of a pleasant, slightly accented voice telling Tony that he could do more, be more; of steady hands that had saved his life and given him hope for a new beginning.

“He was the first person to show me that I can be something better than a spoiled playboy with too much money on his hands. I mean, I’m still kind of a dick and the money isn’t going anywhere, either, but at least now I’m trying to make up for the scores of people that my weapons have killed.” Tony grimaced. “Or, at least, I was trying, until a bunch of assholes blew up my house.” He shook himself out of the memories. “I guess you can say that in a way, this thing is my friend’s legacy, the only thing I have left of him. However, it’s also a huge security risk for me, so I’d love to have it gone, if possible. That being said, I’m not sure if your magic mojo is up to snuff. Removing this won’t be a walk in the park, you know.”

“I am aware,” Vedius answered. “I will have to consider all this carefully. However, I am sure that with proper preparation and with some help from Loki, I should be able to restore you back to health. Don’t you think so, Loki?” he raised his voice a little, but nothing happened. Vedius sighed, shooting the door an exasperated look. “Loki, my boy, stop loitering behind the door and do come inside, will you? I know you are there, hovering in the corridor. There’s no need to spy on us when you can be in the room with us.”

A few seconds passed, then the door opened and Loki slipped inside the room, looking completely unruffled about the fact that he had just been caught snooping.

“I thought you two would prefer to have some privacy for this discussion.”

“Right,” Tony said, not bothering to hide the sarcasm in his voice. “And it has totally nothing with your love for eavesdropping on other people’s conversations. Anyway, come on in. Since this thing was your idea, you might as well contribute.”

Loki hesitated briefly, but eventually he closed the door behind him leaned on the wall next to it. Vedius threw him a knowing look.

“Well?” Loki said after a minute of silence, trying to make his voice sound as uninterested as possible. “Are you going to accept our offer?”

Tony’s eyes flickered between the two of them and he barely suppressed a sigh. They were both looking at him with such expectation in their eyes that it was all he could do not to start screaming
from all the pressure.

“Just…let me think about it for a bit, ok?” Tony opted for the most neutral answer. It had totally nothing to do with the fact that the idea of having people use magic to mess with his body was freaking him out just a little bit. Not to mention the fact that the operation would essentially remove the biggest anti-magic defence he had. So he wasn’t lying when he said: “It’s a great offer, but I’m still not entirely on board with the whole magic thing. I’m gonna need some time to figure this out.”

Loki looked a little disappointed but eventually nodded, knowing by now that there was no way he could push Tony into doing something he didn’t want. Vedius, on the other hand, seemed completely unsurprised by Tony’s reaction.

“Very well. Let me know if you change your mind about this decision.” He stood up from the table and gestured for Loki to follow him. “Come, Loki, let us leave your friend alone to think. If you are feeling idle, you can help me with the dinner preparations.”

“I will come in a moment,” Loki promised. He stayed behind, waiting until Vedius closed the door behind him, then peeled himself away from the wall and walked over, stopping next to the table to hover over Tony impatiently. “Why won’t you let us help you?” There was a small, unhappy frown between his brows. “I know that the device bothers you. I have seen it with my own eyes.”

“I’m not saying I won’t do it,” Tony told him. He dropped the armor piece on the table and ran a hand through his hair. “I just need some time to think this over. It’s a pretty major decision and there are a lot of things that could go wrong. I wanna make sure that I don’t fuck this up.”

Loki gave him a long, searching look before he stepped closer and propped his hands on the table, leaning into Tony’s space.

“Stark,” he said, then softened his voice a little. “Anthony. What are you so afraid of?”

Tony let out a small laugh, his lips twisting into a self-deprecating smile.

“Do you really have to ask? You know I’m still not quite on board with the whole magic thing. Sure, it’s awesome and all, but…conjuring up a flame is one thing and growing back half my chest cavity is another.” He dropped his gaze to his lap, twirling a small wrench in his hands. “I don’t know, it feels…unnatural.”

“You did not have such objections when I healed you before,” Loki argued.

“Yeah, that was because I was bleeding to death. It’s hard to protest when you’re focusing all your energy on trying not to pass out.”

“How about the travel here?” Loki insisted. “You seemed to enjoy that.”

“Yeah, that was kinda cool,” Tony admitted. “Look,” he added when Loki kept giving him that unhappy look, “I’m working on this, okay? Give me time.”

Loki still looked reluctant, but he eventually nodded. “Very well. How much time do you need?”

“Til morning?” Tony guessed. “I want to finish the suit first. Once I’m done with that, I’ll give you your answer.”

“Please do,” Loki said. “And remember that you likely will not get a chance like this again. Unless you somehow manage to convince the healers of Asgard to take you into their care, there is no one else in the Nine Realms capable of curing something like this.”
“Yeah, I kinda gathered that,” Tony told him. Loki looked at him for a moment longer before he straightened up.

“Very well, I will let you work.”

He turned to leave, but before he could reach the door, something occurred to Tony. “Hey!” he called after the demigod, making him turn around. Tony stood up, putting the tools he’d been playing with back on the table. “Why are you doing this, anyway? It’s obvious that this is a huge deal for the old guy. Why would you convince him to do this?”

“Because I wish to give this to you,” Loki said softly, coming back to stand in front of Tony. “I have little left to give in this world – without my position on Asgard, there is not much I can reward you with. Before, I would have bestowed upon you entire kingdoms, riches untold, or a lofty title, but now I am little more than a beggar, living off the kindness of others. Everyone else has turned their back on me, renounced me, and would sooner spit on me than help me, but you, you welcomed me into your home even when I was your enemy. You were willing to work for me, to help me, even though you had no idea if you would be able to create what I asked of you.”

Loki crossed the few remaining inches between them and raised a hand to Tony’s cheek, cupping his jaw.

“You gave me your attention, your affection, but most of all, you gave me your trust. You trusted me to hold the shield on you when we attacked the base. You trusted me to take you somewhere safe, even though you did not know where I was planning to go. I might have taken you straight to your enemies. I might have betrayed you. I might have killed you. And yet you put your life in my hands, because I asked you to. But most of all, you showed me this.” Loki brushed his other hand over Tony’s arc reactor, but pulled it away a second later when the metal started sucking away his magic.

“No, wait,” Tony said, catching Loki’s hand before he could pull it away completely. He pressed it back against the reactor. “I want to see you.” He didn’t have to specify just what exactly he wanted to see. Loki gave him a reluctant nod and left his hand there, letting the device drain his magic away.

Tony watched the transformation with fascination, marveling at the way the pallor of the skin changed into dark blue. The hand he was holding turned a little colder, the skin a little rougher, and Tony ran his thumb over it, tracing the swirling lines around Loki’s knuckles.

“No one ever trusts me,” Loki continued in a low voice. “They always assume I’m lying, or trying to manipulate them, even when I am not. It gets…tiring. after a while, to have everyone look at me with suspicion. If the people of Asgard had known what I was, they would have shunned me completely, just for being born.” He looked down on his blue hands, eyeing the blue shade of his skin with distaste. “And yet you do not mind. You know who I am, you have seen my true form and barely blinked an eyelash.” Gently, Loki eased his hand from underneath Tony’s and pulled it away from the arc reactor, only to raise it up to cup the other side of Tony’s face, holding his head between this palms. Loki’s blood-red eyes were fixed on Tony’s face, gazing at him with a mix of awe and affection. “You have no idea how extraordinary you are, how much you have given me.”

And that was the moment when Tony finally understood what Loki was trying to tell him. This was the same feeling Tony had had on the night of their reunion, after Loki had given him that “you’re still kind of an asshole, but I’m gonna stay with you anyway” speech.

Acceptance.

Loki was feeling acceptance for the what might well be the first time in his life and apparently he was completely blown away by it. Tony couldn’t blame him for it – after all, finding out that your parents had been lying to you for a thousand years must have been one hell of a shock. According to
some of his stories, Loki had been brought up with tales of how the Frost Giants were brainless murderous monsters - it was no wonder that he hadn’t been jumping for joy when he’d found out that he was in fact one of them.

And it was probably pretty hard to take his parents’ declarations of affection at face value, when they had effectively spent several centuries by telling him that he was a monster. No wonder he was fucked up.

“So this is offer to fix me up is what?” Tony asked, just to be sure that he hadn’t misunderstood.

“It is a gift.” Loki brushed his thumb over Tony’s cheekbone in a gentle caress. His skin was rapidly changing back, blue getting covered up by pale beige once more, red eyes turning into green and Tony watched the change with fascination. “A reward for everything you have done for me, everything you are going to do. I cannot give you mountains of gold, or a floating palace in the stars, but I can help you become whole again.” He let his other hand drop back to Tony’s chest, to trace the edge of the reactor with his fingertips. Tony sucked in a breath but remained still, waiting for Loki to finish. “Will you let me do this for you? Will you let me help you get rid of this burden?”

He stared into Tony’s eyes imploringly, all his focus on trying to persuade Tony to accept his offer.

“You can really do this?” Tony checked for the last time. Loki gave him a confident nod.

“Yes. Yes, we can. There is very little that magic cannot accomplish, when wielded with the right mindset.”

Tony hesitated for another moment before he finally gave in, feeling his uncertainty crumble under the affection shining in Loki’s eyes.

“Just let me finish the suit, okay?” he told Loki, raising his own hand to grip the one that Loki had on his jaw. He gave it a small squeeze. Loki’s grin widened until it looked big enough to split his face.

“Thank you,” he muttered and leaned to kiss Tony, pouring all his joy and affection into the press of lips. He pulled back after a minute, leaning his forehead against Tony’s. “Thank you. I will make sure you don’t regret this.” He gave Tony one last kiss before he pulled away completely and set off toward the door again. “I will leave you alone to finish your work. Let me know when you are ready.”

And with that he walked out of the room, leaving Tony alone with his half-finished suit. Tony raised a hand to his lips, wondering what the hell had just happened. In the span of less than fifteen minutes, Tony had gone from being on the fence to Team Magic, and all that because Loki had batted his lashes at him. Tony would be appalled by that, if he didn’t know that he could manipulate Loki just as easily, if he wanted to. It was a weird, double-sided weakness they had going on here, both of them ridiculously susceptible to the other’s wishes, but - since they both seemed to wield it equally - Tony found that he didn’t mind all that much.

If this were happening a few years ago, he would be horrified that he had let someone get so deep under his skin, but now? He didn’t care. Sure, it might be risky to let someone so close, but then, relationships always were. And the distant potential for mutual destruction paled in comparison to what they had. Trusting someone was scary as hell, but – as Tony was beginning to discover – it actually paid off sometimes.

Yeah, Tony concluded as he bent over the half-finished suit again. Acceptance was one hell of a drug.
Tony didn’t go to sleep that night. Both Loki and Vedius had taken one look at him and left him alone after dinner, letting him work in peace and he was glad for that. The faint ache in his head had grown into a full-blown headache over the course of the night, pounding at his temples like a thousand hammers and he cursed a blue streak under his breath as he tried to put the last pieces of the suit in place. He would have happily murdered someone for a pot of coffee – or a bottle of whiskey, for that matter – at that moment. Either one would have been fine, to stave off the withdrawal symptoms, but as it was, he had neither and he wasn’t about to go beg the healer for a bottle of booze. That would be fucking pathetic.

So here he was, trying to reprogram the suit and fighting a headache the size of the moon at the same time. He felt like hell, but he wasn’t about to take a break – he was fully aware that the withdrawal symptoms would only get worse the longer he was without his liquid source of pick-me-up. At least his hands weren’t shaking yet, so that was something.

As it turned out, putting the suit together had been the easy part. The programming was proving to be a bitch, especially since he didn’t have a computer on hand, but he wasn’t a genius for nothing. He’d been able to build a functional suit of armor in a cave, for fuck’s sake – programming the A.I. in the suit to full capacity with nothing but a cell phone on hand shouldn’t be too hard. Even so, it still took him most of the night to have it up and running. By the end of it he felt shaky and exhausted and his head was killing him, but his eyes still lit up with that special kind of satisfaction when he clapped his hands and the suit came to life before him, greeting him with the mechanical voice that was almost-JARVIS-but-not-quite.

“Welcome back, Sir.”

“Yeah, you too, buddy,” Tony muttered, slumping down in his chair. He wiped a hand over his face, rubbing at his eyes. The smart thing right now would be to go to sleep, catch a few Z’s before the inevitable magical reconstruction, but his mind still felt too jittery to rest. So instead of crawling into the nearby bed, Tony stood up and clapped his hands again, grinning like a loon when the suit opened up for him.

It unfolded like a flower, panels sliding smoothly out of the way to make room for him and Tony stepped toward it without hesitation, letting it envelop him like a second skin. Yeah, going for a flight probably wasn’t the wisest thing right now, especially since Loki had stressed that they needed to keep a low profile, but Tony couldn’t resist. It had been several days since he’d last flown and it was starting to feel like the walls of the room were closing down around him, imprisoning him in place and he just needed to get away for a second, to give the finger to gravity and leave his worries behind. Flying always improved his mood and good mood something that was seriously needed right now.

His head was still pounding as he walked out of the house and into the darkness of the hour before dawn, but he ignored the pain, too excited by the prospect of being able to fly again. He kicked off as soon as he could, soaring into the air and fuck yeah, this was amazing. Tony made a lazy lap over the forest, watching the sleeping town below. He was almost ready to land again when he got an idea. Using the data from the suit, he turned around and accelerated, shooting toward the place where they had first landed with Loki.

As far as he was aware, Loki hadn’t gone to retrieve the helmet yet. Tony still privately thought that the thing looked completely ridiculous, but even if it was ugly as hell, it probably wasn’t smart to just leave it lying around like that. He had no idea if this was some sort of standard-issue thing on Asgard or if Loki had had it custom made, but if someone found it, it might bring them a hell of trouble.
Better pick it up before some enterprising shepherd or hunter stumbled upon it.

Without an unconscious guy in his arms, the journey took him less than two minutes. Tony landed on the edge of the forest, looking around and sure enough, the helmet was still there, lying in the mud where he had dropped it. He made his way over to it, his feet sinking a little into the soft earth, but before he could pick it up, he caught sight of the view and stopped, looking around. Tony hadn’t paid much attention to his surroundings before, what with him being in pain and Loki almost dying, but now he was here alone, surrounded only by darkness and quiet, with no one to disturb him.

Turning off the HUD, Tony pulled off his helmet and tipped his head back, staring at the sky above.

He was standing near the summit of a forest-covered hill. Everywhere around him, forests stretched as far as the eye could see, covering the slopes of gentle, rolling hills. There were no signs of civilization in sight, no lights or smoke, just rows of trees and the occasional rock. A light breeze blew through the trees, bringing the smell of tree sap, grass and wet earth.

And over all that, the sky stretched overhead, shining with millions of stars. Tony had never seen many stars in L.A. (or New York for that matter), the sky there too polluted by light from the city to allow him to see much. Here, however, there were thousands of them as far as the eye could see - shining pinpricks of light that filled the sky from horizon to horizon. Tony had never had much interest in astronomy, so he didn’t know any of their names, but even if he had, it wouldn’t have done him much good, because the sky looked different here than it did on Earth. The shapes of the constellations were new, unfamiliar, and he had no idea what any of them meant.

If he were a more contemplative sort, the sight might have inspired him to start philosophizing about the insignificance of man, or the eternity of time, but as it was, it just made Tony feel weirdly alone and annoyed with the world. Here he was, millions of miles from home, stuck on an alien world full of trees and magic - something that many of Earth’s scientists would give an arm and leg to see - and he couldn’t even enjoy the view properly because his head was hurting like a motherfucker. He couldn’t take a picture for his science buddies, either, because his phone battery was dead and he hadn’t given this suit the recording function.

Another wave of pain shot through his head, making him faintly nauseous and Tony cursed, jamming the Iron Man helmet back onto his head. Then he bent down and picked up Loki’s discarded helmet, trying to ignore the smears of blood all over it. He should be getting back soon, anyway, before anyone noticed he was gone. The sky was slowly changing overhead, turning from dark, inky blue to pale pink and there was a danger that someone might see him if he lingered around for too long. He kicked off, clutching the horned helmet in his hand.

As he flew, his mind kept straying back to Loki’s offer. Tony had no idea how Loki had managed to come up with it – after all, Tony had never once mentioned that he wanted to get rid of the reactor. Loki must have picked up on that over time, which wasn’t all that surprising, really – Loki was a pretty smart guy and it wasn’t as if Tony was subtle about his discomfort with having a large glowing target painted in the middle of his chest. Still – idle wish was one thing, reality another.

Over the years, he’d thought many times about getting the arc reactor removed, but there was no technique on Earth that could restore him to his previous state. Even if someone managed to remove the shrapnel from his chest by some miracle, he would still end up with a gigantic gaping hole in his ribcage.

Unless they used magic, that is.

As much as Tony disliked the idea of someone using magic to mess with his body, he had to admit that the healer was probably his best shot at this. He would probably never get a chance like this again and no matter what he might claim, he really didn’t look forward to spending the rest of his life
as a cyborg. Besides, it was only a matter of time before some bad guy figured out what the reactor was and how to take it out and when that happened, Tony would be fucked.

So yeah, Loki’s offer was probably the best chance he was going to get at this. As much as Tony hated to admit it, this was one of the few things he would never be able to do on his own. Was it really so bad to accept help that was offered this freely?

And anyway, Tony was still supposed to make that armor for Loki – maybe he could take this as payment for making the thing. After all, it wasn’t as if Loki had given him any money for all the work. Really, this was as good a deal as he could get. He’d be an idiot to refuse.

Tony landed back in the garden, with Loki’s helmet clutched firmly under his arm. He stood there for a moment, enjoying the tranquility of the pre-dawn hour before he shook himself out of his reverie and went back inside. The house was still dark and quiet, the only light coming from the kitchen window. Tony ignored that for now, heading back to the room where he’d left his tools. He put Loki’s helmet on the table and stepped back to give the armor enough space to peel off him. The suit ended up standing in the corner like a silent guardian, watching him creepily with its empty visor as Tony cleared up his tools, packing everything back into the backpack.

Only when he was finally ready did he walk out, heading for the kitchen. Vedius was already awake, stirring something that smelled like cinnamon in a large pot over an open fire. He looked up when Tony entered, the question in his eyes loud and clear.

“Have you decided already?” he asked Tony, not pausing the stirring motion.

“Yeah,” Tony said. He took a deep breath, steeling himself for the finality of his decision. “Let’s do this.”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

I did some internet research on the topic of the arc reactor, because I wanted to be as accurate as possible, and was very surprised to find that nobody seems too interested in figuring out how the hell the reactor fits into Tony’s chest cavity. If I were a medically-inclined person, I would be all over this stuff, but for some reason, people don’t seem to care. Considering how obsessive people can get while discussing the smallest minutiae of their favourite fandoms, this was a bit disappointing.

Left to my own devices, I perused a ton of anatomical pictures and articles and concluded that the reactor probably sits right on top of Tony’s heart. I didn’t expect it to, since in the first Iron Man movie Pepper shoved a whole hand into Tony’s chest and seemed to reach pretty deep, but anatomy-wise, there’s not enough space inside the chest to shove the heart aside and insert such a huge tube somewhere next to the heart.

If I got it wrong, feel free to correct me in the comments. I’m not a doctor, or an engineer, so I might make mistakes when writing about technical stuff like this.

Thank you, as always, for your wonderful feedback. You guys are amazing! :)

Chapter 28 will be posted on next Friday or Saturday.
The first thing Tony saw when he opened his eyes was gold. A golden glow filled his vision, enveloping him from all sides, stretching above him in a shining dome of light. Tony blinked at the ceiling, feeling confused. Why was he lying down? What had he been doing before he’d passed out? He made a move to sit up but his body refused to cooperate, his limbs still heavy with sleep. Or was it sleep, really? Something about this whole situation felt vaguely...unnatural. There was a light buzzing under his skin, a soft hum that seemed to be slowly fading with each passing second, but which unnerved Tony nonetheless.

Before he could open his mouth to ask what the hell was going on, Loki’s face appeared in his field of vision.

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” the demigod said, the relief in his voice unmistakable. “I was beginning to wonder whether you were going to sleep forever.”

“What-” Tony’s voice was hoarse from misuse when he tried to speak and he licked his lips, clearing his throat before he tried to talk again. “What happened?”

“You don’t remember?” Loki asked with a small frown. Tony let his gaze slide over the golden field above him and the walls of the familiar healing room, trying to puzzle out what had been going on. Bit by bit, the memories came back to him – Loki’s offer, finishing the armor, conversations about the procedure. The last thing he remembered had been Loki’s worried face leaning over him when he’d pulled out the arc reactor. After that, he had nothing.

“You…performed the operation?” Tony tried, a little uncertainly. “Did it succeed?”

Loki’s concerned expression cleared at once, his lips pulling into a small, pleased smile.

“Yes, it did. It was more difficult than Vedius anticipated and you almost died on us twice,” he frowned at the memory, a shadow of unease flickering in his eyes, “but we were successful in the end. Both the device and the iron shards are gone from your chest.”

And all right, Tony really needed to see that. He tried to sit up again and this time he had better luck. He managed to lift himself halfway up before Loki leaned down and slid one of his hands around
Tony’s shoulders, helping him sit up completely. He didn’t let go once Tony was finally upright, keeping his arm wrapped around Tony’s upper back to support him. With impatient hands, Tony tugged at the bandages around his chest, eager to see whether Loki was really telling the truth. Loki was happy to help him, untying the knots on his side to make the process easier for Tony.

Tony tore away the last few layers of gauze over the center of his chest and froze in disbelief when the last strip of cloth fell off, revealing the flawless, unmarked skin underneath. There was no trace that he had ever had a piece of metal installed in his chest – no arc reactor, no hole, no huge, ugly scar – just smooth, tan skin and ribs and muscles. Slowly, cautiously, Tony raised his hands and touched the sternum with his fingertips, wanting to make sure that this was real. The skin underneath his fingers was warm and solid and gave way a little when he pressed harder against it, letting him feel the hard bone underneath.

Holy shit, they really did it! Tony thought in wonder. They had really managed to get rid of the arc reactor and all the accompanying nastiness.

He looked up at Loki, who was still leaning over him with that indulgent smile, and did the only logical thing he could at that moment – he caught Loki’s face between his hands, pulled him closer, and kissed him, breathing all his joy and amazement into the kiss. Loki made a small, happy sound against his lips and kissed back, looking pleased with the reception of his gift.

Tony was just contemplating whether he should pull Loki onto the bed with him, to show him just how happy he was with his new upgrade, when the door to the room opened and Vedius walked in, halting in the doorway when he saw them. Tony and Loki pulled apart at the interruption, but didn’t let go of each other just yet. Instead Loki just leaned back a little, keeping his hand on the small of Tony’s back.

The healer took one look at them and shook his head in resignation, his lips pulling into a small, amused smile.

“Am I right in assuming that our gift meets your approval?” he asked Tony.

Tony looked down at the smooth skin of his sternum again, still not quite able to believe that they had really done it. It was one thing to talk about it in abstract terms and another to have the results right in front of his eyes. He met the healer’s gaze again, trying to convey his gratitude through his eyes alone. He didn’t dare open his mouth yet because there was a danger that if he tried to use words to express how much this meant to him, he might start babbling and never stop. Instead he just smiled, pressing a hand to his repaired chest.

“Yeah, it’s…” He cleared his throat when his voice wavered a little. He told himself that it was from misuse. “Thank you.”

Vedius gave him a nod in answer, satisfied with the answer. Which was great, because Tony felt a little overwhelmed right now. His body was buzzing with new energy and the lingering residue of the healing magic, his head was full of ideas of what he could do, now that he wasn’t limited by a glowing magnet in his chest, and it felt like the whole world was opening before him, full of untold possibilities.

He waited until he was sure that his legs would be able to carry him, then turned sideways on the bed and slowly slid his legs over the edge of the bed. The healing bed was over three feet high and his legs ended up dangling a few inches above the floor, which would normally irritate him, but he couldn’t really bring himself to care about right now because holy shit he actually had a functional ribcage again. The golden field around him dissipated completely once he disrupted it and Tony looked around, checking the state of his stuff. The suit was still standing in the corner, ready to use,
“Where’s my arc reactor?” Tony asked.

“Right there.” Vedius gestured towards the table underneath the window. “Neither of us found contact with it pleasant, so we put it aside the moment it was extracted from your body.”

Feeling pretty steady by now, Tony slowly slid down from the bed and was pleasantly surprised to find that the motion didn’t make him dizzy. He waited for a few heartbeats, just to make sure that he wasn’t going to faceplant onto the floor, but when his vision stayed clear, he concluded that yeah, he was probably going to be ok. Loki finally pulled his hand away from his back, letting Tony stand on his own.

The table with the reactor stood only a few feet away, so Tony walked over to it and picked it up, turning the metallic tube over in his hands. The dull grey casing that used to serve as a container for the reactor was over three inches long and despite obvious attempts to clean the blood from it, there were still a few spots smeared with specks of dark brown rust.

“Wow, I’ve almost forgotten how big this thing was. It must have reached halfway down my chest.” He traced a finger over the glowing metal on top, feeling the familiar tingle in his fingertips. “I guess it’s a good thing no one like Thor or Cap ever punched me in the chest when I was out of the suit. That would have rammed this thing right through my heart and into my spine.” He grimaced and shuddered a little at the idea. “Yeah, that’s not a pretty thought.”

He was so absorbed in examining the reactor that he didn’t even notice the look of horror that appeared on Loki’s face at his words. Oblivious, Tony continued: “I can’t believe I had this inside me. Where the hell did Yinsen get it, anyway? I doubt that the terrorists had any medical-grade steel on hand.” He remembered the dark, dirty cave and shuddered. “Or not. Better not to examine that particular aspect too closely, or I might find out that this came from one of my own missiles and that would be too much of a mindfuck, even for me. Do you mind if I keep this?” he asked Vedius, raising the reactor into the air.

“By all means,” Vedius told him.

“Cool, thanks. It might come in handy.” Tony wandered over to the other bed to stuff the device into his backpack. The two men were watching him with a mixture of concern and incredulity.

“That tube has been in your chest all this time?” Vedius inquired curiously.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “It’s not like I had the opportunity to get it switched for something better. Any operation involving my chest would have been risky as hell, because taking out the tube would have jostled the shrapnel around and I didn’t want to end up dead, after all the effort I had made to stay alive in the first place. Besides, I didn’t trust anyone with the reactor. I only let Pepper help me exchange the first one for a newer model when it got depleted and it became clear that I wouldn’t be able to do it on my own - and she still freaked out on me and refused to touch it afterwards. So yeah,” he concluded, ignoring Loki’s stare, “the tube is the original version.”

Loki watched him stow the reactor away, his gaze sliding over to the suit.

“I did not want to bring it up before,” he spoke up, “but - how are you going to commandeer your suit of armor without the device? I though the device was what fed power into the suits?”

“Not anymore,” Tony corrected him, striding over to the suit in the corner. He gave MARK XVII a
fond pat on the shoulder, feeling like he was at one of his tech expos, showing off his work. “The earlier models used to have that, because I hadn’t built a reactor into the suits itself yet, but after MARK III, all my suits came with a built-in power source. Having them sapping energy out of me was a pretty stupid idea, because if they ran out of power, I would die. The ones I have now can still tap into my arc reactor, but it’s only as a last resort. One I don’t have anymore.” He trailed off, trying to come up with new ideas to make up for that particular design flaw. He’d have to work on that when he had time.

He was feeling a little jittery, like he’d drunk too much coffee in the span of a few hours and so he started pacing, trying to shake some of that strange, nervous energy off. As he moved, he realized something else. “Oh hey, I can actually breathe like this. Wow.” He stopped walking and focused on the feeling, taking a moment to enjoy the new freedom that his newly-healed chest granted him.

This time he noticed the look that Loki and Vedius exchanged at his words and he turned to them, raising an eyebrow. “What?”

“You had trouble breathing before?” Loki asked carefully. There was an edge to his voice that suggested that he wasn’t very happy about this new discovery. Tony shrugged.

“Well, it’s not like I was suffocating or anything. I could breathe, I just couldn’t exactly run marathons. It’s kinda hard to take a full breath when you have a metal pipe taking up a quarter of your chest cavity.” And when the edges of the ribs sometimes dragged against the metal surface of the pipe when he took in too much air. But Loki didn’t need to know that particular detail. He looked horrified enough as it was. So instead of wallowing in past traumas, Tony made the deliberate effort to keep his voice light. “But hey, I managed. It’s amazing what you can get used to, when you have no other choice.”

“But now you do,” Loki reminded him.

“Yeah.” Tony gave him a grin. “Now I do. Thank you for that.” He made sure to include the old man in the statement.

“You’re welcome,” Vedius replied. “How are you feeling?”

Tony paused, taking a moment to actually pay attention to his body for once.

“Actually, pretty great.” Which was the truth. He hadn’t felt this good, this…healthy, since long before Afghanistan. That reminded him: “Hey, did you heal my headache, too? ‘Cause before we did this, I had the mother of all headaches, but now it’s gone. What did you do?”

“The healing spell repaired your body,” Vedius explained. “Once the golden field is put into place, it heals everything that needs to be healed. Including your head, as it seems.”

“Cool,” Tony muttered, because, really – what is one supposed to say to something like that? Repaired his body, huh? Which meant – did it restore his liver, too? He supposed he’d find out once they got back to Earth. He still felt a little stiff, like he’d been lying in bed for a while, but the light outside suggested that it couldn’t be later than mid-afternoon. “Hey, how long was I out?” he asked.

“Almost three days,” Vedius informed him. Tony’s brain made a distinct pause at that, because holy shit, three days?

“What the hell took so long?”

“The damage to your body was quite extensive and your mortal form does not heal as quickly as those of other beings from the Nine Realms do,” Vedius explained. “The spell is set to break once
the body is fully healed. Your recovery took longer than expected.”

“Huh.” Tony frowned. He gave Loki a look. “Is there anything that humans don’t suck at? Because let me tell you, we really got a short end of the stick with this whole ‘inferior strength, slow healing, short lifespan’ deal.”

Loki smirked. “There is a reason why the Midgardians of old revered us as gods.” At Tony’s scowl, he continued: “But if you must know, you mortals have a great capacity for invention and adaptation. Your world is ever-changing, ever-evolving – every time we visit, your imagination stretches further. And while you improve, the other realms remain frozen in their ways, arrogantly convinced that they have already achieved perfection and that there is no point in changing the old ways.”

“Yeah, I bet your old man was pretty shocked when the Dark Elves went all ‘surprise, motherfucker!’ on his ass,” Tony quipped. He shrugged at Loki’s surprised glance. “Thor told me about the whole Dark Elf clusterfuck when he arrived back to Earth after your ‘death’. I had to get him drunk off his ass first, because he was a blubbering wreck and didn’t seem too eager to confide in me at first. I have no idea why – I mean, I’m awesome. Sure, I might have implied he was a crossdresser when we first met and me ramming his face into a rock probably didn’t inspire too many warm feelings, either, but hey, water under the bridge and all that.

“Anyway,” he continued, trying to ignore the fact that they were both looking at him like he’d just grown a second head. “He came back and we drank for a bit and he told me about the elf attack. And then he kinda tried to strangle me when I insulted your memory,” he told Loki, enjoying the baffled look on the guy’s face. “Yeah, that wasn’t his best moment. He looked about ready to toss me out of that window. Seriously, what is it with you guys and throwing people off buildings?”

And hell yeah, the look that Vedius gave Loki at that was pretty hilarious. “Loki?” he asked slowly, raising his eyebrows. Loki suddenly found a great fascination with examining his shoes.

“It was a battle,” he muttered. “We were enemies at the time.”

“I offered you a drink,” Tony pointed out.

“You were stalling,” Loki shot back with a smirk. “You were trying to keep me occupied while you waited for your ragtag band of heroes to arrive.”

“Yeah and then they did and the Hulk rearranged my floor with your face. Good times.” Tony smiled, remembering the end of that battle. “Hey, and speaking of the Hulk, I think we should probably get back. I’ve been gone for ages. They must be wondering where I am.”

“That might as well be true, but I think your location is the least of their concerns at the moment,” Loki said, wearing a strange expression.

“Why?” Tony demanded. “What is going on? And how do you know what is happening on Earth?” He narrowed his eyes, staring Loki down.

“Magic.” Loki told him with an infuriatingly smug smile, looking completely unmoved by Tony’s attempt at intimidation. “It’s a wondrous thing.”

“You’ve been spying on Earth?” Tony asked in disbelief. “How the hell did you do that from all the way here?”

“Well, there was little else for me to do while you were growing a new ribcage,” Loki said pointedly. “Let’s just say that it has been…interesting.”

“Why don’t I just show you?” Loki suggested. “It will be much easier that way.” He gestured for Tony to follow him and Tony did, feeling way too curious not to. Vedius just shook his head behind them and left them to their own devices.

They passed through the narrow corridor and through the door at the end that led into the garden outside. It was full of light and the sound of chirping birds and Tony had to blink a few times before his eyes adjusted to the change of lighting. Everything smelled like flowers and fresh spring grass and Tony took a deep breath, enjoying the chance to get out of the house for a while. As he was looking around at all the greenery and peacefulness, he had a sudden, horrible thought.

“Hey,” he asked Loki quietly. “I’m not dead, am I? This is not some weird afterlife thing with a magic garden and whatnot?”

Loki paused mid-step and laid a hand on Tony’s arm, giving him an amused smile.

“No, you are not dead. In fact, one could say that you have never been more alive.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” Loki shrugged, but his half-hearted attempt at nonchalance didn’t convince Tony in the slightest.

“You’re such a shitty liar,” Tony told him. “I can’t believe anyone ever fell for this bullshit, because you’re terrible at this.”

Loki’s smirk widened. “That’s only because I’m not trying. But even if I was, you would probably see through my lies anyway, because you know me so well.”

“Yeah, I do,” Tony agreed. “That’s why I know that you’re trying to hide something from me right now. But you know what? I don’t care. If you were trying to kill me, you wouldn’t have bothered to patch me up in the first place, and right now, I don’t really give a fuck about what all this is about. So I’m gonna give it a pass. Now, stop with the cryptic bullshit and show me your magic spying thingy instead.”

“As you wish.” Loki led him to a large rectangular stone table that was standing in the middle of the garden. Vedius probably used it when he was re-potting his plants or something, but right now it had a heavy-looking stone bowl standing on it. It was a foot tall, two feet wide and filled with water, but apart from that, there wasn’t anything remarkable about it.

“Okay, whatever.” Loki led him to a large rectangular stone table that was standing in the middle of the garden. Vedius probably used it when he was re-potting his plants or something, but right now it had a heavy-looking stone bowl standing on it. It was a foot tall, two feet wide and filled with water, but apart from that, there wasn’t anything remarkable about it.

“Yeah, I do,” Tony agreed. “That’s why I know that you’re trying to hide something from me right now. But you know what? I don’t care. If you were trying to kill me, you wouldn’t have bothered to patch me up in the first place, and right now, I don’t really give a fuck about what all this is about. So I’m gonna give it a pass. Now, stop with the cryptic bullshit and show me your magic spying thingy instead.”

“Okay, whatever,” Tony waved a hand. “Show me how it works.”

Without further prompting, Loki gripped the edges of the bowl into his hands and muttered a string of words under his breath. Nothing happened at first, but then the water surface turned black, showing a night sky full of hundreds of stars, even though it was still daylight around them.

Loki reached for one of Tony’s hands and laid it on the rim of the bowl, placing his own hand over
it. Immediately, Tony could feel that faint humming under his skin again, similar to the one he had felt under the golden dome on the bed.

“Since you have no magic of your own, I’m going to be the one to power the spell,” Loki explained. “Now go on, tell the water the name of the person you want to see. If you concentrate on them, a vision will show you what they are doing.”

“You know,” Tony said as he stepped closer to Loki, leaning against his shoulder to gaze into the bowl. “This is some Lord of the Rings shit right here.”

Loki chuckled. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

Honestly, Tony wasn’t too eager to dabble into this magic stuff, but on the other hand, he really wanted to find out what was going on back on Earth. Slowly, reluctantly, he bent over the bowl to stare into its inky depths.

“Virginia Potts,” he said, ignoring Loki’s scowl. He tried to picture Pepper in his mind - imagining her in one of her business suits, scolding him because he had forgotten to sign some Very Important Paper that he couldn’t give two shits about.

The surface of the water rippled then stilled, showing a picture of Pepper sitting in her office. The vision was showing her from above and slightly to the side, making it look like it was a footage from a security camera in the corner of the office, only much better quality. She looked tired and worried, but seemed to be fine otherwise. She was speaking to someone on the phone, frowning at what they were telling her.

“Can I look up more people?” Tony asked. Because as lovely as Pepper was, watching her do paperwork got boring very quickly.

“Yes,” Loki answered. “You only need to focus on the person you wish to see and say their name, the magic will do the rest.”

“Okay, here goes,” Tony muttered before he raised his voice a little. “Steven Rogers.”

The picture changed, showing Steve standing in the shade of trees in the middle of some graveyard. There was an unfamiliar black guy standing by his side and they were chatting, looking weirdly cheerful for two people standing at the foot of someone’s grave. Even from a casual observation, Tony could tell that they were friends. They had an easy air about them that spoke of camaraderie and trust, but as far as Tony had been aware, Steve’s only friends were the Avengers, and a few guys from SHIELD. How the supersoldier had managed to find someone who was neither was a mystery to Tony. He should really start paying more attention to his teammates. He was feeling horribly out of the loop here.

A closer look at the gravestone by their feet revealed that it was Fury’s grave. So Fury was dead after all. Well, shit.

Tony was about to switch the scene to someone else when another figure walked towards the pair and it took all of Tony’s discipline not to let go of the bowl so he could flip it off.

Fury strolled over to the two men, wearing a pair of fashionable sunglasses and acting like it was no big deal that he was alive. Which it probably wasn’t for them, judging by their lack of surprise, but Tony visibly recoiled from the water, shooting Loki a pissed look.

“That fucker. I called it - I told you he wasn’t dead. And now he’s just strutting around like nothing happened. He’s lucky that Steve seems to be ok, otherwise I’d have to go over there and kill him
with my bare hands.” He would have ranted on, but his torrent of righteous anger got derailed when another figure entered the picture. “Oh look, there’s Natasha.” He watched her walk over and talk to Steve and his mystery companion. Fury strolled away a minute later, casual as you please. The others didn’t seem to care, carrying on with their conversation.

Tony sighed, turning the whole situation over in his head. So, Fury was alive after all. That bastard. Tony was still pissed at him, but his anger was somewhat mitigated by the fact that his teammates were still alive. Which reminded him that he should probably check on the rest.

“Bruce Banner,” he told the mirror. The image rippled again, depicting Bruce in his lab at Stark Tower. Like Pepper, he seemed to look a bit tired and hassled, but otherwise fine. He was going through what looked like HYDRA files on his computer, chewing the end of a pen as he frowned at the screen.

“Thor,” Tony said next. An image of Thor in flight filled the vision, blurring with the speed. The demigod landed in a garden somewhere a few seconds later, dropping the hammer to the ground when Jane Foster emerged from the door of a house. She ran over to greet him, jumping into his arms and Tony cleared his throat when they started kissing passionately. “Okay, we don’t need that visual. Clinton Barton.”

Hawkeye appeared a second later. It was dark when he was, so only his silhouette was visible as he stood hiding behind a chimney on some roof. As they watched, he leaned over, notched an arrow into his bow and took down a shadowy figure that rounded a corner below. Tony watched him for a moment longer, but all he did was lean back and wait.

Just to have his check-up complete, Tony added: “James Rhodes.”

Early morning sun illuminated Rhodey’s figure as he walked through the ruins of what once used to be Tony’s Malibu house. There was a drawn, unhappy expression on his face as he surveyed the devastation – the crumbled walls, the torn out lawn, the burned interior. A police tape encircled the borders of the garden, keeping out a small crowd of journalists and onlookers. Several guys from police and FBI milled around, looking for clues.

“Well, good to know that at least someone seems to give a shit that I’m gone,” Tony said wryly as he watched his best friend search the remains of Tony’s upper living room. “I wonder if they got my message or if they all think I’m dead. But I’m guessing they know I’ve gone into hiding, or they would all look much worse.”

Or so he hoped. It was kind of a shitty thought, to hope that his friends would be more depressed than this if something happened to him, but it was still better than the alternative - that he could die today and nobody would give a shit. Yeah, that was far too depressing to deal with.

His suspicion got confirmed a moment later when Rhodey bent down to examine one of the huge dried bloodstains on the floor. The HYDRA corpses were gone already, probably stored away in some secret government facility somewhere, but the blood was still there, painting the concrete an ugly brown color. Rhodey surveyed the stain with a puzzled frown, the wheels in his mind working furiously as he tried to figure out what had happened there. Tony didn’t blame him – after all, the Iron Man suit never did this much carnage. It killed, sure, but the death it dealt out was quick and relatively mess-free. This, on the other hand, was as far from Iron Man as one could go.

“I wonder how long it will take them to figure out your involvement in this,” Tony told Loki.

“Probably not very long, if your little red-headed spy manages to puzzle together all the clues.” Loki grimaced. “I was not exactly subtle when I fought the attackers at your house. There must be one or
two who managed to escape my wrath and survived long enough to tell someone the tale of my presence at your side.”

“Wonderful,” Tony deadpanned. “Which means that when I go home, I will get at best cross-interrogated, at worst locked up for consorting with an enemy. I suppose I could always try to claim that you put me under some kind of a spell, but that would be kinda shitty towards you,” Tony quickly added before Loki could get huffy. “And since I’m not planning to renounce you or to pretend that this whole thing between us is nothing, I need an alternative plan.” He freed his hand from under Loki’s and stepped back, trying to figure out what to do.

The magic dissipated once the contact between them broke, the buzz fading from his skin and Tony ran a hand through his hair, weighing his options.

“I thought I would just come home and claim that I had hid away somewhere, but there’s no way anyone would believe that now, after what we did to those guys at my house. Which means that I have to figure out what I’m gonna say to them.” He met Loki’s eyes. “Any ideas?”

“Honestly? No,” Loki admitted. It was clear that it cost him a lot of pride to say it. “I never planned on being found out so soon. And if Thor hears that I am alive, it is only a matter of time before the Allfather sends guards after me to drag me back to Asgard.”

“Shit,” Tony breathed. He was thinking furiously, trying to find out an alternative. Which was hard to do when he didn’t have all the information. “Oh hey,” he remembered, “you said that you’ve been watching the events on Earth while I was out of it. What happened with the whole HYDRA thing? Cause it must have gotten sorted out somehow, or my friends wouldn’t look so chill about everything.”

“I have been watching, yes, but I only saw the aftermath of the battle, not the fighting itself. I can only guess what exactly has been going on. As far as I can tell, your enemies have been defeated and both SHIELD and HYDRA have been disbanded. Why don’t I just show you?” Loki suggested. “I do not know who the majority of the people involved are, but you might be able to puzzle it together.”

“Okay,” Tony relented. “Give me the highlight reel.”

Loki gestured for him to come closer again and together they leaned over the basin to watch. Loki closed his eyes, concentrating as he murmured another string of words and a second later the surface of the water changed, playing a series of scenes without sound.

Steve, lying in a hospital with a bandage around his midsection. That unfamiliar guy from the graveyard was sitting by his bedside, talking to him with a smile. Natasha, getting interrogated by a panel of politicians in what looked like the Congress, standing tall and proud as she answered a barrage of questions, dozens of cameras flashing in her face. Pepper, looking devastated as she stood in the driveway of Tony’s destroyed house, surveying the blackened ruins. SHIELD headquarters, overrun with FBI agents. Several helicopters circling over a river, unsuccessfully trying to put out the fire on the burning wrecks of the helicarriers that were sticking out of the water.

“He did it, then,” Tony said when the last image faded, leaving behind only clear water. “Steve managed to stop them. I still have no idea how he did it, but HYDRA is clearly down. Good.” Well, that was one worry off his chest.

Loki let go off the bowl and turned to face Tony instead. “What are you going to do now?”

Tony blew a breath. “Honestly? No idea.” He wandered over to a nearby stone bench and sat down,
trying to sort through the possibilities. “Originally, I planned to go home. You know, wait for you here to recover, than have you drop me off me back home and pretend that I had been holed up in some cave in Siberia and my armor broke and I couldn’t get home earlier, or that HYDRA had held me prisoner in some secret base.” Loki leaned against the table, waiting for Tony’s verdict. “But now? I don’t know.” He propped his elbows on his knees, leaning forward. “I’ve been gone for almost a week. If I came back now, nobody would believe that excuse, especially once they figure out that I’m not on Earth anymore. Which they will, you can count on that. Bruce isn’t a genius for nothing.”

Unable to stay still for long, Tony stood up again and began pacing, his mind running a million miles a minute.

“As it is, it’s highly likely that I will get locked up the moment I touch down on Earth. For them, I would be an unknown variable – I disappeared without a trace, in the middle of a battle, only to appear a week later, acting like it’s no big deal. If they figure out your role in all this, they will either think that I’m under your influence, or that I have switched sides. Either way, they will probably lock me up, at least until they figure out what my deal is.” His lips twisted into a wry smile. “Can’t say I’m looking forward to that.”

“What do you propose we do, then?” Loki asked, cocking his head a little. “I assumed you would be eager to return back home.”

“Yeah, so did I.” Tony ran a hand through his hair again, mentally discarding a dozen options that all depended on his return to Earth. As he was browsing through his ideas, trying to find one that could work, he suddenly remembered the moment from the workshop a few days ago.

“Hey,” Tony said suddenly, taking a few steps toward Loki. “Back when I showed you my first version of your armor, you told me that you could take me somewhere else if it turned out that Earth doesn’t have enough stuff for it. Was that true?”

“Yes, it was,” Loki confirmed. “But why are you- Oh.” His eyes lit up as he tuned in to Tony’s line of thinking.

“Yeah.” Tony met his eyes. “You said it yourself that once Thor figures out you’re alive, half the forces of Asgard will come after your ass. He may not be the brightest tool in the box, but if the other Avengers put two and two together, he’ll be the first person to hear about it. Because of that, you wouldn’t be able to stay on Earth with me anyway once the whole shebang starts. And me – well, if my predictions are correct, I’m gonna be locked up for at least a week before I manage to convince them that I haven’t gone crazy, and even if they do release me, I’ll still be under 24 hour surveillance for a while. So if you want me to make the armor, we have to do it now, because god knows when we’ll have the next opportunity for it.”

Loki frowned, thinking about the idea.

“I might know of a place,” he started slowly. “The workers there have all the materials and tools you could possible need.”

“Well? What’s the catch?” Tony asked because really, there had to be one, or Loki would have suggested going to that place ages ago.

“The problem is,” Loki enunciated carefully, “that they are dwarves. And they hate me.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. This should be good.
“What did you do? Piss into their morning cereal?”

Loki averted his eyes, looking embarrassed.

“I might have stolen something from them. It was a dare that I made with Thor’s friends, but it did not go quite as well as I had planned.”

“That seems to be a theme with you,” Tony couldn’t help the mild jab. Loki shot him a weak glare but didn’t dispute it.

“I have been forbidden from setting foot into their realm.”

“What will they do if you go there anyway?”

“Maybe nothing,” Loki said, but it was clear that he didn’t believe it. “But it is highly likely that it will not be pretty. However, if we do not announce our presence for all the realm to see, there is still chance that it could work. All we need is to find one or two dwarves who would be willing to let you use their workshop.”

“And how are you going to do that, exactly?”

“I do not know yet,” Loki admitted. “I’m going to talk to Vedius, maybe he knows someone who could help.”

“Okay, I’m just gonna go…pack my stuff,” Tony said.

He watched Loki walk back inside house, feeling a little lost. With the work on the armor finished, he had no idea what to do with himself – there was no technology here, or any kind of mechanical instruments that he could play with and amuse himself for a few hours. Everything ran on fucking magic and despite his recent positive experience with it, he still preferred not to come into contact with it if he could help it.

After a moment of idle wandering, Tony ended up back inside the healing room, where he half-heartedly fiddled with the suit as he waited for Loki to figure out what to do about the dwarves. His mind still did a double take every time he thought about that because holy shit, dwarves. But then, how different was that from the myriad of alien critters he had fought before? So they were going to visit the dwarves. Big deal. He had been able to handle magic and sea monsters and space leviathans. He could handle dwarves, too.

Or so he hoped.

His decision not to return to Earth just yet nagged him a little, but to his surprise he found that he was weirdly okay with it. Sure, it was freaky to teleport between worlds and visit dwarves and giants and ancient gods, but after the whole deal with HYDRA and the stress of almost dying several times, this whole travelling sh!t was surprisingly…relaxing. He’d never thought he would apply the word to magic of all things, and yet here he was, hopping around the galaxy with Loki.

In a way, this could be considered a vacation of sorts. There were no enemies to deal with, no conspiracies to uncover – just him and Loki and an impossible task that he was kinda starting to look forward to. Making the armor would be a challenge, sure (especially since no one else had ever made anything like it before, if Loki was to be believed), but it was also an opportunity of sorts – a chance for him to see just how far he was able to go, what kind of things he could create, when he had the right materials at hand.

And really, what was there for him to do on Earth right now? HYDRA had fallen, the helicarriers
were destroyed and all that was left was for the Avengers to pick up the pieces and try to put things into some semblance of order again. Which they weren’t exactly rushing to do, if the images in Loki’s mirror were to be believed. Sure, Loki could have been lying to Tony, showing him made up images to make him want to create the armor instead, but Tony didn’t think so. After everything they’d been through together, Loki wouldn’t manipulate him like this. He might do other things (his recent attempt to talk Tony into removing the arc reactor came to mind), but he wouldn’t lie about anything as important as this.

Not if he wanted Tony to stay with him.

The only thing that sucked about this was the fact that he would not be able to let his friends know that he was okay. Pepper, especially, was probably going out of her mind with worry, considering the circumstances under which Tony had disappeared. But then – he’d left a message, hadn’t he? He’d already told them that he’d be gone for a while. If JARVIS did everything as instructed (which he would, Tony had no doubt about that), the Avengers probably knew about his absence already (and didn’t seem to care, if their demeanor was any indication).

If nobody on Earth missed him and there was nothing pressing he had to do, what harm was there if he stayed away for another week or two? Pepper had Stark Industries firmly in hand and the Avengers seemed to be doing just fine without him. They wouldn’t even notice he was gone. Hopefully.

So yeah, dwarves, Tony thought as Loki walked into the room, his eyes shining with excitement and anticipation. They were going to see the dwarves.

Tony still had no idea what to expect from that, but one thing was certain – whatever the future held in store for them, it would not be boring.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

First off: I’m so sorry for the delay, guys! I got a new job this week and was a bit overwhelmed by life, so I only got to start the editing on this today. Apart from that, the work on the story is progressing pretty well – 32 chapters are now fully finished, with only four more to go. The total estimated length will be about 250K words and I should be finished with the writing by the end of June.

Secondly, I thought I might share some of my thoughts on the Arc Reactor, so you can understand my reasoning for what I did in this chapter. Plenty of people wrote to me to point out that the reactor in Tony’s chest powers his suit. To that I say – I don’t think so. Not anymore, at least.

The first suits were powered by the reactor in his chest, certainly, but I think that the later models all had a built-in reactor of their own. After all - how else would they fly on their own? You’ve got the War Machine suit and the dozens of suits in Iron Man 3 and they are all independent on Tony, with their own reactors to power them. I might be wrong, but I think that Tony had stopped using the reactor in his chest to power the suits at some points, precisely to avoid depleting it and risking another heart attack. If the suits all have independent energy sources, removing the reactor from Tony's chest shouldn't have any impact on his ability to be Iron Man. (And no, my decision to remove it is not
frivolous. Everything in this story happens for a reason.)

Chapter 29 will be posted next Friday or Saturday, depending on when I manage to finish the last edit. Thank you for your comments and support! I really appreciate it :)
“Congratulations,” Loki told him sarcastically, “now every dwarf between here and Asgard knows that we are here.”

Sorry for the delay! I had a busy week and the editing took me a lot longer than I expected. I would have posted it earlier, but I wanted the chapter to be up to my standards. Hence, the delay. Sorry!

“So, dwarves,” Tony said as they walked out of the house and into the garden behind it. By mutual agreement, they had decided not to leave through the front door, to avoid being seen by anyone from the town. Tony was wearing the suit once more, faceplate up and backpack thrown over his shoulder. He stopped by the large stone table and turned, waiting for Loki to join him.

“Dwarves,” Loki confirmed with a small smirk. His armor had been cleaned and polished, removing any traces of blood, but the holes were still there - six gaping wounds marring the otherwise flawless golden surface, their ragged edges standing out in stark contrast to the smooth gleaming metal. Tony’s katana was strapped to Loki’s back, sharpened and ready to use, and Tony felt a strange wave of satisfaction at the sight. Loki came to stand by Tony’s side and turned to face the old healer, who had followed them out of the house to say his goodbyes. “If we’re lucky enough, we might even persuade them to let us stay.”

“Good luck with that,” Vedius wished them. He had already said his goodbyes to Loki in private and since Tony really didn’t want a hug, he was relieved when the man stopped a few feet away, keeping his distance. “The dwarves can be vicious when they want to be, but if you manage to impress them, their assistance could prove invaluable.” His gaze flickered over Tony’s armor, eyeing the shifting plates. “Are you certain that meeting them armed is a good idea?”

Tony shrugged. “Well, they seem to hate Loki’s guts, so I’d say that yeah, it’s a pretty good idea. This way if anything goes wrong, I won’t be caught with my pants down. If the dwarfs get hostile, we’ll just get out of there. And if they’re not, maybe they’ll be so blown away by modern technology that they’ll agree to help. I can always take off the suit later.”

Vedius didn’t look entirely convinced but didn’t disagree, either. After a moment of hesitation, he gave Tony a reluctant nod and turned to Loki instead.

“I hope you will come visit me again, when you have the time. You know I have always enjoyed your company.”

“I will see what I can do,” Loki told him. “But if Odin doesn’t imprison me, or some alien beast doesn’t kill me again, I might entertain the idea of another visit.”
“You may come as well,” the old man told Tony. “I would like to hear more about how Midgard has changed since my departure all those centuries ago.”

“I’ll bring you a history book next time,” Tony promised him with a grin. “Or a magic-powered iPad with Wikipedia on it. That should keep you entertained for a few years at least. Anyway, we’d better be off.” He quirked an eyebrow at Loki. “You gonna get us out of here or what?”

“Has anyone told you that you can be horribly impatient?” Loki asked, but he was already reaching for Tony’s arm.

“You say that like you don’t enjoy it,” Tony countered and yep, that was definitely a hint of a blush. Loki gave him a scowl, but his eyes were dancing with amusement, a sign that he was enjoying the banter. He managed to tear his gaze away from Tony a second later to address Vedius again. “We’d better be off. If anyone comes here asking for me, you never saw me here. As far as everyone’s concerned, I am dead, and I would like to stay that way for as long as possible.”

He got a nod in response.

“While I very much doubt that anyone will come here, you have my word that I will not tell anyone about your visit,” Vedius assured him. “If Odin wants to find you, he will have to do it without my help.”

“We will be off then,” Loki announced. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“It was my pleasure,” Vedius replied. “Safe travels, and good luck with your negotiations.” He gave them a smile, raising his hand in farewell.

A second later, Loki tugged on Tony’s hand and the house disappeared from view, only to be replaced by now-familiar spot by the forest. Tony looked around, recognizing the place where they had first landed.

“Okay, so now what? Do you need this specific spot do to your magic mojo or…”

“Yes,” Loki said. “Since this place has already been used as a focal point for a bridge between the realms, the residual energy will help me conduct the magic necessary for the spell. However, to accomplish it, I will need your help. Travelling between the realms is near-impossible without the aid of the Bifrost and I ended up overtaxing myself the last time I moved us here. I would prefer not to collapse again this time, so some assistance would be greatly appreciated.”

“Sure,” Tony said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Stand still for now.” Loki stepped closer to him, wrapping his arms around Tony’s neck in a parody of a lover’s embrace. “I need a moment to gather my magic. Once I do, I need you to carry us both upward, as fast as you can manage. I will do the rest of the work.”

“How fast do you want me to go?”

“As fast as you can,” Loki told him.

“You do know that this suit can go supersonic, right?” Tony warned him. “I don’t think that’s a good idea with a passenger on board.”

“A little slower, then,” Loki relented. “I have flown several times with Thor before. It was not a particularly pleasant experience.”
“That’s because he’s a shitty pilot.” Tony gave him a grin. “Me, on the other hand? I’m awesome. Just you wait.”

Loki shot him a slightly skeptical look, but did not comment on it. Instead he closed his eyes, focusing on his breathing. “Once I give my signal, take off.”

Tony flipped down his faceplate and wrapped his arms around Loki’s waist, hoping that he wouldn’t need the stabilizers in the suit’s gloves once Loki fired up his magical voodoo. It took less than a minute before Loki opened his eyes again.

“Now!”

The suit fired up a second later, propelling them both straight up. They shot from the ground like a rocket, climbing hundreds of feet in a matter of seconds. If Tony weren’t so focused on piloting the suit, he might have used the opportunity to take another look at the alien world below, but as it was, he had his hands (literally) full and no attention to spare.

Loki was muttering under his breath in an unfamiliar, throaty language, and the light around them grew, blurring the air around them. One moment they were flying through the atmosphere on Vanaheim, rising high over the forest-covered countryside, and the next the spell took effect, launching them through space at a breakneck speed. Between his own injury and the threat of Loki’s impending demise, Tony hadn’t really been in the mood to enjoy the view properly before, but now? Fuck yeah, this was amazing. Tony craned his neck, watching the dance of stars around them with the expression of a kid in candyland.

“All right. This?” he yelled over the whoosh of magic around them. “This is officially awesome. We have to do it again sometime.”

“You are not deterred by the nausea and vertigo that follows?” Loki asked incredulously.

“You’re speaking to a lifelong alcoholic here, pal. If I got deterred by hangovers, I would have quit drinking booze at sixteen. This is what? An epic celestial light show followed by five minutes of displaced innards? I can live with that, if it means I get to see this.” Streaks of color spilled everywhere around them as they flew, hundreds of stars rotating in groovy, mesmerizing patterns. “Most astrophysicists would give an arm and leg to see this stuff.”

“Lucky you,” Loki told him with a smirk.

“Yeah, lucky me,” Tony echoed, but for once there wasn’t any trace of sarcasm in his voice. “I get a hot dude and a trek through the stars? I’d call that a win any day.”

Before he could say anything else, they landed on some piece of rock overlooking a ravine. The sun was just setting over the distant mountains, giving the rocky countryside around them a dramatic blood-red tinge. That was the first thing Tony noticed. The second was the fact that the sky overhead was an ethereal, dark violet color. The third thing he noticed was that it was really fucking cold here. The mountains on the horizon had solid snow caps on them and the countryside around them was nearly barren, the grey expanse of the land dotted only by the occasional bush or a tuft of grass.

“Okay, what is this, Alaska?” Tony asked, looking around at the tundra. Focusing on his surroundings helped him ignore the queasy feeling in his stomach brought on by Loki’s planet-hopping spell.

“Nidavellir,” Loki said, sounding a little out of breath. “The north, more specifically. The land of the dwarfs is vast, spanning from the icy north to the fiery sands in the south. There are several dwarven
cities in this realm and each of them governs itself more or less independently. My transgression was against their king Eitri, who dwells in the southern parts and since the dwarves here had nothing to do with that dispute, I’m hoping that they might be more inclined to help us.”

He took a few deep breaths to regain his equilibrium after the travel across stars, then reached for Tony’s hand again. They flickered out of existence, appearing near the mountain range. They started walking towards it, and even from quarter a mile away, Tony could see the enormous metal gate at the foot of the mountain.

“Can they make the stuff we need?”

“Of course,” Loki said, like it was obvious. “All dwarves can work with metal. Some of them just do it better than others.”

“And these guys?” Tony gestured towards the gate.

“These are descendants of the ones who created Mjölnir, Thor’s hammer. There are very few beings in the Nine Realm who could surpass their skill with metal.”

“What if they refuse us?” Tony couldn’t help but ask.

Loki grimaced. “Then we try someone else. It has been several centuries since my trespassing in this realm, so there is a chance that they have forgotten about it. A lot of those who would remember are probably dead already, so that helps as well. And - if none of the dwarves are willing to hear our request - we can always try travelling to Alfheim. There are still a few people there who owe me favours.”

That gave Tony a pause. “Dwarves don’t live that long?”

“No.” Loki shook his head. “They are closer to you Midgardians in lifespan than to us. Most of them live for two, three hundred years at the most. Of course, there are a few exceptions, but as a rule, they do not live very long.”

“Three hundred years, huh,” Tony muttered, trying to wrap his head around the fact that Loki considered that “short.” “Us humans must seem like mayflies to you, then. There one day, gone the next.”

A shadow settled over Loki’s face and he averted his eyes, pretending to study the countryside. “Yes, it is…” He didn’t even finish the sentence, trailing off with an unhappy frown and Tony abruptly felt like an asshole for reminding him of the fact that they wouldn’t have much time to spend together. In an effort not to be a complete buzzkill, he tried to search for a way to change the topic. The mountains towered above them, casting a vaguely green tinge on the land in their shadow and Tony got a sudden idea.

“You know,” he said, making an effort to keep his voice light-hearted, “this feels like a bizarre, half-assed recreation of the Wizard of Oz. I’m obviously the Tin Man here, what with the suit and the general lack of emotional response, but I just can’t decide if you’re the Scarecrow or Dorothy in this scenario.”

“I am not the Scarecrow,” Loki objected, getting drawn out of his thoughts, “I am obviously more intelligent than a figure stuffed with hay.”

“Well, you certainly talk enough for one,” Tony quipped, enjoying the glare Loki sent his way. Inwardly he felt relieved, because if Loki was bantering with Tony, it meant that he was no longer preoccupied by thoughts about Tony’s inevitable mortality. “Okay, so no Scarecrow. And you can’t
be Dorothy, either, since you obviously know this place. Which means that you’re the Lion.” He gave Loki an appraising look. “Yeah, I think the Lion fits pretty well.”

“And what? I will find that I had the courage in me all along?” Loki said sardonically.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Tony confirmed. He halted a second later when he realized what Loki was saying. “Wait, you saw the Wizard of Oz?”

“Obviously.” Loki looked like he was fighting the urge to roll his eyes. “There was little else for me to do at your house when I could not move around freely and that film was highly recommended.”

“Okay…?” Tony said, not sure what he should think about that. He had planned to poke fun at Loki with the reference, to use his unfamiliarity with Earth popculture to make a good-natured joke at his expense, but Loki had surprised him. Sure, Tony was aware that Loki had been watching and reading all kinds of stuff since he’d come to Earth, but it was one thing to vaguely know about it and another to be directly confronted with the fact that an alien space Viking understood his pop culture references. He wasn’t supposed to, dammit! It was like one of the rules of the universe - Tony makes robots, Asgardians don’t know how to use a microwave. At least Thor was still adorably clueless about most human customs. Tony had no idea what he would do if they both started using internet and quoting movies at him.

The conversation died down after that as they both got lost in thought. They climbed the low slope towards the gate, rough gravel crunching beneath their feet with every step. The gate was fully within sight now, towering over the path and Tony suddenly felt like one of the heroes in epic fantasy books. He was going to visit dwarves, for fuck’s sake. One could not get more fantastical than that.

“Are you sure they will let us in?” he asked Loki as they crossed the last hundred feet towards the gate.

“No,” Loki said. Now that Tony looked a little closer, he could see the nervousness in Loki’s posture, the way his eyes kept flickering around. Despite his outward mask of confidence, it was clear that he was apprehensive about coming back here again. It made Tony wonder just what the dwarves had done to him back then to make him this nervous now.

“Hey,” Tony said in a low voice, “if they are assholes to you, we can just leave. Nobody’s forcing you to be here.”

“No, I…” Loki said, swallowing heavily, “I wish to do this.”

“Okay then.” Tony still wasn’t entirely convinced that this was a good idea, but if Loki wanted to do it, then who was he to stop him? They walked up to the gate and stopped several feet away, deliberating their next move. Despite his resolve, Loki didn’t look too eager to actually knock on the gate. Before either one of them could move, Tony got an idea. It was obvious, really - he had no idea why he hadn’t thought about it earlier.

“Wait!” Tony exclaimed before Loki could knock. “If they’re going to recognize you, why don’t you just disguise yourself? You can turn into hundreds of people – just put on the face of some random Joe Shmuck and they will be none the wiser.”

Loki gave him a wry smile. “As much as I appreciate your attempt to help, I cannot. The dwarves have wards in place against that kind of deception. In fact, they implemented them after my last stunt here. If they discovered that I was trying to deceive them again, they would kill me on the spot.”
“Oh,” Tony muttered. That was kind of a bummer. “Well anyway, if they’re assholes to you, just let me talk to them. They might have a beef with you, but they’ve never seen me before. I bet I can talk them into letting us in.”

That earned him a doubtful snort. “You are aware that they can be extremely stubborn?”

Tony grinned. “Yeah, but so am I. And I bet that I’m much better at this whole negotiations thing than they are. I mean - I’ve been selling people stuff for years. I could convince fucking Gandhi to buy a nuke from me. I know how to play this game. A bunch of dwarves shouldn’t be too much of a problem.”

“We’ll see,” Loki said. He still didn’t look entirely convinced. Tony also noticed that despite all his talk, the demigod still wasn’t making any move to actually knock on the gate.

“Here, let me do this,” Tony told him. He took two steps and raised his fist, knocking three times on the gate. The metal made a loud, melodic thud when the titanium armor met the gate, echoing inside the mountain. “Wow, talk about good acoustics,” Tony mumbled as he stepped back.

“Congratulations,” Loki told him sarcastically, “now every dwarf between here and Asgard knows that we are here.”

Tony didn’t feel too bothered by that fact.

“Well, I’ve never been a particularly low-key guy, if you know what I mean.” He’d been dying to use that pun for years and Loki’s reaction didn’t disappoint. The demigod gave a low, amused snort before he schooled his expression again, trying to look disapproving.

“Now you’re just being obnoxious,” Loki told him, but there was a hint of a grin playing around the corners of his mouth.

“When am I ever not?” Tony retorted. “Besides, you wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Their banter got interrupted when the gate cracked open a few inches and an annoyed-looking dwarf peeked out.

“If you two Outworlders are done bickering, maybe you can tell us what you want.”

Loki stepped forward, drawing himself to his full height. “We wish to speak to your leader.”

The dwarf’s eyes flickered from Loki to Tony, lingering over the sleek lines of the suit before he looked up at Loki again.

“Who are you?” he asked brusquely.

Loki only hesitated for a second before he replied. “I am Loki of Jötunheim and this is Anthony Stark of Midgard.”

The dwarf gave them another, longer look before he nodded once.

“Wait here. I will relay your request to the King.”

And with that the gate slammed shut again, leaving them outside.

“What a great guy,” Tony quipped into the silence. “So polite and friendly. My PR people could definitely learn from him.”
“Dwarves rarely have any contact with the outside world,” Loki explained. “They live on their own, isolated from all the other realms. As a result, they tend to be…less than amiable when they come into contact with people from outside.”

“So, basically, we’ll be dealing with a bunch of crabby, xenophobic pricks?” Tony raised an eyebrow.

Loki inclined his head slowly. “You can put it that way.”

“Awesome,” Tony muttered. He looked up, admiring the wrought metal gate. It was decorated with intricate reliefs that were divided into several levels, each one telling a different story. From the look of things, most of those stories were about battles and conquests. The figures in those reliefs were caught in the middle of bloodshed, axes raised and enemies littering the ground. Tony suddenly felt really glad that he had brought his suit along. Those guys may be half his size, but he had no doubt that they could pack a punch when they wished.

Tony and Loki stood before the gate to the dwarven realm and waited. And waited. After half an hour of standing around Tony ran out of patience and took off, making a slow lap around the nearest mountaintop to explore the countryside a bit. The only things he discovered were more rocks and tiny spiky bushes, not a single living thing in sight. Oh, and a semi-active volcano, which was spewing little clouds of ash a few miles to the east. Once he concluded that there really wasn’t much else to see here, he landed back in front of Loki, who was leaning on the wall next to the gate, looking bored out of his mind.

“Still nothing?”

Loki looked up from his examination of his fingernails. “No, it has been quiet. They are biding their time.”

Tony opened his faceplate and leaned on the wall next to him, their shoulders just an inch apart.

“Say what you want about these guys, but their customer service sucks. It’s been years since I last had to wait for a business partner to arrive to a meeting. Usually they wait for me, because I can’t be bothered to arrive on time. No wonder they’re always so pissed. This sucks.”

“Maybe this will finally teach you some humility,” Loki drawled. “You are far too spoiled.”

“Says the heir to the throne of the richest, most advanced kingdom in the Nine Realms,” Tony shot back, enjoying Loki’s scowl. “You know, back on Earth we have a saying about a pot and kettle that applies really well in this situation. Sure, we could debate responsibility and privilege all day if you wanted to, but I think that in this particular conversation you don’t really have a leg to stand on.”

Loki shook his head, trying (and failing) to hold onto the disapproving expression.

“You really enjoy being right, don’t you?” He turned towards Tony, meeting his gaze. Thanks to the boost from the armor, Tony was almost the same height as him like this. “You are lucky that you are so charming, or I might have strangled you long ago.”

“Oooh, kinky,” Tony said, making Loki chuckle. “So, I’m charming now, am I?”

“You are fully aware of the effect you have on people,” Loki said in a low voice, leaning even closer. There were only a few inches separating them now and Tony enjoyed the chemistry, the slowly building anticipation before the kiss.

“Do you think the dwarves would mind if we popped away for a while, blew off some steam?” he
asked with false innocence. Despite his flirty tone, he was actually only half serious when he suggested it. After all, it really was fucking cold here. He didn’t think his junk would be too happy if he whipped it out into the cold.

Loki shook his head, a hint of regret entering his voice. “The waiting is part of the tradition,” he explained. “It is an annoying formality, but it has to be observed. If the dwarves came out and found that we did not comply with the ancient customs, they would kill us both.”

“So that’s off the table then, too bad. Dwarvish customs suck.” Tony thought for a moment, then gave Loki a look. “Hey, do the traditions say anything about making out in front of the gate? I mean, as long as we stay here, it should be okay, right?” Even as he said that, he took a step forward, backing Loki into the wall, and propped his hands on either side on his head. “It’s too bad that it’s so cold here, we could have had more fun if I was out of the armor.”

Loki’s arms snaked around his waist, gripping the sleek metal.

“It is a pity, truly. However, if you are feeling cold, I am sure I could find a way to warm you up.”

He gave Tony a smile and leaned forward, brushing his nose against Tony’s. The tip of his nose was cool when it touched Tony’s cheek, colder that it usually was, but Tony didn’t mind. He crossed the last inch between them and captured Loki’s lips, mindful not to poke him with the edges of the helmet around his face. Loki made a pleased little sound and pressed himself closer, metal clanging against metal when their chestplates clicked together. They kept the kisses short and fairly chaste, aware that the dwarves could come back any time. And as much as Tony wouldn’t mind giving them a show, he really didn’t want to lead the negotiations with a raging erection in his pants. If the dwarves really were as stubborn and stingy as Loki claimed, he would need his mind working at 100% capacity to persuade them.

They pulled apart when the gate finally started to open again.

“Well, it’s about damn time,” Tony muttered, slapping the faceplate down. “My toes are freezing off.”

He and Loki stepped away from the wall and walked out to stand in front of the gate again. The heavy metal doors opened slowly, revealing a group of grumpy-looking dwarves. To Tony’s surprise, they looked a lot like the stereotypical dwarves from Earth fantasy books – about four feet tall, stocky, and very muscular. They were all wearing elaborate battle armor, with weapons strapped to their backs; their angular, bearded faces set in near identical hostile frowns.

A guy who must have been their leader (if the gold-plated armor was any indication) stepped forward, his two auburn braids swinging on his chest as he did so. His gaze slid from Loki to Tony and back, shrewd amber eyes taking in every detail.

“I am Bori, son of Eitri, king of this land. Who are you and what do you want?” He folded his arms, staring them down (well, as much as someone who is four feet tall can stare down someone twice his height).

“I am Loki of Jötunheim,” Loki began, repeating what he had already told the dwarf at the gate, “and this is Anthony Stark of Midgard. We have come here to seek your assistance.” He gave the dwarf a small bow, waiting for his reply. After the sharp look that Loki sent him out of the corner of his eyes, Tony hastily bowed as well, though he felt kinda stupid doing it. But oh hey, alien customs and all that. Better not piss them off right off the bat.

“You are known to us, Loki Lie-Smith,” the dwarf said in his sonorous baritone. Judging by the
disdainful tone in his voice, the things he’d heard probably weren’t anything good. “We know of your deceptive ways and penchant for trickery. You may have fooled our kin before, but we will not allow you to fool us, too.”

“That was ages ago!” Loki protested, his mask of politeness slipping a little.

“The dwarves have long memories,” Bori shot back, unimpressed. “We are not as simple-minded as you think. My answer to you is no. I know not what you seek here, but I will not hear your request. I refuse to deal with thieves and deceivers.”

He made a move to turn away but before he could, Tony stepped forward, flipping up his faceplate. “Well, luckily for you, you won’t have to,” he said, speaking quickly before the dwarves made up their minds and decided to bail on them. “The one you’ll be dealing with is actually me. I’m the one who needs stuff from you. Loki is only here as my guide and business partner.”

A flicker of surprise flashed over the dwarf’s face before he schooled it into something neutral again.

“Why do you think we would deal with you, Midgardian, when we have already turned away your companion?”

“Because you may hate his guts, but you have never seen me before,” Tony reasoned. “You have no idea what I can do, or what I can offer you.”

The dwarf didn’t move a muscle, but it was clear that he was thinking the whole thing over.

“Very well, let’s hear your request first. You can present your offers later.”

Tony licked his lips, suddenly aware of the fact that it had been several hours since he had last drunk anything. Instead of buttering them up, he decided to cut straight to the chase. These guys didn’t look like a particularly patient lot.

“I need to borrow one of your forges for a while. Loki hired me to make something for him, but my house kinda blew up recently and I no longer have the means to fulfill the commission.”

“Why should we let you inside our realm?” the dwarf inquired, looking unimpressed. “It is no concern of ours that your own forge can no longer be used.”

Tony pretended to think.

“Well, it just happens that I am one of the richest men on Earth. Midgard. Whatever.” He waved a hand focusing back on the topic. He tried to remember what Loki and Vedius had told him about dwarves before their departure from Vanaheim. The lecture had been pretty long and his head had hurt by the time they were finished, but he had picked up a few important pointers along the way. Like the fact that dwarves were apparently greedy and loved hoarding money, knowledge and technology. If he could exploit that, maybe he could find a way to convince them. “Anyway, the point is that I can give you anything you want. You want gold? I can get you enough to build a fucking palace. I can get you jewels, or rare materials or a fucking unicorn horn – well, not a unicorn horn, that would be ridiculous because unicorns don’t exist, but you get my meaning, right? I can give you pretty much anything. You just have to tell me what you want.”

By now the dwarves were looking at him like he’d grown a second head. Tony’s rambling tended to have that effect on people. It was good to know that this particular aspect seemed to be universal, no matter the place. Since the dwarves still hadn’t said anything, Tony continued.
“Or, I can share some of our technology with you. I’m the guy who makes the most advanced designs on Earth. You want solar-powered stuff? Antimatter generators? Particle accelerator? I can build it for you.”

He might have as well been speaking gobbledygook at them, for all the reaction he got.

“Midgard has nothing to offer us,” the leader answered in a clipped tone.

“That’s bullshit,” Tony shot back. Next to him, he saw Loki stiffen and shoot him a warning glance, but Tony couldn’t bring himself to care. Sure, everyone said you were supposed to be polite to dwarves, but nobody mentioned what a bunch of insufferable dicks they were. “I mean, have you guys been to Earth lately? I guess not because then you would have seen just how much has changed over the years. We’re not some bunch of savages that dig around in the dirt and think that lightning is magic, you know. We have science. People ride around in rocket-powered cars. We have a web of information encompassing the entirety of human knowledge that can be accessed by anyone, at any time, from any place in the world. We’ve got fucking spaceships that travel to the Moon.” By now he was gesticulating, accompanying his words with animated movements of his hands.

The dwarves still looked unimpressed. Tony desperately tried to search for something that would catch their interest. His eyes slid to Loki and he suddenly remembered one of their previous conversations. These guys didn’t seem too interested in modern technology, but maybe a bit of old-school smithing could change their mind.

“Hey,” he said slowly, changing the topic. “You’re the guys who made Thor’s hammer, right?”

“Aye.” One of the other dwarves in the king’s entourage nodded reluctantly. “Mjölnir came out this smithy, forged by the hands of our forefathers.”

“Well, my dad made a shield that repels Thor’s hammer,” Tony informed them smugly. “When Thor tried to hit it, it made him fly fifty feet through the air and gave him a bitch of a headache. Which reminds me,” he turned to Loki in an exaggerated move, “hey, Thor is considered to be one of the best fighters on Asgard, right?”

“Yes,” Loki confirmed, playing along. “As much as I hate to admit it, my brother has always been the superior fighter of the two of us.” Tony wondered how much effort it took to say that with a straight face. Tony gave him a nod of thanks and turned back to the dwarves.

“Well, I beat the shit out of Thor in this suit,” Tony said, feeling greatly entertained by the way their eyebrows climbed up. “If my friend with the shield hadn’t stopped us, I might have killed him.” It was only a little exaggerated, Tony told himself. He could have totally kicked Thor’s ass if the good Captain hadn’t decided to be a buzzkill. Since the dwarves looked reluctantly impressed, Tony continued, flexing the suit a little to show off the beautiful craftsmanship.

“This battlesuit is only one of several that I have. You know what else I have made? An artificial intelligence. Bombs that can wipe out entire countries in the blink of an eye. Air satellites that can find anyone, anywhere in the world.” The technobabble didn’t seem to impress them all that much so Tony tried to search for more poetic variants. “I have created a metal that kills magic. Suits of armor controlled by a thought.” He hesitated for a second, thinking it would be stupid to mention Dummy as an example of the excellence of his craftsmanship, but then he remembered how amazed by him had Loki been. “I took metal and wires and gave them a soul. I have three metallic creatures powered by lightning in my workshop that can think and feel. One of them hates cleaning up and loves bad music and sometimes hides my stuff when I’m not looking.”

When the dwarves still said nothing, their stony expressions giving nothing away, Tony growled in
frustration.

“I don’t know what else I should say to convince you guys to let me use one of your workshops. I’m not asking you to build the fucking Great Wall of China for me here – all I need is a room, a furnace, some tools and a bunch of materials. I don’t know what else you expect from me. Do you want me to beg you for your help? Well, I won’t. You might have the best tools around here, but you’re not the only ones. Sure it would be nice to have top notch equipment at my disposal, but I can manage with less. I’m the guy who built a fucking arc reactor in a fucking cave in Afghanistan. I can do anything. Including making a fucking magic armor.”

“Are you finished?” Loki asked with a hint of humor. Tony shot another look at the dwarves who looked as unimpressed as ever.

“Yeah, I think I am,” Tony answered. “These guys obviously aren’t interested in anything I could show them, so why bother. Do you have anywhere else we can try? There’s bound to be someone else who’ll let me use their fire and a hammer.” In a calculated move, Tony slapped down his faceplate and turned his back on the dwarves, activating the thrusters in the suit that would let him hover several feet above the ground. He didn’t take off completely, just started floating away slowly with Loki walking at his side. “Hey, what about the elves on Alfheim?” he asked him, loud enough for the dwarves to hear. “They’re magic, right? Would they have the stuff we need?”

They had barely made it ten steps, when someone behind them called: “Wait!”

Tony stopped, waited three seconds, then turned slowly. “Yeah?”

The dwarves still looked annoyed, but reluctantly intrigued as well.

“That metal in your chest,” the leader ground out, sounding like someone was dragging the words out of him almost against his will. “What is it?”

“That’s a new element that I created,” Tony explained, keeping his voice carefully even. He had the bastards now, he knew it, they had taken the bait, but it was still too soon for gloating. Interest was nice and all, but until they had a solid deal, he couldn’t be sure about anything. He floated back over to them and landed, keeping his faceplate down. “Apart from being the strongest power source on Earth, it also happens to block magic. Want me to show you?”

He got a reluctant nod in response.

“Loki?” Tony asked with a grin. “Can you do the thing with the flame?”

Loki grimaced a little but nodded, filling the palm of his right hand with bright blue flames. He let them envelop his whole hand before he lifted it and pressed his fingers against the arc reactor in Tony’s suit. The flames died instantly. Loki then pulled his hand back and sent out a steady stream of fire towards the suit’s chest, only to have it stop an inch away from the surface and disappear.

“Okay, are you convinced now?” Tony asked the dwarves who were watching the demonstration with great interest.

“Did he really give life to a thinking metallic creature?” one of them asked Loki, completely bypassing Tony.

“Yes,” Loki answered. “I saw it with my own eyes when I was staying in his house. The creatures are something between servants and house pets – they prepare meals and clean his house and when they feel like he’s not paying enough attention to them, they tug on his shirt to make him speak to them. His house is controlled by an invisible guardian that lives in the walls and can do anything
from allowing Stark to speak to people on the other side of the world to stealing the secrets of his enemies.” He gave Tony a fond look. “Stark has no magic, and yet he has managed to create things that no magic user can hope to match.”

“That is high praise, coming from you, Lie-Smith,” the leader said, looking interested despite himself.

“It is nothing but the truth,” Loki told him, doing a great job of looking humble and admiring. Tony would almost believe it, if he didn’t know that Loki couldn’t do humble to save his life. “And if you still do not trust my words, let his work speak for him. Let him show you the secrets of his craft. Maybe that will finally convince you of our honesty.”

Bori didn’t say anything for a moment, deliberating over his answer before he finally nodded at Tony. “Very well, we will grant you the use of one of the lesser workshops, under the condition that you come with us alone. We will not allow the Trickster to cross our doorstep.”

“Sorry, no,” Tony answered at once. “We’re a package deal. He’s coming with me.”

“We do not want him in our Realm,” the dwarf insisted.

“Well, that’s too bad, because I need him,” Tony shot back, abandoning all pretenses of politeness. “He commissioned the thing from me, but I still don’t know what exactly he wants. Besides, I need his help. The thing I’m going to be making is magical and I’m still not quite on board with all the theory behind it. I’ve never made anything like this, so I will need him to walk me through the entire process, step by step. He can’t do that from here.”

A thunderous frown appeared on the king’s face and for a moment Tony was almost certain that he had just blown their chance to get inside, when one of the king’s companions, leaned forward, whispering something into Bori’s ear. The dwarf listened, then nodded reluctantly.

“The Trickster may stay,” he said finally. “You will keep an eye on him. If he commits any crime against us, breaks any of our laws, both your lives will be forfeit. What say you to that?”

Tony deliberately didn’t look at Loki, because he knew exactly what Loki’s face looked like right now. The demigod would hate the idea, but Tony had to admit that this was probably the best chance they would get.

“I’m willing to take my chances,” Tony said, meeting the dwarf’s eyes.

“Hm,” the dwarf rumbled, looking a little taken aback. It was clear that he hadn’t expected Tony to accept. “Very well then. We will allow this, with great reluctance. As I said, you will be granted the use of one of the workshops of our choice, along with any materials you may need. In return, we ask that you show us the secret of your magic-killing metal. You have a month to create what you came for. Do we have an agreement?”

In reality, a month was probably more time than Tony would ever need, but hell, more was better than less. After a second of hesitation, he reached down and shook the dwarf’s hand.

“Yeah, I guess we have a deal. Now, where is that workshop?”

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The massive metal gate opened and Tony followed the dwarves inside, trying to do his best not to gape at the sight around him. It would be easier to keep a poker face with the faceplate down, but he had opened it out of respect for the dwarves’ customs and now he was having a hard time not to look
impressed. The dwarves might be tiny guys, but their kingdom was anything but.

The entrance hall spanned hundreds of feet, the massive open space interrupted only by two rows of columns to support the ceiling, which was high enough to be obscured in the shadows. Lights burned all around them, not torches or lightbulbs, but some sort of artificial light that burned bright yellow without any apparent source to feed it. There were a few dwarves milling about the entrance hall when they walked in and they all shot the group curious gazes, but none of them stopped to speak to them.

The king led them through the entrance hall and down one of the side corridors, striding with purpose. His entourage was still throwing mistrustful glances at Loki, but since their anti-burglar charms or whatever they were hadn’t lit up upon Loki’s entrance, they seemed to be content to let him be for now. Their little party walked for what seemed like eternity, heading deeper and deeper inside the mountain. For a moment, Tony had a horrible thought that this was all a trick and the dwarves were going to imprison them after all, but since nobody had as much as touched them yet, he pushed the worry back. Even if someone tried to pull a con on them, he and Loki were more than capable of getting out of here. A bunch of dwarves with axes were no match for the joined forces of Loki’s magic and Tony’s armor.

After having passed dozens of doors and archways leading into forges and workshops, they finally arrived into a room that was comparatively smaller than any of the ones Tony had glimpsed on their way here. It was a bit dim and cramped with workbenches and tools, the floor about fifteen feet across in both directions. That was less than quarter of what Tony had at his disposal at home, but oh well, beggars couldn’t be choosers. Maybe the dwarves would give him an upgrade once he showed him some of his stuff.

The king of the dwarves stopped in the doorway, awaiting Tony’s verdict.

“Well? Is this what you requested?”

Since it looked like a negative reaction would get them both kicked out of here, Tony opted for a diplomatic answer.

“Well, I can work with this.” When the dwarves didn’t move from their place, Tony sighed. “I guess you guys want to see the magic-killing metal now? Okay, give me a sec.”

He stepped into the largest free spot on the floor, which was less than six square feet, and spread his arms, giving the armor the command to disengage. He had deliberately chosen to stand facing the dwarves, so they had front-line seats to the show when the suit started shifting, opening up to let Tony step out of it. It was hilarious to watch their expressions, the way they desperately tried to look like they weren’t the slightest bit impressed. Tony waited until the suit was completely off, then reached for his backpack and fished out the spare arc reactor core. There was no way he was going to give them the one from his chest (if only because he felt some sentimental attachment to it), but he no longer needed the spare core and the dwarves would have a field day with it.

“There,” he said, handing over the gleaming device to the leader, “just as I promised. That’s the metal that I invented. I’m not gonna need it anytime soon, so if you want to examine it, be my guest. If you have any questions about how I made it or what it does, I’ll be happy to answer them.”

Bori accepted the device after a second’s hesitation and the other dwarves huddled around him, eager to see what the fuss was about. It was all Tony could do to stop himself from shooing them out of the room. He exchanged a look with Loki, who seemed amused by the whole thing.

The dwarves had their heads bent together, whispering furiously. It took them another while before
they finally reached some sort of conclusion.

“Thank you for your offering, Anthony Stark of Midgard.” Bori gave him a small nod and maybe it was Tony’s imagination, but he thought the dwarf looked almost excited. “It seems that you spoke truth about your accomplishments in metalwork. You are welcome to stay here and work on your commission, as long as you keep the Trickster from committing any more mischief. If you fail to do so, we will not hesitate to retaliate against you both.”

“Sure, Loki will behave,” Tony promised solemnly. “He’s been on his best behavior for months.”

The leader gave them both one more long searching look before he nodded, satisfied.

“I trust that you have the necessary means at your disposal to make him behave, if need be,” Bori continued, oblivious to the beat of amusement that passed between Tony and Loki at the words.

“Of course, sir,” Tony answered, biting his lip to suppress his grin when he saw the glint in Loki’s eyes, signalizing that they had both arrived at the same, completely inappropriate conclusion. The dwarf probably wouldn’t appreciate hearing about all the methods Tony used to keep Loki in line.

“In that case, I will leave you to you work.” Bori didn’t even bother to wait for Tony’s response – just gestured to his entourage and walked out, leaving Tony and Loki finally alone. Tony walked over and closed the door, meeting Loki’s eyes over the room.

“Well?” He raised an eyebrow, waiting for Loki’s verdict. “Looks like we made it.”

“Indeed,” Loki said, coming closer. “I had my doubts about our ability to convince the dwarves to cooperate with us, but now I can see they were baseless. Your ability for persuasion has prevailed once more.”

“Yes, what can I say?” Tony spread his arms. “I’m just that good. I’m no expert on dwarves, but those guys just about looked like they were pissing themselves in excitement when they marched out of here with my reactor. It should keep them entertained for a while.”

Loki made a slow turn, surveying the shabby room with a disdainful expression. “This is not exactly what I had imagined.”

“Better than a cave in Afghanistan, believe me,” Tony told him. “It may be tiny, but give me enough time and I bet that they’ll let me check out their better stuff.” He threw Loki a roguish grin. “No one can resist the Stark charm once I turn it on.”

“So I have observed,” Loki muttered, but the look he was giving Tony was fond.

Tony stepped up to the nearest workbench to examine the available tools. He was starting to feel that familiar itch under his skin, that relentless urge to shape and create and he couldn’t wait to try out all these alien things in the room. Loki stepped closer to him, leaning over his shoulder to see what had caught Tony’s attention.

“What do you think?” he murmured in Tony’s ear. “Will you be able to create what I asked for?”

“Only one way to find out,” Tony replied, lifting a pair of pliers. “Let’s get started.”

To be continued…
The dwarfs in this story will all be OCs that I created specifically for this fic. There won’t by many of them though, because as a reader I usually hate it when people flood their fics with tons of OCs that take the attention away from the main characters. The dwarves are necessary for this story and will serve their purpose (just like the guy on Vanaheim), but I’ll be trying to keep their number to a minimum. As far as I’m aware, King Eitri is a real character from the comics, but all the others in here will be purely my creation. I hope nobody minds too much.

As always, thank you for all the wonderful comments you keep leaving me on this. Your support makes me incredibly happy and keeps me motivated to do my best with this. Thank you! :)
Pride and Prejudice

Chapter Summary

“You know,” Tony said, “I never thought I’d say this but I think I’m racist against dwarves.”

Chapter Notes

A thank you belongs to my beta InsanitysxCreation for all the tips she gave me for this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The workshop was dim and cramped, the forge and workbenches taking up most of the floor space. The air was hot and a little smoky, heated up by the forge blazing in the corner. Although Tony couldn’t see any kind of ventilation system, there must have been one somewhere, to suck away the smoke produced by the metalwork. The floor beneath his feet was made of rough dark stone, same as the walls, reminding Tony that yep, he was in fact somewhere deep inside the mountain. A mountain full of dwarfs. The situation couldn’t get much more fantastical than that.

The forge looked pretty old school - a sturdy chimney-like structure with a large rectangular hole in the front, built out of the same dark grey stone as the rest of the workshop. The fire inside it was blazing, the heat strong enough to be felt halfway across the workshop.

Further examination of the room revealed dozens of tools strewn all over the workbenches, a tap with running water and several mysterious machines inscribed with runes. Tony had Loki translate the runes for him, but he was no wiser about the machines’ purpose after the translation than he’d been before. His best guess was that they were probably smelters of some kind, but he had no idea how to make those things work. To avoid the headache which he could already feel building at his temples, he decided to focus on something else. Practical matters. That was much better than trying to figure out how he was going to create a magical artifact in less than a month.

“Hey,” he said, catching Loki’s attention. The demigod lifted his head from where he was examining of a weird looking pair of tongs. “The dwarves know you’re alive now. Won’t that be a problem for you?”

“It could be,” Loki admitted reluctantly. “The dwarves do not have much contact with the outside world, but there is a possibility that someone from Asgard might stop by. They make a great number of our weapons and armor. If Asgard sends someone for a new batch of arms, it is almost certain that they will hear about my presence here.”

Even though he tried to act like it was no big deal, Tony could see that the thought made him uneasy.

“Why did we come here, then, if you need to stay hidden?” Tony inquired. “We could have hid away somewhere, or figured out a way to do it on Earth, or-“
“Someone would find out sooner or later,” Loki said with resignation. “After our manner of departure from Midgard, it is almost certain that Thor knows about me already. I did not make much effort to hide myself during the battle with your enemies. And while Thor himself may not be clever enough to piece all the clues together, I have no doubt that your little spy or the green beast have puzzled it out. By now he no doubt knows that I am alive and is searching for me, if only to drag me back to Asgard and throw me back into prison.”

“So we’re on the clock here,” Tony concluded. Great. Just what they needed. “What happens if he finds us here?”

“Nothing good.” Loki grimaced. The fingers on his right hand were playing with the edge of his left sleeve, a nervous tick that he didn’t seem to be aware of. “Which is why I need the armour as soon as possible. I was not jesting when I implored you to work on it. We might have had plenty of time on Midgard but here our chances of being discovered grow with every day that passes.”

Tony walked over to him and laid a hand on his forearm, just to have that point of contact between them. Loki’s hands stalled their restless movement at once and Loki relaxed a little, leaning into the touch.

“What will you do once the armor is finished? Provided that someone doesn’t kill us first?”

“I…” Loki bit his lip, uncertainty filling his every gesture, “I do not know. I did not plan that far ahead.” It was obvious that the admission cost him a lot of pride.

“Why do you—” Tony started to ask, hoping to finally find out why Loki needed the damn thing in the first place, when he got interrupted by a voice from the doorway.

“So you really are here,” rumbled a deep, sonorous bass. “I thought they were pulling my leg when they told me we were hosting a Midgardian.”

A dwarf with a fiery mane of hair and three braids in his chest-length beard was standing in the doorway, watching the two of them with interest. He was dressed in a brown blacksmith’s apron and didn’t seem to be wearing any visible weapons, but after his experience with Natasha, Tony knew that didn’t have to mean anything. There was something about the way he stood that subtly hinted at the fact that he probably wouldn’t need a big showy axe to clear out a battlefield. When he made sure that both occupants of the room had noticed his presence, the dwarf strolled inside, looking around.

“I see they put you into one of the Lower Workshops. Well, it could have been worse. You could have gone straight to prison. You must have made Bori one hell of an offer to let you in at all.” He stopped a few feet away from them and looked up expectantly, waiting for Tony’s reaction.

Tony exchanged a glance with Loki, who seemed to be just as baffled by the dwarf’s sudden presence in the room.

“Um, not to be rude or anything,” Tony began, “but who the hell are you?”

The dwarf let out a short, amused snort and made a small bow to him. “Nári. At your service.”

“Tony Stark, hi.” Years of carefully honed business manners kicked in and before he could think more about what he was doing, Tony had stuck out a hand for a handshake. The dwarf only hesitated for a second before he took it, his grip strong enough to grind Tony’s knuckles together. Tony kept his game face on, even though he privately wondered whether he was going to need another cast after this. “Call me Tony.”
To his relief, the dwarf dropped his hand after a few heartbeats and turned to survey Loki, who looked distinctly uneasy under the dwarf’s scrutiny.

“And you must be Loki Lie-Smith, the Trickster. I’ve heard a lot about you. So, back from the dead, are you? Lucky you.” His forest-green eyes lingered on Loki for a moment longer before they turned to Tony’s suit, giving it a quick sweep. When Tony didn’t move, the dwarf crossed his arms and leaned against the leg of the nearest workbench. “Well?” he asked impatiently. “Are you going to work or not?” He seemed perfectly comfortable where he was, looking at home among Tony’s stuff.

“Just to be clear,” Tony said carefully, “you are here to do what? Play bodyguard? Help me with my work? Point and laugh at my hammering technique?”

“A bit of each, I suppose,” Nári replied with a small shrug. “If you’re anything like the others, you probably don’t know your ass from a hole in the ground when it comes to smithing.” Tony opened his mouth to say something sharp back but the dwarf raised his hand, silencing him. “Oh, I know. You’re not like them. You’re *special*. You can make armor in your sleep.” The slightly mocking tone that entered his voice was rubbing Tony in all the wrong ways. “Everyone thinks they are the greatest smith in the world, until they actually have to make something. But worry not, I’m here to help you with that. Judging by that suit over there, you’re not completely hopeless. Maybe you’ll be even able to make what you came here for.”

It seemed all too convenient that a random dwarf would just decide to come and help them out of the goodness of his heart.

“Okay, spill,” Tony told him. “Who did you piss off to get this gig? Babysitting the hapless mortal and his wizard friend?”

“Oh, no one,” the dwarf replied readily. “I volunteered. It seemed like too much fun to pass up and it wasn’t as if there was a line of people scrambling for the job. You should really be glad you got me – of all the dwarves here, I am probably the one least likely to murder you in your sleep.”

“Yeah, that’s…encouraging,” Tony managed feebly. He got a knowing grin in response.

“Well then.” Nári clapped his hands. “Since I am here already, I might as well help out. Now, what is it you wanted to make?”

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Since the dwarf didn’t look like he was going to leave anytime soon, Tony decided that he might as well tell him what he wanted to make. It took some help from Loki, because the magical contract didn’t seem to like the idea of sharing details with an outsider, but eventually he managed to convey the general plan to the dwarven blacksmith. The longer Tony explained, the higher the dwarf’s eyebrows climbed, until they almost disappeared into his hairline. When he finished, the dwarf was shaking his head, looking at them both like they’ve gone crazy.

“Lad, I hate to tell you this, but this little magic trick you’ve dreamt up here is impossible.”

“You know, I hate that word, ‘impossible’.” Tony crossed his arms, not the slightest bit fazed by the dwarf’s skepticism. “It’s so limiting. If I had a dollar for every time someone told me something is impossible, only for me to prove them wrong later, I would be – well, still a billionaire, just an infinitely richer one.” He met the dwarf’s eyes, staring him down. “And let me tell you now, I don’t believe in impossibility. ‘Impossible’ is a word used by people without imagination. It is an excuse for narrow-mindedness. In my opinion, what people call impossible are just things that hadn’t been discovered or proven yet.”
He started to pace, gesticulating with his hands.

“If you had asked me ten years ago, I would have told you that magic was bullshit – that it didn’t exist and you were obviously delusional. If you asked people a hundred years ago, they would have told you that space travel was impossible – that it was just a fanciful notion made up by crazy writers that had no basis in reality or science. Alien life was thought to be a sci-fi invention just a few years ago, and yet aliens exist and had no problem trying to turn one of our cities into dust. In just the past few years, I’ve had so many misconceptions proven wrong that I can barely count them. Aliens exist, as does magic. There are other worlds out there besides Earth. In fact, I’m standing on one of them right now.” He spread his arms in a gesture encompassing the room around him.

“If all these things exist, if they are possible, why shouldn’t there be an armor that amplifies and repels magic at the same time? Why should all those other things be possible, but not this one?”

“Because the rules of magic don’t allow it,” Nári protested.

“Says who?” Tony challenged. “God? Does he even exist? Probably not, or we would have heard from him by now. All the gods from the old religions have turned out to be just a bunch of dudes in weird armor, who have better technology that we do.” He gestured towards Loki, who scowled.

“There are no gods - just aliens and crazy mages. Why should the One God be any different? With our luck, he’s some dude from Alfheim who’s been dead for centuries now.” He whirled around, full of manic energy. “And if God doesn’t exist, who makes up all these rules? Some wise old guy with a book and a magic wand? Who’s the one who said what can and can’t be done with magic?”

Loki and the dwarf exchanged glances, but neither could give him a good answer. Tony shrugged.

“Rules or not, I’m gonna try anyway. As far as I’m concerned, rules have always been more like guidelines for me. And even then, I rarely stick to them, because they’re boring.” He picked up a random screwdriver and tossed it in the air, catching it effortlessly in his hand before he tossed it up again. “I think it’s time those rules got redefined. I mean, how do we find out if they apply unless we try to break them?”


“You know what?” Tony said. “I think I do. Besides, Loki thinks I can do it.” He shot the demigod a glance, only to find him already staring at Tony.

“Then he is mad!” the dwarf exclaimed, throwing up his hands. “You both are. Attempting something like that…”

“It’s called innovation,” Tony spoke over him. He was starting to get annoyed by the dwarf’s stubborn insistence on his stupid ‘rules’. “Progress. Humanity wouldn’t be where it is today if humans weren’t willing to experiment. Try out new things. Boldly go where no man has gone before.” The reference flew completely over the dwarf’s head. “I alone have managed to advance our technology by decades in just a few short years. I’ve created things most people couldn’t even conceive of in their wildest dreams. I took insane, impossible concepts and made them a reality.” He caught the screwdriver, wrapped his fingers around it and met the dwarf’s gaze in challenge. “Now tell me again that what I want to make is impossible.”

“It is,” the dwarf muttered, “but clearly, you are not going to let that stop you from trying anyway. Tell me, human, are all your kinsmen as annoying and pigheaded as you?”

That made Tony chuckle.
"No. I’m a special case, though some of them come close.” He sobered up again. “Well, now that you know what I’m trying to do here, the only question that remains is: Are you going to help me with this? Because if you’re not, you might as well fuck off now and stop taking up space in my workshop. I’ve wasted enough time already and need to get to work.”

The dwarf gave him a long, searching look before he reluctantly nodded.

“I said I would help you, didn’t I?” Without another word he turned around and went to build up the fire in the forge. From his place by the table, Tony could hear him mutter: “The first Midgardian to come here in centuries and he’s completely batty. Can we never get anyone normal?”

“Normal is overrated, anyway,” Tony said loudly, not even bothering to pretend that he hadn’t heard the dwarf. “Normal doesn’t move the world forward. It takes a special kind of crazy to invent something like the phone or an atomic bomb. Believe me, I would know.”

One only had to remember Howard’s drunken ramblings and random explosions in the middle of the night. No, “normal” didn’t cut it when one wanted to make something extraordinary.

The dwarf shot him a glance over his shoulder.

“Yes, you probably would. You do look like the type.”

Tony exchanged a glance with Loki.

“I think that was an insult.”

For the first time since the dwarf’s arrival, Loki’s posture relaxed a bit as he smirked.

“Yes, I think it was. You should probably be offended, if it wasn’t true.”

“Don’t even start.” Tony pointed the screwdriver at him. “Besides, you’re one to talk. I look like a poster boy for sanity next to your 'bow before me, mortal vermin!' conqueror speeches.” He managed to do a passable imitation of Loki’s Asgardian accent. “You should get that checked out, by the way, all that sense of superiority can’t be healthy.”

A playful glint entered Loki’s eyes and he opened his mouth to reply, no doubt with something appropriately witty and sarcastic, when the dwarf interrupted them.

“If you two are done with your oh-so-clever repartees, maybe we could get back to work? Unless you’re only here to stand around and prattle all day, in which case I’ll take my leave because there are better things I could be doing with my time. Like drinking. Or watching the lava flow under the mountain.”

Tony raised his hands in surrender.

“Oh, sheesh, don’t get your panties in a twist. Where do you wanna start? I could draw you a few designs, so you can get an idea of what I’m working with. I assume I can borrow the materials I need for this?”

The dwarf nodded.

“Yes, you are free to take any metal or substance you need to create your work. All except for the Uru.”

“So you do have the Uru?” Tony perked up at the mention of it, because hell yeah, that would be
“We do,” Nári confirmed, “but you are not getting your hands on that. Especially not for him.” He nodded towards Loki. “You can play around with the rest however you wish. We have plenty of different metals, so you should be able to find something to suit your purposes.”

“How do I create the alloys? In these machines?” Tony pointed at the smelter-like things near the wall.

“Yes,” Nári said. “If you use them right, you can make anything you want.”

Tony walked over to the machines which had puzzled him so much before.

“So, how do I turn this thing on? How do I program it to make it do what I want? It doesn’t have any buttons.”

The dwarf looked at him like he was a complete moron.

“Buttons?” he said with derision. “Who do you think we are? Savages?”

Tony barely suppressed a sigh.

This was going to be a very long month.

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They worked for hours, with Tony drawing blueprints and schematics for the armor and explaining what kinds of metal he had tried using and the dwarf peering over the edge of the table, criticizing everything from the design to the way Tony held a hammer. After four hours of nonstop critique, Tony was almost ready to smash the hammer against the dwarf’s stupid face. He was used to working alone, with only JARVIS’s polite voice providing quiet feedback, and having a mouthy squirrel bitching about every single thing he did was slowly driving him crazy. He was almost ready to strangle the dwarf when another dwarf appeared in the doorway, just when they were in the middle of another one of their useless arguments.

“No, this is insane,” Nári was arguing. “You cannot overlay steel with another metal like that. The whole structure will fall apart at the first blow.”

“I already told you, I don’t want to overlay it,” Tony gritted through his teeth. “I want to-

“Ehm,” an unfamiliar voice interrupted them. It belonged to a small, snooty looking dwarf with blond hair and grey eyes. “Nári, if you are done with these two frauds,” he levelled a contemptuous look at them, “come to the dining hall. Bori wishes to speak with you.”

“Oh great, another smartass,” Tony drawled, straightening up from where he’d been bent over the armor designs. “Cause there weren’t enough of those in the room already.”

“You would be wise to watch your tongue, Midgardian,” the new dwarf warned him. “Or you might lose it.”

“Tell me,” Tony shot back, “are all dwarfs born with a stick in their ass, or is that just you?”

The blond dwarf made an enraged noise and took a step forward, but Nári moved between them, stopping him from confronting Tony.

“Leave him be, Farin,” he told the snooty guy. “I will come with you.” He set down the tool he’d
been holding and started walking towards the door. “I will have someone bring you dinner,” he threw over his shoulder before he walked out. The blond dwarf gave Tony one last, contemptuous look before he followed, closing the door behind him. Tony sank back against the workbench, feeling drained.

“You know,” he told Loki, who had relocated into a corner hours ago and pulled a book out of nowhere, “I never thought I’d say this but I think I’m racist against dwarves.” That made Loki look up from whatever fantasy epic he was currently reading. “Does that make me a bad person?” Tony continued. “Cause these guys are insufferable. They are so fucking smug in their perceived superiority, it makes me want to punch them in their stupid smug faces.”

A slow smirk spread over Loki’s face.

“I believe the Midgardian saying for this is ‘welcome to the club’.”

“Thanks,” Tony muttered. He wiped a hand over his face, trying to switch away from “creative mode” into something more practical. They hadn’t been awake for all that long – definitely less than fifteen hours, and yet he was feeling exhausted, the fatigue weighing over him like a heavy cloud. Maybe it was because all the tools in the workshop were heavier than normal, made for someone a lot stronger than Tony and working with them got tiring fast. Or maybe it was because they’d travelled thousands of miles between magical realms today and he was jet-lagged. Or maybe it was both. “What time is it?” he asked with a frown.

“Here?” Loki said. “Middle of the night, probably. On Vanaheim? Evening. I know not what time of day it is in your home on Midgard.”

“Okay, thanks.” He stopped in the middle of the workshop, looking around. “Is there anywhere we can sleep? Or are we expected to just crash down on the floor and catch some Z’s under the table?”

“There is a bedroom over there,” Loki pointed at the door opposite the entrance. “If you can call it that.”

Tony wandered over to the door he hadn’t noticed before and opened it, bending down a little to pass through. He stepped inside and straightened up, looking around.

“Oh, you have to be fucking kidding me.”

It was a tiny room, no more than ten by ten feet across. It held one rickety, narrow bed, a small table, a metal sink and a squat-toilet in the corner that was walled off from the rest of the room by a ratty curtain.

It looked like a prison cell in a Third-World country.

“I told you so,” Loki said smugly behind him.

“How the fuck am I supposed to sleep on that?” Tony gestured towards the shitty bed. “And how are we both supposed to fit on it?”

“We are not,” Loki told him. “I presume they gave us this room on purpose, just to enjoy our arguments over who gets to sleep on the floor.”

“Well, I’m sure as hell not sleeping on the floor,” Tony said resolutely. “And neither are you,” he added when Loki opened his mouth to protest. “This is a fucking travesty. I had better accommodations in a fucking cave in Afghanistan than here. More evolved, my ass. People in ancient Greece had better beds than this.” He gave Loki a pleading look. “Hey, you’re the Mister
Hotshot Mage here. Can you do something about it? Make the bed bigger or something?"

“Step back a little,” Loki told him. He squeezed in through the doorway and came to stand next to Tony. Then he raised his hand and muttered a few words. The bed shuddered, rose into the air and slowly began to grow. Frail wooden frame solidified into polished oak, tattered grey blankets turned into a smooth green comforter and the narrow mattress expanded into a queen-sized bed. The bed landed softly, looking completely out of place in the grubby room. It was now taking up two thirds of the floor, but Tony didn’t care – after all, it wasn’t like they were going to be spending much time in this room anyway.

Tony made an instinctive step towards the bed, eager to sit down on it and find out if it was as soft as it looked, when he realized that he was covered in grime from the workshop.

“Is there a bathroom or something here?” he asked Loki. “Or do dwarfs not believe in hygiene?”

“I never cared to find out that particular tidbit,” Loki said with a grimace of revulsion. “But I would not be the slightest bit surprised to find that personal hygiene is not very high on their list of priorities.”

“Awesome.” Tony muttered. Before he could say anything else, there was knock on the door to the workshop. The door opened a second later, revealing a thin, mousy looking dwarf with a tray in his hands.

“Lord Bori told us to send you supper,” he said, shuffling over to the table. He laid the tray on the nearest free spot on the workbench and scuttled out again, shutting the door behind him. Tony threw Loki a bewildered look.

“What the hell was that?”

“A servant,” Loki explained. “One from the lower castes, by the look of it.”

Tony hesitated for a moment, a snappy comment about dwarvish society on his tongue, before he just shrugged and let it be. So dwarves had servants. Whatever. It was none of his business. Instead of offering biting political commentary, he just walked back to the workshop to see what the dwarves had sent them.

The meal turned out to be two bowls with some sort of unappetizing-looking beige mush and a piece of two day-old bread for both of them. Tony ladled a wooden spoon full of the stuff and let it slide back into the bowl with a disgusting squelch.

“Are we supposed to eat this?”

Loki’s face was mirroring his lack of enthusiasm about the food. “Yes, apparently.”

“Great.” Tony let go of the spoon and looked around, but it didn’t look like anything else would be coming. “Looks like our hosts are going along with the absolute minimum of assistance necessary.”

“They could always just let us starve,” Loki pointed out wryly.

“Lucky us,” Tony said sarcastically as he reached for the bowl again. He pushed some tools aside to make more space on the workbench and sat down with a bowl in his lap. Loki imitated him, taking a bowl from the tray and sitting down next to Tony.

“It seems that they still have not got over my little trick,” he muttered as he ladled the first spoonful of the mash. He brought it to his lips and made a face when he tasted the meal. “This is disgusting, but
at least it doesn’t seem to be poisoned?” He quirked an eyebrow at Tony.

“Silver linings?” Tony said before he ate the first spoonful of his portion. “Oh, god, this is vile. What the hell do they put into this? Fifty year old beans? Yikes.”

“I think in this case, is better not to know what you eat,” Loki pointed out wisely.

With revulsion, Tony ladled another spoonful and forced himself to eat it. As he rolled the mass around in his mouth, something occurred to him.

“Hey, how well can dwarves cook?”

Loki frowned. “They haven’t died out yet, so either they are used to eating this sludge, or they eat something that is actually edible and this is just revenge against me. Why?”

“Maybe,” Tony said slowly, thoughtfully, testing out loud an idea that had just occurred to him, “maybe this isn’t a punishment for you, but a negotiation tactic.”

“What do you mean?” Loki’s frown deepened.

“I could be wrong, but I think this is their fucked up attempt at power play.” Tony’s gaze slid from the bowl in his lap to the suit, remembering the eager expressions on the dwarves’ faces when he had given them his new element. “The guys want my stuff, but they won’t ask for it directly – that way they would be risking that I might get something valuable in return. But if they force us to negotiate for the simplest of things, like food and a bigger bed, they aren’t losing anything they wouldn’t be losing already, while they gain a ton of new stuff practically for free.”

Loki stared at him for a moment before he shook his head.

“I think you are giving them entirely too much credit. Dwarves have never been very smart.”

“And that’s your prejudice speaking,” Tony asserted between mouthfuls of food. “From what I’ve seen, these guys are pretty smart – or at least, some of them are. Maybe I’m wrong and they are a race of simpletons, but I don’t think so. The ginger dwarf they sent here was sharp as hell. He only needed one look at my suit and technology to know exactly what I can do, what I can offer them. He might be trying to hide behind the “och, I’m just a simple blacksmith” shtick, but I’ve worked with enough spies over the years to recognize one. Sure, he probably is a blacksmith, and a good one at that, but it’s not all he is. And maybe he is an outlier and the others are dumber than a box of bricks, but I doubt that.”

When Loki continued looking skeptical, Tony nudged him with his elbow. “Is the ‘dwarves are dumb’ another one of the things you were taught when you were growing up?”

“…Yes,” Loki admitted after a heartbeat of silence. “I was taught that dwarves are simple-minded little creatures that only know how to work with metal, that the mortals of Midgard are primitive and uncivilised and worship us as gods and that the giants of Jötunheim are brainless, bloodthirsty monsters.” His lips twisted at the last part, a mixture of old hurt and bitterness bleeding through for a moment.

“And yet here we both are, living proofs that it is bullshit,” Tony pointed out, trying to steer him away from that direction before Loki could sink into another existential crisis over his recently discovered Frost Giant identity. “Sure, I might be a genius, which puts me far above most of the populace, intelligence-wise, but I’m far from the only one. Just from the top of my head I could name you another two or three dozen people just as smart or even smarter than me. And you can’t be the only smart guy from Jötunheim, either. Sure, your education probably accounts for some of your
intellect, but nature plays a big part, too. And if our two races are different – better - than what the bigoted idiots on Asgard taught you, who is to say that the dwarves aren’t smart, too?”

Loki was silent, staring into his bowl of food with a thoughtful frown.

“Look, I know that centuries of misconceptions and prejudice won’t just disappear after a single conversation,” Tony continued when the demigod didn’t say anything, “but maybe you should give the dwarves more credit. They’re not complete idiots and we would be stupid to underestimate them.”

“What do you propose we do, then?” Loki asked finally.

“Right now? Nothing,” Tony decided. “If my guess is right, they are expecting us to bitch about the crappy room and the shitty food and beg them for an upgrade. They would pretend to hesitate and play hard to get while we offered them increasingly better stuff in exchange and once we offered something they desperately want, they would reluctantly accept and pretend that they were doing us a favor, while in private they would be ecstatic over the deal they got. It’s a classic negotiation tactic – put the other party into a position of disadvantage, so that they have to offer you more just to get on even ground with you.”

“You seem quite familiar with it.” Loki shot him a sidelong glance.

“Is that your roundabout way of asking me if I have used it, too? Yeah, I have,” Tony admitted. “Not very often, and I’m not terribly proud of it, but yeah, I have. Mostly I just use it for people who piss me off but who I’m forced to deal with anyway. People like Justin Hammer, the Russian government, and pompous idiots who won’t take no for an answer. A few people have even tried to use this tactic against me, but they always got shut down fast. The problem is that back then, I could afford to refuse them, because I had all the advantages on my side. Here?” He gestured with his hand at the mountain around them. “Not so much. It will be a tricky situation to navigate but I think we can manage – after all, the dwarves don’t know that we’ve seen through their game. We can use this to our advantage, beat them at their own game.”

By this time Loki was looking intrigued, the bowl lying half-forgotten in his hands. “How?”

Tony grinned. “We use their weaknesses against them.”

“The dwarves are proud,” Loki said slowly, thinking. “And greedy. They are quite inventive and covet new ideas and technology.”

“There you go,” Tony praised. “So we dangle the technology in front of their noses, but don’t offer anything that we haven’t already promised them before. We won’t beg for anything, but we won’t stay silent, either. We’ll wear them down with careful application of passive-aggressive bullshit. You’re good at that.” He nudged Loki with his elbow. “Coming up with venomous little jabs, sarcastic criticism of people’s shortcomings. This should be right up your alley.”

“What exactly do you expect me to do?” Loki tilted his head a little, looking skeptical.

“Instead of asking for something better, insult their food.” Tony poked the mass in his bowl with the edge of his spoon. “Insinuate that your pet horse could cook something better than this. I will subtly show off my stuff and comment on all the things they don’t have here. We can’t be too harsh though, or we risk getting thrown out or imprisoned, but - if we calibrate the insults just right - it’s only a matter of time before their pride gets the better of them and they break.”

“Or they might simply get angered and kill us both,” Loki pointed out.
“Yeah, that is always a possibility,” Tony allowed. “But I don’t think they will. They were practically salivating over the suit. Now I just need to space out the breadcrumbs of knowledge well enough and they will gobble it right up. And if I play my cards well, I might get some of their stuff in return. Maybe even the Uru.”

“Are you sure that it will work?” Loki met his eyes.

“Sure?” Tony shook his head. “No. But it won’t cost us anything to try.”

“Is suppose not,” Loki muttered. “I hope you are correct about this. I do not relish the idea of having to eat this for a month.”

“Yeah, neither do I.”

Tony leaned his shoulder against Loki’s and went back to finish his meal.

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They put their plan into motion the next morning. Shortly after breakfast (which had been brought by another mousy-looking dwarf and tasted just as disgusting as the dinner had), they got a visit from the king himself. He walked into the workshop with a group of lackeys behind him, looking imperious and completely at home at the dingy room (which, technically, he was, since the whole kingdom was his). Tony looked up from his design, gave him a lazy nod and went back to work, as if there wasn’t a dude from dwarven royalty standing eight feet away.

The silence lasted all of five seconds before the king pointedly cleared his throat. “Do you not have morning greetings on Midgard?” he said, sounding cross.

Tony let another two heartbeats pass before he straightened up, putting on a surprised expression. “Oh, it’s you. Hi. Sorry I didn’t notice you. I kinda tend to disappear into my own head when I’m working and you dwarfs all look the same at the first glance. Did you want something?”

The dwarf, Bori, pursed his lips at the lack of respect, but let it pass. Tony privately counted another small victory. If he could play up the “dumb, uncouth human” card for what it was worth, who knew what kind of stuff he could get away with. Outwardly he didn’t move a muscle, keeping his best media grin firmly plastered on his face.

“Are you satisfied with your accommodations?” the king asked and oh yeah, here it was. Tony exchanged a quick glance with Loki before he shrugged. “Hm, no, not really. It’s kinda cramped and the bed is uncomfortable as fuck, but I guess that I can’t really expect much better.” He gestured at the walls around them. “I mean, we’re in a hole in the ground. It would be stupid to expect it to look like a five star hotel. I should probably be glad that you guys at least have indoor plumbing. Cause let me tell you, it would be a bummer to have to shit in a bucket.”

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from laughing when he saw their faces. Oh yeah, this was hilarious. They couldn’t exactly refute his claims, because if they did, they would be essentially admitting that they had put him into a shitty room on purpose. He watched the king’s eyebrows draw together like a pair of two angry, furry caterpillars, as he tried to figure out how to respond. Tony exchanged another look with Loki, who had his best poker face on, but there was a glint in his eyes that suggested that he was greatly enjoying this.

When no answer came except furious glowering, Tony continued. “Anyway, why are you guys
here, if not to upgrade our room? Cause I’m kinda busy and don’t have all day to stand around.” He turned away from the king and picked up a random tool, casually dismissing him. He had barely made three steps when the dwarf spoke again.

“This conversation is not over yet,” he stated imperiously. Tony rolled his eyes, then turned back to face him.

“Okay…?” He raised an eyebrow. “What do you guys want from me?”

“Tell us how you made the glowing metal,” Bori demanded.

“What? You can’t figure it out on your own?” Tony leaned his hip on the workbench and crossed his arms, staring them down. “It’s not that hard – well, okay, it is - but I thought you guys are pretty good at this thing. I mean, yeah, I might be the only person on Earth who has this, but it only took me about twelve hours to figure it out once I knew what I was trying to do and I was half dead at the time.” When they continued looking at him expectantly, he sighed. “I’m not getting rid of you unless I tell you, am I?” He waved a resigned hand. “Okay, whatever, I’ll show you how I did it. I’m not sure if you’ll be able to recreate it here, because it requires some pretty specific equipment, but I could sell you some of the stuff once I get back to Earth, if you want.”

He walked over to the suit, which was standing silently by the wall, locked down and power turned off. Tony clapped his hands, addressing the visor. “Come on, buddy, wake up. We’ve got work to do.”

The visor lit up. “Voice input recognized. Welcome back, sir.”

“Yes.” Tony touched the glove on the left hand and activated the holoprojection nodule hidden there. “I need a keyboard. Can you do that for me?” A blue light flickered and the holographic keyboard materialized in the air above the metallic hand. “Awesome. Now, if I feed you some data, can you run a simulation for me?”

“Affirmative, sir,” the suit answered. It wasn’t quite JARVIS, but it would have to do. Tony bent down and retrieved his backpack. There were several memory discs in it and as luck would have it, one of them contained the data on the elemental creation. The dwarves huddled closer as he worked on opening the file and Tony tried to ignore their presence behind his back. Using the suit as a replacement for a computer was mildly annoying because everything took twice as long than it would have if he had his computer, but since he didn’t have anything better to work with, he might as well get used to it. Besides, a visual presentation always worked better than trying to explain the nuances in molecular structure to a bunch of guys who probably thought his suit was magic.

Okay, guys,” he turned around and gestured at the model of the particle that appeared in the air next him. “This is what the atom of the metal looks like.” The dwarves were looking at the holoprojection with barely disguised wonder and for a moment, Tony felt like a teacher giving a physics lesson to a bunch of high school kids. He tore his eyes from the blue glowing ball of protons and electrons to shoot an amused smile at Loki, only to find the demigod’s gaze on him already, watching the demonstration with interest. Oh right, Tony thought, I invented this before we met. He’s probably curious as hell, too.

With a small smile, Tony turned his attention back to the gaggle of dwarves in front of him.

“And how did I discover this? Well, I was searching for a new energy source to power my suits, when I came across one of my dad’s old projects…”

The dwarves listened with rapt attention as he described the scientific process, carefully omitting any
mentions about blood poisoning or medical arc reactors. The suit helpfully displayed models of atoms and the particle accelerator as Tony spoke, growing more animated the longer he talked. He had always enjoyed talking science with people who seemed to get what he was doing. Some of the dwarves looked confused by his explanations, but most of them nodded thoughtfully, something like respect growing in their eyes.

They finally departed a couple hours later, whispering furiously among themselves. Only Nári stayed behind, watching Tony with a strange expression in his eyes. Before Tony could ask what the look was about, the dwarf had already snapped back into his usual sarcastic mood and started criticizing Tony’s latest design adjustments of the armor for their lack of effectivity. They fell into an argument about Tony’s ideas for the suitable metals, trading banter and thinly veiled insults and Tony suddenly realized that this felt an awful lot like working with Bruce, or Reed Richards. It was surprisingly comfortable – probably the closest to home he’d felt since this whole space-travelling thing started.

He was just going to shoot back something snappy when the door to the workshop opened and another servant came in, carrying their lunch.

Tony exchanged one look with Loki and started to laugh.

It was a roast.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay, guys! I was planning to get this chapter edited yesterday, but I got a sudden strike of inspiration and spent half a day writing chapter 33 instead. To be honest, I haven’t been able to write much lately, because ever since I started working at my first proper, full-time adult job a few weeks ago, my writing morale has been shot to hell. I barely write half of what I used to before (if I manage 5K words per week now, I’m lucky), and it makes me annoyed that I’m no longer able to keep up with my writing schedule. I still have almost three chapters in reserve, so the posting should continue as planned for the foreseeable future, but I have less time to devote to this story than I expected and it’s a little unnerving to be cutting it so close.

Sorry for unloading this on you guys. I guess I just needed to vent a bit. I’ll try to get the story finished on time, so you don’t have to wait for the updates too long.

Chapter 31 will be posted on next Sunday, June 21 because I’m going on a trip on Saturday and won’t be able to get this posted.
It only took a few days before things around the workshop began to change. The changes were subtle at first – a meal that was actually edible, better tools for working that magically appeared on one of the workbenches overnight – but they were there and Tony had to suppress a smug grin every time he discovered a new upgrade to his workshop. The dwarves didn’t comment on it, pretending that the stuff had been there all along, so Tony decided to stay silent as well and play along, even though inwardly he was doing a hundred little victory dances because he’d been right, hell yeah he’d called it, and now the dwarves were doing exactly what he had predicted.

That way he barely blinked when he was granted the use of several other, more advanced machines in the workshops across the hall and access to a nearby bathroom that had an actual bathtub and a faucet with running hot water. The tub was small, barely big enough to let him sit down comfortably, but it was miles better than going to sleep covered in grime.

The dwarves became more pleasant, too, slowly warming up to him with each passing day, and once Tony stopped insulting them with every other breath, he found that he actually got on pretty well with them (or at least, as well as Tony got on with anyone). They were craftsmen like him, eager to discover new things and techniques and their feedback on Tony’s ideas greatly helped him improve his designs for the armor.

The only one who looked out of place was Loki, who spent most of his days quietly reading in their bedroom or watching Tony work from the corner of the workshop. He rarely contributed to the discussions about the armor, keeping his distance from the dwarves, and Tony couldn’t help but think that it was weird as hell. This was Loki, the guy who usually looked like he owned any room he walked into. Him being this quiet, almost…meek, was uncharacteristic to say the least. Tony let him be for the first few days, because he figured out that Loki would talk to him eventually about whatever it was that was bugging him, but when the demigod didn’t say anything, Tony decided to breach the topic himself.

“Hey,” he said casually on their fifth night there, as they were getting ready for bed. He’d pulled an all-nighter the night before and was about ready to crash, but he was too curious about this to let it pass just yet. “What’s the deal with you and the dwarves?”

“Deal?” Loki gave him a puzzled frown. “I have no deal with them, you do.” Tony would almost believe that Loki didn’t know what Tony was talking about, if he hadn’t noticed the brief flicker of
unease in his eyes. The demigod turned away right after, keeping his back to Tony as he pulled his tunic over his head to fold it onto a nearby stool.

“You know what I mean,” Tony insisted. “You’ve been all weird since we came here. Why do you hate them so much? Besides them being dicks, I mean?”

Loki’s shoulders tensed a little, but other than that, he didn’t move.

“I do not wish to speak about it.” There was something about the clipped way he said those words, an undertone of tension in his voice that told Tony that whatever it was, it probably wasn’t anything pleasant.

“Come on,” Tony cajoled, stepping closer until he could lay a hand on the tense back in front of him, “surely it can’t be that bad.”

However, instead of relaxing, like Loki usually did under his touch, Loki’s muscles clenched up even further, until his body felt like a statue under Tony’s hand, solid and cold and unreachable.

“I already said I do not wish to speak about it.”

Tony gave it another five seconds, but when Loki’s posture didn’t change, he let his hand slide away and reached for the waistband of his own pants instead, taking them off. They finished undressing in silence and Loki dimmed the lights with a wave of his hand before he climbed into the bed, scooting over all the way until he was almost pressed against the wall, with his back still to Tony.

Since Loki couldn’t have been projecting the “do not talk to me, do not touch” any louder than he already was, Tony just sighed and slid under the covers, keeping a foot of empty mattress between them to give Loki enough space to sulk. He had no idea what Loki’s problem was, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to pry. Especially since he knew that Loki wouldn’t answer him anyway - the demigod could be stubborn as hell when he got like this and Tony had long since learned to leave him alone when he got sulky. Nothing good ever came out of forcing him to talk when he didn’t want to talk.

Instead of prying into Loki’s business, Tony decided to use his time before sleep for something more productive. He often got his best ideas in that strange drowsy state between wakefulness and sleep and was now hoping that maybe this time his brain would take the opportunity to finally figure out a way to magic-proof the armor. Before he could come up with anything, however, he fell asleep, the exhaustion from working for two days straight without coffee winning over.

Tony had no idea how long he’d been asleep, but it probably hadn’t been very long because it was still the middle of the night when he got woken up by a sudden movement next to him. Loki was thrashing under the covers, mumbling feverishly. Tony was just about to reach over and shake him when Loki sucked in a harsh, desperate gulp of air and opened his eyes, blinking furiously. He raised a shaking hand and covered his eyes, trying to calm down.

Tony gave him a moment to compose himself before he spoke into the darkness: “You okay?”

The silence was so long that Tony almost started to think that he wouldn’t get an answer. Finally, he got a quiet admission: “No.”

“Wanna talk about it?” Tony rolled onto his side to face Loki, who still had an arm thrown over his face. It was dark in the room, so he could only see a silhouette of the man next to him. When Loki didn’t say anything else, Tony sighed. “You know, normally I’m not into the whole psychotherapy thing, but this is the third time you’ve woken up like this since we came here. Something is
obviously bugging you and I’m already awake, so if you wanna talk about it, I’m here.”

There was a moment of stillness before Loki slowly lowered his hand and sat up, the blanket sliding down his chest to pool in his lap. Tony remained lying against the pillows, giving him time to compose himself a little.

“Our stay here has stirred up some unpleasant memories,” Loki muttered finally. His back was still tense and his fingers were playing with the blanket over his legs, making small, nervous movements.

“Yeah, I kinda got that,” Tony said and yeah, that glare Loki shot him was totally deserved. He never claimed to be good at this. “What kind of memories?” When Loki didn’t answer, he continued: “Does this have to do anything with the reason why you keep looking at the dwarves like they’re gonna bite you if you as much as breathe their way?” He propped himself up on his elbows. “I mean, you do a pretty good job of looking bored and unaffected, so they probably don’t know, but I’ve noticed that you always tense up anytime one of them comes into the room. What the hell did they do to you?”

His hands itched to touch Loki, to lay a hand on his shoulder or wrap an arm around his waist, but he kept them to himself, knowing from his own experience that touch usually wasn’t welcome when one was forced to remember something unpleasant.

“I…” Loki swallowed and licked his lips, before he tried again. “Some time ago, I made a bet with my- with Thor’s friends. They found out about my ability to cross between the worlds unassisted by the Bifrost and wanted me to prove it to them. They dared me to go to Nidavellir, into the underground dwarven realm and bring back something valuable that would prove that I had really been there.” He sighed. “I was young and foolish, eager to prove myself superior to Thor, so I agreed to go, paying no heed to my mother’s warnings. She had found out about our plans and tried to stop me, but I felt resentful that she was questioning my abilities and did not listen to her.”

His lips twisted in a weak parody of a smile. “I got to Nidavellir without any problems and managed to persuade the dwarves to let me inside their kingdom. There, I sneaked inside their treasury and tried to steal one of their valued artifacts. Unfortunately, I had underestimated their security and got caught when I attempted to leave with it.”

“What did they do to you?” Tony asked quietly. Loki looked down at his hands.

“Traditionally, the punishment for trespassing into the royal vault would be death. However, since I was Odin’s son, the dwarves could not execute me without asking permission from the Allfather first. Asgard still holds authority over the Nine Realms and if they killed me without Odin’s knowledge, such an action could be considered an act of war and could bring the wrath of Asgard on the entire dwarven realm.” His voice sounded strangely detached as he said it, like he was reciting something he had been taught a long time ago, and his gaze was a million miles away. Tony could only wonder what he was seeing in the darkness. Loki continued:

“After some negotiations, I was brought back to Asgard in chains and put on trial. Mother and Thor both spoke on my behalf and tried to persuade the dwarves to release me, but they refused. I had committed a crime against Nidavellir and the dwarves demanded that I be punished for it. In the end, Odin had no choice but to comply with their demands, because he didn’t want to risk a war with them, either. He managed to persuade them to hand me over into Asgard’s custody, on the condition that he would oversee that I fulfill the conditions of the punishment they chose for me.”

“What happened?” This time Tony sat up fully, scooting over until he was sitting shoulder to shoulder with Loki.
“Dwarves have always loved symbolic punishment,” Loki said bitterly. “At first, they wanted to cut off my hand for stealing, but Odin forbade that. Instead, since it had been my skillful words that had allowed me to enter their kingdom in the first place, they decided to render me silent by sewing my mouth shut.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tony breathed before he could stop himself. He had a brief flashback to some horror movie he’d seen years ago which had a guy with sewn lips in it, then imagined the whole process with the needle and the thread and promptly felt sick to his stomach. “Jesus fucking Christ. That’s sick.”

His hand found Loki’s on top of the cover and he threaded their fingers together, squeezing them tightly. “And your dad just let them do that?” he asked in disbelief.

“What other choice did he have?” Loki shot him a look. “He did not wish for a war with the dwarves and they demanded my punishment. He had to appease them somehow.”

“Still, that just…barbaric.” Tony shook his head.

“Such are the laws of our realm,” Loki replied somberly. “They might seem cruel to you, but the Allfather thought it a fit punishment for almost causing a war with the dwarves. So he made an example of me and ordered to have me silenced.” Loki grimaced at the memory. “The dwarves held me down and sewed my mouth shut by hand, with a bespelled needle and thread. As you can imagine, it wasn’t exactly pleasant.”

Even as Tony shuddered in sympathy at the mental image, his anger started to grow. From what Loki had said, he’d been little more than a kid when he’d done it. Who the hell does something like that to a teenager over a stupid prank? And who the hell allows someone else to do that to their own son? God, Odin was fucked up.

Absentmindedly, Tony ran his thumb over Loki’s knuckles, trying to come up with something, anything, that would keep him from putting on his suit and just punching all the dwarves in the face. Even though he rationally knew that these were not the same dwarves who had done that to Loki, a small, savage part of him still itched for revenge. He took a few deep breaths and forced his anger down with some effort, knowing that it wouldn’t help anything if he went after them now. Instead, he went over Loki’s words again, trying to find something else to focus on. He found it soon enough.

“Wait, what about Thor? He was the one who talked you into this whole mess in the first place.”

“Odin made him watch the punishment,” Loki answered, “to see what happens to those who flaunt the laws of other realms. Judging by his later transgressions, that particular lesson was lost on him.”

“And they didn’t punish him in any way?” Tony gave him an incredulous look.

“He got two years of patrol duty on Nidavellir.” Loki snorted bitterly. “Not much of a punishment for him, since he loves fighting the rock trolls.”

“Fuck.” God, this whole thing was just…beyond fucked up. “How long?” Tony had to ask. “How long did you have to wear the-” he gestured to his mouth.

“Six months,” Loki said, one corner of his mouth lifting a little at Tony’s expression of horror. “The Allfather originally wanted the sentence to be two years long, but mother intervened on my behalf, pleading with him to shorten it.”

Tony tried to picture it, tried to imagine how it would be to have to live through something like that,
“They did.” Loki’s voice was eerily calm. It seemed that watching Tony freak out on his behalf was actually calming him down.

“Oh god, I think I’m gonna be sick.” Tony ran his free hand over his face and tried to do some of the breathing exercises Pepper had always tried to force on him for stress management. It took a couple minutes before he was able to speak again. “Your dad is a real piece of work. Fuck, I thought I had it bad growing up, but compared to Odin, my own father looks like Dad of the Year.” He gave Loki a look. “If you ever hear me complain about my father again, feel free to slap me. Apparently I haven’t appreciated enough how good I actually had it.”

Loki cocked his head. “How was your father? You never talk about him and when anyone mentions him, you look uncomfortable. I am now getting quite curious about the comparison.”

Tony shrugged, trying to keep it casual but probably failing.

“There isn’t much to talk about, really.” When Loki continued looking at him expectantly, Tony sighed and continued: “He was a cold, calculating bastard who only sired me because he needed an heir to inherit his company. He never showed any sort of affection for me, never told me he loved me, and in those rare occasions when he actually was around, the only emotion he expressed towards me was disappointment. He was great at charming people and smiling for the cameras, but in private he was distant and closed off, more interested in engines and advancements in technology than in his own family.” And yeah, when he put it like that, the character he’d just described sounded uncomfortably familiar. “His happiest moment of parenthood was probably the day when he shipped me off to the boarding school.”

“How old were you?”

“Seven.”

An arm snaked around Tony’s waist, but he barely noticed, too caught up in old bitterness.

“What did your mother think about his decision?” Loki seemed genuinely curious.

Another shrug, a small, uncomfortable movement of Tony’s shoulders that spoke volumes of his opinion about of that particular topic. While Howard’s disapproval had always stung, hovering like a shadowy bat at the back on Tony’s mind whenever anyone compared him to his father, Maria’s neglect had always felt a little more personal. Tony had had plenty of classmates with distant, absent fathers, so Howard was more of a norm rather than an exception, but the other kids’ mothers usually seemed to be involved in their lives, always looking happy when their children came home for the holidays. Not Maria Stark.

“She didn’t seem to care much that I was gone,” Tony admitted quietly. “It freed up her schedule for more cocktail parties and charity balls. If she ever made any sort of protest against the whole boarding school thing, I never heard about it.”

“Maybe your parents just didn’t want you to see them fight,” Loki suggested. Tony responded with a short snort.

“Yeah, right. But to have an argument, you first have to spend more than five minutes in the same room with the person you’re trying to argue with. And care enough about the topic of the conversation to actually argue about it. I think I was always more like an afterthought to them, an
accidental byproduct of their marriage that they had to put up with, rather than someone they spent time with because they wanted to. Sure, we spent time together sometimes, but they both always seemed…distant. Cold.”

Loki’s hand snuck over onto his side, brushing over his ribs in a soothing gesture.

“Is that why you do not like to be touched?” Loki murmured.

“Yeah, probably.” Tony let his head fall forward when Loki’s hand trailed upward over his shoulder and onto his nape to play with the short hairs there. “I could count the number of hugs I got as a kid on the fingers of my hands. Then I went to the boarding school and then high school and nobody touched me there, either, because I was like seven years younger than everyone else and nobody wanted to hang out with a little kid. And then I went to college and discovered sex and the rest is history.” He let out a short chuckle. “I bet a Freudian psychologist would have a field day with this – Tony Stark not hugged enough as a child, becomes a sex-obsessed alcoholic with daddy issues.”

“You’re letting me touch you now,” Loki reminded him.

“Yeah, I guess I am.” A small smile appeared on Tony’s face. “But then, you’re a special case. I don’t usually do this whole “cuddle up and sleep together” thing.”

“I know,” Loki said with a smile of his own. He trailed a hand down Tony’s arm, the brush of his fingertips leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. “You appear very open and approachable at the first glance, but underneath all the smiles and superficial charm you are a very private person. It used to frustrate me at first, the inability to penetrate that icy wall of yours, but now I think I understand better why you are the man you are.”

Tony was almost about to point out that Loki had effectively derailed their conversation from the original topic, but then he remembered what they had been talking about and decided to keep silent about it. It seemed that Loki didn’t wish to revisit the whole dwarvish punishment deal and if Tony was completely honest, he wasn’t too thrilled to talk about it again, either. He allowed the diversion, settling more comfortably into Loki’s embrace. Neither one of them appeared to be ready to go to sleep just yet, so Tony searched for another topic to talk about.

“What about your mom? You haven’t talked about her much, but from the little I’ve heard, you seemed to like her well enough.”

Loki bowed his head a little, letting out a soft sigh.

“Yes, she was…one of the few people who seemed to be genuinely fond of me. She must have been aware of what I was, must have known from the very beginning, but she never treated me any different. She brought me up as her own son and never gave me any reason to doubt her affections. She…accepted me.” His voice hitched a little in the middle of the sentence, but Loki didn’t seem to notice. “It is only now that I know exactly how much that means and I regret that I wasn’t able to tell her-” He broke off with a small punched sound, trying to regain his composure. Tony heard him swallow several times before he continued. “The last time I saw her was when she visited me in my cell, shortly before the Dark Elves attacked. If I had known…” He shook his head with a sigh. “I did not expect that I would never see her again.”

“Yeah, nobody ever does,” Tony told him quietly, rubbing small circles on Loki’s knee through the blanket.

“I was not even allowed to attend her funeral,” Loki added bitterly. “My home had just been attacked and half-destroyed, my mother murdered and I was not even allowed to say goodbye to her.” His
voice hitched, but he didn’t seem to notice, too caught up in the torrent of memories. “I pleaded with them to let me see her, but nobody would even hear me out. They could have brought me to the funeral in chains, for all I cared, could have temporarily bound my magic if they were that worried about me escaping, but they didn’t. They did not even tell me that she was dead until after the funeral was long over.” His voice broke off with a choked sob and he bowed his head, using the hair as a curtain to shield his face.

Tony only hesitated for a second before he wrapped an arm around Loki’s shoulders and drew him close. Loki went, practically melting against him as he buried his face into Tony’s throat and held on for dear life. Together they lay back down against the pillows and Tony rubbed his hands over Loki’s back, letting him grieve. As he lay there, staring into darkness and listening to Loki’s hitching breaths, Tony felt a sudden surge of burning anger at all the people who had fucked Loki up over the years. Odin and his meddling. Thor and his casual disregard for other people’s wishes. Asgard and its society of prejudiced, racist pricks.

Sure, Loki had totally deserved to be in prison after the stunt he’d pulled in New York, but to deny him something as basic as a goodbye to the woman who raised him… Just like with the dwarves, Tony had to fight a sudden urge to go over to Asgard and punch Odin in the face. For a supposedly wise, loving father, that guy had sure fucked up.

Instead of entertaining some of his darker revenge fantasies, Tony decided to focus on the present moment and the man wrapped in his arms. Loki had stopped shaking a while ago, but hadn’t spoken since that last, broken admission.

“I’m sorry,” Tony murmured into the darkness.

“You have nothing to apologise for.” Loki lifted his head, propping his chin on Tony’s chest. “Why would you apologise for something that was not your fault?”

“It’s not an apology, but…” Tony searched for words, “an expression of sympathy, I suppose. A human custom, if you will. I might not know what it’s like to be denied…that, but I don’t have to have that experience to know that what they did was super shitty. What a bunch of dicks.”

“Yes, they are.” Loki concurred wearily.

“I mean, it’s one thing to put you in prison and another to deny you even the most basic decency… Christ.”

They lay in the darkness for a while, just breathing together in silence before Loki spoke again. “What about you? Did you go…?” he trailed off, letting Tony finish the sentence. His fingers were making idle patterns over Tony’s chest, exploring the newly-healed skin over his ribcage.

“To my parents’ funeral?” Tony raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, I did. It was…bad.” Yeah, that was one word for it.

“What happened?” Loki asked, sensing that there was more to the story than just simple grief.

“I was twenty. And drunk. They expected me to make a speech.” Tony snorted. “You can imagine how that went.”

“Strangely enough, I think I can,” Loki told him. “You have an unfortunate tendency to say he most inappropriate things at the worst time possible, and you often lash out at people when you’re hurting. My guess would be that you were grieving and angry, the alcohol loosened your tongue and you made some disparaging remarks about your dead father. Someone took offense and punched you
“Wow, you’re almost scarily good at this,” Tony said, running an absent-minded hand through Loki’s hair. “Yeah, it went almost exactly like that, except I was the one throwing punches when someone suggested that I was an ungrateful little brat who didn’t love his father enough. It almost ended in a brawl.” He could remember it, too, the disappointed glances thrown his way over the coffin, the whispered insinuations that he would never be good enough to live up to Howard’s legacy. It had rankled him back then and it still annoyed him even now, almost quarter century later.

“Almost?” Loki raised an eyebrow.

“Obie intervened, making excuses for my behavior,” Tony explained. “He managed to play it off as a grief-induced mental breakdown and avoid any potential scandals and lawsuits, but it was a near thing. I guess he had to protect his investments,” he added bitterly.

“Didn’t you have anyone who was genuinely interested in your well-being?” Loki asked in disbelief.

“Jarvis seemed to like me well enough. He was our family butler,” Tony added as an explanation. “He used to take care of me when I was growing up. He was a pretty great guy, never put up with my bullshit.” At Loki’s unspoken question, he said: “He died a few months after my parents.”

Loki wisely didn’t comment on the fact that the A.I. Tony had constructed a few years later just happened to have the same name as the dead butler. He didn’t need to, really - they both knew that Tony had created him to be a new companion when no living being was willing to spend more time in his presence than strictly necessary.

“After that, it was just me and Obie, who did his best to keep me busy with designing weapons so that I wouldn’t ask too many questions about what the hell he was doing with them behind my back. Luckily for him, I was a shallow idiot, too busy with parties and fucking random women to even ask about whom he was selling my weapons to. And no, before you ask, I didn’t go to his funeral. I was fucking pissed at him and still trying to cope with the fact that a guy whom I have known since preschool just tried to kill me.” Tony made a face. “Of course, the media had a field day with that – they called me out on it, pointing out that I was an ungrateful dick for not even bothering to attend the funeral of the man who practically raised me. I didn’t bother to explain that this same man had also tried to kill me on three separate occasions. The circus around the Iron Man thing was bad enough as it was, no need to add to it.”

He raised one of his hands from Loki’s back and ran it over his own face, trying to come up with a way to switch the topic.

“God, this is getting fucking depressing. Can we talk about something else?” He was getting a bit sleepy, but Loki still seemed fully awake, not willing to go back to sleep just yet.

“What would you like to talk about?” Loki inquired.

“Tell me more about your mom,” Tony said. “How was she? You haven’t spoken about her much, but she sounds like a pretty remarkable lady.”

“She was,” Loki admitted softly.

“Tell me about her,” Tony told him again.

Loki sighed, settling more comfortable against Tony.

“She was a mage, the same as me. She was smart and proud and beautiful and never let anyone...
dictate her what she should do,” he began. “When I was little, she used to read me and Thor books before bed, tales of great warriors and mighty battles…”

Loki’s voice grew fond and soft, recounting favorite memories and Tony let it wash over him, listening to Loki’s tale until he fell asleep.

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After that night, things got better for them. Now that Tony knew about the source of Loki’s uneasiness with the dwarves, he didn’t make him interact with them more than was strictly necessary and Loki seemed content enough to curl up in a corner somewhere and just watch them work. The demigod still wasn’t completely comfortable around them, but at least he no longer looked like he was going to jump out of his skin whenever one of them walked into the room.

The dwarves themselves were…frostily civil to Loki. They would never be polite (Tony suspected there wasn’t anything that could force a dwarf to be polite) or friendly to him, but at least they were no longer outright hostile and Tony counted that as a minor victory. Now that he knew what the dwarves were capable of, and what their ideas of “punishment” entailed, he was just glad that he and Loki were both still in one piece and mostly being left to their own devices. With things being what they were, he had to take whatever he could.

Even though he tried not to show it, Loki’s tale had left him deeply unsettled and wary in a way that he hadn’t been before. Sure, all his gambles with them had paid off so far, but he never knew how much longer his luck would hold. The deal he had with the dwarven king was fragile at best and he really didn’t want to find out what would happen if the dwarves thought he was trying to deceive them in any way. Aware of the month-long deadline that was slowly creeping closer with every passing day, Tony threw himself into his work, working harder than he had before.

Still, he was Tony Stark and the vague notion of a distant threat wasn’t enough to make him back down completely. Sure, he became a little more careful around their hosts, toning the insults down to avoid anything that could be used as an excuse for an intergalactic incident, but he didn’t roll over, either. He might be on their home turf but he would be damned if he let them gain the upper hand in their interactions just because Loki had told him a scary story.

He waited until they had provided him with all the amenities he could wish for under the guise of hospitality before he finally pulled out his trump card – the adamantium.

“So,” he said with forced casualness as he fished the lump of metal out of his backpack and laid it on the workbench in front of Nári, “I’ve been thinking of using this for the armor, but I don’t have enough of that stuff to make the armor out of it. Is there any way you guys could replicate the metal for me? Or do you have anything like it?”

Nári picked up the lump, forest-green eyes lighting up in interest. “No, I don’t believe we have this. What is it?”

“Adamantium,” Tony replied. “Hardest metal on Earth.” He pulled one of the adamantium bullets out of the bag and let it clatter down onto the table. “I have a few more pieces of the metal, but I don’t have enough to make a full suit. Do you think you could do something about that?”

“We will see,” the dwarf responded cryptically as he lifted the lump of metal to examine it. “Why are you so set upon using this particular metal for the armor? Can you not just use Asgardian steel or some variant thereof?”

“This,” Tony lifted Loki’s ruined chestplate from the workbench, “is your famed Asgardian steel,
after an encounter with half a dozen adamantium bullets. So no, I’m not gonna use it, because it’s shit. You guys may be satisfied with the stuff you have, but I’m not and I’m gonna make something better. My question is: Can you replicate this metal for me?"

The dwarf continued studying the adamantium, turning it over in his hands.

“How did you obtain this metal?”

“This one?” Tony said. “I stole it, just before I blew up an entire base full of my enemies.” Nári shot him a quick, sharp look that Tony ignored. “But if you mean in general, then this is an artificially created metal. It’s not mined from a mountain somewhere, but created in a lab. Much like the anti-magic metal that I made. The problem with this is, I’ve been trying to recreate it for years, but I never managed to get the formula quite right because I had no way to study the original. I never actually had the chance to get my hands on any of the metal before this, because access to it is highly restricted.”

“It must be very rare,” Nári said slowly. Thought he was trying to hide it, there was that gleam of interest in his eyes as he gazed at the metal. Tony gave himself a mental high five, but outwardly he kept his poker face intact. Yeah, he had them now.

“It is,” Tony confirmed. “I’ve been trying to get my hands on it for twenty five years. This is the first time that I succeeded and I still don’t have enough of it to make everything I want.” He allowed himself a brief moment to imagine everything he could do with the metal. A suit made of adamantium. Impenetrable, undefeatable. Maybe a built-in adamantium dagger for close combat? The sheer possibilities made his head spin.

“What can it do?” the dwarf inquired. He still looked a little skeptical, but the glint in his eyes suggested that much like Tony, he had already come up with at least a dozen possible uses for it.

“Well, it’s the hardest metal on Earth,” Tony told him. “From what I’ve seen, it’s pretty much indestructible and impenetrable by all means both conventional and unconventional. It would make an amazing armor, sure, but when you turn it into a weapon, it’s just…insane.” A brief memory of an angry man with claws flashed through Tony’s mind and he couldn’t quite suppress the grin. “I know a guy who has these foot-long adamantium claws on his hands and he can tear through pretty much anything. Steel, marble, concrete, bone – he can tear them to shreds in a matter of seconds. Watching him fight is like watching a one man army.”

“How did he come by these claws?” Nári asked. “Surely they cannot be natural.”

“No, the claws are his own. From what I understand, he was born with them. He got the adamantium in some crazy scientific experiment a few decades ago. Someone wanted to see if it’s possible to infuse the human skeleton with adamantium. As it turns out, it is and now the dude has bones made of metal.”

Nári and Loki were watching him with identical expressions of incredulity.

“How do you even-” Nári began. “How can anyone possibly survive something like that?”

Tony didn’t blame them for the disbelief. He’d been able to see Wolverine’s file and man, the experiment was fucking insane. It was a wonder the guy hadn’t gone mad from the pain. Well – crazier than he already was.

“He’s immortal,” Tony explained. “He’s got some sort of superhealing going on, so he can’t die. If you kill him, he just heals and comes back to life. From what I’ve heard, he’s almost two hundred
years old now, but doesn’t look a day over forty. It’s some sort of a mutation in his DNA, nobody’s been able to figure it out yet.”

“You have gods living amongst you?” Loki demanded, rising from his chair in the corner to join the conversation as well.

Tony let out an amused snort at that notion.

“He’s no god. Just an angry dude with claws and a drinking problem. He’s a mutant,” he added as an explanation when the two men continued staring at him. “We’ve got tons of them on Earth, they can do all sorts of stuff.” At Loki’s uncomprehending look, Tony rolled his eyes. “Seriously? You’ve never heard of mutants? You guys have been creepily spying on us for centuries. I can forgive Grumpy here his lack of knowledge, since he’s been literally living under a rock, but you? No wonder you thought we were a bunch of primitive idiots when you weren’t paying attention. Your intel people suck.”

“So it would seem,” Loki muttered. “It appears that we have underestimated your realm once again. None of the information from Agent Barton mentioned these “mutants”. What are they?”

Tony took all of three seconds to contemplate whether he should tell these guys about the Earth mutants, but in the end he decided, why the hell not. If it helped him gain even more respect from the dwarves (and curb Loki’s future homicidal attempts towards Earth and its inhabitants), he would count that a win.

“Remember how I told you we’ve evolved?” he asked Loki. He got a reluctant nod in answer. “Well, we have. And not just the technology but the humans themselves as well. For decades now, there have been people born with extraordinary abilities. Some of those are just little quirks like claws or wings, but some of them have powers that could give you guys a run for your money.”

Loki lifted one eyebrow. “Such as?”

“There’s a guy, a telepath, who can read every thought of every person within half a mile radius. He can control people with his mind, erase their memories, implant false thoughts, that kind of stuff.” Tony gave a wry chuckle. “It’s a good thing he’s a good guy, or humanity would have been enslaved ages ago. “

The flabbergasted expressions on Loki and Nári’s faces were utterly priceless, so Tony decided to continue.

“Then there’s a guy who can control metal. All metal. He’s insanely powerful – he can lift entire buildings with his mind, twist steel into a pretzel like it’s jelly. I’ve seen him throw cars, bend bridges, even levitate people by the iron in their blood. It’s utter madness. Then there’s a lady who can control weather. She can conjure up hurricanes, tornadoes, lightning storms…basically Thor, just without the superhuman strength. Then there’s a guy who can turn things into ice, guy who can set things on fire with a thought, a blue lady who can turn into any person she wants, a red guy who can teleport, a guy who shoots lasers out of his eyes…Basically, any crazy thing you can think of, someone has it.”

When they still looked speechless, Tony smirked. “You’re really lucky you went toe to toe with the Avengers and not the mutants, you know,” he told Loki. “We may have the Hulk, but we’re still pretty vanilla, all things considered. If you had come across the mutants instead, you wouldn’t have lasted five minutes. If Professor X, Magneto and Wolverine had joined powers against you, you would have been sent back to Asgard in a shoe box.”
“Why didn’t they join the fight?” Loki wanted to know. Tony shrugged.

“Most of them were halfway across the world, trying to thwart another one on Magneto’s crazy plans for mutant world domination. By the time they were done, the battle in New York was already over. So you should probably be glad for their internal squabbles, or you would be dead now.”

“They fight amongst themselves?” A second eyebrow rose up to join the first.

“Yeah, all the time. It’s been going on for ages.” Tony waved a bored hand. “The two old guys had some sort of lovers’ spat years ago and now they’re trying to pass it off as a conflict of philosophies so they can continue bickering. Their minions clash occasionally, the bad guy gets imprisoned, then escapes again a few weeks later and they start all over again. I prefer to stay out of it. I have enough crazy on my hands as it is without tangling with the mutants as well.”

“So you are not…?” Loki gave him a significant look.

“A mutant?” Tony said. “No, as far as I know, I’m not. I’m just a freakishly smart guy with a talent for figuring out how things tick. Nothing supernatural about me, I’m afraid. But if I ever sprout a pair of wings or start spitting fire, you’ll be the first to know, I promise.” He shot Loki a grin before his gaze slid back to the lump of metal that Nári was still clutching in his hand. “Anyway, I believe we were talking about adamantium, before I went on a tangent about my gifted associates.” He picked up the bullet from the workbench and tossed it into the air before he caught it and spun it between his fingers. “Can you guys do that for me, or do I have to figure it out on my own? Cause I’m pretty sure I could do that, don’t get me wrong, I just thought the work might go faster if I didn’t have to do every little thing.”

The dwarf was still studying him with calculating eyes.

“Why would we do this for you?” He tried to sound haughty and uninterested, but Tony didn’t miss the fact that he still hadn’t let go of the adamantium.

“Because you would benefit from it, too,” Tony told him. “If you crack the formula and make some of the metal for me, you will obtain a brand new, super tough metal, along with the secret to its creation. I only need a bit of it, so if you make more, you can keep the rest of what you create.”

When the dwarf still looked unconvinced, Tony lowered his voice a little into that coaxing drawl he always used on people who were skeptical about his latest idea. It usually worked (except on the Widow, who was too good to fall for his bullshit. But on everyone else? Hell yes). “Come on, I can see that you’re dying to get your teeth into this one. I mean, an awesome new metal that could revolutionize weaponry for centuries to come?” He took a step closer, holding the bullet between his fingers. “This is the stuff that ripped a hole through both my suit and Loki’s oh-so-fancy Asgardian Steel armor. You can’t get much better than this.”

Nári hesitated for a moment longer before he gave in with a resigned sigh.

“Damn you, Stark. You are too good at this. Did you take lessons from him?” He nodded his chin in Loki’s direction. Tony gave him a smile that was all teeth.

“No, I was awesome long before I met Loki. His presence just helped me polish my skills a bit.”

Nári looked between them, shaking his head.

“You are both out of your mind if you think this armor idea of yours will work, but I would be a fool not to take the opportunity when it’s right before me.” He gave Tony a resigned look. “I will see what I can do about your metal.”
He turned to leave, but Tony made three long strides and cut him off before he could walk out of the room.

“Uh-uh-uh,” Tony wagged his forefinger, blocking the door with his taller body. “Do you think I’m an idiot? There’s no fucking way I’m gonna let you walk out of here with the biggest piece of adamantium I’ve been able to get my hands on. Give it here, that thing is not leaving this room.”

Nári glowered at him, but eventually handed the lump of metal over. It was all Tony could do to stop himself from snatching it from the dwarf’s hand and cradling it protectively against his chest.

“How am I supposed to study it if you don’t give me anything?” the dwarf asked crossly.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t give you anything,” Tony corrected him. “Here you go.” He tossed him the adamantium bullet, which the dwarf caught with a quick snatch of his hand. “You may want to wash it before you analyze it, there might still be some of my blood on it, but besides that, it should be serviceable.”

The dwarf’s gaze slowly drifted up from the bullet to Tony, his eyes suggesting that he thought Tony was completely batshit insane. Tony just shrugged and kept his grin on. He wouldn’t be the first or the last to think that. Tony was kinda used to it at this point. With another withering look at Tony, Nári finally turned and walked out with the bullet clutched in his hand, muttering under his breath about the insanity of Midgardians.

Loki waited until the dwarf was out of the room before he walked over to Tony, leaning into his shoulder companionably.

“Did you just persuade the dwarves to work for you?” he asked in amusement.

“Yeah, I guess I did.” Tony tossed the lump of adamantium in the air, catching it easily in his right hand. “And they might even deliver, once they get over their collective nerdgasm over the metal.”

“The dwarf was right,” Loki muttered. “You are frightfully good at this.”

“How did you think I got so rich?” Tony shot him a sidelong glance. “It wasn’t through my goodness of heart, that’s for sure.”

“Watching you play the dwarves like a well-tuned harp almost makes the stay here bearable,” Loki told him as they retreated back into the workshop.

“Really? Almost bearable? Well, I know what else could make the stay here more than bearable,” Tony drawled, and started backing the demigod against the nearest workbench. He always got a wave of endorphins after he managed to strike a deal and what better way to enjoy it than through sharing it with someone else?

“Oh really?” Loki scooted back to sit on the bench, biting his lower lips as he watched Tony lean closer. “And what could that possible be?”

“Lock the door and I’ll show you,” Tony murmured into his ear. He bit the earlobe next, enjoying the soft gasp that Loki made at the contact. “I already got rid of Captain Cockblock. It would be a shame not to use the opportunity.” He stepped into the open V of Loki’s legs, running his hands up Loki’s thighs in a slow, teasing motion.

“Hmm, I think I might just let you persuade me,” Loki purred into his neck. He wrapped his arms around Tony’s waist, pulling him closer. “You know I could never resist a good offer.”
“Yeah, you really should.” Tony shot him a grin full of teeth. “Because it’s a very,” he kissed Loki’s neck, “very good” a scrape of teeth against his collarbone, “offer” he finished by giving the demigod a hickey onto the hollow of his neck. Loki arched against him, mouthing at his jaw.

“In that case, what are we waiting for?” Loki pulled back to give him a challenging look. The lock on the door clicked, giving them the privacy they wanted. Tony shot Loki another winning grin and reached down to untie their pants.

He didn’t get much else done that day.

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

I won’t be posting another chapter this week, because I need to take some time off from editing and posting to re-read the story and figure out what I’m going to do with the last few chapters. I’ve got most of it finished but it’s a bit of a mess and will take me some time to get it all sorted out. Sorry for the delays this will cause, but I really do not wish to end up posting half-finished stuff.

Chapter 32 should (hopefully) be posted on next Friday, July 3. Thank you for your patience!
Several days later, there was still no adamantium. The dwarves were still studying it, muttering about it in the workshops across the hall, but so far they hadn’t made much progress with it. Normally Tony would be feeling smug as hell about the fact that Earth had something that the dwarves couldn’t crack, but since he wasn’t having much luck with uncovering the secret of the metal’s origin himself, it significantly cut down on any feelings of gleeful superiority he might have harbored.

Any attempts he made to create a better, harder metal than those he had managed to come up with already were also met with failure. Back on Earth, Tony had had several alloys that could have served him reasonably well, but here, without his equipment and - most importantly – without JARVIS to run simulations for him, he felt like a blind man groping through a desert in search of a single grain of sand. Sure, the alloy-making machines that the dwarves had were pretty handy – the problem was that no matter how many times Tony tried, the metal they produced was never as good as what he wanted. It had been days now without any real progress and Tony was growing steadily more frustrated, trying out dozens of possible combinations and then sulking morosely when they failed.

The metal itself was the last component he needed before he could try to tackle the whole anti-magic thing. He already had the cast ready, the design perfected after plenty of input from both Loki and the dwarves, so the only thing left was the material. Which he still didn’t have.

Loki didn’t help the matters much, either. He still avoided the dwarves, which was nothing new, but he had been weirdly on edge the last few days, acting strangely nervous despite the fact that he had nothing to fear here. Tony didn’t know what was on the demigod’s mind, but Loki’s mood was affecting him, too, making him feel unsettled despite the fact that nothing exciting or dangerous was going on. The dwarves were cooperating, the work was progressing steadily (when one ignored the major issue of the metal), and nobody had tried to poison them yet, so all in all, things were pretty good.

And yet, there was a strange sense of growing urgency in the air, a feeling that their time was slowly but surely running out, which drove Tony to spend days on end in the workshop, poring over blueprints and metal compositions, looking for answers. He had no idea how long they had been
here already. The days blended into each other, the passage of time marked only by the meals and
the occasional sleep, but since there was no daylight, Tony had a hard time guessing what time of
day it was. He’d never been one for regular sleep - or sane working hours, for that matter – and since
nobody tried to stop him from working, he could spend as long as he wanted in the workshops. So
he did.

The idea for a solution came to him one afternoon, as he was going over the computer readings of
the materials from Earth and comparing them with the ones he had managed to create here so far.
The compositions scan of Thor’s hammer flickered into existence before him, the armor helpfully
displaying a rotating holograph of the magic hammer along with all the pertinent information. Tony
stared at it for a long time, feeling like a lightbulb had just gone off in his head.

“Of course,” he mumbled. “That’s it.”

“What did you find?” Loki half rose from his chair in the corner, his eyes scanning Tony’s face.

Tony gestured towards the blue hammer rotating in the air.

“I think I know how to make your armor,” he told the demigod. “But I’m gonna need some Uru to
do it.”

“The dwarves will never allow that,” Loki said with a small shake of his head. “They will never let
you even touch the Uru, much less give you any of it to make an armour for me. They would sooner
cut off their own hands than give their greatest secret to an Outworlder.”

“Maybe,” Tony said, “maybe not. We won’t know until we try.”

“They will not give you anything,” Loki repeated stubbornly. “You might have persuaded them to
help you, but nothing you can offer them will ever make them give up Uru.”

“Well,” Tony said slowly, eyeing the hologram display, “in that case I will simply have to make
some of my own.”

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“No,” Nári said resolutely when he came into the workshop an hour later and Tony presented his
idea. “Absolutely not. Of all the things you could ask of us, this is the one we will never give you,
Tony Stark.”

“What if I offered you-” Tony began.

“No,” Nári repeated, not even waiting to hear Tony’s offer. “And that answer will not change, no
matter how much you try to persuade us. You may plead, you may beg, you may even try to
foolishly threaten us, but nothing you can say could ever persuade us to let you get your hands on
Uru.”

“Really? Not even if I-”

“No.” The dwarf didn’t even let him finish the sentence. “Especially since you would use it to create
something for him.” He shot a contemptuous look into the corner where Loki sat. The demigod
returned the glare with one of his own. Tony fought the urge to roll his eyes. Seriously, those two
were sometimes worse than catty high school brats.

“Okay, so no Uru, got it,” Tony pretended defeat. “But just for the sake of scientific curiosity – what
makes it so great? What’s so special about it?”
“Why do you wish to know?” the dwarf’s suspicious gaze turned away from Loki and landed on him instead.

“I mean, you guys are super serious about guarding the stuff,” Tony said casually. “I can’t help but be curious about it. ‘Cause I’ve seen it before and it didn’t look all that special. Kinda grey, matte, heavy as fuck, but nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“Did you miss the part where Mjölnir is a magical hammer that only responds to its rightful wielder?” Nári gave him an incredulous look.

“Yeah, that might have been mentioned in passing,” Tony allowed. “Once or twice.” He leaned back against the workbench in a display of fake nonchalance and pinned the dwarf with a gaze. “So, how did you guys do that? How did you program the hammer to respond to Thor only?”

“We didn’t,” Nári told him. “Odin did. From what I have heard, he made it so that only those worthy—”

“…may wield the power of Thor, blah blah blah.” Tony finished for him “Yeah, I know the drill. Thor was smug as hell when he got us all drunk and tried to persuade us to try and lift his hammer.”

“And did you?” Loki wanted to know.

Tony shrugged. “Well, most of us gave it a shot. Nobody could lift it, of course. Thought I privately think that Steve probably could do it, he just didn’t want to hurt Thor’s feelings. The guy was wrecked enough as it was, what with his mom and brother being dead.” He shot Loki a look that the demigod pointedly ignored. “No need to add to that by stealing his hammer as well.”

“So you couldn’t lift it,” the dwarf said gleefully. Tony thought he was enjoying this little tidbit way too much.

“Well, no, but it was hardly a surprise.” Tony folded his arms with a small, uncomfortable jerk of his shoulders. “I mean, I’ve got a bloody streak a mile wide. You could probably populate entire countries with the number of people my weapons have killed over the years. It’s no wonder Thor’s magic hero hammer didn’t like me. I wouldn’t like me either.”

Loki frowned a little at his comment but the dwarf looked intrigued.

“What weapons?” Nári cocked his head a little, looking far too interested for Tony’s taste.

“Oh, I didn’t mention? I used to be a weapons manufacturer before this whole superhero shtick. Best one in the world. I gave it up a few years ago and started selling peace instead. It’s been pretty good so far.” Since he didn’t like the gleam of interest in Nári’s eyes, he decided to get the conversation back on track, before anyone got the genius idea to commission some nukes from him. “So, Odin programmed the hammer, not you. Which means that you did what, exactly?” He cocked his head a little. “Make a hammer that can shoot lightning? Or is the lightning Thor’s own and the hammer is just a boomerang that always comes back to its owner?”

“The hammer is enchanted.” It was Loki who answered this time. “It has a number of enchantments on it that allow him to use it as a magic weapon. Thor does have some magic of his own, mainly the ability to control weather and lightning, but he tends to rely heavily on the hammer to help him channel those powers. The hammer magnifies his magic, gives him most of his power. Without it, he is little more than a regular brute, relying largely on his strength.” His lips pulled into a small, derisive smirk, a clear testament of what he exactly thought about his brother’s abilities.

“Okay, so the hammer works as a magnifier for Thor’s own magic, but also has some powers of its
own?” Tony turned back to the dwarf, waiting for his nod. “So, how much of the enchantments did you dwarfs do on it? Did you make it shoot lightning, or did Odin do that, too?"

Nári frowned at his wording, but answered anyway, growing a little more cautious under the barrage of questions. Dwarf or not, he was no idiot.

“No, that was all Odin’s doing.”

“So you guys just what? Made an indestructible magical boomerang?” To be honest, Tony was feeling a little disappointed here. He had expected the creators of a legendary magical weapon to be able to do a lot more than that.

“Just.” Nári shook his head with a disbelieving laugh. “Just? You say it as if that by itself was nothing remarkable. The hammer is one of our greatest creations.”

“Yeah, but it’s still just a piece of metal on a stick.” Tony waved a hand dismissively. “Odin was the guy who gave it the majority of its special juice.” He pushed away from the table and started to pace, gesturing to his suit as he passed it. “Look, I can make a badass piece of metal, too. That will be the easiest part about all this, honestly. What I need to know is how to make it do what I want it to do. I mean, I know how to make a user-specific thing. I’ve done it before. My suits are keyed only to me, to my DNA imprint – if anyone else tried to climb inside one, the suits wouldn’t work for them.” He picked up a screwdriver, making big, sweeping gestures with his hands. “The problem I’m dealing with here is – how the fuck do I make it amplify and repel magic at the same time? I’m not a magic guy. I have no fucking idea how to do any of that.”

“Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you started making outrageous plans,” Nári shot back. “What you are proposing here is impossible.”

“Yeah, you already told me that.” Tony suppressed the urge to grind his teeth together in frustration. “Like a million times. And I’m still gonna do it anyway. I just thought you guys might have some ideas about how to go about this, what with you being legendary blacksmiths and all. But as it turns out, you’re kinda shit at this. That’s a disappointment. I thought the guys who made Mjölnir would be more impressive than this.”

He was walking on thin ice here and he knew it, but he refused to back down. He had hoped to get more insight on the creation of magical weapons and armor, but so far he had only gotten a bunch of useless, self-important blather and not much else.

“We did not make Mjölnir,” a hint of annoyance had slipped into Nári’s voice, “Our ancestors did.”

“So what?” Tony shot back. “My dad made a shield that neutralizes Thor’s hammer. Should I just sit down in a corner and cry that I’m never gonna make anything as badass as that? Bullshit. I already have. And I will make more, if I get the opportunity. Besides,” he pointed out, “just because you guys didn’t make the hammer doesn’t mean that you don’t know how the whole process works.”

The dwarf set his jaw. “We do. We just do not wish to share that knowledge with you.”

“Yeah, I already figured that,” Tony told him. “I thought I might ask anyway, just in case.” He ran a hand over his face, smearing a bit of soot over his cheek in the process. “God, talking with you people is like pulling teeth. I thought Justin Hammer was bad, but I’m beginning to get a new appreciation for his sleazy brand of douchebaggery.” He took a few deep breaths, trying to keep himself from getting riled up. He knew the dwarf was being difficult on purpose and it was annoying as hell, but even though he would love nothing more than to punch the smugness off the guy’s face and get some real answers, he couldn’t afford to piss the dwarf off completely. As much as he hated
it, this was really the only place where he had the chance to actually make Loki’s armor. If he angered the dwarves and they kicked him out, this whole armor business would be over.

“Okay,” he said with forced calmness, once he had managed to get his temper somewhat under control. “Okay, so the hammer is enchanted. How do I enchant stuff?”

The dwarf looked at him like he was a complete moron.

“With magic, of course.”

“Well, I don’t have that,” Tony informed him crossly. “As far as I know, I’m 100% Muggle.” His eyes found Loki, who was watching the whole conversation with interest. “But I have a mage here, a pretty good one. Could Loki do it? The whole enchantment bit?”

Nári shot the demigod a quick glance before he turned his back on him dismissively.

“Maybe. But I doubt that. The enchantments are always stronger when they are done by someone else other that the intended recipient of the artifact.”

Tony leaned back against the side of the workbench and fought the urge to sigh in annoyance.

“Well, I’m certainly not going to march up to Odin and demand that he enchant some armor for me. I don’t think that would go over well, all things considered.”

Loki’s amused snort confirmed that for him.

“I did not say you had to go to Odin,” the dwarf grumbled.

“Then what else did you mean?” Tony honestly had no idea.

“*You* could enchant it,” Nári said casually and it was all Tony could do not to turn around like a moron to look behind himself because there was no fucking way the dwarf was talking about him.

“Um, did you miss the part where I’m a muggle? There’s zero magic on me. Nada. Zilch. I may be a lot of things, but ‘magic’ is not one of them.”

The dwarf rolled his eyes. “Of course you are. Can’t you feel it? Your creations are full of it.”

Tony just stared at him with skepticism.

“Sorry, buddy, but you must be wrong about that. I’m the guy with technology. All my innovations are based on scientific knowledge. No magic voodoo to be found anywhere.”

Nári gave an exasperated sigh. “Oh, for...” He turned to Loki. “Tell him, wizard. He might believe you.”

Loki rolled his eyes behind the dwarf’s back but complied, standing up from his chair. Tony crossed his arms over his chest and raised an expectant eyebrow.

“You’re not,” Loki said dryly. Tony was almost ready to start gloating to the dwarf that he’d been wrong when Loki added: “But you could be, if you made the effort.”

“I’m- What are you- What?” Tony ended up saying incredulously. “Are you kidding me?”
“No.” Loki made several steps toward him. “I’m quite serious.”

Tony ran a hand through his hair, feeling like everyone around him had suddenly gone crazy.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Didn’t you tell me yourself, that science is simply a less advanced form of magic?” Loki asked him. Tony desperately searched for a counterargument.

“Actually, that was Thor, not me. I was simply paraphrasing. But even if I wasn’t, it still doesn’t mean that’s what I’m doing is magic. It’s all science-based with solid theories behind it.”

“It may be,” Loki allowed. “That doesn’t make it any less spectacular.” He leisurely crossed the room and stopped a foot away from Tony, only to do that loom-and-lean-into-your-space thing he did when he wanted to make a point. “I have seen your world, Anthony, and the things you create are light years ahead of what the rest of the realm has. You have managed to create things that not even the Aesir have.”

“You mean pizza?” Tony didn’t bother to turn down the snark. He got a chuckle in response.

“Pizza is a wonderful invention, truly, but it’s not what I meant,” Loki refused to get himself derailed from the topic. “I was talking about your flying suits of armour and your invisible servant that can steal your enemies’ secrets right from under their noses and then turn them into a light show for your perusal. Nobody else in the world has anything like it.”

“Yeah, there’s a reason why I’m the best in the world at what I do,” Tony allowed. “But I’m telling you, it has nothing to do with magic. I’m just building up on my own technological advancements.” When Loki kept giving him that look, Tony sighed in frustration, running a hand through his hair. “Look, I’ve tried, okay?” he finally admitted. “I’ve tried making invisibility cloaks and teleports and time machines. But none of that stuff works.” He paused for a second, mentally going over the list of failed prototypes. “Yeah, okay, the cloaks kinda work, but not in the same way that your magic does. But the fact still remains that I’ve ran a hundred readings and analyses, but despite all my efforts, I haven’t managed to figure out how to do anything that you do.” His gestures grew progressively more animated. “I still don’t have the first idea how to go about teleportation, or shapeshifting, or any of that. I can’t spit fire, or levitate stuff or…”

“That is not all magic is,” Loki interrupted his rant. “You view of magic is very narrow-minded, but that is only to be expected.” Before Tony could bristle at the veiled insult, Loki continued. “Magic has a thousand different forms. It is not just the flashy destruction that you seem to associate it with. It has other, more subtle branches. Creation, illusions, manipulation of reality…” He waved his hand and suddenly they were standing in the middle of a sunlit garden. Tony whipped his head to look around, taking in the blooming trees and flowers around them.

“Did you just teleport us?”

Loki gave him a smile.

“No. We are still in the workshop. I just created an illusion.” He snapped his fingers and the scene around them changed into endless miles of red, barren desert. The high afternoon sun glared down on them, but there was no heat. Another spell and they were standing in the middle of a frozen wasteland, with icy cliffs rising high around them and snow as far as the eye could see, but there was no cold. Loki waved his hand again and they were in the middle of space, orbiting around a dying star.
“Holy shit, this is amazing,” Tony said, gazing with wonder at the planets swirling in the distance. “Are we really still on Nidavellir?”

“We have not moved an inch,” Loki told him. He snapped his fingers again and the illusion around them vanished, the celestial light show turning back into the dimly lit dwarven workshop. They were still standing in the same spots where they had been before. Tony blinked and looked around, trying to reorient himself.

“Wow,” he said, once he managed to ground himself back in reality, “that was pretty awesome. Why have you never showed me that before?”

Loki smirked. “A wise man never reveals all his cards at once.”

“No, you just wanted to show off, admit it,” Tony shot back with a grin. Loki managed to hold onto his smug expression before a smile broke through.

“…yes, that too.”

Tony looked around again, taking in the grubby walls and the frowning dwarf in the corner.

“Is this the part where I wake up and find out that you have been keeping me in a coma for the past five months and everything that happened was a dream?” he couldn’t help but ask. Because at this point, he wouldn’t be surprised by anything.

“That is an interesting thought, but no,” Loki said. “Everything you have seen so far has been real. Well, except this illusion.” He shook his head with a small, amused smile. “You Midgardians have the strangest ideas.”

So much for the hope that the whole HYDRA thing had been just a fluke.

“Okay, so you conjured up a Fata Morgana for me,” Tony allowed. “I still don’t see what that has to do with my suits.”

“Magic, in its most basic form, is the ability to shape the world around you,” Loki explained in a low voice. “To feel out its structure, discover the energies pulsing through it, and make them bend to your will. Which you have.” He waved a hand towards the suit standing by the wall. “You laugh in the face of gravity and your so-called laws of physics.”

“They still apply,” Tony argued. “I’m just bending them a little.”

“That is exactly my point!” Loki exclaimed, gesturing animatedly at the room around them. “Magic is not about ignoring the laws of the universe, but about finding ways to harness them, use them for your purposes.”

“I still don’t see how this ends up with me throwing fireballs.”

Loki scoffed. “Every idiot can conjure up fire. It takes the minimal amount of talent and practice. But just because you may not be able to conjure up a flame doesn’t mean that what you are doing isn’t magical. I told you, magic has thousands of forms. What you are doing is much more profound than a simple manipulation of elements.”

“Like what?” Tony wanted to know.

“Take your servants, for example,” Loki suggested. “The mechanical creatures you keep in your workshop on Midgard.”
“They’re just helper bots,” Tony tried to shrug.

“No, they are your children,” Loki told him with an expression that was far too knowing. “They are much more than simple machines. If they were, they would obey you without question, but they do not. They have their own independent thoughts and preferences. They feel. Each one of them has a distinct personality.”

“I thought you only treated them as servants,” Tony told him. Honestly, he was a little surprised that Loki had noticed that much about the bots. Most visitors to his workshop never gave them more than a passing glance.

“I did, at first,” Loki admitted. “But I have spent enough time with them to get to know them and I know that what they are goes far beyond simple programming. Your robots have distinct opinions on things. They have a sense of humor. They worry about you when you get hurt.” He gave Tony a look. “You did not program that.”

“No, they must have learned that from Pepper.”

“Still, can’t you see how remarkable that is?” Loki insisted. “An artificial being that can think and feel? In all my years, I have never seen anything like it. The one thing that came closest was the Destroyer that guarded Asgard’s Vault, and even that was a mindless beast, blindly obeying the orders given to it by the ruler of Asgard. But you, you have taken wires and plates and turned them into living beings” He shook his head in wonder.

“Does this conversation have a point?” Tony asked, feeling a little weirded out by the whole thing.

“Yes, it does,” Loki said, coming closer. “The point is, you are remarkable. You have a talent for doing the extraordinary. Countless mages and dwarves alike have tried creating artificial creatures, bring them to life. They spent centuries pursuing that dream, fruitlessly searching for a solution and yet you managed it almost effortlessly, without paying it much thought. You created the most powerful artificial mind in the world, a mind that could help you conquer entire realms in a matter of days, and yet you use him as a companion.” Loki let out a disbelieving breath. “Most people would regard him as a mere computer, nothing more than a program you made, but I have spent hours talking to him and found that he has a very unique mind, with opinions that often do not correspond with the ones you hold. If he were only a program, he would be a blank mirror of the values you imposed on him, but he isn’t. He has his own ideas about the world and a moral code that is distinctly stricter than yours.” He gave Tony a look.

“Yeah, JARVIS is a goody two shoes,” Tony snorted. “I have no idea how he manages to be so moral, when he’s spent the past fifteen years in my company.”

“Don’t you see?” Loki laid his hands on Tony’s shoulders, gripping him to illustrate his point. “You have managed to create a being that is separate from you, an entity who can think and feel and you don’t consider it to be anything remarkable. That in itself is remarkable.”

“Okay, so JARVIS is pretty awesome. I already knew that, but thanks. Still, I don’t see how JARVIS relates to me being able to enchant a fucking magic armor.”

“The point is,” Loki said, “you can work with magic. You have already done it before. You may not be a mage yourself, you may not have magic, but you still know how to work with it, on an instinctive level, much like the dwarves here do. Even when your body was filled with the power of that horrible metal, you still retained your ability to create extraordinary things. The presence or absence of magic has nothing to do with it – it is simply who you are.”
“So you’re saying what exactly?” Tony narrowed his eyes. “That there is a way for me to do the enchantments? Even though I don’t have the slightest idea what I’m doing?”

“I could help you with that,” Loki offered. “There are ways to make the whole process possible.”

“How would you do that?” Tony asked warily. The thought of himself handling magic didn’t sit very well with him.

“I could help you become...more aware of magic,” the demigod explained. “If you could feel it, if you became more attuned to it, you could work with it so much easier.”

“And what if that didn’t work? What then?”

Loki only hesitated for a second, before he replied. “I could...lend you some of my own magic. Only for the few days it would take to create the armor.”

“You can do that?” Tony asked in disbelief. “You can just...lend someone a piece of your magic? Just like that?” He had a brief mental image of Loki sitting behind a counter in a car rental-type place, a huge board behind his back filled with things like Fireballs for 3 days = 100 bucks, Invisibility for a day = 200 bucks, and a line of eager Asgardians in that ridiculous armor lining up for a piece of magic. It was bizarre. He shook his head to drive the thought away and focused back on Loki.

“...Yes, I think it could be possible,” Loki said reluctantly. Tony couldn’t help but notice that the demigod wasn’t quite meeting his gaze.

“Really,” Tony said no even bothering to hold back his skepticism.

“There might be some...complications,” there was a wealth of things unsaid in that small pause, “but I am fairly confident that I will be able to do it.”

Tony still wasn’t fully on board. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Do you have a better one?” A hint of annoyance slipped into Loki’s voice, betraying that he was no way near as unaffected by the whole situation as he was pretending to be. “If you do, let’s hear it. I’m all ears.” He folded his arms over his chest and pinned Tony with an expectant look. Several heartbeats passed before Tony sighed, giving up.

“Okay, let’s say, purely hypothetically,” he stressed those words to make it clear that he hadn’t agreed to anything yet, “that I had magic. What would happen if I did? Would I be able to do the enchantments?”

“Among other things, yes.” Loki nodded. “Just imagine the things you could create if you were fully aware of magic, and not just groping blindly in the dark. The inventions you could make. Imagine what that could do if you could combine your technology and science with magic.”

“Is that a good idea?” Tony asked cautiously. “Me and magic?” He paced to the other side of the room, then whirled back. “I mean, I already have enough juice to conquer entire countries with nothing but a few suits and a single A.I. I took down your entire alien army with a modified nuke that I made twenty years ago.” He paused, weighing his words. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but - I don’t think giving me magic is a good idea. You don’t know what I would do with it.” His gestures became progressively more animated the longer he spoke. “Sure, I’ll make the armor for you, but what then? Will I just go back home to tinker with my stuff, even though I know there are entire worlds out there that I could explore? It could hold for a while, sure, but you know me, I could never resist the opportunity to come up with new stuff. What if I take this whole magic thing too far? What
if I can’t control it? I could destroy the Earth. I could blow myself up. I could get drunk on power and decide to conquer Asgard. Or teach the dwarves to dance.” Which, honestly, was a much worse idea.

Loki just laughed. “I think your conscience wouldn’t let you. Nobody wants to see dancing dwarves.”

Tony shook his head, chuckling a little despite himself before he grew serious again.

“No, but seriously, who would keep me in check if this whole thing went pear-shaped? The Avengers can barely handle me as is.”

Loki stepped closer, laying his hands on Tony’s shoulders.

“I think you’re forgetting someone.” He gave Tony a meaningful look. Tony raised his eyebrow.

“You? Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure you’re super awesome at this whole magic thing, but I’m not sure you’re the best candidate for something like this. I think you’re more likely to cheer me on when I burn Asgard to the ground than try and stop me.”

“You might be surprised,” Loki muttered.

“No, but seriously…” Tony shook his head, making an effort to swallow half a dozen biting remarks about Loki’s propensity to cause chaos. He tried to focus on the practical aspects instead. “Let’s say, again purely hypothetically, that you do this for me, that you hang around to keep an eye on me. What happens if you can’t do it any longer? Like, something comes up and you have to leave or-”

“Did I not already tell you that I am not leaving?” Loki cupped Tony’s face in his hands. “Do you still doubt my commitment-”

“No, that’s not it,” Tony interrupted him before Loki could work himself up into a full-blown meltdown. His face was already scrunched up in a thunderous frown, a sign of an impending storm. Tony reached up and wrapped his hand around Loki’s left wrist, squeezing gently. “Look, I’m not doubting your commitment or whatever here. I really believe that you want to stay with me.” He had meant to say it only as a thing for Loki’s benefit, but as he said it, he realized with a jolt that he actually believed it. Huh. “But let’s be real, here. Promises are one thing, reality another. You may want to stay with me, but something might still come up.”

“Like what?” Loki said defensively. He pulled away, taking a step back from Tony, but he wasn’t quick enough and Tony saw the flicker of something close to panic in his eyes.

Tony only hesitated for a second before he decided to just say it. He’d been trying to give Loki space and let him talk about it on his own time, but it was becoming increasingly clear that this was a thing that Loki flat-out refused to talk about and they really, really needed to talk about it. Especially since it was clear that their time was slowly running out.

“Well, Thor is probably looking for you as we speak,” Tony started out with the easier part. “He might not be the sharpest crayon in the box, but even he must have figured out that you’re alive ages ago. It’s only a matter of time before he finds us here, and - if he doesn’t kill you right here on the spot - he’s gonna try and take you back to Asgard. Will you just go with him, or will you run, like you have before?” Tony made a strategic pause, watching Loki’s face. “Or are you going to fight him? Your own brother?”

“I still might.” Loki raised his chin defiantly. He took a step towards Tony once more, towering over him. “Tell me, Stark, if it came to a fight, whose side would you stand on?”
Tony suppressed an exasperated sigh.

“Honestly? In this case? Neither one. This is your own private family spat. I’d rather not get between the two of you. If you wanna punch his lights out, be my guest, but I’m not gonna help you. Either of you,” he added for good measure.

Loki glowered at him for a moment longer, looking skeptical.

“You have already fought him on my behalf once before.”

“That wasn’t on your behalf,” Tony felt it necessary to point out. “If there was any behalf to be had, if was my own. You were my prisoner. Mr. Macho Hammer-dude stole my stuff, so I went to get it back. As far as I was concerned, you might have been a suitcase full of money or that magical blue cube of yours, and it wouldn’t have made one ounce of difference in the outcome.” And yeah, there was a small, assholish part of him that was greatly amused by Loki’s offended expression. He grinned. “Sorry, love, but that’s the honest truth. So no, I’m not gonna get in the middle of whatever spat you two idiots are having. I’ve had enough family drama to last me a lifetime already, I don’t need to borrow yours, too.”

Loki pretended to pout, but seemed to accept Tony’s answer. Tony decided to continue with the original train of thought before they got completely derailed from the topic.

“Besides,” he added after a second’s hesitation, “Thor’s not the only one you’re hiding from, is he?”

He was watching Loki’s face closely, so he didn’t miss the minute flinch or the flicker of fear in Loki’s eyes.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Loki said stiffly.

“Look, I’m no idiot,” Tony told him. “I may not be the most perceptive guy on the planet, but I can put two and two together. And I know that-” He stopped himself in the middle of the sentence when he noticed the dwarf that was still in the room with them, watching their conversation with great interest.

Oh, Jesus fucking Christ on a pogo stick. He had completely forgotten about the dwarf. They had been so caught up in their banter that they completely ignored the guy in the corner. Shit.

Tony briefly closed his eyes, praying for patience, then he opened them again and turned to Nári.

“Hey,” he tried to use his most polite tone, but wasn’t having much success. Loki was like a live wire next to him, stiff and practically vibrating with tension and Tony knew that this conversation would be hard enough to have as it was. No need to have a nosy asshole spying on them as well. “Could you leave us alone for a while? Just go for a walk, or mine some gold or go do whatever the hell it is you guys do. Can you just give us some space?”

The dwarf peeled himself away from the wall, his eyes flickering between them. It was clear that he would love nothing more than to stay and find out what they were going to be talking about, but at the same time, he seemed weirdly unperturbed about the fact that he was being essentially thrown out of the room. Tony figured that it was probably because he hadn’t expected them to get so caught up in their argument and forget about him in the first place.

Nári pretended to be annoyed with the request, but he didn’t quite manage to hide his glee at finding out so much about Loki’s personal affairs. And they had just managed to give him enough material for a hundred reports. Normally Tony would be concerned about what the dwarves could use the information for, but right now his attention was almost completely focused on Loki, who was doing
a very good impersonation of a stone pillar next to him.

Tony waited until the dwarf finally left the room, then marched over and locked the door behind him. Then he turned to Loki, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Well?”

“Well what?” Loki shot back, but the retort lacked the bite he was trying to inject it with.

“Are you going to tell me yourself, or do I have to drag it out of you bit by bit?”

When Loki stayed stubbornly silent, Tony ran a hand over his face, rubbing at his beard.

“Look, I was trying to give you space, let you broach the topic on your own, but you haven’t. And honestly? I’m kinda running out of patience here, so let’s hear it: What the hell is going on with all this?” He made a sweeping gesture that managed to encompass the room, the armor and Loki himself, all in one.

Loki crossed his arms to mirror Tony’s stance. Tony thought he looked a little too defensive.

“Why do you think there is anything going on?”

Tony suppressed the urge to scream. This was even worse that trying to pry secrets out of the dwarves.

“I’m not stupid. I know when something is up.” He waited for another few heartbeats for Loki to speak, but when it didn’t happen, he decided to go for the offensive. “Okay, if you’re not going to tell me, I’ll just have to guess and put this thing together myself. I might get a few things wrong, but whatever. You can correct me if I miss anything. So, let’s go over the facts first, shall we?”

He started to pace, pulling together memories of things both Thor and Loki had told him, trying to order all the information in his head into a coherent whole.

“After the whole debacle with the Frost Giants, you and Thor fought on top of the rainbow bridge. You ended up hanging from the edge and instead of letting him pull you up, you essentially committed suicide. Only, you didn’t die.” He shot the demigod a look but Loki wasn’t looking at him, staring off into space. “You told me yourself a while ago that someone found you, someone whom you wish you had never met. I’m gonna assume this someone is not a pleasant guy to be around.

“Fact two,” Tony continued. “I’ve seen you fight recently, really fight, and you’re a fucking badass. You could level entire armies and not break a sweat. And yet, all you did in New York was strut around my tower, making empty threats. You could have joined the invasion, could have killed us all single-handedly, but you didn’t bother. Why is that?”

Loki raised an eyebrow at that, but still didn’t speak. However, he wasn’t correcting Tony either, which was something. Encouraged, Tony continued.

“Who brings a conquering army to Earth and doesn’t even bother to ensure that they win? Who lets himself get caught by his enemies in the middle of an elaborate plan? You didn’t have to let us arrest you, or stay in that cell. You can teleport, for fuck’s sake. You could have zapped yourself away at any point, and yet you stayed, watching us bicker like a bunch of catty high schoolers. Why?” Tony leaned his hip on the workbench. “Don’t tell me that spending twelve hours in a glorified glass container is your idea of fun.”
Loki gave him a challenging look. “Maybe it was all part of my plan.”

“Yeah, maybe it was,” Tony allowed. “Still, not a very good plan. There were too many unknown variables in the mix for you to predict that accurately. The outcome could have been vastly different if any of us had made a slightly different choice. You’re a really smart guy, a pretty great strategist, I’ll give you that, but even you aren’t that good. No offence, but you really aren’t.”

Loki grimaced at that, but still didn’t comment.

“Another fact,” Tony continued. “You had a bunch of people under your command, using your magic mojo to brainwash them and control them. You led them like puppets, directing their every move, and yet one of them managed to break free of your mind-control without much problem and the other installed a subroutine that allowed him to close the portal with your scepter.” Tony gave Loki a look. “So, either your control wasn’t that good and they slipped through the cracks, or you knew about it and didn’t bother to stop them.

“Which brings me to my final, highly controversial conclusion,” Tony pointed a finger at him. “You weren’t planning for your plans to succeed, were you? You were aiming to fail from the start.”

He knew he was right when Loki took in a small, shocked intake of breath.

“Your fellow heroes probably wouldn’t be very happy to hear you say that,” Loki drawled, trying to cover up his uneasiness.

“Well, I wasn’t, either, when I first figured it out,” Tony told him with a crooked smile. “I mean, it’s one thing to heroically stop a conquering army led by a mad genius and another to find that you were just a tool that said evil mastermind used to cover up evidence that he never planned for said conquest to succeed in the first place.” Tony circled around him, monologuing along the way. “So, did you ever want to conquer Earth, or was the whole villain shtick just one long, elaborate stage act that you performed as you waited for us to arrive and foil our plans? Because let me tell you, for all the pretty words and threats you dropped back then, you didn’t seem particularly eager to actually do any of the conquering.”

He stopped in front of Loki, meeting his eyes in challenge.

“So, which one was it? Were you trying to destroy us, or were you trying to destroy them?”

Loki stared at him for a heartbeat longer before his lips broke into a slow, satisfied smile.

“Oh very good,” he praised. “People really tend to underestimate you, don’t they?” He sobered up a little after that. “How long have you known about this?”

“Known?” Tony said. “A few weeks? I’ve been trying to put this all together for a while, turn it into something that would make sense, but I didn’t have all the puzzle pieces. All I had to go on were theories and speculations, which I didn’t have confirmed until now. But still, you haven’t answered my question: Which side were you trying to destroy, really?”

Loki just continued giving him that sphinx-like smile.

“I do not think that I even have to answer your question – after all, I am certain that you have already found the right answer for yourself.”

Tony suppressed the urge to shake him, to make him stop with all this cryptic bullshit and already give a straight answer for once.
“Oh, for fuck’s sake, just tell me already!” Tony lost his patience. “You know, there’s only so much I can guess and I really don’t have a very high tolerance for bullshit.”

Loki kept his annoying act for a little longer, then rolled his eyes and leaned back against the workbench.

“Oh, very well, you got me.” He laid a theatrical hand over his heart. “You’ve uncovered my devious plans, Oh Mighty Hero.” The sarcasm was practically dripping from his voice. “What do you wish to know?”

He was trying to look put-upon, but the act wasn’t completely convincing. It made Tony think that Loki had probably been waiting for Tony to figure it out, and was actually relieved to have the weight of the confession taken off his hands. Tony took a deep breath, sorting through the questions in his head. There were approximately a million of them in there and he didn’t want Loki to clam up again under a barrage of questions, now that he had finally managed to get him to agree to answer some of them.

“All right,” he said slowly. “One thing at a time.” He could have asked a lot of things right then, but there was one question that had always nagged him. “During the attack on New York, you chose my house for your magic portal, targeted me specifically with your snide remarks about ‘warm light for all mankind’.” He tilted his head a little, giving Loki a curious look. “Why? Why me?”

“Because you were the only one who could stop me, stop the attack,” Loki said quietly. “I knew you would be able to infer from my words what I was planning to do.”

“You wanted me to stop you.” Tony tried to digest that information. “So you really were planning for the attack to fail?”

“Hoping, yes,” Loki admitted casually, like it was no big deal. “And your little band of heroes far more than exceeded my expectations.

“Why did you throw me out of a window, then?” Tony demanded. “Why would you try to kill me if you were hoping for my help?”

To his credit, Loki actually looked ashamed. “My...self-control was not at its best and you were being obnoxious.”

“That’s a really stupid reason for trying to kill someone,” Tony pointed out.

Loki’s lips pulled into a self-deprecating grimace. “I know. And if it helps, I am sorry for throwing you out of that window.” He was giving Tony his best puppy dog eyes. Tony felt a sudden urge to find the nearest bottle of something alcoholic and get black-out drunk. Why was he always the one who had to deal with this shit?

Outwardly he just sighed, and waved a hand, deciding to focus back on the whole ‘Loki planned for the attack to fail’ thing.

“Oh, so you didn’t want to Chitauri attack to succeed. Then why the hell did you attack in the first place when you didn’t even want to?”

“Because I had no choice,” Loki hissed, the first hint of emotion entering his voice since this whole conversation had started. He drew himself up, moving into Tony’s space. “My options were to either lead an army of Chitauri in a glorious conquest to Earth, or suffer another countless months of torture followed by a prolonged, extremely painful death. Call me a coward, if you wish, but I really like being alive.”
Tony opened his mouth to reply, to say something, but Loki continued, months of trauma and frustration pouring out like water from a dam.

“Do you have any idea, what it’s like, to be made undone, to be taken apart, your mind ripped into pieces, only to be put back together and then forced to go through the same thing again and again, until you break, until you beg for mercy, for death - anything that would make it stop, that would make the unbearable pain go away? Do you know what it’s like, to scream yourself hoarse, to whimper at the feet of your captors and know that you are never going to get away? To have everything ripped from you – your mind, your sanity, your memories, until you are no more than a mindless beast, and pain is the only thing you know, the only thing you will ever know, and the only certainty in your life is that the pain will never stop, that it would never go away and you’ll be in this agony forever?”

There were tears in his eyes, his whole face twisted into a tormented grimace just at the memory and Tony found himself completely at a loss about what to do. He didn’t get a chance to do anything, however, because Loki continued.

“I held on for as long as I could, staying silent under their barrage of question and torture, but there is only so much the mind can take before it breaks. There is only so much pain the body can withstand before it shuts down, before the pain drives you mad. I forgot my name, I forgot everything that wasn’t pain. I resisted them for months, but in the end I broke, because I just couldn’t take it anymore. I told them everything I knew, just to make it stop.” He took in a shaky breath, a single tear escaping from his eye. Several more spilled out when he closed his eyes and he wiped them off with an angry swipe of his hand before he opened his eyes again.

“I was given a choice to lead the army to Midgard, to open a path for them, and I took it, because anything was better than the pain.” He gave Tony a haughty look. “I attacked your world, and I would do it again, in a heartbeat, if it meant that I got to escape from that.” He snorted. “But you probably wouldn’t understand that, would you? You’re the hero, the shining beacon of hope and morals, who used his own captivity to become a better man. It must be nice, to stand there in your moral superiority, safe in the knowledge that you would never waver, never doubt, never break.”

He had probably been aiming for contempt, but his voice was far too shaky to pull it off. He looked like he was holding himself together by the barest thread, like a single word could break him into a thousand pieces and it was at that moment that Tony finally understood just how fragile this guy really was. After what he had gone through, it was a fucking miracle that he was still sane enough to put together two coherent sentences, much less be here with him, like this.

For once, Tony knew exactly what to say.

“No,” Tony told him quietly, because Loki needed to hear this, “I broke alright. The terrorists held me for months and tortured me every day. I could only keep up the defiant macho act for so long before they finally got to me.”

“What did they do?” Loki asked in an equally quiet voice.

“They threatened to cut out my tongue,” Tony admitted. “Almost did it, too. I’ll never forget the words – ‘you need your fingers to work, but you don’t need to be able to talk to make us what we want’. That one thing was the final straw that finally made me give into their demands. So yeah, they broke me – I just didn’t let them see it. I agreed to their terms, built the suit out of the materials they gave me and then murdered the shit out them all with it.” He shot Loki a glance. “In way, I did pretty much the same thing that you did. Only, your method ended up causing a lot more collateral damage.”
Loki was silent, but he was watching Tony with avid interest, listening to his tale. Tony hadn’t planned to make this talk all about himself, but it looked like him admitting his own weakness actually helped Loki come to terms with his own mental breakdown. So he continued, admitting things he had never told another living soul before.

“I managed to keep it together through the attack, the return home and the endless press conferences about my miraculous escape, but once I came back home, I fell apart like a house of cards. I spent two months locked in the workshop with only Dummy and the guys for company, drinking my way through half of California’s booze reserves. I had horrible PTSD, incredibly vivid flashbacks every few days where I would forget where I was and become convinced that I was back in the cave, with Yinsen dying under my hands. I would be talking to Pepper on the phone about something work related, get triggered by a random word and then spend the rest of the conversation curled under my desk and trying not to hyperventilate into the phone.”

He ran a hand through his hair, his lips twisting into a wry grimace.

“I had insomnia from hell and nightmares for months. Pepper kept pestering me to get back to work, to snap back into my playboy billionaire philanthropist routine, but I couldn’t even go outside for weeks without smelling sand and blood and gunpowder. Stane kept making snide remarks about me being a hermit, but I just couldn’t face the world yet. So no, no moral superiority here,” he added, addressing Loki’s accusation. “I was a wreck after Afghanistan, and that was only a margin of what you went through. If I had been in your place, I would have most likely ended up leading a genocide, too, only much, much sooner.”

Loki looked at him for a very long time before he nodded, his expression still tight. Tony took one look at him and sighed.

“Come here.” He pulled the demigod close. “You look like you seriously need a hug.”

Loki practically folded around him, pressing himself close as he buried his face in Tony’s neck, squeezing Tony like he was a lifeline and Loki was holding on for dear life. Tony wrapped his arms around him in return and held him, rubbing his hands up and down Loki’s spine.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” he murmured into Loki’s hair. “Nobody deserves to go through something like that.”

There was a heartbeat of silence before Loki muttered, so quietly that Tony almost missed it: “Maybe I did.”

That actually made Tony pull back a little and give Loki an incredulous look.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“No,” Loki said with a small shake of his head. “Maybe what happened was a punishment for all the bad things I’ve done-”

“Okay, stop right there,” Tony interrupted him because there was no way he was going to allow that kind of talk. “First off – torture is wrong, plain and simple. Nobody deserves to be tortured. Secondly – what the fuck?”

Loki gave him a shadow of his usual smirk.

“Well, you did point out yourself that I attempted a genocide of your people.”

“After you’ve been tortured for months,” Tony emphasized. “You know, the fact that you were
doing it under duress does in no way absolve you of your crimes, or change the fact that hundreds of people are dead because of you and your fucking alien army, but you getting tortured some more really isn’t the right answer to that.”

“Then what is?”

Tony shrugged. “I don’t know, but scrambling your brain again surely isn’t it. Do you really think that getting tortured will magically bring all those dead people back to life?

“Then what else am I supposed to do?” Loki asked in exasperation.

“Repent.” Tony couldn’t believe he was saying this to Loki of all people, but here it was. “Try to make up for the damage you’ve caused. What do you think I’ve been doing these past few years? No amount of money given to charity will ever make up for the fact that terrorists have used my bombs to wipe out entire cities full of people, but if I can save just one life by being Iron Man, it’s still worth it.” He gave Loki a look. “You could try it, too. I bet you’d be great at it.”

“And what? Join your ragtag band of heroes?” Little by little, Loki’s snarky wit was coming back. Tony took that as a positive sign.

“Well, nobody’s forcing you to. If you’re really that opposed to fighting alongside the Avengers, you can always just hang out with me. You could help me kick Doctor Doom’s ass, develop some bitching new technology…”

Loki didn’t bother to answer that suggestion. But at least he wasn’t saying no. Tony thought it was a positive sign.

They stood like that for a moment longer, just enjoying the closeness of the embrace. Tony would have been content to just continue drifting along, when he remembered that Loki still hadn’t answered one very important question.

He pulled back, meeting Loki’s eyes.

“Okay, you’ve told me plenty about your little trip among the stars, but there is still one pretty crucial piece that I’m missing: Who the hell did this to you?”

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

I’m not dead! And I haven’t given up on this story, either, so don’t worry guys, this fic will get finished, eventually.

I’m really, really sorry for disappearing so suddenly and stopping my updates over the summer. I wish I hadn’t done that, but I was completely overwhelmed by real life and didn’t have any time (or energy) left to write. I got hit by a combination of insane work hours (lawyer’s office, yay), a massive writer’s block and an upcoming academic deadline and I had to drop one of my activities to be able to deal with the others. Unfortunately, this story became the victim in this case.

The truth is, I have been neglecting my final thesis for months and the deadline is rapidly approaching, so now I have to spend all my free time researching and writing if I
want to finish school this autumn. The deadline for handing it in is the end of August, so I won’t be able to work on this story for two more weeks. Once I finish the thesis and hand it in, I promise I will go back to this story and finish it (there are only a few chapters left), so please, bear with me for a little while longer. I feel really embarrassed for dropping the ball like that, but I was having so much fun writing this story that I neglected other things I should have been doing and now I’m paying the price. Once I’m done with school, I will be able to get back to writing.

You can expect the next chapter sometime in September. Sorry for the delays!

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